**Strategic Planning for Communities Count in King County**

*August 2013*

After a long and thoughtful gestation, in 1997 [Communities Count](http://www.communitiescount.org/) assumed its formal identity as a public/private partnership to develop and report on a core set of social and health indicators in King County, one of the largest and most diverse counties in the United States. Today, Communities Count faces the challenges of remaining relevant and useful in the Age of Information. We begin with four questions:

1. **What is the role of Communities Count?**
   * The germ of Communities Count came from a 1993 King County Council mandate to develop a vision of healthy communities for the County’s children and families, and to identify concrete ways to evaluate progress toward that vision.
   * In 2013, after five major data reports, changes in format, technology, frequency of updates, and availability of data, we are re-examining our role along several dimensions.
     + Scope: Should we cover all relevant topics, or limit ourselves to a select few?
     + Depth/Context: How much is enough/too much?
     + Data-to-Action: Should we present data on the efficacy of relevant policies and programs?
2. **Who are our current audiences? What other audiences might be able to use Communities Count?**
3. **What is our unique value?** What do audiences like? What do they want that we don’t provide? What do we provide that they don’t need? How can we most effectively communicate with them (website; social media; in-person presentations; webinars; other)? How much explanation and context do they want/need? How do they use our data (specific data-to-action examples)?
4. **If we still offer real value to King County audiences, what’s the best way to sustain our operation?**

We consider these issues in light of the following changes that have occurred since indicator projects started rolling out in the late 1990s and early 2000s:

* Proliferation of surveys with at least some overlap with a survey that Communities Count has fielded every 3 or 4 years since 1999: King County Resident Survey; King County Metro customer survey; BRFSS; ACS; Civic Health Index (CityClub); Sound Behavior Index, Social Capital Index (Puget Sound Partnership); Child Care Survey (WA Dept. of Early Learning); etc.
* Probable redundancy of analyses with little communication among those doing the analyses (in academia, government, policy think tanks, major foundations, human services providers, media [especially new media outlets], etc.). Often redundancy occurs even within entities (branches of King County, WA State, and municipal governments).
* Movement to web-only platforms (Communities Count is completing this transition now).
* Introduction of powerful tools for data visualization.
* Increased use of relational databases for analyzing and presenting data reports.
* Cutbacks in CC’s traditional funding base.
* “Democratization of Data” – proliferation of public data sources, often with little guidance about how, when, and why to use and interpret the data.
* Perception that informative, valid data are just a click away. Is this true? If so, what are the implications for indicator projects like Communities Count?

**Fortunately, we have several sources of information we can use to address our key questions.** Some of the following sources emerged serendipitously due to delays in the design and launch of our new website.

* Urgent data requests during design of website (unexpected source that provided valuable information about who was using our data and how those data are currently being used).
* Usability testing for website.
* Website analytics.
* Feedback from the website and from public presentations.
* Ongoing data requests.
* Invitations/requests for collaboration in data collection.
* Interviews, surveys, group meetings, and other outreach/analysis from external strategic planners.

**The above sources have already given us some answers (pre-strategic planning):**

* County-level data are not fine-grained enough: Strong demand for sub-county analyses, often for geographies smaller than regions: cities, census-designated places, neighborhoods. Data at these levels are often difficult to find.
* Feedback, across several domains, that Communities Count data are being used to make policy and planning decisions.
* Preference for easy-to-understand graphics.
* Enthusiasm for data visualizations (but no clear sense yet of how/if audiences are using them).
* Enthusiasm for the depth of information provided on our website, but no sense yet of whether this is actually *useful* in making planning and policy decisions.
* Requests for data that would require tailored analyses and/or oversampling (in specific geographies, of particular age groups, with more ethnic/racial diversity).
* More requests than we can satisfy for in-person presentations, tailored to specific audiences (planners, city councils, human services agencies).
* Requests for up-front explanations of confidence intervals, race/ethnicity category abbreviations, statistical concepts.
* Suggestions that we provide more guidance about evidence-based policies and programs to facilitate data-to-action agenda.

**This leaves us with some specific issues to address in our strategic planning process:**

* Of the topics that we currently cover, which are/are not genuinely useful? Are there topics that we should be covering?
* What kinds of partnerships should we nurture?
  + For data collection and analysis: Should we do our own survey(s), partner with others, or just use publicly available data? If we partner with others for data collection/analysis, what form should those partnerships take?
  + For breadth of coverage: Should we continue to cover a broad range of topics or carve out our own small niche of data expertise? If we create/join a coalition of “expert” data sites, we would need quality-control and monitoring standards, as *we would be shifting at least part of our identity to that of a data clearinghouse.*
  + For interpretation of data (possibly extending to evidence-based applications): partnerships with content and policy experts.
  + For governance/membership/financial support: If we find new audiences for which Communities Count data are genuinely useful, we would hope to expand our steering committee and supporting membership accordingly.
* What level of detail and explanation is most useful/appropriate for our audiences?
* What new technologies should we embrace? New technologies offer the promise for streamlining operations, but: (1) Do they fulfill that promise? (2) Do they address the needs of our audiences? We need to streamline, but sometimes feel ill-equipped to evaluate the extent to which various technologies will actually serve our needs and the needs of our audiences. This question needs to be addressed in tandem with questions about how much context/interpretation to provide.
* How can we most effectively communicate with internal and external audiences, and with partners/potential partners? We’re open to everything from social media to in-person presentations, but we want to be able to measure the effectiveness of our communication efforts.
* *Important technical question:* How can we most responsibly present data for small geographies, knowing that policy decisions are being made on the basis of what we present?
  + We currently use charts and maps to localize data.
  + How much additional explanation is necessary?
  + “Impressions of difference” vs. statistical power: Because of small Ns, differences between groups may appear large but are not statistically significant. What is the most responsible way to present these data (understanding that data can catalyze positive change in the absence of statistically significant findings)?
* Should we offer guidance about evidence-based policies and programs?
  + Do we want to provide more explanation, interpretation, and suggestions for action?
  + Do we take the next big step of linking to evidence-based solutions? If so, what responsibilities/liabilities might we incur? What new audiences might we attract if we took this step?
  + *Note:* If we take this on, the issue of statistical power becomes more important; we may assume an added responsibility to train audiences about evidence-based practice and interpretation of data (especially trends).
* How do we build a model for our own sustainability?
  + Do we continue with our current model (with new efforts to find funding from corporate sponsors and foundations)?
  + Should we develop a membership model?
  + Do we accept contracts for tailored data requests, in-depth analyses, oversampling for surveys, etc.?
  + Should we change our legal/tax status? Should we continue our primary data analysis affiliation with Public Health? What are the relative advantages/disadvantages?
  + Answers to the above questions will help us address issues about size and staffing.