

City of St. Albert Corporate GIS

Setting Priorities – Literature Review

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Public Service related quote – Peter Drucker (1973)

“Being dependent on a budget allocation mitigates against setting priorities and concentrating efforts, yet nothing is ever accomplished unless scarce resources are concentrated on a small number of priorities.

To obtain its budget, it needs the approval, or at least the acquiescence, of practically everybody who remotely could be considered a constituent.

Being budget-based makes it even more difficult to abandon the wrong things, the old, the obsolete. ... The temptation is great, therefore, to respond to lack of results by redoubling efforts.”

Reality Check

“Many organizations often don’t realize they lack clear priorities until they are in the middle of a crisis.”

Key Considerations

- Achieve a balanced participation between different groups.
 - In terms of the City of St. Albert it means a good cross-section of City business and representing both “have” and “have not” departments.
- Encourage a multi-sectoral perspective.
 - Thinking in terms of “what is good for the City” instead of just “what is good for the department”.
 - Wearing *corporate* hats instead *department* hats.
- Ignore staff and dollar resources when setting priorities. Those factors do not affect what is a priority, only how priorities can be addressed.
- Achieve a balance between the centre and the periphery.
- Use clear and consistent criteria.
- Result in aims and objectives that are clear and feasible.
- Use an open and understandable process.
- Funding constraints should not be taken into account for setting priorities.
 - Funding will only come into play during the development of objectives and targets and the selection of service delivery mechanisms.
- DON'T follow a process blindly. Ensure that the priority-setting process used works for YOUR organization. Try out a number of processes on a subset of activities and see which one works for you.
- Nurture relationships throughout the entire process.
- Establishing meaningful priorities to guide organization decisions is a complex process. Setting priorities under the pressure of impending program reductions or any significant change in resources dramatically complicates the task. – *Duttweiler*.

Guidelines for conducting a brainstorming activity

The idea here is in order to set priorities you must have a list of activities or requests that need to be prioritized. Try to make this list as complete as possible. The guidelines below are suggestions on how to run a group brainstorming activity.

1. Clearly frame an open-ended question.
 - What are your GIS needs?
 - As direct and indirect questions. Sometimes additional information can come from simply discussing what is going on today.
2. Do not censure or make judgements about any ideas.
 - Generate as many ideas as possible.
 - Do not comment on the ideas at this time.
3. List all ideas generated on a flip chart.
 - Have someone writing down the ideas as fast as possible.
4. Encourage hitchhiking.
 - Encourage people to add ideas that build on or are generated by someone else's suggestion.
5. Focus on quantity.
 - The more ideas the better.

- Often the best suggestions come in the last few minutes of a brainstorming activity.
- 6. Stay loose.
 - Keep the environment free and supportive.
 - Do not force people to participate.

Indicators of a high impact, outcome-based program

- **Need / Opportunity**
 - The needs or opportunities involved justify corporate GIS involvement.
 - The activity addresses important needs or opportunities that can be described, documented and evaluated.
 - Needs or opportunities may be current or emerging.
- **Outcomes**
 - Intended outcomes are defined and specific to organization priorities and outcome goals.
 - Strategy and activities described provide a clear path to the identified outcomes.
- **Impact**
 - Intended outcomes will result in significant improvement in the targeted needs or opportunities over time.
 - Intended results can be achieved, measured, documented, and communicated.
- **Niche**
 - The identified role is grounded in current or emerging research and technology, and experience-based knowledge and is uniquely appropriate for the corporate GIS
 - The corporate GIS can contribute and make a unique difference in the problem or need.
- **Accountability**
 - Resources needed to conduct the program are identified, justified by the intended outcomes, and used efficiently and effectively.
 - Accountability needs of all stakeholders are identified and monitoring, evaluation, and reporting plans are defined.
- **Implementation**
 - Activity is well defined and achievable with high quality.
 - Implementation plans are audience-centred, feasible, flexible, and comprehensive.
 - Indicators of progress are identified and lead to intended outcomes.
- **Image**
 - The proposed activity contributes to a visible, accurate, and positive organizational image.

Resources for a high impact, outcome-based program

- **Program Support**
 - Political, fiscal, and other resource support needed to conduct a quality program exists or is likely to be accessible.

- **Leveraging**
 - Priority is given to activities addressing priority needs or opportunities and with potential for leveraging resources or enhancing program support.
- **Sustainability**
 - Needed resources are likely to be available for a sufficient time to make a meaningful difference in the targeted needs or opportunities.
- **Collaboration**
 - Collaborative effort within the organization, between the organization and other like entities or groups is employed as appropriate.
- **Research Base**
 - There is an identified credible research/information base for guiding the program.

