



Public Engagement:

Strengthen capacity to improve results

September 2010

A Report by the Office of the Auditor

Suzanne Flynn
Metro Auditor

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for Auditing

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MEMORANDUM

September 29, 2010

To: Carlotta Collette, Acting Council President
Rod Park, Councilor, District 1
Carl Hosticka, Councilor, District 3
Kathryn Harrington, Councilor, District 4
Rex Burkholder, Councilor, District 5
Robert Liberty, Councilor, District 6

From: Suzanne Flynn, Metro Auditor 

Re: Audit of Public Engagement

The attached report covers our audit of Metro's public engagement efforts. This audit was included in our FY2009-10 Audit Schedule. Our objectives were to determine expenditure on communications products and services and to evaluate the effectiveness of public engagement efforts. We looked specifically at the use of public engagement in the Urban and Rural Reserves decision-making process and Metro's web site.

For the purposes of this audit, we defined communication activities as two-fold, either for the purpose of informing the public or for the purpose of receiving information back from the public. Based upon our analysis of expenditure, we concluded that Metro's communication efforts were focused primarily on informing the public. We believe that in order to be more effective, public engagement activities should be better supported. At this point, there is not a clear understanding or management of an agency-wide approach.

We have discussed our findings and recommendations with Michael Jordan, COO, and Jim Middaugh, Communications Director. A formal follow-up to this audit will be scheduled within 1-2 years. We would like to acknowledge and thank the management and staff in the departments who assisted us in completing this audit.

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Summary

Metro communicates with the public for a variety of reasons. Some of its communication strategies were intended to change people's behavior, such as encouraging them to drive less or garden with native plants. Others were to provide information about parks, natural areas, and recycling facilities. Some strategies were intended to solicit the public's input about policy decisions.

This audit evaluated the effectiveness of Metro's efforts to engage and learn from the public about regional policy choices. To conduct our analysis we separated communication into two categories, one was communication "to inform" and the other was communication "to engage." Communication "to engage" was defined both as providing information and listening to the public.

We determined that while Metro had a responsibility to engage the public, spending patterns indicated that this was not a priority. Metro spent \$13.2 million from FY2006-07 to FY2008-09 on communications staff, materials, and services. Seventy-three percent of the overall expenditures went for information purposes and 27% was for public engagement.

Metro's Communications Department did not have a strong role in decisions made about investments in communication. Our analysis indicated that the Department controlled only 3% of Metro's expenditures for materials and services dedicated to communication activities. While the Communications employees were centralized under the supervision of the Department director, they were assigned to projects by funding source and not used according to specific skills needed.

We reviewed two communications efforts, the web site and a public process to assist in policy decision-making. We found similar problems in each.

After analyzing the content and use of the web site, we determined that only a small portion of the web pages on the site were viewed. We found a large percentage of web site visitors surveyed trusted information from Metro. Similar to national research, we found a correlation between satisfaction with the web site, how much trust the user placed in Metro, and how likely they were to engage.

In its recent public engagement process to determine urban and rural land reserves for the region, Metro designed two approaches. One used a steering committee with diverse interests and the other provided opportunities for the general public to provide input. We found that both efforts could have been stronger. The committee did not arrive at a consensus as planned. Without demographic information, Metro could not determine if the representation of public input was demographically balanced.

As a result of our analysis, we recommended that Metro reassess its spending priorities on communications so that public engagement efforts can be more effective. The Communications Department should specify staffing and spending for public engagement efforts and evaluate them upon completion.

Background

Metro is a regional government with far-reaching and diverse responsibilities. As such, Metro communicated with the public on a variety of topics to achieve its goals. Some of its communication strategies were intended to influence people's behavior, such as encouraging them to drive less or garden with native plants. Others were intended to solicit the public's input about policy decisions.

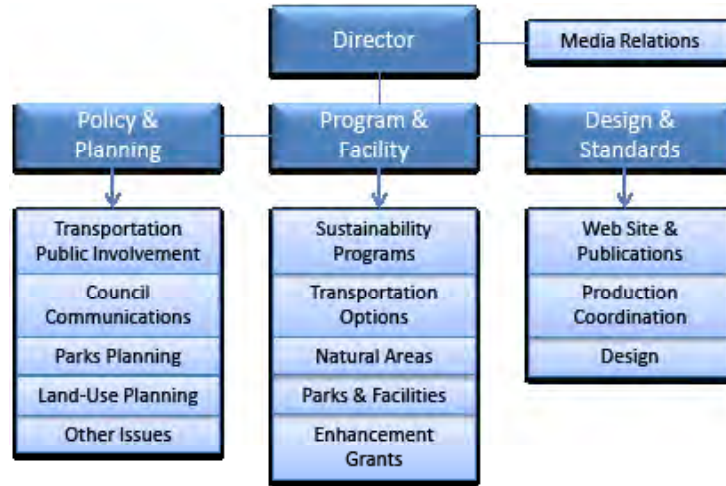
This audit made a distinction between communication that was intended to inform and communication that was intended to engage the public in a dialogue. We defined communication "to inform" when Metro delivered messages to the public, such as Walk There maps and natural gardening guides. We defined communication "to engage" when, in addition to providing information, Metro received information from the public, such as testimony at hearings or written comment.

