



What Is The NolaStat Project?

The NolaStat Project recommends a package of transparency and accountability reforms to be implemented by the City of New Orleans. The reforms aim to improve the quality, efficiency, and equity in the delivery of city services by improving access to city data, and by developing systems of performance accountability. A NolaStat Steering Committee of community stakeholders will provide oversight of these reforms in City Hall.

The NolaStat Project endeavors to 1) Answer the public's need for better information while also improving record flows between public officials; 2) Institutionalize performance management; and 3) Leverage new information systems technology to improve the quality of interactions between citizens and government.

The plan of action is flexible, with short-term strategies, and scalable long-term objectives.

The NolaStat Project goals support three fundamental democratic principles:

1. Transparency

The NolaStat Project will foster greater transparency by leading the call for the creation of a data catalog on the City of New Orleans Web site where city administrative data would be published. The Data Catalog would provide the public with universal access to raw data, published in a timely manner, with regular frequency, in a machine-readable format. The New Orleans Data Catalog would improve upon earlier reform examples, such as the D.C. Data Catalog, and the new portal created by President Obama for federal records, Data.gov.

2. Accountability

The NolaStat Project will foster the creation of an institutionalized process of performance review and management using data published through the Data Catalog, to establish benchmarks and goals in the delivery of government services. Accountability Sessions, styled after successful CitiStat processes around the country, will be used internally as an administrative tool to set cooperative inter-agency goals, to identify resources required to achieve those goals, and to periodically review progress in the attainment of goals. Outcomes of accountability meetings will be part of the public record.

The Data Catalog will also create the opportunity for accountability to citizens themselves, allowing programmers in the community to develop performance dashboards and reports -- including charts, maps, calendars, and alerts -- in feature-rich mash-ups of data with Internet tools. Working with technology innovators, the media, watchdog organizations, bloggers, and active citizens will be able to independently audit government performance achievements, and to have more informed interactions with public officials.

3. Civic Participation

The NolaStat Project will help people use data, fostering the use of the Data Catalog to create new ways to inform and empower citizens, and to improve the quality of interactions with public officials. The Data Catalog will allow neighborhood associations and civic, issue-based organizations to use data to answer their particular needs, to create Internet applications and conduct research which improves their knowledge of government activities, to have more meaningful interactions with public officials.

A data catalog in and of itself may not be useful to a broad audience, but innovators in technology and social media can operate as intermediaries to re-package raw data in formats that are friendly and useful to a general audience. Better-informed citizens will have higher value interactions with public officials, no longer merely asking for information, but having a knowledge-based dialog in support of an idea or an issue. The NolaStat Project will support activities which improve the public's capacity to use data.

Why Is NolaStat Needed?

Improved Public Access to Data Helps to Stimulate Neighborhood Investment

Neighborhoods have complained that their recovery from Hurricane Katrina has been impeded by the lack of access to city data required to apply for philanthropic development grants. Corporate and non-profit real estate developers, as well as academic researchers, have expressed similar complaints.

An open data policy would relieve the need for data by providing records online in a pre-approved, unrestrained process. Public officials would benefit because they would no longer have to respond to public records requests for data already published on the city's Data Catalog.

The Same Solutions Which Improve Public Access to Data, Also Improve Government Data Sharing and Performance Management

Flood-damaged homes have been placed on demolition lists and bulldozed by the city without properly notifying the homeowner, and even after the city has issued the homeowner a building permit. These are disastrous examples of inadequate information systems integration, and the lack of any process to correct deficiencies in business processes.

The integration of information systems in a services-oriented architecture design not only makes it possible to publish records on a data catalog for public consumption, but also improves the capacity of public officials to share records from a centralized access point. Meanwhile, administrators can more readily develop business intelligence tools using the data catalog to track and correct performance issues across departments.

Better Informed Citizens Have Higher Quality Interactions with Public Officials

Asymmetrical access to crime data lowers the quality of interaction with police representatives in community meetings. Meetings tend toward the recitation of crime counts from standardized reports, rather than discussions about strategic problem solving, and deep analysis about how to create a safer community. One critical concern is the responsiveness of the police through the 911 system. Common complaints are that operators don't answer 911 calls, or that the police take a long time to respond to calls in some neighborhoods. Because reports of those metrics aren't produced, the discussion never takes place about the reality or the extent of the problem.

