NNIP Baltimore 2017

Plenary Session: Supporting Local Government

May 18, 2017

Panel

Noah Urban, Data Driven Detroit (Moderator)

Megan Johanson, Community Research Partners

April Urban, Case Western Reserve University

Alicia Rouault, Metropolitan Area Planning Council

**Noah**: Panel on how NNIP partners can be supportive to local government. Encapsulates an issue that touches everyone in this room. We all work with local governments. Want to cover some sensitive issues, can share both positives and negatives to the relationships we have been able to establish with local city governments. City governments can provide data, can make decisions, have subject matter expertise and can be fabulous partners on specific projects. But panel should also cover risks and challenges that can come from local government entity. Political transitions can make it difficult make it hard for us as we try to be impartial partners over a longer period of time. City governments can also be bureaucratic and unchanging - making it difficult. All city governments are different, and function differently, but sharing experiences should still be beneficial.

Will start with Megam, from Columbus.

**Megan**: CRP is a nonprofit research and evaluation organization created as a partnership between city, county, and university. We consider them our core partners to this day. For city and county, we have annual contracts with each of them, with annual amount of hours. We have a point person in both governments. Meet with point people annually to decide what types of projects they are interested in and how many hours will that take. For example, city asked them to assess the large multifamily properties so CRP did a field survey with a checklist and rating system. We combined that info with code violation data and gave that to the city for decision making around code enforcement.

With the County, we have working with child and family services to assess effectiveness of an emergency support team to help caseworkers with high volume. Wanted to get process evaluation data from people who were involved into report with recommendations and gave that back to county for decision-making.

We simply help them with additional capacity. Some of the things are things that the government could do, but we bring a broad perspective to the projects that we work on through diverse professional teams. We also contribute ability to work with not only City and County, but with other groups that are interested.

For example, we did a youth needs assessment that was focused on youth birth-12 in Franklin County (follow up to study on your 12-24). This project involves support of core partners + 4-5 other entities in community that wanted to get involved and support the project.

**Noah**: *How to maintain neutrality and independence?*

**Megan**: Well, we are not really evaluating what the government does just providing analysis and recommendations, so we haven't had a problem.

**Noah**: *Are you working with elected officials? How to avoid having the work too politicized?*

**Megan**: Originally commissioners were funding through the core agreement, but now that got pushed down to agencies so we don't have that problem.

**Noah**: For organizations, as small as ours, how to deal with contracting without putting the sustainability of organization at risk?

**Megan**: City probably has simplest contract system. County process can be delayed. At county, has to be approved by agency leadership. The city pays half up front, half in installments. For county, we bill every month for projects billed, so we have a little more concern of leaving money on the table.

**Noah**: Turn now to April from Poverty Center at Case Western Reserve University.

**April**: Think of our work in 2 buckets: (1) invest in children initiative and research evaluation (2) integrated property and data system, known as “Neo Cando”.

Neo Cando has three funders:

* Land Bank - Quasi-Governmental
* City of Cleveland - Department of Community Development
* Nonprofit funding intermediary - Cleveland Neighborhood Progress

Will focus on relationship with Department of Community Development and Department of Building & Housing. We make code enforcement data available to community development entities in Cleveland. The City maintains workflow of data to run department; they give it to us on weekly basis which we transform and link to other parcel info and get to a web based portal.

That relationship managed through the VABAG - Vacant and Abandoned Properties Group; which gets together on monthly basis to understand issues of vacant and abandoned properties. That groups helps govt get on same page about funding and sharing research and information.

**Noah**: *Relationships that allow for constructive criticism. How have you fostered that?*

**April**: Being a part of VABAG is instrumental in our context in helping us to be a neutral voice and maintain our neutrality. We bring data and information to the policy and advocacy discussions. We have also taken an infrastructure approach. We have some specific objectives that we complete for Dept., but we hope that the work benefits additional jurisdictions.

