
Executive Summary

of

2000 Survey of New York's Local Government Leaders: Policy Issues, Training Needs and Technology Use

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Executive Summary

New York State's Local Governments & Their Leaders

A Survey of New York Local Chief Elected Officials

Local government officials in New York face a variety of important public policy issues. In the spring of 2000 the Cornell Local Government Program initiated a survey research project to get the perspective of local officials on key issues. County board chairs, town supervisors, and city and village mayors were asked to respond to questions in three key areas.

- **Policy Issues.** Local leaders were asked to identify and rank the pressing public service and policy issues they face.
- **Training Needs.** Second, these officials were asked to identify priority training needs and preferences for training formats, timing and location.
- **Information Technology.** Third, officials were asked to identify key aspects of their government's use of local information technology, e.g. microcomputer and software use, sources of technical help, internet access and use, and web site characteristics.

The 468 survey respondents represent the mix of communities in New York when gauged by size of place or region of the state. The respondents to this survey are well balanced across the population size

range from small to large municipalities in New York State. Counties, cities, towns and villages with small, medium and large populations are well represented by the respondent sample in comparison with statewide totals. Additional analysis of survey results has also been done to compare responses from New York with partner surveys conducted in the spring of 2000 in Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

New York's Local Elected Leaders

The current profile of local chief elected officials indicates that over 50% have served for four years or less, and are in their first or second term, depending on the length of term. Most of these chief elected officers bring a wealth of previous local public service to their current position. Less than ten percent of these chief elected officials are serving for a first term in their first local position. Previous local public service is clearly the norm for most chief elected officials.

The profile of local leaders in this survey indicates that there is a relatively large pool of local chief elected leaders that are in their first or second term of office. Many of them are relative newcomers to the board leadership role. This pool of leaders may be open to training opportunities that address the skills and practices that are unique to managing and leading a governing board, particularly practices and skills that improve performance.

Priority Public Service and Policy Issues

State Aid and Revenue Reform

First, local leaders, across all major local government classes, expressed a strong need for reform in state aid (general revenue sharing, and highway aid), and for reform in the administration of property taxation and assessment. More targeted fiscal concerns were expressed by municipal officials from some local government classes for more state flexibility in local administration, policy and revenue raising options.

Economic Development

Second, local leaders across all local government classes expressed a strong concern for economic development related issues. These general concerns include: business retention and expansion, recruitment of new manufacturing, and recruitment of new retail. Some specific subgroups of municipal officials also expressed concern about downtown revitalization, tourism development, and understanding local government's role in economic development.

Planning and Land Use

Some local officials expressed strong concerns about planning and land use issues but those concerns tend to be more targeted on particular groupings of local governments and are less broad based.

- **Infrastructure.** There is a broad based and strong concern about the decline of infrastructure generally, and the adequacy of road maintenance in particular.

- **Public Safety.** The public safety concerns noted in this survey are strongest regarding the state requirements for equipment and personnel in Emergency Medical Services.

These results suggest the need for applied research and educational outreach in a number of areas. There is a continued need for applied research on the state-local fiscal system, including the major state aid flows to localities and the local property tax. It may be appropriate to develop some new approach and/or materials on the “nuts and bolts” or property tax administration and potential avenues for reform, including the linkages with new revenue options and sales tax distribution options for localities. Second there appears to be a continuing need for outreach to help local officials understand their roles and options in economic development. Third, there is a continuing need for research, policy development and outreach on infrastructure needs and improved capital planning. There are more targeted needs for research and outreach in the areas of open space preservation, the location of development and sprawl issues, the impacts of new development on public service costs and dealing with dilapidated buildings or abandoned parcels in more developed areas.

Specific Training Needs

Community Vision

Local officials expressed their strongest support for training to help create a long-term vision for their municipality and once created, for how to make the vision happen.

