

## Has Coral Springs Found The “Holy Grail”? – From Sterling To Baldrige

By Christine Heflin, Organizational Development Coordinator, City of Coral Springs, Florida, USA

### Introduction

It’s been over 14 years. The Baldrige Criteria are not “flavor of the month” here in the City of Coral Springs. Has fourteen years of implementing this management model been worth it? You be the judge.

Following is the first of three articles telling the story of how Coral Springs came to use the Baldrige criteria, our steps and missteps in implementation, the kind of results our efforts produced and what the “next level” looks like for us. This article will provide background on how the City came to use the model and a brief description of how the Baldrige criteria work.

### Background

Coral Springs calls itself a “municipal corporation;” which reflects the fact that we use a private sector model to run the government. The population is about 132,000 residents. We are thought of as a bedroom community, but in fact 20 % of our assessed valuation is commercial, including a full industrial park. The median age here (35) is not typical of Florida and the housing in our centrally planned, built-out community is designed for families of every economic strata. Our FY 2007 budget was \$134 million and the City has 784 FTEs.

The Baldrige criteria hit our radar screen in 1994. We knew them as the Florida Sterling criteria then. At that time, the City Manager was looking for ways to jar the City out of the “government as usual” mode. He was a risk taker, liked to shake things up and made decisions very quickly. He got a hold of popular management titles on Customer Service and Quality Management and wanted in. He particularly liked the idea of ratcheting up our graciousness when dealing with the public.



As we progressed from a very successful Customer Service initiative, that is still alive and well, onward to Deming and TQM, there was some dissention in the ranks but it was rarely verbalized. Resistance to the Customer Service upgrade was minimal; we all like smiling and soon the City became a nicer place to work. TQM, along with process improvement teams, was met with some cynicism. Early teams were productive, which helped. However, at that juncture, it was easy for department directors and supervisors to “keep doing what they were doing” and just change their lingo a bit.

Meanwhile back at the front office, the Senior Assistant City Manager, a born and bred public sector executive, like many of us, was still searching for the Holy Grail. The Grail would transform us from a reactive organization that keeps its head down to an organization that attacks problems and achieves excellence. As he persistently followed the footnotes and networked with others playing with TQM, he found the Sterling Council. The Sterling Council is a tiny unit attached to Florida’s Governor’s Office and is in charge of promoting management excellence among the State’s businesses. The model they promote, the Sterling Criteria, is promoted at the Federal level as the Baldrige Criteria.

### **The Criteria**

The Sterling and Baldrige criteria are identical but revised from time to time to trim them to only those features that clearly contribute to achieving results. Deming is the underpinning, but the Criteria are far more explicit than Deming’s “Fourteen Points.”

Back in 1994 I could not have given you an adequate explanation of the Baldrige Criteria; now I think I can. After 4 years of Examiner training with Sterling and two with Baldrige, there should be no doubt. But it seems no matter how long you work with the criteria, the “ah-hah’s” just keep coming.

There are seven main criteria areas:

- 1) Leadership;
- 2) Strategic Planning;
- 3) Customer Focus;
- 4) Measurement and Analysis;
- 5) Workforce Focus;
- 6) Process Management; and
- 7) Results.

The Criteria in the first six areas call for a systematic approach that is well documented and repeatable. Systems are modified and “continuously improved” until they produce the intended results, which are measurable and have a short and long-term time frame. The approach employs Scientific Method. That is, the organization hypothesizes that a system design will produce a measurable outcome, then the hypothesis/system is tested and revised until the intended results are achieved. You may not get it right the first, or even second time, but you learn. The systems in the first six categories work together to



citizens had any interest in the data, or how about all of the strategic plans that sit on shelves gathering dust. Simply put, processes were never developed to actually affect the plans.

This stuff isn't tough. Can you imagine a successful professional sports franchise not taking a systematic approach to leadership, strategic planning, pleasing customers, developing the athletes, measuring players and plays, and adjusting all the of above to improve results? Successful franchises know all these systems need to support each other to translate into a winning season.

Tough or not, in the early days of Sterling/Baldrige, Coral Springs saw only "trees". None of us could have described the "forest" or how the criteria areas support each other. But criteria by sub-criteria we developed processes, and little by little, each of us came to understand how it all comes together.

But there were unfortunate events along the way. Take Self-Directed Work Teams as an example. The City Manager who started us down the Sterling road read about Self-Directed Work Teams and loved the idea. What's not to love? More people directly serving customers, less bureaucracy, and happy employees who are masters of their own day. Well there is merit to the approach, if processes are well defined and include well defined requirements and productivity standards. However, if priorities, standards and requirements are fuzzy, a unit needs a supervisor. When the City Manager directed self-direction, most department directors just stayed low and held their breath. A couple reacted quickly, gave supervisors other duties, and proclaimed their units self-directed. Good people find a way to be productive, no matter what, but the wait and watch approach was clearly prudent. We don't talk about self-directed work teams any more but do have a few groups that have naturally evolved in that direction as measurement systems were perfected.

Most of the early decisions were dead on. Tuning up customer service first was a stroke of brilliance. The quick return on investment in terms of organizational self-esteem and quality of working life created employee buy-in and support from the Commission. In another great move, the City Manager increased community and Commission buy-in by asking highly successful private sector executives to publicly endorse the criteria. It was just dumb luck that one of our Commissions used the Criteria to run his business and was a major advocate of the approach.

The initiative to flatten the organization and promote employee empowerment, although scary, actually worked. We became faster on our feet and everyone was more engaged in their work. When the City Manager left to spread the gospel elsewhere, the current manager, Mike Levinson took the helm. Mike's experience was primarily as a private sector executive and Sterling/Baldrige fit his style perfectly.

We used a "train the trainer" approach to deployment as we rolled out each element. Line staff learned the material and presented it to their co-workers, using examples taken directly from their daily work lives. We used a few remarkable consultants, one for team

building and group processes and another for customer service and performance measurement. The professional consultants were used to train specific internal consultants so we were able to wean ourselves from the contractors very quickly. More than a dozen of us became Sterling Examiners and got to look at how the criteria were employed by other organizations. As a result, Coral Springs' human capital appreciated rapidly.

