Chapter 9 – Evaluating the Effectiveness of Public Involvement Plans

PIPs may be evaluated systematically, or in the context of specific projects or activities. Public involvement is effective if the objectives of the PIP or activity are achieved. These objectives may range from informing the public early and continuously, to ensuring that public input is carefully considered throughout the decision-making process. A variety of methods and measures may be used to gauge an agency's progress in meeting its public involvement objectives.

This chapter outlines how to evaluate whether a PIP or activity is achieving agency public involvement objectives. The guidance could be used to initiate a systematic approach to public involvement performance measurement (PIPM), or to do project-specific evaluations. Included is guidance on basic concepts, key steps in the evaluation process, a sample performance measurement framework, and potential data sources and evaluation techniques. The chapter concludes with strategies for applying a performance measurement framework to improve the public involvement process.

9.1 Background and Resources

The examples in this chapter draw upon a performance measurement framework developed by PIPM Working Group, a working group of FDOT and Florida MPO staff with experience in public involvement. The PIPM Working Group developed the framework based upon a series of research projects conducted for FDOT on evaluating the effectiveness of public involvement in transportation. Details on these examples or copies of the final research reports can be found on online at www.dot.state.fl.us/emo/pubinvolvement.shtm.

A software tool based on the performance measurement framework (PIPM Tool) was developed to aid FDOT staff in evaluating their public involvement efforts. The tool is primarily intended for use by District staff during the PD&E phase. For more information about the PIPM Tool, contact the FDOT Environmental Management Office.

9.2 Important Terms and Concepts

The following terms and concepts are important to understand when undertaking a performance measurement effort:

- Goal: The overarching purpose of the program or activity
- Objective: Specific statement of how the agency plans to achieve its goal
- Indicator: A variable selected and defined to measure progress toward an objective
- Target: A realistic, measurable criterion for evaluating an indicator
- Performance measurement: A process of defining and monitoring indicators of organizational performance in relation to specified targets.

Indicators of performance are defined based on organizational goals (what the agency wants to achieve) and objectives (how the agency proposes to achieve the goal). A good indicator is one that lends itself to

establishing measurable performance targets. For public involvement, qualitative data obtained through surveys will be a primary data source for measuring targets, as discussed further in Section 9.4.

Indicators should not only be relevant to a stated objective, but generally understandable to staff and the community at large. Although results may not always be communicated to the public, doing so is one way to demonstrate the agency's commitment to effective and meaningful public involvement. A set of indicators, rather than any single indicator, is often needed to obtain an accurate picture of performance in relation to an objective.

Targets establish a desired level of performance at a given point in time. Agency or individual progress in meeting the target provides insight into how well the public involvement activity is performing. Together, the goals, objectives, indicators, and targets serve as a framework for public involvement performance measurement, as illustrated in Figure 9.1.

Figure 9.1 Example Public Involvement Performance Measures Framework

<u>**Goal:**</u> All interested parties have an opportunity to participate fully in the decision-making process and public input is carefully considered.

<u>**Objective:**</u> Provide **equitable** access to transportation decision-making/Use a variety of **methods** to involve and engage the public

<u>**Indicator:**</u> Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation/Access to information by persons with disabilities

<u>**Target:**</u> 80% of meetings are within one-eighth of a-mile of a transit stop/100% of electronic material is Section 508 compliant/ 100% of meetings and events are located at ADA compliant facilities

9.3 Establishing an Evaluation Framework for Public Involvement

The PIP or CAP typically consists of public involvement goals, policies, objectives, and descriptions of public involvement techniques. Therefore, the goals and objectives of a PIP or CAP are a logical place to start when attempting to define appropriate performance indicators.

Figure 9.2 is an example of a public involvement goal and objectives developed by the FDOT PIPM Working Group. They are typical of PIPs and programs and could form an initial basis for an effective performance measurement framework.

Figure 9.2: Example Public Involvement Goal and Objectives

Goal: Ensure that all interested parties have an opportunity to participate fully in the transportation decision-making process and that public input is carefully considered.

