



2005 – 2006 Annual Report



The Research Bureau

Research in the Public Interest That's What We do

“The Research Bureau’s well-deserved reputation for integrity makes its reports a vital resource for elected officials, policy makers, journalists and citizens alike.”

Telegram & Gazette Editorial, October 2, 2005



The Research Bureau

A Message

from the President and the Executive Director

The year was marked by our 20th anniversary gala to celebrate our past accomplishments, and by our efforts to position the organization for the next two decades. On September 29 in the Great Hall of Mechanics Hall, we recognized the foresight of The Research Bureau's founders and the hard work and dedication of our past presidents. And we paid special tribute to Fairman C. Cowan, who was not only instrumental in the founding of The Research Bureau, but has played a continuous role in its growth and development. Our tribute included establishing a fund in his honor to support our government performance measurement project. At the same event, with an eye toward the future, we unveiled an updated logo with an abbreviated name, and a new mission statement. While still officially the Worcester Regional Research Bureau, the leadership decided that the length and difficulty of getting the words in the right order called for adopting a shortened version. Hence, we are doing business as The Research Bureau. And our mission statement hones in on what we do best: "conducting independent, non-partisan research and analysis of public policy issues" in the Greater Worcester region "to promote informed public debate and decision-making."

A second major undertaking of The Research Bureau during this year was the Central Massachusetts Talent Retention Project. The work was commissioned by the Regional Competitiveness Council, one of six appointed by Governor Romney three years ago. The purpose of these councils was to conduct in-depth analyses of each region's economic climate and develop projects that would advance the goals of job growth and economic development within each region. Analysis of the Central Region's economy identified education and knowledge-creation as one of the Region's key strengths. Central Massachusetts is home to fifteen colleges and universities that enroll more than 35,000 students annually and graduate approximately 5,000 students each year. The Central Massachusetts Regional Competitiveness Council identified the ability to retain a greater proportion of the "home grown" talent graduating from these institutions as a priority, since this talent pool could enhance the competitiveness and attractiveness of the workforce to existing employers and to those interested in establishing businesses in the Region. It is also a pool of potential entrepreneurs.

The questions the Central Massachusetts Talent Retention Project sought to answer were: 1) how much of this talent are we currently retaining, and 2) how can the Region attract more college graduates to remain here.

A summary of the findings and recommendations are found later in this report. While this is the first time that The Research Bureau has been hired as a consultant, there are other public agencies that have expressed interest in engaging us on a consulting basis, and something we will consider seriously if the requests are compatible with our mission.



As The Research Bureau enters its third decade of operations, we wish to express our gratitude to the numerous individuals, corporations, foundations, and institutions that have supported us for so many years. And a special thank you to all the Board members who have donated their time and resources over the years. Many have been involved since our founding. The 2005 contributors as well as those who have provided in-kind services and financial sponsorship of forums are listed at the end of this report. We are also very grateful to The Research Bureau's Executive Committee for its thoughtfulness and diligence in guiding the organization. Our sincerest thanks to Agnes Kull, The Research Bureau's volunteer treasurer since 1994, who, each year, donates countless hours to work on the Bureau's behalf. We also want to acknowledge the Bureau's very able staff, Jean Deleso, Kimberly Hood, and Kendra Metzger for their insights, initiative, teamwork, and good humor. With the continuing beneficence of all those we have mentioned, The Research Bureau will have the necessary help to inform public discussion on important public policy issues in the greater Worcester region over the next twenty years. Our warmest thanks to all of you.

Eric H. Schultz
President

Roberta Rubel Schaefer, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Promoting a Healthier, More Prosperous Region

Retaining Talent

The Research Bureau recently issued the final report of the Central Massachusetts Talent Retention Project, an initiative of the Central Massachusetts Regional Competitiveness Council, funded by the Executive Office of Economic Development with additional support from the Fallon Community Health Plan and the Greater Worcester Community Foundation. The purpose of this project was to document the career and location decisions of more than 5,000 students who graduate from the Region's fifteen colleges each year, to better understand why they stay or leave, and to suggest opportunities that would enable the Region to retain more of its talent. The survey findings indicated that students base their location decisions primarily on the availability of career opportunities, but they know little about those opportunities in Central Massachusetts. We concluded that colleges and employers need to develop a series of action steps that would build stronger connections between college students and employers in the Region.

