

# The Effectiveness of Citizen Advisory Boards (CABs) in Washoe County, Nevada

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## INTRODUCTION

Citizen Advisory Boards (CABs) were established in Washoe County to assist the Board of County Commissioners with “issues of concern” (CAB Handbook 2001). Although CABs were authorized under Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS) 244.1945 in 1979, Washoe County was the first and is currently the only county in Nevada to establish Citizen Advisory Boards based on geographical or neighborhood interest, rather than topical interest, such as the Shade Tree Council or Board of Massage Examiners, etc. Currently, there are 14 CABs in Washoe County.

Assisting the Board of County Commissioners with issues of concern is twofold: 1) CABs help the commissioners to better understand and respond to resident concerns; and 2) CABs serve as the critical venue for public awareness on issues. Although CABs were initially established as a means to provide citizen oversight on county budget issues, their domain has since expanded to include planning and other issues (CAB Handbook 2001). Therefore, the CABs serve as a key venue for public participation in Washoe County. It is through these local neighborhood and community advisory boards that citizens can participate on issues that affect them.

**How effective are Washoe County Citizen Advisory Boards? As the focal point for citizen participation in Washoe County, are the CABs effective at helping the commissioners understand resident concerns? And do the commissions take CAB recommendations under advisement when rendering a decision?**

How effective are Washoe County Citizen Advisory Boards? As the focal point for citizen participation in Washoe County, are the CABs effective at helping the commissioners understand resident concerns? And do the commissions take CAB recommendations under advisement when rendering a decision? Neighborhood boards and councils in other states have been successful in conveying the concerns of residents, thus giving citizens a voice in local government decision-making (Berry et al. 1993). The neighborhood groups and citizen boards studied were found to be most effective when addressing issues that were local in scope, rather than regional, and on issues that were of little controversy (Berry et al. 1993).

As the name implies, the role of a CAB is advisory in nature, and hence, members do not engage in power sharing, which some believe is necessary for effective citizen participation and honest governance (Arnstein 1969; de Souza Briggs 2002). However, Citizen Advisory Boards in Washoe County, Nevada, act as the central venue for citizen participation in local governance issues, and hence, an assessment of their effectiveness would be beneficial to residents and local officials in Washoe County.

## METHODOLOGY

**In addition to comparing actual support for citizen recommendations, I also examined CAB members' perceptions of effectiveness.**

The data source was compiled using agendas and meeting minutes from Citizen Advisory Boards (CABs), the Washoe County Planning Commission (PC), and the Board of Adjustment (BOA). To measure the effectiveness of the CABs, I looked at how many of the CABs' recommendations were supported by the commission(s), and how many were not supported. In addition to comparing actual support for citizen recommendations, I also examined CAB members' perceptions of effectiveness.

**Measuring Actual CAB Success:** To measure actual CAB success, I followed decisions made by the Citizen Advisory Board and tracked their rate of success as they progressed through the planning process to the respective decision-making commission. All of the issues that come before the CAB represent some form of a land-use decision. The two commissions charged with making a final decision on land-use issues are either the Planning Commission (PC) or the Board of Adjustment (BOA). The meeting minutes that I tracked included the PC and BOA from 2000-2002. Motions and recommendations made by the CAB that were supported and upheld by the PC or BOA equated to success and therefore, effectiveness on the part of the CABs. Motions and recommendations were coded as a dichotomous variable: Either the motion was followed and supported (1), or the motion was altered, ignored or simply not followed (0).

Although there are 14 CABs in Washoe County, I elected to drop one CAB, Gerlach, as an outlier. Gerlach is the only CAB that is considered rural, and thus it addresses issues not similar to the other 13 CABs. In addition, the Gerlach CAB does not meet monthly as do the other CABs. To systematically measure whether CAB recommendations were followed and acted upon, I conducted a random sample of the 13 CABs and selected five of the 13. I tracked the meeting minutes for these five CABs for the 2000-2002 terms, providing three years of meeting minutes. The five CABs randomly selected were East Washoe Valley (EWVCAB), Galena Steamboat (GSCAB), Incline Village/Crystal Bay (IVCBCAB), Spanish Springs (SSCAB) and Warm Springs (WSCAB) (Figure 1).

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In the event the applicant appeals a decision, then the Board of County Commissioners has a hearing to render a final decision. An appeal is uncommon, but may occur occasionally. All board and commission meetings fall under the purview of the Nevada Open Meeting Law.