Federal and state laws and regulations required Metro to engage the public, most significantly in the areas of transportation investments and land-use. Metro had broad latitude in interpreting legal requirements for public engagement. With few exceptions, legal requirements obligated that input be sought but did not prescribe how to obtain it. Metro's Charter also required that Metro have a citizen engagement process and a citizen's committee to aid communication between the public and the Council. The Council adopted guiding principles for citizen involvement in 1997.

Organizationally, employees who provided services for communications projects were in the Communications Department. However, the authority to decide communications strategies and investments was decentralized among Metro's departments. For that reason, this report discusses both the agency's communication function as well as the Communications Department.

The Communications Department was configured into three units led by managers who reported to the Communications Director. This position was filled by an interim director until December 2008. One unit was responsible for policy and planning, a second unit provided marketing services for individual programs, and the third served as the agency's publications and web site team (Exhibit 1).

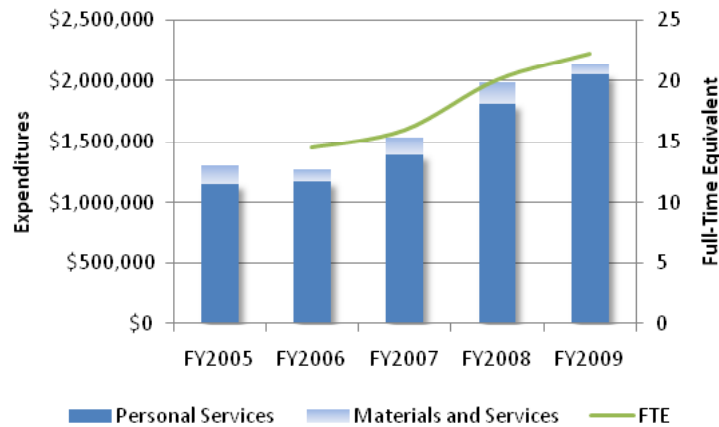
Exhibit 1
Communications Department
Service Areas by Unit



Source: Auditor's Office analysis of Communications Department organizational chart

There were 25.5 full-time-equivalent employees assigned to the Department in 2010. Communications Department expenditures over the five-year period from FY2004-05 through FY2008-09 were almost all for staff costs, which steadily increased over the years (Exhibit 2). The departmental expenditures and staffing levels in Exhibit 2 under-represented Metro's personal services costs because some employees were accounted for in other departments' budgets, such as Planning and Development and Parks and Environmental Services.

Exhibit 2
Communications Department
Expenditures FY2004-05
to FY2008-09 (adjusted for
inflation)



Source: Auditor's Office analysis

Scope and methodology

The purpose of this audit was to assess how Metro invested its communications dollars over a three-year period and whether its engagement processes and on-line tools were positioned effectively for public input.

Our objectives were to:

- Determine how much Metro spent on communications products and services from FY2006-07 through FY2008-09,
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Metro's web site as a source of information and a tool for engagement in policy decision-making, and
- Evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of Metro's engagement strategies for the Urban and Rural Reserves policy decision-making process.

We calculated expenditures for Metro's Communications employees and purchases of materials and services using data from the financial system. We identified expenditures for materials and services through contract records, vendor names, and interviews with staff. We extracted expenditures made through contracts as well as those made directly to 154 vendors.

Our scope excluded expenditures for Metro's visitor venues because they rarely engaged the public about policy issues. We excluded expenditures related to educational or programmatic outreach, because they were not related directly to communication. We also excluded any expenditures paid for with a purchasing card. We determined that excluding these expenditures did not materially affect our totals.

We used a case study approach to evaluate the web site and the engagement process for the Urban and Rural Reserves project. For each, we interviewed staff, calculated how much Metro spent, and attempted to determine what outcomes were achieved. We compared methods used by Metro to those recommended by experts as best practices.

For our evaluation of the web site, we conducted an online survey in April and May 2010 and analyzed available performance data. Based on the limited design of the survey, results should not be generalized. For the Reserves project, we interviewed participants and a consultant, observed public hearings, and analyzed zip codes in the legal record provided by participants. We also assessed 2000 Census data by the zip codes for several indicators, including family income, per capita income, race and ethnicity, age, and home ownership.

As part of our preliminary audit work, we conducted tests of Metro's compliance with its public records policies and procedures. We identified some areas that needed improvement and communicated that information in a separate letter to management.

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

Governments communicate with their constituents for a number of reasons, but not all communication is public engagement. Sometimes governments provide information or advocate for a specific outcome. Public engagement occurs, however, when governments learn something from the public. Strong public engagement efforts lead to a government's deeper understanding of a community's values and the trade-offs it is willing to make when they conflict. This information can be used to guide policy-making.

