Using Technology to Promote Transparency in City Government

A Joint Publication by the National League of Cities and the Public Technology Institute

This guide will focus on a variety of examples from around the country that use technology to increase transparency. With a national push toward a more “open government,” transparency is fast becoming more of the rule than the exception. Transparency – simply put – is becoming more open to the public in terms of decisions that are being made and how work is being done. Cities around the country have been employing various methods to increase transparency in their day-to-day practices for years now. From broad engines of information like city websites to more focused tools that display a city’s expenditures, cities have been looking for ways to better engage their constituencies. Transparency helps make cities more accountable to their constituents. Informing citizens of key decisions and the reasons behind them actively engages the citizenry and promotes the concept of the whole community becoming more closely involved in city decision-making processes.

eNotify
San Carlos, Calif.
Population: 27,238
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The City of San Carlos is using technology as a tool to provide a variety of information to its residents. As one of the first cities in the world to create a city website, San Carlos has been continually innovating its approach to informing and engaging constituents. One of the city’s most recent tools is an e-mail listserv called “eNotify.” This service allows residents and business owners to sign up for a variety of types of information, ranging from general city news to local project newsletters and updates to local meeting agendas and minutes. By the end of 2009, the listserv had more than 8,000 subscribers accessing almost 60 different types of information from the city.

Information about the city council, boards and commissions tends to be some of the most popular pieces of information being provided. Live and “on-demand” versions of these meetings can be accessed online. The city’s document management software also enables the city to publish minutes of meetings, in addition to staff reports and briefing materials of the council and each board and commission. Residents having access to the same information the city council and commissions have helps them become better informed of the issues in their city and helps foster a better dialogue between constituents and city officials.
My Neighborhood Map
Seattle
Population: 598,541
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The City of Seattle created the “My Neighborhood Map” tool for its residents to access information about a variety of city services. The tool is unique in that it eliminated the need for users to sift through multiple departmental websites to get to the information they are looking for.

Started in 2006, the program consists of three types of information: services (information on libraries, parks and property parcel data), impacts (notices that affect one’s ability to get around such as construction projects or during fire department response to calls) and statistics (current and a 10-year history of major crimes by Census tracts). The map includes information on 15 city departments, as well as the public school system, hospitals and recreational entities, such as farmer’s markets, art galleries and museums.

Since its launch, the “My Neighborhood Map” interface has been updated to allow users to use their mouse to manipulate the map — clicking and dragging to move the map, double-clicking to zoom, and moving panels to increase the size of the map. These new features have not only made accessing information easier, but it also allows them to see what else is going on in the city that may be of interest to them.

Citizen Dashboard for Bond and Capital Improvement Projects (CIPs)
Mesa, Ariz.
Population: 463,552
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Easily accessible information about bond projects maintains a city’s accountability, answers questions about the projects and provides overall support for funding for capital projects, many of which rely on bonding mechanisms. But most importantly, citizens can learn how their money is being spent and be part of their city’s development process. Mesa provides a variety of options for its citizens to access information about results of their bond votes, project status and financial data and interactive updates.

Due to the appeal of interactive mapping capabilities, the city created a dashboard Web application for citizens that offers a variety of features, including status of the approved bond package and projects it involves, charts displaying each project status and money spent to date and browsing features of bond projects with links to more information and pictures.

Each project outlines the intended work with either pictures of the actual state of construction or the initial design documents and concept. Interactive maps are available to drill down by region of the city to understand the variety of efforts and navigate to the specific project of interest. Information is updated automatically from city CIP financial programs as the project moves from design to construction to completion — with both a project status and funds spent to date financial update.
Online NYCStat Stimulus Tracker  
New York City  
Population: 8,363,710  
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The New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT) and the New York City Mayor’s Office of Operations created the NYCStat Stimulus Tracker, an online tool to help the City of New York track federal stimulus funds. The NYCStat Stimulus Tracker enables residents to follow stimulus funding progress on a project, contract and payment level and ties public outcomes to money spent. Individuals can also use a mapping capability to view the work happening in various locations around the city.

NYCStat Stimulus Tracker provides detailed, almost immediate information on stimulus projects in eight areas: infrastructure, energy efficiency, economic and workforce development, health and social support, education, public safety, neighborhood stabilization and budget relief.

In addition to the availability of information, the tool has helped city departments and the public in a variety of ways. Users are able to see how funding sources are distributed to building projects and other city programs, track performance measurements, see details of projects and learn how these projects are helping the city and help hold the city government accountable by easily identifying progress toward program goals.

Your Tax Dollars At Work  
Louisville, Ky.  
Population: 256,231  
Contact: Beth Niblock, Chief Information Officer, City of Louisville, Beth.Niblock@LouisvilleKy.gov

The City of Louisville has created a primer-like tool that provides information on various aspects of the city’s budget. Through the “Your Tax Dollars At Work” website, residents can see where revenues come from, how money is budgeted to the various departments, where expenditures are going, city employee salaries and the status of stimulus funds.

By detailing how and where funding is received and distributed, residents are able to see how the city is fiscally maintained. The pages, which detail where revenues come from and how money is divided between departments, provide users with a quick snapshot of the percentage breakdown, and then more detailed information including date and budgets from current and past fiscal years and a forecast for the upcoming fiscal year.

The “Louisville Checkbook” feature within the website allows users to search by vendor, agency, category and fund source to see how the city has spent its funds in the current year and in the two previous years. City employee salaries are also easy to access through a variety of search parameters. The final component tracks stimulus funds, also with a snapshot view of percentage breakdown and then a more detailed table with individual project information, amount awarded and spent and start and end dates.
OpenPalmBay
Palm Bay, Fla.
Population: 100,786
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Spurred by potential state legislation requiring cities with a population of more than 20,000 to disclose financial information, the City of Palm Bay created “OpenPalmBay”. The legislation did not pass but the city still went ahead and developed this interactive online database, where users have access to the city’s financial information including: expenditures, employee salaries, revenue, and annual and monthly financial reports.

Users can sort through information, which is updated quarterly, by category, payee, department or project. Information can be viewed online or exported to a different file format so that the data can be used for other purposes. A glossary of financial terms and a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section help make the information more understandable to users and there is also an online form available to submit any feedback, issues or problems encountered with the database.

About This Publication
In the spring of 2010, the National League of Cities (NLC) and the Public Technology Institute (PTI) polled members of their respective information technology leadership committees to identify the technology topics in which local elected officials are most interested. This resource is part of a series of guides jointly produced by NLC and PTI that address the topics identified by the survey.

About the National League of Cities
The National League of Cities is the nation’s oldest and largest organization devoted to strengthening and promoting cities as centers of opportunity, leadership and governance. NLC is a resource and advocate for more 1,600 member cities and the 49 state municipal leagues, representing 19,000 cities and towns and more than 218 million Americans.

Through its Center for Research and Innovation, NLC provides research and analysis on key topics and trends important to cities, creative solutions to improve the quality of life in communities, inspiration and ideas for local officials to use in tackling tough issues and opportunities for city leaders to connect with peers, share experiences and learn about innovative approaches in cities.

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About the Public Technology Institute
Created by and for cities and counties, the not-for-profit Public Technology Institute promotes innovation and collaboration for thought-leaders in government, and advances the use of technology to improve the management and delivery of services to the citizen. www.pti.org.

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