

EVALUATION AND MUNICIPAL URBAN PLANNING: PRACTICE AND PROSPECTS

Mark Seasons
University of Waterloo
Waterloo, Ontario

Abstract: Recent concerns with performance measurement, efficiency, and effectiveness have sparked a renewed interest in monitoring and evaluation at all levels of government, including municipal government. Much of the literature on evaluation in municipal urban planning focuses on evaluation research methods and techniques. This article explores the state of evaluation practice, including monitoring, in planning departments in municipalities of regional scale and style in Ontario. Applications of evaluation in planning practice are compared and contrasted with generic evaluation practice. Qualitative research methods were used to identify critical determinants of success (or otherwise) with evaluation in these planning departments.

Résumé: La préoccupation récente à propos des instruments servant à mesurer le rendement, l'efficacité et l'efficacité a suscité un intérêt renouvelé pour la surveillance et l'évaluation à tous les niveaux de gouvernement, y compris le niveau local. Une grande part de la littérature sur l'évaluation de l'aménagement urbain municipal se concentre sur les méthodes et techniques des processus d'évaluation. Cet article examine l'état des pratiques d'évaluation, incluant la surveillance, dans des services régionaux municipaux d'urbanisme en Ontario (municipalités régionales et comtés). L'usage de techniques d'évaluation dans le domaine de l'urbanisme est comparé à une utilisation plus générique de telles techniques. Cette recherche se sert de méthodes qualitatives afin d'identifier les facteurs associés au succès ou à l'échec des efforts d'évaluation entrepris par les services d'urbanisme.

Public-sector organizations, including municipal governments, face significant challenges to established operating procedures, organizational structures, and policy frameworks. They are under increasing pressure to justify their decisions (and often their existence) in a continuing period of fiscal restraint and increasing demands for accountability (Graham, Phillips, & Maslove, 1988; Pal,

1997; Peters, 1996). The experience is widespread, with examples in the literature from the United States, Australasia, and Canada as well as other OECD countries (Government of Canada, 1994, 2000; Kearney & Berman, 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 1999; Wholey & Newcomer, 1989). Common and shared challenges include continued fiscal constraints; the management of high debt and deficit levels; reduced sources of revenue generation; a populace that demands increasing accountability and less bureaucracy and arbitrary process; and considerable pressure to provide maximum return for public investments.

In response to these challenges, many public-sector organizations have completed a critical appraisal of organizational roles and responsibilities, culminating in a much clearer focus on core business functions. Common strategies include streamlining of administrative processes, often leading to a reduction in staff numbers. Traditional and new services are being delivered differently; outsourcing or downloading of programs to other levels of government or the private or not-for-profit sectors has become common. There is a trend towards development of more accessible and transparent decision-making processes. Finally, we see the adoption of increasingly sophisticated performance standards and measurement systems in the public sector (Altshuler & Behn, 1997; Aucoin, 1995; Borins, 1998; Gibson & Boisvert, 1997; OECD, 1998).

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Indicators

Monitoring implies a continuous evaluation or assessment of activities in policies, programs, processes, or plans. This involves the collection and interpretation of data on a regular basis. Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey (1999) interpret monitoring as the systematic documentation of aspects of performance that indicate whether or not activities are functioning as intended or according to some appropriate standard. Weiss (1998, p. 4) defines evaluation as “the systematic assessment of the operation and/or outcomes of a program or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement” of the activity. Indicators provide the basis for assessment of progress (or otherwise) towards the achievement of stated goals and objectives (Pal, 1997). They provide quantitative or qualitative measures of trends and patterns. Traditional categories include economic, social, and environmental indicators. Researchers have also developed indicators as measures of sustainability (Cartwright, 2000; Dilks, 1996; Maclaren, 1996a,

1996b). These indicators help evaluate whether, and how well, development balances economic with social and environmental goals.

Evaluation in the Public Sector

Evaluation practice has become sophisticated and varied in its practices and applications over the past thirty years (Chelimsky, 1997). The evaluator's traditional requirement for ethical, robust research methods has been complemented by recognition of the need to strategize to ensure that evaluation recommendations and findings are followed.

A review of the recent literature (see, for example, OECD, 1999) on evaluation practice reveals several themes in current evaluation practice, including the identification of causal links between program goals, objectives, inputs, and resultant outputs, impacts, and outcomes. Evaluators are concerned with the evaluability of programs — the ease with which program statements (e.g., goals, objectives, policies) can be assessed. Evaluators position evaluation as a learning tool for organizations, and as a process that is inclusive. They understand that two-way communication is key to effective evaluations.

The evaluation literature also recognizes the need for an organizational culture that is conducive to, and supportive of, evaluation; this usually includes a “champion” for evaluation. To be effective, evaluation processes must have sufficient resources, including properly trained staff, financial resources, and technical support for evaluation research. The evaluation literature often advocates a structured, formalized approach to research that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods, following the principle of triangulation. Finally, the evaluation community acknowledges the need to tailor evaluations to organizational realities. Evaluations are quite practical exercises (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 1994; World Bank Institute, 2000).

Evaluation in Municipal Government

Although most of the trends noted previously are experienced at the local government level, it is important to recognize, as Magnusson (1985, p. 581) has, that “local governments are not just national governments writ small.” Many complicated social, economic, and environmental issues are manifest and must be addressed at the

municipal government level (Alexander, 1992; Government of Ontario, 1982; Higgins, 1986; Siegel, 1993). There are factors and forces that demand a different handling of issues. For example, resource constraints present very real obstacles to the effective delivery of municipal services. In many nations, municipal governments are “creatures” of senior government; they exist at the discretion of provincial, state, or federal governments. This is certainly the Canadian experience (Tindal & Tindal, 2000). As a result, municipal program activities are highly circumscribed by senior government policies, regulations, and directives.

Municipalities typically have limited revenue generation capacity; they rely heavily on the property tax base, and they depend significantly on provincial, state, or federal financial transfers, the majority of which are conditional in nature (Hodge, 1998). Thus, there is often very little discretion in program delivery for municipal governments. However, municipalities are acutely aware of the need for political and fiscal accountability (Graham, Phillips, & Maslove, 1998): not only must they be efficient, but they must be perceived as such by an increasingly critical electorate and by senior government.

