

## USA

### QUALITY OF LIVE INDICATORS IN JACKSONVILLE

*Choosing and collecting indicators on quality of life for urban citizens is usually seen as a technical exercise, to be carried out by government ministries and research organisations. This does not, however, necessarily have to be the case and many benefits can be reaped from having a citizen-led approach to quality of life indicators.*

The Jacksonville Community Council Inc. (JCCI) is an open membership NGO that works through 750 volunteers and aims to promote the informed participation of citizens in community life. They are based in Jacksonville, Florida, USA, a coastal city dependant on shipping and tourism.

In the early 1980s the assessment of quality of life in Jacksonville was generally focused on economic progress, the prevailing statistics being the local economic index. Other progress statistics and data did exist, but these were concentrated mainly on the specific interests of particular organisations (eg environmental groups, social services departments). There was no comprehensive approach towards monitoring progress and quality of life in the city.

In 1985 the JCCI decided there was a need for a comprehensive view of the quality of life in the city, and that it should be led by citizens in order to promote sustainability and the accountability of politicians and government. JCCI secured funding from the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce (more recently funding has been supplied by the City, though the Chamber of Commerce continues to be a key partner) and set out to organise citizens to build a model to define and measure progress. JCCI publicised their proposed approach on TV and newspaper surveys asking residents to identify the factors that they think are important to their quality of life. Through this awareness-raising, they were able to bring together a group of some 100 people representing the range of the community's voices. This group worked together to create a model for quality of life indicators. The approach used was consensus building and discussion (rather than through a majority vote). The end result was a nine-part indicator model, including sections on education, economy, public safety, health, environment, social environment, government and politics, culture and recreation, and mobility.

To implement the model and collect data, nine task forces were created, one for each section. The task forces decided on the specific indicators they would collect to show progress in their section. JCCI appointed a steering group to lead the task forces, taking decision on a range of criteria for indicators, to ensure that they would be useful and representative. A total of 71 specific indicators were identified, covering topics as diverse as new jobs, gap between African American and total unemployment, air quality, commuting time, library book circulation, infant mortality, discrimination complaints, or the rate of volunteering. Indicators mainly brought together existing data, although a telephone survey of the public was conducted for indicators for which no existing data was available.

This model is now at the heart of an ongoing research programme. Two reports on findings are published each year - a concise summary for the public (an annual 'report card') and a longer research document for planners, the media, government research officials and other interested groups. Each year gold stars are designated to indicators that show they are moving ahead, and red flags are assigned to those moving in the wrong direction. Yearly findings are disseminated through presentations on TV, conventions and other interested groups. The indicators are used by a range of groups, including city planners, journalists, elected officials, the Chamber of Commerce, and others. Furthermore, after the report card is issued, community organisations are encouraged to 'adopt' an indicator and take actions to improve it over the following year. One example of this is JCCI itself which, having noted indicators showing a high level of school drop-out, sponsored a city study aimed at combating this problem. This led to a programme to provide educational counselling services in schools (rather than the existing approach in less accessible city counselling offices). The programme started in 1991 in one school, and is now serving in 22 schools, where pupils staying on have risen from 27% to 79%. Another example of this is the Chamber of Commerce's initiative to improve the water quality of the city's St Johns River.

This approach has had a significant impact on the city by focusing attention and actions on key community issues. Moreover, there is an increasing trend in the development and use of local indicators by cities and communities worldwide.



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