Objectives:

1. Provide equitable access to transportation decision-making.
2. Inform the public early, clearly, and continuously.
3. Use a variety of methods to involve and engage the public.
4. Carefully consider public input in transportation decisions.

9.3.1 Identifying Appropriate Indicators–Outputs versus Outcomes

When identifying indicators, consider whether the indicator addresses what really counts in regards to public involvement and not just what can be easily counted. Too often, evaluating the public involvement process becomes an exercise in counting heads at a public meeting or hits on a project website. This is because it is easier to monitor products and services delivered (outputs) rather than results of the PIP or activity (outcomes). It is no surprise, therefore, that the national review of agency PIPM conducted for FDOT found an overabundance of output-oriented indicators and evaluation efforts.

> "Not everything that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted counts."
>
> *- attributed to Albert Einstein*

In order to know if what is getting counted really counts, begin by preparing a set of performance indicators that help to explain whether or not a public involvement objective has actually been met. These indicators should attempt to monitor outcomes and not just outputs. Sets of indicators addressing both outcomes and outputs may be needed to obtain an accurate picture of performance.

For example, Objective 1 (Figure 9.1) suggests providing equitable access to transportation decision-making. Agency performance on this objective can be understood in relation to a variety of potential indicators. One indicator may be whether project information is available in languages other than English. However, this indicator provides only limited information and is not applicable in areas with a mostly English speaking population. Additional indicators, such as those in Table 9.2, would provide a more complete picture of performance on this objective.

9.3.2 Example Indicators

As mentioned, Table 9.1 provides example indicators for the objectives in Figure 9.1. These indicators are designed to address desired outcomes, with some addressing outputs important to achieving those outcomes. Although some indicators relate to more than one objective, they are organized under the most closely related objective. Consider which indicators focus on outcomes and which address outputs.

9.3.3 Potential for Bias

One issue that complicates any evaluation of PIPMs is that results may be biased by influences outside of an agency's control. For example, a group that opposes a transportation project may report dissatisfaction with the agency's public involvement process, regardless of the quality of that process or the efforts made to address their concerns. Compounding this issue is the fact that controversial projects may draw more opponents than supporters to a public involvement event.

The potential for bias in evaluating public involvement activities can be reduced, or at least better understood, by evaluating performance systematically and by using sets of indicators, rather than relying on a single indicator or evaluation effort. Evaluation results can also be categorized by level of controversy, level of environmental review, or other characteristics that indicate whether a potential for bias may exist. Categorizing evaluation results also provides insight into the possible need for refinements to the public involvement approach by size of project or level of controversy expected.

Table 9.1: Example Public Involvement Indicators for Sample Objectives

Equity: Provide equitable access to transportation decision-making.
Indicator E-1: Access to information and participation opportunities by persons with disabilities
Indicator E-2: Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation, where available
Indicator E-3: Geographic dispersion of public involvement opportunities
Indicator E-4: Convenience of meeting or event time
Indicator E-5: Convenience of meeting or event location
Indicator E-6: Availability of information in languages other than English
Information: Inform the public early, clearly and continuously.
Indicator I-1: Clarity and adequacy of project information
Indicator I-2: Response time to inquiries from the public
Indicator I-3: Awareness of affected parties of the proposed transportation action
Indicator I-4: Affected parties impression that ample notice was provided of public meetings
Methods: Use a variety of methods to involve and engage the public.
Indicator M-1: Participants are involved using multiple techniques
Indicator M-2: Affected parties feel they had an adequate opportunity to participate
Indicator M-3: Perception of the value of methods used
Responsiveness: Carefully consider public input in transportation decisions.
Indicator R-1: Agency partners feel that their input was considered

9.3.4 Setting Targets

A target establishes a desired level of performance for an indicator. As such, it should be both realistic and measurable. One way to determine a reasonable target is to conduct a baseline study of current performance. Another way is to consider the performance of peer agencies. Given that few agencies routinely evaluate their public involvement efforts, one way to get started is to simply choose a target based on past experience or best practices. The target can then be refined when sufficient data becomes available through the performance monitoring process.