One decision that proved critical to our success was that we never created a "quality shop". The Baldrige Criteria are the way we **do things**, not something we do. Using the principles and values of the Criteria is everyone's job. Processes were never developed by a staff group. Even a good strategic planning system became great through a process that included feedback from employees at all levels and, of course, Commission members.

### **Coral Springs and the Sterling Award**

Our first application for the Florida Sterling Award was in 1995. Sterling is Florida's Award for Excellence. Excellence is defined as: *having sustained positive trends in measurable results; results that compare favorably against benchmarks; and deployed processes in accordance with the Sterling/Baldrige criteria requirements.* The Criteria booklets (Sterling and Baldrige) are very concise. Criteria requirements are presented as questions. For instance, the Process Management category asks "How do you determine key work process requirements, incorporating input from customers, suppliers, partners, and collaborators, as appropriate?" A good application describes each approach in enough detail to address every noun and verb in a question.

Our 1995 application was not a good application. It included anecdotal war stories about good things the City government had done. Processes were not described. Some results were presented; primarily our satisfaction scores from a resident survey. No trends or comparisons were provided. At that time, an application that far off the mark was not even graced with a site visit by an Examiner team. During site visits Examiners "clarify and verify" processes described in the application. We begged and managed to schedule a visit and receive some feedback. It was at this point that management wisely decided to train some of the City staff as Examiners, a decision that greatly accelerated progress.

In 1996, we were back in there again with another application. Using the feedback, and with several trained Examiners on staff, we finally vaulted over the bar in 1997 and became the first government to win its state Baldrige-based "Sterling" award. While we almost knocked the bar down with our nose, we did have some great results to report. We had the next to lowest crime rate of the cities in the metropolitan area, the best ratio of employees to residents (a crude measure of productivity), the best bond ratings, and the next lowest millage rate.

Winning made us better. We worked up to the expectations we had set for ourselves. In addition, with the award we received yet another crucial feedback report. We had much of the model in place but there was abundant room for growth. Our performance

reporting system was not routinely used in all operations. The results reported were primarily based on survey results and did not include much objective data on performance, e.g., cycle time, error rates. We had more data than true management information, and the list went on.

Again using the feedback report, we upgraded. Performance reporting was deployed to the troops by requiring supervisors to work with their employees to include measurable objectives in their performance plans. Individual objectives now have to be “linked” to department objectives that are in turn linked to the City’s Key Intended Outcomes. More process measures were developed and deployed, particularly in high profile areas, such as the Building Department and Code Enforcement. New reports were developed, most notably an Early Warning System, which tracks indicators of potential problems in operations. An IT “fixit” system was developed to reduce the IT response time for technical support, and again, the list goes on.

Our organization, and perhaps all organizations, is more productive when engaged “in a righteous struggle.” As such, in 2003, the City Manager and his team decided we would again apply for the Sterling Award in an effort to become the first two-time winner. The City also aspired to increase our score by over 100 points. Both goals were achieved and results were even better. For more than five years our resident quality rating was over 90%; employee satisfaction was at 95%; employee productivity was at an eight year high; our General Obligation (G.O.) Bond rating was the highest and our millage rate the lowest in the metropolitan area.

That appeared to be the end of the road for using an award to push ourselves toward excellence. There was of course a national award, the Baldrige Award, but it was for the private sector only. We don’t know for sure, but it appeared that there was a sentiment that including the public sector in Baldrige would reduce the award’s prestige. The reason given for not including the public sector was funding.

Bolstered by the perceived and actual need for a new paradigm for government and a bit of lobbying, the Baldrige program conducted a non-profit pilot program in 2006. Applicants had to be winners of their State awards and, while not eligible to win, they could submit an application for feedback. The Baldrige folks were hoping for funding for the non-profit category in 2007.

So, what did we do? Well of course, we submitted an application to the 2006 pilot program, along with 10 other organizations. Our 2003 Sterling feedback report had become dog-eared from use. It told us that we needed to be more systematic about sharing the learning from improvement projects throughout the organization. The report called for improvements to our complaint tracking process. Primarily, it marked us down for lack of comparative data for our results. To address these shortcomings, “Improvement Cycles” were undertaken by the City and reported in the 2006 application. Our efforts were rewarded. Coral Springs was one of only two pilot program applicants that received a site visit.

## Conclusion

If you want to know how we fared when being judged by the Baldrige team, you will have to wait for the gory details. After all, we are hoping for a “real” site visit this fall (2007). The Baldrige Award now has a “non-profit” category that includes governments, and in May 2007 Coral Springs applied. For an overview of the processes we reported in our application, stay tuned for the second article in this three part series.

## About the Author

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## Has Coral Springs Found The “Holy Grail”? – From Sterling To Baldrige (Article 2 of 3)

By Christine Heflin, Organizational Development Coordinator, City of Coral Springs, Florida, USA

This is the second in a series of three articles on the City of Coral Springs’ implementation of the Baldrige Criteria. The Baldrige criteria are a management model and the basis of the Baldrige Award administered by the National Institute of Standards and Technology of the US Department of Commerce.

*First a recap.* There are seven categories of criteria: Leadership; Strategic Planning; Customer and Market Focus; Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management; Workforce Focus; Process Management; and Results. The criteria require systematic highly deployed approaches in the first six categories. The approaches must be designed to continuously improve the organization’s ability to meet customer requirements and produce “Results,” the seventh category. To win the Baldrige award an organization must demonstrate best in class performance overall and in key areas that drive results.

