



Opt In Program:

Clarify purpose and weigh effectiveness

May 2014

A Report by the Office of the Auditor

Suzanne Flynn

Metro Auditor

Mary Hull Caballero

Principal Management Auditor

Kathryn Nichols

Senior Management Auditor



Knighton Award for Auditing

Audit receives recognition

The Auditor's Office was the recipient of the Bronze Award for Small Shops by ALGA (Association of Local Government Auditors). The winning audit is entitled *"Tracking Transportation Project Outcomes: Light rail case studies suggest path to improved planning"*. Auditors were presented with the award at the ALGA conference in Tampa Bay, FL, in May 2014. Knighton Award winners are selected each year by a judging panel and awards presented at the annual conference.

Metro Ethics Line

The Metro Ethics Line gives employees and citizens an avenue to report misconduct, waste or misuse of resources in any Metro or Metro Exposition Recreation Commission (MERC) facility or department.

The ethics line is administered by the Metro Auditor's Office. All reports are taken seriously and responded to in a timely manner. The auditor contracts with a hotline vendor, EthicsPoint, to provide and maintain the reporting system. Your report will serve the public interest and assist Metro in meeting high standards of public accountability.

To make a report, choose either of the following methods:

Dial 888-299-5460 (toll free in the U.S. and Canada)
File an online report at www.metroethicsline.org



SUZANNE FLYNN

Metro Auditor

600 NE Grand Avenue

Portland, OR 97232-2736

Phone: (503)797-1892 Fax: (503)797-1831

MEMORANDUM

May 22, 2014

To: Tom Hughes, Council President
Shirley Craddick, Councilor, District 1
Carlotta Collette, Councilor, District 2
Craig Dirksen, Councilor, District 3
Kathryn Harrington, Councilor, District 4
Sam Chase, Councilor, District 5
Bob Stacey, Councilor, District 6

From: Suzanne Flynn, Metro Auditor 

Re: Audit of Opt In Program

This report covers our audit of the Opt In program. We also completed a follow up of our 2010 audit on public engagement. Our objectives were to determine if Opt In was an effective public engagement tool and whether recommendations from our previous audit had been implemented. This audit was included in our FY 2013-14 Audit Schedule.

Since 2011, citizens in the region have been able to communicate their opinions to Metro via periodic online surveys. Our review of the Opt In program confirmed that it increased the amount of input Metro received. However, we note that the information obtained cannot necessarily replace other forms of public engagement. With three years of experience, Metro should now assess this new approach and determine its place in the array of engagement strategies. Procedures also need to be strengthened to increase the effectiveness of this effort. Our review of the previous audit found that two recommendations out of nine were implemented and four were in process.

We have discussed our findings and recommendations with Martha Bennett, COO, and Jim Middaugh, Director, Communications Department. A formal follow-up to the 2014 audit will be scheduled within 2 years. We would like to acknowledge and thank the department director, management and employees who assisted us in completing this audit.

Table of Contents

Summary	1
Background	3
Scope and methodology	5
Results	7
• Limited progress made toward goals and objectives	7
• Participation rate fell as membership grew	8
• Connection between input and decision-making could be improved	10
• Other options may be more cost-effective	11
• Better planning and project management needed	14
• Contract management should be strengthened	14
• Membership recruitment agreements needed accountability	15
• More work needed to implement 2010 audit recommendations	17
Recommendations	19
Management response	21

Summary

Recent developments in technology offered Metro potential new tools to achieve public engagement goals. Starting three years ago, the Communications Department contracted with a public opinion firm to help develop a series of periodic online surveys through the Opt In program. Citizens were invited to join and provide input by setting up a member account. The first survey was initiated in March 2011.

Opt In was created in part to allow more individuals and diverse groups to shape Metro's policy development and decision-making. It also was viewed as a means for the agency to maintain a relationship with participants over time.

The purpose of this audit was to evaluate whether Opt In was an effective public engagement tool. Objectives were to determine whether goals and objectives had been met, identify any barriers to success and assess the project costs. We also completed a follow up of a previous audit concluded in 2010.

We found that Metro succeeded in getting people to join Opt In, but did not attract diverse groups that reflected the demographics of the region. As the membership grew, the percentage of responses Metro received from Opt In surveys fell. While there was some evidence that Opt In influenced the development of policy recommendations at the program level, Metro Councilors generally did not use input from Opt In in their policy decisions.

Metro had an expectation that Opt In would be more cost-effective than other forms of public engagement. It was proposed after a number of public engagements using traditional methods resulted in high costs and low turnouts. We estimated two measures for the audit: cost-per-response and cost-per-engagement. A cost-per-response comparison suggested that Opt In was less expensive than other strategies. However, each type of engagement may not require the same number of responses. Our comparison of cost-per-engagement suggested that in some cases, other tools should be considered.

As a new project, Opt In could have benefited from stronger planning and management. By the time surveying started, it was still not clear who the ultimate consumers of the results would be and what their public input needs were. The program operated without written policies and procedures to establish expectations for employees, vendors and partners in Metro's new venture. Metro contracted for multiple tasks related to the creation and continuing operation of Opt In. Lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities and uneven contract management made Opt In less transparent and efficient.

In our 2010 audit, we made nine recommendations to management to improve Metro's overall approach to communicating with and hearing from the public. Management implemented two recommendations, four were in progress, and three had not been implemented. The Communications Department had made

progress on developing objectives for engagement and evaluating strategies used to engage, but had not developed a system to use the lessons learned to improve future engagements. A time-tracking system allowed management to better understand Communications' income and expenditures. However, we found that goals and priorities for Metro's communication investments as an agency had not yet been established.

