



Liberate Data: A Modern Transparency Plan for the New Mayor

By Brian Denzer

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Healthy democracies engage citizens and respond to their needs. But as we all remember, Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath overwhelmed government on all levels, leaving people helpless.

Neighborhood associations and non-profits stepped in, driving recovery with house-gutting services, case management, home rebuilding assistance, donations, housing and population surveys, and more. We still need government, however, in key areas including infrastructure repairs, blight abatement, and public safety, and the government must report its progress to the community.

Unfortunately, that hasn't happened. City government fails to define priorities in concert with the community, prevents easy access to information, and continues to be an impediment to recovery. The information that is available from the city is often locked behind Websites that are out-of-date, inaccurate, incomplete, and challenging to use. They give the appearance of transparency without providing really useful information.

Consider the example of the assessors' Website. Assessment maps weren't available for several years, yet the vendor selected by the assessors' office offered maps in other cities. In recent months, maps have become available; however, only 30 percent of properties display on the maps, and it still isn't easy to identify unfair or inaccurate assessments. Essential details are missing, such as square footage. The Website has nice aerial photography and looks sophisticated, but it's really just a veneer of transparency. It provides a powerful example of how government can introduce bias in the way information is presented – by virtue of its monopoly control over data – that can actually harm the public interest by allowing unfair assessments to persist.

According to nationally-respected real estate analyst Arthur Sterbcow, as much as \$150 million in property taxes remains uncollected by the city every year. Just half that amount would have balanced the city's budget last year without painful cuts to services. Furthermore, some portion of the revenue gain could be returned to homeowners as property tax relief by lowering the millage. This would also make New Orleans more attractive for investment.

Other city information remains locked up in paper form. Many are familiar with how challenging it is to scan newspaper listings for zoning change applications that could impact the quality of life in a neighborhood. In an era of smart phones and email alerts, publishing notices on paper is the modern equivalent of using scribes to transmit information when the printing press was the most advanced technology.

The few examples that exist of true cooperation and data-sharing between public officials and neighborhood associations convincingly demonstrate that when citizens and government work together, the sum is greater than its parts.

Some neighborhoods have found code enforcement officials receptive to using lists of blight complaints that were produced by neighborhood association housing surveys. This reduced the need for limited and overburdened code enforcement staff to conduct surveys themselves – in a city with over 50,000 abandoned properties – and allowed neighborhoods to express their own priorities for the properties that

require attention. What was lacking was a feedback loop: Neighborhoods still had to hunt down follow-up information about enforcement actions.

The city needs to get out of the business of attempting to build flashy applications, and instead focus on publishing good, timely, reliable data. That shift would allow more innovative information delivery solutions and analysis to emerge in an independent and competitive marketplace of ideas.

Other cities are cultivating the growth of an entirely new tech sector based upon building applications that transform government data into useful information. For example, it's possible in some cities to use privately developed iPhone applications to send pothole complaints to municipal 311 systems.

At the federal level, President Obama issued an open government memorandum on his first full day in office, declaring that government should be more transparent, participatory, and collaborative. The result is a comprehensive policy directive that requires agencies to publish records on Data.gov, and to improve their compliance based upon public feedback.

Such a commitment to open government by incoming Mayor Landrieu would support a healthy 21st Century democracy, support neighborhood revitalization, and signal a refreshing start to a new administration.

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