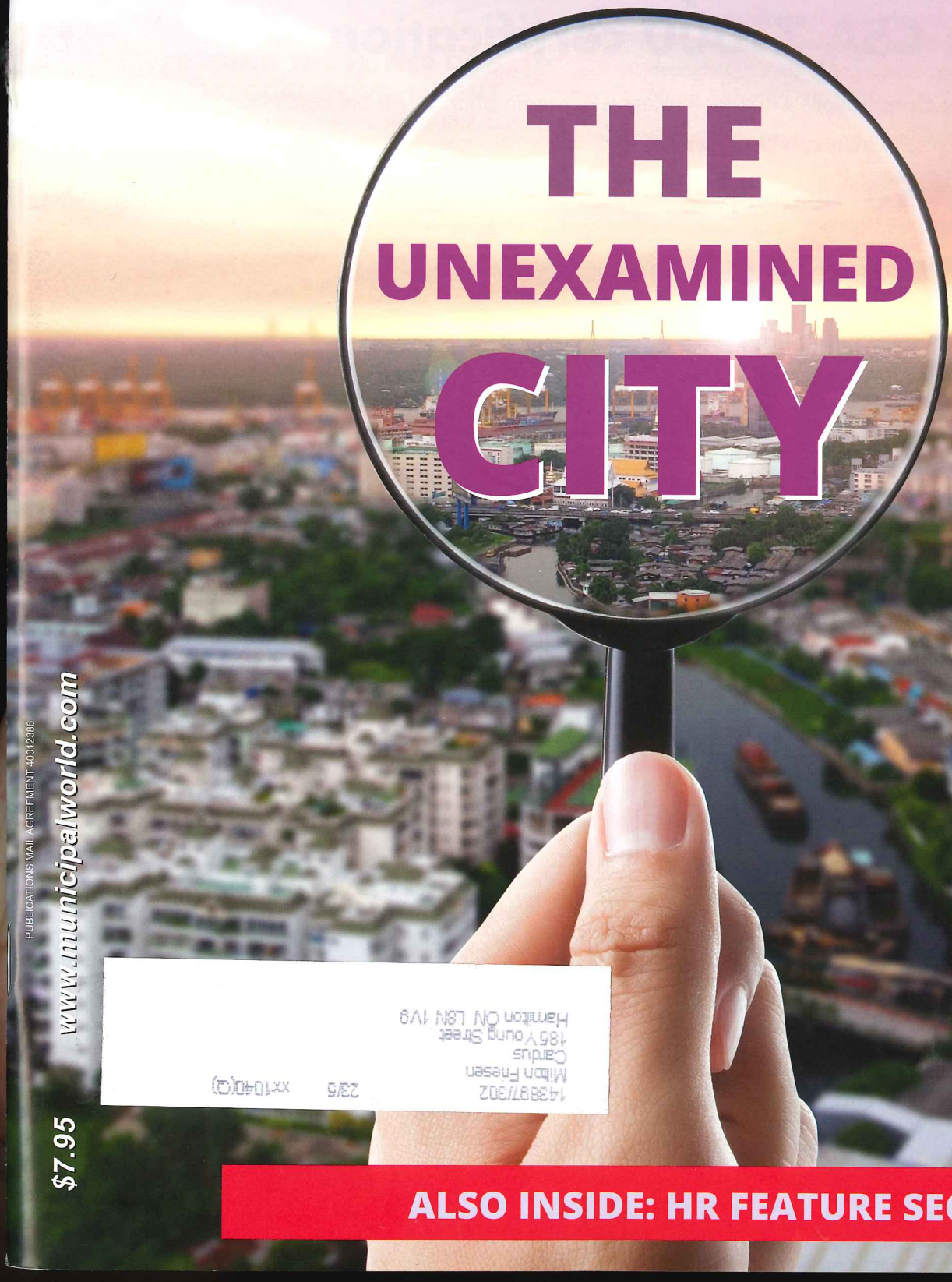
Municipal World

CANADA'S MUNICIPAL MAGAZINE SINCE 1891

JULY 2016



THE UNEXAMINED CITY

www.municipalworld.com

PUBLICATIONS MAIL AGREEMENT 40012386

$7.95

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EDITOR'S CORNER

Susan M. Gardner

It's likely that we've all heard this before: "**What gets measured, gets done.**"

This often-repeated maxim has, as its foundation, the basic principles of performance measurement and management. The concept has been touted by numerous management gurus over the years (Peter Drucker perhaps being the most notable). However, its roots date much further back in recorded history. Rheticus, a 16th-century mathematician, cartographer, and astronomer, has been credited with being the first to suggest that "if you can measure something, then you have some control over it."