**Noah**: *What about community groups? If you are working closely with city, how do you maintain trust with these community orgs?*

**April**: We do a lot of hand holding. We put out data, but community groups don’t immediately know what to do with it. Through hand holding, people have come to know us and we are there to assist them. Sometime I laugh because I will hear from neighborhood groups “we know you are on our side” and hear the same from government entities “you understand how we work”. That can feel fishy, but that is truly our mission. We try to fully and clearly explain and translate what we see. Being fully transparent has helped us stay neutral in our objective.

**Noah**: Turn now to Boston

**Alicia**: Leads data services at MPAC, a state level agency. As part of the public sector, MPAC serves 101 cities and towns in Boston area. We are a planning agency and provide technical assistance to municipalities and help them work together. 14 staff in data services team. We work to collect data, manage data, and drive data-driven decision making across the region. State of MA is interesting because counties are weak and there are no unincorporated areas. Regional planning agencies step into role of helping cities work together. Data services in divided in three teams: digital, analytical, research. Ultimately we provide TA to cities and towns and that is part of our mandate. A small part of muni budgets goes to state, and then MPAC is mandated to provide that back to local cities and towns through TA. In addition, we do a lot of work directly with cities outside through direct contracts.

MBAC provides benefits to member cities and towns through capacity. Help cities and towns create tools, access data, and analyze and understand data. Different to work with a city of 5,000 than working with the city of Boston. Capacity varies. We also play a role in change agency- ways to innovate and serve as a convener at local, regional and state level. Encourage people to think regionally - want to help folks to think through planning and transportation and equity.

Diverse mix of how we get funded. State funds and federal funding through DOT of FHA. For federal money, we can serve as a pass through or realize project work. We also get work through private foundations.

**Noah**: *Honing in on TA, how to help people in city departments without making them feel defensive?*

**Alicia**: People can prickle at words technical assistance. Framing it as public consulting is more how I think about it. There are definitely times where capacity is missing and you can be helpful. But, for city of Boston, we try to be a partner and collaborator. Allows us to be interdisciplinary and apply a regional lens.

**Noah**: *what does local contribution mean for relationship?*

**Alicia**: We also do direct contracts. Funding that we do get from state, it is not guaranteed every year, has to get passed through the governor’s budget every year.

**Noah**: *To all, what advice would you give to other partners in building relationships with your cities? What is biggest challenge you have encountered?*

**April**: Advice: be aware of the challenges that your cities departments are facing. If you can be an ally in solving a problem or issue that is helpful that will strengthen the relationship. You need to be willing to understand the challenges facing the city or county.

Challenges: Hard to communicate infrastructure component or vision of our work. We don't want to solve one problem. Want to do data work that is replicable, that doesn't become an inefficient way to do work. Hard to communicate that bigger picture approach to city government departments. Hard to translate their service to a bigger picture questions.

**Alicia**: Advice - important to be an ally, also done a ton of consulting through code for America. All about relationship building and about building empathy for your partners. I like to think about what happens when people say no, most of the “nos" in government are coming from a place of fear and risk aversion. But it is rational, it is important to emphasize with that fear.

**Megan**: Ask the city what their problems are and demonstrate how you can do something to alleviate that. If you can develop recurring contract with city, this flexibility helps you to be a responsive partner in moments of need.

Biggest challenge is when clients are too busy to respond, approve scope or give feedback. We know they want to do project, but we can’t move forward until we get their feedback. People in government may be pulled in 100 directions.

**Steven, Sunlight Foundation**: *So to flip this discussion a little, at Sunlight we work with cities around the country. What advice do you have for local governments in working with NNIP partners?*

**April**: Don’t wait until they have perfect data. I understand why people do that, but we have had a great partner in the Department of Building and Housing, but they have not been cheered on as much as they should be.

**Alicia**: Tendency of govt to paint everything as a rosy picture. However, this work requires govt to let their guard down and acknowledge that there are things to improve.