Sometimes when I am describing Baldrige I recall an act on the Ed Sullivan Show (you need to be 50 + to remember this) in which a juggler spins plates on sticks. He keeps adding plates and sticks until he’s running up and down the stage giving sticks a quick spin to keep the plates from crashing. They all stay up but it looks exhausting and anything but sustainable. Here come some more plates and sticks. Baldrige wants you to synchronize the processes/approaches in the categories so they support each other and operate in the spirit of eleven core values. Thankfully, most of the values are imbedded in the criteria, for instance customer-driven excellence; valuing employees and partners; focus on results; and a systems perspective.

In fact the criteria are not overwhelming. When you improve in one category, improvement always occurs in others. If you do it right and implement the model using teams that include line staff and other pragmatists, the pieces will fit together like a pre-school puzzle. In that spirit, this article will simply proceed to tell you about the processes Coral Springs established in the first six Criteria categories.

**Customer and Market Focus** – No, Customer and Market Focus is not the first Baldrige category, but it was the one Coral Springs took on first. Our earliest efforts in this area started in 1993 when popular literature on Customer Focus and Service Excellence was on the bestseller list. Well aware that government is infamous for bad service and hoping to use private sector tactics, our City Manager directed staff to create a customer service program.

The start of this start was a resident survey. For 1993, this was nervy. Although municipal resident surveys are fairly common in 2007, they’re still not pervasive. They remain intimidating. What if the residents say you stink? Opponents will beat your elected officials over the head with the results. The incumbents will fire the manger as they are swept out of office.

Our manager at the time was a risk taker. He launched a resident survey. Risk was rewarded; Coral Springs initial results were pretty good. The overall approval rating and department ratings were in the 80s. And although the survey instrument was poorly designed, it did identify key issues in the community. Further, during budget deliberations, the Commission liked having data on resident priorities. A precedent had been set and 15 years later, the annual resident survey is fundamental to the City's strategic and tactical planning.

Of course, the survey has evolved. It's a phone survey that contacts residents evenings and weekends so we can hear from a representative group of our over-extended families. With a population of 132,000, a sample of about 400 would permit us to draw conclusions about what the community thinks but with 1,000 completed surveys we have information on "market segments." Not only geographic segments but "children" "no-children;" "minority" "not-a-minority;" "home-owner" "renter." The segmented data assists in coming up with cost effective strategies to push customer satisfaction. It also assists in developing a strategy everyone in the community can support.

The second prong of our attack was customer service training for all employees. By the time the "Premier Customer Service" program was rolled out management was aware of the Sterling Criteria (Florida's version of the Baldrige Criteria) and how measurement is central to the model. Baldrige junkies often remind trainees "what gets measured gets done" and "if you can't measure it, you can't learn about it." It was no surprise when a highly regarded consultant on customer service told us that a good customer service program must use measurement to define success and sustain improvement. She warned us about here today and gone tomorrow "smile training." Measurement and (you won't guess this one) **fun** is what keeps great service going.

So began the work of our Customer Service Team. A cross-functional team was used to develop the customer service program because we were told "Sterling" organizations used teams. It also seemed that a team approach would promote employee buy-in. Departments were represented by their front desk staff who, guided by our consultant, developed measurable customer service standards.

You will have to go the Coral Springs website for all the standards but one of my favorites is the ten/five greeting. If a customer is within ten feet of an employee, the person is acknowledged, at least with a nod or a smile. If they are five feet away, they are addressed. An "I'll be with you in a moment" will do. Another standard is to answer a phone in three rings or less. Another requires that our voice mail messages let people know when we are out of the office and won't be returning calls promptly. The standards are monitored through "quick strikes." Human Resources staff calls City numbers to check for the required greeting, an updated voice mail message, etc.

No one gets in trouble over a quick strike but getting it right brings on the fun, movie tickets from supervisors and "applause cards" from coworkers. Pizza has been the prize for the best performing unit. Apart from getting goodies, people enjoy the up-beat work atmosphere; internal customers get great treatment too.

From 1994 to 2007 Customer Focus has been enhanced in more ways than we have space to discuss but many of them are “listening and learning” mechanisms. These are ways of determining customer priorities and requirements. Our up-graded resident survey is complemented by a business survey. Neighborhood focus groups give us input on local needs. Our website “Help Desk” takes comments, complaints and requests that are acknowledge in 48 hours. Point-of-service surveys are used to tune up the processes of individual departments. Our customer service rating is now 94% for residents and 96% for businesses.

**Strategic Planning** – Our strategic planning process is the Coral Springs flagship. It was recognized by the Gore Commission and more recently the Institute of Public Administration of Canada as a benchmark. Its magic comes from well-defined roles, information, timing and a structure that fully deploys policy direction.

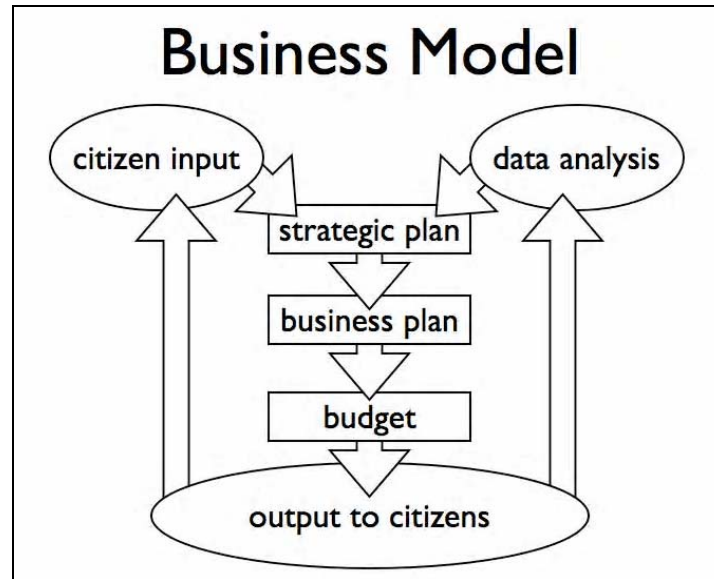
Local government personnel often complain about elected officials getting involved in operations. Few governments clearly define their elected board’s policy role. This is not the case in Coral Springs. The fiscal year begins Oct. 1 but in January staff start to pull together an environmental scan to be used in the Commission’s Strategic Planning Workshops. The Commission will use the information as the basis of their discussion of the City’s strategic priorities.