Our recommendations for the current audit address the need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Opt In efforts. Metro should clarify the purpose of this project and weigh its effectiveness against other tools and strategies with similar purposes. Improving the quality and delivery of the public input received would be increased by establishing policies and procedures, aligning survey topics with public input needs of the Metro Council, improving communication of results to the Metro Council, and adjusting recruiting and participation strategies based upon data.

Background

One of Metro's ongoing challenges is to inform and engage 1.6 million citizens across the region about its policy choices and services. Within the organization, the Communications Department has responsibility for planning for and managing a range of engagement strategies, such as public hearings, open houses, focus groups and opinion polls.

Technology offered an expanded set of communication tools, and Opt In is one of the tools Metro developed to make use of new technology. Started three years ago, Opt In was a series of periodic online surveys. Citizens were invited to join and provide public input about Metro's programs and policies. Members joined Opt In by setting up an account on the project website.

Metro proposed Opt In after a number of public engagements using traditional methods resulted in high costs and low turnouts. Metro began recruiting participants in January 2011. It encouraged its employees and those in other organizations to join and recruit others. Metro also paid community groups to recruit those who traditionally had not participated in its decision-making process.

Metro launched the first Opt In survey in March 2011. A total of 26 Opt In surveys were conducted through the end of June 2013. In some instances, outside agencies used Opt In for their own surveys. Metro's survey topics included natural areas, climate change, the Oregon Zoo, and public engagement. Metro's Opt In survey reports are posted on the project's website.

Communications was responsible for managing Opt In, including recruiting members and scheduling surveys. In most cases, the department conducting the survey was responsible for developing the questionnaire and paying the costs.

Metro contracted with a public opinion firm to operate Opt In. The vendor provided survey development expertise and oversaw the technical aspects of the process. It also was responsible for maintaining membership data, analyzing survey results, writing reports and updating the Opt In website. Metro renewed its contract for these services in 2012. It is set to expire in June 2014.

The Office of the Auditor issued a report on Metro's public engagement strategies in 2010. That audit defined engagement as activities Metro organized to seek out and receive information from the public. We found that Metro was not well-positioned for public engagement because it invested more in other forms of communication, had structural weaknesses in the organization of its communications function, and did not maximize the use of its tools and processes to engage the public. The audit made nine recommendations to improve the effectiveness of communications and public engagement activities.

Scope and methodology

The purpose of this audit was to evaluate whether Opt In was an effective public engagement tool. Our objectives were to determine:

- if Opt In met its goals and objectives;
- any barriers that prevented Opt In from meeting its goals;
- project costs, and;
- the status of progress on recommendations made in the 2010 audit.

The scope of the audit covered three fiscal years, from FY 2010-11 through FY 2012-13, except for the data related to Opt In membership. For that data, we extended the scope through October 2013 to include more recent information about the demographics of Opt In. We analyzed data ending June 2013 and compared it to data ending in October 2013 to determine if the growth in new members during the intervening four months affected our conclusions. Extending the scope did not change the results. The more recent Opt In data is reflected in this report and we used it to compare to Census data.

We analyzed survey participation and costs of Opt In over time. Different criteria applied to these analyses and led us to use slightly different numbers of surveys. The participation analysis used 23 surveys while the cost analysis was based on 24 surveys. For participation, we included only surveys that invited all or nearly all Opt In members to respond. To determine costs, we excluded surveys paid for and conducted by other agencies. We included costs related to two telephone surveys conducted in conjunction with Opt In surveys because they were used to test Opt In's reliability. Cost estimates were based on expenditure data from Metro's accounting system, time-keeping records and interviews with staff.

We interviewed Metro Councilors, program managers and employees, as well as representatives of the Opt In vendor. We reviewed public engagement literature and information about other online tools. We also reviewed Metro budgets, project documents, the Opt In website as well as the procurement process to select the Opt In vendor, the resulting contract and contract expenditures. We assessed a sample of scope-of-work orders.

We reviewed Metro's recently adopted public engagement guide and observed meetings of the Public Engagement Review Committee and the Public Engagement Network, both of which were organized after our 2010 audit.

This audit was included in the FY 2013-14 audit schedule. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Results