A complete set of example targets for the indicators noted in Section 9.3.4 is provided in the report *Performance Measures to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Public Involvement Activities in Florida*. For the purpose of illustration, consider the following examples. Indicator R-1 (Agency partners feel that their input was considered) is an indicator of agency responsiveness. A reasonable target might be for a majority of agency partners (i.e. 75%) to feel their input was considered. Setting the target at 75% rather than 100% recognizes that it may be unrealistic to attempt to satisfy all participants, given limited resources and the potential for bias noted previously.

Targets might be further broken down by type of respondent, as follows. A short follow-up survey of those who participated or commented would be needed to determine the result, as shown in Section 9.4.1.

Indicator R-1: Agency partners feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of government units feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of organizations feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of user groups feel that their input was considered.

Target: [75%] of individuals feel that their input was considered.

Where an indicator is monitoring something that is required by law, then an appropriate target would be to achieve 100% compliance. For example, the ADA requires government meeting locations and information to be accessible to persons with disabilities. In this situation, it would be reasonable to set targets at 100%, as shown in the example below.

> Indicator E-1: Access to information and participation opportunities by persons with disabilities
>
> > Target: [100%] of meetings, events and project-related information sources are accessible to persons with disabilities.

Note that this target would involve documenting whether agency meeting and event locations are ADA accessible. It would also involve evaluating whether project information is provided in a manner that is accessible to those with disabilities, when requested.

9.4 Data Collection and Evaluation Methods

PIPM relies in large part on qualitative information, as opposed to quantitative data. How participants feel about the quality of the efforts made to involve them tells us more about an agency's performance than the number of people that participated. The degree of public satisfaction with a public involvement process or activity can only be understood by asking participants and in some cases where those who chose not to participate, for their opinion.

Data needed to measure indicators should also be cost-effective to collect. Ideally, such data would be routinely collected by the agency. Although data on meeting attendance and other outputs may be routinely collected or readily available, data on the outcome of public involvement activities will involve other methods of gathering information.

Comment forms, questionnaires, and short surveys are all cost-effective methods that can be employed for this purpose. Geographic information system (GIS) analysis, internet tools, and staff debriefings or logs are other useful and relatively low-cost methods for collecting data needed to evaluate public involvement performance.

9.4.1 Surveys and Questionnaires

Surveys and questionnaires are essential data collection tools for evaluating public involvement. They are often the only way to obtain the qualitative data needed from the public for the evaluation. Surveys can be conducted in person, by phone, via internet, mailed, or emailed, and can either target specific groups or be a random sample.

Surveys can be distributed at meetings to be mailed back, inserted into publications, or mailed directly to potential respondents. Return postage for mail surveys is typically prepaid, as this leads to higher response rates. An advantage of email surveys is little or no reproduction or distribution costs. To use email surveys, it is necessary to have email addresses for the targeted respondents, and random distribution is generally not an option. Alternatively, questions may be asked by telephone or in person, allowing for follow-up questions and more in-depth discussion.

Figure 9.3 is an example survey relating to Indicator R-1: "Agency partners feel that their input was considered." See Appendix D for examples of initial and follow-up surveys used by FDOT District Five in assessing public involvement for the SR 600/John Young Parkway Project.

Figure 9.3 Example Survey of Agency Responsiveness to Public Input

We are committed to providing interested parties with the opportunity to participate in our transportation decision-making processes. We want to ensure that those who have taken the time to participate are aware of what we did with their input.

Our records indicate that you have participated in some way in the following project. We appreciate your time in answering a few brief questions.

Project: 1234567

Project Description:

Which of the following best describes your role?

- o **Interested individual**
- o **Government representative** (examples include public officials or staff of local governments, transit agencies, water management districts, metropolitan planning organizations, regional planning councils, etc.)
- o **Representative of a state, regional, or local organization** (examples include neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, or the Chamber of Commerce)
- o **Representative of a user group** (examples include bicycle/pedestrian groups, freight movers, and commuters)

I was given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process:

O   Strongly Agree   O   Agree   O   Disagree   O   Strongly Disagree

My ideas were considered in the decision-making process:

O   Strongly Agree   O   Agree   O   Disagree   O   Strongly Disagree

Comments:

9.4.2 Statistics

Basic statistics, such as percentages, can be useful in evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of a public involvement program or activity. Survey responses can be calculated and compared to preset targets to determine performance in relation to a given indicator. Figure 9.4 illustrates an example report for a fictional project. It compares "actual" findings on public involvement performance to agency targets for a range of indicators. Some of the items are simply fulfilled or not, whereas others involve a percentage of responses that support the target for that indicator.