These steps include:

- Provide opportunities for the college and university career services staff and other college administrators and professors to become more familiar with the Region's employers, employment opportunities, and the skills and qualifications employers are seeking in candidates. Employers could host such individuals on-site at their facilities for this purpose.
- Provide opportunities for students to meet with local employers early in their college careers to inform students about career and employment opportunities in the Region. These opportunities could consist of colleges hosting informal gatherings for employers to meet with students at their campuses and the employers opening their facilities to students through programs similar to the "Hub Crawl" sponsored by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. At these events, there are panel discussions including senior management and recently-hired college graduates that address various facets of the company and the working environment. This is followed by informal networking and a tour of the facility.
- Establish a Web site that will serve as an "internship clearinghouse" for all students and employers in the Region. Ideally, the Web site will enable any employer in the Region to post internship opportunities online and search student resumes. For students, the Web site will provide expanded access to internship opportunities and employer profiles, and the ability to both submit and post a resume online. The development of this tool will require a partnership involving colleges and universities, the public sector, private employers, and non-profit organizations in the Region.

The results of this project and the recommendations are important for policy makers, employers, the area's institutions of higher learning, and others concerned about improving the Region's ability to retain a higher proportion of its "home grown" talent. Retaining and attracting young highly-educated individuals will enable the Central Region to be more competitive and attractive to employers than it would be otherwise.

"The Research Bureau's recommendations [in the Talent Retention report] are sound and simple. As always, success depends on follow-up. Sponsors of this survey should insist on implementation."

*Robert Z. Nemeth
Telegram & Gazette,
April 16, 2006*

Promoting Tourism

At the request of the Chairman of the City Manager’s Task Force on Event and Convention Promotion, The Research Bureau studied promotion of those activities in thirteen other cities and made recommendations to bring more visitors and business to the City and the Region. In our report “Destination Worcester: What’s the ‘Convention-al’ Wisdom?”, we suggested that the Central Massachusetts Convention and Visitors Bureau (CMCVB) Board of Directors give greater attention to promoting conventions and events in Worcester as the largest City in the Region and the only one with a convention center. To achieve this, the CMCVB Board should be restructured so that voting is based on population or funding contributions. At present, Worcester is the only community in the region that provides local funding to the CMCVB; the predominant source of revenue is the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism.

With greater attention to Worcester, the City Manager and the City Council should increase funding from the hotel/motel tax. (Currently, Worcester contributes about 20% of the tax whereas most CVB’s studied receive at least 50% of the tax.) The City Manager and City Council should also invest in research to determine the economic impact of tourism and conventions that would establish baseline data. Such research would provide a better understanding of the market the City is trying to reach.

“The Worcester Regional Research Bureau yesterday called for a major shake-up of the board that oversees the area’s two convention and tourism bureaus, to bring more convention and related business to Worcester.”

*Bronislaus Kush
Telegram & Gazette,
March 28, 2006*



Promoting Economy in Municipal Operations

The City of Worcester continues to face serious financial pressures. During the past year, The Research Bureau continued to call attention to these issues through reports and forums analyzing the problems and making recommendations that would promote greater economy in the delivery of municipal services.

Restructure municipal employee health insurance premium contributions

Since 1992, The Research Bureau has been alerting City officials to the perils of the current municipal employee health insurance structure. In FY06, these benefits cost the City \$60 million, or 13.6% of the budget, the second largest expenditure after the Worcester Public Schools. Earlier this year, the International Brotherhood of Police Officials Local 378 agreed to increase the employee contribution to 20% for current employees and 25% for new hires. Unless the other unions agree to this change, employee health insurance benefits will cost \$67 million, or 14.3% of the FY07 budget. The City Manager has projected that without changes, health insurance benefits will consume 40% of the budget by 2014. At The Research Bureau's annual forum on state and local finances on March 3, 2006, the Commonwealth's Secretary of Administration and Finance warned the City "You are on an unsustainable road. Unless you turn around, you'll be Springfield-like [which is in virtual receivership]." If all remaining unions settled in a similar fashion to the police union, total savings would be \$9.5 million in FY07.

Build on accomplishments to improve city services and cut costs.