Limited progress made toward goals and objectives

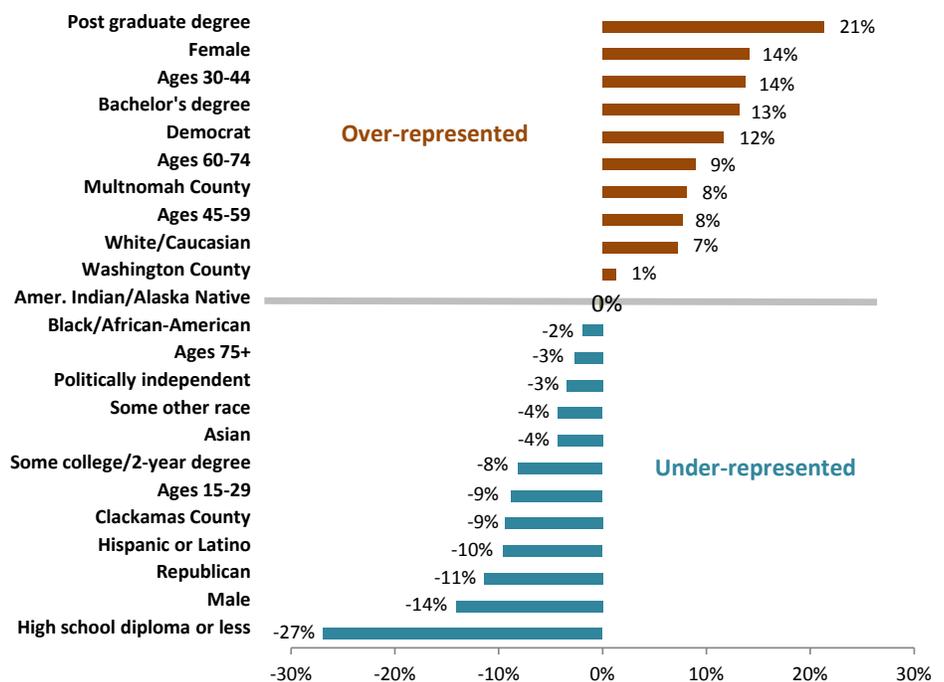
Opt In was created in part to allow more individuals and diverse groups to shape Metro’s policy development and decision-making. It also was viewed as a means for the agency to maintain a relationship with participants over time.

We found that Metro succeeded in getting people to join Opt In, but did not attract diverse groups that reflected the demographics of the region. As the membership grew, the percentage of responses Metro received from Opt In surveys fell. While there was some evidence that Opt In influenced the development of policy recommendations at the staff level, Metro Councilors generally did not use input from Opt In in their policy decisions.

The Communications Department set a target to recruit 10,000 Opt In members within the first year. It achieved the target in January 2012, and more than doubled the membership the following year. By October 2013, Opt In members who lived in Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties totaled 23,255. An additional 3,852 lived outside of the tri-county region.

Metro wanted Opt In members to be representative of the region and undertook activities to recruit various demographic groups. It made progress in attracting members from groups that traditionally had not provided input to Metro, but has more work to do before it will be representative of the region. Membership data showed that some groups were over- or under-represented in Opt In compared to Census and county voter registration data. To management’s credit, written reports consistently noted Opt In results were not representative. Exhibit 1 shows the groups that were over- or under-represented in Opt In, based on members who lived in the tri-county area.

Exhibit 1
Member characteristics compared to regional population



Source: Auditor’s Office analysis of Opt in, Census and voter registration data.

Communications emphasized the recruitment of minority and low-income groups because historically they have not participated in Metro's decision-making processes. Data collection weaknesses related to race and ethnicity and income, in particular, reduced Metro's ability to measure progress by these indicators.

Among the minority groups, the Hispanic population will be an increasingly important one for Metro to engage because it was growing faster than the non-Hispanic population in Oregon. Measuring progress toward recruiting Hispanic members was less reliable, though, because Opt In collected race and ethnicity data differently than the Census. The Census asks if a person is Hispanic and then asks about race. People can be Hispanic and of any race. Opt In did not separate ethnicity and race, so its race categories were under-counted. It is also possible that Hispanic members indicated their race, but not their ethnicity. Reliable comparisons depend on Opt In using the same data collection procedures as the Census.

Gathering accurate income data is an ongoing challenge in the research field. Half of those who joined Opt In declined to provide their incomes, making a comparison to the Census unreliable. To track progress on this indicator, Metro may need to motivate members to provide the information by explaining why it is important or find alternative sources of income information about Opt In members.

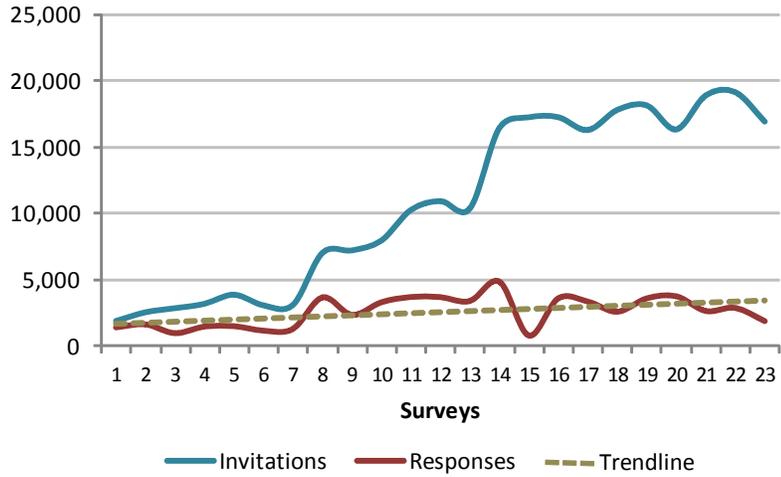
The level of effort Metro invests in making Opt In's membership representative should be determined by what it is trying to achieve with the information provided. If, as some hope, Opt In will replace the need for statistically reliable polling, then more work is needed. If the goal is to increase the quantity of public comments received, then any increase from traditionally under-represented groups is an improvement. Metro should decide which purpose Opt In is intended to serve and match its goals and targets accordingly.

Participation rate fell as membership grew

Regardless of Opt In's potential value as a statistically reliable option or a current tool to produce more input, it needed members to participate in surveys. We reviewed the number who participated and the rate of participation over time. The results were mixed.