Communication and Leadership Skills

Local officials indicate relatively strong support for training in a number of key areas. These include training for newly elected officials and clusters of communication, leadership, planning and development, and computer and information management skills. Many of the communication and leadership training skill areas have some generic content. Many local professionals have exposure and experience with training content with items like: using public input and involving the public, presenting information to the public, finding capable people for leadership positions, and collaboration among organizations. These local resources can be mobilized to help meet these critical training needs.

Local Government's Role in Economic Development

Local officials indicated that sorting out local government's role in economic development is both a pressing policy issue and a topic for which training is greatly needed.

Computer Training

Despite the broad-based use of computers by local governments (see section 4 of this report) there is a continuing need for training on targeted topics in this area.

Capital Planning

Strong demand for training in capital planning matches policy concerns about infrastructure condition.

Training Patterns & Preferences

Initiatives to improve training options for local officials need to consider both the existing framework of training and the preferences of local officials for training opportunities. The survey evidence reported in this section has important implications for improving local government training opportunities.

Statewide and Regional Training Events

Roughly half of the chief elected governing board members in the state attend a statewide and a regional conference during the year. More officials attend regional conferences than statewide events sponsored by their municipal association. Town and village officials have lower attendance rates at these state and regional events than county and city officials.

Willingness to Travel

In addition to state and regional events, local officials attend other training opportunities. Local officials expressed a willingness to travel substantial distances for other training events. Half of the officials responding to our survey said that they had traveled 50 miles or more for a training event in the previous year. County and city officials reported traveling substantially further than town and village officials. For most local officials the distances traveled for training were long enough to permit regional or multi-county training sites.

Local Government Payment for Training

Roughly three quarters of the officials in the survey indicated that their local government routinely paid for governing board members to attend training. Another 20% paid for training but only rarely. The percentages vary among subgroups. Training sponsors can be assured that governing board members will be able to get reimbursed for training by their municipalities.

Best Times for Training

Weekday evenings in the winter is the most preferred time for training events when considering the aggregate responses for all governing board members in the survey. The time of week and month of the year will vary with the type and size of local government that is being targeted. For example, weekday mornings are the preferred time of the week for training by county board chairmen.

Preferences for Training Approaches

Over half of the local officials in the state have participated in face-to-face classroom training and video down link training events. Of these two popular formats, local officials in the survey strongly prefer face-to-face training to video downlink events for future training opportunities. Local officials indicated a strong willingness to try new training approaches, especially microcomputer based training, video tape

instruction, and web site/email instruction and interaction.

Comprehensive Training Course for Improved Governance

Two thirds of the local officials in the survey indicated that they would be interested in enrolling in a multi-unit-training course covering key topics needed to serve more effectively as a governing board member.

Information Technology

Computer Use

These survey results indicate that computers are used by 97% of local governments in the state. This represents a rapid growth in usage over the last 15 years. Local governments, even smaller ones, are using computers for a wide variety of applications. Most local governments (54%) have in-house personnel that they turn to for technical assistance for their computers and most of them do not find it very hard to get computer assistance.

Internet Access

Over half, 63%, of local governments in the state have access to the Internet. They are using the Internet primarily to reach out for needed information from state agencies, statewide local government associations and from their peer local governments, in that order of importance.

Municipal Website

A smaller but still significant number of local governments have a municipal web site. Nearly 40% of local governments in our survey have a web site. The existence

of web sites varies substantially by size and type of government. Over 80% of cities and counties have web sites while only 23% of small towns have web sites. Most of these are exclusively municipal sites (63%), but the remainder demonstrates an interesting variety of shared community sites and other joint arrangements. Most municipal web sites provide basic municipal information (90%) and links to other community organizations (63%). A smaller group of local governments are utilizing their web sites for more advanced features, such as regular reporting, making forms available and other useful municipal purposes.

Summary

The level of computer use, Internet access, and web site development indicates that local governments are slowly but steadily utilizing critical electronic resources. Those who work with local governments should increasingly seek to utilize these resources and assume that local governments will be ready to use them. In the training portions of this survey, local officials identified a clear package of needed training priorities for information technology and a willingness to experiment with computerized and web based training opportunities.