LONG-TERM EVALUATION OF IMPACTS OF CITIZEN PLANNER PROGRAM

Photo by: Kurt Schindler, MSU Extension Senior Educator

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INSIDE

THE CITIZEN PLANNER PROGRAM AND MASTER CITIZEN PLANNER CREDENTIAL:
Long-Term Evaluation of Impacts

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Introduction

The December 2014 issue of ***Planning and Zoning News*** showcased the Michigan Citizen Planner Program, and the Master Citizen Planner credential and its impacts beyond the classroom. *This article will reveal the findings of further studies on these two initiatives measuring perceived impacts of elected and appointed planning officials in Michigan.*

Complexity in decision making with regard to local land use has increased considerably (Sullivan, 2012). Volunteer planning officials find it hard to meet basic roles of their appointed planning related duties, let alone address issues like climate adaptation, resiliency planning, sustainable development and placemaking. An example of planners' challenges in land use decision-making within the local context is how local officials have been affected by disaster recovery and natural hazards planning (***Planning***, 2015).

The Michigan Land Use Leadership Council (MLULC), appointed in 2003 by then Governor Granholm, identified the need for education and training in Michigan. A key goal of the council was *"that 60 percent of planning and zoning officials complete basic land use planning, zoning, and smart growth educational programs by 2010 and document participation in such programs within 1 year of appointment."* (Cullen, 2006, p. 4; PSC, 2003). Cullen and others in a 2006 study conducted of Michigan planning officials statewide, found that nearly 80% preferred continuing education as a requirement for planning officials past their first term. Scholars and land use professionals nationally support these findings, which suggest local planning officials *"operate with insufficient procedural guidelines and lack the appropriate expertise to implement effective zoning schemes"* (Samson, 2008, p. 893).

The Citizen Planner Program and the Master Citizen Planner credential offered by Michigan State University (MSU) Extension cater to this growing need (Solomon & Pape, 2014; Beyea, 2014). This article reports perceived impacts of these initiatives on communities in Michigan. *Perceived impacts* are measured using two techniques. One known as *Ripple Effect Mapping*, is a qualitative process that captures statements and stories about experiences associated with community development and planning after having gone through the program. The other is through an *online survey.* Comments captured during the Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) process were included in the survey. While surveys measure phenomena quantitatively, oftentimes stakeholders or program funders may not be able to understand the story behind the data. This process enabled the Ripple Effect Mapping to capture these stories, while collecting quantitative data through the survey.

Ripple Effect Mapping

MSU Extension educators used a type of focus group interview to explore perceived impacts of specific individual outcomes that have rippled through select Michigan communities as a result of the Citizen Planner program. REM, unlike most types of focus group interviews, relies on past program participants as well as non-participants to identify and describe impacts in a qualitative way. Individuals that have not completed the Citizen Planner program who are likely to have witnessed actions taken by the program participant are also engaged in discussion. The idea is to learn about personal outcomes associated with the program and how 'citizen planners' have led to other improvements in the community. Those outcomes and resulting ripple effects are mapped on a computer and projected in real time on a wall (or notecards are pasted on a wall and organized and connected) in a 'mind map' that radiates out from the center. The center is labeled 'The Citizen Planner Program' and statements recorded radiate outwards forming the ripples of impact (see Figure 1).

Three counties were selected for REM sessions - Manistee, Kalamazoo, and Oakland. Counties were selected based on the relatively high number of participants that have completed the Citizen Planner program in those locations. Invitations were sent to past program participants asking them to participate and to invite another individual from the community that could speak to the difference in the community that the Citizen Planner program has made. The 'nonparticipants' included fellow planning commissioners, elected officials, and appointed officials such as managers and administrators. Ultimately, groups of approximately 20

Appreciative Inquiry

Share a brief story about your experience with Citizen Planner either as a participant or interacting with someone who completed the program using one of the following questions:

- What is a highlight, achievement, or success you had based on your involvement in Citizen Planner?
- What is something about your involvement in Citizen Planner that you are proud to share?
- What connections with others, such as planning commission members in other communities, planning professionals, etc. – new and/or deepened – have you made as a result of Citizen Planner?

Ripple Impact Stories

The Citizen Planner Program introduced a standard of professionalism acting as a valid credential among planning officials. For example, Citizen Planners voted on development decisions based on findings of fact and the law rather than personal beliefs and vendettas.