The Data Catalog will allow innovative citizens to calculate metrics which answer concerns not addressed by standard reports— unanswered 911 calls, for example, or 911 response times — thus creating a more dynamic and elevated interaction with public officials to answer real concerns. Concerned citizens or issue-based organizations would also be able to independently audit statistics to test the authenticity of official reports. Over time, confidence in city statistics should improve as the official and the audited numbers converge, while the quality of interactions with public officials becomes more meaningful and productive for citizens.

As Government is Increasingly Digitized, Citizens Increasingly Require Digital Democracy

Just because records are warehoused electronically doesn't necessarily mean that they're being used electronically. Even though permit applications are stored in a database, citizens are still forced to hunt for those applications in newspaper listings of meeting agendas. This leads to surprise zoning adjustments to, for example, change the zoning at an address from residential to commercial, with potentially dramatic consequences for the quality of life in a neighborhood.

A priority use case already identified which would benefit from the Data Catalog is a permitting alert system. Independent of the city, but using data published on the city's Data Catalog, programmers could collaborate with neighborhoods to develop tools to trigger a notification when a permit application is submitted to the city. The use case could be expanded to allow citizens to comment on a permit application, and for those comments to be electronically sent back to the city. Digital data provides the opportunity for citizens to interact with their government in revolutionarily new ways to defend their quality of life.

Action Steps

Short-term strategies are required to improve the prospects that candidates elected in the 2010 municipal elections will implement NolaStat reforms. Longer-term strategies are required to ensure that those reforms are completed in a meaningful way, and to harvest the opportunities available in the adoption of NolaStat reforms.

Research and Planning Underway

- Research national models of open records and performance management policy reforms to recommend best practices for NolaStat reforms.
- Inventory and assess the state of the city's information systems.
- Identify and prioritize the most important data sets for residents, and use cases for the data.

Proposed Steps Leading Up to the 2010 Municipal Elections (Year One)

The most vital short-term strategies are those necessary to raise public awareness, and to educate candidates who decide to run in the 2010 municipal, about the benefits of the NolaStat reform. The primary election will be held on February 6th, and the general election will be held on March 6th.

- Take advantage of the mayoral election to educate candidates on the benefits of implementing a Data Catalog. A public awareness campaign using grassroots outreach, and traditional and social media outlets, will elevate the benefits of the NolaStat reform in the consciousness of the electorate.
- Spearhead contract reform to ensure that all information services contracts contain a clause that data will be exposed through the Data Catalog.
- Work with community partners to begin prototyping an Internet application using city data which serves a critical public need.
- Build the NolaStat Steering Committee into a robust and credible authority for oversight of NolaStat reforms in city government.
- Cultivate personal relationships with public officials and data custodians in City Hall, to foster a spirit of cooperation and shared purpose.
- Foster the development of data-sharing agreements ahead of the creation of a data catalog, in order to demonstrate responsible use of data, and secure valuable lead time in the development of a critical data use.

- Continue to follow national developments in the creation of CapStat type reforms, and cultivate relationships with national experts to share knowledge, and to identify resources available for the IT investments and community engagement desired by the NolaStat project.

Proposed Steps Following the 2010 Municipal Elections (Year Two)

Longer-term strategies are defined by the monitoring and public awareness activities required to ensure that campaign commitments to implement NolaStat reforms are fulfilled. Additionally, activities in this period would begin the process of fostering the use of open data to prototype, develop, and implement Internet applications which serve a broad audience of information consumers.

- Advise in the creation of a city office of transparency and accountability to adhere to NolaStat objectives, and to follow national best practices in open records policy and performance management.
- Task the NolaStat Steering Committee with oversight of reforms under a new mayoral administration to ensure that the NolaStat reform recommendations are adopted in a robust and meaningful way.
- Support neighborhoods, the Citizen Participation Process, the media, watchdog organizations, and active citizens in their need for services which transform raw data into useful tools.
- Research and recommend solutions which foster improvements to data credibility, and which allow the public to add knowledge to data.
- Develop a strong user agreement and enforcement recommendations to ensure responsible use of data published on the Data Catalog.
- Dedicate time helping to build the capacity of underserved communities to use data. Educating at-risk youth in the technical skills required to use data might be an emerging activity as the NolaStat reforms mature.
- Propose an “Apps for New Orleans” contest for Web-based applications which respect user-centered design criteria, and which answer citizen-defined priority use cases.

Interim Findings Which Might Impact the Success of NolaStat Reforms

1. The NolaStat Reform Should Be Institutionalized to Survive Leadership Changes

The Data Catalog and performance management recommendations should be institutionalized to ensure that reforms persist beyond leadership transitions. Contract reform to guarantee that data managed in information services contracts gets published on the data catalog would secure the open records reform. Creating an ordinance tying the budget process to an accountability process would be one way to secure a performance management process. The NolaStat Steering Committee should provide long-term oversight to ensure that the process endures.