Success Factors

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all approach to priority setting. Each organization needs to develop a custom-fit approach that works for them.

1. Clearly identify tasks and activities.

- 1.1. Have effective mechanisms for consulting and engaging stakeholders.
 - Coordinate between groups.
 - Have good local intelligence. Talk to the little people.
 - Collect information corporately.
 - Do it collaboratively.
 - Use a variety of methods, if need be: email, phone, group meetings, one-on-one meetings, surveys.
- 1.2. If external targets and deadlines are present then reflect those in early priorities.
 - Federal and provincial legislation.
 - Public commitments.
- 1.3. Have stakeholders prioritize within their business areas.
- 1.4. Look for shared priorities between stakeholders – these have a better chance of being achieved.
- 1.5. Identify areas of weakness.
- 1.6. Outline improvement needs.
- 1.7. Learn from existing strengths.

2. Clearly prioritize tasks.

- 2.1. Have stakeholders put their priorities into some kind of order.
- 2.2. Start from PROGRAM needs. Staff and dollar resources should not factor into priority setting.
 - Even under dire cutback scenarios, there are opportunities for creative programming, staffing and alternate program support.
- 2.3. Timetable in stages.
- 2.4. Be realistic.
- 2.5. Be specific.
- 2.6. Meet SMART objectives.

- Specific
 - Measurable
 - Achievable
 - Relevant
 - Time-bound
- 2.7. Identify dependencies between activities. If activity B needs to be done before activity A, then ensure that they are prioritized accordingly.
 - 2.8. Identify baseline activities. These are the activities that need to be completed before anything else can be dealt with. There should only be a small number of these.
 - 2.9. National and provincial mandated activities should be given greater priorities.
 - Translate into local meaning.
 - 2.10. Align priorities with partners.
 - Create as wide a resource base as possible so that priorities can be met.
 - 2.11. Plan ahead.
 - 2.12. Choose a priority setting method that is effective, fair, and supportable.
 - 2.13. Make sure you are comparing apples to apples and not apples to toasters. Ensure consistency in describing priorities.
 - 2.14. Poll other groups and organizations who may have gone through the same process. A fresh perspective and/or an experienced voice can be valuable.

3. Have a sustained focus on what matters.

- 3.1. Don't get sidetracked by short-term issues, crises and new initiatives.
- 3.2. Ensure a performance management scheme works to deliver priorities and that it reports to key senior management.
- 3.3. Keep all stakeholders and key personnel aware of the priorities and progress on those.
 - Staff briefings.
 - Newsletters.
 - Intranet.
 - Email.
- 3.4. Key messages need to be championed by the leadership team, with the priorities stated and restated.
- 3.5. Risks need to be managed.
 - There must be a clear link between objectives and risk. Risk management must be embedded in the planning processes.
 - Seek consensus where possible. This helps to mitigate the effects of any leadership or organizational changes.
 - Use a traffic light system (green, yellow, red) to track progress on items. This method will indicate problematic priorities and/or targets before they become a crisis.
- 3.6. Shift resources to priorities.
 - Priorities often fail to be met when management fails to shift resources to achieve them.

- Budgeting should be led by policy with bids for external funding being made to support the priority list.
- 3.7. Review priorities.
- Revisit and review priorities at regular intervals, assessing progress and make changes to them as appropriate.
 - It is important for scrutiny to keep an overview of progress against priorities.
 - Investigate and identify any blockages that are preventing progress from being made.

Public Sector Management

“Public sector managers have to manage a complex set of demands, priorities and accountabilities, often across a wide number of service areas. It can be easy to lose sight of what is important.”

The following are critical actions:

1. Focus on what your organization is about. Prioritize and do something.
2. Get the right people involved in deciding what matters.
3. Put resources behind what matters most.

Challenges and Barriers

1. The group does not clearly understand or agree on what the priority setting process is trying to accomplish.

- If group members are not on the same page about what the process is all about, then the results will not be accepted.
- If this foundation cannot be set then the group has no hope in being successful.
- Clarify decision roles and rules.
 - Who has the authority to make decisions?
 - Does the simple majority rule?
 - How do you deal with cases where there is no clear

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Strive for consensus on this point and ensure that everyone is starting on the same page.
- Decide and clarify committee roles in advance.

2. Thinking the group can “do it all” and that there is no need to prioritize.

- If people feel guilty about admitting that they cannot improve all areas at once, they will resist setting priorities.
- If the group can truly “do it all” the need for setting priorities would not have come up in the first place!

