



WASHINGTON STATE AUDITOR'S OFFICE

Performance Audit
Town Hall Meetings:
Education & Transportation

Report Summary

April 2006

Elway Research Inc.

Introduction

In April 2006, the Washington State Auditor's Office convened a series of four "town hall meetings" with randomly selected registered voters to discuss government performance audits. These meetings were part of Auditor Brian Sonntag's efforts to engage Washington citizens in performance audits mandated by Initiative 900.

These town meetings followed a series of focus groups and statewide surveys, all of which were designed to:

1. Verify that the programs slated for initial performance audits – the transportation system and the education system – were areas citizens wanted the auditor to look at.
2. Assess citizens' expectations for the performance audits.

Citizens were asked to evaluate the transportation and education systems' current performance and to share ideas about the direction of the performance audits.

Fifty citizens, selected from a list of registered voters, were invited to each of the meetings, held in Kent, Lynnwood, Vancouver and Pasco. A total of 188 citizens participated, representing 21 legislative districts.

Each of the two-hour meetings consisted of a combination of electronic interactive polling and facilitated discussion. Participants were told about the performance audits and shown charts about current levels of spending in education and transportation. Participants filled out a questionnaire about state government performance before coming to each meeting. The compiled results of this pre-survey are included in the full, 81-page report by Elway Research.

The meetings were designed and facilitated by Elway Research Inc. and FLT Consulting in close collaboration with the State Auditor's Office.

This summary is a condensed version of the full report on the town hall meetings. The full report is available at the State Auditor's Web site, www.sao.wa.gov.

Summary of key findings

- Half said state government is working "about the same" as it always has.
- Fifty-five percent said local government is working "about the same" as it always has.

- “Accountability” out-ranked “efficiency” and “effectiveness” *combined* as “most important” measure of government performance.

Government performance

The meetings opened with general questions about state and local government performance, intended to warm the participants to the subject and provide a context for specific education and transportation topics.

- Half of the participants thought state government was working “about as well as it always had.”
- Those who paid close attention to state government were more likely to say it was working better now (30% compared to 12% of others).
- 21% of participants over age 50 said state government was working better, but only 9% of those 50 or under agreed.
- Local government got slightly better ratings than state government: 28% said it is worse than in the past; 17% said it is better now, and 55% said it is the same.

Participants were asked what they thought was working better than it used to in state government. This list is not prioritized or tabulated. Responses were:

- Online information
- Customer service
- Emissions testing
- Less partisan bickering
- Energy policies
- Tax breaks for the elderly
- Better communication with citizens
- I-900

Participants were asked what they thought was working worse than it used to in state government. This list is not prioritized or tabulated. Responses were:

- Child Protective Services
- Mental health
- Can’t get a hold of people on the phone
- Prosecution of non-violent crimes
- Property takings
- High property taxes
- Ability to solve long range problems
- Elections/ballot counting
- Thresholds for assistance too high
- Leadership
- Air pollution
- State mandates on businesses, schools, locals
- Over-regulation/complicated regulations
- Affordable healthcare
- “Stepchild” feelings outside of Puget Sound

Education system

State public education system got mostly negative ratings:

- 55% said it is not working as well as it used to
- 38% said it is ineffective vs. 11% effective
- 45% said it is inefficient vs. 10% efficient
- 55% said it is unaccountable vs. 4% accountable

Local school districts got middling marks:

- 14% said it is working better than it used to; 40% said working as well as it used to
- 27% said it is ineffective vs. 20% effective
- 30% said it is inefficient vs. 17% efficient
- 37% said it is unaccountable vs. 16% accountable

Funding priorities:

Participants in each group were asked to choose their top two funding priorities for programs “beyond basic education.” The combined priorities were:

- 58% vocational education
- 47% early childhood learning
- 26% alternative learning programs
- 20% Running Start
- 19% special education
- 14% summer school
- 5% bilingual programs

Education public information

- Half knew “what is going on in your local schools,” half did not
- 8 in 10 received information directly from a school district
- 2 in 3 said schools encourage citizen involvement
- 1 in 3 thought information was available “that lets you evaluate the performance of the education system”
- 1 in 3 said such information was “not at all” available

Expectations for Performance Audits

- Expectations for performance audits were typically expressed in terms of measurements, such as graduation rates and test scores
- Participants were also interested in outcomes. Several wanted some measure of how high school graduates were doing after they graduated – whether they were working or had gone to college
- Several others wanted some measure of teacher performance

Transportation system

Washington State Department of Transportation performance ratings:

- 15% said it is effective; 30% said ineffective
- 5% said it is efficient; 54% said inefficient
- 6% said it is accountable; 57% said unaccountable

Department's priorities performance ratings

- Traffic congestion: 63% Poor
- Traffic Safety: 56% Uncertain
- Roadway condition: 54% Uncertain
- Freight mobility: 62% Uncertain
- Public transportation: 49% Uncertain

Local transportation agencies' performance ratings:

- 22% said they are effective; 26% said ineffective;
- 12% said they are efficient; 38% said inefficient;
- 11% said they are accountable; 42% said unaccountable.

Easing congestion top transportation priority

- 6 in 10 chose it from a list of 5 priorities
- 2 in 3 rate system "poor" in regard to congestion

Only 1 in 8 confident their priorities are represented in the state transportation budget

- More than half thought they are not
- 1 in 7 did not know whether they were or were not

Transportation Information

- 7 in 10 said information to evaluate the performance of the transportation system is not available, or they were not sure if it was available
- Nearly 6 in 10 learn about the transportation system from news reports
- 63% had logged on to Department Web site
- 64% had used traffic cam
- 60% had used traffic radio
- 2% had used Department's "The Gray Notebook" (Quarterly Performance Report)

Expectations for transportation audits

Expectations for transportation performance audits were varied.

- The most consistent theme had to do with making information more available and more understandable
- The content of the information had mostly to do with cost effectiveness and planning