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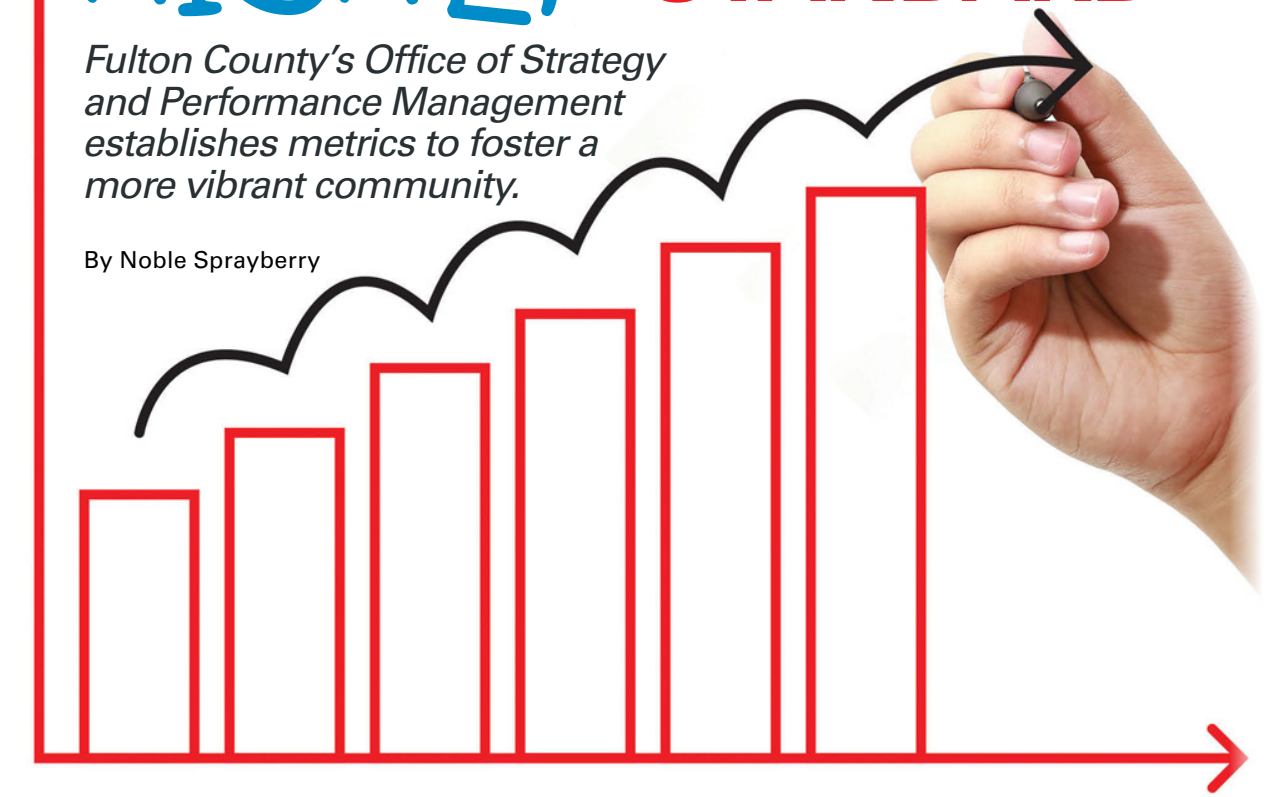
Fulton County's Office of Strategy and Performance Management establishes metrics to foster a more vibrant community.

By Noble Sprayberry



MORE THAN 1 MILLION PEOPLE live within the borders of Fulton County, where the government, like those of counties throughout the state, is committed to playing a vital role in the health and well-being of its citizens and visitors.

But do those who live, work or pass through the county's borders appreciate the efforts, or even understand the scope of the work done on their behalf? And, possibly more importantly, is the county accountable for doing everything possible?

In establishing a four-year strategic plan extending from 2016 to 2019, the seven-member board of commissioners identified six priority areas. The process placed an emphasis on viewing the county's role through the eyes of an average citizen, according to Anna Roach, Fulton County Chief Strategy Officer.

"There are certain things in the county we have direct control over," Roach said. "But if you think about it from a citizen's perspective, they don't understand or acknowledge jurisdictional boundaries as an acceptable limitation to service delivery."

So when the county sets aspirational goals, such as ensuring the safety of everyone, the strategic plan was designed to consider the county as a whole, not just the relativity small jurisdictional footprint of the county government.

Not only will the county manage its own operations, but it will also work with other governments or organizations to create outcomes to benefit all citizens. "What we would do in those instances is be the convener around a larger conversation," Roach said.

County Manager Dick Anderson said one key to success is an understanding that the initiative is not a plan placed in a binder. Instead, it's a living system with measurable results, and it's an approach that could help any county in the state, regardless of size.

"Any organization hugely benefits from getting clear on their priorities and measurable metrics, and that's what leads to more aspirational thinking," he said. "Any county of any size can use that sort of approach. I think the key is to not let it be just a document you put on the shelf. It needs to inform the budget and the political leadership needs to have ownership."

Setting Goals

The county hired the consulting firm Accenture to guide the project toward its goals of enhanced transparency, accountability and performance, and the result was a multi-step process necessary to shape an operational plan. It began in 2015 with a retreat by the board and key staff members.

The goal of the project was to think aspirationally, as opposed to operationally, and to embrace broad, actionable principles extending beyond the idea that county government simply delivers a range of services.

"In the end you've got to aspire to do something big and impactful," Anderson said. "We started with the idea that Fulton County is the biggest, so let's make sure it's the best … and it's all people and not just some people, and the plan would also cast a wider net than just the county services that are delivered."