The City of Worcester has demonstrated an ability to adapt, innovate, and improve City Services in ways that cut costs and increase productivity:

- The City's Web site now allows for a number of transactions online including payment of various taxes, securing several kinds of licenses and permits, and birth, death and marriage certificates.
- The Worcester Police Department (WPD) has replaced paper reports with an automated system for morning and overtime reports, payroll, attendance and work schedules, all of which can be accessed electronically.
- The WPD uses digital mapping technology to identify clusters of reported crimes and disturbances.
- The Department of Public Works and Parks (DPWP) established a Customer Service Center (508-929-1300) which enables citizens to call one number for all complaints related to DPWP rather than calling one of fifteen numbers that existed previously. The Service Center received the Massachusetts Municipal Association Innovation Award for 2005.

"The Research Bureau report shows why the city and school administration place such high priority, in the face of strong union resistance, on reforming the health insurance benefits."

*Telegram & Gazette Editorial,
March 23, 2006*

“In its new report on Worcester’s fiscal prospects, The Research Bureau underscores the pressing need to restore financial stability in fiscal 2007 and beyond. The Research Bureau’s concerns are well-taken. To be sure, several proposals involve collective bargaining and may be politically sensitive. But the alternatives for closing the budget gap are deep service cuts and tax hikes – budget-balancing options that ill-serve the city or its residents.”

*Telegram & Gazette Editorial,
May 17, 2006*

In its recent report “How Can Worcester Insure its Fiscal Health in FY07 and Beyond?”, The Research Bureau identified areas other than the employee health insurance for reducing costs, increasing productivity, and expanding the tax base:

- Hire a professional manager to supervise Worcester Police Department fleet operations who will establish a vehicle maintenance schedule, a vehicle replacement schedule, and a plan for optimal utilization of Department vehicles.
- Include first responder service in EMS services provided by UMass Memorial Healthcare at no cost to the City so as to reduce the burden on Worcester Fire Department personnel and equipment, and reduce fuel costs.
- Restructure the Code Division of the Fire Department to include less costly civilian engineers.
- Outsource custodial services for municipal and school buildings which could save the City \$2 million annually.
- Establish electronic bill payment to pay major vendors. Negotiate change in contractual arrangements to be able to issue checks to all salaried municipal employees either biweekly or monthly.
- Establish a trust fund to pre-fund Other Post-Employment Benefits (OPEB) such as retiree health insurance, which currently represents a \$1 billion liability for the City.
- Fund the Route 20 Sewer Project to create new opportunities for expanding the City’s tax base.

Monitoring Trends to Improve Management

The Research Bureau is now in the sixth year of its performance measurement project, which was implemented with a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in 2001. Each year, we track Worcester's performance toward achieving the goals of its strategic plan: to improve economic development, public education, public safety, municipal and neighborhood services, and youth services. Municipal departments have used The Research Bureau's trend data to improve the management of departments and the delivery of services.

The Research Bureau's ComNET (Computerized Neighborhood Environment Tracking) surveys have been particularly helpful in contributing to some City initiatives. Since the spring of 2001, The Research Bureau has partnered with more than 100 residents in 13 of the most socio-economically challenged neighborhoods (comprising 180 miles of sidewalks and about one-third of the City's population) to conduct ComNET surveys. Each survey allows residents, who are accompanied by students from the College of the Holy Cross and trained to use handheld computers and digital cameras, to systematically record various problems and assets in their neighborhoods. The data collected are then transmitted to the appropriate agency for remedial action. Citywide, almost two-thirds of the more than 10,000 problems identified through ComNET have been resolved primarily by Public Works, Code Enforcement, Parks, and neighborhood associations working in partnership to improve the quality of life of residents and the overall vitality of Worcester's neighborhoods.

Some of the City's initiatives include the following:

Abandoned Vehicle Removal Program – Abandoned vehicles were identified by ComNET participants as a major problem. They were not being removed in a timely fashion partly because the job was the responsibility of two separate departments. Since the Department of Public Works and Parks (DPWP) assumed responsibility for the Abandoned Vehicle Removal Program in 2003, more than 5,000 vehicles have been tagged and removed. The revenues collected from fines issued have exceeded towing and storage costs incurred by DPWP, allowing the program to be self-sufficient.

Street and Sidewalk Repair – The poor condition of the City's streets and sidewalks is the most frequently identified problem by ComNET participants. (It is also cited as a serious problem in the yearly Citizen Satisfaction Survey.) While DPWP was well aware of the issue, the survey quantified the extent of the problem and resident dissatisfaction. Over the last few years, the City has made a serious commitment to systematically remedy the problem although securing sufficient funding for these repairs remains a serious problem. From 2003 to 2004, the City increased the number of street miles resurfaced by 58% and miles of sidewalk repaired by 33%. The FY07 budget includes an additional \$2.25 million for street and sidewalk repair.