In his feature article on page 4 of this issue, Milton Friesen teases out some of this idea as it relates to municipalities deriving the full benefits of the evaluation process. At its heart, evaluation involves determining where the organization is today, where it wants to be, and devising a plan to move it towards that envisioned future. (This loudly echoes the fundamentals of strategic planning, underscoring the prominent role of evaluation in implementing the strategic plan. Check out the article on page 13.)

In this process, of course, it's not only evaluation or *measurement* that counts. It's also critical that you use the right tool for the job. Friesen refers us to a report by FSG, suggesting that the organization must be specific about the issue to be addressed; must determine whether that issue is simple, complicated, or complex; and must choose the appropriate evaluation tool accordingly. (As the saying goes, there is no need to use a hammer when a flyswatter will do.)

These performance measurement principles are as timeless today as they were in the 1500s. They form the core philosophy for many valuable management tools. For example, "Lean thinking," as explored by Larry Coté and Jag Sharma in their article on page 7, is based around a process of measurement and mapping, and the pursuit of continuous improvement – with potential to vastly transform an organization. (With its roots in the automotive industry, Lean is also a tool that demonstrates the value and application of measurement principles across diverse industries and organizations.)

Regardless of the tool, however, it's *ongoing* evaluation that really makes the difference. It's important that the evaluation process is not simply about taking a snapshot at a given point in time, but involves a series of snapshots over time, so that we can find the answer to this single basic question: Are we making progress?

Depending on the issue, the process for getting the answer to that question (and the answer itself) may not always be simple, but odds are good that it will always be worth knowing. Read on!

Evaluation that serves the common good

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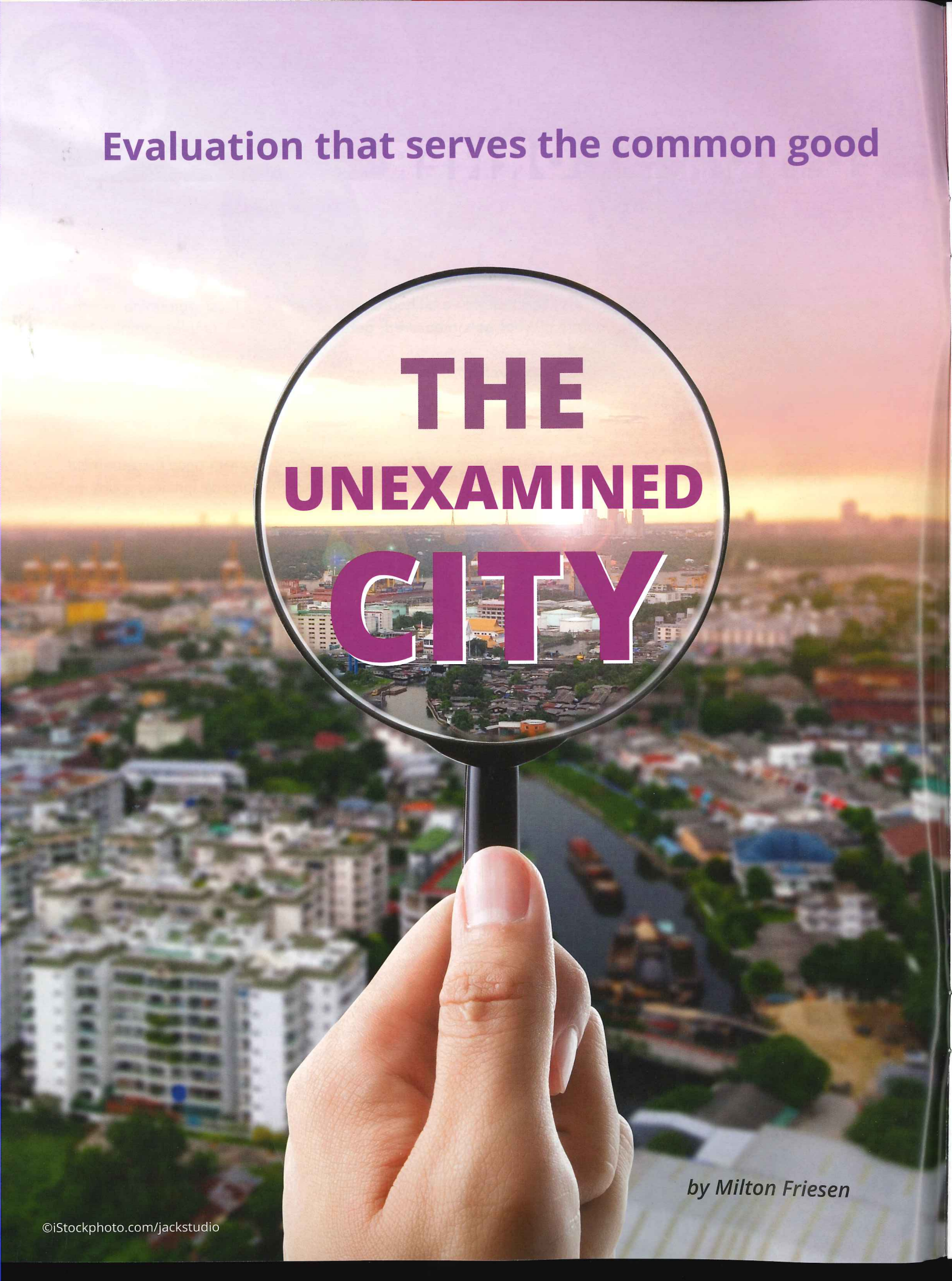

