

Run a Transparent Government

Four ways local governments can use technology for cost-effective transparency



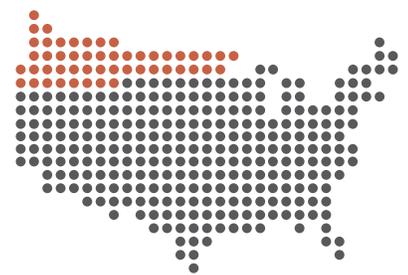
Budget constraints have stopped many local governments from reaching for transparency — but it doesn't have to be that way.

The call for transparency in local government

Citizens and elected officials at all levels are calling for increased transparency in local government — and many government leaders are eager to answer the call. Transparency benefits local governments and their communities in many ways, from promoting deeper trust and citizen engagement to driving economic growth. Budget constraints have stopped many local governments from reaching for transparency — finding the right balance between the cost of making government more open and the cost of public safety and essential services can be difficult. But it doesn't have to be that way.

To achieve greater transparency, a growing number of local governments nationwide are implementing open-data policies¹ and relying on new cost-effective technology solutions to strengthen their connections to the people they serve. As of February 2019 there were more than 140 open-data policies at the state and municipal levels across the United States, according to the Sunlight Foundation, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to making government and politics more transparent and accountable.²

The five largest U.S. cities — New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Philadelphia — now have open-data policies. So do several other major U.S. cities, including Boston, San Francisco, Charlotte, Austin and Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, a growing number of small and mid-sized cities are joining the movement for open data and greater transparency. Bloomington, Illinois, which is home to fewer than 78,000 people, Jackson, Michigan, with a population of less than 34,000, and Williamsville, New York, with fewer than 6,000 residents, all adopted open-data policies in 2014. The number of municipalities with open-data policies more than doubled in the last 5 years. This trend shows that the benefits of open data are not limited to states and large municipal governments. Smaller communities also can enjoy the benefits of increasing the transparency of their information and operations.



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¹ The federal government defines open data as information resources that are “accessible, discoverable and usable by the public.” Gallup, February 25, 2019 (<https://opendatapolicyhub.sunlightfoundation.com/collection/>)
“Open Data Policy — Managing Information as an Asset,” Executive Office of the President, Office of Management and Budget,

² “The year in local open data — 2014 edition,” Sunlight Foundation Blog, December 18, 2014 (<http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2014/12/18/the-year-in-local-open-data-2014-edition/>)

Transparency can help local governments run leaner by providing more information to more people, with less effort and fewer costs.

Why transparency matters

Transparency in government is most often discussed in terms of its value to individual citizens, but it can benefit local governments as much as the people they represent. By engaging more fully and more directly with citizens, government leaders gain new opportunities to educate, inform and learn from their communities. Greater transparency can also help a local government run a leaner operation and “do more with less” by providing more information to more people, with less effort and fewer costs. Here are some of the key benefits of greater transparency:

- **Build and maintain public trust** — Making more information more readily available to the public builds trust between citizens and government. Gallup reported in October 2018 that 72% of U.S. adults have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in local government — far more so than in their state or federal governments — but maintaining a high level of public trust is an ongoing challenge.³
- **Foster economic growth** — Making government information more widely available also has the potential to generate significant economic value by fueling new products and businesses. In seven sectors alone — education, transportation, consumer products, electricity, oil and gas, health care and consumer finance — open data could generate \$3 trillion to \$5 trillion annually, according to the McKinsey Global Institute.⁴ The real-estate site Zillow, for example, is a \$90-million company that analyzes both local and federal government data to help people make informed decisions about buying a home.



³ “Americans Still More Trusting of Local Than State Government,” Gallup, October 8, 2018 (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/243563/americans-trusting-local-state-government.aspx>)

⁴ “Unlocking innovation and performance with liquid information,” McKinsey Global Institute, October 2013 (http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/business_technology/open_data_unlocking_innovation_and_performance_with_liquid_information)

To achieve the benefits of transparency, however, local governments must take deliberate steps to create a more open relationship with their citizens.