This admixture of resource limitations and high public visibility, combined with the general trend towards less and smaller government, means that municipal governments are adopting a corporate model of organizational management and decision making. Evaluation and monitoring have achieved new importance because of this growing interest in performance, value for money, and calls for accountability. The focus of municipal evaluation practice seems to be on assessment of efficiency rather than effectiveness. In response, an increasing amount of research focuses on specific techniques such as program analysis (Hatry, Blair, Fisk, & Kimmell, 1987), performance measurement (Berman, 1998), benchmarking (Keehley, Medlin, MacBridge, & Longmire, 1997), and best practices (OECD, 1998; Patton, 1998).

Evaluation and Planning Practice

Municipal planners provide the policy and regulatory context necessary to direct the use and development of land in communities. Land-use decisions have a direct impact on a community's quality of life, the form and location of economic development, public-sector investment decisions (e.g., infrastructure), and the viability of natural environments. Indeed, planning is usually a high-profile and con-

flict-ridden activity in municipal government. As such, mistakes and bad decisions can have considerable long-term consequences.

Planners are often uncertain about the efficiency, effectiveness, or impact of their interventions. They (and the many stakeholders in planning issues) would feel more comfortable if they could establish causality between planning interventions and results, to determine whether a planning decision was correct, justified, or successful (Baum, 2001; Christensen, 1985; Hodge, 1998; Mastop & Needham, 1997; Patton, 1986; Sawicki & Flynn, 1996). However, planners have considerable trouble assessing whether their work is “good” or “bad” (Alexander & Faludi, 1989; Baer, 1997). As Bryson (1991, p. 165) stresses, “we need to build the empirical defense of planning and planners.”

Indeed, planners are acutely aware of the consequences of poorly informed decision making. These consequences include missed opportunities, misallocation or waste of limited resources, and damage to political and professional reputations. Planners need a realistic and objective evaluation of planning alternatives (Minnery, Cameron, Brown, & Newman, 1993). They also need an improved sense of the outcomes and impacts of their interventions in communities (Murtagh, 1998). Planners need clearer definitions of “success” or “failure” in specific contexts (Talen, 1997). These could be provided by regular and consistent use of monitoring and evaluation processes.

The literature on applications of program evaluation techniques to urban and regional planning is limited. There seem to be two phases to this literature. The first phase occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. This literature advocated highly rational and technical analyses of planning goals and proposals (see, e.g., Friend & Jessop, 1977; Hill, 1968; Lichfield, Kettle, & Whitehead, 1975; McLoughlin, 1970; Robinson, 1972). The material refers to techniques such as the planning balance sheet, goals achievement methods, and cost-benefit analysis (see Bracken, 1981; Burchell & Listokin, 1983; Chapin & Kaiser, 1979). These techniques have received considerable attention in that literature; however, there is little evidence in the planning literature of widespread use of these techniques as decision-making tools.

A second and more recent phase has produced several articles and texts that advocate monitoring and evaluation methods and tech-

niques. This material is prescriptive; it cites what should occur when evaluation principles and techniques are used (e.g., Baer, 1997; Lichfield, 1996; Talen, 1996a, 1996b). This literature suggests that evaluation models are highly rational in nature. As presented, these models require sufficient time, resources, and expertise — factors that are rarely present in many municipal planning organizations. To be effective in this context, municipalities must make a significant resource commitment to data collection and monitoring.

The models and databases are highly developed in the economic and environmental realms, and less so in the social realm of activity. These models also assume well-developed, reliable, and robust sets of quantitative indicators that underpin monitoring as well as evaluation methods. The planning literature presents suggestions and idealized evaluation models and methods. The emphasis on models and technique in this literature is welcome. We can assume that evaluation has merit and can make a valuable contribution to decision making in municipal governments.

Over the past decade, several municipalities have developed sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems. There is growing activity in monitoring and evaluation in many cities as well as states and provinces (Government of Ontario, 1999). Indeed, Ontario has issued performance measurement directives (via the Municipal Performance Measurement Program [MPMP]) to municipalities that require monitoring and assessment of nine core service areas (Government of Ontario, 2000). Typically, evaluation processes are linked to the mandated monitoring and evaluation of growth management policies, the evaluation of sustainability, and the regular review of comprehensive municipal plans. These municipalities and states manage monitoring and evaluation processes that are linked to sustainability (Roseland, 1998), community vision, municipal plans, and environmental assessment exercises.¹

However, what seems to have been overlooked in the planning literature is an examination of organizational realities — the factors that facilitate, or obstruct, evaluation in municipal planning. The next section examines how issues such as the “realities” of organizational culture and politics, competing demands for limited resources, and effectiveness of communications, among many others, affect evaluation practice in municipal government planning departments.

Research Approach

The research program, which took place in 1999–2000, was exploratory and qualitative in nature; thus statistical validity was not a research goal. It examined how issues such as the “realities” of organizational culture and competing demands for limited resources, among many other factors, affect the potential for monitoring and evaluation practice in municipal planning departments. Fourteen Ontario municipalities were identified for participation in this study (Figure 1). These municipalities were considered leaders in Canadian municipal planning practice, with mandates, activities, and structures that would be familiar to planners working in comparable organizations in other jurisdictions (Table 1). Ontario has a population of approximately 11 million (Government of Ontario, 2000) representing about one third of Canada’s population.

