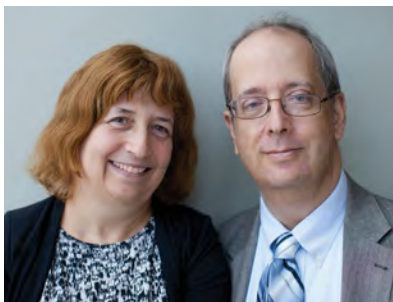




PERSPECTIVE

The Benefits and Challenges of Transparency Websites

BY KATHERINE BARRETT AND RICHARD GREENE



For many years, the City of Round Rock, Texas, has been putting “boatloads of data” on its website, according to Chief Financial Officer Susan Morgan. But having reams of fiscal information on the Internet didn’t mean anything was easy to find. That’s been changing, however, and now, with the aid of the Texas Comptroller’s office, this growing community of 120,000, 20 miles north of Austin, is one of 12 local governments that has earned the highest possible evaluation in the comptroller’s Transparency Stars program: five stars.

This four-year-old initiative provides guidance, graphic support, and a consistent approach to local government transparency. Stars are earned for meeting comptroller-set standards for providing the public with basic financial and budget data, as well as contracting and procurement, economic development, public pension, and debt information.

Why does this matter? R.J. Cross, author of the annual “Following the Money” report for U.S. PIRG (a federation of U.S. and Canadian public interest research groups), says that greater transparency in websites

increases “public trust in government.” Though empirical research to back this up is somewhat thin, Cross and others argue, sensibly, that giving taxpayers a chance to see inside the government’s books counters suspicions of nefarious internal government machinations. Moreover, it empowers taxpayers to participate more fully in their governments.

On an even more practical level, clear, publicly available information can save time for overworked finance offices. According to OpenGov, a company that provides transparency services to local governments, websites that provide clear, understandable budget and finance information to residents reduce public records requests by about 20 percent and cut the time spent answering questions from the city council by about half.

As with so many beneficial governmental operations, challenges abound. U.S. PIRG’s Cross cites a shortage of resources—both time and staff—to find errors, help ensure privacy and security, focus on data standardization, and provide regularly scheduled updates.

One of the biggest issues she sees is technological weaknesses. Antiquated software and paper-based processes make it difficult to keep websites updated and error-free. Technology can also fall short when legislatures or city councils lay out transparency mandates that practitioners find difficult to achieve because the information does not originally exist in the mandated format.

What’s more, government officials vary in their needs and desires. Some are intent on exhibiting performance measurements, others want to focus on in-depth budget details, and a growing number are looking for equity scorecards to show how dollars are divvied up in terms of geographic or demographic diversity. The menu is long, while time and money are always limited.

An important early step to making transparent information useful is to find out what the public wants.

Another hurdle that must be cleared is providing information that’s useful to people whose education level, interest, and access all vary greatly. The City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has been successfully dealing with this issue. It is one of 28 cities that are currently getting assistance from the City Budgeting for Equity and Recovery program run by What Works Cities, a part of Results for America. In the last several years, Philadelphia has made great strides in reaching out to its population to better communicate budget and other financial information at different levels that will meet the varying needs of residents.

For example, its 744-page five-year 2022 to 2026 financial plan is summarized in several different forms, including a four-page infographic version and a “Community Engagement Recap” that explains how the city’s outreach programs helped form the FY 2022 budget and beyond. City documents are presented at a seventh-grade reading level, and the infographic was translated into Mandarin, Vietnamese, Spanish, French, Arabic, and Russian. In summer 2021, the city posted a short budget process video on YouTube.

Like almost all evolving transparency efforts, these achievements have come with a lot of lessons learned. In January 2021, Philadelphia reached out with a community survey to provide input

on its upcoming budget. It received 13,000 replies—a good response, but troubling when the data was analyzed. While the city is 44 percent Black and 15 percent Latino and has a household median income that is far below the U.S. average, a large portion of the respondents to the survey were White women with graduate degrees.

The problem, said Sadia Sattar, deputy budget director, was that the survey was run mostly through online channels. Next time, she plans to meet residents where they are—for example, stationing survey takers outside local grocery stores. “This is a city with a high population that is under the poverty level. You have to be careful that when you produce things, they are accessible to everybody,” she said.

An important early step to making transparent information useful is to find out what the public wants. “We encourage governments to ask community members what types of information they’re most interested in, and in what format,” said Greg Jordan-Detamore, strategy and design lead for OpenCities, part of the What Works Cities technical assistance effort. One way to find this out is by testing a website for usability—getting permission from a select group of users to observe how they use websites and the kinds of problems they encounter.

This approach helped the City of New Orleans, Louisiana, understand why information it was posting to its website about contracting was getting disappointing reactions from local businesses. The OpenCities team began to research the question by first talking to vendors and then asking them to demonstrate how they located open bid opportunities in the city.