All commission meeting minutes are considered public record and kept on the Washoe County Web site in Adobe PDF files. I downloaded meeting minutes files for the PC and BOA from 2000-2002. Although CAB meeting minutes are also considered public records, they are not maintained on the Washoe County Web site in Adobe PDF files. So, I obtained hard copies from the Washoe County Community Development Department. I coded each CAB case into an Excel spreadsheet with the following information.

Year	2000, 2001, 2002
Month	month, i.e., 12, 11, 10, etc.
CAB Name	EWVCAB, GSCAB, IVCBCAB, SSCAB, etc.
Issue Type	Variance (V#), Special Use Permit (SPU#), etc; for all six types.
Issue Scope	N - neighborhood, i.e., the issue is localized to that particular CAB. R – regional, i.e., the issue extends beyond the respective CAB.
Level of Controversy	High (3) = Five or more comments/concerns expressed. Medium (2) = Two to four comments/concerns expressed. Low (1) = Zero to one comment/concern expressed.
CAB Motion/ Recommendation	Motion passed by the CAB is summarized noting key recommendations as close to verbatim as possible, reflecting both the motion taken and recommendations that followed.
Commission to hear the Motion /Recommendation	BOA - Board of Adjustment, or PC - Planning Commission.
Commission Recommendation	0 - The Commission <u>does not</u> support the CAB motion/recommendation. One (1), the commission <u>does</u> support the CAB motion/recommendation in the commission's final decision.

I saved all the information into an Excel spreadsheet and tracked the unique case number in the PC or BOA Commission meeting minutes with the PDF “find” option. Once I found the case in the meeting minutes, I then read through the meeting minutes to determine if the PC or BOA supported or did not support the CAB motion or concerns.