“One consequence of the [ComNET] program, is that you bring the community closer to government. Residents come to understand that while some problems are resolved immediately, others, such as repairing streets, become part of a capital program that may take months or years to fulfill.”

*Robert Moylan, Commissioner
Department of Public Works and
Parks, City of Worcester,
The Beacon, June 2005*

Customer Service Center (508-929-1300) – This project, mentioned earlier, developed in part as a result of The Research Bureau’s proposal that the City establish a system of enabling citizens to log in their requests for service on a regular basis rather than having to wait for the yearly ComNET survey. The Customer Service Center, managed by DPWP since it began operations in 2002, is a computerized service request/work order system, which logs and tracks citizen requests, inquiries, and complaints. During FY05, the Center responded to over 110,000 calls and about one-quarter resulted in work orders. When a call comes in requesting, for example, that a pothole be filled, a computerized work order appears on the screen in front of the consumer service representative, prompting the representative to enter the appropriate information about the caller and the service request. The completed request then goes electronically to the appropriate DPWP division. The DPWP division accepts the work order, updates it as necessary and closes it when the work is completed. A resident can call the Service Center at any time for an update on the project. The Customer Service Center has recently been experimenting with the use of handheld computers in the field by DPWP personnel. This will allow workers to receive a request for action from the Customer Service Center, respond to the problem and report back to the service center that it has been resolved, all via computer. DPWP is working to enhance an online component to allow citizens to submit requests using the Internet and email. As noted earlier, the Service Center saves thousands of dollars a year because fewer people are needed to answer phones. It also has improved the way information is passed on to the public and cut the response time of the DPWP to residents’ complaints.

Keep Worcester Clean – An analysis of the ComNET data indicated that a number of the issues identified during the surveys cut across departmental jurisdictions. The Keep Worcester Clean Program (KWC) is the result of a collaboration among the Department of Public Works and Parks, Divisions of Health and Code, and numerous neighborhood associations to better coordinate existing City services. The aim is to improve the overall cleanliness of the City, including street and sidewalk sweeping, graffiti removal, and the City’s response to litter and illegal dumping.

Neighborhood Plans – The City’s Planning Division has incorporated ComNET data into the neighborhood plans it has developed for two of Worcester’s targeted neighborhoods. The data have been overlaid onto maps, which show existing structures, projects planned, and other neighborhood features.

Use of ComNET Data by Neighborhood Associations – ComNET data are used in grant applications for funding and to develop association work plans that measure specific outcomes such as improved physical appearance of neighborhoods.

MEETINGS & THOMAS GREEN AWARDS



Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau; Eric Schultz, President, Fallon Community Health Plan; Tamar Jacoby, Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute

Annual Meeting, June, 2005

Tamar Jacoby, senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and author of *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What it Means to be American*, discussed the need to reform the nation's immigration laws so that we continue to be a beacon of hope for immigrants. According to Ms. Jacoby, this will require both a guest worker program and securing our borders against terrorists.

Board of Directors Meeting, September 2005

Dr. John Mullin, Dean of Graduate Studies at UMass Amherst, offered some advice and made some predictions about the Greater Worcester region. These included the need for Worcester to think and act as part of a region, to press the MBTA for 30 trains a day, and to develop 5,000 market rate units of housing in the downtown area.



John Mullin, Dean of Graduate Studies, University of Massachusetts Amherst; Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau



John Cogliano, Secretary of Transportation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau; Eric Schultz, President, Fallon Community Health Plan

Board of Directors Meeting, January 2006

Secretary of Transportation John Cogliano briefed the Board on the Romney Administration transportation plans for Worcester, including the completion of the Route 146 Connector, increased commuter rail service, and three phases of work to minimize traffic gridlock in the City.

2005 Thomas Green Recipients



Jose Machado, JoAnne O'Leary



Karen Ludington, Mark Berthiaume



Nathan Reando, Francis Paquette



Mayor Timothy Murray, **Joel Wentworth**, Robert Nemeth

Recipients are in bold text.