The OpenCities team discovered that many individuals who were looking for bid opportunities were not using the city website at all. The reason? Historically, New Orleans’ website had provided a link to their third-party procurement solutions platform (BRASS), which led users out of the

city website domain. Vendors who bookmarked that site stopped seeking information on the city website and missed out on timely announcements and updates posted to the Purchasing and Supplier Diversity Offices' primary web pages.

"There is a lot of insight you can uncover simply by observing," said Owen O'Malley, OpenCities project manager.

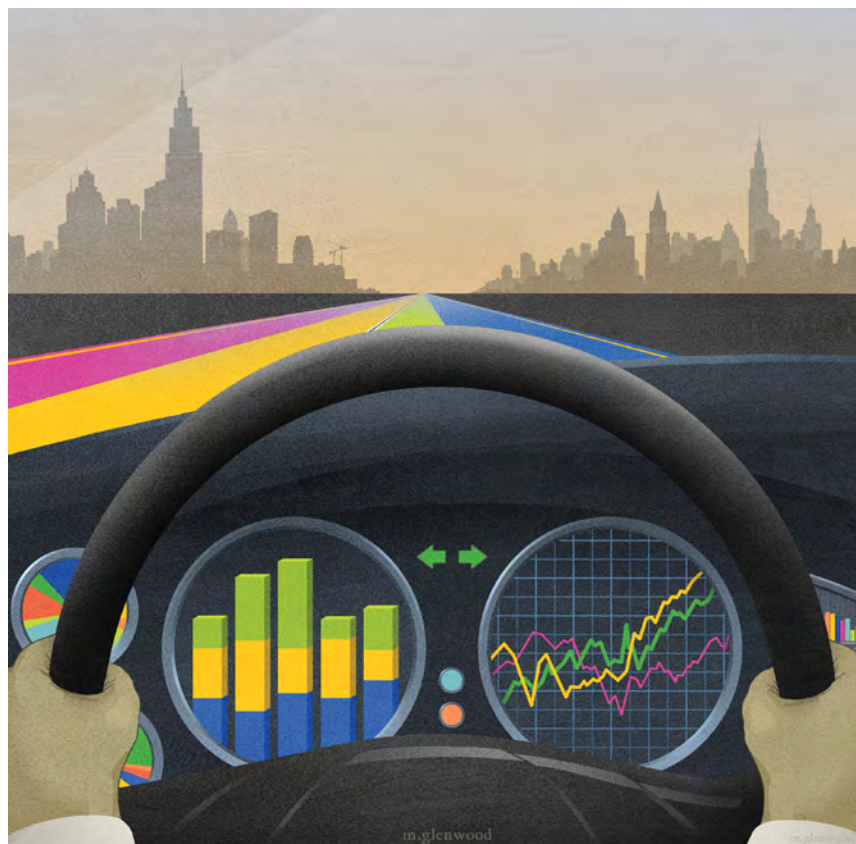
Much help is available from nonprofit groups and companies that specialize in government transparency, as well as state agencies. For example, staff in the Ohio Treasurer's office provides technical assistance to local governments on a voluntary basis, while also assisting local governments in displaying data. The Project Mountaineer program, run by the West Virginia State Auditor's office, provides interested city and town officials with interactive dashboards and "enhanced reporting functionality and fiscal health monitoring."

In the State of Texas, changes to the comptroller's approach over the years reflect the way transparency websites have morphed over time.

The first such effort there, called the Leadership Circle, ran from about 2009 to 2014 and focused on providing an online government checkbook. Data was provided in PDF form, which could not be downloaded, easily accessed, or analyzed. The effort did not have rigorous standards, and local governments were admitted into the "Leadership Circle" relatively easily.

In contrast, data in the seven-year-old Transparency Stars program must be provided in a downloadable format and PDF presentations are not accepted. Forms are provided to aid local governments in making information accessible to the visually impaired and to ensure that the information provided is complete and meets all the comptroller's criteria.

Texas provides visualization tools and assistance for governments that have problems, questions, or special circumstances that don't fit neatly into



a mold. Today, 205 local governments in the state have received at least one Transparency Star. There's still a long way to go in a state with 254 counties, 50 community college districts, more than 1,200 cities, more than 1,200 school districts, and nearly 2,500 special purchase districts, all of which are eligible for voluntary participation.

The assistance provided by Texas has been a real boon to Tarrant County, another of its 12 five-star recipients. According to Kandice Boutte, assistant director of the Tarrant County Budget and Risk Management Department in Texas, the idea of providing clear financial information for residents wasn't new to the county, but the Texas Transparency Stars

program provided guidelines for putting pertinent information in one central location and helped it think about the placement of information, the ease of navigation, and the number of clicks it might take a user to get the information they needed. "The program allowed us to focus our efforts and take a step back to think about this as an actual consumer," she said.

Boutte sees the most value has flowed to residents. "If you have a question, you should be able to get answers in a centralized place," she said. "We live in a world where folks protest and have questions and want to hold elected officials accountable. Part of our job is to provide information to the public, so they know what their tax dollars are being spent on." ■

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