

BOSTON, OPEN CITY?

City Councilor Michelle Wu proposes open data ordinance for Boston

By Dennis Keohane, Boston Globe

On Monday, Boston City Councilor At Large Michelle Wu filed an “open data ordinance,” aimed at requiring the city’s agencies and departments to make their various datasets available online, using publicly developed open standards. The ordinance will be proposed at the Boston City Council’s meeting on Wednesday.

The logic behind making more of the city’s data available to the public is mainly to create opportunities for civic innovation, something Mayor Walsh and the [New Urban Mechanics](#) office has been pushing heavily since the start of 2014.

“Boston has been doing a great job of making some data available already, and using that data to measure performance,” Wu said in an interview.

“An open data ordinance would codify all that and shift the expectations of what would be available,” she added. “This is the direction of innovation and government today; the days are over when we can simply be reactive and waiting for people to call city hall or request information.”

While Boston already has a data portal that makes some datasets available to the public, the city does not have any requirements to make data accessible beyond the Massachusetts Public Records Law. Boston currently has 46 datasets open to the public while New York has had over a thousand datasets made available since the city

enacted an open data law in 2012, according to a statement from Wu's office.

While one goal of making more city datasets available to the public would be more government transparency, the opening of City of Boston's databanks would also allow people who have great ideas and "know how to use data," as Wu said, to create more civic innovation.

Both New York and San Francisco have enacted open data laws that have led to more civic innovation. The press release specifically cited San Francisco's partnership with Yelp (to display the city's publicly available health inspection scores on restaurant's Yelp site) as an example of how open data can lead to innovation.

The lack of open data rules in Boston creates a situation where departments can refuse to let the city post their public databases, like the city assessor's office currently does with property records.

For the open data ordinance to be a success, there will need to be some oversight, Wu said, in order to make sure that data that could infringe on someone's privacy or create a safety isn't made public. Another issue that could arise by making more data publicly accessible is the reality that various programs and web platforms are used by different departments to track information each using different type of formatting and data collection methods.

Wu said that when New York passed an open data law, they set a 2018 deadline for all the city's departments to reach compliance. She added that New York is well ahead of schedule at this point. Wednesday's city council meeting will present an opportunity to begin the process of figuring out what a Boston open data law will look like. "There will need to be some time necessary for everyone to get on the same page," Wu said. "And it is important that it's put in format that is most usable to civic innovators."

To do that, Wu hopes that the public will participate in the conversation to decide the types of data that will be made public, which formats the city will use, and what the timeline for all departments to comply with a possible law should be.

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