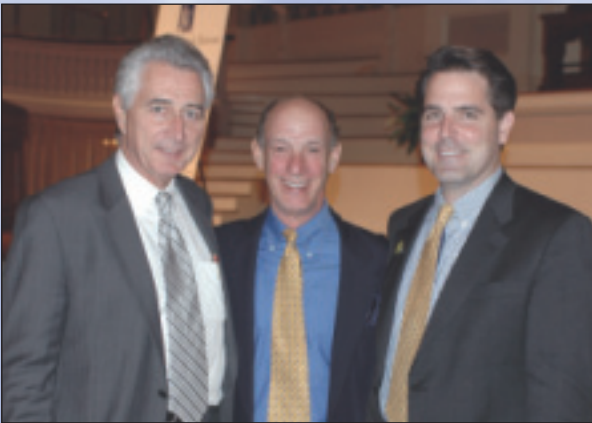


Photo courtesy of Steve Lanava, Telegram & Gazette Photographer



*Photo courtesy of Steve Lanava,
Telegram & Gazette Photographer*



Photo courtesy of Steve Lanava, Telegram & Gazette Photographer



Worcester Regional Airport: The Region's Ticket to Takeoff?

December 8, 2005



State and Local Spending in FY07: Diagnosing Our Fiscal Health

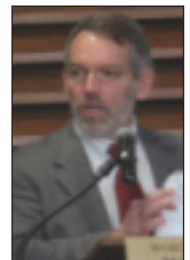
March 3, 2006

(from left to right) Thomas Trimarco, Commonwealth Secretary of Administration and Finance; Michael O'Brien, Worcester City Manager; Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau; Brian Bullock, Holden Town Manager; Brian Buckley, Attorney, Fletcher, Tilton & Whipple, PC

Government Regulation & Housing Prices: What's the Connection?

March 29, 2006

James Stergios, Executive Director, Pioneer Institute; Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau; Daniel Morgado, Town Manager, Shrewsbury; Amy Dain, Project Manager, Pioneer Institute; Michael Jaillet, Town Administrator, Westwood; Frederick Mulligan, President, Cutler Associates



Frederick Mulligan,
President,
Cutler Associates

The Education Gender Gap: Why are boys not making the grade?

May 19, 2006

Back row: J. Michael Steele, Principal, The Nativity School of Worcester; John Bassett, President, Clark University; Paul Reville, President, Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy; Sandra Stotsky, Education Consultant; Roberta Schaefer, Executive Director, The Research Bureau



TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

By any name – The Research Bureau at 20, stronger than ever Telegram & Gazette, October 2, 2005

The Worcester Regional Research Bureau would be justified in celebrating its 20th anniversary by looking back on two decades of thoughtful, independent public-policy analysis.

While paying due homage to accomplishments of the past, however, there has been a strong emphasis on the future. The organization embarks on its third decade with a new name - simply, The Research Bureau - a new, streamlined mission statement and a new research fund.

The Fairman C. Cowan Research Fund, established with a major leadership grant from Saint-Gobain, recognizes the contributions of Mr. Cowan, a co-founder and driving force since the organization's inception. It will be used as needed to start new projects and to continue projects in progress.

The Research Bureau is a fully collaborative and collegial enterprise, but much of the credit for its record of accomplishment belongs to its indefatigable executive director. Roberta R. Schaefer brings to the job a rare blend of intelligence, passion and the ability to fairly weigh diverse points of view on every issue.

The Research Bureau's well-deserved reputation for integrity has made its reports - 130 of them to date - a vital resource for public policy-makers, elected officials, journalists and engaged citizens alike. Worcester and the region are fortunate, indeed, to have such a resource.

“The range of complex, often controversial issues the bureau has tackled is astonishing.”

*Telegram & Gazette Editorial,
June 9, 2005*

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The Research Bureau

Bureau co-founder honored

Telegram & Gazette, September 30, 2005

“By dint of independence, intelligence and persistence this lean, mean organization has earned a position of uncommon respect, in this community and far beyond.”

*Telegram & Gazette Editorial,
June 9, 2005*

WORCESTER - Fairman C. Cowan, one of the founders of the Worcester Regional Research Bureau, was hailed at the agency's 20th anniversary dinner at Mechanics Hall last night as a man of vision, passion and perseverance and was honored with a research fund in his name.

Mr. Cowan, former general counsel for the Norton Co. and a veteran of dozens of civic campaigns, including the one that brought the city manager form of government to Worcester, spent much of his speech crediting the bureau's success to others, especially Roberta Schaefer, its executive director from the start.