- **Empower citizens and increase community engagement** — When local governments are transparent, public trust increases. When trust is high, citizens are more engaged and feel empowered to take a greater degree of personal responsibility for their community.
- **Gain a better understanding of community needs** — Engagement is a two-way street. With increased transparency, trust and communication, local governments can interact with citizens to gain new insights and ideas, gauge more accurately what citizens and the community need, and set priorities accordingly.
- **Educate citizens** — Knowledge is the first step toward collaboration, cooperation and change. Savvy local government leaders are using greater transparency to educate citizens and enlist their support for important civic initiatives and projects.
- **Showcase progress and achievement** — By highlighting growth and change, local government leaders can give citizens a clear sense of what their government has achieved, what remains to be done, and how their government is working for them.⁵

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Key benefits of greater transparency

Build and maintain public trust

Foster economic growth

Empower citizens and increase community engagement

Gain a better understanding of community needs

Educate citizens

Showcase progress and achievement

Technology is the key to greater transparency in local government. The right digital tools can make transparency an achievable and scalable goal.

How local governments can become more open

There are three essential components in government transparency:

- 1) **Open-data policies** that direct local governments and their agencies to be more transparent
- 2) **Best practices** that bring those policies to life
- 3) **Technology solutions** that make information more accessible and deliver services more efficiently

In today's highly connected world, technology is the key to greater transparency in local government. In fact, transparency and digital access to information are synonymous. Without technology as the means to realize transparency, open-data policies and best practices would be little more than good intentions and wishful thinking. Only the right digital tools can make transparency an achievable and scalable goal. Yet in the past, technology sometimes created more barriers than opportunities.

Until recently, it was difficult to use technology to offer a clear path to widespread government transparency because too few Americans had broadband access to the Internet. Today, 70 percent of Americans have broadband access at home. Others can access the Internet using portable computers and mobile devices wherever free Wi-Fi or cellular service is available, or by taking advantage of public terminals at libraries and elsewhere. Only 15 percent of American adults today do not use the Internet at all. Among those, almost half told the Pew Research Center that the main reason they don't go online is because they don't think the Internet is relevant to them.⁵



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⁵ "Broadband Technology Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, September 2013.

Local governments can use a new generation of relatively low-cost, easy-to-use technology solutions that also offer a high return on investment.

How to prevent budget issues from blocking transparency

The cost of early technology solutions coupled with shrinking budgets has kept many local governments, particularly small and mid-sized cities, from pursuing greater transparency. Forced to choose between making information available online or paying the salary of a police officer or firefighter, many opted for public safety over public access.

Today, local governments can use a new generation of relatively low-cost, easy-to-use technology solutions to become more transparent and engage with citizens — solutions that also offer a high return on investment.

Four leading options include:

- 1) Meeting and records management solutions** — By automating meeting agendas and minutes, and automatically publishing records online, local governments can create a paperless system that works better for both government staff and the public. Digital records and advanced search tools make it easy for anyone to locate the exact information they need, which reduces the number of public requests for information and lessens the demands on staff.
- 2) Streaming government data** — By linking to the government website and automatically refreshing information as staff members work throughout the day, technology that streams government data online can provide the public with current information, while also making transparency less labor-intensive and eliminating the cost of hiring extra staff to post frequent updates.



3) Geographic information systems — Local governments use geographic information systems (GIS) to visualize, analyze and interpret spatial and geographic data, which helps them identify and understand relationships, patterns and trends that can lead to cost savings, greater efficiency and better decision making in both day-to-day operations and long-term planning.

4) Streaming audio and video — Local governments don't have to stop at making agendas, minutes, records and other public documents available online. They can also use the Internet to provide both live and on-demand webcasts of public meetings — from city council meetings to various other official gatherings and municipal projects.

By streaming public meetings, local governments can energize and support the democratic process. Citizens previously disengaged from their local government now have a convenient way to stay informed about public issues, track public policy, and take a more influential role in the process. They no longer have to worry about adjusting their schedules to attend meetings in person, or spend time searching for radio or television broadcasts of public meetings. These web-based services allow citizens the freedom to choose when and where they catch up on decisions that affect their communities.

Four ways cities can increase transparency

1

Meeting and records management solutions

2

Streaming government data

3

Geographic information systems

4

Streaming audio and video

Conclusion

By making strategic investments in key technology solutions, local government leaders can achieve greater transparency, making it easier for the public to find and access information. In turn, transparency helps local governments build a trust-based relationship with the citizens they serve, one that ensures more efficient delivery of services, contributes to economic growth and promotes cooperation and mutual support.

About iCompass

iCompass Technologies provides cloud-based meeting and records management solutions for local governments, working under the guiding principle that software to improve efficiency and transparency should be available for any sized organization.

For more information, visit iCompass.tech.com.

