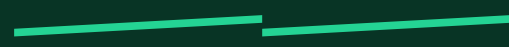
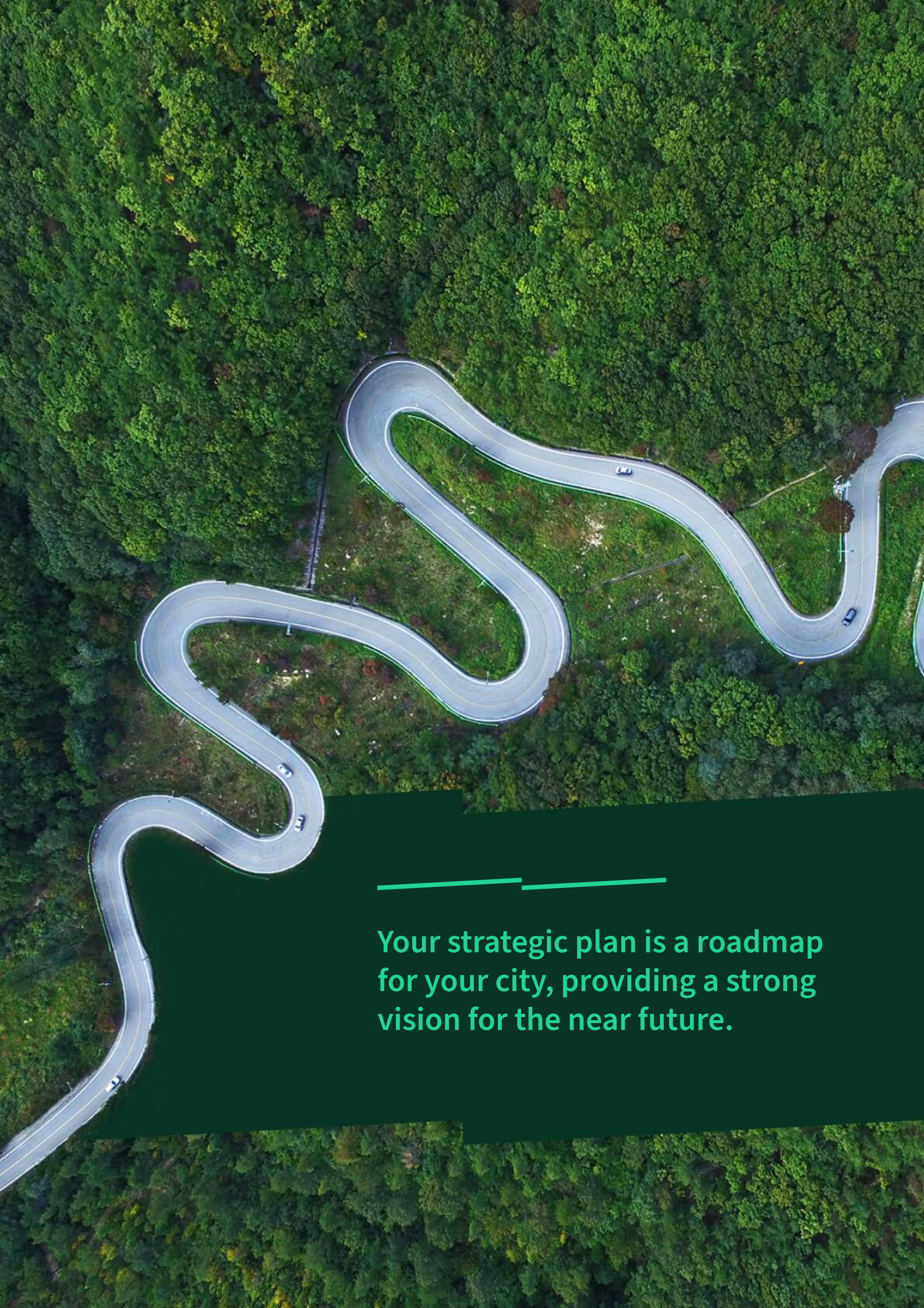




The City Manager's Guide to

Strategic Planning Made Easier Through Community Feedback



Your strategic plan is a roadmap for your city, providing a strong vision for the near future.

Introduction

What makes a city a city? Is it its architecture, its landmarks, the flavor of its streets? Is it its public transportation, restaurants and shops, parks, libraries, and pools? The answer is all of the above, but at its heart, what makes a city is its residents.