A wide variety of data is included in the scan but it is presented concisely. Examples of scan data include information on changing demographics, survey results, economic trends, City-wide and department performance results, comparison data on the results of other governments, actions by the State and Federal governments that effect city operations. Apart from the obvious advantage of having the facts, our Commission’s ability to reach consensus is clearly facilitated by having well presented data in front of them.

The product of the Strategic Planning Workshops is either an affirmation or modification of the City’s seven strategic priorities. The seven priorities are stated in broad terms, “Neighborhood Vitality,” “Customer Involved Government,” “Strength in Diversity,” etc. To reduce ambiguity, they are defined with “directional statements” developed by the Commission. A directional statement might explain that addressing the “Transportation and Mobility” strategic priority should involve the increased public transportation opportunities. When the Strategic Priorities and directional statements have been established, the ball is in the management team’s court. They develop a “Business Plan” of initiatives that will move the City in the direction established by the Commission. The management team hammers out the Business Plan first with staff at all levels, and then refines it at workshops with the Commission. When it is done, you have a laundry list of projects to be completed. Lead departments are assigned to the projects; the lead departments develop action plans.

*A word on timing.* Because of the rule “no additional funding for anything outside of the Business Plan,” when the Business Plan is final, so is the budget. Employees are fans of this rule. There is no extensive number crunching being redone scores of times over a

season until the numbers capture what the Commission wants. First the Commission decides what it wants and then the detailed crunches are done. Only minor adjustments are needed as the season progresses. Required Commission budget hearings in the summer take less than a half hour. The diagram below summarizes our strategic planning process.



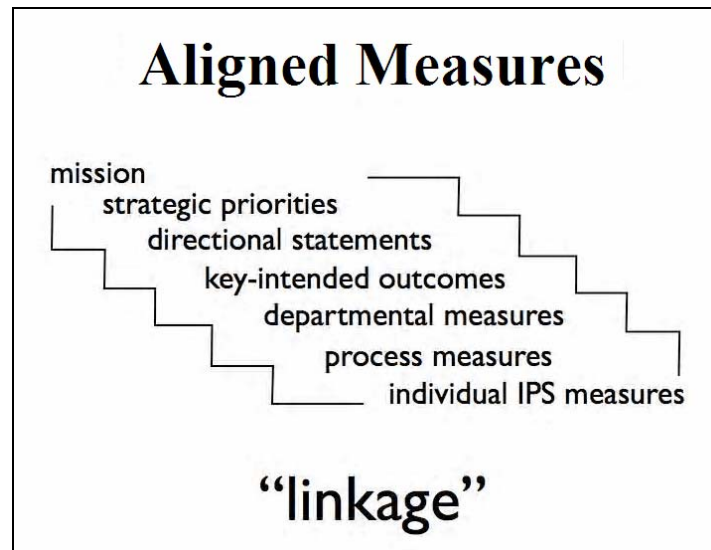
*Another plug for good timing.* Outside of the Strategic Planning, Business Planning, Budgeting process, the Commission adopts fiscal policies. These policies require levels of reserves and take some money off the table before the pressure to spend begins. Coral Springs' fiscal policies have much to do with its AAA GO bond rating.

Strategic deployment is done through “linked” objectives. I have heard other organizations call this the “golden thread.” Department objectives support citywide objectives (Key Intended Outcomes). Unit and individual objectives are linked to the department objectives. The form that displays my objectives requires that they be recorded under the department objective they link to. My annual evaluation is based in part on these objectives. All objectives at all levels are measurable and monitored. Department Directors meet with the Manager quarterly to discuss their numbers.

**Workforce Focus** – Workforce focus is *supported* by an annual employee satisfaction survey (that is acted upon) and by using teams of employees to research and recommend the benefits plan, the position classification system, and the design and annual revision of the incentive pay system. Workforce focus is *created* by a very flat organization structure and a staffing level that is very “economical.” Managers have a large span of control (15 positions report directly to the City Manager) and carry their own portfolios of work. They don't have the time to micro manage and must rely on the judgment of empowered employees. Control is through training and accountability. When you eliminate redundant reviews, accountability is very clear and pride in workmanship becomes more pronounced.

Our culture of valuing employees is reinforced systematically but is mostly a function of people who truly appreciate each other. The systematic part includes the City Manager's quarterly briefing of all employees on new developments and progress. Work processes are designed by the staff who do the work and all staff are trained in process improvement. We develop professionally as we devise ways of doing our work better. Exceptional work is rewarded; there is no C.O.L.A. only a 1% to 7% award based on achievement. For fiscal restraint, only 4.25% of the raise can go in base salary, the rest is taken in cash or leave or stashed in a 457. Sworn Fire and Police personnel have different systems based on their contracts.

**Measurement and Process Management** – The Measurement and Process Management categories are joined at the hip, as is Measurement and Strategic Planning. You'll recall that objectives at all levels are measurable and aligned (See Diagram Below). This not only causes deployment, it also causes learning. Tactics may not always have the intended effect on the measurable objectives but the measurable lack of success causes the organization to move on to other tactics.



“Core” processes (fire response, parks maintenance, police investigation, etc) are continuously measured in two ways, in-process measures and performance measures. In-process measures tell the workers if the process is on track to achieve performance measures for quality, cycle time and out-put. The in-process measures work like the gauges on a dashboard. If in-process measures are in a “good” range, everything just proceeds but if indicators show a problem, a fix can be put down before a problem occurs. If all plans are to be reviewed by the Building Division within 15 working days, and a report shows 50% of the plans in house have been there 13 days, the team takes action to get the work done on time. Process Management is watching the in-process measures to determine if corrective action is needed to avoid compromising standards.

