

Analyst says government needs measurable goals

Achievement, not promoting public trust, is key, he says

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The public deserves better ways to measure how well government works, a national analyst told state and local managers Tuesday.

"You have big and thankless jobs to do, but you have no right to do them blind or badly," said Jonathan Walters, a writer for Governing magazine and the author of a book about reporting government performance.

"If you go to work every day and have no idea whatsoever what it is you are supposed to be accomplishing or making any kind of difference in the world, that is a problem."

But Walters also said government should use measurements to achieve concrete goals, not as part of a public-relations campaign under the banner of "accountability" to persuade people to trust government.

"It's not your job to make people trust you," he said. "It's your job to perform well."

Walters spoke at a gathering of more than 100 managers, mostly from state and local governments, at the Anderson Readiness Center in Salem. The meeting was sponsored by the Oregon Progress Board, the city of Eugene and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

In addition to writing for Governing magazine for more than 20 years, Walters is the author of a 1998 book, "Measuring Up: Governing's Guide to Performance Measurement for Geniuses (and Other Public Managers)."

Walters also does three volunteer jobs for his hometown of Ghent, N.Y. He is a volunteer firefighter, freedom-of-information officer and chairman of the town planning board.

Walters said he has found no government that is doing a good job of measuring progress.

"But at least Oregon has figured out this is important," he said.

Oregon established the Oregon Progress Board in 1989 to focus attention on state goals and measurable indicators known as benchmarks. The board almost was eliminated in 2002, but Gov. Ted Kulongoski and the 2003 Legislature revived it by tying the performance of state agencies to measurements.

Jeff Tryens, Progress Board executive director, said a goal of Tuesday's meeting was to determine whether there is interest in a statewide association on the issue.

Links

OREGON PROGRESS BOARD:
<http://egov.oregon.gov/DAS/OPB>

GOVERNING MAGAZINE:
<http://governing.com>

Walters said citizens also have to take responsibility for their government.

"We have a citizenry today that is generally out of it," he said. "People can tell you a lot more about the 'Runaway Bride' than they can about their local government -- never mind state or federal government."

One of the citizens who advise the Progress Board is Anita Blanchard of Salem, who said that people often fail to distinguish between governments.

"If something turns out to be stupid, everybody gets painted the same way," she said.

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