

Open Data in Los Angeles Office of the Controller

BY MARK MACK

The current controller for the City of Los Angeles, California, was elected in 2013 with the goal of reimagining local government through transparency, technology, and transformation. He immediately started working toward opening the books on the city's finances by creating an open data portal, ControlPanel LA, which provides information on the city's expenses, revenues, budget, and more.

The Los Angeles Controller's Office learned four major lessons during the development of their Open Data platform:

1. Achieve buy-in from government administration and elected officials.
2. Know your audience.
3. Put information in context.
4. Make sure the program is sustainable.

ACHIEVING BUY-IN

Without the support of the government's leadership, achieving online fiscal transparency is an impossible feat. The Los Angeles controller embraced the idea of "transparency by default," which means the controller's office does not separate public data from operational data. Such an expansive transparency agenda can be risky for elected officials because it provides an opportunity for scrutiny from their political opponents, their constituents, and the media.

Initially, some employers in the controller's office weren't excited about the open data platform. A mix of middle management and line staff who worked with data or public records requests shared concerns that the process was moving too fast and wasn't going to be executed properly. Despite these fears, the project continued and was launched three months after the controller took office. The speedy take-off was greatly assisted by technical help from the director of financial analysis and reporting and his staff, who figured out how to collect data from the current financial systems to use in the new open data platform. The controller's excitement about transparency filtered down to all levels of the office, making staff enthusiastic to be working on a project that no previous administration had tackled.

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When the open data platform was launched, in December 2013, the mayor issued an executive directive promoting transparency and accountability for the City of Los Angeles, making raw data publicly available in easy-to-find and accessible formats.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

For an interactive open data platform to succeed, there needs to be a clear understanding of who will be using it. The Los Angeles Controller's Office identified five primary segments that are likely to use their open data platform: media, the general public, internal city staff, the civic technology community, and prospective business partners.

Media. The media look at the platform constantly. Now that it has been established for a few years, it is one of the first places news agencies go when covering a story related to city finances. The open data platform provides the media with context as well. According to the director, the media can sort through eCheckbook data and generally find what they are looking for, adding that it doesn't always turn out well for the city — but that's how transparency works. It also turns out that the media's ability to grab stories from the platform can drive policymaking decisions, which happened with a strong public response to an article in the Los Angeles Times about the way trash was being collected, based on information from the open data platform.

General Public. The general public is interested in the city's finances. This group is the smallest segment to use the platform, probably because its members have the least amount of technical education on public finances. Raw-data platforms like the one the Controller's Office provides are essential for any type of open data effort, but if you really want to reach out to more than your technical audience, you need to curate the information, the director said. Curation of data is part of being transparent with communities that may not be able to interpret the data on their own, so the Controller's Office created the Checkbook LA app, which allows citizens to explore eCheckbook data through engaging

data visualizations, including charts and graphs. The office also created the community financial report (its popular annual financial report), which provides an online-only version of the city's comprehensive annual financial report in an easy-to-read format, so anyone who is interested can comprehend the city's finances and explore its operations. The goal of the community financial report is to educate and empower non-finance experts.

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Internal City Staff. While the City of Los Angeles staff may be the largest user of the open data platform, the Controller's Office has discussed ways of expanding their usage to make better use of the platform. The platform is a useful tool for city staff members who are interested in information that is already somewhat curated, putting together pieces of information that aren't necessarily easy to connect. The platform also provides a lot of information for staff members who are interested in departmental billing, revenues, expenditures, etc.

Civic Technology Community. When the platform was launched, the Controller's Office started to cultivate a relationship with people who were interested in civic technology and open data, from private-sector startups to academics. The controller wanted to put the data into the hands of people who could analyze the information and make a positive impact. For example, the Controller's Office became very involved with Hack for LA, a non-profit that is dedicated to bringing coders, entrepreneurs, students, activists, and governments together to solve the region's biggest problems through technology. The Controller's Office connected Hack for LA volunteers with the appropriate city data or with subject matter experts at city hall. For instance, staff in the Controller's Office connected a Hack for LA project called Food Oasis, which gives Los Angeles residents information about where to find healthy food in their neighborhoods, with local city council offices to increase the visibility of the project and foster a connection with the city's decision makers. Although the project is not directly related to finance, the Controller's Office was able to provide the project volunteers with the appropriate city data.

Prospective Business Partners.

The open data platform is also useful for groups such as vendors, consultants, and contractors that are interested in doing business with Los Angeles. These groups want to know how much money the city has spent on similar products or services. The Checkbook LA app, which is part of the open data platform, can be easily filtered to provide that information.