by Milton Friesen

There is a well-known philosophical maxim (attributed to Socrates) suggesting that the unexamined life is not worth living. Though the maxim applies, on its face, to the lives of individuals, the concept could apply equally to the "lives" of organizations – including municipalities.

Evaluation is an important part of that collective examination. What is involved in the art and science of taking stock of where an organization is, where it wants to be, and then how it might narrow the gap between the two?

Over the years, I have had many conversations with councillors and administrators who took up their municipal work with a desire to engage in substantive debates and discussions about how to make a city better. In some cases, a particular failure to deliver what the community needed propelled them to seek out the challenges of leadership. I have also seen that aspirational drive get worn down very quickly as the bulk of their time and energy is given to the mundane, or (worse) the trivial, while the substantive questions are sidelined by urgencies. Evaluation frameworks and approaches can play a critical role in determining whether we attend to the substantive, the mundane, or the trivial.

How do municipal leaders know if the time and energy they invest is making their communities better? How do they know if they are making a real contribution to the common good or public interest mandated by municipal legislation? These are core questions for all municipal leaders to consider.

Simple, Complicated, or Complex

Although it was not written with a municipal leadership audience in mind, a recent report by consulting firm FSG titled "Evaluating Complexity: Propositions for Improving Practice" features critical thinking for anyone who is involved in social investment and community leadership. The significantly social nature of elected and civil service is a prime context for complex interactions and the public nature of that work merits quality evaluations.

Organizational scholars such as the late Brenda Zimmerman have identified that some problems or settings are characterized by simple problems – we know all the moving parts and how they act, in addition to having a lot of experience sorting them out. This is the "recipe" type of problem, where uncertainty is relatively low. It doesn't mean that simple problems are easy, but we've got most of the challenging elements sorted out. There are also problems that are complicated. A common example is the task of sending a rocket into space. There is a whole lot going on; and, getting all of the engineering and project management elements oriented in such a way that the rocket actually does what it is supposed to do is indeed very complicated. Finally, there are the class of problems identified as complex. These problems may have a lot of contributing elements, but what makes them truly complex is that changing any one element can shift the direction of the whole system. The global climate is a good example of a complex system.