Process Improvement is what the staff does when the process is not able to produce to standards that have been established and when the requirements (standards) change. Baldrige asks if we have a standard methodology for process improvement. We train all

employees on basic analytical thinking (Plan/Do/Check/Act) and a Six Step approach we picked up from Xerox. But the answer is no, we don't.

Here in Florida we are mindful of what took an internationally recognized quality program down. This local pioneer suffocated their program with paperwork. Requiring extensive paperwork to document agility can't be a good thing. We require data, not forms; we push segmenting data. If the fire trucks don't get there fast enough, find out how fast they could be by looking at the track record of other places. Find out how fast your department is by day of week, time of day, part of town. Look at the segments of the response sequence and get times on dispatch, turn out, travel time. With our segmented data we can precisely identify where systems are not performing and come up with economical solutions. Training to improve turnout is far less expensive than throwing FTEs at response time.

Before leaving Process Management and Measurement, I want to share a point of view that influences the City's choice of measures. Governments often are afraid of assessing performance based on the "outcomes" of processes, i.e. the city's crime rate. Although a government does not have control over all the factors that effect outcomes, to manage a government, they must be measured and compared. Outcomes are what the public cares about. To manage a process, the organization must decide what tangible "outputs" the process should produce and regularly measure the outputs. The official crime rate of a city changes annually and in suburbia, weeks can go by without a significant event on a beat. To give direction to patrol officers the department must determine what it wants from the patrol process that can happen day after day, e.g., community contacts, field interviews. If management knows what it wants, the staff will be more effective.

**Leadership** – Going back to the Ed Sullivan analogy, leadership are the people spinning the sticks to keep the plates up in the air. The Baldrige Criteria asks "How senior leaders guide and sustain your organization. Describe how senior leaders communicate with your workforce and encourage high performance." Go back and reread this article for the answer. I told you improving in one category pushes improvement in others.

But leadership has its challenges; it's their job to dare to use the model. This brings us to three of the Baldrige core values – visionary leadership, focus on the future, and social responsibility. Leadership must demonstrate those values and considerable courage to fight cynicism and use the system. Things are never perfect and it is easy to find examples of people and processes not operating well, even in an organization using Baldrige for over a decade. Fortunately, leadership can pull out the data presented in Category 7 to prove that flawed as any human system may be, the Baldrige Criteria make them better and cause them to continuously improve.

The next and last article in this series will start with our results and will share the experience of preparing a Baldrige application and being the subject of a site-visit and feedback report.

## About the Author

**Christine Heflin**, is the Organizational Development Coordinator for the City of Coral Springs, Florida. Previously, Ms. Heflin spent 10 years in D.C. with the Federal Government in Management and Policy Analysis, 7 years as the Director of Budget and Research for Pima County Arizona and 5 years as a Consultant/Trainer of the Florida Institute of Government. She has Master of Public Administration from the University of Maryland. For further information Christine can be contacted at [CCH@coralsprings.org](mailto:CCH@coralsprings.org).

## **Has Coral Springs Found the “Holy Grail” – The Last Year of the Quest for Baldrige (Article 3 of 3)**

By Christine Heflin, Organizational Development Coordinator, City of Coral Springs, Florida, USA

This article, the last in a series of three, has three objectives. First, we are proud to announce that the City of Coral Springs found the Holy Grail. We received the call from the Department of Commerce on Nov. 20, 2007, informing us that Coral Springs is the first municipal government to receive the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Second, the article provides details on the latter stages of our quest. The third objective is to convince you that the virtues of the Baldrige model are more than myth and our quest was worth it.

Remember that the Baldrige Criteria are used to assess candidates for the award. The criteria are in seven categories: Leadership, Strategic Planning, Customer Focus, Measurement and Analysis, Workforce Focus, Process Management, and Results. Using the model means establishing processes in the first six categories that are systematic, deployed throughout the organization and consistently produce best in class Results, the seventh category. Coral Springs started its quest in 1994 with Deming and TQM. We stumbled onto the national Baldrige program through the Florida State quality program, won the Florida Sterling Award twice and then dared to dream that the national award would be open to governments. After a pilot project, the dream became a reality, “non-profits” became eligible for the Baldrige Award in 2007. The City of Coral Springs applied; rallied for a Baldrige site visit and, you know the rest, we won.

### **Tactics and Set Backs**

In late 2006 our feedback report from the non-profit pilot project was received. The chair of our application team, Susan Grant, the Human Resources Director, followed her training as a CPA and the Baldrige model and reviewed the data provided. Our total score put us on the cusp. A decision could have gone either way. Adding 100 points would clinch the situation, so that goal was set. She segmented the data. Improvement in Results, the category with the most possible points, became a priority. Our trends were good, but we needed much more comparison data to move up to the next “scoring band.” The Finance Department was asked to gather financial comparisons by analyzing the financial reports of other governments. Budget and HR staff would do the research needed to find more comparisons for measures of customer satisfaction and operations. Tuning up the complaint tracking system and making succession planning more systematic were other priorities because of their point potential.

So this sounds more like playing a numbers “game” than management improvement. Be cynical, but the fact is by establishing priorities based on valid feedback, focus was created and two years of work was accomplished in just 6 months--without contractors, consultants or staff dedicated to “quality”. In the first half of 2007 Coral Springs did the following:

- upgraded complaint tracking to a “Help Desk” system;
- developed and implemented a Succession Planning program;

- revamped its measurement system to better align with sources of comparison data;
- expanded its intra-net employee webpage to a Knowledge Network;
- made performance measurement data more available through a new net-based application;
- deployed revised training on process management to all supervisors; and
- provided refresher training on Baldrige to the entire workforce, part time and full time.

To get that level of effort, an organization must pursue something tangible and important. For us, that was the Baldrige Award and proving government can be excellent.

The cross-functional writing team was also an implementation team and we led the charge on the improvements we hoped to report in our categories. Top management and all departments were fully engaged in doing whatever it took to get to the next level. There were no bench sitters. We pulled together in a way that only a sense of crisis can provoke.