PROGRAM SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is a concern for any new program. In the case of transparency, it is essential — stakeholders will not tolerate organizations that stop sharing data, so once you've started, you're committed. The Controller's Office has taken measures to insure that the data it shares is updated in a timely fashion, and the open data platform has continued to perform with little interruption, despite personnel turnover.

Key Takeaways

- **Curate Data.** Curation of data is an important aspect of being transparent with communities that may not be able to interpret the information otherwise.
- **Have Policies in Place.** Formal policies clarify the goal of the project and provide momentum. A formal declaration of support explains why the initiative is necessary.
- **Collaborate Outside of the Finance Department.** Open data platforms can be a collaborative space, connecting financial information to other projects in ways that can help every city department, not just finance.
- **Be Sustainable.** Once you start being transparent, there's no looking back. Start out by sharing only information you'll be able to keep supplying. As the transparency program grows, so can the amount of data you share.
- **Keep Up with Technology.** Don't let technological updates limit transparency. Constant maintenance and oversight will allow the platform to stay in operation, even in the face of changes from external sources.

The program that runs the open data system is highly automated, so even if the person in charge of maintaining data leaves, the program will continue to update with the next month's information with minimal intervention. The automated processes of the program allows for new technical staff members to learn the system without feeling rushed to meet the next update deadline.

The open data platform also includes data that fall outside of the department's jurisdiction, from independent departments such as the Department of Water and Power, Los Angeles World Airports, and Port of Los Angeles. The owner of the platform ensures that these data are current, so the team running the platform have to reach out to these departments regularly.

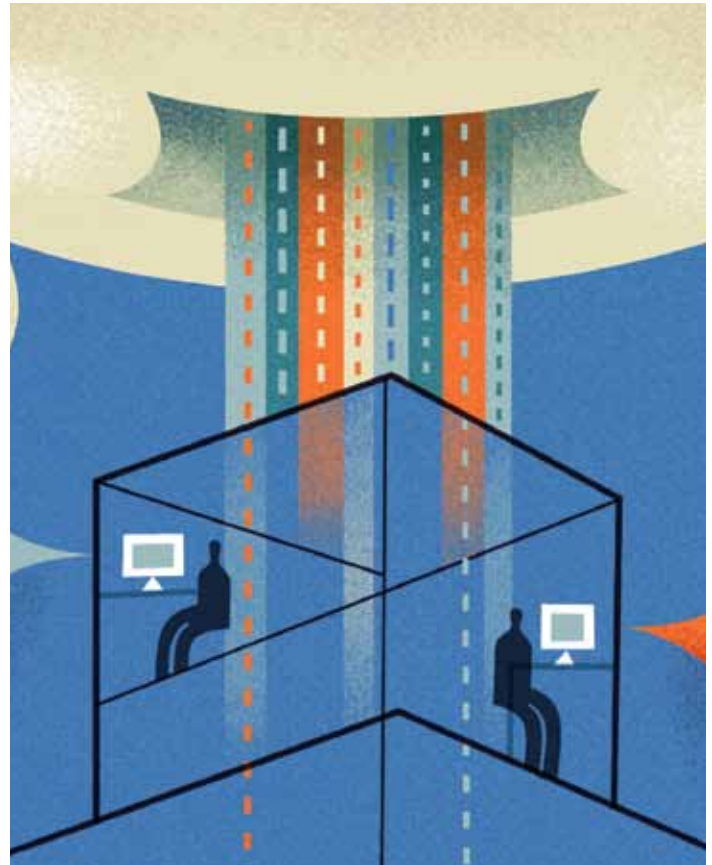
Another sustainability issue is being aware of changing policies. Last year, the Controller's Office needed to adjust the way it disclosed information on a part of its legal program regarding outside counsel payments. The change was the result of a court case that had no connection with the Controller's Office or the open data platform, but complying with the law meant that some of the information being shared had to be removed.

Adjusting to system updates also factors into program sustainability. For example, when the financial management system program was upgraded for the city's eCheckbook data, the existing automated processes had to be reprogrammed to capture the open data. The platform requires constant maintenance and oversight so it can be adjusted when changes to external sources occur.

CONCLUSIONS

An open data platform can be a great way to make local government finances more transparent, but each government will define its own transparency goals. The Los Angeles Controller's Office has adopted what it calls "transparent by default," sharing everything it can with its stakeholders. The first step in getting the program started was achieving buy-in from administrators and elected officials. Knowing your audience is another crucial step, allowing a government to

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share data that each segment of the community can understand and find useful. That information also needs to be in context. Knowing your audience isn't enough; you must also help users connect the dots of finances and programs. And finally, program sustainability is crucial; don't start a project you can't finish because your constituency will expect continuity of shared data. ■

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