"She's bright, imaginative, persistent ... everything a manager should be," Mr. Cowan said of Mrs. Schaefer, who was given two standing ovations from the crowd of several hundred. "If she were in the dot-com world, she'd be a multimillionaire by now."

The bureau was the brainchild of Mr. Cowan, Paul and Philip Morgan of Morgan Construction Co., who introduced Mr. Cowan last night, and several others. The deal was sealed at the Worcester Club with \$40,000 in pledges to get it off the ground and an offer from Assumption College of office space at \$1-a-year rent.

Now on Main Street near Mechanics Hall, the bureau has a \$500,000 annual budget and a place at the table when the city's future is debated.

Mr. Cowan, a former Isaiah Thomas Award winner, was revealed as likely the only man on the planet to have read and edited the more than 130 research bureau reports.

In a spoof of that accomplishment, Mr. Cowan threatened from the podium to read a 20-page report compiled by him about other municipal research bureaus, and then, to the delight of the audience, threw blank pages over his shoulder.

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Tracking Team

When citizens take to the streets, they learn more than just where problems are; they learn whose job it is to fix them.

Governing, April 2006 By Jonathan Walters

If the physical condition of a neighborhood is a significant indicator of its overall health, then few cities in the country are taking the measure of neighborhood well-being quite as accurately as Worcester, Massachusetts.

In fact, city officials and citizens say, documenting the incidence of cracked sidewalks, missing street signs and abandoned vehicles is a way of assessing the municipality at large.

The formerly down-at-the-heels industrial town in the central part of the state is on the leading edge of an ongoing experiment that marries citizen action and technology. Community leaders and city officials alike argue that it has changed how citizens and government view each other, as well as the big job of keeping a cash-strapped municipality and its downtown district and myriad neighborhoods healthy.

The experiment, known as ComNET (tech talk for “computerized neighborhood environment tracking”), offers participating neighborhoods a customized mechanism for objectively gauging the physical conditions that define them. Now in use in nearly 60 communities and business districts nationally, from New York City to Seattle, ComNET was developed by the Fund for the City of New York’s Center for Civic Innovation “because we discovered that citizens in large part judge government by the physical condition of their streets and streetscapes,” says the Fund’s Barbara Cohn. By engaging the community in the process of accurately cataloging such conditions, she says, the Fund hopes to get citizens, businesses, nonprofits and government working more closely together on sprucing up their communities.

To date, the ComNET phenomenon has illustrated its power in focusing citizen action on streetscapes, and on improving the look of downtown business districts. Whether that will translate into broader civic activism or any real improvements in municipal fiscal health remains to be seen.

A PUNCH LIST

The ComNET system is straightforward enough. Using hand-held mini-computers about the size of a BlackBerry, along with digital cameras, citizens survey the conditions in their neighborhood, from run-

down houses to busted streetlamps.

Armed with that inventory, neighborhoods not only have “a punch list of problems,” notes Ronald Charette, executive director of the South Worcester Neighborhood Center, but also a baseline for gauging whether their fortunes are rising or declining.

Under the Worcester program, neighborhood monitors now set out on annual, weekend forays to check up on the physical condition of their streets and streetscapes, homes and businesses. Walking tightly prescribed routes that have been downloaded into the ComNET handhelds, the system allows users to document problems with pinpoint accuracy using either street addresses or lot numbers.

Traveling in teams of three or four — typically a scout to keep the team on its prescribed route, the unit user to input findings and one or two others to point out trouble spots — participants call up menus listing nearly three dozen broad categories of physical features, from “Building-Residential” to “Crosswalks,” offering a drop-down menu under each that lists more specific conditions such as “roof/chimney broken” or “lines fading.” The data is then uploaded for analyzing and tracking, allowing users to generate a wide variety of spreadsheets depending on the kind of analysis they want to do or action they want to take.

As data accumulates from year to year, neighborhoods get a clearer picture of specific areas of need, along with a gauge of whether they’re dealing effectively with documented problems. Four neighborhoods in Worcester piloted the program in 2001, and four more were added in each of the following two years. In all, the dozen neighborhoods encompass approximately 55,000 of the city’s 175,000 residents, according to the Worcester Regional Research Bureau, which oversees the program.

WHO’S RESPONSIBLE?