Metro conducted 23 Opt In surveys between FY 2010-11 and FY 2012-13, in which all or almost all members were invited to participate. During that time, membership grew to almost 20,000. The number of Opt In members taking surveys also increased, ranging from a low of 759 to just over 4,900. The average was almost 2,600. The trend in actual terms for some demographic groups also was slightly positive (Exhibit 2).

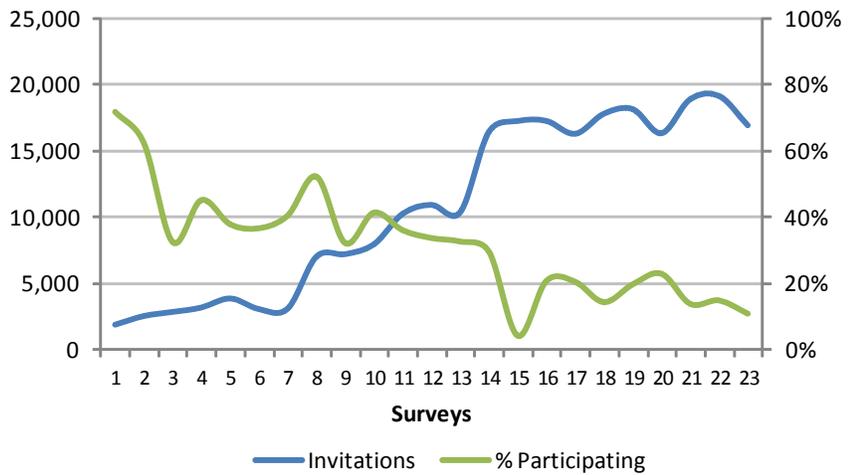
Exhibit 2
Opt in members taking surveys (responses) compared to membership (invitations)



Source: Auditor's Office analysis of vendor's data.

We found, however, that the percentage of Opt In members taking surveys fell sharply over time, beginning with a high of 72% and ending at 11%. Exhibit 3 shows the number of members invited to take the 23 surveys and the percentage who participated.

Exhibit 3
Percent of Opt in members taking surveys (responses) compared to membership (invitations)



Source: Auditor's Office analysis of vendor's data.

The purpose of the first survey, which had the highest participation rate, was to explore why people joined Opt In and what topics were important to them. A survey focused on Glendoveer Golf Course and Fitness Trail (Survey 15) had the lowest participation rate, but it purposely discouraged input from those who had not visited the course. The last survey in the analysis asked Opt In members about Metro's public engagement practices.

Our analysis of participation by various demographic groups and other indicators showed that the percentage of those taking surveys fell over time for all groups. The downward trend repeated the pattern in Exhibit 3 regardless of gender, race and ethnicity, education level, political affiliation or how long members had belonged to Opt In.

These trends indicated that management's overall success at recruiting people to join Opt In exceeded its capacity to sustain the rate of participation over time. While participation rates sometimes were included in Opt In reports, the vendor had not maintained the data in a format to enable analysis of participation trends. It assembled the dataset in response to this audit. Trend analysis, in actual and percentage terms, could help management understand who was taking surveys and whether steps needed to be taken to increase participation by groups not represented in the results.

**Connection between
input and decision-
making could be
improved**

Although most Metro Councilors supported the concept of Opt In, they rarely sought or used the input it delivered. A number of factors affected the connection between public input and policy decision-making, including:

- the notification process when results were available;
- the design of written reports;
- missed opportunities by staff to communicate results, and;
- technical and other problems related to the Opt In website.

Management and program employees decided the timing and topics of Opt In surveys and notified Councilors by email when they were about to be launched or when results were available. This may not have been the best notification method because Councilors received hundreds of emails in a day.

Another factor was the length and format of Opt In reports. Per its agreement with Metro, the vendor prepared reports with results to the questions asked, submitted them to project managers and posted them on a website separate from Metro's. The reports averaged 15 pages in length.

In preparation for Council meetings, references to Opt In surveys were included in documents for Councilors to review prior to the meetings. We found that information could have been delivered more efficiently and effectively. In one case, the documents reported how many people took an Opt In survey, but did not communicate what they said. In another case, Opt In results would

have taken considerable effort to find. In one 386-page document, actual and summarized results from focus groups and workshop participants were included, but Opt In results were not. The report directed Council to the Opt In website to find that information.

We found many reports were not always available on the website. At one point during our audit, more than half the links to the reports were broken. Additionally, it could have been difficult to find specific reports because of the way they were described on the site. Some were listed by their general topic, while others were labeled by a specific result within a topic. Two reports posted on the site were marked “draft.”

At the request of Communications, Metro’s Data Resource Center developed and was testing a mapping tool that will be able to present Opt In results geographically. This could make Opt In results more useful for decision-making, but additional steps are needed to strengthen the overall communication process.

Although Opt In results were not explicitly used in policy decision-making, Metro programs reported making use of them when developing policy recommendations, especially the responses to open-ended questions. Public input helped programs to understand Opt In members’ priorities, develop communication plans, and craft questions to ask in subsequent forums. One project manager reported Opt In information being less useful when topics were politically sensitive, because its results were not statistically reliable.

Other options may be more cost-effective

Metro viewed Opt In as a means to be more strategic in its use of communications resources. One of its primary selling points was that it would be more cost-effective than traditional forms of public engagement, such as open houses, focus groups and telephone surveys. Our analysis of Opt In costs indicated that while per-response rates were relatively low, per-survey costs were closer to the costs of telephone surveys. Decisions about the future use of Opt In will require Metro to define its underlying purpose relative to other engagement strategies.