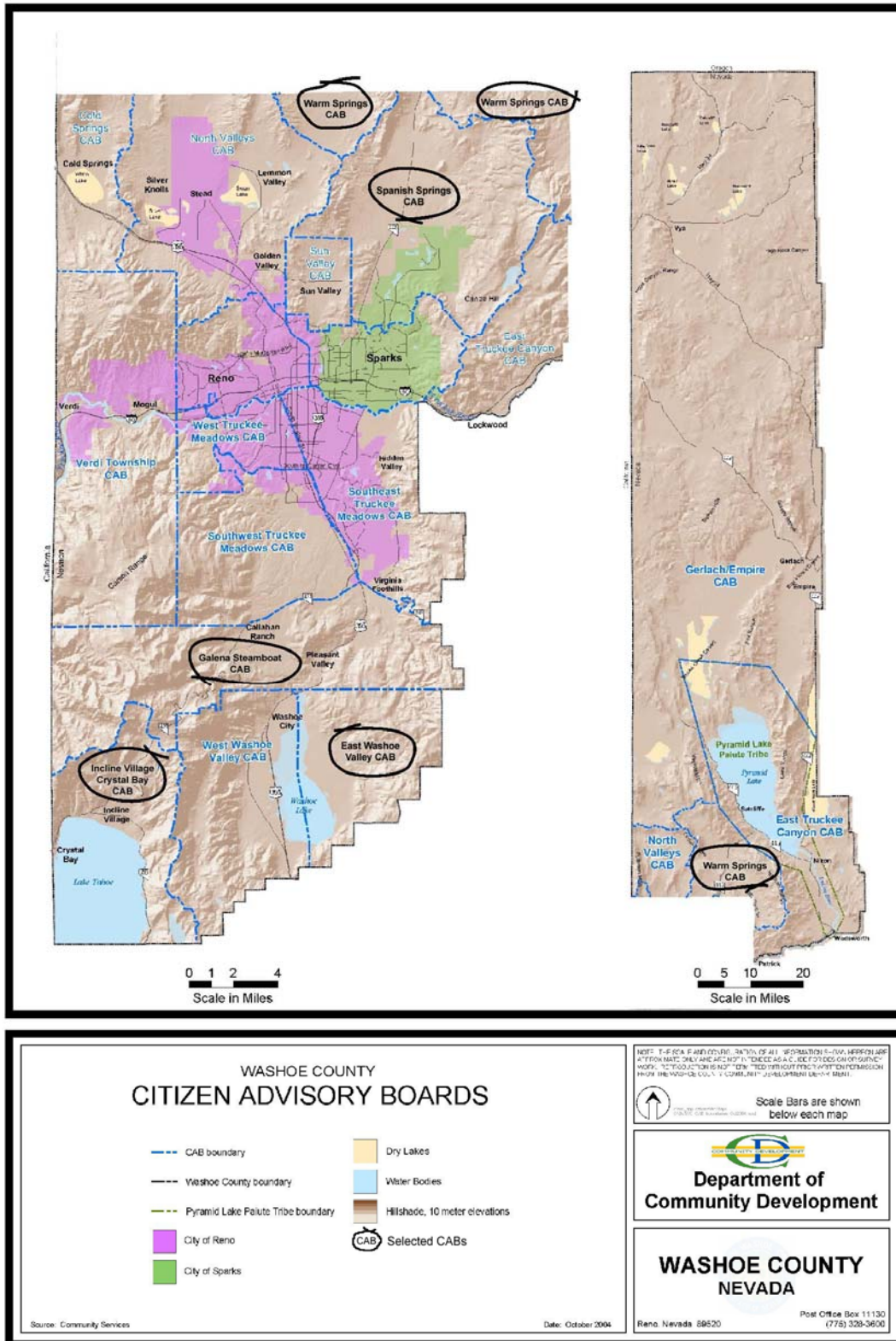


Figure 1. CABs randomly selected to track recommendations.



The CABs selected represent three of the five districts in Washoe County - Districts One, Two and Four (Figure 2). Although Districts Three and Five were not represented through the random selection of CABs, the types of cases and issues to come before all 13 CABs are similar, so this should be a representative sample of CAB issues.