The idea of arming citizens with tools they can use to pressure government to act might strike a lot of municipal officials as a supremely dangerous idea. And one of the Worcester officials who might be most

nervous having citizens loaded with facts about the physical condition of their neighborhood is Robert L. Moylan Jr., commissioner of the city’s Department of Public Works. “Streets, sidewalks, litter, lights, all that’s ours,” says Moylan.

In fact, he says, ComNET has led to at least two interesting phenomena. Rather than creating a noisy new lobby haranguing his department about potholes and missing street signs, the process of documenting problems has actually led to a much better understanding among citizens of the whole issue of demand versus resources. Moylan says neighborhoods now are much more tuned in to the fact that given the city’s budget situation, the city simply can’t address every problem that neighborhoods list — unless citizens want to see a big jump in property taxes. Second, and perhaps even more important, he says, ComNET has led to a much better understanding of who, exactly, is responsible for what when it comes to fixing up a neighborhood.

Neighborhood activists confirm Moylan’s view. “For a long time, we kept hearing the word ‘they’ when it came to neighborhood problems,” says Edith Morgan, who lives in the Brittan Square neighborhood. “They” should do something.” The “they” to which Morgan refers, of course, is the city. As Morgan talks, she unfolds a ComNET-generated spreadsheet listing all the specific trouble spots in her neighborhood. Next to each there is a clear designation of responsibility. For a remarkably high number of them, it’s the community itself that’s been designated as lead agency.

With the advent of ComNET, Morgan says, has come an increased willingness among citizens in her neighborhood to step up and deal with problems themselves. Now, she notes, if there’s debris accumulating in someone’s driveway or yard, for example, neighborhood activists know to approach the homeowner directly, a tactic that she says has proved surprisingly effective. In the case of residents who might not have the physical or financial wherewithal to repair or clean up their property, community members have frequently chipped in to get the work done.

According to the Worcester Regional Research Bureau, about one-quarter of all the problems identified in neighborhoods aren't issues the city is responsible for, but rather neighborhood issues, whether it's a run-down residence or bushes growing over a sidewalk. "It really has gotten citizens and the city to both understand each other's responsibilities better," says Roberta Schaefer, executive director of the bureau.

ComNET has done more than just connect city and citizens, though. As a way to boost broader civic participation among some of the city's most prominent institutions, the bureau has teamed up with Holy Cross University to incorporate ComNET into its curriculum.

As part of two courses — in urban policy and urban politics — Holy Cross students join up with the neighborhood teams to go out and conduct the annual surveys. It's a good way to add a little practice to the theory, says Jeff Reno, assistant professor of political science at Holy Cross, who teaches the two courses. Not incidentally, it also has helped break down some of the traditional town-and-gown barriers that typically afflict college towns, he says. The partnership with Holy Cross is just one example, Schaefer adds, of how ComNET can be adapted to local circumstances and opportunity. "Getting students and neighborhoods together has been a nice side-light," she says.

According to the bureau, the on-the-ground results of ComNET have been pretty good, too. To date, 64 percent of around 10,000 identified problems have been addressed by public works, code enforcement or neighborhoods, according to bureau data. Between 2003 and 2004, the city increased sidewalk repairs by 33 percent. Five thousand abandoned vehicles were removed. And the city has boosted street resurfacing by 58 percent. No neighborhood has seen a less than 50 percent solution rate, even in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Advocates point to this as another benefit of ComNET: allowing city officials to document relative equity in neighborhood action and investment.

BEYOND THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Still, the city faces huge issues beyond whether or not this pothole gets patched or that window repaired. Even though his budget has doubled in the past few years, from \$4 million to \$8 million, DPW director Moylan points out that the city is still slipping backwards on such fundamental issues as pavement resurfacing. Worcester

has 400 miles of road. Assuming a lifespan of 20 years, Moylan says, the city should be resurfacing 20 miles a year. In fact, it's doing eight.

And while the city has undergone a remarkable renaissance, fueled by a boom in education, medical care and research, there are chronic fiscal issues that threaten to overwhelm it. According to City Manager Michael O'Brien, employee health care costs, for example, have gone from \$23.4 million in 1991 to \$65 million in 2005. It's an unsustainable trend that O'Brien says policy makers and city workers alike have to come to terms with if the city is going to remain fiscally viable.