We developed an estimate of Opt In project costs and used it to assess how costs compared to other forms of engagement using two measures:

- cost-per-response
- cost-per-engagement

We estimated that the total costs for Opt In from FY 2010-11 through FY 2012-13 were almost \$652,000 (Exhibit 4). About one-third of those expenses was for Metro personnel, including staff costs related to project management, panel recruitment, survey development, and building a mapping tool. Because

some personnel costs were not tracked by Communications and costs were also were incurred in other departments, we used several different sources for our analysis.

Exhibit 4
Estimated Opt In expenditures
(adjusted for inflation)

Personnel Services	FY 2010-11	FY 2011-12	FY 2012-13
Project management	\$38,026	\$21,053	\$14,340
Survey development	\$10,648	\$27,478	\$37,071
Member recruitment		\$25,768	
Mapping tool development		\$13,620	\$14,568
Total	\$48,674	\$87,919	\$65,979
Materials and Services			
Opt In survey	\$39,493	\$87,461	\$49,920
Web development & panel maintenance	\$43,426	\$33,220	\$ 9,000
Marketing	\$28,591	\$48,392	\$ 1,061
Associated telephone surveys	\$30,460	\$28,599	
Third party recruitment		\$46,473	\$ 3,021
Total	\$141,970	\$244,145	\$63,002
Total Opt In Expenditures	\$190,644	\$332,064	\$128,981

Source: Auditor's Office analysis.

Based on our estimate above, we concluded that Metro paid about \$10 for each Opt In response. We compared this to costs-per-response of other engagement strategies (Exhibit 5). Use of this cost-per-response measure suggested that Opt In was less expensive than other strategies. A similar conclusion was reached in a report presented to the Metro Council one year after Opt In was initiated.

Exhibit 5
Estimated costs-per-response

Engagement strategy	Cost-per-response
Opt in survey	\$10
Stakeholder meeting	\$35
Telephone survey	\$56
Open house	\$400
Focus group	\$781

Source: Auditor's Office analysis of Opt In costs. Other engagement costs estimated by the Communications Department or vendor price sheet. Focus groups and telephone surveys costs were adjusted to include staff time.

We also assessed Opt In using a second cost measure, the total cost-per-engagement strategy. This approach takes into account that each strategy may not require the same number of responses because a single response from one method may not be as helpful as a single response from another. We estimated that each Opt In survey cost Metro about \$27,000 based on total project costs. The average number of responses for these surveys was about 2,700. In comparison, Metro's costs for telephone surveys during the last three fiscal years averaged about \$35,000, when staffing costs associated with survey development were included. These surveys each involved 600 to 800 respondents, fewer than Opt In, but because the samples were randomly selected, survey results were statistically representative of the citizens in the Metro region.

More traditional strategies, such as open houses, which reportedly involved 25 attendees, would cost about \$10,000 per open house. While fewer respondents were involved, this strategy can offer the opportunity for dialogue and information exchange between citizens and policy makers in a way that on-line surveys would not.

Costs of different public engagement strategies cannot be compared in a vacuum without consideration of their relative usefulness in helping Metro achieve its overall mission. The effect of each public engagement strategy is different, and Metro should more carefully consider the specific engagement needs and circumstances before determining which tool or tools it should use. Many of Metro's policy decisions are complex and require a level of public education before authentic engagement can occur.

The field of engagement is changing rapidly and online surveys are only one of many available tools. Opt In was implemented with a broad set of mixed goals. Some saw Opt In as a way to receive public comments online from a broader public while others expected that once the panel reached the 10,000 mark, it could be used to conduct more scientific surveys with a regionally representative sample of respondents.

Depending upon the desired goals for future engagements, there may be alternatives to Opt In at comparable cost. Such consideration should also weigh the investment Metro has already made in Opt In. If Metro wants to continue experimenting with other forms of online engagement using an online panel, there are other commercial tools which may offer additional benefits at lower cost than Opt In. Metro could also consider using tools which provide formats other than surveys and allow for more interaction between panel members. Or, Metro could explore these formats by expanding the functionality of Opt In.

Opt In is a technological tool. As such, its value is determined by how well it serves the needs of Metro's decision-makers. The agency had not established goals to link its engagement with the public – to deliver information or receive it - to its overall mission.

Better planning and project management needed

Metro omitted factors attributed to successful project development as it moved Opt In from concept to implementation. There was lack of clarity about Opt In's purpose, objectives and roles and responsibilities, which made it difficult to evaluate its value as public engagement tool. Better planning could have improved management.

We found two documents that described Opt In. One was the request for proposals from public opinion research and marketing firms needed to launch the tool. The second was a proposal drafted by Communications about how Metro would recruit people to join Opt In. That proposal listed some expected outcomes for Opt In, but was not an overall project plan.

By the time Metro started conducting surveys, it still was not clear who the ultimate consumers of the results would be and what their public input needs were. The program operated without written policies and procedures to establish expectations for staff, vendors and partners in Metro's new venture.

Surveys originated in and usually were paid for by Metro departments. Staff decided the topics and which questions to ask, sometimes with input from Communications. A department's ability to pay for a survey was a key factor in whether it was conducted and when. Management also used some surveys to increase Opt In's membership rather than deliver public input into a decision-making process.

Employees we interviewed who used Opt In for their projects considered it beneficial. They suggested it could be improved by establishing clear guidelines for its use and identifying those responsible for various steps in the process, such as engaging the vendor and resolving technical problems.