Local government leaders are responsible for providing a diverse range of services and running dozens of initiatives, often in parallel, from plowing snow to building new bridges. Some of these arise daily, but others are more predictable, even occurring cyclically. One of the responsibilities of local governments is ensuring that the many elements that make up a city or county stay on track, evolve, and grow. To do so, government leaders are tasked with both creating [strategic plans](#) to guide them into the future, and with [performance management](#) to help them understand if their efforts are working along the way.

Typically built on a timeframe of between two and five years, a city or county's strategic plan sets big-picture objectives and touches on all aspects of livability—from health to culture to equity—not only mapping out a city's goals, but also the means by which to get there. One of the biggest challenges for a city or county in creating a strategic plan, is knowing what to prioritize.

For that, [the key is to turn to the residents](#) that lie at the heart of a city. Understanding what all of a city's residents need not only helps governments serve their entire community, it also makes the strategic planning process—as well as many other governmental processes—simpler, more efficient, and more effective. This eBook will discuss some of the challenges of creating a strategic plan, performance management, and how representative community input can streamline those processes.



Understanding what all of a city's residents need not only helps governments serve their entire community, it also makes the strategic planning process—as well as many other governmental processes—simpler, more efficient, and more effective.

Strategic planning best practices for cities and counties

01

How do you craft a vision that personifies a city, moves it into the future, and represents the diverse interests of all its residents? This is one of the questions that city and county managers must ask when creating a strategic plan and choosing its priorities. Yet the question of priorities is complex, as there are several factors that enter into the decision-making process and into the best practices of local government strategic planning:

1 Determining a vision

Unlike budgeting and other planning, a strategic plan doesn't require city managers to account for every dollar ahead of time. The Government Finance Officers Association's (GFOA) [Best Practices: Establishment of Strategic Plans](#) suggests that, "While it is important to balance the vision of community with available resources, the resources available should not inhibit the vision." Furthermore, the GFOA sees strategic planning as "influencing the future rather than simply preparing or adapting to it," going on to say that it is the vision itself that should then determine the allocation of resources.



2 Obtaining community input

Gaining resident and stakeholder input is important to the creation of any strategic plan. The GFOA's Best Practices urges governments to put mechanisms in place to gain that input, such as public hearings, surveys, meetings, and workshops. However, getting this input in a representative and timely manner has historically been a significant—and sometimes expensive—challenge for local governments.



3

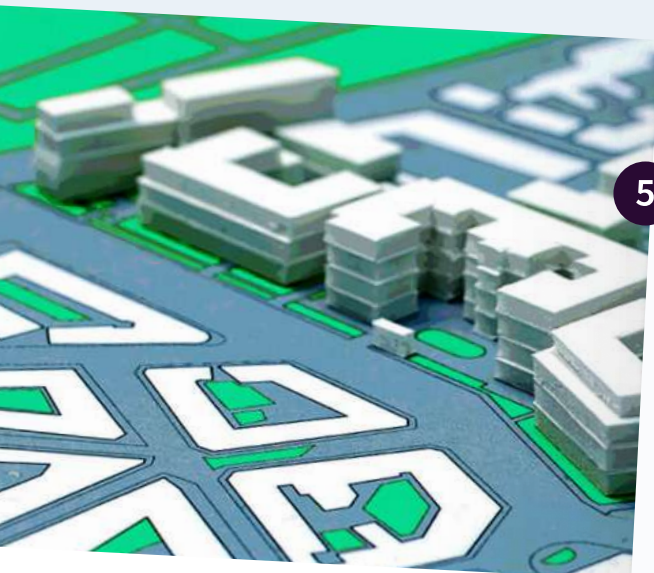
Getting stakeholders aligned

The creation of a strategic plan varies in approach and by jurisdiction, but always involves buy-in from multiple stakeholders. In some cities and counties, elected officials set goals while the staff creates the plan itself. In other places, it's the staff itself that conceives the plan, while elected officials review and approve it. And in some cities and counties, strategic plans are a group effort, created by a committee that includes elected officials, staff, community members, and stakeholders. Yet no matter how the plan is created, collaboration and multi-level cooperation on the planning level will help guide and set the tone for subsequent policy and budgeting decisions.

