

# **The City of Minneapolis Upgrades Its Online Financial Transparency**



**BY MARK MACK**

**T**he City of Minneapolis, Minnesota, started its online transparency project after the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG) gave it a D- rating for sharing government data. This turned out to be the catalyst it needed to embark on a citywide initiative.

In 2014, Minneapolis started exploring ways to make its finances more transparent to the public. With the support of newly elected city council members, the Minneapolis Finance Department was able to launch its financial transparency web platform in February 2015. (The site is at [minneapolismn.opengov.com](http://minneapolismn.opengov.com).) The city's communications team coordinated a public outreach campaign via press conferences, newsletters, and other outreach efforts, and in its first year, website traffic averaged 1,600 views per month, with 1,883 unique visitors. That's six times more traffic than the city's 2015 budget document page, but about the same number of unique visitors (1,908). The financial transparency website was launched in conjunction with the city's open data portal, which had been made available a few months earlier. Together, these two web platforms provided citizens, media, and city staff with valuable reference tools and an improved understanding of city services.

## BACKGROUND

The U.S. PIRG report, "Transparency in City Spending," came out in early 2013.<sup>1</sup> U.S. PIRG had developed a rubric that scored cities based on level of detail and comprehensiveness, ease of access to a single website, and search and download features. After receiving a poor rating for the city's efforts, the Minneapolis Finance Department began to make a concerted effort to implement a new online financial transparency initiative.

In November 2013, the city elected several new city council members who were interested in improving the city's transparency efforts. With these elected officials on board, the city council passed an open data policy in August 2014 that directed the Information Technology Department to create a publicly accessible web portal for government data. The finance department chose a project manager to lead the ini-

tiative and got started seeking a better way to share financial data — one that would help a broad audience fully understand the city's financial information. For example, rather than merely publishing large tables of numbers, the finance department chose a platform that allows users to easily search for summary or detail information at the department, fund, or account code level. The platform also had a robust suite of built-in graphics, making it easier for users at all levels of understanding to use the data.

Minneapolis was not on its own in addressing the transparency issue. Change was in the air, and several related government entities were also implementing their transparency initiatives at approximately the same time. In 2012, the State of Minnesota relaunched its 2009 Transparency and Accountability Project as Transparency MN; that project was

launched in January 2015. Hennepin County, Minnesota, was also working on its own financial transparency dashboard, which was launched in October 2014.<sup>2</sup>

## IMPLEMENTATION

The City Council Open Data Policy directed the information technology department (IT) to initiate an open data project in March 2014. The goal was to provide data for the public, media, and internal city staff. The finance department had to

decide early in the process whether or not the Open Data Minneapolis platform would adequately serve its needs, and it chose to find an alternative route that would provide access to additional context to complement available data. The city wound up developing two tools simultaneously for different purposes: to provide public access to large amounts of data (on the IT portal) and to provide context for the data (on the finance department portal). (IT made its open data portal available in December 2014.)

The project manager for the finance department's program started researching open with city staff and key leadership, including the finance officer, city coordinator, mayor's chief of staff, and the City of Minneapolis Ways and Means Committee chair.

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City staff members discussed features and capabilities, and began evaluating the benefits of OpenGov as a potential solution for online financial transparency. From May through September 2014, city staff members provided input on features, and the team began to research into potentially working with OpenGov. The project manager, after continuing due diligence and researching customer satisfaction by interviewing 8 to 10 existing customers, found that other local governments had reported positive experiences in working with the company. After the research was complete, the city council approved a request to sign a contract with OpenGov.

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Negotiations were concluded in December 2014, resulting in a two-year contract for \$46,900 (including three annual renewals locked in at \$24,900/year). This package includes monthly spending reports, revenue reports, and annual balance sheet reports consistent with the city's comprehensive annual financial report (CAFR) tables.

As the city finance department developed its expanded financial transparency website, staff members made a concerted effort to educate the public about its new online financial transparency tools. Public outreach efforts included social media, and in a major speech, the mayor announced