Ripple Impact Stories

A public hearing regarding a controversial zoning decision had over 500 people attending. Various groups among people attending were concerned about possible conflicts of interest. The city turned the special use permit down. This prompted the developer to sue in federal court, but the city prevailed. One of the major reasons for the city winning the case was attributed to the Citizen Planner Program. Records retention and the necessary detail in minutes of meetings were key to providing facts before the federal court.

people - half past participants and half nonparticipants – were brought together for each of the three REM sessions.

Each session began with facilitators using a combination of appreciative inquiry and one-to-one interview techniques (see Appreciative Inquiry sidebar). The initial questions were intended to get people
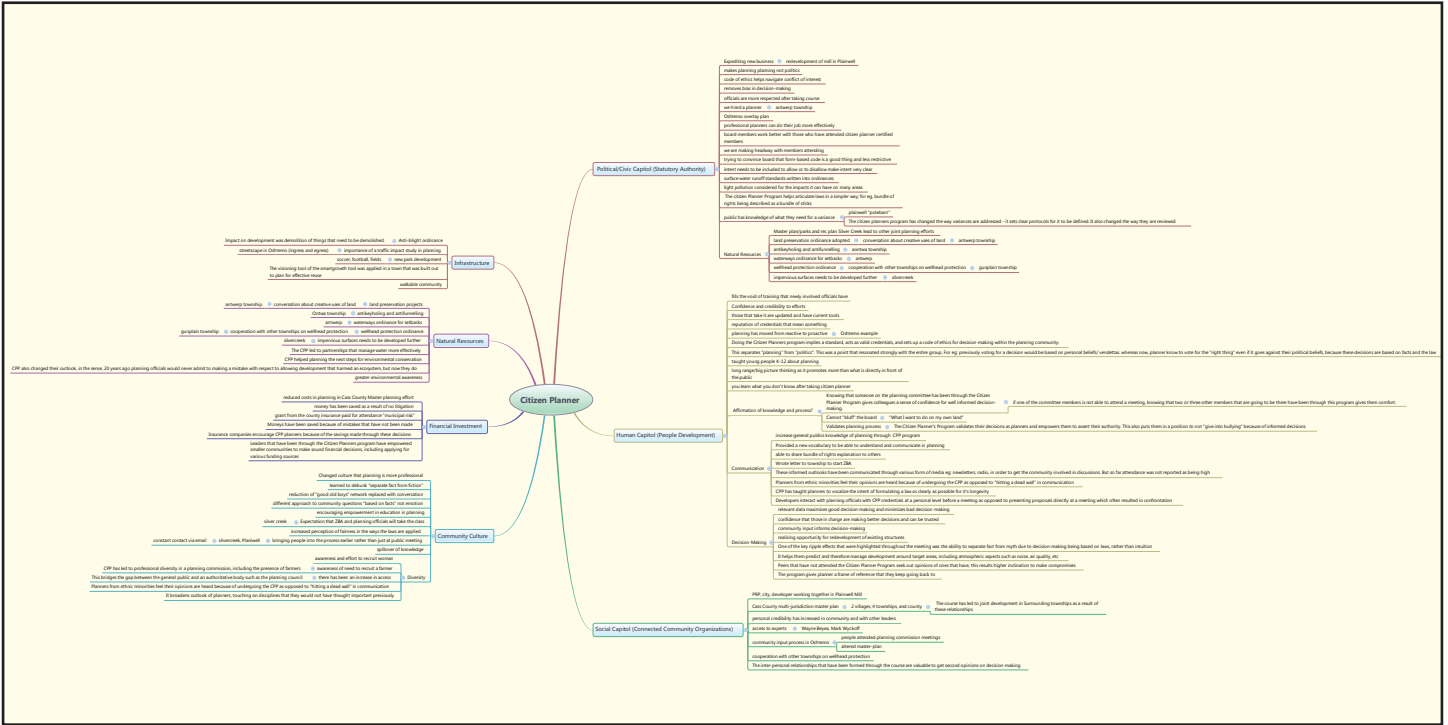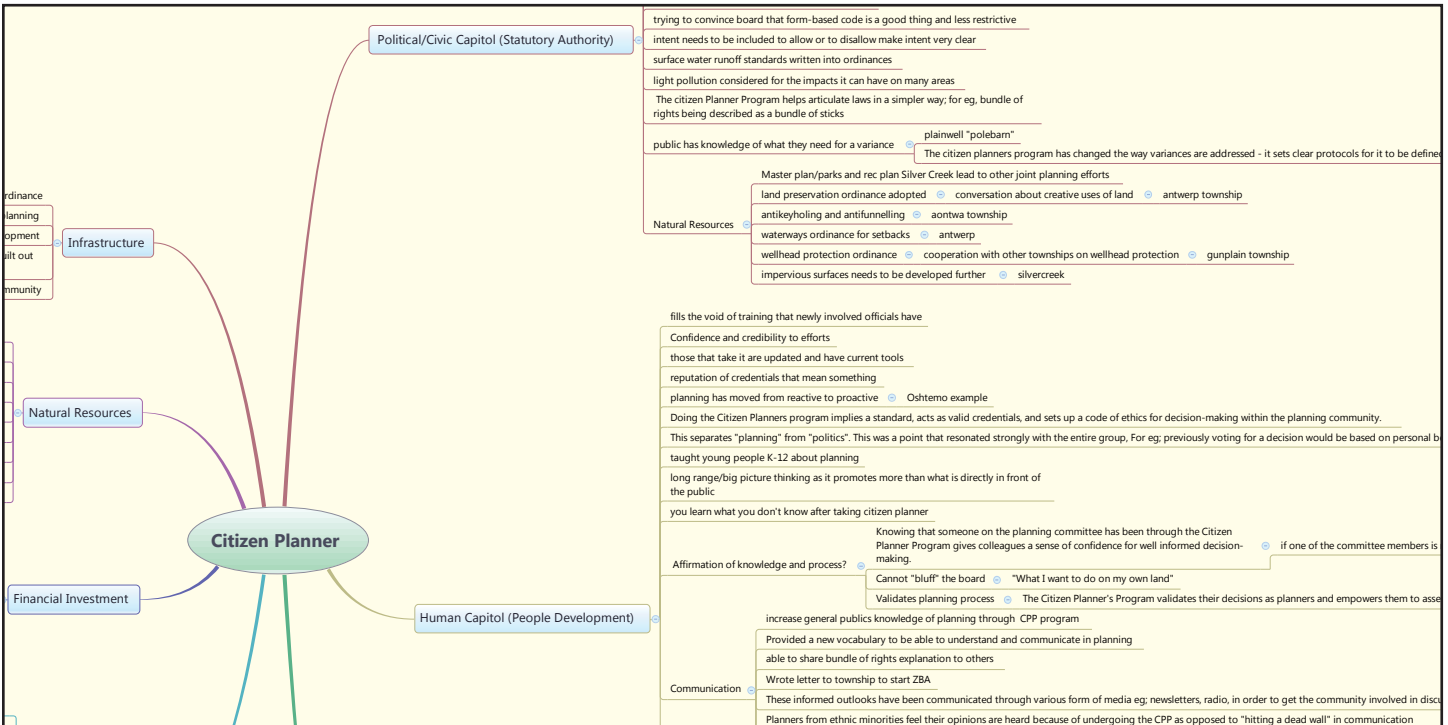
Figure 1:
Kalamazoo Ripple Map