Which leads to the larger question of whether a program such as ComNET can translate into broader political action. The vision, says Jim Cruickshank, executive director of the Oak Hill Community Development Corp., is to move people beyond the street focus and toward city-wide advocacy. If ComNET isn't doing that directly, he argues, it's at least another avenue for attracting potential new talent and energy to the larger cause. "Everyone has certain interest buttons," he says, and ComNET has been yet another way to draw people into civic action. Ron Charette, who represents the city's poorest neighborhood, is more blunt. When it comes to broader fiscal issues bearing down on Worcester, what his group is doing through ComNET "is just one small corner of the playing field," he says.

The other significant question facing ComNET is sustainability. As far as community interest goes, neighborhood activists say they've been successful at assembling teams to do the ground-level surveying. Paying for it all is another question. ComNET's current costs come to about \$35,000 a year, including hardware, software, administrative costs and a small fee to the Fund for the City of New York for warehousing Worcester's ComNET data. The bulk of the costs are covered by a grant from a nonprofit, which is slated to end in 2007. (Costs for ComNET vary among communities, says Cohn at the Fund for the City of New York. It all depends on variables such as how much of the customized software work can be done locally, how much training is required, what kind of technology is already in place and who will administer the program.)

And so in the next couple of years, the city and local activists are going to have to decide whether they value the program enough to pay for it themselves.

Cruickshank thinks the program is worth it, and that through some joint fundraising it can survive. "I think the approach is to look at how we can come together to raise resources to continue, and we'll definitely work on that."

Ron Charette says that he, too, would love to see ComNET continue, and he thinks it is in the city's interest to maintain it. At the moment, though, he can't see diverting current resources away from other clear areas of need. "Do I sacrifice money that right now I'm using to get people fed?" says Charette. "That's the rub."

It's a tough choice, he adds, especially given that he credits ComNET, in part, with saving his neighborhood. At the end of the 1990s, a huge slice of South Worcester was slated for demolition to make way for an access road to the airport. "There were plans to wipe out 200 homes for the airport road. We used ComNET to document the positives and galvanize the neighborhood. ComNET was an epiphany. It gave us the sense that we could fix things."

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Research Bureau Annual Meeting Speakers (1986 – 2006)

- 2006** **David Driscoll, Massachusetts Commissioner of Education**
- 2005 Tamar Jacoby, Author and Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute
- 2004 John Gannon, Staff Director, U.S. House of Representatives,
Select Committee on Homeland Security
- 2003 Governor Mitt Romney, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- 2002 Fred Siegel, Professor of History, The Cooper Union for the
Advancement of Science and Art, New York City, and Senior Fellow,
Progressive Policy Institute
- 2001 Heather MacDonald, Senior Fellow, The Manhattan Institute
- 2000 Rev. Dr. Floyd H Flake, Senior Pastor, Allen African Methodist Episcopal
Church and former U.S. Representative to Congress
- 1999 Howard Husock, Director of Case Studies in Public Policy and Management,
Kennedy School, Harvard University
- 1998 Myron Magnet, Editor, *City Journal*
- 1997 Thomas Birmingham, Senate President, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- 1996 Glenn C. Loury, Professor of Economics, Boston University
- 1995 Peter Harkness, Editor and Publisher of *Governing*
- 1994 James Q. Wilson, Author and Professor of Political Science, UCLA
- 1993 Robert Poole, President, Reason Foundation
- 1992 William Hudnut, former Mayor of Indianapolis
- 1991 David P. Forsberg, Secretary, Executive Office of Health and Human Services,
Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- 1990 Bruce Carnes, Director of Planning and Budget,
Office of National Drug Control Policy
- 1989 Edward J. Logue, CEO, Logue Boston, former Director of the Boston
Redevelopment Authority
- 1988 Raymond Flynn, Mayor of Boston
- 1987 William Bulger, Senate President, Commonwealth of Massachusetts
- 1986 Ira Jackson, Commissioner, Department of Revenue,
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Benchmarking Municipal and
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in Worcester: 2005 – October 2005

Benchmarking Economic Development
in Worcester: 2005 – November 2005

Downtown Worcester Office
Occupancy: 2005 Survey –
December 2005

Benchmarking Public Education in
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Citizen Satisfaction with Municipal
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City Council Salaries and the
Competitiveness of Elections:
A Survey – 9/22/05

Siting Residential Social Service
Programs: The Process and
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Reorganizing Public Safety Functions:
Considerations For and Against –
12/15/05

Destination Worcester: What's the
"Convention-al Wisdom?" – 3/27/06

How Can Worcester Insure its Fiscal
Health in FY07 and Beyond? – 5/16/06

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