That type of knowledge about the public's views is best learned over time, through sustained engagement rather than periodic efforts related to a specific policy. It can result in better, more widely accepted decisions, public confidence in government, and institutional memory that is not lost when staff leaves the agency.

We evaluated the Metro web site and public engagement efforts in the Urban and Rural Reserves project to determine if improvements could be identified to benefit future engagements. Although the web site was a communication tool and the Reserves project a decision-making process, some of the same problems occurred in both. Our analysis indicated areas where Metro could improve its public engagement efforts.

We found that Metro was not well-positioned for public engagement, because it:

- Invested more resources in other forms of communication over public engagement
- Had structural weaknesses in the organization of its communication function, and
- Did not maximize its tools and processes to effectively engage the public

We also found that Metro had assets on which to build a meaningful public engagement system. Almost all respondents to our web survey reported a level of trust in Metro's information. Some public participants we interviewed developed a more favorable opinion of the agency as a result of their participation in the Reserves project.

Public engagement not prioritized

Agency documents were unclear about spending priorities for public engagement. One way to determine an organization's priorities is to evaluate how it spends its money. We found that Metro invested more towards providing information than engaging the public. Metro spent \$13.2 million from FY2006-07 through FY2008-09 on communications staff, materials, and services. Seventy-three percent of the overall expenditures went to information purposes and 27% went to engagement purposes.

Exhibit 3
Expenditures on
Communications Functions
FY2006-07 to FY2008-09



Source: Auditor's Office analysis

We concluded that this emphasis on informing:

- Made the agency's public engagement tools and activities less effective
- Led Metro to emphasize stakeholder engagement over public engagement, and
- Increased the likelihood of Metro making decisions without the input of a cross-section of the region.

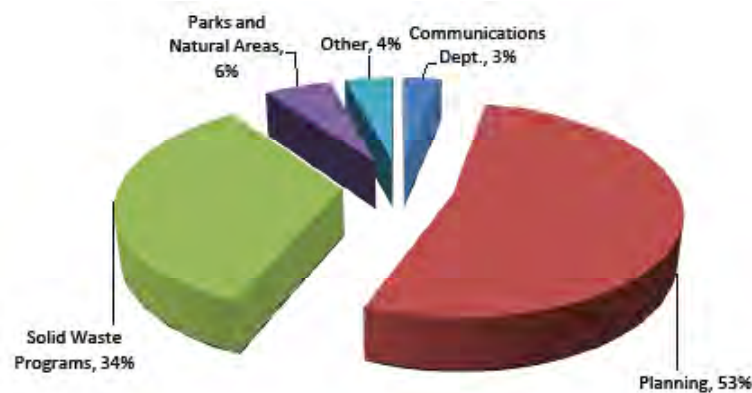
**Communications
Department's role
could be strengthened**

The Communications Department did not have a strong role in decisions made about communications investments because it lacked authority over agency-wide spending. Management's response to revenue constraints also kept the Department from using employees' skills strategically.

Funding from six revenue sources paid for the Department's employees. The Department tied specific employees to those funds and physically located them in the departments that paid their salaries. Tying employees to funding sources limited management's ability to use staff where it would be most effective. While it may increase the employees' programmatic knowledge, locating them in individual departments created barriers to sharing expertise within the Communications Department.

On the expenditure side, the Communications Director did not control Metro's spending for communications materials and services. Metro allowed each department to make independent decisions about purchases and did not coordinate or track them across departments. The Communications Department controlled only 3% of the agency's expenditures for materials and services spent on communication activities. Programs related to planning and solid waste controlled most of the payments.

Exhibit 4
Communications Materials
and Services Expenditures
Agency-wide
FY2006-07 to FY2008-09



Source: Auditor's Office analysis

Metro's decision to centralize staff in the Communications Department and decentralize the spending for materials and services across the agency had some negative consequences, such as:

- No manager or department was responsible for overall expenditures and evaluating their effectiveness
- Some investments were made without the input of Metro's in-house Communications Department
- Communications Department employees served two masters: the department that funded the project and the Communications Department management.
- Communications Department managers accepted projects on demand, making it difficult for them to prioritize jobs and manage workflow

The Communications Department recently undertook steps to establish criteria to make staffing decisions. The Communications Framework outlined what types of projects should be done in-house and which would best be done by consultants and other external communications vendors. This Framework was the Department's attempt to control its workflow and cope with the underlying fragmented management system. The criteria established how the Department would respond to requests. In practice, managers were unable to use the criteria to prioritize work. The Framework also did not determine whether the projects should be undertaken at all.

Most of the services outlined in the Communications Framework were for informing rather than engaging. The Department did not have resources for large-scale public engagement projects. When describing how such projects would be staffed, the Communications Framework called for temporary employees, independent contractors, or consultants. Metro had four full-time public involvement employees on staff, but they were assigned to the Planning and Development Department. These employees were not mentioned in the document as a staffing option for other departments, because they were restricted to federally funded transportation projects.