Figure 2:
An excerpt of the Kalamazoo Ripple Map

thinking about the Citizen Planner Program and how this has impacted their knowledge, skills, confidence, networks and relationships, which in turn have impacted the communities represented in the REM session. People were asked to discuss impacts first with another person of their choice and then with the others in the room. These initial comments became the first 'ripples' to be mapped. Comments that were similar to others were grouped and turned into separate categories (see Figure 2). This process continued with past program participants and nonparticipants, ultimately piggy-backing on comments made which eventually revealed stories about changes in their communities. Comments were organized and reorganized into groups and subgroups to refine the ripple map over the course of the session. Stories shared by participants emerge through this process as the richest form of information about the program – information that surveys or other types of focus group interviews cannot capture in its entirety (see sidebar).

The ripple map that emerges at the end of each session is not the final product of REM. Since statements on impacts (ripples) are grouped into categories,

these categories can be compared with each other. The importance of each category with all the others can be examined as well. Using the *Community Capitals Framework*, a model for analyzing community and economic development programs through a systems lens (see Community Capitals Framework sidebar and Figure 3), Extension educators assigned a weight to each impact depending on whether it was representative of a particular type of Community Capital (e.g. Natural Capital, from Flora, C., & Flora, J., 2008). In a spreadsheet, each impact was counted for the Community Capital(s) for which it represented. After assigning weights, total scores were tallied for each Community Capital and a relative score was calculated for each Community Capital based on the impacts on the ripple map.