**Noah**: Broker the relationships with officials in your city so they know you not as as adversary.

**Alicia**: Tendency of open data community to make self-referential comments about value of open data. We need to communicate that value and frame things as benefits to governments and residents.

**John**: *Work we do can get politicized. You can become a casualty of that. Any advice for dealing with it?*

**Megan**: I haven't had a direct experience with that. CRP is non-partisan and designed to not be affiliated with one party or another. We try to provide some interpretation, but people can use it however they want.

**April**: In this content, something getting politicized isn't necessarily related to political party, can be disagreement around solutions. It is good that we have a convening body that provides a place to openly discuss (AVBAG) That body needs a lot of trust and someone who is not afraid to bring up issues. Someone who is at constant risk. Otherwise you run risk of group think and not advancing.

**Noah**: In Detroit, in 2013, city council by district for the first time. Created new demand for information by district. At D3, we wanted everyone to have equal access to those data, and not prioritizing one area or one issue. If a district manager approaches us with an issue, we would pull data for the whole city to maintain neutrality and equity.

**Seema**: Following up, how many have direct experience in city government? Many of us have worked inside government. Understand to identify value from outside. We have ability to think long term and not just fight fires. *One of the things that is starting to rise up, supporting a data intermediary is the question of whether that is taking capacity away from local government itself? Should resources going to local data intermediary go to local government itself? Important for us as NNIP to discuss that existential crisis.*

**April**: We would not want to exist in that scenario. If government is best place, we’d be happy to hand it over. One reason why government is not best place in the data intermediary role is that we cross jurisdictional boundaries. City doesn't have an interest in county wide or regional issues. There are communication issues and toes that get stepped on and they communicate to us that we bring that value.

**Noah**: A lot of the data intermediary work is relatively new. 300 years of context informing how people react to city government which is hard for the city to navigate. That baggage presents a large barrier that we don't have to navigate.

**John (Kileen):** *Data intermediary services that we talk about doing this work in service to communities who have been at other end, who have burdened with policies and disinvestment. These places don't have a lot of trust in government. How do you experience those edges most?*

**Megan**: From contribution that City of Columbus provides, we are able to do some small projects that are community driven TA. <10 hours of work. Those are targeted to those types of communities.

**Alicia**: When a city contracts with you, are they asking you to do that outreach? Often technical projects wont explicitly call out need to engage, but as a mission driven agency we try to bring values and principles to our work and stand up for those issues in our meetings. One of those principles for us is doing responsible and thorough community engagement.

**Noah**: Are we doing activities that city would normally be doing? Depends on capacity of city. We have done projects that Detroit didn’t have capacity to do that anymore. Might have projects that are not permanent or long term.

**Sarin (CURA@VCU):** We do a lot of work with local government. Richmond is one of most fragmented areas. Build one on one relationship with data person. Respect those relationships over time and at personal level.

**Tom Kingsley:** I think this issue is something that we as NNIP haven't thought through fully. When we started, needed NNIP in some cases to do job that cities just couldn't do. Then we added NNIP partners in cities that could do a lot. What has changed now is that we are now more seeing the mission of NNIP partners to not only get the work done, but to help strengthen local institutions so they can do more of it. A part of the mission is to help strengthen city government. While also doing things that the city would never be able to do. Some of that is relationships. We should work ourselves out of some jobs but not all.

**Jef Matson, CURA:** *We tend to avoid working with local governments. It takes away from time we could be working with community partners. City has looked to us to lend credibility to what they were trying to do. How can you handle that situation?*

**April**: I think we haven’t had to face that exactly. Once we felt our data was used in a way that we didn't agree with the analysis and we communicated that.

**Megan**: We usually advise an organization ahead of time. People are usually aware that the results might not look great, but often they still want to do the research and understand better.

**Noah**: We use a strategy screen to determine if we should move forward with projects and often city work fails first test of strategy screen because can’t pay enough to cover our work.

**Leah**: *To Megan, Would someone at your city be willing to talk to other cities about developing this type of ongoing relationship?*

**Megan**: Yes, certainly.