Although the tool already is in use, management should revisit the steps it missed during the planning phase and articulate how Opt In helps Metro achieve its public engagement goals.

Contract management should be strengthened

Metro contracted for multiple tasks related to the creation and continuing operation of Opt In. The number of parties involved added complexity to the program. Lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities and uneven contract management made Opt In less transparent and efficient.

The vendor responsible for providing public opinion research expertise and technical services worked closely with a few managers and staff to develop

the initial surveys. The limited number of people involved in the beginning allowed for informal communication. As more Metro departments and different employees started using Opt In, clearer expectations and formal guidance were needed on the roles and responsibilities of Metro and the vendor.

Before the vendor began work on each Opt In survey, employees were required to prepare an agreement that described the survey goal, scope of work, expected work products, and the maximum price that Metro would pay. Of 80 payments made under the Opt In contract, we found only 10 scope-of-work orders had been prepared. Without them, Communications could not verify that the invoices paid by Metro reflected the agreement with the vendor. Additionally, we found in one case where a scope-of-work order existed, Metro paid \$300 above the original agreed-to price.

As the program evolved, Metro allowed other government agencies and organizations to conduct surveys through Opt In. The vendor contract was not amended to guide such outside use. Metro entered into an inter-governmental agreement with one entity and a memorandum of understanding with another, but the other arrangements were informal or in draft form. The lack of documentation posed risks for Metro if disagreements had arisen over roles and responsibilities, ownership of survey results or payments.

Payment arrangements with other governments for Opt In costs were inconsistent. In some cases, Metro paid the vendor and then got reimbursed. Some agencies paid the vendor directly. In one case, Metro paid part of the costs and in another Metro paid the full cost. Metro paid annual panel maintenance fees for Opt In. One agency paid part of these fees, but others did not. It was unclear why Metro subsidized some of the other governments' use of Opt In but not others, and which benefits Metro received by doing so.

**Membership
recruitment agreements
needed accountability**

Metro used a variety of methods to recruit members to join Opt In and attract diverse groups to participate. The most successful in terms of total recruits were Metro's own promotions, such as those related to the Oregon Zoo or the Portland Center for the Performing Arts. That approach resulted in more than 7,000 new recruits.

To draw more diverse participants, Metro entered into formal and informal agreements with a variety of organizations to recruit members from specific demographic groups. At the outset, Metro engaged Portland State University, Northwest Health Foundation, United Way and AARP to lend their names to Opt In and attract younger, older, and more diverse racial and ethnic groups to participate. The Pamplin Media Group eventually joined the collaboration. Each organizations' logos appeared on the Opt In website.

The extent of the benefits that accrued to Opt In because of Metro’s collaboration with these large organizations was unknown. The agreements generally were informal, although one organization asked Metro to sign a memorandum of understanding. Initially, Metro did not track recruits as they joined Opt In by the organizations that attracted them, so it was not possible to evaluate these methods.

Metro later invested more than \$75,000 in payments and personnel time to enlist smaller community organizations to recruit more diverse members to join Opt In. Unlike its original partners, Metro provided each of these organizations with a unique link for recruits to use when they joined, so that this method could be evaluated. The organizations combined drew almost 2,400 new members, but some were more successful than others.

Metro took two contractual approaches to engaging the smaller organizations to recruit Opt In members. In the first approach, Metro entered into formal contracts with three organizations to recruit a minimum of 1,000 members each to join Opt In from specified groups, such as suburban residents, political conservatives, or people with high school educations.

One organization met its obligations. The other two did not, but received their full payments anyway. One of the two organizations took credit for 557 recruits, but our analysis of the vendor data found only 119 new members used the link unique to the recruiting organization. The higher self-reported figure ended up in a Metro report summarizing the recruiters’ results, indicating it had not been reconciled with the membership data.

In the second “sponsorship” approach, Metro paid an additional six organizations to recruit, though no minimum targets were specified in their agreements. They were to recruit Opt In members from the groups they served, such as senior citizens or minority populations. Exhibit 6 compares sponsorships to other recruitment methods in terms of cost-per-recruit.

Exhibit 6
Results of various
recruitment methods
(adjusted for inflation)

Recruitment method	Costs	Members recruited	Cost per member recruited
Contracts (3)	\$21,406	2,275	\$ 9
Sponsorships (6)	\$28,088	103	\$273
Payments to contractors and sponsors	\$49,494	2,378	\$ 21
Total recruitment costs (personnel costs included)	\$75,262	2,378	\$ 32

Source: Auditor’s Office analysis of costs and Opt in panel data.

Retaining the services of outside organizations to recruit more diverse members showed some promise. However, this method also resulted in unintended consequences, increasing the over- and under-representation of some groups. For example, the most successful community organization in recruiting new members attracted some who were politically conservative and those with high school diplomas or less, as specified in its contract. Those gains were outweighed by the fact that it also succeeded in recruiting 13 times as many Democrats and four times as many more highly-educated members, two groups Metro did not need help recruiting.

More work needed to implement 2010 audit recommendations

In our 2010 audit, we made nine recommendations to improve Metro's overall approach to communicating with and hearing from the public. Management implemented two recommendations, four were in progress, and three had not been implemented.

The recommendations were based on findings that Metro's communication activities were focused primarily on informing the public rather than receiving information and that an overall approach was not in place. We recommended Metro:

- establish agency-wide communication goals.
- develop processes to evaluate projects against the goals.
- ensure spending priorities matched these goals.