4

Measuring impact

A strategic plan is more than a city's wishlist; it also addresses the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Performance management assesses the implementation and effectiveness of a strategic plan on an ongoing basis through key performance indicators (KPIs) and data analysis. Furthermore, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, a strategic plan should be flexible and dynamic, adapting with environmental changes and to the insights delivered. Similarly, performance management should measure success both over time and in real time, allowing local governments to adapt as necessary.



5

Building on the past

A vision for the future doesn't need to reinvent the wheel. Previous strategic plans, regional plans, state plans, or even plans from nearby cities and counties can all be used as a reference, framework, and guideline for the creation of a strategic plan.



Strategic Plan Key Ingredients: a forward thinking vision, community input, stakeholder alignment, borrowing from past successes, and proper performance management.



The obstacles to strategic planning without adequate community feedback

02

The best practices laid out above provide the necessary guidance for city and county managers to craft a forward-thinking and impactful strategic plan. Yet while these best practices emphasize the need for resident input, they fail to take into consideration the barriers currently in place to representative community engagement. As a result, each best practice introduces its own set of challenges—challenges that are deepened by a lack of adequate and easy-to-gather community input:

1 Building a vision

Strategic planning doesn't require a dollar-for-dollar accounting of funds, but it does require a broad-strokes idea of resources, especially since it's the vision itself that's meant to determine that allocation. Yet without understanding what residents need from their city, it's almost impossible to know both how to prioritize funding by area, as well as to understand which avenues of fundraising—from added tax to public-private partnerships—are pursuable.

2 Gaining resident and stakeholder input

There's no question that the GFOA's recommendation to include resident input in the strategic planning process is an important one; after all, a local government's strategic plan needs to be in the best interest of its residents. But while the mechanisms proposed to gather that input—public hearings, surveys, meetings, and workshops—are a good first step, they leave governments with the same issues of representation they already face. In most cases, resident feedback comes from the same ten people (the STP)—the squeaky wheels who already attend public hearings and meetings, actively engage with their council members, or loudly comment on the city's social media. At the same time, the broader community doesn't lend its voice, either because of barriers such as a lack of free time, general distrust in government, accessibility, or because people simply don't know they can. As a result, simply relying on public hearings and meetings for community input will lead to the creation of a strategic plan that heavily favors the same few residents the city is already serving.

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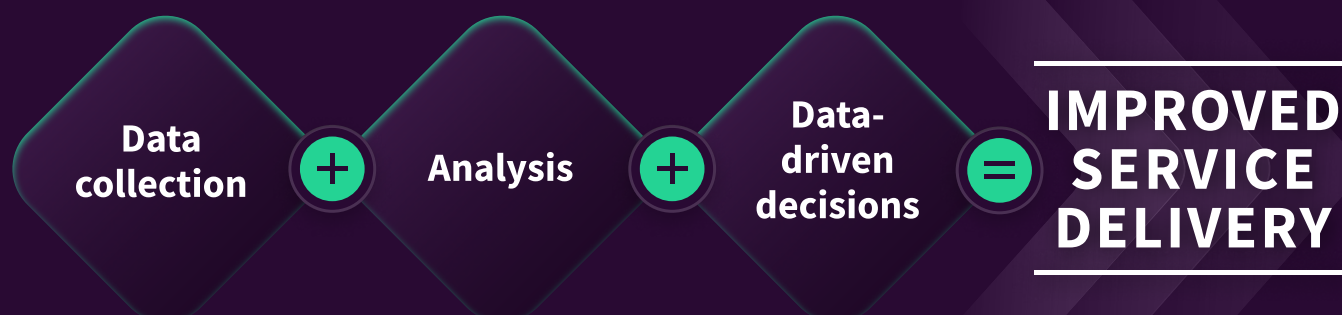
Performance management and your strategic plan

A strategic plan is more than a city's wishlist; it also addresses the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Performance management assesses the implementation of your strategic plan and evaluates how effective it is. Good performance management can help you stay on track and measure the impact of different initiatives in support of strategic and other city plans year-round.

The performance management part of your strategic plan will:

- ✓ Identify key performance indicators (KPIs)
- ✓ Serve as the basis for improving processes and services
- ✓ Rely heavily on data and analytics
- ✓ Measure your current achievements

Performance management is, “The process of consistently reviewing performance data to inform decision-making.”