Best practices indicate that activities to gain knowledge about public preferences should be an ongoing activity, not a periodic check in about a single policy decision. According to the Framework, Metro put high-profile, long-term public engagement projects in the hands of temporary employees or consultants. As a result, Metro may not benefit from the experience and community relationships developed by these temporary employees for future engagements. Metro had several projects on its horizon that required public input, including plans for community investments, climate change, parks, travel corridors, the Zoo master plan, and solid waste sites. These efforts could be more efficient and effective if in-house expertise were used.

Web site could be used more effectively

Methods of communication are undergoing significant change. According to recent studies, people increasingly used the Internet to access information and engage with government. The Internet could be a powerful tool for engagement, potentially making communication with the public easier, less costly, and more effective. We looked at Metro's web site because it was a key point of entry to the agency for the public. In examining the web site, we evaluated who it was reaching, how it was managed, and what tools were used. Overall, we found Metro used the web site to inform rather than engage. Few resources were dedicated to it and little attention was paid to whom it was reaching.

Although Metro considered the web site its primary communication vehicle, the site accounted for less than 10% of communication spending in each of the three years from FY2006-07 to FY2008-09. Staffing also presented a barrier to its effectiveness. There were several employees who worked on the web site, but for most it represented only a small percentage of their total job responsibilities. The number of full-time equivalent employees declined from 2.8 to 1.9 over the past three years.

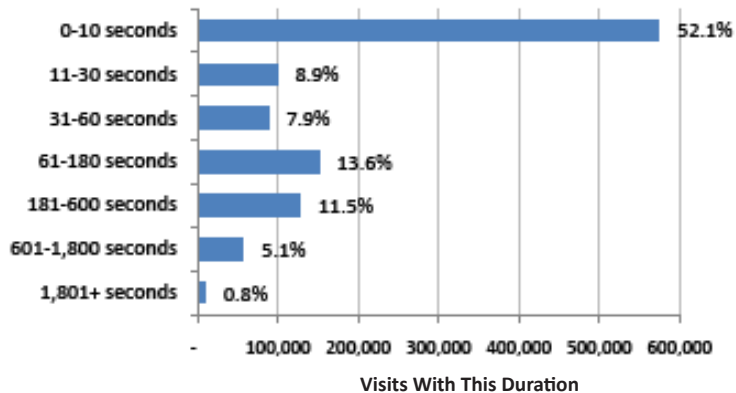
Staff who managed the web site did not control spending decisions. Instead, every department decided independently about which web projects to fund. As a result, no one was responsible for or tracked expenditures. Without understanding how much was spent, it was not possible to determine if Metro was getting a satisfactory return on its investment.

Additionally, the agency did not track the number of visitors and the quality of their experiences to identify whether its strategies were effective. An advantage of online communication is that data to evaluate how it is used is readily available, often at no cost. We found minimal tracking of available data. Employees' work was driven by a continuous stream of requests, rather than by finding out what worked and building on it. Employees said they were too busy managing their day-to-day responsibilities to regularly monitor the web site. Staff used data primarily for technical support, such as monitoring browsers and server usage.

We found frequent use of the web site. In FY2009-10, the main web site had over 1 million visits from more than 680,000 unique visitors, predominantly from the Metro region. Considering the region had an estimated population of 1.6 million in 2009, many people were learning about Metro through the web site.

The unit that produced Metro’s printed material also coordinated the web site and edited its content. The site had thousands of pages, but no system to find out what had real use and value. Visitors viewed only a small portion of the web site’s pages. Over half of visits lasted less than ten seconds and people most frequently left after visiting only one page.

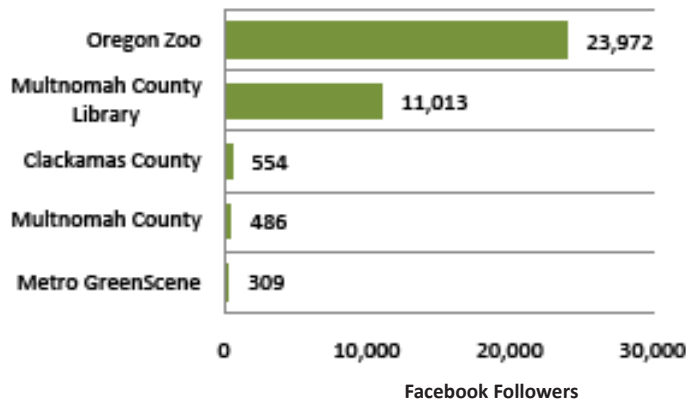
Exhibit 5
Length of Web Visits
July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2010



Source: Auditor’s Office analysis

During our audit, Metro prepared to launch wider use of interactive tools, such as Facebook and blogs. While it had key technical tools in place, it did not have processes and staffing to support an online dialogue. To date, Metro’s use of these tools had not reached broad audiences, with the exception of the Oregon Zoo. Metro’s main Facebook page, Metro GreenScene, had few followers compared to other area governments.