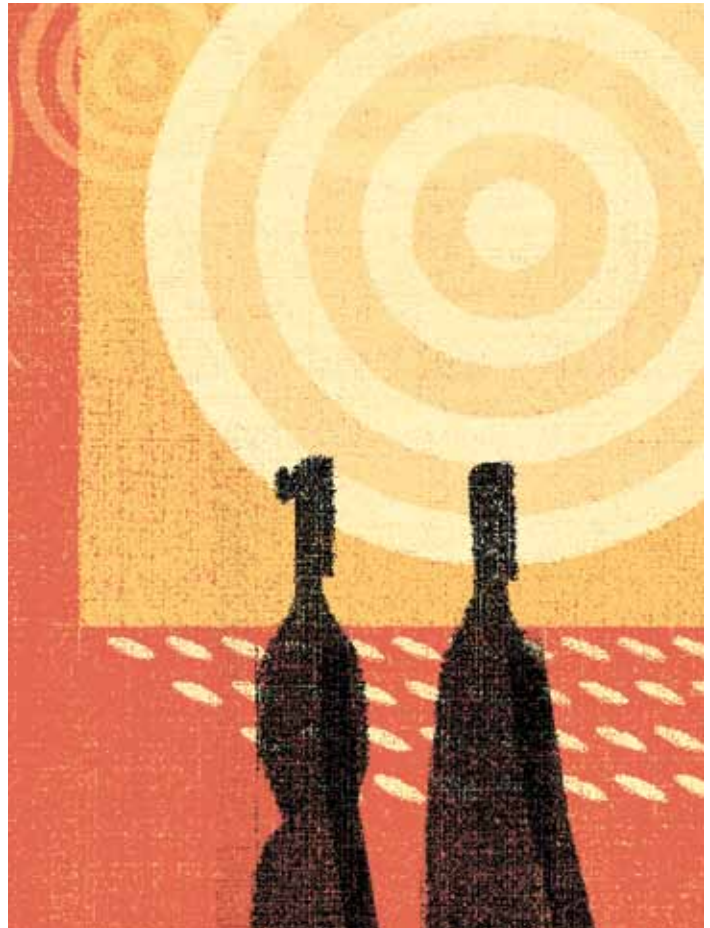
the launch of these tools. Staff also discussed the project at budget meetings and press conferences with the city council, the mayor, and the communications team.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CHALLENGES

As it started to develop its web platform with OpenGov, the finance department was also in the midst of a multiyear enterprise resource planning (ERP) upgrade, a process that factored heavily into decisions made about automating data uploads into OpenGov. Finance department staff decided to manually update data once a month until the ERP system could be integrated with OpenGov.

### Key Takeaways

- **Vote in Transparency.** Strong support from an elected official can help get a transparency effort started.
- **Link Policies to Action.** Policies need to support the transparency initiative.
- **Ask for Staff Support.** Involve the appropriate finance staff members in developing the site.
- **Don't Forget about Public Outreach.** Educate the public about the transparency initiative and incorporate their opinions and concerns.



The usefulness of detail at different levels was an early topic of discussion. To avoid potential confusion and misinterpretation of data, city staff decided against publishing transactional detail and favored the use of “Notes” to further explain apparent trend anomalies (e.g., revisions in department organizational charts) to provide short narratives in plain language. The goal was to use Notes to help users easily understand the data being reported by providing sufficient context, which improves OpenGov’s utility and provides meaning beyond the numbers themselves.

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## CONCLUSIONS

In creating its online financial transparency project, the Minneapolis finance department incorporated a number of important steps. At the very beginning, the city made sure it had support from the top — in this case, elected officials who greenlighted and supported the creation of an IT portal and a finance department portal. Next, the city created a policy to support its transparency initiative and sought staff support, involving the appropriate finance staff members to help develop the site and reaching out to the public to educate stakeholders about the project and to incorporate their opinions and concerns. Project management was also crucial so the project team could determine how much time should be dedicated to the project.

Once the project parameters were set, it was time to make sure the data selected for the platform were relevant and would provide information that would matter to stakeholders. A crucial step here was the city’s Community Engagement Minneapolis campaign, created to inform residents about the online transparency tools the city was developing. A successful public outreach campaign fosters better community engagement.

**The City of Minneapolis, Minnesota (population 422,331), has a \$1.4 billion annual budget and 4,133 employees.**

Finally, the city quickly learned that they’d need to get everyone on the same page (and keep them there). A major part of creating an online fiscal transparency initiative is to involve many people from different parts of government, to achieve buy-in and to make sure the information is useful. ■

### Notes

1. Transparency in City Spending, The Federation of State PRIGS, 2013 ([uspirg.org/reports/usp/transparency-city-spending](http://uspirg.org/reports/usp/transparency-city-spending)).
2. The state financial transparency portal, called the Transparency and Accountability Project for Minnesota, is available at [state.mn.us/opendata](http://state.mn.us/opendata). Hennepin County’s financial transparency dashboard is available at [hennepin.us/your-government/budget-finance/revepxdashboard](http://hennepin.us/your-government/budget-finance/revepxdashboard).

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