Table 1:
Share of Impacts per Community Capital Relative to Total Impacts Reported for Each Community

Community	Community Capital						
	Natural	Cultural	Human	Social	Political	Financial	Built
Manistee County							
% of total impacts	3.45%	9.20%	41.38%	19.54%	21.84%	3.45%	1.15%
Kalamazoo County							
% of total impacts	6.00%	4.50%	40.00%	15.00%	26.50%	3.50%	4.50%
Oakland County							
% of total impacts	6.40%	11.20%	30.40%	12.00%	28.00%	7.20%	4.80%

When asked about impacts of the Citizen Planner Program and Masters Citizen Credentials, participants brought to light statements or stories mostly associated with improved board or commission processes – including basing decisions on standards, more professional interaction with the public, and new or revised plans and ordinances, increased professional relationships with the public, the development community, and other interests (see Table 1). These impacts are expected with a training program that focuses on individual mastery of the fundamentals of planning and zoning.

Overall, MSU Extension educators found REM to be a fitting technique for evaluating a community development program like Citizen Planner that does not have easily identifiable financial impacts that educational programs targeting businesses and agriculture might be able to demonstrate with basic surveys. It is an effective technique to encourage reflection and capture what relationships forged through the program can lead to. However, ripple effect mapping is not a substitute for conventional program evaluation techniques. It is a useful way to tell a richer story about the changes that communities have made as a result of an educational program or other intervention of some kind.

Figure 3: Community Capitals Framework
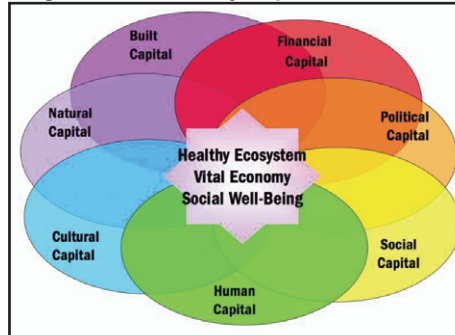
The Community Capitals Framework

Natural Capital – Those assets that abide in a location, including resources, amenities and natural beauty.

Cultural Capital – Reflects the way people *"know the world"* and how to act within it. Cultural capital includes the dynamics of who we know and feel comfortable with, what heritages are valued, collaboration across races, ethnicities, and generations, etc.

Human Capital – The skills and abilities of people, as well as the ability to access outside resources and bodies of knowledge in order to increase understanding and to identify promising practices.

Social Capital – Reflects the connections among people and organizations or the social glue to make things happen.

Political/Civic Capital – The ability to influence standards, rules, regulations and their enforcement.

Financial Capital – The financial resources available to invest in community capacity building, to underwrite businesses development, to support civic and social entrepreneurship, and to accumulate wealth for future community development.

Built Capital – The infrastructure that supports the community, such as telecommunications, industrial parks, main streets, water and sewer systems, roads, etc.

http://www.soc.iastate.edu/staff/cflora/ncrcrd/capitals.html

Ripple Mapping Impacts Results

Ripple Mapping results indicate that the highest impact observed in all three locations is *Human Capital*. Feedback from past participants of the program reported a high increase in competency both at the personal and peer level. This was attributed to an increase in understanding of their roles and responsibilities as elected or appointed planning officials as a result of undergoing the CP and MCP program. *Political Capital* is the next biggest reported impact. Elected and appointed planning officials that have undergone the program expressed an increase in skill level while communicating with other professionals of the built environment outside their area of expertise and the public, as well as an increase in diversity (professional background, income, ethnicity, etc.) serving on boards and commissions. *Social Capital* is the third highest reported impact. The program offers a portal into a network of planning officials from surrounding townships, cities and counties which is used to corroborate ideas or decisions as well as form collaborations. These networks and collaborations are perceived to have a positive impact on the public, development community and other professionals.