2. False Transparency and No Transparency Are Nearly the Same Thing

The veneer of transparency can impede the implementation of actual transparency. Just because a data set is made available on the city Web site, doesn't mean that it can be found, that it is useful, that it is accurate, or that it meets the public's needs. Public oversight is required to ensure that an open records policy is meaningful.

3. Cool Technology Doesn't Always Provide a Solution the Community Can Use

Undue attention is paid to cool technology used in front-end Web applications, without actually engaging citizens in the community to determine if their needs are being met by those applications. While the City of New Orleans was recently given an award for a feature-rich Web site, NolaStat usability tests show, for example, that it can take a savvy Internet user an hour and a half on the city's Web site to find dubious zoning information for an address.

The best assurance that data will be used in ways which benefits diverse communities, is to allow those communities access to data so that they can work with innovators who will create the information delivery systems that best serve their particular needs.

4. “But Who Cares About Data?”

The fact is that the most likely users of a Data Catalog aren't average citizens, but innovators in technology and social media who will transform that data into more useful forms to be consumed by a broader audience – with maps and charts, for example, or academic research and news stories. It should also be emphasized that the highest frequency users of the D.C. Data Catalog aren't external users (yet), but internal government agencies which require access to other agencies' records. This fact underscores the importance of a data catalog strategy to improve record flows in city government, and to support a performance management process.

5. The Institutions of Governance Must Change With Technology

Despite revolutionary changes in the way people interact with each other on the Internet, and new ways to mix and publish data in dynamic mash-ups, the business processes of government still operate by the technology of mainframe computers, personal spreadsheets, and “sneaker net” mailboxes. There will need to be a recognition that business processes will have to change in order to improve data management processes, and to improve service to citizens.

6. The Centralization and Outsourcing of IT Services to Contractors Is “A Significant Risk”

A D.C. FOIA officer issued a strong warning against the conflict of interest presented by IT contractors who become entrenched as permanent advisors to policymakers. The City of New Orleans should swiftly review all IT contracts, establish priorities which meet the needs of citizens (not contractors), and terminate contracts which don't meet well-established goals. Contractor control over data is a serious impediment to data access in New Orleans. Meanwhile, the capacity of departments to manage technical problems should be improved.

7. A Performance Management Process Must Strike a Balance Between Standard and Flexible Metrics

Nationally-accepted metrics of government performance are an important tool, but they shouldn't be over utilized. The costly lesson of a \$20 million overrun in a 2008 summer youth jobs program in D.C. was that public officials can become complacent in the review of reports which may disguise underlying problems. Government efficiency improvements, which can produce real cost savings, require flexibility, and the relentless pursuit of metrics which may reveal hidden problems.

8. Good Data Custodians Are Often Good Public Servants

An important benefit of the city's Data Catalog is relieving pressure on public officials who are inundated with public records requests to serve an active citizenry and journalists, and a broad array of post-Katrina recovery needs. These public officials may unnecessarily feel under assault. The Data Catalog should alleviate the pressure for common record requests, and liberate those public officials to focus on the work of the people. Meanwhile, data custodians should be afforded more opportunities to have positive interactions with the community, and to develop relationships of trust.

9. Fear of Bad Data Can Be An Impediment to An Open Records Policy

Public officials often don't have the resources or capacity to fix data problems, and may therefore be reluctant to publish their records on a Data Catalog. It is essential for stakeholders in the NolaStat Steering Committee to

recognize and address those concerns, whenever possible, by offering help from intermediary experts who can assist in improving data credibility. When merited, strong disclaimers about the accuracy of data should accompany data sets published on the Data Catalog. Similarly, metadata should contain qualitative information about the source, chain of command, transformations, and accuracy of data.

10. Fear of Confidentiality Violations Can Be An Impediment to An Open Records Policy

All data sets should be reviewed before being published on the city's Data Catalog to protect private citizens from the release of privileged information. On the other hand, privacy concerns shouldn't pre-empt transparency, when data elements which contain private information can be treated or removed from published data sets to ensure the proper balance between transparency and the right to privacy.

For More Information About NolaStat and Related Reforms

Visit the NolaStat Web site:

<http://NolaStat.org>

Visit the federal data catalog created by President Obama:

<http://Data.gov>

View over 200 data sets published on the D.C. Data Catalog:

<http://data.octo.dc.gov>