

1978

BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

RAISING THE BUREAU'S VISIBILITY: BY HOW MUCH? BY WHAT MEANS?

INTRODUCTION

- * *Should the Bureau of Municipal Research be a household phrase in Metro and other urban centres in Ontario, or should we continue to work behind-the-scenes and out of the bright lights?*
- * *Should our research be aimed at specific problems facing local government conducted under strict and objective guidelines, or can we score better marks for good government with hard hitting press releases in reaction to local issues?*
- * *And, will fund raising change for the better or worse if we opt for a new image based on a dramatic increase in the visibility of the BMR?*

It's very difficult to answer these questions because there is evidence to support both approaches. Most Bureau supporters would say that the ideal lies somewhere between the two extremes but in the end one philosophy must dominate and someone must determine where to draw the fine line that divides these different points of view.

CURRENT OVERVIEW

Any discussion of changing an organization's basic philosophy or approach must begin with:

1. *a review of the organization's goals and objectives, and*
2. *an evaluation of the current operation.*

Goals and Objectives as established in our by-laws are as follows:

- * *to inform the public about governmental policy-making and administration,*
- * *to stimulate public debate regarding governmental policy-making and administration, and*
- * *to provide constructive evaluation of governmental policy-making and administration.*

These goals and objectives are sufficiently broad as to allow for a change in BMR visibility. However, they seem to imply a responsibility to examine and question the methods of local government operation in a serious and objective manner. Therefore, while press conferences and more visibility might be desirable, it is probably safe to say comments would have to be restricted to previously researched matters. The ability to speak out on current civic issues would therefore be severely hindered.

Current Operation - Bureau supporters are certain of the organization's positive impact on public policies but when pressed may find it a little difficult to produce cold, hard evidence. Certainly there are indicators, such as news clippings, letters of support, and actual changes in certain laws or programmes. But in the end many factors help to effect change, and the Bureau is often merely one of these influencing factors. What criteria then can we use to establish some bench mark for the relative success of our current Bureau operation? The following list might prove a good starting point.

1. *number of members*
2. *size of budget*
3. *volume of research*
4. *size of staff*
5. *attendance at conferences*
6. *media coverage*
7. *letters of praise*
8. *recommendations implemented*

While every one of the above items has increased considerably over the past few years, this does not mean that everything is going along precisely as it should. Perhaps some of the increases could have been greater or maybe the increases achieved could have been accomplished with less effort than actually occurred.

But perhaps the most important item in this list of criteria is the one dealing with the number of Bureau recommendations that were actually implemented. A review of the past 15 studies reveals that in every instance some or all of the recommendations were adopted in an official government report, or actually introduced and passed in the form of new laws or changes in programmes. Just how much credit the Bureau can claim for these changes varies greatly with each case and is extremely difficult to document.

VISIBILITY RAISING EFFORTS

The Bureau has long recognized the importance of having its' studies read by decision-makers and those who have influence on decision-makers. Also, we are aware of the need to have enough visibility to assist in our fund raising efforts. But we have been guided by the longstanding policy that ours is a research function best performed behind-the-scenes. It is up to others to press for reform after the Bureau has provided sufficient ammunition. Within this context, the Bureau has initiated several new visibility raising efforts and has a few more planned.

1. *A stronger emphasis on current civic problems with practical solutions for decision-makers.*
2. *Cultivation of interest in specialty trade magazines to increase publicity.*
3. *Introduction of BMR In Review, a one-page synopsis of Bureau studies sent to 8,000 metro residents involved in special interest groups (business, labour, ratepayers, etc.).*
4. *Increased number of BMR seminars and conferences.*
5. *Standardized and modernized Bureau's visual image (brochures, publications, letterhead, etc.).*
6. *Opened a regional office to get closer to local problems.*
7. *Started making formal presentations to the Municipal Liaison Committee to encourage municipal and provincial response to Bureau publications.*
8. *Developed a new Bottom Line Report to document Bureau impact on public policy, to be used as a fund raising tool and to keep members informed.*
9. *Developed a Scoreboard to show where insufficient action has been taken and encourage follow-up.*

SUMMARY

Should the Bureau opt for a dramatic change in its public visibility? There are several questions that should be addressed before such a change is considered:

1. *How will the Bureau's objectivity and credibility be affected?*
2. *Will fund raising be more or less difficult?*
3. *What kind of staff would the Bureau be able to attract?*
4. *Will information be available from government sources?*
5. *Will our ability to influence public policy be increased or decreased?*