Figure 4:
Survey responses from Michigan
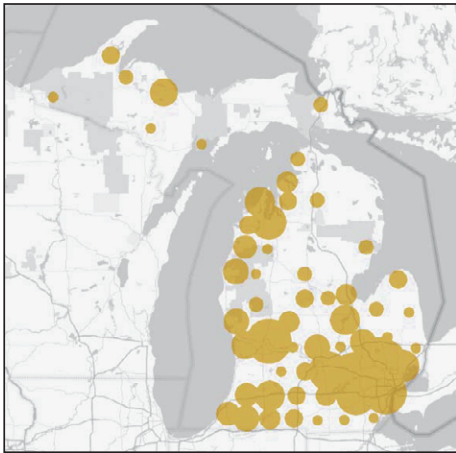
Survey

The Citizen Planner (CP) and Master Citizen Planner (MCP) impact survey was sent online to 3,402 people throughout the state of Michigan (see Figure 4) that enrolled in the program between 2003 and 2014. The survey was developed using Qualtrics. Out of 411 participants that completed the survey, 82.6% have completed CP while 9.5% have attended a few classes, but have not completed the program, 5.6% have not done either, and 2.3% have completed workshops or seminars related to the program. 34.2% have completed MCP while 65.8% have not.

When asked about their educational backgrounds, 5.1% of respondents have of up to the high school level, 21.8% have

Figure 5:
Citizen Planner (CP) and Master Citizen Planner (MCP) Impact Scores from Survey
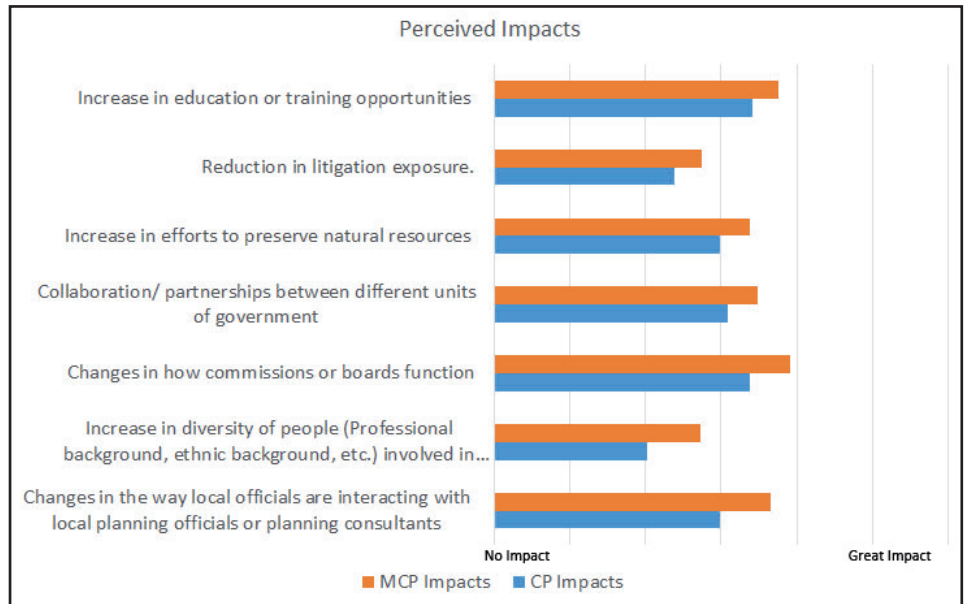
had some college experience, 9.6% have an associate's degree, 20.8% have an undergraduate degree, 10.9% have done some graduate courses and 31.9% have a graduate/ professional degree. When asked if participants have had planning related training from different institutions, 18.2% have had it from the American Planning Association, 5.6% from Michigan Association of Counties, 5.4% from Michigan Farm Bureau/Farmland & Community Alliance, 19.2% from Michigan Municipal League, 36.5% from Michigan Association of Planning, 75.9% from Michigan State University Extension or Citizen Planner, 36% from Michigan Townships Association, 29.7% from MSU Planning and Zoning Center, 28.5% from their county planning commission/ department, 7.3% from their state planning and development region/ council of governments/ Michigan Prosperity Region, 22.4% from MSU Land Policy Institute and 11.7% from other institutions.

The questionnaire included a set of questions focusing on seven impacts identified through the Ripple Mapping sessions (see Table 2). Perceived impacts

of respondents were reported using Likert response scales, with one being great impact to four being no impact. Mean scores are calculated for the group overall and for each program, CP and MCP for reporting impacts. To *check for significant differences of perceived impacts between respondents who have completed the CP program and those that have continued on to complete their MCP credentials,* Ordinal Regression is used.