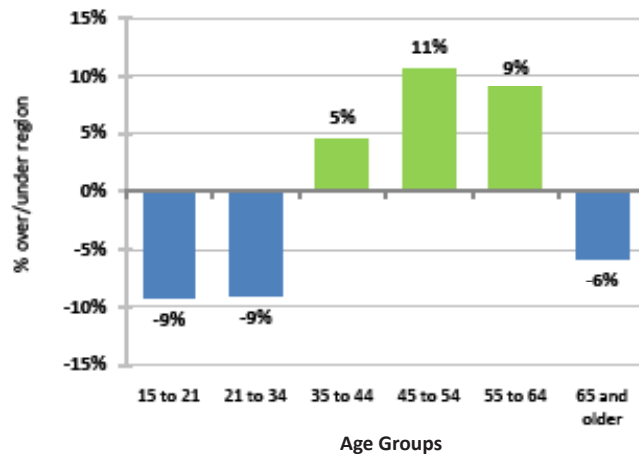
Exhibit 6
Facebook Use
August 2010



Source: Auditor’s Office analysis

Without a plan for engagement or a method for monitoring use, the web site was not as effective as it could be. We conducted an online survey of web site users. Although our analysis was limited, people under 35 years of age were under-represented among those visitors responding to our survey. This audience was important to engage because the agency often had projects with 20- or even 50-year planning horizons.

Exhibit 7
Age of Web Users Compared
to Regional Population



Source: Auditor analysis of online survey, 2010

While visitor satisfaction expressed in the survey responses was high, other performance data showed Metro’s audience base had declined over the previous year. Data on the number of visitors to Metro’s web site was available for only two years. Visitors had declined 9% from 750,000 in FY2008-09 to 680,000 in FY2009-10. However, our survey of visitors found respondents were generally satisfied. Most (67%) found what they were looking for, but this varied depending on the topic. More than 80% of people looking for information related to the budget, composting, paint and employment, found it. In one important area, visitors had less success. Only 28% of people looking for contact information found it. This was because Metro did not provide most employee contact information online.

According to national research, there is a correlation between satisfaction with a government agency’s web site, how much trust people placed in that agency, and how likely they were to engage. Our survey produced similar results. Overall, 92% of respondents agreed or somewhat agreed that they trusted information from Metro and 82% agreed or somewhat agreed that Metro wanted to hear their viewpoint. Respondents who found what they were looking for reported trusting information from Metro more. Those who felt Metro wanted to hear their viewpoint were also more likely to trust Metro information.

Exhibit 8
Correlation Between
Satisfaction, Trust and
Likelihood to Participate

	Trusted information from Metro generally	Did not trust information from Metro generally
Found what they were looking for	95%	5%
Did not find what they were looking for	83%	17%
Felt Metro wanted to hear viewpoint	99%	1%
Did not feel Metro wanted to hear viewpoint	52%	48%

Source: Auditor's Office analysis of online survey, 2010

Recent engagement process could have been stronger

The Legislature granted new authority in 2007 to Metro and Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington Counties to identify areas of the region for future development and reserve others for agriculture and natural areas. The designation of urban and rural reserves for the next 40 to 50 years was intended to bring a measure of certainty to land-use decision-making. The legislation authorized Metro to designate urban reserves and each of the three Counties to designate their own rural reserves. Metro adopted an ordinance in June 2010 to formalize the designations.

Rules based on the legislation required Metro and the three Counties to pursue a coordinated citizen engagement process. The four jurisdictions decided on a two-track engagement. One track would be a steering committee representing business, agricultural, environmental, social and local governmental groups. The second track would involve separate opportunities for the general public to participate in the decision-making process. Metro staff took lead roles in supporting both the steering committee and the coordinated process for public engagement. Additionally, each County conducted its own activities.

We found that the steering committee took priority over the public opportunities. Metro invested \$1.7 million in the Reserves project overall from July 1, 2007, through April 30, 2010. Of that, 75% went to support the Reserves Steering Committee. The remaining 25% went to public engagement. We concluded that neither effort effectively delivered information to the decision-makers, and that this was the result of an ineffective design and implementation.

Steering Committee did not arrive at a recommendation

Metro designed the steering committee to reduce lobbying by individual interests that had emerged each time the Council considered changes to the Urban Growth Boundary. It believed the ultimate decision about the reserves designations would be improved if the individuals could reach consensus and make a recommendation on a long-range plan. The steering committee had 30 members, four of whom were elected officials representing Metro and each County. Those four were the only voting members.

The design of the steering committee seemed comprehensive. It had the technical support of planners from each jurisdiction and the assistance of a professional facilitator. Representation also seemed appropriate. It had direction from the Metro Council in the form of guiding principles. It adopted its own operating principles with two clearly stated goals: To oversee the study of and make recommendations on the designations of urban and rural reserve areas to the Metro Council and County Commissions.