Source: National League of Cities

3 Getting your strategic plan approved

While the responsibility of creating a strategic plan varies by jurisdiction, the process often involves drafting by committee or approval by elected officials like council members. Problematically, those committee members or elected officials are often hearing from those same ten people—many times with anecdotal stories, which are powerful but not necessarily representative—making them less likely to advocate for or approve measures outside of those residents' interests. At the same time, city managers often lack the data necessary to back recommendations beyond the STP, making an equitable strategic plan more difficult to achieve.

As a city manager, **ideating your strategic plan presents an opportunity for community engagement** on a greater level.

4 Measuring your impact

Strategic plans cover many different areas of livability, each with a different set of KPIs, and it can be difficult to achieve a standard metric across city hall. Resident satisfaction is a metric that can be tracked in real time and over time, allowing for an understanding of how the city is performing in each of the areas identified in the strategic plan, and ultimately allowing for improvements during execution.

5 Looking at past successes (and learning from past mistakes)

Looking at previous or neighboring strategic plans can help guide cities and counties. However, it's not as simple as adapting and replicating what has been done before—government leaders must strive to take advantage of only what has been successful. Unfortunately, unless there are metrics of success such as levels of resident satisfaction attached to other plans and initiatives, understanding what has and hasn't worked becomes impossible. How do one city's initiatives compare to another's? What does resident satisfaction look like in other areas? How do I know if my organization is actually over (or under) performing and how can this comparative data be useful?

With these challenges in mind, city managers must find ways to expand how they gather resident input and feedback. Doing so will lower the burden of strategic planning and moreover, will allow for the creation and implementation of a strategic plan that represents all corners of the community.

Equity and inclusion: necessary ingredients of a strategic plan

In order to accurately represent the interests of all corners of your community, you must aim for an equitable and inclusive strategic plan.

The American Planning Association [defines planning for equity](#) as, “Recognizing planning practices that have had a disparate impact on certain communities and actively working with affected residents to create better communities for all.” Similarly, the ICMA’s [Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) urges to “Consider issues of equity and inclusion that go beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, and include variations in age, sexual orientation, ability, economic status, educational attainment, immigration levels, and community size,” and goes on to say, “Equity and inclusion are possible only when barriers are acknowledged and removed.”

When thinking about creating an equitable city, local governments can either build equity into each strategic priority, or create a separate Equity Strategic Plan. In either case, it's imperative that measures that ensure inclusivity be woven in during the planning process. This is because often the voices that are easiest for governments to hear do not necessarily speak for the most people. To ensure all voices are being heard, the barriers that may exist to resident participation must be removed. These include:

Accessibility

Are your public meetings accessible to residents without private transportation? Can they be attended by shift workers, single parents, or others who may not be available in the evenings? If not, what alternatives exist? What opportunities do community members have to make their voice heard?

Knowledge

Are your residents aware that they can participate in the strategic planning process? What means are you using to distribute information and encourage their participation?

Language

If your community is multilingual, is the information you’re disseminating available in more than one language? How are you communicating with non-English speaking residents?

Information sources

Are your residents more likely to respond to calls to action through official or unofficial sources? Can you utilize social media and community surveys to expand your reach?

Trust

How can you increase trust within your community, especially among community members who have historically been reluctant to engage with governments?

Equity and inclusion: necessary ingredients of a strategic plan

If you're just getting started with building an equitable strategic plan, below are some resources to help you ensure your city's future is inclusive:

Government Alliance on Race & Equity's [Racial Equity: Getting to Results](#) provides in-depth instruction on performance management for equity to incorporate into strategic planning.

The National League of Cities has defined [six steps](#) for advancing racial equity in your city.

[PolicyLink](#) includes a vast number of resources on racial and economic equity, including webinars, guides, and tools.

Living Cities has been working to operationalize equity and inclusion. Check out their [website](#) for ideas on how to incorporate equity into your own organization.

The American Planning Association's [Voices of Equity](#) provides a series of videos on planning for social equity.

ICMA's [Equity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) is an excellent resource for understanding what areas should be looked at from an inclusionary lens.