Survey Impacts Results

The CP program respondents reported lower impacts scores, as compared to MCP participants (see Table 3; Figure 5), with the highest score for an *increase in education or training opportunities* (CP mean 2.29). C*hanges in how commissions or boards function* (CP mean 2.31) is second. CP participants included the category of *collaboration/ partnerships between different units of government* (CP mean 2.46) as the third highest. The MCP participants reported higher impacts and their top three included first, *changes in how boards or commissions function* (MCP mean 2.04). Second is an *increase*

Table 2:
Ripple Mapping Impacts Measured in the Survey

	Ripple Mapping Impacts in Survey
1	Changes in the way local officials are interacting with local planning officials or planning consultants.
2	Increase in diversity of people (professional background, ethnic background, etc.) involved in the decision making process.
3	Changes in how commissions or boards function.
4	Changes in collaboration/partnerships between different units of government.
5	Increase in efforts to preserve natural resources.
6	Reduction in litigation exposure.
7	Increase in education or training opportunities.

in education and training opportunities (MCP mean 2.12) and third is *changes in the way local officials are interacting with local planning officials or planning consultants* (mean 2.17).

Significant differences in perceived impact of changes within their local communities were found between CP and MCP participants using Ordinal Regression. Of the seven categories, three have significant differences: 1) *the way local officials are interacting with local planning officials or planning consultants*, 2) *an increase in diversity of people (professional background, ethnic background, etc.) involved in the decision making process*, and 3) *changes in how commissions or boards function.* In each of these, the MCP rated the impact significantly greater than CP participants that did not go on to earn the advanced certificate.

Discussion

The Michigan Citizen Planner program was specifically developed to address the growing gap between increasingly complex challenges that communities around the state face and skill sets that passionate individuals need to address these challenges. Given the feedback from Ripple Mapping Sessions as well as the survey, participants feel that the program has given them the knowledge and skill sets needed to improve how planning decisions in their communities are made. Some impacts of the program are increased competency among elected and appointed planning officials, better judgement, higher quality of work through collaborations, stronger networks between planning officials from neighboring townships, cities and counties and increased diversity of people involved in the decision making process. Ripple Effect Mapping revealed stories of how Citizen Planner gave them the knowledge and confidence to be more involved in decision making and to introduce changes to improve plans, regulations, and decisions by their local governments. *Survey results indicate that these impacts are significantly higher in people with continuing planning education rather than people without.* Further research can investigate the impacts of mandatory continuing education for elected and appointed planning officials, impacts of content specific skill-sets taught by the program and impacts of online vs classroom training. Institutional memory is also an avenue that could be explored, as well as impacts of term limits on elected and appointed planning officials with continuing education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Michigan Citizen Planner program and Master Citizen Planner credential have had positive impacts on communities in Michigan over the more than decade history of the program. People that voluntarily enrolled in continuing planning education (i.e. MCP) reported higher impact compared to people that enrolled in a single certificate granting program (i.e. CP).One reason for this could be that capstone projects in the MCP program bridge the gap between acquiring knowledge and actually applying it in practice, since one requirement of the program is a hands-on approach of initiating a community planning project. As states debate the most suitable method for training citizen planners – with volunteer or mandatory requirements combined with continuing education – these results indicate the impacts of such training, which have implications for related statewide programs offered throughout the nation.

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Table 3:
Results of Ordinal Regression between Impacts of Changes in Local Communities (dependent) and Master Citizen Planner Completion (independent)

Citizen Planner (CP) Master Citizen Planner (MCP)		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Significance (p)	Wald
Changes in the way local officials are interacting with local planning officials or planning consultants	MCP	2.17	103	0.793	0.003**	8.568
	CP	2.51	192	0.927		
Increase in diversity of people (professional background, ethnic background, etc.) involved in the decision making process	MCP	2.64	104	1.014	0.011*	6.442
	CP	2.99	190	1.005		
Changes in how commissions or boards function	MCP	2.04	104	0.812	0.015*	5.964
	CP	2.31	193	0.899		
Collaboration/ partnerships between different units of government	MCP	2.26	104	0.890	0.059	3.570
	CP	2.46	197	0.917		
Increase in efforts to preserve natural resources	MCP	2.31	103	0.970	0.081	3.041
	CP	2.51	189	0.971		
Reduction in litigation exposure.	MCP	2.63	103	1.163	0.260	1.267
	CP	2.81	189	1.200		
Increase in education or training opportunities	MCP	2.12	104	0.855	0.272	1.209
	CP	2.29	192	0.985		

* p value of .05 or less, ** p value of .01 or less