And there **was** a crisis. Some of the stress was self-generated by our quest for Baldrige. Some of it was due to the Florida economy. Real estate values are falling and there are houses that just won't sell on every block. However, most of the angst was from controversy over property taxes. Throughout the winter/spring of early 2007, almost daily, newspaper articles quoted State legislators and the Governor as they explained how "local governments are spending like drunken sailors." If you skip to the charts at the end of this article, you will see that this was not the case for Coral Springs. That being said, some folks in town are paying much more in property taxes than neighbors with comparable homes. Florida state law has provisions that limit the annual increase in taxes on single-family homes but if you buy a different house or your first house, look out. Your taxes can be two or three times more than your neighbor's if they have been in their place for many years.

As you may recall from earlier articles, to win the Baldrige award an organization needs positive trends in the results it reports. Several of Coral Springs key results are measured by the annual resident survey and business survey. After 14 years of focusing our operations on our customers, they would be asked to grade us during a barrage of negative publicity. So go the fates, but again the City turned to the model, this time Category 3, Customer Relationship Building. Our Communications and Marketing Department made sure "the State of the City" was well presented in the Coral Springs Magazine, on our website and our television channel 25. Top management worked with "stakeholders" in the State legislature and provided data on the many factors affecting municipal finance and in-depth analysis on the impact of alternative tax proposals that were surfacing.

When the dust settled and the surveys completed, some key ratings (e.g., Overall Quality, Customer Service) were down a point or two but actually held steady given the margin for error of +/- 3.0%. Only the "Residents' Value Rating" had taken a significant hit;

58% of the residents felt their taxes were appropriate relative to the service level they receive. This was down from 74% the previous year. We took a deep breath and moved on; the propensity of evidence regarding quality was still in our favor.

As a side note, working with the State legislature paid off. The bill that passed reduced Coral Springs revenues by about \$3.5 million, down from the \$10 million dollar hit that earlier proposals would have produced. A Constitutional amendment was put on the ballot, which passed. It will reduce revenue by another \$2.4 million. We are in austere times but the situation is manageable. And demonstrating how well the model works in hard times helped make our case to the Baldrige Examinors.

## The Site Visit

A very carefully crafted application had been developed for the 2006 pilot program. Each category lead had to update their texts, describing the improvements we had made. The Baldrige and Sterling Examiners in our ranks were the “Criteria Police”, reviewing the work to make sure every question and every part of every question was answered. The application was shipped to the Department of Commerce in late May and preparation for the site visit began. A site visit is not guaranteed but waiting to hear officially would have been a waste of time we needed.

We had weathered the budget cutting process by asking employees in every unit to collaborate on finding savings that would have minimal affect on customer service. Positions were lost through attrition and there was some reorganization to take up the slack. Employees were involved every step of the way, supporting both the workforce engagement and workforce development criteria of Category 5. Some benefits were cut; an employee team representing all departments made the recommendations on how to minimize the impact.

Through it all no one was laid off and performance-based raises were given at the same level as in the prior five years. Clearly, anticipating the challenges had paid off. The City’s low debt level, policy of funding depreciation and very economical staffing levels served us well. Having survived the perfect storm, morale was good as we began deploying a quick Baldrige refresher course to all employees, full time, part time, and our “frequent flyer” volunteers. Since the plan was to use this training as an opportunity to reinforce process management skills, it was decided to do most of the training in small groups, so a unit’s own processes could be discussed. We also knew that many employees were much more apt to ask questions in a small meeting. At sessions of more than 10, some of our folks clam up.

And so over the course of a couple of months every one of us was reminded of the Baldrige vocabulary that describes our every day work lives. During their three to four day stay, the Examiners can interview any employee to **verify** how we actually operate and **clarify** how systems work. We also got pumped. Our Leadership System (Category 1) includes the City Manager briefing the work force every quarter on progress, pitfalls and developments. When Mike Levinson made his rounds he reminded us that the

Baldrige Award is a Presidential award and we could be the first government ever to win it. If we rose to the level of a Baldrige winner, it meant we operated not only like a business but like the business elite that produce great results for stockholders, employees and their communities.

Our flow charts and reports with the most current data on in-process and performance measures were pulled together in briefing books. We knew the Examiner Team would be asking for these documents as part of verification. Process improvement teams were asked to pull together all their documentation, as they were among the “most likely to be interviewed.”

When the Examiners began their interviews that Monday in October we felt ready, but tense. There were some moments when the pressure got the best of us. Mostly, we felt close. No rank, no departments, fluid and abundant exchange of ideas, information and moral support. You would have to live it, to believe it.

The first day went well and logistics were smooth. On the second day you could tell from the questions that some hypothesis had been formed on what our Achilles’ heel(s) might be. Our approach to comparison data looked specious. All of an organization’s approaches need to be “systematic” to pass muster. That includes your approach to selecting and using comparison data. A review of the 69 line and bar graphs presented in the Category 7 Results section of our application, showed that Coral Springs did not compare itself to the same group of governments in every graph. As a result, it appeared as if the City shopped for comparisons that made us look good.

In fact, we had a systematic methodology and several of us were asked about it to see if our stories were consistent. Some results were compared only to south Florida governments because climate and/or State laws have a significant influence on the numbers. For national comparisons, we developed a list of governments that had a claim to excellence based on their bond ratings and/or ratings done by other objective sources, e.g., state quality programs, Money Magazine, etc. Some of them had a resident Customer Service rating; some had ratings from their business communities; others used the same turnover statistic we use to help assess the work climate. None use exactly the same set of measures. Our comparisons were with great organizations but not the same great organizations for every result.

Apart from running down a few potential “opportunities for improvement.” considerable Examiner time was spent talking to employees at different locations and of every division. Our employees had a love/hate attitude toward being interviewed. On the one hand they were intimidated, on the other they wanted to be part of the action. Everyone talked about what the Examiners asked and critiqued their own answers; all our training was being reinforced by the site visit process.