Furthermore, cities should turn to the wealth of data available to them to ensure their strategic plans are equitable and demographically representative. Among the resources that are available to understand how representative a city's strategic plan is, are the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Small Business Administration, state demography office, pollution/air quality meters, economic development office, industry associations, school district, public health department, 911 and emergency response data, crime and criminal justice data, insurance statistics, property ownership and foreclosures records, local government hiring/retention/salary/HR statistics, resident feedback, and more.

Speak with one of our local government solutions specialists today to find out how Zencity can help you leverage community feedback in creating a more equitable city.

Get in Touch

How harnessing broad community input can help streamline your strategic planning process

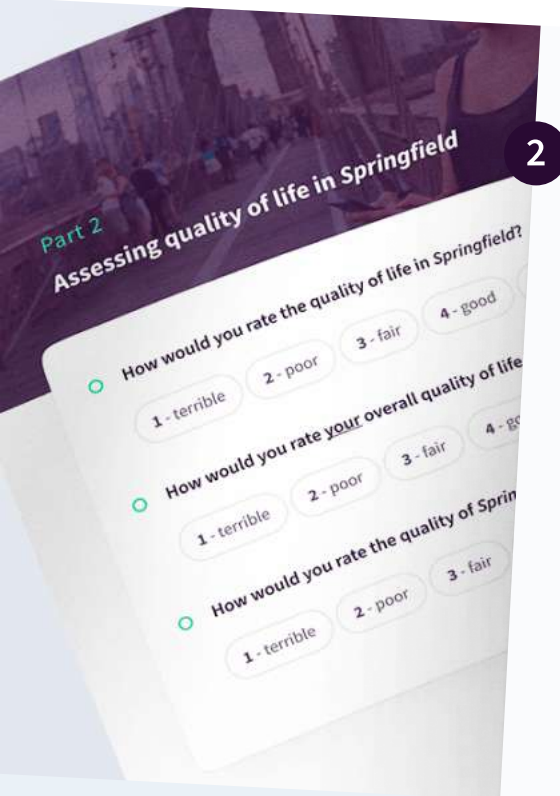
Perhaps the biggest challenge for city and county managers alike in creating a strategic plan is obtaining broad community input. Yet doing so is essential to streamlining the strategic planning process, as having representative input—and the data behind it—is not only “the right thing” when it comes to determining a vision for the future, it also simplifies each step along the way, from understanding how to allocate funds to getting the plan approved to assessing its effectiveness. How then can city and county managers obtain representative resident feedback and leverage it for a more effective planning process?

1 Getting beyond the STP for better city planning

Getting beyond the STP can be daunting. After all, the STP make their voices heard, whether by showing up to meetings or making phone calls. It’s easy to mistake the enthusiasm of a few residents for the needs of the community at large, and it’s hard to have the evidence in hand to overcome that enthusiasm when it comes to getting elected officials aligned with a plan.

For this reason, city managers must find ways to gain broad resident input easily and in a timely manner. This can be done through traditional ways, such as changing the time or location of community meetings to accommodate a greater section of residents. But through technology such as Zencity, this can also be accomplished by listening to the voices that don’t make themselves heard through traditional means of civic engagement: Zencity helps cities access community feedback on unofficial channels, such as through comments in Facebook groups or conversations on Twitter. In other words, it gives city managers insight to conversations happening not only in town hall meetings, but also among friends and neighbors.





2

Using community surveys for a better realization of vision

How should a city or county choose its strategic priorities? The challenge for city managers is once again in hearing the voices beyond the Same Ten People. Zencity helps cities understand their entire community's needs around specific priority areas by gathering feedback in a representative manner through surveys that are distributed through unofficial channels, such as sponsored posts on social media. Through community surveys, cities can learn how residents feel about certain measures, which areas need improvement, and how to allocate funds to effectively serve the entire community.

3 How resident feedback can help get council on board and your strategic plan approved

The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and it's for that reason that council members often push for the measures their loudest constituents are fighting for. But both city managers and council members ultimately have the same goal in mind: to serve all of their residents. Using Zencity, city managers can set up projects to see resident feedback on individual topics. That data can then be used to support their recommendations around strategic plans and give council members the wider community's views around certain topics and issue areas. As a result, city managers can much more easily get strategic plans approved by helping council members feel confident that they are serving their constituents and the interests of the entire city or county, and not just the squeaky wheels.