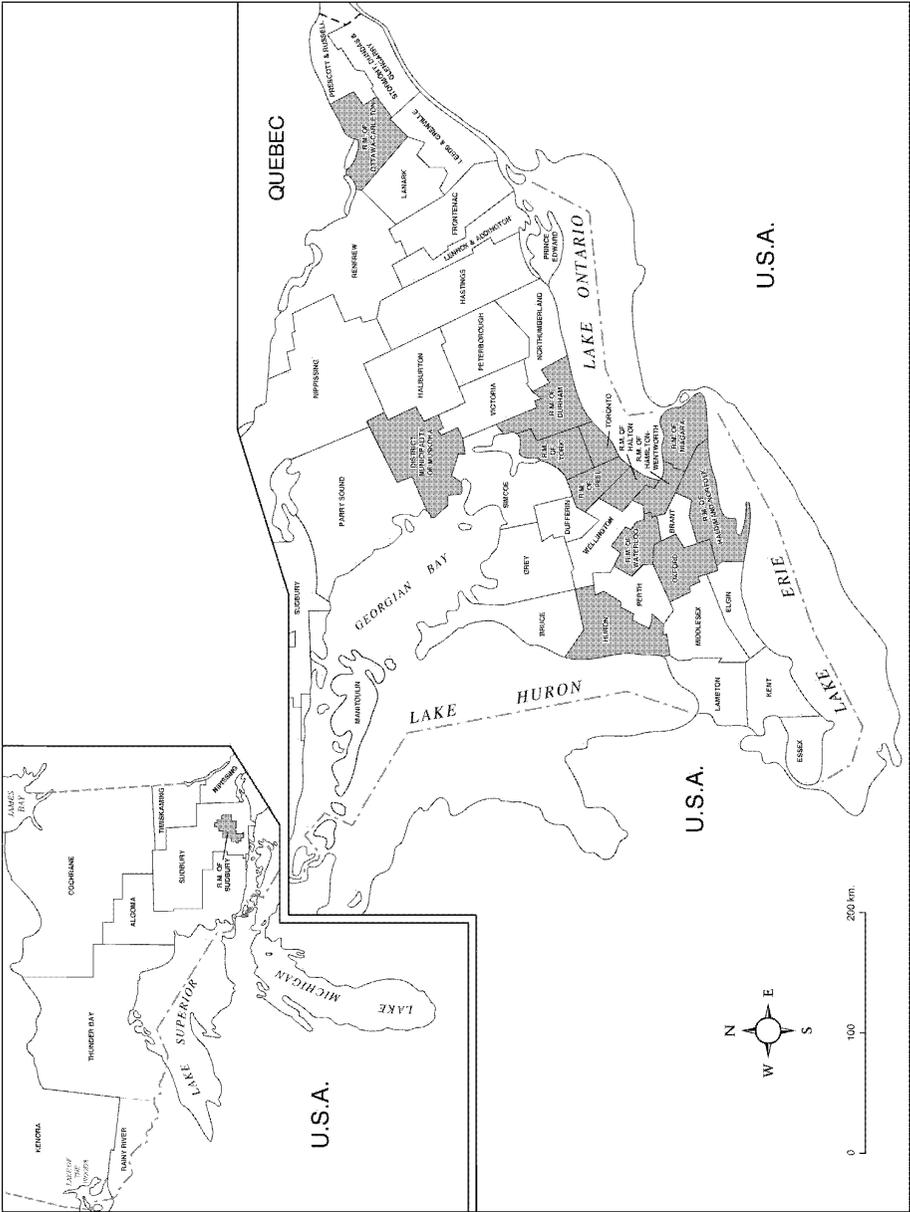
Regional municipalities in Ontario sit in a stratum between local government (e.g., towns and cities) and the provincial government. Regional governments provide services on a region-wide scale; community-type services are provided by local municipalities. Regional planners are typically concerned with land use, infrastructure, and environmental issues of regional significance. Although regional

Table 1
Populations (1996) of Sampled Municipalities

Municipality	Population
RM Niagara	414,774
RM Durham	472,754
RM Peel	881,794
RM Halton	350,180
RM Hamilton-Wentworth ¹	481,531
RM Waterloo	418,334
RM York	611,659
RM Ottawa-Carleton ²	748,981
RM Haldimand-Norfolk ³	106,137
RM Sudbury	160,488
DM of Muskoka	78,876
City of Toronto ⁴	2,462,510
County of Huron	61,740
County of Oxford	99,883

Source. Statistics Canada 1996 census. ¹ Amalgamated in 2000, now the City of Hamilton. ² Amalgamated in 2000, now the City of Ottawa. ³ Norfolk and Haldimand reverted to individual county status in 2000. ⁴ Amalgamated in 1999, previously Metropolitan Toronto.

Figure 1
Study Municipalities in Ontario



municipalities have been delegated extensive planning powers by the provincial government, regional land use plans and policies must conform to provincial planning policies and legislation. Municipalities within regional jurisdictions must create and implement plans that are compatible with the region's plans (Hodge, 1998; Tindal & Tindal, 2000).

The primary research method comprised structured, open-ended interviews. The intent was to explore respondents' reactions to several research themes that are prevalent in the generic evaluation literature, and included resource issues, research methods, indicators, causality, and organizational culture. This interview strategy permitted comparison and contrast of perspectives from different participants (Weiss, 1998). Trends, insights, and patterns were thus identifiable from conversations with the respondents. Study participants included the commissioner or director of the planning departments of the 11 regional municipalities in Ontario, plus the City of Toronto and the counties of Huron and Oxford.² These respondents were accountable for departmental planning and evaluation, and could therefore provide a comprehensive assessment of monitoring and evaluation activities.

Two other qualitative research methods provided context for, and complemented, the field interviews:

- a literature review of published material on evaluation theory and practice, which included texts and articles drawn from the fields of planning, public administration, evaluation, and qualitative and quantitative research; and
- a document analysis of municipal plans and policies. These documents complemented information gathered through interviews. The material included the respondents' community plans, monitoring reports, and special studies.

Several themes were identified for further study, based on the literature review of evaluation generally, and specifically in planning practice. In each case, the findings of the literature review provided a point of reference or benchmark for best practices in evaluation practice. These findings were compared and contrasted with the results of the field research (structured, open-ended interviews) with the selected municipalities and with document analysis. The themes included application and purpose, process issues, participants, evalu-

ation methods, communications, organizational culture, and resources (time, money, and expertise).

Application and Purpose

According to the evaluation literature, evaluations should be credible, useful, and timely (Government of Canada, 1994; Winberg, 1986). They should inform clients and stakeholders about aspects of programs that performed successfully (or otherwise). In this sense, evaluations play an important diagnostic role. Mayne and Hudson (1992) suggest that evaluations can be used as a decision-support tool to help decide whether a program should be continued, expanded, or terminated. Evaluations can be conducted as a way to keep program stakeholders informed and as a means to ensure accountability by an organization.

Evaluations can focus on process details as a means to understand implementation success or failure (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999, p. 231). They can be theory driven, searching for explanations from precedents about program behaviour (Mertens, 1998).³ Regardless of the reason or style, evaluations must respond to organizational needs, and they must be tailored to organizational context (Rossi et al., 1999, p. 76). It should also be noted that evaluation results are “rarely intended by evaluators or evaluation sponsors to be ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake.’ Rather, they are intended to be useful, and to be used” (Rossi et al., 1999, p. 96). Weiss (1984, p. 161) makes a key point: “when agency people have real questions in mind and real decisions to face, they are more likely to pay attention to evaluation findings.”