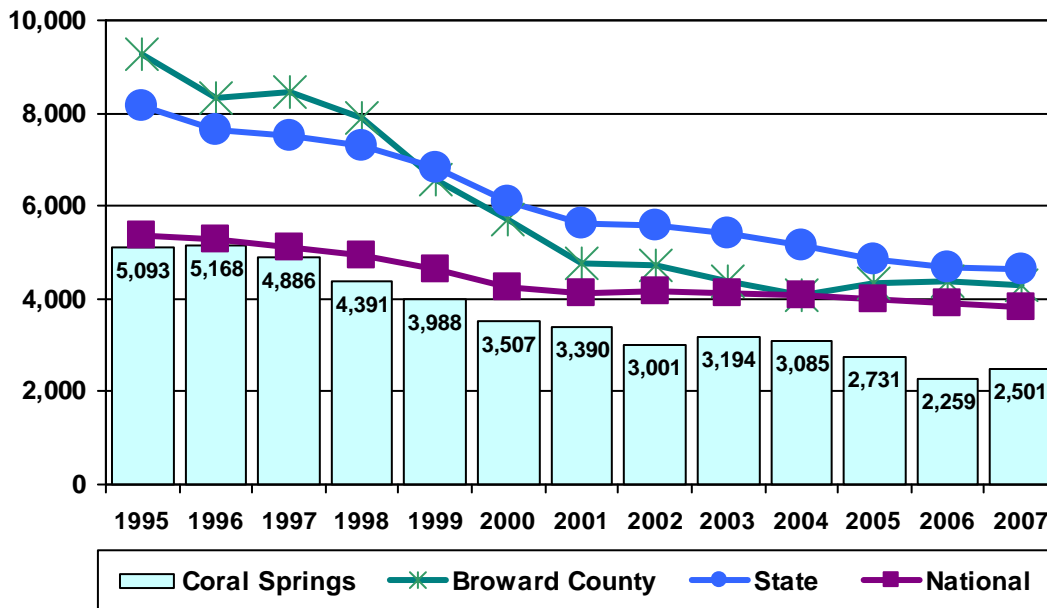
On the third day, we had one significant interview first thing in the morning. The Examiners had another hour of questions about our systematic comparisons but at the end of the session they looked pleased. There was a brief meeting for so-longs and humorous

presentations and they were off to finalize their report. Our fate was in their hands and the hands of the judges’.

**Did We Find Grace**

I won’t wax on about the day we got the good news...I like the after glow better! I’ll pass someone in the hall and we smile with no comment and the smile means, “we did it.” What you do want to know are the results we produced. Our application with all the results is posted on the City web site [www.coral Springs.org](http://www.coral Springs.org) but here are some highlights.

Since 2004 we have had the highest possible bond rating from all three rating agencies which uses Coral Springs as a best practice to educate other applicants. Our resident Customer Service Rating (from our annual survey) has been 94% or above since 1999; two governments in our comparison group had some comparable ratings but none exceeded ours; we began a business satisfaction survey in 2004; our ratings from businesses have risen each year and are now at 96. Our crime rate results with county, state and national comparisons are on the graph below:



*Fig 1. Crime Rate Incidents per 100,000 (Composite Index Indicator and KIO)*

In response to our “spending like drunken sailors” detractors, the chart below shows our expenditures per capita.

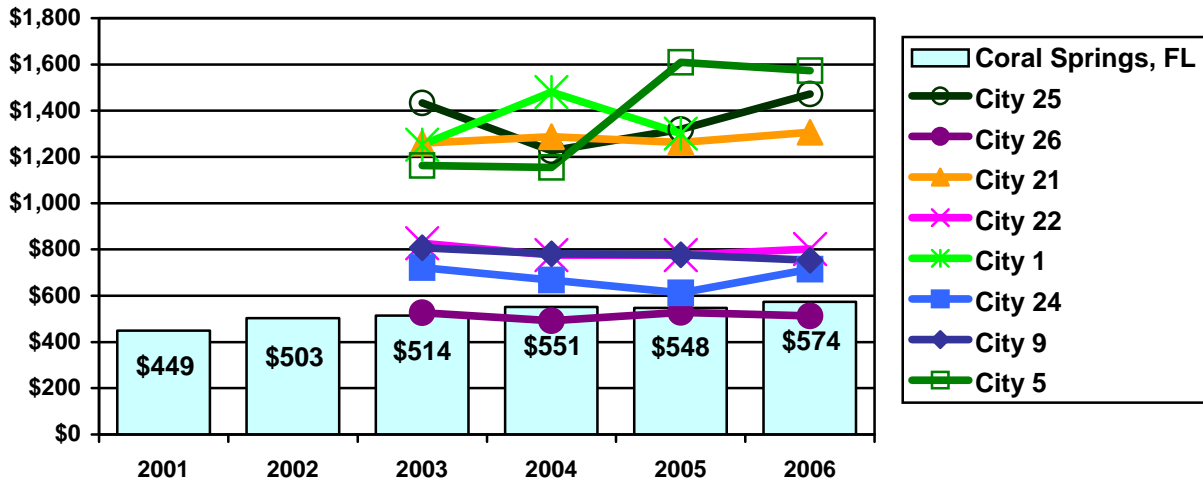


Fig 2. Net Operating Expenditures per Capita (FTMS)

Note that we don't name our comparison cities in results that we share publicly. The Baldrige Examiners were given names but the point of comparisons is not to look good at another government's expense; the point is to figure out how you're doing and find best practices. We have adopted best practices from these quality governments and gain a lot from collaborating with some of them.

Below is a chart showing our level of long-term debt. This graph is included because buying down debt has been an important part of the City's long-term strategy. Funds that would have been used for “adds to staff” in many other governments are used to pay off the bonds issued for infrastructure.