Coronavirus: Reopened

28% 16%



Libraries

17% 2%



Water Quality

14% 32%

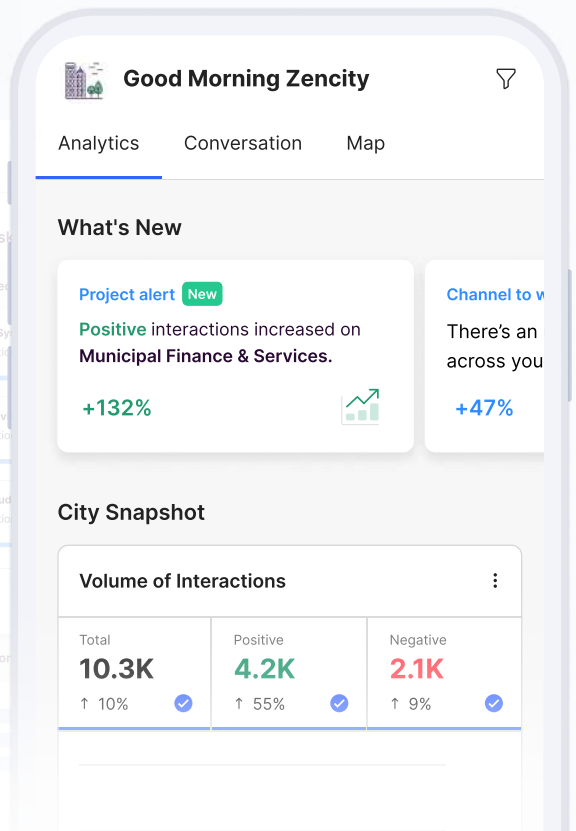
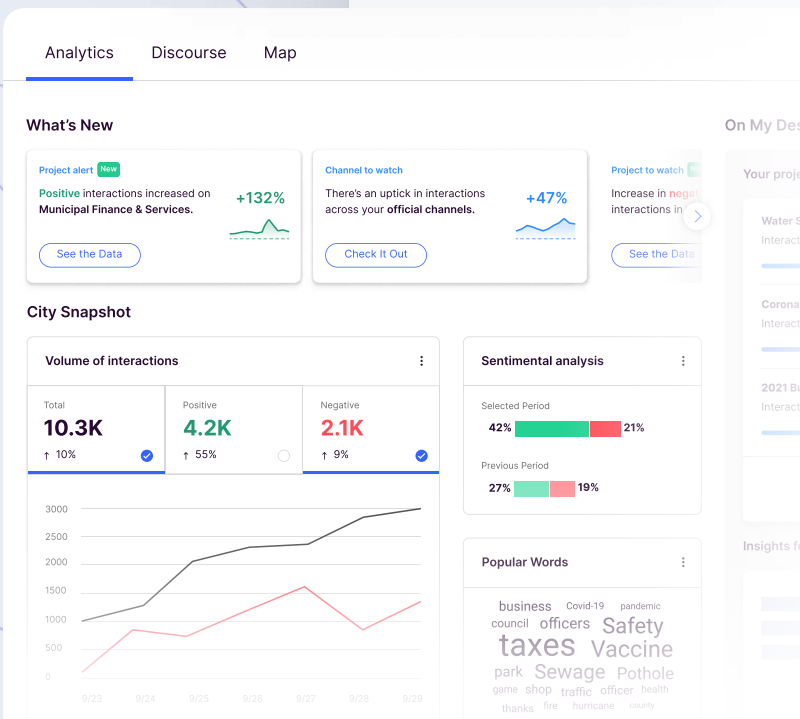
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Community feedback as a performance management solution

Performance management is part of the creation and implementation of a successful strategic plan. Good performance management enables you to measure the impact of your organization’s work and ultimately understand if your strategic plan is moving the needle. But performance management is hard. While each topic of a strategic plan may require different metrics for evaluating its success, resident satisfaction can serve as a consistent metric across all priority areas and goals—and resident feedback is the ultimate way to measure resident satisfaction, providing a strong performance management solution. With Zencity, cities can create project dashboards to view all of their resident sentiment and discourse in one place, both in real time and over time. This allows for a better understanding of the strategic plan’s implementation, and allows cities to adapt their approach as necessary.

City and county managers can also use Zencity’s Community Survey for an overall understanding of resident satisfaction and in order to gain insight into areas which may need improvement. Since the Community Survey allows for ongoing, continual resident satisfaction scoring, city and county leaders can use it as an automatic KPI of resident satisfaction.