Figure 9.4 Example Results of a Project Public Involvement Evaluation

Indicator	Actual	Target (Set by administrator, 2000)
E-1_A *Participant satisfaction with efforts to accommodate persons with disabilities*	60%	100%
E-1_B *Accessibility of meetings, events, and information to persons with disabilities*	60%	100%
E-2_A *Public involvement events within walking distance of fixed-route transit service*	0%	30%
E-2_B *Public involvement events are accessible via paratransit service*	100%	20%
E-3 *Geographic dispersion of involvement opportunities*	Unfulfilled	Fulfilled
E-4 *Participants and invitees felt meetings were held at a convenient time*	100%	50%
E-5 *Participants and invitees felt meetings were held at a convenient location*	100%	100%
E-6_A *Information provided in languages other than English*	Fulfilled	Fulfilled
E-6_B *Translators made available at public meetings*	Fulfilled	Fulfilled

Once documented, evaluation results may be tracked over time to assess whether performance has improved, remained steady, or declined. They may also be aggregated across a number of projects for a sense of agency-wide performance over a specified period of time.

Figure 9.5 is one example of how results can be communicated in chart form. In this fictional example, it is clear that meeting participants have become more satisfied with the timing of public meetings in recent years than they had been in the past. Possible explanations for this improvement might include a change by the agency in when meetings are held in response to early survey results indicating that a meeting time was not convenient.

Figure 9.5 Example Multi-Year Indicator Tracking Chart
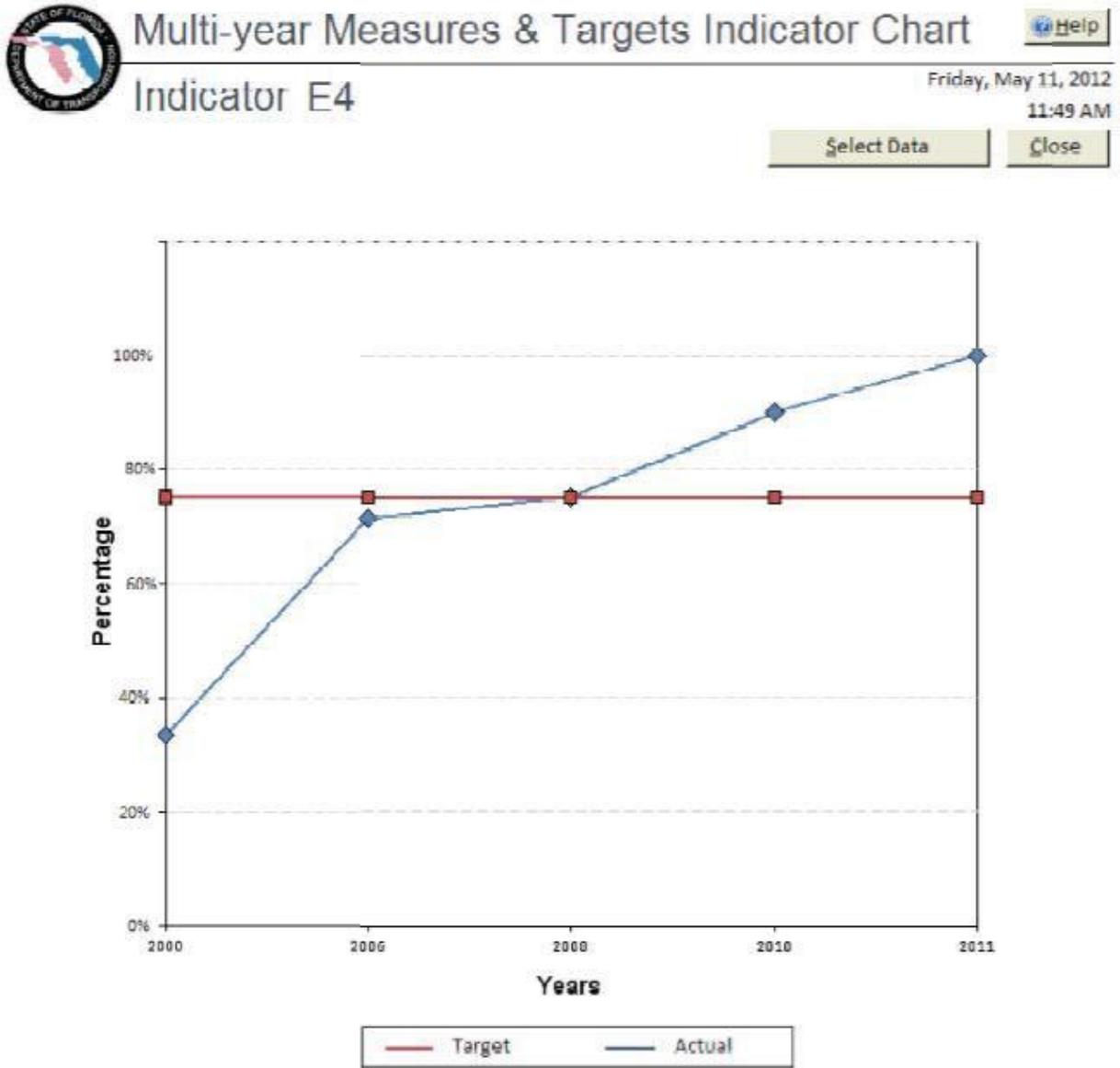
The purpose of this indicator is to achieve a better understanding of participant needs regarding timing of public meetings. This indicator tracks whether those participating or invited but not participating feel that the public involvement opportunities of the agency were offered at a convenient time.