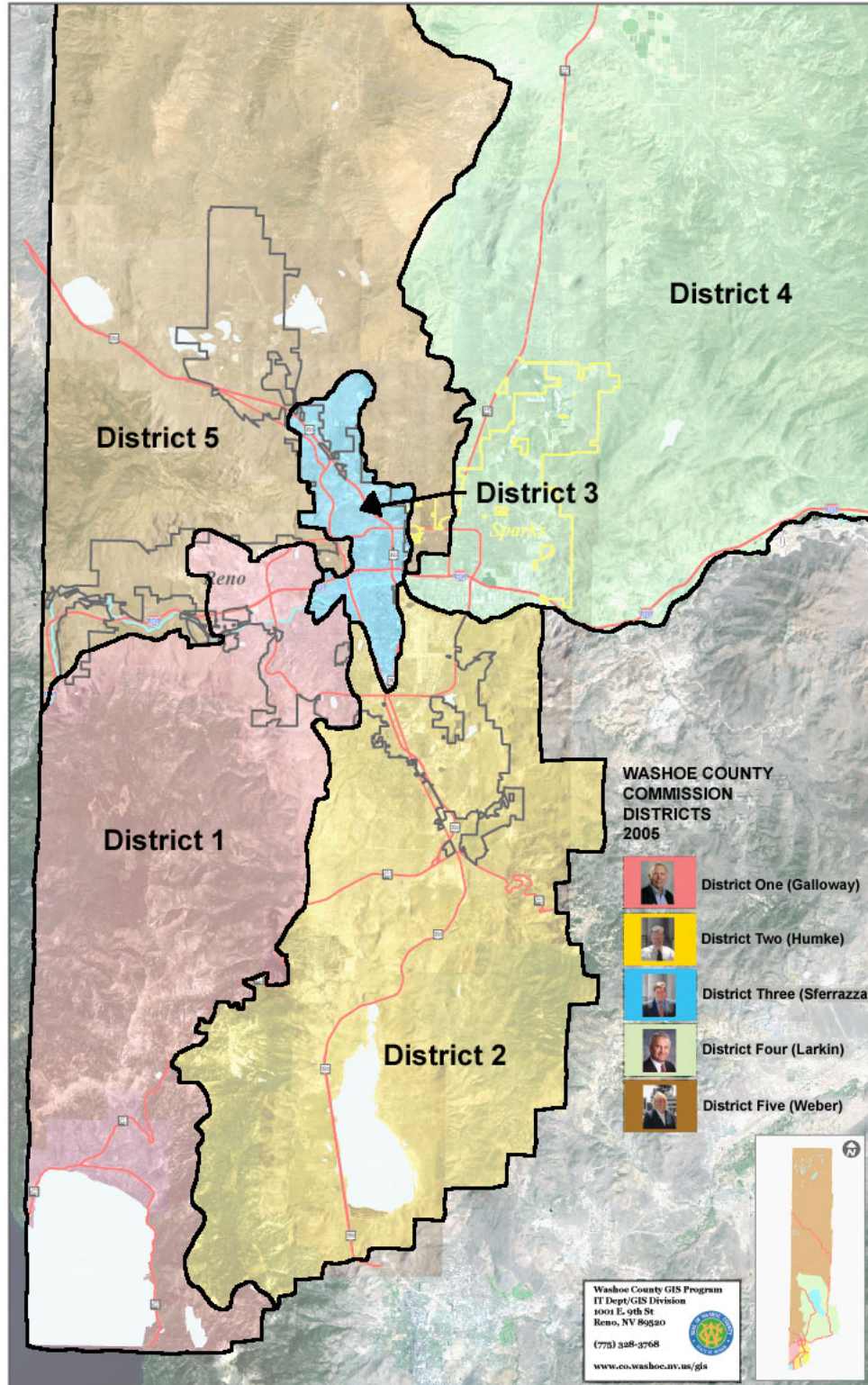


Figure 2. Washoe County Commission Districts.

**Measuring Perception of CAB Effectiveness:** In addition to measuring actual CAB support by tracking meeting minutes, I also measured the perception of CAB effectiveness by surveying CAB members. Although perception is shaped by many factors, it is predominately framed by one's own experience. As Rosenor (1978) notes, we understand effectiveness better when we know who perceives the efficacy and in what context they perceive it. Therefore, I asked CAB members two questions:

- 1) How effective do you think YOUR CAB was in addressing the issues that came before your board?
- 2) How effective do you think YOU were as a CAB member?

CAB members from 1997 to 2003 received the survey, which was mailed to their homes.<sup>1</sup> A total of 209 were successfully mailed to participants' home addresses in February 2004. A total of 152 surveys were completed and returned, achieving a 73 percent response rate.

## RESULTS OF CAB EFFECTIVENESS

**Actual CAB Support:** I reviewed 177 cases in the CAB meeting minutes over three years (2000, 2001 and 2002) for the five CABs selected. Out of the 177 total cases, the boards took action on 157 cases.<sup>2</sup> I tracked only those 157 cases. Motions made by the CAB were tracked from the CAB meeting minutes to the BOA or PC meeting minutes to determine if CAB motions were supported or not supported in the final commission decision. The BOA or PC supported 137 of the 157 actions, and did not support 11 actions. Eight applicants withdrew from the process prior to reaching the final commission hearing. These results give CABs an overall success rate of 87 percent (Table 1).

Table 1. Tracked cases of CAB motions with number of actions supported or not supported by the commissions.

	<b>Total Cases Heard</b>	<b>Cases with Board Action</b>	<b>Action Supported by Commission</b>	<b>Action Not Supported by Commission</b>	<b>Cases Where Applicant Withdrew</b>
<b>2000</b> <i>91% supported</i>	63	58	53	2	3
<b>2001</b> <i>82% supported</i>	63	56	46	5	4 <i>one still unknown</i>
<b>2002</b> <i>88% supported</i>	51	43	38	4	1
<b>TOTAL</b> <i>87% supported</i>	177	157	137	11	8

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed description of the methodology used in the mail survey please refer to Rebori 2004, UNCE Publication # EB 04-04.

<sup>2</sup>The measure of Kappa Agreement was 1.000 for issue scope. The issue was neighborhood (1) or regional (2) in scope. The measure of Kappa Agreement for level of controversy was .867. Level of controversy was high, medium or low. Cohen's Kappa Agreement is gaining popularity as a measure of scorer reliability.

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The commissions, either the BOA or PC, did not support 11 motions (11 cases); two in 2000, five in 2001 and four in 2002. Table 2 summarizes each case not supported by the commission(s). No clear pattern exists for non-support. A variety of issue types were not supported. Issue scope, such as neighborhood or regional, indicated no pattern. Level of controversy seemed to have no bearing on whether a motion was supported. From this analysis of Citizen Advisory Boards, there seems to be no predictor of success for a motion being supported by the commission.