In a municipal context, the differences may be understood in this way. A simple system or context might be mailing tax notices. It may require a significant skill level, organization, diligence, and effort; but, the system and process is clear, well known, and easily verified or evaluated. A complicated context or project might be replacing sections of underground utilities in a busy downtown corridor. Many specific and interacting capacities must be brought to bear on accomplishing the task and many technically challenging elements contend with factors like weather. Each element is well known, but the number of moving parts and intricate connections makes it difficult. Careful planning, experience, and execution can accomplish the project, and it is clear what needs to be done and when it is completed. An example of a complex challenge would be increasing a given municipality's power to make decisions and access resources such as new revenue, new markets or economic investments, or new legislative powers. The range of citizen, corporate, regional, provincial, federal, and global dynamics that come into play in changes like this are like a spaghetti plate of dynamics: some are known, many are unknown, and changes in any dimension can shape the range of possibilities in many other dimensions. There are many interacting elements, any one of which can change the nature of the game. The "common good" is not singular, is ill-defined, and can change significantly over time. All of these connected and interacting factors make this a complex problem.

Making the Most of Evaluation

How does a discussion of problem types relate to evaluation? In one sense, it is about applying the right kind of evaluation to the right kind of problem or context. If we take evaluation approaches that have been designed for simple, well-established processes and apply them to contexts or dynamics that are complex, we will gain little insight, and any response to this information may actually be counterproductive. Given these dynamics, there are a few guidelines that will help improve the benefits that are possible with evaluation.

First, evaluation can be threatening. It can yield new insight and shed light on what we are doing and how we are doing it. Although it can increase the function of a given process, department, or municipality, it may not always be a positive process for everyone involved. In some cases, we would rather be left to keep doing what we are doing. In other cases, people may become cynical when the wrong approach to evaluation is taken (e.g., treating an experimental project that explores unknown approaches the same as a well-established process). Talented and capable people can and do experience enforced limits or sanctions based on wrongly-applied measurement or evaluation approaches. Our solutions, derived from incorrect evaluation, can make a problem worse rather than solving it.

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Second, we need evaluation and must continue to develop our ability to see linkages between cause and effect, however imperfectly. Evaluation always has flaws, but it is important to understand that it happens continuously – even where it is not formalized. Raising our evaluation approaches to a conscious and organizational level enables large groups of people to take stock of whether they are making progress toward their collective goals. It is important to be able to see connections between the work people do and the results of that work. If a municipality undertakes a tree planting program, they may want to know if new trees are being planted faster than old trees are dying. They may also want to know if they can afford to increase the city-wide tree canopy given its impact on the departmental budget.

Third, growth in evaluation that contributes to the common good (or to the thriving of a community) requires an increased capacity to identify the kinds of problems or systems to which the evaluation is being applied. Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber published a paper in 1973 about the nature of problems faced in social policy and identified the existence of problems they labelled "wicked" – solutions are not clear, the problems may not even be defined, no one controls drivers of the problems, and the effect of solutions is unknown (perhaps unknowable). Though the term has reached common use status (and morphed into superlative forms such as "super-wicked" problems), we have yet to absorb the core ideas into our practices. Administrative and political leadership can ill afford to assume that most of their problems are simple; but, in the unexamined city, the business-as-usual core tends to evolve toward standardized approaches in the service of efficiency.

Adapting to a More Challenging "Normal"

As Clay Christensen has so capably demonstrated in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, commonly accepted standards or approaches strongly favour the simple-to-complicated end of the spectrum. In the increasingly dynamic world of deeply interrelated influences we live in today, a world where wicked problems seem more prevalent, the complicated-to-complex side of the spectrum represents a much more challenging normal. Evaluation approaches that are not tuned to the context will lead to option blindness – we won't see what we need. We would think it ridiculous and dangerous if a driver only looked at the temperature gauge and made that the measure of success or failure as a driver. Temperature matters – but on a busy highway, there are other measures that matter more.

Identification of our context, problem type, and potential evaluation approaches requires that we sharpen our set of investigative questions as we approach evaluation.

