The Most Frequent Reasons for a Community's Not Being Selected an All-America Cities Finalist

The information below is designed to act as a general guide in helping understand why your community was not selected. Remember, too, that your entry is read very critically and when a question is not answered in accordance with the instructions it is regarded less favorably.

Almost 200 hours were devoted to evaluating the entries by six staff people and the five-member Screening Committee, including a full day of discussion about them by the Committee and staff, as well as verification of the Committee's preliminary choices. Although there are specific reasons why individual communities were not selected as finalists, listed here are the factors common in one form or another to many of the entries.

In a process which must take into account a high degree of variation in terms of community characteristics, objectivity in weighing how accomplishments were achieved, what the results were and who benefitted is difficult in almost all instances. Within the constraints with which we must deal, the evaluation is not infallible, and subjective judgment frequently comes into play.

In reviewing your community's story, remember the basic criteria for evaluation take into consideration the following factors: The relevancy of the projects to the community's basic problems; quantitative and qualitative measures of participation, e.g., its representativeness; how many participated, kind of decision making involved, etc.; innovative techniques used in resolving problems and involving citizens; the ease of project accomplishment; the use of community resources; and the nature of unresolved problems and proposed action.

With respect to the above criteria, many entry responses contained either inadequate information or so much that it was not possible to see what actually resulted. It is important to include concrete results, e.g., return on investment in CBD revitalization as reflected in changed sales volume for business owners and in tax revenue for local government, or the number of new jobs created by economic development efforts. In many cases, the committee thought that communities should be expected to be dealing with what was described and that city government has taken substantial steps to do so.

The committee is looking for what might be termed "added value." For example, in all the stories this year where downtown revitalization was a factor, what was achieved beyond the direct work to revive downtown retail activity? Were multiple subsidiary objectives also included, such as, historic preservation? Were innovative techniques for planning, financing and promoting the project part of it? The intent of the program is not as much to identify positive government initiative or a well-run city administration as it is to recognize responsible citizen accomplishment which stimulates other community institutions to take action for problem solving. We do not downplay the importance of a community that is well served by its officials, but our purpose is to identify successful citizen efforts to effect change.
(1) The high quality and large number of entries make selection difficult. Since only a relatively small group can be chosen, it means approximately 100 good stories must go unacknowledged.

(2) Many good cities resent the fact that periodically a community with a rather unsavory past has achieved recognition. The answer is that, while the All-America Cities Award Program always has winners with stories of a "good town getting better," there are also frequent winners with a "kick the rascals out" or "economic comeback" story. The program is meant to grant recognition to cities for what their citizens have done and to give guidance and inspiration to others to confront and solve their problems. The slate of finalists is balanced accordingly.

(3) Sometimes a city has a good program, but its sole, or major, accomplishment is an activity for which other award programs would have been more appropriate. Good examples would be a vigorous safety campaign (National Safety Council awards), or a cleanup campaign (National Cleanup, Fixup, Paintup, or Keep America Beautiful awards). This should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of such projects as part of the activities of an All-America City story. But when it forms the basis for a city's entry, it puts that city at a disadvantage competing against other cities with good stories covering additional accomplishments.

(4) Often a city's accomplishments have been in the too distant past. Although a continuing effort is laudable, a cutoff date must be established. In some instances the Screening Committee might feel it would have been more appropriate if a community had applied sooner and given preference to projects completed or initiated more recently.

(5) The opposite situation is also common. A city with a good story may still have its biggest hurdle ahead. It is one thing to get a redevelopment plan approved but still another to achieve site construction; or get a goals program underway, but better yet to implement some of the defined goals. Proposing a city-county merger is different from getting it adopted, etc. The Committee is apt to judge such a community as off to a terrific start but may feel that the town should reapply at another time when the project has been completed or when some tangible results can be reported.

(6) Finally, some entries are disregarded because the preparers have failed to follow guidelines on mechanics, such as, improper type size.
QUESTION 5 - It is not necessary here to list people in their relative order of importance or to give more than five names. The list of names provides us with some idea of the kinds of community people representing the projects, as well as specific contacts for future inquiries.

QUESTION 6 - Any innovative project which attempts to bring about change in the community will face definite opposition. It is vital for further progress that the source of such opposition be identified and other impediments (e.g., legal, traditional, practical) to progress noted. Indicate the degree to which projects/action were opposed, from whom it came and how well organized it was, e.g., from government, existing community organizations or new organizations that were created in reaction to your own group or from groups of individuals. What steps were taken to overcome the opposition? What do you regard as the most effective technique used in your situation in dealing with the opposition?

QUESTION 7 - This gives you an opportunity to put the whole story down in one complete statement. Do not repeat points already made. Weave the responses to Question No. 1 into an overall framework that shapes citizen action in your community. (See attached example.) The first step of citizen participation is to identify the most serious problems of your community and how efforts have been directed toward their solution. Then, proceed to bring in unique aspects of the story that did not fit under one of the other questions, and put the whole situation into a chronological pattern. Do not write about each project as a separate entity. Provide some insight into how the programs fit into the community—their impact, spinoff activity, etc. For example, if economic development and the creation of new jobs make up a project area, how does that project area relate or affect other phases of community life—how will new jobs affect housing, the environment, transportation and what provisions are made for their impact?

Tell how the projects or issues described in answer to Question No. 1 combine with other actions to illustrate a commitment to enhancing the quality of life in your community. If it hasn't already been covered in connection with the question on organization, you might include in this summary statement a few sentences about organizational effectiveness, e.g., if a new organization was formed to meet the problem, why were existing organizations unable to cope with it. If groups of organizations formed a coalition to solve a problem, in what way has the coalition been used for defining and resolving other problems?

QUESTION 8 - The All-America City Award is not a citation for community perfection. We are interested in cities that have problems. Do not be afraid to admit your shortcomings. We are interested in whether or not you are doing something about them. Among residual problems might be inadequacies in local government services and organizations, problems of racial relations, environmental pollution, unchecked spread of blight and incomplete plans for future development.

QUESTION 9 - Think about innovative procedures used in planning, implementation and evaluation, including methods used to involve people, effective communication techniques, access to special resources like college/university personnel or facilities, office headquarters, etc. Again, please be specific—generalities such as, "Lots of citizen involvement," or "People working together," are not as helpful as a more detailed response. (If you need more space, please use only one side of one additional sheet.)
A REMINDER

1. All entries must be submitted on the official form.

2. Do not add any additional or supplemental materials except for QUESTION No. 9.

3. Type size should be no smaller than this type.

4. Observe the margins on each page.

5. Give the approximate dates of all undertakings.

6. Type name under signature.

7. If appropriate, please include business as well as home telephone number.

8. Many communities like to have their mayor or other public official sign the entry. This is perfectly acceptable. However, we need to have the name, preferred mailing address and telephone number of a major contact person for the entire program. There is quite a bit of follow-up correspondence, in addition to numerous telephone calls.

9. Be sure that leaders involved in the projects described know that an entry is being prepared. In some cases, we have spoken with people listed in the entry who were totally unfamiliar with the fact that their project or program had been included. CF/NML prefers that major community leaders, public and private sector, be informed and involved in the entry process.

10. Send $100.00 filing fee with completed entry. Please make check payable to National Municipal League, Inc. If paying the filing fee presents an obstacle to participation, CF/NML will, upon your request, provide advice on how you might deal with it. Call toll free 1-800-223-6004 outside of New York State.