

Bond Case Briefs

Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

Moneyball Invades Boston's City Hall, Where Everything Is Graded.

There is no place sports heroes cast a longer shadow than in Boston, where Red Sox immortal Ted Williams has inspired City Hall to come up with its own batting average.

The average on Thursday for Mayor Martin J. Walsh and his lieutenants was 1.36. That's probably confusing even to diehards, since the best Williams ever hit was .406 back in 1941, a mark that hasn't been surpassed since. But by the city's unique calculations, batting a thousand or just above means that targets — a pothole filled within one business day, for example — are being met.

Plenty of cities have what amount to dashboards of data that show how quickly streetlights are fixed or the number of public-school kids attending class. Only in the hometown of the Red Sox is a single number generated to show how well Walsh and his starters are serving Boston's 656,000 residents. While the city has collected data for years, the batting average is two months old.

It's drawing praise for its boldness as well as some head-scratching about whether one number properly assesses the myriad duties on which cities are judged. "They're really jumping into the deep end," said Neil Kleiman, a professor at New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. "No other city has anything like it."

Greatest Hitter

This is how it works: Department heads gather data on 21 quality-of-life components, from crime to road repair to visitors to the library. Those metrics are folded together to produce the daily tally, as well as a weekly, monthly and quarterly score. All the numbers are posted on City Score, a website that mimics Fenway Park's imposing left-field wall, aka, the Green Monster.

Dan Koh, Walsh's chief of staff, gave a TED Talk last year entitled, "What Government Can Learn from Baseball." Koh led off with — what else? — how the late Williams, who some consider the greatest hitter in baseball history, was the impetus for a single performance number for the sprockets and gears of municipal bureaucracy.

Walsh, elected in 2013 to succeed the late Thomas M. Menino, calls himself and Koh the odd couple of urban America, a streetwise mayor who hired a techno-geek to help build the data-driven city of the future. The Harvard-educated Koh became enamored in college with statistics as used by former Oakland Athletics General Manager Billy Beane, whose implausible success relied on data to find a roster of unheralded yet talented players. His story was chronicled in "Moneyball," the 2003 Michael Lewis book, and later a feature film.

Seeing Red

Boston residents who spot graffiti and or missed trash pickups are encouraged to message the city, or call the 311 non-emergency hotline. Complainants who send photos of problems may receive, in return, photos of the problems fixed. Many who report issues are surveyed twice, in making the

complaint and receiving the result, on how well they were treated along the way.

Walsh meets regularly with his performance managers as well as department heads to talk about the results. At a session two weeks ago, the batting average was 1.11, meaning targets were being met at a slightly better-than-expected rate. The meeting began on an upbeat note with Chris Dwelley, the citywide performance manager, reporting that the prompt repair of streetlights had improved 28 percent in February compared to January. The average for "STREETLIGHT ON-TIME %" as seen on the scoreboard that day was .99.

Walsh nodded his approval, but as he scanned the scoreboard on a screen on his office wall, he saw something he didn't like: red. White numbers are at or above targets, the red are below. For example, ambulance-response times had been in the red for a while. Walsh dug into the reasons why and concluded that Boston had grown while its ambulance fleet had not. Proving the scoreboard is no mere gimmick, Walsh decided, within just a few weeks of spotting the offending color, to include 10 more ambulances in his next budget proposal.

What bothered him most were the constituent satisfaction surveys, red across the board. "There's a disconnect somewhere," he said, vowing to root it out.

Mayors in other cities have looked into making dashboards public before rejecting the idea, according to NYU's Kleiman. What they typically fear, he said, is that airing bad numbers would bring unwanted attention to their problems. Koh gets it. His boss initially had the same reaction. But in the end, the rationale that the city needed to be run like a business won out. "We deliver services and we have customers," the mayor said. And besides, "we have a lot of good numbers" to show off too.

Like the day after the meeting, when the average came in at 1.26. That was, for those keeping score at home, up .15 from 1.11 the previous day.

Bloomberg Business

by Tom Moroney

April 8, 2016 — 2:00 AM PDT Updated on April 8, 2016 — 6:00 AM PDT