Table 2. CAB motions not supported by the Board of Adjustment or Planning Commission.

<b>Citizen Advisory Board</b>	<b>Commission</b>	<b>Scope<sup>^</sup></b>	<b>Controversy Level<sup>^^</sup></b>	<b>Issue Type</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Month</b>
Incline Village CAB	BOA	N	L	Variance	2000	7
Galena/Steamboat CAB	BOA	N	L	Special Use Permit	2000	8
Warm Springs CAB	PC	R	H	Special Use Permit and Variance	2001	10
Incline Village CAB	BOA	N	M	Variance	2001	5
Galena/Steamboat CAB	PC	N	H	Tentative Subdivision	2001	10
Galena/Steamboat CAB	PC	N	M	Comprehensive Plan Amendment	2001	6
Spanish Springs CAB	BOA	N	M	Special Use Permit	2002	12
Spanish Springs CAB	PC	N	M	Tentative Subdivision	2002	10
Spanish Springs CAB	PC	R	L	Comprehensive Plan Amendment	2002	5
Spanish Springs CAB	PC	N	R	Special Use Permit	2002	5

<sup>^</sup> Scope reflects N = Neighborhood or R = Regional.  
<sup>^^</sup> Controversy Level reflects H = High, M = Medium or L = Low.

This assessment investigated CAB effectiveness by tracking motions made by the CAB to see if the commission supported them. The objective was also to determine how responsive the local political system is to advisory board comments, concerns and recommendations. The overall success rate of 87 percent seemed quite high, so I decided to investigate some cases in more detail. I selected 10 cases for in-depth analysis.

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I selected five highly controversial cases—cases with five or more comments/concerns or recommendations attached to the CAB’s motion, and five low controversial cases—cases with zero to one comments/concerns or recommendations. I reviewed staff reports and CAB and commission meeting minutes and interviewed county staff planners. Based on results from staff interviews (Appendix A), it appears the commission(s) responsiveness to recommendations and concerns from the CABs are more aligned to reasonableness and scope than to level of controversy, range of issue or respective commission.

I would conclude, based on this analysis; that the CABs in Washoe County are effective at getting their comments and recommendations addressed and responded to by local government when those comments and recommendations are reasonable and within scope.

## RESULTS REGARDING PERCEPTION OF CAB BOARD MEMBERS

**Perception of Effectiveness by CAB Board Members:** The other component of effectiveness I examined was the perception of effectiveness of CAB members. This was measured on a survey that asked respondents two questions:

- 1) How effective do you think YOUR CAB was in addressing the issues that come before your board?
- 2) How effective do you think YOU were as a CAB member?

The first question measured a CAB member’s perception of the board’s effectiveness based on the experience as a CAB member. The second question measured perception of individual effectiveness as a CAB member.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents (n= 86) ranked their CABs as effective to very effective in addressing the issues that came before their board (Figure 3).