For this target, the tool calculated the percent of respondents that felt the meeting or event was held at a convenient time, finding the share of total responses per project that were marked "Strongly Agree" or "Somewhat Agree." The above graph compares performance levels with predefined targets.

9.4.3 GIS and Internet Tools

GIS and internet tools are useful in evaluating indicators and targets with geographic elements. For example, Indicator E-2 provides the following example targets:

Indicator E-2: Convenience of meetings and events to public transportation, where available

Target: [60%] of public involvement events are within one-eighth of a-mile of a transit stop.

Target: [60%] of public involvement events are within paratransit service areas.

To evaluate this indicator and its targets, begin by obtaining the transit schedules and hours of operation for the affected areas. This information can typically be downloaded directly from the area transit agency's website. In most cases, the distance from an event location to a transit stop can be determined by using one of various available web applications.

A useful tool for this purpose is Google Transit®, a web-based application that maps public transit and other transportation systems, as part of Google Maps®. Some transit agencies also provide detailed information on their websites detailing transit stop locations in the service area.

9.4.4 Staff Debriefings

Staff debriefings are an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of a public involvement process or activity in relation to agency objectives. A debriefing session following a specific involvement activity can help staff identify effective practices and potential areas to improve prior to the next event. Below are a few questions to contemplate during in-house debriefings.

1. In general, what seemed to work well? What didn't?

Staff perceptions and general comments received from the public can be valuable in beginning to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a process or technique.

2. Are enough people in the affected community participating in the public involvement activities? Were those who participated representative of the affected community? Did the audience include those who were expected to have an interest in the project?

A common problem for transportation agencies is lack of attendance at public meetings. If key segments of the community are not attending a public event, this may indicate a variety of issues. The timing and/or locations may be inappropriate for some audiences. The notifications may not be reaching the intended audience. Area residents may not believe their comments are important or will be considered. They may simply prefer other ways to be informed and involved in the decision-making process. A follow-up survey with those invited and interviews with key stakeholders can provide insight into the reasons for low attendance and how to address the issue in the future.