However, the steering committee did not achieve either goal. It oversaw the study of urban reserves, but was disbanded before it could consider rural reserves. It did not produce a consensus recommendation or majority-minority report on urban reserves. We identified several factors that contributed to the steering committee not succeeding:

- Monthly three-hour meetings were structured for presentations instead of consensus-building. Staff and others provided information while committee members listened.
- The timetable was unattainable. The committee held its first meeting long before important information was available. When there was time for discussion, there was no information to discuss. When there was information, there was no time to discuss it.
- Meetings were formal events with microphones and long tables, which discouraged discussion.
- Expectations for the role of the facilitator differed. The contract proposal sought a meeting facilitator, but a professional mediator was hired. The facilitator defined the job narrowly, seeing the role as mediating the differences among the committee's four voting members. Others thought the job was to shepherd the full committee to a recommendation. In the end, the facilitation role, which cost Metro and the Counties \$277,000, was not a significant factor. The voting members eventually reached agreement after the committee disbanded.
- Metro brought in key support too late to maximize its effectiveness. It hired the Planning Department's project manager as a limited duration employee about two weeks before the steering committee's first meeting. No work plans had been developed. The facilitator came on board at about the same time. Had she been brought in early to help with the process design, she said she would have advised convening a smaller group and making time for her to meet individually with each member.

Reach of public
engagement effort
unknown

Staff reported that Metro and the Counties provided 180 "discrete opportunities" for the public to provide input. However, Metro does not know if those opportunities involved a "cross-section" of the public, as required by state planning rules.

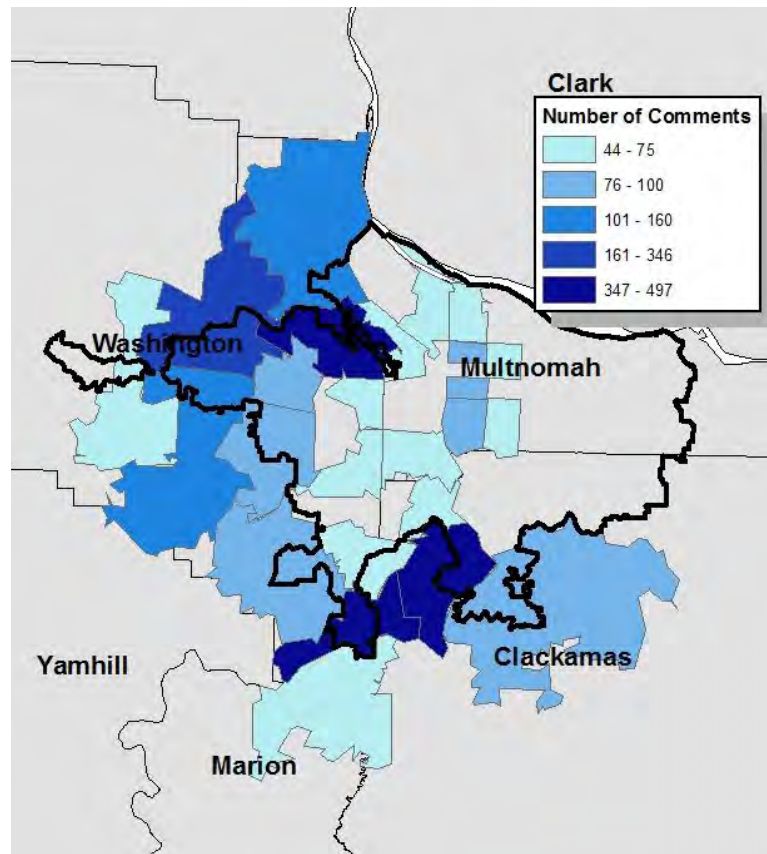
The Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development required that a cross-section of affected citizens participate in the land-use planning process, but left it to government entities to define what a cross-section of

their jurisdiction was. Metro and the Counties' public involvement plan did not contain such a definition for the region. Best practices state that public engagement should result in demographic diversity. Staff sought no demographic information from those who participated in the process. Had demographic information been collected, it could have been used to monitor results of engagement strategies, target outreach to unrepresented groups, and inform decision-makers about who they were hearing from and who was silent.

We found that comments came primarily from the western and southern sections of the Urban Growth Boundary. Zip codes in central Portland, eastern Multnomah County and northern Clackamas County were not among the top 25 zip codes with the highest number of comments (Exhibit 9).

It may not be realistic to expect everyone in the region to provide input. From the outset, staff predicted more input would come from the region's edge but no plans were in place to monitor whether the prediction held true and if outreach needed to be more targeted to ensure a cross-section of input. Public involvement summaries and reports did not inform decision-makers of the geographic gaps in the input and any demographic groups associated with those areas that had not been heard from.