When we followed up on this audit, we found that goals and priorities for Metro's communication investments as an agency had not yet been established. A discussion about general priorities began in October 2013, and public engagement was among them. Metro must complete work on the first recommendation before progress can be made on project evaluation and spending priorities.

The remaining recommendations were directed to the Communications Department and focused specifically on engagement, which the audit defined as activities intended to include the public in Metro's decision-making processes. Management made progress on developing objectives for engagement and evaluating strategies used to engage, but had not developed a system to use the lessons learned to improve future engagements.

The department also made headway on specifying staffing and funding for engagement by implementing a time-tracking system, though acknowledging more work needs to be done. The time-tracking system allowed management to better understand Communications' income and expenditures. That information, in turn, helped the department implement the recommendation to assign staff based on skills rather than funding source. Starting in FY 2014-15, staff will be funded through Metro's cost allocation system, which should provide management with more flexibility in assigning employees where needed.

Our final recommendation was to increase the likelihood that input from a cross-section of the public would be considered. The department began asking participants for demographic information, selecting focus group members to attract voices that traditionally have not engaged with Metro, arranging translation services at public meetings, and hiring a Spanish-speaking engagement specialist with ties to community groups. We considered this recommendation implemented.

Recommendations

To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Opt In, the Communications Department should:

1. Decide how Opt In will be used in the future by:
 - a. Clarifying its purpose and goals as a public engagement tool.
 - b. Weighing its effectiveness against other tools and engagement strategies with similar purposes.
2. Increase the likelihood that it will obtain and deliver public input as intended by:
 - a. Establishing policies and procedures to provide guidance to those who use Opt In to solicit input.
 - b. Aligning survey topics with the public input needs of Metro Councilors.
 - c. Improving the communications of results to enable Councilors to integrate the input into their decision-making process.
 - d. Analyzing demographic and trend data to adjust recruiting and participation strategies to achieve the goals in 1a.

Management response



Metro | *Making a great place*

Date: May 19, 2014
To: Suzanne Flynn, Metro Auditor
From: Martha Bennett, Chief Operating Officer
Jim Middaugh, Communications Director
Re: Management response to Opt In audit and 2010 audit follow up

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to management's request to audit Opt In. We understand and support the audit findings and recommendations and are already working to make changes that reflect them. At the same time, we are proud of our progress.

Background

The public engagement landscape is changing rapidly. Public agencies around the country are evolving their public engagement strategies to factor in the decline of traditional media and changing demographics while continuing to meet the charge of engaging with constituents. At Metro, this is particularly true for certain large-scale projects related to long-range planning. It's also true for certain communities. Attracting participation that reflects the region's growing diversity is difficult.

In the face of all these challenges, and Metro's own experiences with poor results and high costs for more traditional public involvement tools, we recognized we needed to innovate. Opt In was born in this context and in response to the 2010 audit's recommendations. As Metro's newest engagement method, Opt In joins a multitude of other tools and techniques used regularly to educate and engage residents.

Summary of management response

1. Decide how Opt In will be used in the future

While Opt In generates more participation from a more diverse population than other engagement methods, Opt In should be used where large-scale engagement is needed and/or a large number of comments are desired. Opt in should not be used when statistically representative comments are required.

Management agrees with the audit findings, and as such, we have adopted guidelines in Metro's Public Engagement Guide to help establish clear goals for engagement. Based on goals, the appropriate engagement method or methods should be selected. When evaluating Opt In against other methods, criteria like representativeness, timing, cost, and level of desired interaction should be considered. When looking at other methods, Metro should consider not only the methods themselves but also the ability to get people to use them.

2. Increase likelihood Opt In will obtain and deliver public input as intended

Changes within Communications, changes in Opt In contracts, and clearer procedures will improve guidance to those using Opt In. Management will use the opportunity afforded by this audit to engage the Metro Council in a discussion of how to better link online engagement with decision making.

A recent RFP for online engagement seeks additional support in making results of online engagement more accessible and effective. The initial effort to create an online results visualization tool will continue. More frequent communications to online engagement participants will be provided. The RFP also seeks additional support for analyzing and using participation data to achieve better results.

Response to recommendations

Purpose and goals

Opt In achieved its goal of attracting more diverse participation and more participation overall. One of Opt In's most important goals was to increase participation by underrepresented communities. During the audit period, a larger number of these community members participated via Opt In than any other method. The more than 20,000 people who joined Opt In remain an asset to Metro because they may be contacted about and encouraged to participate in any Metro engagement opportunity.

We also hoped to build an Opt In membership that reflected the demographics of the region. We agree we were unsuccessful with this goal. Metro consistently reminded staff, Metro Council members and the public about this challenge and included disclaimers in reports about results. Fortunately, the work Metro did with community based organizations to expand Opt In membership established new relationships and improved awareness and participation.

Until we can improve the demographic representation of Opt In participants or develop a reliable statistical weighting method Opt In should not be used exclusively if representative participation is desired. At this time, the only tool available to achieve representative participation appears to be scientific polling, which often is expensive and fails to engage groups with direct interest in the issues.

Effectiveness vs. other tools and strategies

We are pleased the audit concurs that on a cost-per-comment basis Opt In is less expensive than most other methods of public engagement, even though the findings include start up and recruitment costs. We also agree that Opt In is not the appropriate tool for every engagement scenario.