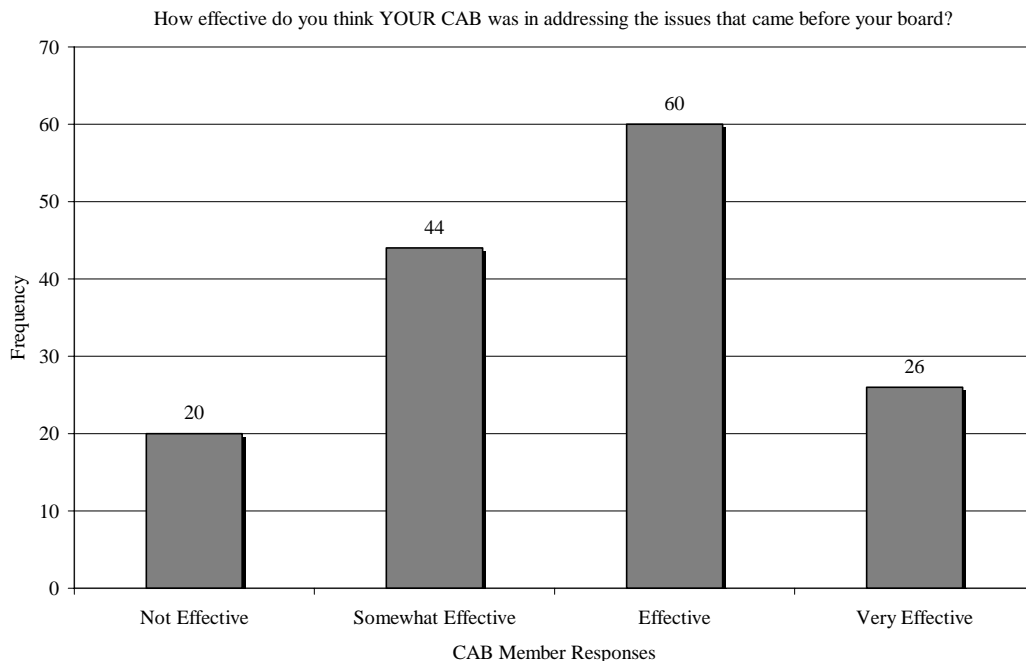


Figure 3. CAB members’ perceptions of CAB effectiveness in addressing issues.



When asked how effective the individual felt as a CAB member, 59 percent (n=89) ranked their individual efforts as effective (Figure 4).

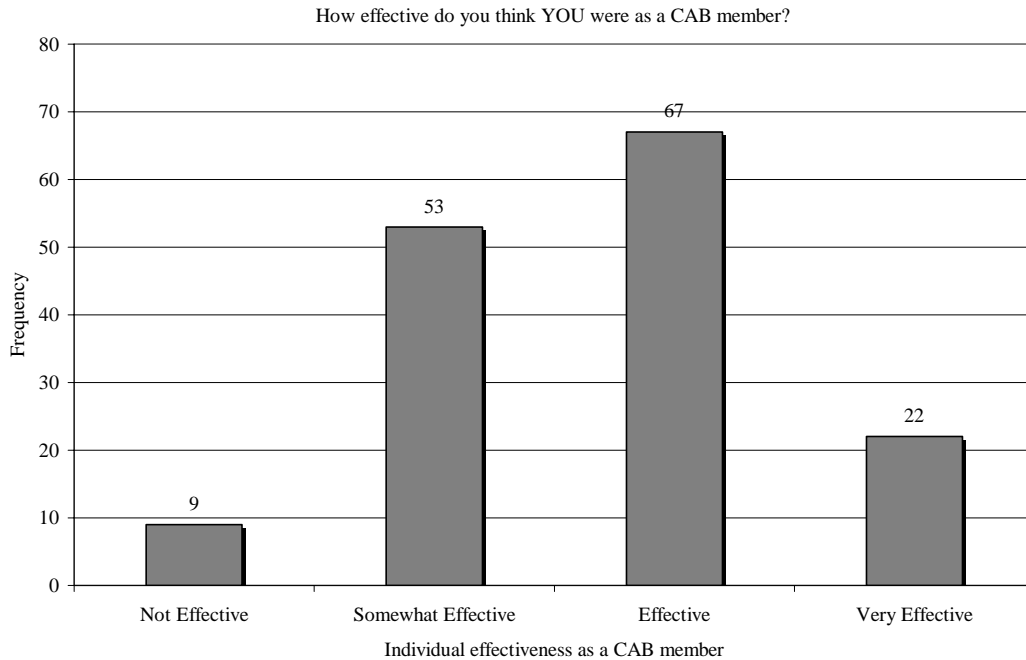


Figure 4. Individual perception of effectiveness as a CAB member.

Perception of effectiveness both as individuals and as a group seems high. However, when examining actual effectiveness as reported by motions supported and recommendations followed, it seems the CABs are more effective than members actually perceive them to be.

## CONCLUSION

**Overall, it appears CAB comments, recommendations and concerns that seem reasonable and are within the scope of the CAB review are seriously considered and addressed by staff planners and commissioners.**

Overall, it appears CAB comments, recommendations and concerns that seem reasonable and are within the scope of the CAB review are seriously considered and addressed by staff planners and commissioners. It also appears from reviewing meeting minutes and tracking 10 cases in-depth, that every attempt is made to address the concerns and recommendations of the CAB. CABs also seem to be very successful (87 percent) in having their motions supported by the commission(s).

The overarching question in this assessment is whether the Citizen Advisory Boards have an effective voice in local governance and whether their concerns are addressed. Based on my analysis of CAB meeting minutes over three years involving 157 land-use cases, I conclude that Washoe County Citizen Advisory Boards are an effective voice for community concerns, and in general, their comments and recommendations are addressed by county staff and the commission(s). In general, it seems that Citizen Advisory Boards, although they are not empowered with decision-making authority, are fairly effective in carrying out their role when it concerns local governance issues impacting their communities and neighborhoods.