The research indicated that there is a need for proper, comprehensive monitoring and evaluation in Ontario regional municipal government planning departments. Respondents in this research indicated, without exception, an interest in and support for the principle of monitoring and evaluation of planning policies, programs, and projects. Indeed, most municipal governments have introduced a form of performance measurement and its variants (e.g., total quality management, continual quality improvement, etc.) in recent years. This performance measurement culture has been reinforced by Ontario’s recent policy requiring municipalities to undertake performance measurement of service delivery (Government of Ontario, 2000).

The subjects of monitoring and evaluation include municipal land-use plans, vision statements, secondary plans, special-purpose plans, and housing and development policies, among many others. Many municipalities also evaluate planning processes (e.g., review and approvals systems performance). The respondents also noted that they evaluate staff performance through internally mandated corporate performance measurement tools.

Respondents cited accountability as a main reason for monitoring and evaluation. More often than not, this performance-based culture originated with the administrative centre — the chief administrative officer (CAO) or equivalent office. The respondents understood the need to assess the performance of planning tools on a continual basis. However, performance measurement was considered easier said than done. Several respondents mentioned considerable frustration with what seemed arbitrary and inappropriate performance measurement systems imposed from the organization's centre.

There was considerable variation in the techniques or models used, the frequency of use, and the comprehensiveness of evaluation. This was expected, given the range in municipal size, availability of resources, and complexity of decision-making settings. Every respondent noted that evaluation of some kind occurs throughout the plan formulation process (e.g., in the consideration of issues, solution alternatives, and implementation strategies). However, formal evaluation, including monitoring, occurs on a less frequent basis and is oriented to assessment of outputs, not outcomes.

The most common subject of monitoring and evaluation is the municipal land-use plan. In most cases, comprehensive monitoring of the municipal plan occurs as required by Ontario's Planning Act, for example, on a five-yearly cycle or *ex post facto* basis. It could also be argued that municipal planners are "evaluated" in every appearance before their councils and committee members. It is important to note that in the majority of cases, monitoring and evaluation processes began with the preparation and implementation of the region's first municipal plan. As regional government in Ontario dates to 1968 and municipal land-use plans were prepared shortly thereafter, some municipalities had 25 years or more of experience with monitoring and evaluation. In other cases, monitoring and evaluation activities predated the completion of initial municipal plans. Evaluation was used in a more general, less formal sense by all respondents.

Process Issues

Evaluations take many forms (Patton, 1998). For example, evaluations can be *ex ante* in nature — they can occur before the program is finalized and launched. *Ex ante* evaluations are used as part of the planning process to refine program details. Formative evaluations occur in mid-program cycle as a way to assess and modify program delivery. Summative evaluations (*ex post facto*) occur once a program has been completed or it has achieved sufficient maturity to permit an assessment of performance. In any case, the program must be evaluable — the contents of plans or policies must be worded in a manner that facilitates evaluation.

Evaluation process design is critical to its success. In typical evaluation practice, evaluations are designed in a fairly “rational” manner, beginning with issue identification, articulation of goals and objectives, and so forth, to implementation and communication of results (Rutman, 1984). Process design must consider factors such as client and stakeholder needs and expectations; constraints of time, expertise, and money; whether program elements are readily evaluable (e.g., clearly articulated and measurable goals, objectives, and policies); research methods at every stage; data collection and interpretation; and communications strategies (Mertens, 1998).

The research found that formal, *ex post facto* forms of evaluation occurred on a five-year cycle, or when sufficient time had elapsed to permit a reasonable assessment of progress (or otherwise) towards the plan’s or policy’s stated ends. Most respondents noted that they evaluate their decision options and alternative solution paths as an implicit aspect of their practice. It was also apparent that the municipal plans’ goals, objectives, and policy statements were generally not readily evaluable, that is, conducive to evaluation. In most cases, the goals were vaguely worded. This permits selective interpretation of intent, which may suit political purposes. However, vagueness in wording complicates efforts to determine direction or level of success or failure with plan-related activity.

On a similar note, many municipalities have incorporated vision statements designed to guide and provide the philosophical framework for the plans. Vision statements are crafted as desired long-term end-states for a community. The wording is designed to inspire, to generate optimism, and to mobilize stakeholders towards its resolution. Again, vagueness in these statements makes evaluation difficult and can undermine the validity of visioning exercises.

A key issue involved the selection and monitoring of appropriate indicators. It should be noted that there is considerable pressure from municipal government administrators to generate and track what senior planning officials consider to be arbitrary and efficiency-based (output) indicators that have little to do with planning policies. Most regional municipalities used quantitative indicators based on secondary data sources. Examples of these indicators included the number of housing units built, population trends, water or air quality, number of roads paved, and basic economic data (e.g., employment and unemployment statistics). However, these indicators were rarely presented in the municipal plans or were difficult to find in the documents.

There are well-established and accepted indicators for municipal planning in Canada (e.g., population numbers, unemployment rates, units of housing developed). The question is whether these indicators tell planners what they need to know about the performance of their plans and policies. For example, what does the number of paved lanes really tell us about a community's quality of life? It was thus often difficult to link the indicators tracked by planning departments with plan or policy outcomes. In fact, outcomes were not usually clearly articulated in the plans. This represents a significant challenge, and obstacle, for evaluation in planning practice. In generic evaluation, the articulation of outcomes is a fundamental product of the exercise.

Participants

The generic evaluation literature tells us that evaluations can be carried out by in-house staff or by external evaluators. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. Internal staff can have a sound and comprehensive understanding of organizational mandates, resources, and structures. Personal bias, as well as organizational culture and politics, can influence internal evaluators, but this is true of any researcher (Palys, 1997).

External evaluators can be more objective because of their "distance" from the organization and program. However, they often miss the subtleties and nuances that explain much about organizational behaviour (Patton, 1999). In either event, professional evaluators are trained to carry out applied social science research. They are familiar with quantitative as well as qualitative research methods. They often possess advanced education and skills training in research tech-

niques (Caron, 1995). Finally, evaluators tend to be dedicated full time to policy research and evaluation projects.

Evaluation was carried out by municipal staff, usually by the planning department, for each of the sampled municipalities. In larger municipalities professional evaluators who were attached to a central department, such as the CAO or corporate resources group, provided evaluation expertise as required to the planning department. In most cases, planners had not received extensive formal training in advanced evaluation methods. Instead, their research skills were based on knowledge acquired years earlier during their initial undergraduate or graduate planning education. This suggests a need for regular upgrades in qualitative as well as quantitative research skills. However, most municipalities simply lacked the financial resources to carry out continuous training and education for planning staff.