Exhibit 9
 Number of Comments by Top
 25 Zip Codes in Urban and
 Rural Reserves Project



Source: Auditor's Office analysis of public comments documents

Although not conclusive, we used census data to further examine participation. Based on this analysis, it is possible that public engagement might not have been demographically representative. The highest input zip codes were wealthier, less racially and ethnically diverse, and had a higher percentage of home ownership than the region as a whole, according to Census data. These areas also had a higher percentage of 25 to 34 year-olds than the region as a whole. However, this age group did not appear to be well represented by those who attended or testified at the public hearings we observed.

Metro and the Counties could have increased the likelihood of attracting a cross-section of input had they identified that as a goal. That fundamental lack of direction led to the following inefficient and ineffective investment of resources:

- There was a duplication of representation. Many of the same groups represented on the Reserves Steering Committee were also identified as the primary audiences for public outreach.
- Groups that traditionally do not participate in government decision-making were not targeted for engagement. These groups will be affected financially by needed public investments as the region grows. In particular, young people will live the longest with the benefits and consequences of these policy decisions.

As a result, these efforts became an unfocused attempt to reach the general public. Research from the marketing field indicates that targeting audiences is more effective and efficient than general appeals, especially when there are limited funds to invest. Engagements that try to prioritize everyone leave decision-makers hearing mostly from the most motivated and able participants.

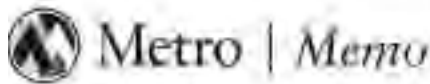
Some decision-makers expressed concern about the number of events and repetitive nature of the input from the same participants. We attributed this result to the weak design of the engagement. With little direction about the goals of the public engagement process, coordinators were left without a standard by which to evaluate their performance. Success was defined by the number of open houses and hearings held and the number of people who showed up. These numbers did not reveal who participated and who did not. Had that information been sought and monitored, strategic outreach activities could have been developed as the process went along to solicit more diverse and effective input.

Recommendations

1. To improve the effectiveness of communication efforts, Metro should:
 - a. Establish agency-wide communication goals and priorities that include public engagement
 - b. Develop processes to evaluate and prioritize various communications projects against these goals
 - c. Ensure spending is based on agency priorities

2. To improve the effectiveness of public engagement efforts, the Communications Department should:
 - a. Develop objectives for public engagement
 - b. Evaluate public engagement efforts in meeting these objectives
 - c. Use the results of evaluation to improve future engagement
 - d. Specify departmental staffing and funding levels for public engagement
 - e. Assign Communications staff based on skills, rather than funding source
 - f. Increase the likelihood that input from a cross-section of the public will be considered

MANAGEMENT RESPONSE



Date: September 24, 2010
To: Suzanne Flynn, Metro Auditor
From: Michael Jordan, Chief Operating Officer
Jim Middaugh, Communications Director
Subject: Public Engagement Audit

We would like to thank you and your office for conducting this audit. As you know, we encouraged this review during development of your annual audit schedule and we appreciate the diligence and professionalism shown by your staff in researching and preparing the report. We welcome all of your recommendations. We identified a number of the deficiencies and opportunities that you also identified and have already taken action to address them.

These actions include hiring a new director of communications, creating a centralized communications management team, shifting formerly embedded personnel from other departments to Communications (which accounts for a significant portion of the increased FTE and associated costs you identified), implementing a more function-based team structure and launching several new-media initiatives. Additional changes are underway that are responsive to your recommendations. Those changes, and additional improvements being planned or underway, are highlighted below and organized on the basis of your recommendations, which for summary purposes are grouped under four general categories: prioritization, evaluation, staffing levels and assignments, and ensuring diverse input. We also provided some additional information to address some of your specific findings.

Prioritization

During the course of your audit the Communications Department established a communications framework. That framework calls for an annual prioritization process, with quarterly updates, for communications investments based on objectives approved by the Senior Leadership Team in response to Council direction. The framework was completed during Fiscal Year 2009 after the time period of your audit was well underway. The FY 2010-11 budget was the first one created using the framework.

While we agree with your finding that the framework did not effectively establish goals or overall agency communications priorities, it did help ensure the Communications Department had a significant role in creating budgets for the Community Investment Strategy, HB 2001 greenhouse gas reduction scenario development, the Sustainable Communities Partnership grant application, the Zoo bond implementation program and the Natural Areas Program education campaign.

The Metro Senior Leadership Team is working to establish an overall agency prioritization strategy. The Communications Department is actively participating in that work. Similarly, as part of the Metro/MERC Business Study, a cross-department team identified a number of potential efficiencies and improvements to web services. A cross-department team will make recommendations about priority web projects. Those priorities will be evaluated by the Senior Leadership Team as part of the annual budget process. We believe these actions, along with your recommendations, have put us on a course to establish a more effective prioritization system.