When comparing the actual responsiveness versus the perceived responsiveness of local officials to CAB concerns, actual responsiveness and effectiveness is higher than perceived responsiveness by individual CAB members. It was interesting to find that only 58 percent of CAB members thought their CAB was effective, even though 87 percent of CAB motions were supported and upheld by the commission(s). This presents a significant discrepancy between perception of government responsiveness and actual responsiveness. Why is perception of responsiveness lower than actual responsiveness? A variety of factors are at play when gauging perception of effectiveness. Many of these factors cannot be measured simply by the survey questions. However, I would suggest a few possible explanations that would benefit from additional research.

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## **DISCUSSION**

If CAB actions are not followed through by local officials in the manner CAB members had hoped, they may have low levels of trust for local government and hence lower levels of perceived CAB effectiveness. In addition, if a CAB member joined the CAB to solve a particular problem or influence policy on a certain issue, the member may be disappointed if their CAB does not turn out to be the appropriate venue for addressing the “personal agenda” item. For example, when some individuals become members of the board, they begin to understand the roles and limitations of the board, or see the “reality” of advisory boards. Perhaps they had misperceptions of their authority and impact prior to volunteering. Once they realize the nature of their responsibilities, they may realize that their personal expectations and reasons do not meet the expected outcome. Hence they may get easily frustrated and view their participation as not as effective as they had initially hoped. In this sense, expectations exceed reality.

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Some board members may be frustrated with the limited capacity of an advisory board. As previously stated, the responsibilities of CAB members is primarily to address land-use issues, although they address a broad range of issues community-wide. Land-use issues mainly concern growth in one’s community. Typically, land-use and growth issues are controversial and easily become emotional for participants and other community members. If some individuals join a CAB to address growth or subsequent water issues, and feel that they are limited in their capacity and roles as CAB members, they may perceive themselves as not effective.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS – Steps toward improving Effectiveness**

Based on results from this assessment, I recommend that clear expectations be established for CABs and that the CABs and commissions work together to establish them. This two-way communication, from the CABs to the commission(s), and from the commission(s) to the CABs, will help create open lines of communication. Clear expectations from both entities will increase citizen satisfaction and

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increase perceptions of effectiveness. When expectations are understood, it will help increase trust in government and local officials, as well as participation in citizen efforts and boards.

Another step toward improving perceptions of effectiveness would be to provide feedback to the CABs on the final outcomes of their recommendations. Once a CAB forwards a motion and recommendation to the commission, the CAB receives no feedback by the county regarding the commission's ultimate decision on the matter. The CAB does not know if the commission incorporated the recommendation into a final decision or if the CAB motion was supported. The onus of responsibility has fallen on the CAB to track the final results. If the county provided a user-friendly process for tracking CAB success or impact, members could more easily connect their efforts to final outcomes and realize the impact their participation has on issues.

The CAB role is to provide advice to commissioners on issues of community concern. Based on the results presented, Citizen Advisory Boards are substantially effective at helping the commissions better understand and respond to resident concerns and serving as a venue for public awareness. However, I need to add a caveat to this statement. This study reflected effectiveness from only one dimension. CAB perception of effectiveness and actual effectiveness was only assessed from the bottom-up, vertically from the CAB motion toward the final decision maker, the commission(s).

Effectiveness was not assessed horizontally. I did not question other citizens in the community about how effective they perceive the CABs to be or how representative they think the CABs are to concerns in the neighborhood. In addition, I did not ask commissioners and elected local officials about their perceptions of effectiveness of CABs in their districts and jurisdictions. The bottom-up, one-directional approach is a limitation to this assessment. However, it is an important first step toward gaining a better understanding of the effectiveness of CABs as a citizen participation structure.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEWS WITH COUNTY PLANNERS

All interviews were conducted by the author via telephone with various Washoe County Planners.

**General Question:**

1. **Based on your experience as a planner for the County, do you feel that Board of Adjustments or Planning Commission seriously consider the comments, concerns or recommendations put forward by the CABs?**

**Date:** 11/22/04 **CASE:** Tentative Subdivision Map Case No. TM0007-002 for Montreux 2000

A: Absolutely, without a doubt! They seriously consider the concerns of the CAB and their recommendations.