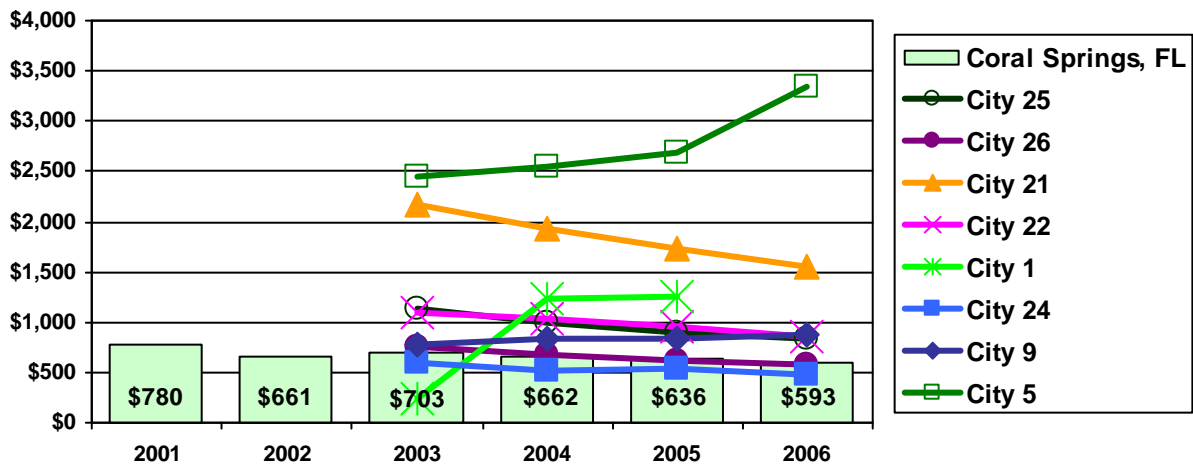
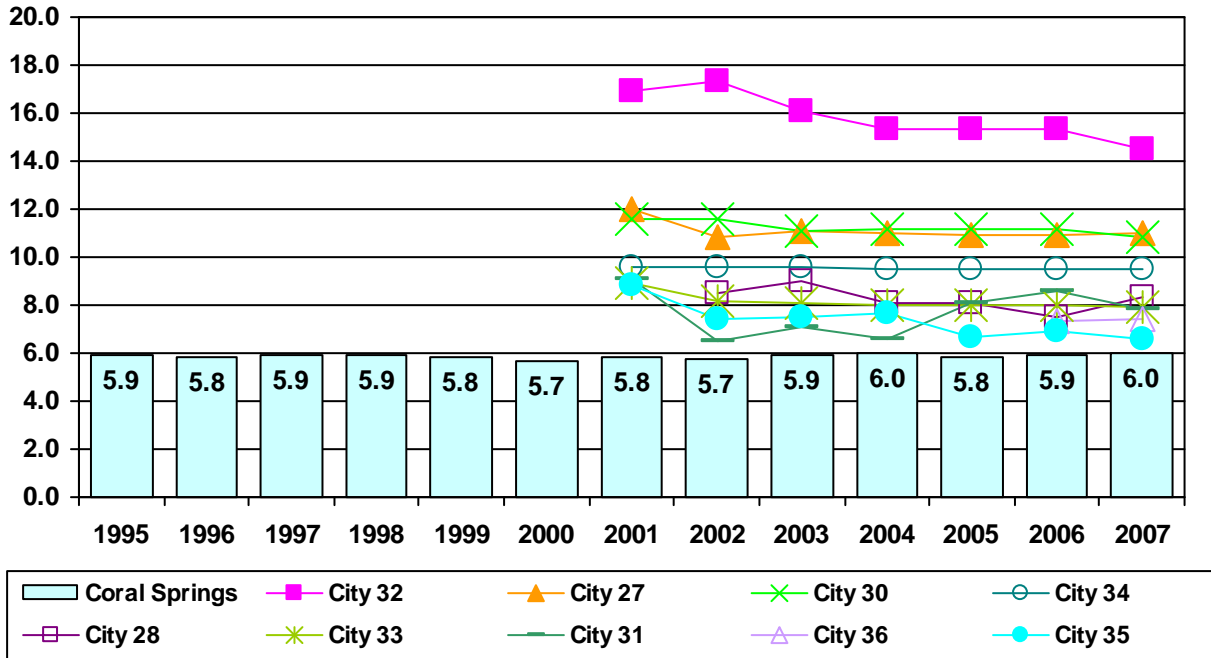


Fig. 3 Direct Net Long-Term Debt per Capita

One more chart is offered to make an important point. The chart below shows our ratio of employees per 1,000 residents. Yes, games can be played with this ratio by doing work through contracts, but that is not the case in Coral Springs. Solid waste collection is the only direct service provided by contract. The ratio is kept low by eliminating redundant levels of review. The City has a “flat” organization structure with supervisors who have large spans of control. Quality control is through clear accountability and training.



*Fig 4. Employees per 1,000 Residents*

How do employees feel about their empowerment and workload? Sometimes we chafe under the burden but job security, respect and engagement mean a lot. Our turnover rate is absolutely and comparatively very low (4.5%) and employee satisfaction is at a ten year high of 95%.

**The Quest Continues**

Part of the quest is sharing the model. Local government could become the flagship for the other levels of government. This process would be hastened, if we had some common measures with common definitions, but that’s a subject for another article.

Another part of the quest will be applying the model to global issues that need local action, like affordable housing and becoming “green.” Creating more community in our community as we become highly multi-cultural is another challenge. Strategic challenges are never scarce, but Baldrige governments are agile as well as systematic, and ready to take them on.

## About the Author

**Christine Heflin**, is the Organizational Development Coordinator for the City of Coral Springs, Florida. Previously, Ms. Heflin spent 10 years in D.C. with the Federal Government in Management and Policy Analysis, 7 years as the Director of Budget and Research for Pima County Arizona and 5 years as a Consultant/Trainer of the Florida Institute of Government. She has Master of Public Administration from the University of Maryland. For further information Christine can be contacted at [CCH@coralsprings.org](mailto:CCH@coralsprings.org).