EVALUATION, cont'd on p. 40

EVALUATION, cont'd from p. 6

In a recent blog post, I proposed a dozen questions that can sharpen our evaluation. Two questions will serve as examples. First, are your evaluation approaches as dynamic and adaptive as the realities you are attempting to measure? A completely rigid and predetermined measure that cannot change according to context may be a sign of an ill-fitted approach. Second, do your evaluation approaches fit naturally with the time frames and rhythms of the contexts and systems you are seeking to change? For the early years of most new ventures, profit margins can be far from robust and require patience as a new product, clientele, or strategy is developed. Effective venture investment recognizes this and evaluates measures such as profit margins differently in year one than they do in year five.

Finally, evaluations don't live outside the system, they are part of it and are critical to the performance of that system. A well-fitted evaluation approach will resonate with and substantiate the work itself. We wouldn't think of considering our view of the road ahead as an appendage to driving – looking at the road is a vital form of continuous evaluation that every driver needs and is inherent to driving. If evaluations feel like they are being Frankensteined onto a project or process, it's worth understanding why that is the case and could signal a misapplied evaluation approach.

Public officials, administrators, and employees are accountable to the people they represent and serve. Measuring the performance of individuals, projects, departments, and the systems they inhabit remains a critical aspect of the diverse, common-good mandates they serve. Fitting specific evaluation frameworks to the contexts and problems is a requirement that is becoming more important as the complexity of municipal dynamics increase. It may well be that, in such an environment, the *wrongly* examined city is as much a hazard as the unexamined city. MW

LEAN, cont'd from p. 8

For too long, many municipal organizations have dedicated significant time and energy on "point" level improvements that, in the end, result in a degree of "exciting chaos." However, these impacts made at the "point" may not have the same positive impact upstream and downstream – thus, the citizen may see very little positive impact and possibly see a negative impact. Inherent within Lean is a focus on the "system" level improvement to ensure an *organizational* perspective – one where impacts are throughout the entire business process and the positive impacts will be measurable on the bottom line, as well as in respect of the quality/level of service experienced by the client/citizen.

Continuous Improvement Journey

When implemented properly, Lean can actually improve staff pride of ownership, create a culture of working together, and increase the organization's ability to do more with what they have, while doing it faster and at less cost.

However, Lean is not a "one solution fits all" approach. Every organization must recognize where they are in their continuous improvement journey and consider a plan based on their unique objectives/strategy and their propensity for change. Therefore, understanding how to apply the concept and thinking can be a challenge for municipalities, but the rewards and results are worth it.

Lean is both tried and tested in the private sector and, more recently, has proven successful across all levels of the public sector. Increasing numbers of municipalities are leveraging the power of Lean thinking within their organizations and, when done correctly, are experiencing improvements in their input costs, quality, and service, as well as increased pride of ownership of their staff.

In a follow-up article, we will showcase several short case studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of implementing Lean in local government. MW

PLANS, cont'd from p. 10

Planners interviewed generally agreed that developers have not contributed to plan proliferation. Since they prefer simpler regulations, developers generally have little interest in creating additional layers of policy. Development pressure often spurs secondary plans, but does not invariably lead to new plans. Intense development pressure may overwhelm a municipality's planning capacity, precluding creation of secondary or neighbourhood plans. In Vancouver, planners suggested that existing plans guide developers' actions, rather than developers driving plan generation.

Conclusion

Communities across Canada are contending with an increasingly complex policy environment resulting from the many planning documents they have adopted and now must coordinate. Analysis of interviews with planning professionals in Vancouver, Halifax, and St. John's helped to illustrate the perceived roles of various groups in creating plans. While all participants in the planning process share responsibility for plan creation, those with direct control over plan development (planners, managers, and political leaders) have the greatest potential to control the rate at which new policies are generated. Planners understand that creating volumes of planning documents can lead to inefficiencies. Many communities face significant challenges in trying to coordinate the number of plans at play. Poor coordination of land use planning can hinder implementation, create costly delays, and undermine public confidence in planning.

Research on planning practice helps to explain how those involved in local planning influence plan creation. Although many recently developed plans responded to expectations from other orders of government (such as sustainability plans for gas-tax funding or growth plans to meet provincial requirements), planners increasingly recognize the need to find ways to better consolidate and coordinate plans to ensure policy coherence and effective implementation.[3] MW

3 To stay updated on this project on the challenges of plan coordination, visit the project's website at <http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/multiple-plans/index.html>.