Evaluation

For the current fiscal year, the Communications Department established a department-wide goal that calls on staff to "consider measurement in all your work." We believe that clearer objectives are an important start to better evaluation. Metro will expand the use of surveys that ask people who engage with Metro how they heard about the opportunity to participate. Metro recently initiated the use of trackable email. Open and click rates are reviewed and evaluated at least quarterly. In addition, communications staff recently started producing monthly monitoring reports on web usage and monthly monitoring of earned media results. Improving the reports and the use of these reports by management is an important next step.

In early 2008 the Communications Department entered into a series of flexible services contracts to improve the monitoring and evaluation of communications materials and services spending. These contracts provide a mechanism to ensure the Communications Department is consulted on and able to better monitor the effectiveness of a significant portion of the agency's communications work. The scope of communications-related flexible services contracts was expanded during August of 2010. While we have made strides in tracking communications spending, more work is needed to ensure that all agency-wide communications investments are based on agency priorities and that they are monitored and evaluated.

Staffing Levels and Assignments

Based on agency priorities identified by the Senior Leadership Team, the responsibilities of several communications department staff members were shifted as part of the FY 2010-11 budget process. Additional improvements in timekeeping and cross-project accounting are under consideration but Metro's diverse range of funding sources makes it difficult to assign staff solely on the basis of expertise while complying with required rules and regulations. Diverse materials and services budgets for many projects were identified by communications staff during budget development and are centrally managed by the Communications Department even though funds remain in the budgets of other departments. More work is needed to improve tracking of those funds so policy-makers and the public are fully aware of the amount and uses of communications resources.

Ensuring Diverse Input

Metro is working on a number of projects to improve its capacity to establish and effectively maintain an ongoing dialogue with a diverse cross-section of the public. For example, the Communications Department recently entered into a contract to test the use of what is known as an Internet Panel. The panel involves recruiting a large, demographically representative group of residents to participate in ongoing public engagement efforts online. The technique is widely used by the private sector but currently is rare in the public sector.

Because demographic information is captured for each panel participant, staff will be able to measure results against demographically specific goals and objectives. The technique also will allow staff to provide more robust information to policy-makers about the people who are participating even if goals are not achieved.

The Communications Department also is exploring the use of other online systems to make it faster and easier for the public to engage with Metro. The department has created the necessary legal and technological infrastructure to support an online comment tool. While there currently is not adequate staff to support its use, management is working to shift resources to support this function. Similarly, Communications Department staff is developing a plan to promote the various opportunities to engage with Metro. Additional resource shifts may be needed to implement the promotion plan.

Through the work of Metro's Diversity Action Team, Communications Department managers and staff are helping select goals, indicators, strategies and actions for committee participation and public

involvement by communities of color and other underrepresented populations. The goals will help guide communications investments and monitoring. Metro Communications staff members also are creating an Environmental Justice Committee to provide advice about culturally specific engagement work.

Other Findings

Informing vs. Engaging

Your report characterizes Metro's communications-related investments in two categories, to inform and to engage. Metro appropriately invests significant resources in communication that helps people know how best to reduce toxics, recycle, bike, walk, carpool and use transit. That said, we believe your report raises important policy questions about the relative balance of investments in information and engagement. We will pursue those questions during budget development.

Reserves as case study

Your audit used the urban and rural reserves decision as a case study. While Metro played a lead role, it is important to note that this effort was shared among four governments who were not always aligned in their desired outcomes from the process. Because of the complexity of the reserves project Metro and its partners made an informed choice to make significant investments in informing and engaging stakeholders about the nature of the decisions and options to refine choices and areas of conflict. We also believe that when you take into account the significant contributions of partner agencies the overall allocation of resources among engagement and information would appear more balanced.

Stakeholders vs. the General Public

With land use decisions in particular, Metro always attempts to engage the entire regional community while, at the same time, recognizing that its decisions change the long term use of individual parcels of property and so affect specific individuals and families in profound ways. Metro also frequently relies on stakeholders—in particular the region's elected officials and community based organizations—to serve as representatives of public interests. The appropriate balance between stakeholders and the general public and between ongoing, large-scale engagement and the needs of specific landowners is an area that deserves more strategic consideration and policy discussion at the Metro Council level.

Website and Social Media

We agree Metro's website has many pages that are visited only rarely. For this reason, staff does not spend time managing those pages. In most cases individual pages reflect things like a single news release or a single Council decision. Those pages are static but still available for visitors who need them.

Metro's use of social media is very new. Metro made a conscious decision to experiment with social media tools using its programs and venues before expanding its use into the policy arena. Based on experiments to date the Communications Department is preparing to expand work to grow subscribers, panel members, fans and followers. Metro's use of Twitter recently has attracted a combined 2,300 followers using two separate channels.

We would prefer to see a growing number of visitors to Metro's site. In the past, Metro has not promoted its site. The Communications Department is preparing a campaign to raise awareness of the site and what it offers and to encourage people to join the Internet panel described above. The reach of the campaign is limited by available resources.

Again, we appreciate your thorough evaluation. Your recommendations will help guide important and continued improvements in Metro's ability to effectively inform and engage the region.



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