[Learn how Zencity harnesses cutting edge AI and expert analysis to connect you to your community's heartbeat.](#)



5

Benchmarking against similar communities

To borrow from the successes of nearby communities, city and county managers must first understand what those successes are. Zencity's [benchmarking tool](#) allows leaders to see how their organization is performing compared to similar jurisdictions, both overall and around specific services. With the knowledge of where they are underperforming comparatively, they can adapt their strategies accordingly, investing more in certain initiatives or celebrating and amplifying others.

Once areas for improvement are identified, cities and counties must also easily understand how to improve. Zencity works with hundreds of cities and counties, which provides both the data necessary for benchmarking and exposure to a plethora of local government initiatives for sharing successful best practices. Zencity's team of data and policy experts curate detailed reports and insights into what's working elsewhere, so that communities don't have to reinvent the wheel.

ZENCITY INSIGHT

Predicting resident sentiment regarding a new casino launch

new casino growth local economy
counties community sentiment



Measuring community sentiment

In the analysis of the pre-launch of a county's new casino, Zencity showed that 47% of residents reacted positively, 52% were neutral, and only 1% had negative feelings towards the project based on social media comments, reactions, and shares.

Lessons learned from other counties

While on the surface, it seems that based on those figures the casino would be a welcome addition to the county, Zencity's expert analysts were able to compare the pre-launch sentiments to those of other communities where casinos had been built, raising a warning that other local jurisdictions also saw favorable reactions pre-launch, while resident concerns grew as the project progressed.



WHAT IS ZENCITY?

Community insights & analytics for local government

Zencity helps cities and counties of all shapes and sizes understand the needs of their residents. Our cross-channel platform is the only civic engagement solution that aggregates and analyzes organic input alongside proactive surveys, transforming broad-reaching community feedback into actionable insights. We do this using cutting-edge AI and our team of expert analysts.

✓ Get council on board

Zencity gives you the broad reaching, community input you need to make data-based recommendations to elected officials and to help council feel confident when approving your proposals.

✓ Improve performance management

Zencity's resident sentiment analysis provides a standardized KPI across all of your initiatives and services, allowing you to easily measure impact and pinpoint areas that need improvement.

✓ Stay one step ahead

Real-time resident feedback helps you be proactive in responding to the community and expressed priorities. Automatic alerts about trending topics can also help you understand what's a crisis and what's just noise.

✓ Benchmark your achievements

Compare your performance to that of similar cities and counties with Zencity's Benchmarker and see where your community excels, and where you need to improve.

✓ Hear from all corners of your community

Gathering community input can be challenging. Zencity plugs into the organic conversations people are having across hundreds of data sources, making it easier to understand your residents' needs.

✓ Run ad-hoc & ongoing community surveys

Zencity's end-to-end survey services provide temperature checks on specific initiatives, as well as ongoing, statistically valid, and representative community surveys with expert reporting.

✓ Act with data in hand

Zencity's platform automatically transforms all of your residents' feedback into actionable insights using AI and a team of experts, giving you the necessary data to budget, plan, and take action based on your community's expressed input and priorities.

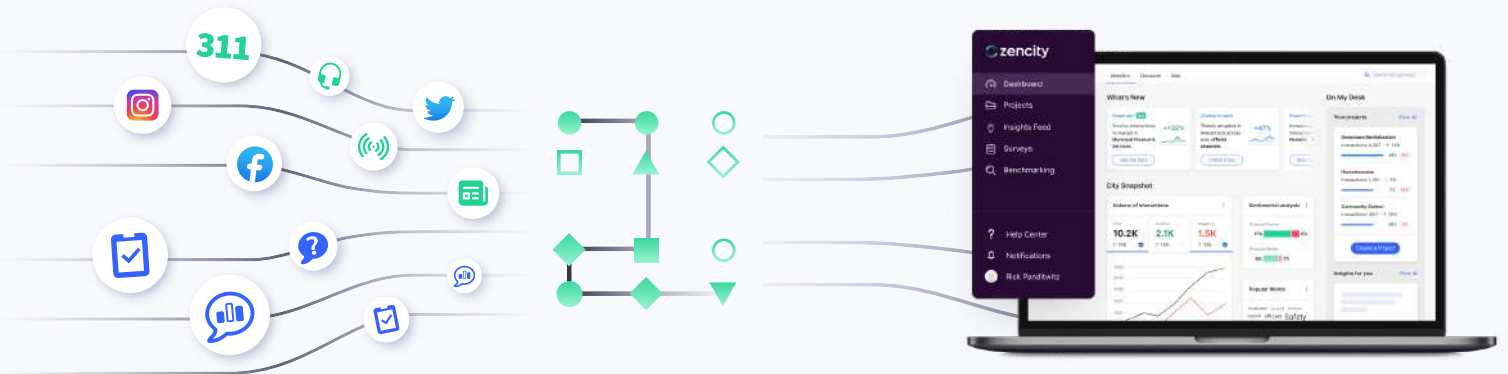
Plan, strategize, budget, and measure impact - across every department in city hall - with non-stop access to community feedback.