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Communicate the need for priority setting.
 - Priority setting is essential for downsizing in a fair manner.
 - Priority setting is essential for making the case for restitution or expansion of support.

- Take the list of activities and estimate the time effort for each. Compare against available staff and time resources. Demonstrate the mismatch.
- Review recent history and look for times when unclear priorities caused problems.
- Find examples of how setting proper priorities has improved a group's performance and allowed it to better meet stakeholder needs.

3. Fears of “winners and losers”.

- If people fear that a change in priorities could cost them their jobs, funding or status, they may focus their energy on guarding their own turf.

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Develop an ownership of the process and priority criteria.
- Allow for the articulation of alternatives.
- Cultivate open communication between committee members, stakeholders and senior leadership.
- Create an environment that encourages the bringing forward of concerns. Squash judgemental comments.
- Ensure that committee members are committed to implementing changes.
- Establish a positive tone focusing on the *future* of the organization.
- Acknowledge the good work already done. Build on it if possible.
- Provide a voice for members. Ensure the people are heard and know that they have been heard.

4. Difficulty in focusing the attention of leaders and key people on key issues, decisions, conflicts, and policies.

- The challenge is to establish the imperative of organization priority setting, asking people to set aside specific interests until the broader framework is developed.
- Without leadership commitment, participants may fear that the group's priorities will be overturned or go nowhere.

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Involve the decision-makers in defining the process and priority criteria.
- Show the link between activities in question and leadership/organization goals, objectives and priorities. In some cases, this may be the **ONLY** way to get their attention. Do NOT assume that they already know!
- Keep the entire process within a reasonable time frame. This will minimize the influence of committee turnover and help to ensure that people don't lose track.
- Assure that the products are used.
- Assure that key committees or members have a continuing role in implementing findings.
- Senior leadership must be committed to and understand the need for change.

5. Feeling overwhelmed with the amount of data and options that could be considered to set priorities.

- By trying to organize and consider too much information, participants and staff may insist on pursuing the “perfect” priority setting process instead of one that is simply good and practical.

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Make key information available prior to decision meetings.
- Build in time to allow people to reflect on and digest information presented, and to modify decisions.
- Ensure the time frame is clearly understood.
- Don't let the analysis time drag on (set a reasonable time frame) – to avoid analysis paralysis. But don't rush the job to simply meet a deadline.
- The process needs to be realistic and reasonable.
- Be *very* specific when defining activities, targets or priorities. Avoid vague objectives and tasks.
- Identify activity dependencies. Knowing that activity B needs to be done before activity A helps identify some order of priorities.
- Keep the focus on what are *current* priorities rather than precedent.
- If needed, bring in a facilitator that has experience in guiding the priority setting process.
- Get the group to concentrate on business priorities in isolation from staff and dollar resource issues. Those should not factor into the process.
- Identify dependencies between priorities. Identify “nested” and “linked” programs.

6. Trouble envisioning priorities across a “system”.

- The management of part or whole relationships.
- The challenge is to arrive at organization-wide priorities that reflect a consistent interpretation of mission and goals.
- It is often easier to set priorities within an organization than across many.

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Ensure that preliminary information gathering and interpretation has been carried out across the entire organization.
- Enable communication of activities and needs across the entire organization.
- Bring forward external information.
- Bring forward organization-wide business goals, objectives and priorities.
- Ensure consistency in priority descriptions.
- Measure each activity or target against meeting those.
- Set an environment that helps people see more broadly than their own personal paradigms.
- Encourage creativity.
 - Assist people to think beyond current programs, staffing patterns, volunteer roles, inter-organization opportunities, and funding alternatives.

7. Translating priorities into action.

- This requires the willingness and ability to follow through on changes reflected in the new priorities.

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Be as specific as possible when defining activities or tasks being prioritized. This makes the translation into action less ambiguous.
- Consider the support needed to produce an effective product.
- Build on existing strengths.
- Learn from previous failures and challenges.
- Emphasize the process of fitting talent (knowledge and skills) to the task.

- Recognize that tasks have become less discrete and more complex.
- Develop a well-defined implementation plan.
- Follow through on priorities.
- Inventory staff competencies. These will drive funding and staffing requests and give an indication of time frames for each item.

8. Insisting on consensus.

- While consensus is a reasonable expectation in some organizations, it simply is not possible in others.

MITIGATION STRATEGY: Strive for consensus, but be prepared not to reach it. The group should set the ground rules up front for what happens if consensus cannot be reached.