Inclusiveness is seen as an advantage in evaluation practice: the greater the number and diversity of participants, the richer the information and potential findings and the greater the chances for stakeholder buy-in for the evaluation process and findings (Patton, 1998). As Rossi et al. (1999, p. 96) note, the clients and stakeholders must reach consensus on the purpose of the evaluation as well as its process details and evaluation criteria. The research found that there were often two groups of clients for evaluations: internal and external. Internal clients include the program's unit head and program managers and staff, as well as senior administrative staff and politicians. Other internal clients could include other departments within the organization as well as other units, agencies, or departments elsewhere in government. Stakeholders (defined here as people or organizations that are affected by, or can affect, a program) varied with the program. They may be the end-user of the program or could be defined as broadly as a city's residents.

The evaluation literature tells us that each group will have different needs from, and expectations about, the evaluation process (Weiss, 1984). As Patton (1998) notes, different stakeholders will bring different perspectives to the evaluation. Those perspectives will affect the interpretation of results. The composition of clients and stakeholders must be factored into evaluation process design and communications strategies.

Numerous and varied clients of monitoring and evaluation were identified in this research. In every case, the council was considered the

primary client. Other municipal government clients included other departments, planning staff, and the Chief Administrator's Office. External clients were considered important in many municipalities; planning departments acknowledged that they are ultimately accountable to the residents of the region. In some municipalities, the public(s) expected and demanded evaluation of planning performance. These were municipalities with a highly educated, activist, and informed populace. In other municipalities, the public(s) had a peripheral or minimal interest in evaluation results. The amount and type of monitoring and evaluation was often commensurate with levels of interest and support on the part of clients and stakeholders.

Evaluation Methods

A key lesson from generic evaluation practice is that research methods must be appropriate to the program and organizational context. In general, qualitative and quantitative research methods, as well as triangulation,⁴ are used in evaluation studies (Weiss, 1998). However, decisions on method will be affected by factors such as program details, resources and time available, breadth versus depth decisions in research scope, and the demands made by the selected research questions. Causality — the ability to identify links between program goals and inputs and the ensuing short- and long-term results — is usually an important aspect of program behaviour. Accordingly, logic models can be developed to help the evaluator map the program terrain. Logic models illustrate the main components or activities of a program and its objectives and indicators for each activity (Myers, 1999), and establish links between program intent and program outcomes and impacts (Julian, 1997; Rush & Osborne, 1991).

Typically, the research program determines the information sources that are required. Common quantitative information includes statistics from censuses and special-purpose surveys. Qualitative sources can include focus groups, case studies, and informal conversations with clients and stakeholders. Evaluators may refer to related literature in order to create benchmarks for program practices. They usually conduct document analysis of program files and reports (UNICEF, 2000; Weiss, 1998). The research indicated that common data sources are secondary rather than primary in most cases. Quantitative indicators included national and municipal censuses, municipal assessment records, development application files, and special statistical or scientific surveys, among many other sources.

Some regional municipalities complemented their quantitative monitoring methods with a more qualitative approach. These municipalities monitored indicators that reflect constituents' perceptions, feelings, and values. The assumption here was that many planning decisions turn on these intangibles; thus they warranted close attention.

In these cases, research methods included "report card"⁵ assessment of planners' and municipal governments' success (or otherwise) in their efforts, issue-based focus groups, opinion polling, round tables, and other citizen-based consultative, feedback mechanisms (e.g., regular newsletters, web pages). The challenge often lay in convincing municipal administrators of the credibility and utility of "soft" data in planning and municipal decision making. Again, the data collected must be relevant to each municipality's context.

There was little evidence of the use of logic models or similar constructs in municipal planning organizations. This may indicate that planners find the links between goals and outcomes difficult to trace. However, some respondents used standard evaluation terminology when discussing their evaluation activities. A minority of respondents was able to explain the concepts of and links between goals and inputs, outputs and outcomes. The monitoring and evaluation literature stresses the importance of continuous data collection and monitoring. The respondents stressed the need to be selective and realistic in the choice of data to monitor. There was a sense that success and failure are highly relative concepts in planning practice; this made the development of suitable indicators difficult. Typically, many non-planning factors determine the outcome of planning policies and programs. Figure 2 summarizes common indicators and qualitative and quantitative sources used by these municipalities.

Communications

Effective communications, including the dissemination of results, is essential to evaluation. As Weiss (1984, p. 183) explains, the "submission of a 400-page typed report is almost a guarantee that nobody will read the results." It is important that the results of the findings be communicated as widely as possible. This process contributes to the advancement of knowledge in the field, provides the client with a good understanding of the organization's performance, and addresses expectations of accountability. The results may be interim, in which case the communications strategy is designed to

keep clients and stakeholder informed about, and confident in, the evaluation process (Winberg, 1986).

Clients and stakeholders must see themselves in the process for them to support its activities and results; thus the communications media must be carefully selected to address recipients' information needs (Rossi et al., 1999). The reporting media can be varied and could include the mass media, interest groups, policy networks, technical reports, articles in professional or academic journals, newsletters, and personal contact at meetings of stakeholder associations (Mertens, 1998; Weiss, 1984).

A long-standing challenge in planning practice, and in evaluation generally, has been the most effective means of making contact with stakeholder groups. Several municipalities reached beyond the standard open house information session format. One common theme was that planners and evaluators should go where the stakeholders are to minimize effort, and to take advantage of structures that already exist. These planners work with existing organizations. They go to the groups, whether the garden society or an environmental club. People in most communities are highly organized. The key is

Figure 2
Common Indicators

Indicators	Quantitative Sources	Qualitative Sources
Development patterns	Municipal data/GIS	
Land absorption rates	Municipal data/GIS	
Demographic trends	Census data	
Population trends	Census data	
Employment data	Census data, surveys	
Air, water, soil quality	Field research/GIS	
Affordable housing	Municipal data	
Kms of streets paved	Municipal data/GIS	
Visions	Surveys	Open houses, focus groups, outreach ^a
Quality of life	Surveys	Open houses, focus groups, outreach
Plan performance	Surveys	Report cards, focus groups, outreach
Design/development options	Surveys	Charrettes, ^b focus groups, open houses

^a Outreach programs could include kitchen or community hall meetings, radio and cable talk-back shows, web-based chat rooms, and distribution of information brochures.