**Date:** 12/13/04 **CASE:** VA02-019 – Variance

A: All boards take into consideration both the CAB and staff comments. They may not always be able to act upon them but they take them into consideration.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SW0003-011 and VA0012-036 – Special Use Permit and Variance

A: Absolutely! BUT I have a caveat. The CABs are not up on land use laws. Sometimes they ask you things or forward recommendations that are illegal. It is the planner's responsibility to filter their requests to what is legal and reasonable. I'll give you an example; one time a CAB spent two hours discussing a case and denied it for no reason simply because they didn't want it. So the planner must filter the CAB comments and recommendations and be reasonable.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SR17-17-97 and TM02-006 – Tentative Subdivision Map

A: Absolutely, without a doubt. Those comments carry a lot of weight. It's one of the first question asked by the Commissions (BOA or PC).

**General Question:**

2. **In your opinion, are CAB members knowledgeable about the types of issues and concerns on a case? In other words, in your opinion, do CAB members understand what comments or recommendations can be addressed and which ones are outside of their scope as an advisory board? Do they know what issues or concerns could be addressed versus which ones are beyond addressing?**

**Date:** 11/22/04 **CASE:** Tentative Subdivision Map Case No. TM0007-002 for Montreux 2000

A: I have found CAB members to be very knowledgeable about the process and what they can address. The comments and concerns to come from the CAB are usually very valid—some comments are not. As a planner I have found the CABs perform a valuable service. They often raise points or ideas that I have never considered as a planner...some points, of course, are simply outside of the scope. However, the comments to come from residents attending the CAB meeting are often out of scope and difficult to address but the CAB comments are usually very pertinent.

**Date:** 12/13/04 **CASE:** VA02-019 – Variance

A: Every once in a while we do training for the CABs on issues they can address—usually at least once a year. They do a pretty good job of understanding their scope of work—at least for Incline Village, that is my planning area. They (the CAB) tend to recognize when they go outside their scope but usually their recommendations tend to fall within scope of their work—not always, but usually.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SW0003-011 and VA0012-036 – Special Use Permit and Variance

A: Sometimes they... There are some CABs that the CAB chair keeps their CAB focused and on track. As planners, many times we have to get them (the CAB) back on course because they get so far off track. It is a constant need for keeping them (CABs) on track.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SR17-17-97 and TM02-006 – Tentative Subdivision Map

A: In general, I think they do—some CAB members never understand. They (CAB) have a really good sense of what's in their community, their function and the limit of their authority.

### **General Question:**

### **3. In your opinion, do you feel that both staff and the Commissions (either BOA or PC or BOCC) seriously work toward addressing the recommendations put forward by the CABs?**

**Date:** 11/22/04 **CASE:** Tentative Subdivision Map Case No. TM0007-002 for Montreux 2000

A: Yes, we use the CAB comments and recommendations in our staff reports and work to address them in the staff report before it goes to the commission for the hearing. The CAB comments and recommendations are very helpful to me when I prepare the staff reports. Sometimes the CABs may not realize the constraints they place on the applicants when they propose a recommendation. The CAB is just another recommending body, just like Washoe-Storey Conservation District and others. We take all the recommendations under consideration when preparing our staff reports to address the concerns and recommendations.

**Date:** 12/13/04 **CASE:** VA02-019 – Variance

A: Yes, we do seriously work to address CAB recommendations. The commissions very seriously take into consideration the CAB recommendations and try to determine if their recommendation is reasonable.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SW0003-011 and VA0012-036 – Special Use Permit and Variance

A: YES, if their recommendations are reasonable, thought out and they stick to the issues, absolutely. It is a two-way street. We need to keep CABs in a mode of learning—this has been a constant challenge to keep CABs aware of land-use law. I wish the CABs would go out and talk to their neighbors more when they know a certain case is coming forward. That would be my recommendation and what I would like to see happen more.

**Date:** 12/16/04 **CASE:** SR17-17-97 and TM02-006 – Tentative Subdivision Map

A: I think so—Yes, absolutely. Where there are issues raised or addressed by the CAB—they (Commissions) take it into serious consideration—Not all recommendations are consistent with the staff recommendations but in general I would say at least all their comments are addressed.

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