When Metro is working on site-specific projects where a lot of give and take is desired, for example Newell Creek Canyon, open houses and more traditional tools may still work. We've recently added new tactics to improve participation and engagement at site-specific events. When it comes to regional policy making -- i.e. the Regional Transportation Plan, growth management -- traditional tools like open houses are less effective. Virtually all tools other than scientific polling struggle to attract representative participation. And, with the demise of land lines, even polling is becoming more challenging and expensive.

The Communications Department will continue to use the Public Engagement Guide to help other departments select the most effective engagement methods, recognizing that some projects benefit more from face-to-face conversation and dialogue while others struggle to attract participation.

The audit findings reference "other tools" that may be more cost effective. We have found that other tools all suffer from the same challenge: the ability to get people to use them. When Metro has tried other tools, for example Shape Southwest or MetroQuest, we struggled to get people to participate. In fact, participation in both cases was driven largely by emails to Opt In members letting them know about the other tools. Without the Opt In database, the other tools would have had much lower participation resulting in higher costs per response. In addition, each use of an alternative tool required significant support from vendors and staff and Metro did not own the platforms after completion.

Policies and procedures

Opt In was a start up. As a result, Metro tried different approaches to maximize partnerships and recruitment. The fact that TriMet, Portland State University, Clackamas County, Washington County, City of Portland, Portland Development Commission and others took advantage of Opt In demonstrates considerable success. Metro used a variety of agreements and procurement methods because using one method would have reduced flexibility and therefore the number of partnerships. Metro will continue to reach out to other partners to take advantage of the Opt In database. It is likely that a variety of contracting methods will be required to meet the needs of different partners.

As for contract management, changes in the Communications Department's administrative support structure improved contracting processes, policies and procedures during the audit period. Communications is responsible for developing the contract used for Opt In but, like other agency-wide flexible service contracts, individual departments other than Communications were responsible for project-specific work orders. A recently launched, agency-wide procurement enhancement project will improve best practices for flexible service contracts. In addition, as of July 1, 2014 a new, non-flexible services contract will be in place for Opt In that will help support more effective documentation.

Communications has developed a draft check list to provide guidance to people who want to use Opt In and to clarify roles and responsibilities for various staff and vendors. We will complete the draft check list after the new contract is awarded. Communications also restructured various staff responsibilities. A new Community Relations Division within the department is intended to improve awareness of and coordination of engagement efforts across Metro. The new division will be tasked with evaluating Opt In versus other methods and with ensuring adequate support is provided to other departments and partners using Opt In. As the new division gets rolling and a new contract is in place management intends to identify a project manager for Opt In from within Communications.

Aligning surveys with the needs of the Metro Council

Management looks forward to engaging with the Metro Council about the kind of information they are looking for based on the audit. We agree with the audit's finding that staff found Opt In results useful. We also believe results helped shape the Metro Council's urban growth decision, the parks levy, changes in exhibits and parking at the zoo, and many other projects and programs.

Improving communication of results

Management understands people are more inclined to participate if they believe it will make a difference. We agree with the finding that Metro needs to do a better job connecting public input with decision making. Like attracting representative participation, finding ways to provide public input that meaningfully influences complex decisions is challenging. Improvements are necessary to ensure public input has the appropriate level of influence and to ensure people who comment understand how their comments will be used.

With its recent RFP, Metro seeks proposals to improve the accessibility and understandability of the results of online engagement. We also hope to complete work on the initial online results visualization tool begun by Metro's Data Resource Center. The visualization tool responds to feedback suggesting councilors might use results more if they were more easily sorted by various categories.

Analysis of demographic and trend data

We agree the percentage of Opt In members participating in each survey fell as the total number of members grew. In part, this is typical. The less interested people are in the topic the less motivated they are to participate. As people were recruited farther from the core of Metro's business lines, participation rates fell. In addition, the falling participation rate reflects management decisions to maintain staff positions instead of supporting panel management and retention activities in the depths of the recent recession. Based on fiscal realities, the Communications Department dedicated virtually no budget for Opt In panel communication and retention during FY 12/13.

Nonetheless, the audit's finding that more attention should be paid to panel member participation rates makes sense. Metro recently issued a new request for proposals to build on the Opt In membership and to improve online engagement, research and customer service support. We intend to select a firm or firms that can help improve Metro's ability to use analysis of participation to improve performance. We also believe more regular contact with members and better reporting about how members' comments are used will boost participation.

2010 recommendations

We believe we made significant progress on the 2010 audit's recommendations. Metro is advancing numerous programs and projects that improve public engagement. A new website with significantly improved translation and interactivity will launch on May 20th. A new public engagement advisory committee is in place. A restructured Communications Department will be better positioned to develop engagement approaches that better connect with different communities. Changes to the way the Communications Department's budget is developed provide more flexibility to respond to and support agency priorities. Time tracking by communications staff has created better awareness about how communications resources are being allocated. And, a new Public Engagement Guide makes significant progress toward the objective of establishing agency-wide goals and priorities for public engagement.

Conclusion

The audit findings and recommendations point out important areas for continued improvement. We believe Opt In has been a successful and useful tool in increasing the scope and diversity of participation in Metro decision making and we are committed to making it more effective. While there is more work to be done we also are proud of our progress on the 2010 audit recommendations and we will continue our work to implement strategic actions in response to them.



METRO

Office of the Metro Auditor
600 NE Grand Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97232
503-797-1892
www.oregonmetro.gov