

Bob Behn's Public Management Report

An occasional (and maybe insightful) examination of the issues, dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities in leadership, governance, management, and performance in public agencies.

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On why public executives must fulfill

Citizens' Basic-Services Imperative

Inside the 175-year-old **Mount Auburn Cemetery**, lie Charles Bulfinch, Mary Baker Eddy, Buckminster Fuller, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Winslow Homer, Julia Ward Howe, Edwin Land, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Outside, on Mount Auburn Street, lies a well-known pothole.

The pothole is not as famous as Holmes or Longfellow. It gets no press. You can't find it on Google. Yet, to many Cambridge locals, this pothole is infamous.

How do I know this? Because as I drive down Mount Auburn Street past the Cemetery, I observe the cars in front of me weaving to avoid this pothole. It isn't very big. To a New York connoisseur, it would hardly qualify as an authentic pothole.

Still, many drivers are quite aware of its existence. They are not swerving at the last minute. They plan their maneuver well ahead.

Because water has a peculiar characteristic, potholes grow especially well in the frost belt. Like most substances, water contracts as it gets colder—until the temperature drops to 39° Fahrenheit, at which point the water starts expanding. Then, at 32°, when the water freezes, it expands dramatically.

On every road, water seeps into every crack. Whenever the temperature drops to freezing, the water expands making the crack slightly bigger. When the temperature increases, the ice melts, and more water seeps in. When the temperature drops again and the water freezes, the crack expands a little more. Eventually the crack is no longer a crack. After multiple freezing and thawing cycles, it graduates from crack to pothole.

Moreover, it doesn't help that our utilities keep digging up the streets. The companies that provide us with water, electricity, phone and Internet services are constantly creating even more cracks—some large, some tiny—all of which can become potholes.

In Baltimore, one of the targets for which its **CitiStat performance strat-**

egy is well known is the "48-Hour Pothole Guarantee." If a citizen calls 311 to report a pothole, the city will fix it in two days. In fact, Baltimore hits this target roughly 95 percent of the time. And, on average, the city fills its potholes in less than a day.

Yet several friends have complained: Why is Baltimore so fixated on fixing potholes? Why is a mayor devoting so much time and money to potholes? Filling a pothole is simply an input to the transportation services that the city provides. The number of potholes repaired within 48 hours, they argue, is a silly measure. It contains no information about the quality of the city's streets, let alone the transportation services provided to those who can't afford a car.

Mayors have real and significant operational responsibilities. They have to pick up the garbage, plow the snow, clean the parks, and fill the potholes. If they fail to provide these very basic, very visible services, they quickly become ex-mayors.

Mayors, these friends argue, should focus on improving the city's entire transportation system. And, if streets are an essential component of that system, a mayor should concentrate on measuring and improving the flow of automobile traffic. Or, at least, a mayor ought to measure the smoothness of the streets not the number of potholes filled. In fact, why doesn't some innovative mayor figure out how to construct the streets so that they don't ever have potholes?

Or, if potholes are a problem, why doesn't a mayor develop a better way to fill potholes, so they don't have to be filled again and again and again?

Unfortunately, since the invention of asphalt, potholes have plagued humanity. We humans can land on the moon and clone sheep. Potholes, however, have defeated us. Every

year, Honolulu patches over 60,000 potholes. How often does it freeze there? So, until science figures out a way to eliminate potholes, mayors will have to deal with them.

After all, citizens—a.k.a. voters—care about potholes. Citizens want potholes fixed—and fast.

Citizens for NYC is an organization that supports efforts of neighborhood organizations to improve the quality of life in New York City. It also conducts an annual survey of community leaders (though certainly not a random sample) to determine their top quality-of-life problems. In 2005, the top concern in Manhattan was street noise, the top concern in Brooklyn was garbage, and the top one in the Bronx was drug dealing. But in Queens and Staten Island—and city-wide too—the top concern was potholes. (In 2006, potholes dropped to number six, city-wide.)

Mayors have operational responsibilities that are real and significant. They have to pick up the garbage, plow the snow, clean the parks, and fix the potholes. If they fail to provide these very basic, very visible services, they quickly become ex-mayors.

Indeed, providing core services is a public executive's first test, and doing so often requires innovation. But before any public executive can engage too much policy creativity, he or she must first deliver core services.

When confronted with Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency failed to demonstrate any **managerial competence**. And its attempts to cope with the aftermath haven't been much better. Some day, we hope, FEMA will grasp the basic-services imperative. **B**

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