^b Charrettes are group meetings designed to discuss and develop scenarios of the future. These scenarios are often expressed through use of illustrations and graphics.

to find out what these organizational structures look like and how to access them.

The municipalities used newsletters, brochures, and a variety of public meetings to solicit and communicate planning ideas. These methods are familiar to planners. Some municipalities had the resources to create and manage interactive web sites and e-mail discussion groups. Innovative communications media included planning “report cards,” round tables, use of community cable systems, and kitchen meetings (in rural areas).

An interesting and fundamental point emerged from this research: municipal governments do not “market” themselves well. As corporate bodies, they are often not effective communicators. The planners were aware that communications strategies were important and had to be carefully crafted. They understood that the means of communication are often as important as the findings themselves. Further, they understood that different recipients require different communications strategies. The physical presentation of information was considered important; graphic quality conveys messages about competence and capability.

The role of the media (print, electronic) in evaluation, and planning in general, was also discussed. The respondents felt that the media should be involved from the outset of the evaluation exercise. The research also found that recipients of evaluations must be prepared for — oriented to — the concepts and process of evaluation. This orientation increases comfort levels and can make recipients more receptive to findings. This process of education and orientation requires a patient, structured, and incremental approach.

Organizational Culture

The selection and use of appropriate research techniques is necessary but not sufficient for effective evaluation practice. The organization conducting evaluation must have a supportive culture. In this context, culture refers to the attitudes of staff, as well as demonstrable support from senior management and politicians (Love, 1996; Poister & Streib, 1999). It also requires a willingness to improve, to excel; this implies tolerance of risk and acceptance of failure (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Peters, 1996). These are attributes of the “learning organization,” places that embrace monitoring and evaluation as a means of enhancing their performance (Senge, 1994). However,

many organizations are averse to change, avoid criticism, and are content with the status quo. In this context, monitoring and evaluation activities would be threatening and would be regarded with suspicion, if not hostility. Organizational culture may thus be the most important determinant of success or failure with evaluation.

Respondents identified the less tangible but often more important challenges of organizational culture. It was clear that some planning departments were more receptive to monitoring and evaluation than others. The receptive organizations considered themselves "learning organizations." These municipalities welcomed the opportunity to learn from past practices, to explore alternative ways of doing things, and to strive for excellence.

Clearly, organizational factors can facilitate or impede monitoring and evaluation. Resource support was considered a necessary but not sufficient factor. As one respondent noted, municipalities need to commit resources and establish in employees a culture receptive to evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation was especially well received in organizations that are interested in constant improvement. In a true learning organization, all members contribute to the process of continuous learning and evaluation. As one respondent noted, all staff should be involved in evaluation. The key seems to be making monitoring and evaluation part of everyday practice for planners.

In most of these municipalities, monitoring and evaluation of planning activities was considered somewhat discretionary rather than necessary. Similarly, there were suggestions of resistance to evaluations that might embarrass the municipality by revealing errors or inadequacies in political or staff decisions. On a related issue, respondents noted that council members rarely have enough time or training to properly assess regular planning reports, let alone monitoring and evaluation reports. The culture and goals of council are quite different from those of staff and administration; this reality must be considered when introducing and managing evaluation.

The "human factor" can also determine success or failure with evaluation efforts. There can be considerable individual resistance to evaluation. In fact, the respondents noted that many people simply do not want to be evaluated because they fear criticism that comes from "bad news" about program performance. There seem to be personality types that are attracted to, or intimidated by, evaluation. In fact, one respondent suggested that planning, as a profession,

seems to attract people who are insecure, like predictability and rules, and shun criticism. It was also suggested that some planners are afraid to draw conclusions; they are more comfortable with managing planning processes than with taking action. Clearly, evaluation will work in a receptive organization — one that is confident and committed to learning from its successes and failures.

Resources: Time, Money, and Expertise

Every level of government has had to grapple with the pressures created by fiscal constraint and the conflicts caused when demand for public services exceeds supply (Pal, 1997; Paquet, 1999). This is especially true for the many municipal governments that have experienced the often-negative effects of downloading of responsibilities from senior governments, reductions in revenue generation capacity, and the distractions associated with reorganization and amalgamations (Graham et al., 1998; Siegel, 1993).

The results are predictable and include reduced funding support for programs. This has meant staff reductions, services curtailment, and low energy and poor morale in many municipal organizations. These factors militate against innovation, including evaluation. Although most respondents expressed interest in and support for evaluation processes, they noted obstacles to a more complete evaluation approach. Not surprisingly, all respondents identified constraints of time, staff skills, and financial resources. In this environment, monitoring and evaluation tends in practice to be overlooked and undervalued. As a result, it can be difficult to garner sufficient resources and commitment to support evaluation.

In the majority of municipalities, planning staff resources were dedicated to the review and facilitation of development proposals; this was a common municipal priority. As a consequence, there was little time left for research and monitoring, and certainly very rarely on a full-time basis. It should also be noted that most planning departments had minimal (and often decreasing) staff resources to contend with increasing work demands. There were very few instances of relatively “pure,” dedicated policy or research shops in the sampled municipalities.

Resource constraints are real for most municipalities. The costs associated with monitoring and evaluation can be considerable. For organizations already averse to critical review of activity, monitor-

ing and evaluation becomes an expensive and unattractive option. Some organizations are wary of monitoring and evaluation processes because they are perceived as too lengthy and complicated and as not often contributing much to the decision-making process.

With the exception of mandated five-year reviews of municipal plans, the realities of planning practice are such that monitoring and evaluation often become the forgotten stages in the planning process. As one respondent noted, “the urgent pushes out the important.” It was clear that evaluation processes must produce findings in a timely and useful manner. On a more positive note, evaluation has considerable potential in receptive municipal cultures. Evaluation is perceived positively in these communities.

CONCLUSION

This research indicates that municipal planners understand, and support, the principles and value of evaluation. Planners in this research program wanted to understand the impacts of their decisions; they wanted to establish links between objectives and outcomes. However, there is a significant (and perhaps expected) gap between the normative ideal for monitoring and evaluation that is proposed in the planning and evaluation literature, and the reality for planning departments in most Ontario regional municipalities. This research provides some of the reasons for this gap.