The goal was a system of operating, measuring and accountability touching all facets of county government. And The process gathered as much information as possible from not only within the government, but also from the citizens. For example, residents were asked to complete a countywide survey to comment on key priority areas.

"We sought input on what success might look like, and citizens could weigh in," Roach said. "It was a solid framework for developing meaningful strategies that was later operationalized throughout the county."

Also, the county established strategic teams for each priority area. "With safety, there were 20 front-line employees who came up with the key ideas," Roach said. Afterward, each team passed ideas along to the cross-strategy integration team, made up of the county manager, county executives and department heads.

The team provided feedback and refined the ideas, and the next step was to take the information to the county commissioner responsible for each area of emphasis. "It was an iterative process, but the important thing was that it began with our front-line employees," Roach said.

Targets

The six priority areas identified by Fulton County encompass issues relevant to all citizens, beginning with All People are Safe. Like with each of the areas, there are clear measurable standards the county committed to tracking, ranging from the crime rate to the number of residential and code violations in unincorporated Fulton County. That's only the beginning, and each measure is followed up by standards for accountability, such as tracking the percentage of crimes for which someone is arrested, as well as the percentage of those formally charged.

Safety, however, is only the first priority. All People are Healthy will track factors indicating wellness, such as the number of people who smoke and the percentage of the population with a body mass index that is considered healthy, as well as resources like access to primary care physicians.

The objectives of All People are Self Sufficient are targeted to economic stability, housing, literacy, food and independence, such as seniors living alone.

The area All People's Lives are Culturally and Recreationally Enriched will emphasize goals such as having more residents who know about cultural and recreational opportunities, or increasing the number of residents who believe these are worthwhile goals.

Many of the areas have, or will have, online reports providing immediate feedback. The area All People have Economic Opportunities has web-based dashboards tracking information including as commercial tax revenue, the employment rate and the high school education rate.

The final priority area is also a challenge: All People Trust Government is Efficient, Effective and Fiscally Sound. Citizen trust, financial performance, technology and facilities performance, human resources management and compliance will all play into this area.

Ownership

The strategic plan also placed an emphasis on accountability, and each member of the board claimed ownership of one of the priority areas. For Commissioner Joan Garner the opportunity to work in the area of All People are Healthy continued a long-running emphasis.

Throughout her time in office, she has focused on community health, which is not just about the offices providing services. "We're

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really talking about the people of the county," she said. "And when I looked at statistics about Georgia and Fulton County, and when I looked at the disparities, I wanted to ask why we had the disparities and what are the root causes."

While she did pay attention to the health needs of her constituents, finding a way to focus and create long-term gains proved hard. She also appreciated that a person's well-being extends beyond a simple definition of health. "I was also concerned about safety, their ability to be self-sufficient, economic opportunities and so on," she said.

With the new strategic plan, however, each commissioner serves as an executive sponsor of one priority area, and county staff will prepare and present annual reports about gains made on those points of focus. "With each commissioner signed on as an executive sponsor of each area, you go deeper rather than just being very broad."

There is an additional benefit to the system, Garner said. Many of the priorities areas overlap, and board members are not limited to participating in discussions only about the area they sponsor. Garner said she loves the approach. "I think it's a really creative way of holding each of us as commissioners accountable to our constituents," she said.

Taking Action

While the planning process was extensive and detailed, the final goal is to create tangible benefits for Fulton County residents. Traditionally, a county might consider ways to serve residents in a direct way through some form of service, according to county manager Anderson. However, the new strategic plan embraces a holistic approach to managing county government.

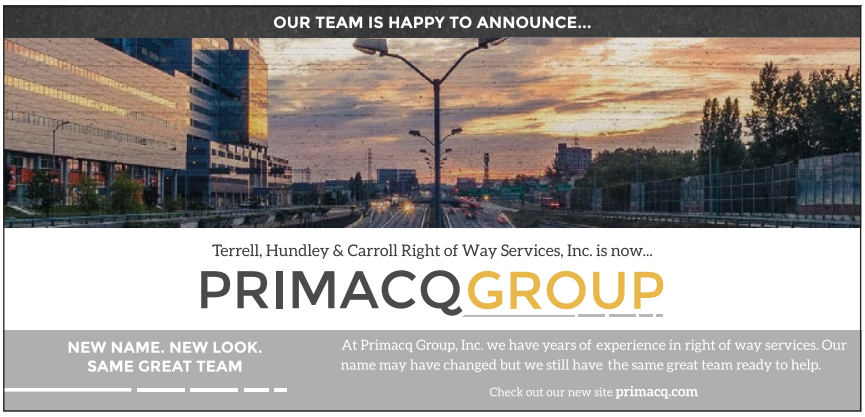
Many of the priority areas overlap — safety might blend into health and self-sufficiency — depending on the specific circumstances under review. For example, about 40 percent of those who are jailed suffer from some form of behavioral health issue, and it is the type of challenge the new system is designed to address, Anderson said.

Instead of trying to devise, and budget for, one or more county programs to tackle one specific part of the issue, the county leaders took a step back. "Perhaps direct service delivery was not the proper model," Anderson said.

They focused on behavioral health, which had encompassed a broad range of services provided by the county. Going forward, however, instead of the county providing the service, the board agreed to outsource behavioral health operation to a group of community-based providers, and a request for proposal will go out in the fall to begin the selection process.

The goal is a system that does not simply address health, but also embraces the idea that a better behavioral health system can reduce the number of people being sent to jail — one part of the system benefits another.

A broad, aspirational plan backed by invested lawmakers, measurable results and a commitment to use the county's budget to support are the basis of the strategic initiative. "It really has caused the perspective to change," Anderson said. "Rather than being risk-adverse, we ask about the ideas that are going to have an impact."

For more information on Fulton County's strategy and performance management office, visit their website at www.fultoncounty.gov/strategyandperformance. ■

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