- Decide if the simple majority rules.
- Identify who has the authority to step in and make a decision if there are cases of no clear majority.
- Identify whether committee votes binding or if are they simply advice to be passed on to those higher up.
- Clearly identify and record the points of agreement and disagreement (e.g. the reasons for “nay” votes) – these notes may be needed later.
 - Consider using non-binding straw votes to explore and find these.
- Actively recognize that there is strength in differing viewpoints.
- Don’t place viewpoints in value order.

9. Lack of stakeholder buy-in for the priority-setting results.

- A lack of buy-in from stakeholders and affected parties means that they may not support or follow the priority order.
- The team needs to serve as the catalyst for empowering, motivating, and supporting decisions made for the entire association.
- A lack of buy-in can lead to passive resistance and/or active sabotage

MITIGATION STRATEGY:

- Ensure that stakeholders are involved in developing the priority setting criteria and process.
- Use identified and credible criteria for final priority setting.
- Ensure that the stakeholders feel that their input has been heard and is valued.
- Keep clear lines of communication from and to all stakeholders, particularly those not directly involved in the priority-setting process.
- Assure that the organization formally adopts the resulting priority statements.
 - This avoids the impression that priorities are “the committee’s view” or the “staff view” only.
- Have at least one high-level representative on the committee to emphasize the importance of the process and results and to facilitate communication between senior leadership and the committee.
- Educate and demonstrate the benefits of a system-wide approach to setting priorities. Communicate these.
- Nurture stakeholder relationships.
- Follow through on priorities.

- **Ensure that there is a process and a timeline and/or regular schedule for revisiting the priority list.** It is crucial that stakeholders know that there is opportunity to respond to changing business needs by bringing forward new items or raise items up in priority. This should reduce the resistance to setting priorities in general.

Help for the “better late than never” scenario

Factors to explore:

- How explicitly were priorities identified in preparing for the current workplan?
- To what degree do identified priorities represent agreed upon ORGANIZATION-WIDE priorities?
- To what degree do staff and departments understand and respect the process that was used to generate priorities?
- Have priorities been reviewed and updated recently?
- How emotionally changed is the current situation?
- To what extent are people able to focus on current critical community needs?

Methods

Covey’s Quadrants

- A high-level prioritization scheme used to discriminate among alternative courses of action or activities that have differing importance and/or urgency.
 - Described by Stephen Covey in the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.
1. Tasks are categorized by four quadrants based on two variables.
 - Important / Urgent.
 - Impact / Need.
 2. Assign one criteria to each axis.
 3. Identify quadrants. Example:
 - ***Sacred Cows – High impact / low need.***
 - May include activities that are politically important, difficult to eliminate, but might be redesigned to minimize investment.
 - ***Horizons – High need / low impact***
 - Have the potential to become “stars”, but need to be developed further.
 - Make the choice to gear up or get out.
 - ***Dogs – Low impact / low need***
 - Consider for phase out.
 - ***Stars – High impact / high need***
 - Items you likely want to maintain and improve.
 - ADVANTAGE:
 - Simple to use and understand.
 - DISADVANTAGE:

- Does not prioritize within each quadrant.
- Can only measure against two criteria.
- Can be subjective.

Example:

QUADRANT 1 = Important and Urgent ◦ Tasks	QUADRANT 2 = Important but Not Urgent ◦ Tasks
QUADRANT 3 = Not Important but Urgent ◦ Tasks	QUADRANT 4 = Not Important and Not Urgent ◦ Tasks

Paired Comparisons

- A simple scoring system for comparing activities.
- Each activity gets ranked against each of the other activities.
 - Compare activity 1 to activity 2 and 3 and 4. On each comparison, note which item has a higher priority.
 - Compare activity 2 to activity 3 and 4.
 - Compare activity 3 to activity 4.
 - Compare the composite rankings.
 - Activity 1 – X *do third*
 - Activity 2 *do last*
 - Activity 3 – XXX *do first*
 - Activity 4 – XX *do second*
- ADVANTAGE:
 - Gives a detailed ranking, not just a grouping.
- DISADVANTAGE:
 - Suitable only for short lists.
 - Potentially complicated to understand.

The ABC Method

- Rank each activity into a category. Then rank within each category (e.g. A1, A2, A3).
 - A = vital
 - B = important
 - C = nice to have

The Payoff versus Time Method

- Weight each task by (1) the expected payoff and (2) the time it takes to do.
 - High payoff, low time tasks should be done first.
 - Low payoff, high time tasks should be closely examined to see if they should be done at all.