The literature calls for fairly elaborate, rational, and resource-intensive methods and processes of monitoring and evaluation. This is probably not possible in most planning organizations. Very few of the prescribed research methods have been used since planning-oriented applications of evaluation were first introduced in the late 1960s. The research confirms that planners must “satisfice” (see Simon, 1957) — they are doing the best they can in the circumstances. The ideal monitoring and evaluation model is often unrealistic and rarely attainable in its entirety. Evaluation methods and strategies must be tailored to the needs and resources of individual municipalities. The concept and process of evaluation should be introduced gradually, and enhanced in an incremental fashion. In the absence of legislated mandates, municipal governments should develop incentives that encourage monitoring and evaluation. For example, program budget decisions could be contingent upon a review of progress assessed through monitoring and evaluation.

The evaluation model must be simple, easy to understand, and workable within existing resource limits. Roles and responsibilities for evaluation must be clearly articulated. The municipality's plan should explain the monitoring and evaluation philosophy, strategy, and process; a separate chapter on evaluation should be incorporated into municipal plans. The benefits of evaluation should be clearly and effectively communicated to staff and council, as well as other stakeholders. Ideally, everybody who contributed to plan development could also contribute to the monitoring and evaluation of the plan.

Evaluation has a place in planning practice. Figure 3 summarizes the key elements that facilitate, or impede, monitoring and evaluation in regional municipal planning practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by the University of Waterloo/Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Small Grant Program

NOTES

- 1 Information on dozens of Canadian, American, and other international experiences with sustainable indicators may be found at <http://www.rprogress.org/resources/cip/links/cips_web.html>.
- 2 This research program was reviewed and approved according to ethics policies and guidelines developed by the University of Waterloo's Office of Research. Respondents were assured of anonymity.
- 3 There are many types of evaluation; these serve as examples.
- 4 Triangulation refers to the development of multiple lines of evidence or perspectives on a research challenge. This could involve reference to different theories, multiple analysts, and/or multiple research methods.
- 5 The report card method provides letter grades to municipal councilors and staff. Participants are asked to rate progress towards goals and commitments expressed in official plans and vision statements.

Figure 3 Facilitative or Obstructive Factors

Factors that *facilitate* effective monitoring and evaluation include:

- Sufficient staff and financial resources to do the job properly; ideally, staff should be dedicated to monitoring and evaluation.
- Clear and continued expressions of support from the CAO, commissioner, and council; in addition, there is often a role for community stakeholders committed to effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation. A process champion is valuable.
- An organizational culture that encourages constant improvement through critical analysis of performance (the learning organization).
- An organization that is comfortable with policy-based research and long-range planning versus short-term, action-oriented organizations.
- The integration of quantitative and qualitative research, as well as triangulation of research methods.
- Plans or policies with goals, objectives, and policies that are evaluable — designed and phrased to be evaluated from the outset.
- The development of key indicators that enable monitoring of social, economic, and environmental phenomena. Indicators should be easy to access, analyze, and explain.
- Demonstrable reasons for and benefits of monitoring and evaluation; the value-added of evaluation must be clear to political and administrative decision makers.
- Clear and regular communication of details concerning monitoring and evaluation process details (e.g., timing, indicators, roles, priority, and interpretation of significance of findings). These details should be expressed in plans and policies.

Factors that *impede* effective monitoring and evaluation include:

- Resource constraints (e.g., planning staff without advanced research skills, lack of funding, limited training or educational opportunities).
 - The absence of a political or administrative "champion" for monitoring and evaluation; an indifferent or adversarial community of stakeholders.
 - An organizational culture that discourages risk-taking, avoids criticism, and relies on limited monitoring practices.
 - An organizational focus on action and short-term planning rather than long-term planning and associated research.
 - A heavy dependence on quantitative research methods, with minimal use of qualitative research.
 - Indicators whose meaning and application is unclear.
 - Policy or plan contents that are vaguely worded and are thus difficult to evaluate.
 - Inadequate justification for monitoring and evaluation (i.e., evaluation for its own sake).
 - Insufficient articulation or communication of the monitoring and evaluation purpose and approach in publications (e.g., planning documents).
-

REFERENCES

- Alexander, E.R. (1992). *Approaches to planning: Introducing current planning theories, concepts and issues* (2nd ed.). Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach.
- Alexander, E.R., and Faludi, A. (1989). Planning and plan implementation: Notes on evaluation criteria. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 16, 127–140.
- Altshuler, A., & Behn, R. (Eds.). (1997). *Innovation in American government*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Aucoin, P. (1995). *The new public management: Canada in comparative perspective*. Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.
- Baer, W.C. (1997). General plan evaluation criteria: An approach to making better plans. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 63, 329–344.
- Baum, H. (2001). How should we evaluate community initiatives? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 67, 147–157.
- Berman, E.M. (1998). *Productivity in public and nonprofit organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Borins, S. (1998). *Innovating with integrity*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Bracken, I. (1981). *Urban planning methods: Research and policy analysis*. New York: Methuen.
- Bryson, J. (1991). There is no substitute for an empirical defense of planning and planners. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 10(2), 164–165.
- Burchell, R.W., & Listokin, D. (1983). *The fiscal impact handbook*. Rutgers, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research.
- Caron, D.J. (1995). Knowledge required to perform the duties of an evaluator. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 8(1), 59–79.
- Cartwright, L. (2000). Selecting local sustainable development indicators: Does consensus exist in their choice and purpose? *Planning Practice and Research*, 15(1/2), 65–78.

- Chapin, F.S., & Kaiser, E.J. (1979). *Urban land use planning* (3rd ed.). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Chelimsky, E. (1997). The coming transformation in evaluation. In E. Chelimsky & W.R. Shadish (Eds.). *Evaluation for the 21st century* (pp. 1–26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Christensen, K.S. (1985). Coping with uncertainty in planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 50(1), 63–73.
- Dilks, D. (1996). *Measuring urban sustainability: Canadian indicators workshop*. Ottawa: State of the Environment Directorate, Environment Canada, & Centre for Futures Studies in Housing and Living Environments, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- Friend, J.K., and Jessop, W.N. (1977). *Local government and strategic choice* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Pergamon Press.
- Gibson, J., & Boisvert, B. (1997). *Data-driven performance: Accountability, business planning and performance measurement in Canada*. Ottawa: Conference Board of Canada.
- Government of Canada. (1994). *Review, internal audit and evaluation*. Ottawa: Treasury Board. <http://www/tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/TBM_161/CHAP3-1_e.html>.
- Government of Canada. (2000). *Standards for evaluation in federal departments and agencies*. <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/TBM_161/CHAP3-2_e.html>.
- Government of Ontario. (1982). *Monitoring guidelines: An approach to monitoring official plans*. Toronto: Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.
- Government of Ontario. (1999). *Performance monitoring in the planning system*. Toronto: Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.
- Government of Ontario. (2000). *Municipal performance measurement program*. <<http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/business/mpmp/mpmp-e.asp>>.
- Graham, K., Phillips, S., & Maslove, A. (1998). *Urban governance in Canada: Representation, resources and restructuring*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- Hatry, H., Blair, L., Fisk, D., & Kimmel, W. (1987). *Program analysis for state and local governments* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

