

Partnership for Sunshine: 'What Works City'

New national initiative supports cities in use of public data

Getting a crowd to pay attention to a discussion of open meetings and open records is often difficult, if not impossible. Sunshine Week happens in March each year and it gets only a passing nod in most cases. In general, the public thinks that government collection of data is of no benefit to them, at best, and a huge invasion of privacy at the worst. The challenge for most of us who advocate for open records and access to data is getting the public to understand how it benefits from this.

Suddenly, it appears there may be hope on the horizon for an attitude change, at least in some cities. Recently Bloomberg Philanthropies announced a new, national initiative to support cities in their use of public data to make the cities more efficient and to improve the lives of local citizens.

What Works City is a program developed by the charitable organization to partner with numerous other groups to accomplish this goal. Among those partnering in this effort are the Sunlight Foundation, Harvard University, and Johns Hopkins University Center for Government Excellence.

These groups will help cities learn new approaches and best practices, access resources that work for that city, partner with other similar cities on common projects, and reach new technical solutions. While more than 112 cities across 40 states have applied to be a part of this initial program, only 100 cities will be admitted to the program through 2017 and Kansas City is one of those in the initial group, according to a late-summer announcement.

Apparently Kansas City's goal for this project is to strengthen its existing performance management programs. Other cities are attempting to create their own performance management programs, implement open data practices for the first time, develop real-time program evaluations and integrate data into ongoing projects.

The announcement included prior examples of cities using data to improve their performance on programs, including New Orleans' use of data on blighted residences to assist in compliance with its housing laws after the



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effects of Hurricane Katrina. Kansas City also was cited for its prior use of citizen surveys to document increased satisfaction with the city's image and to guide decision-making for city departments.

The Sunlight Foundation will be working with cities that are seeking to increase their programs allowing access to data collected by government entities. "With this program, cities will get the support they need to use their high quality, released data in the way that's most effective for them, putting it to work in answering their most pressing questions.

Meanwhile, they will also be supported in improving the way they use public input about their data," the Foundation said in announcing its involvement in the program.

Meanwhile, Kansas City, in touting its selection to be in the program, claims to be a solid partner in the arena of public transparency and accountability, a claim that I personally, as a Kansas City resident, hope is true. "This selection will keep us ahead as a technologically advanced community," said Mayor Sly James in discussing this news.

The city's satisfaction survey, taken every year, tracks whether citizens are satisfied with the city as a place to live, looking at the quality of various city-

provided services. In the same press announcement, the city also pointed out that businesses, organizations or citizens "can review city data and use it to develop ideas, programs or projects, meaning the entire city can become a better place to live, work and play."

It is encouraging to see cities put much of their public operations onto the web for public review. It seems to me that, at a minimum, basic city platforms, such as city ordinances, should be readily available for access and downloading via the Web. Announcements of meetings of public bodies should be available on the city's website, along with minutes of past meetings, and they should be posted in a timely fashion.

Given the wealth of data cities across the state collect, it is exciting

to hope that the outcome from programs such as this could be that reporting on local government is enhanced for journalists across the country.

I would argue, at the same time, that it's up to us, as journalists, to use this data to show our readers how important having this access is to them -- show them how cities work better when public knowledge of what is happening is readily available. Find stories based on public data that is available to you and use it to flesh out the press releases that cross your desk. Make it your goal to find a way to use public data every day.

Cities get ideas how to use data from programs such as this that encour-

age it. So do you and your citizens. Make Sunshine Week more than a once-a-year event!

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