The Importance versus Performance Method

- STEP 1: Rate the importance of essential services or indicators on a 1-10 scale using individual voting sheets, group consensus or surveys.
- STEP 2: Assign indicators into one of four categories based on their high or low importance and performance.
 - High importance/low performance – *may need increased attention.*
 - High importance/high performance – *important to maintain efforts.*
 - Low importance/high performance – *potential areas to reduce efforts.*
 - Low importance/low performance – *may need little or no attention.*
- ADVANTAGE:
 - Gives an indication of where efforts are best directed.
 - Groups activities by their need for attention.
- DISADVANTAGE:
 - Does not specifically rank activities.

Priority-Setting Matrix

- List the options that the team will be considering.
- Select priorities according to criteria set by the group. Below is a list of possible criteria.
 - Overall impact or payoff. (e.g. number of staff, departments or datasets)
 - Effectiveness.
 - Availability of solutions.
 - Feasibility.
 - Effect/impact on other activities or systems.
 - Leadership and staff support.
 - Resources (cost or time) to address.
 - Governed by legislation or regulations.
 - Fit with department/organization guiding goals and objectives.
 - Mandated work.
 - Importance.
 - Urgency.
 - Known commitments.
 - Logical fit.
 - Risk of maintaining the status quo.
 - Acceptability.
 - Within the control of the team.
 - “Customer pain” caused by the problem.
 - Legal or ethical considerations.
- Discuss and refine the list of criteria. Ideally it should be between two and five.
- Decide on the weighting of each of the criteria.
 - Equal ranking – No one criterion is more important than the others.
 - Unequal ranking – Some criteria are more important than others. How much more important?
- Draw a matrix – Each activity is one row. Assign a column to each of the criteria.

- Rank each activity against each criterion. Use a score (e.g. 0 – 5), using data or opinion as appropriate.
 - Although participants may use individual score sheets, some groups may prefer to assign a score to each criterion through discussion.
- Multiply each activity's point rating by the weight(s) and add up the activity's score.
- May be used to decide which activities to refer to a subcommittee or improvement team.
- **ADVANTAGE:**
 - Gives some indication of priority order.
- **DISADVANTAGE:**
 - This method is best used to compare a short list of options.
 - May be difficult to decide which criteria to use.

Multi-Voting

- **Variation 1 – Iterative Voting**
 1. 1st vote – Each person votes for their highest priorities; they may vote for more than one item. Those items receiving votes representing at least 50% of the number of people voting move on to round 2.
 2. 2nd vote – Each person gets to vote a number of times equal to ½ the number of items remaining on the list. E.g. If there are 8 items then they get 4 votes.
 3. Continue this structure until the list is reduced to 3-5 items. These are the highest priorities.
 4. This process can be repeated to also identify mid-level priorities.
- **Variation 2 – Cast Five Straws (or sticky notes)**
 1. Each member gets 5 votes to cast. They can distribute the votes in any way wanted. E.g. All 5 votes on a single item, or distributed amongst a number of items.
 2. The top 5 items become the group's priority list.
 3. This process can be repeated to identify mid and lower priority items. (Remove the top items and start again with the revised list.)
 - REFERENCED in Kaner, S. et al. 1996 Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC.
- **Variation 3 – Hi, Mid, Low**
 1. Divide the number of the items of the list by three.
 2. Each person receives that number of choices to indicate his or her highest priority items.
 3. Everyone can distribute his or her votes in any way she or he wants, but must cast no more than 1/3 the total number of items.
 4. Votes are tallied and the top third of the list become the highest priorities.
 5. The top priorities are removed from the list and the number of items divided by two.
 6. Each person receives that number of choices to be distributed as wished.
 7. Votes are tallied and the top half of the round two list become the mid level priorities.

- REFERENCED in Kaner, S. et al. 1996 Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC.

Hybrid priority-setting matrix / quadrant method

1. Score each activity against priority-setting criteria.
Example – rank each between 1 and 5:
 - a. *Technical Feasibility* – How easy is it to do?
 - b. *Creative Feasibility* – Do you have the creative content and skills?
 - c. *Importance to the User* – Someone who is actually going to be the recipient of the end product.
 - d. *Importance to the Business* – How well does it meet organization-wide objectives and priorities?
2. Record all scores in a spreadsheet.
3. Add the scores together.
4. Create a chart from the spreadsheet.
5. Divide the chart into quadrants. This should give you:
 - a. **Do First** – Important and feasible.
 - b. **Maybe Later** – Important, but feasibility is uncertain.
 - This is the quadrant where most of the discussion, debate and allocation work will come in.
 - Keep track of these items over time. New technologies may make these a lot easier to build or deal with in the future.
 - c. **Maybe Not** – Feasible, but not very important.
 - Slip these items in when there is time.
 - d. **Don't Bother** – Not important and not feasible anyway.
 - File these away for information, but don't spend much effort on them.

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