See Zencity's technology in action →



THE ZENCITY SOLUTION

Getting community feedback has never been easier



Aggregated data

We aggregate and anonymize millions of resident-generated data points from a variety of sources including social media, local news, 311, council meeting minutes, and more

AI powered analysis

Zencity analyzes the data with our award-winning AI to identify and classify resident discourse by topics, trends, anomalies, source, location, and sentiment

Actionable insights

Our platform and mobile app, paired with curated reports by our data analysts, provide visual, actionable insights so you can understand your community's needs and priorities in real-time and over time

Meet Zencity

Founded in 2015, Zencity works in partnership with leading organizations such as ICMA, NACO, ELGL, Mastercard, Microsoft, and more. Today, hundreds of state and local government organizations from across the U.S., and the globe, use Zencity as an integral part of their workflow to ultimately increase resident satisfaction and improve the quality of life of their residents.


DAYTON


Sarasota County




ADAMS COUNTY
COLORADO

TOWN of CARY

 City of
Philadelphia


AURORA
ILLINOIS

Measuring the impact of a strategic plan around winter services

Civic engagement is often discussed with the purpose of reaching all corners of the community and as a means of better understanding and aligning with residents' needs. But while civic engagement is essential for crafting your strategic plan, it can also be used as a performance management tool to understand how well you've accomplished your goals.

The Borough of State College, PA, implemented a strategic communications and operations plan around snow removal, particularly around communicating to the public what it means to be under a "snow emergency." They turned to resident feedback data to understand how well they implemented their plan and to measure its effectiveness.

Using Zencity, the Borough was able to determine that **positive sentiment around winter weather services was 10X greater than negative sentiment**. Furthermore, the Borough was able to compare resident satisfaction around winter services to satisfaction in similar communities with Zencity's benchmarking tool. In comparing satisfaction levels around winter services, Borough leaders learned they were **performing higher than peer municipalities**. Lastly, State College learned that its residents were more heavily reliant on unofficial sources than peer communities, leading the Borough to tweak its strategic plan and reset its goals to become the official line of communication.



"With Zencity's benchmarker, it was very powerful to see - through data - that we were performing so well... The impact this positive feedback has had on key leaders in our organization and their teams is invaluable. Focusing on these positives also gives us even more momentum to continuously improve - and the data helped show us how we can improve and grow as well."



Douglas Shontz

Assistant to the Borough
Manager, State College, PA

You can find the full case study [here](#)

STATE COLLEGE
PENNSYLVANIA

Conclusion

Drafting a strategic plan for a city or county is no easy feat: it involves building a vision, juggling multiple stakeholder interests, and dynamic execution. Each of those tasks requires a nuanced understanding of resident needs—after all, it is its residents that make a city a city.

But understanding resident needs and incorporating community voices into one’s strategic plan goes beyond inclusive governance. Hearing a broad range of resident voices at all stages of the process simply makes for better strategic planning: it not only streamlines the process and ensures that your plan speaks for all of its residents, it also makes gaining approval from elected officials easier, and lays the groundwork for effective performance management. In other words, broadening the channels with which you gather resident feedback will lead to a more inclusive city, but it’s also simply good business.

See how Zencity can help your community streamline its strategic planning process by incorporating more resident voices today.

[Schedule a demo →](#)

Popular Words

business Covid-19 pandemic
 council officers **Safety**
taxes Vaccine
 park **Sewage Pothole**
 game shop traffic officer health
 thanks fire hurricane county