3. What type of feedback did you receive from the public about the event?

Consider the results of any surveys, comment forms, questionnaires, or personal comments received by staff in relation to the meeting or event. If many people indicated that the meeting was not at a convenient location, consider whether there is another potential meeting site closer to the affected area. Another alternative might be to attend scheduled meetings of interest groups in the area, or to provide updates via newsletters with

information on how interested parties can provide comments or get involved. Alternatively, positive comments about meeting format provide reinforcement that the format is appropriate for reaching the intended audience.

4. Did the public seem to understand the information they were provided? Are the right communication techniques being employed?

When providing information to the public it is important to keep the message clear, simple and informal. If the comments received are irrelevant to the project, this indicates people do not understand the information they were provided or what information/input is being sought. The public may have unrealistic expectations about how they can influence the project, their role in the decision-making process, or the type of decisions being made during the current phase of project development.

5. Are there significant unresolved issues on the project?

The level of involvement needed will vary according to the nature of a project and the level of public interest or concern. If significant opposition to a project remains following the public involvement effort, then it is likely that all relevant issues have not been identified and resolved to the satisfaction of the community. Continued dialogue and additional involvement opportunities are needed to develop acceptable solutions. Additional efforts may also be needed to demonstrate to the public how their input is being used.

9.5 Improvement Strategies

Performance measurement is a valuable management tool, as it provides essential information on how to improve upon past results. A common saying is "what gets measured gets done." Certainly, there is some truth to this saying. However, it is only true if the results of the performance measurement effort are translated directly into improvements to the public involvement process or techniques evaluated.

Each time a public involvement evaluation is performed a list of improvement strategies should be identified and then implemented in subsequent activities. When the targets for performance are not met, this is an indication that improvements are needed. Positive results help to inform what activities or approaches work best and should be used again. Appendix D provides two cases of how performance measurement has been used by FDOT to improve public involvement.

Insight into potential ways to improve public involvement may also be obtained by considering the findings of a detailed assessment of public involvement in Florida's transportation decision-making process. This Statewide Assessment of Public Involvement Findings was conducted across FDOT functional areas and among MPOs in Florida and provided the following suggestions for potential improvement:

Involvement and Outreach

- Maximize opportunities for one-on-one or small group dialogue.
- Create opportunities for staff to build relationships with the public and to provide education on transportation issues, both within and outside of project development.
- Provide opportunities other than public meetings for people to have input in project decision-making.
- Look for ways to coordinate and communicate with other agencies on public involvement or outreach activities.

Continuity and Commitments

- Establish a process for passing project information on public concerns and comments from phase to phase.
- Increase communication between functional units within FDOT Districts on project development issues of importance to the public. Consider instituting regular cross-functional debriefing meetings and cross-functional area attendance at key project meetings.
- Consider a project management approach or a single point of contact for the public who has the necessary technical knowledge and would follow a project from planning or project development through to construction.

Training and Information Exchange

- Provide regular public involvement training and target the training, where appropriate, to specific topics of interest or concern and to specific functional units or responsibilities.
- Provide organized opportunities for FDOT Districts, as well as MPO staff, to share experiences, ideas, and best practices in working with the public.

Performance Measures and Evaluation

- Develop a systematic method, based on defined performance measures, which can be used by FDOT functional units and MPOs for evaluating the effectiveness of their public involvement process.
- Develop performance measures that focus on desired outcomes and that correspond with and advance the business plan of that functional unit.

The last two items above were addressed through the public involvement performance measurement research discussed in Section 9.1. The full report is available on the FDOT Environmental Management Office website.

9.6 Conclusion

Seeking public input is vital to the success of transportation planning and project development. Evaluation of public involvement efforts identifies what is being done well and where improvements need to be made. Alternative strategies for improvement may then be identified, implemented, and evaluated to determine what strategies provide the best results. Communicating evaluation results to the public and any changes made in response to the evaluation is one way to demonstrate the Department's commitment to public involvement.

This chapter provides guidance on how to establish an effective PIPM framework for public involvement. It emphasizes the importance of an outcome-oriented approach to evaluation which draws upon qualitative data from surveys, questionnaires, and comment forms. The framework is intended for use as a management tool and to diagnose and improve upon existing practices, rather than for quality assurance purposes. The tools and resources identified in Section 9.1 may be adapted for this purpose.