- Higgins, D.H. (1986). *Local and urban politics in Canada*. Toronto: Gage.
- Hill, M. (1968). A goals-achievement matrix for evaluating alternative plans. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 324(1), 19–29.
- Hodge, G. (1998). *Planning Canadian communities: An introduction to the principles, practice and participants* (3rd ed.). Scarborough, ON: ITP Nelson.
- Julian, D.A. (1997). The utilization of logic models as a system level planning and evaluation device. *Education and Program Planning*, 20, 251–257.
- Kearney, R., & Berman, E. (Eds.). (1999). *Public sector performance: Management, motivation and measurement*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Keehley, P., Medlin, S., MacBride, S., & Longmire, L. (1997). *Benchmarking for best practices in the public sector*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lichfield, N. (1996). *Community impact evaluation*. London: UCL Press.
- Lichfield, N., Kettle, P., & Whitehead, M. (1975). *Evaluation in the planning process*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Love, A. (1996). Knowledge for empowerment: A visit to the evaluation unit of the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 2(3), 349–361.
- Maclaren, V. (1996a). *Developing indicators of urban sustainability: A focus on the Canadian experience*. Toronto: ICURR Press.
- Maclaren, V.W. (1996b). Urban sustainability reporting. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 62(6), 184–202.
- Magnusson, W. (1985). The local state in Canada: Theoretical perspectives. *Canadian Public Administration*, 28, 575–599.
- Mastop, H., & Needham, B. (1997). Performance studies in spatial planning: The state of the art. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 24, 881–888.
- Mayne, J., & Hudson, J. (1992). Program evaluation: An overview. In J. Hudson, J. Mayne, & R. Thomlinson (Eds.), *Action-oriented evaluation in organizations: Canadian practices*. Toronto: Wall & Emerson.

- McLoughlin, J.B. (1970). *Urban and regional planning: A systems approach*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Mertens, D. (1998). *Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Minnery, J., Cameron, C., Brown, J., & Newman, P. (1993). Evaluation in urban planning: A framework for analysis. *Australian Planner*, 31(1), 8–13.
- Murtagh, B. (1998). Evaluating the community impacts of urban policy. *Planning Practice and Research*, 13(2), 129–138.
- Myers, A. (1999). *Program evaluation for exercise leaders*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (1998). *Best practice guidelines for evaluation* (PUMA Policy Brief No. 5). Paris: Author.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (1999). *Improving evaluation practice: Best practice guidelines for evaluation and background paper* (PUMA/PAC(99)1). Paris: Author.
- Osborne, D., & Gaebler, T. (1992). *Reinventing government*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Pal, L. (1997). *Beyond policy analysis*. Scarborough, ON: ITP Nelson.
- Palys, T. (1997). *Research decisions: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Harcourt Brace.
- Paquet, G. (1999). Tectonic changes in Canadian governance. In L. Pal (Ed.), *How Ottawa spends 1999–2000: Shape shifting – Canadian governance toward the 21st century* (pp. 75–112). Ottawa: Carleton University Press.
- Patton, C.V. (1986). Policy analysis with implementation in mind. In B. Checkoway (Ed.), *Strategic perspectives on planning practice* (pp. 105–122). Toronto: Lexington Books.
- Patton, M.Q. (1998). *Utilization focused evaluations: The new century text* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M.Q. (1999). Organizational development and evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 14 [Special Issue], 93–114.

- Peters, B.G. (1996). *The future of governing*. Lawrence, KA: University of Kansas Press.
- Poister, T.H., & Streib, G. (1999). Performance measurement in municipal government: Assessing the state of the practice. *Public Administration Review*, 59, 325–335.
- Regional Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth. (2000). *Vision 2020: Promoting action towards a sustainable community in Hamilton-Wentworth*. <<http://www.vision2020.hamilton-went.on.ca/indicators/index.html>>.
- Robinson, I.M. (1972). *Decision-making in urban planning: An introduction to new methodologies*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Roseland, M. (1998). *Toward sustainable communities*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Rossi, P.H., Freeman, H.E., & Lipsey, M.W. (1999). *Evaluation: A systematic approach* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rush, B., & Ogborne, A. (1991). Program logic models: Expanding their role and structure for program planning and evaluation. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 6(2), 95–106.
- Rutman, L. (1984). *Evaluation research methods: A basic guide* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Sawicki, D., & Flynn, P. (1996). Neighborhood indicators: A review of the literature and an assessment of conceptual and methodological issues. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 62(2), 165–183.
- Senge, P. (1994). *The fifth discipline handbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.
- Siegel, D. (1993). Reinventing local government: The promise and the problems. In L. Seidle (Ed.), *Rethinking government* (pp. 175–202). Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy.
- Simon, H.A. (1957). *Models of man, social and rational*. New York: Wiley.
- Talen, E. (1996a). After the plans: Methods to evaluate the implementation success of plans. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 16, 79–91.
- Talen, E. (1996b). Do plans get implemented? A review of evaluation in planning. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 10(3), 248–259.

- Talen, E. (1997). Success, failure, and conformance: An alternative approach to planning evaluation. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design*, 24, 573–587.
- Tindal, C.R., & Tindal, S.N. (2000). *Local government in Canada* (5th ed.). Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson.
- UNICEF. (2000). *Monitoring and evaluation manual*. <<http://www.unicef.org/reseval/mandelr.htm>>.
- Weiss, C. (1984). Increasing the likelihood of influencing decisions. In L. Rutman (Ed.), *Evaluation research methods: A basic guide* (pp. 159–190). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Weiss, C. (1998). *Evaluation* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Wholey, J.S., Hatry, H., & Newcomer, K.E. (Eds.). (1994). *Handbook of practical program evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wholey, J., & Newcomer, K. (1989). *Improving government performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Winberg, A. (1986). A phased approach for conducting program evaluations. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation*, 2(1), 1–11.
- World Bank Institute. (2000). *Evaluation*. <<http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/evalunit.html>>.

