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WGBH Commentary

Boston's Brave New World Of Open Data Access

By Michelle Wu

Public accessibility is a time-honored Boston concept. Our Boston Public Library boasts of being the oldest publicly-supported municipal library in the world, established in 1848. And for the last 380 years, Bostonians have enjoyed the nation's first urban park, Boston Common.

Today's new frontier of information and access is in the digital commons, as we turn online to download books, buy clothes, and answer questions.

This week marked a huge step forward in accessing city government online as well. By Monday evening, Boston had its first Executive Order and draft Municipal Ordinance calling for open government and open data.

Mayor Marty Walsh reaffirmed his commitment to transparency outlined in his inaugural address by signing an executive order directing the city's Chief Information Officer to issue a City of Boston Open Data Policy that would make data available while protecting privacy, confidentiality, and security.

At this week's Boston City Council meeting, I am proud to introduce a draft Open Data Ordinance requiring further interdepartmental coordination, reporting, and public participation in developing open data standards.

With these efforts, Boston joins a small but growing list of local governments that have passed laws requiring government agencies to share data freely and openly.

No longer are we satisfied with meeting public records requirements, including federal Freedom of Information Act obligations, in a reactive way, responding to citizen-generated requests slowly on paper.

Instead, open data laws call for proactive information sharing, inviting transparency, scrutiny, and accountability.

From parking tickets to small business permits and licenses, student enrollment to pothole complaints, cities are already collecting an incredible amount of information. With such metrics, government today should center on data-driven decision-making to ensure efficiency, equity, and inclusion.

Boston has turned to data to measure results for years.

Under Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston launched a performance measurement system called Boston About Results in 2006, setting goals and metrics for each city department, with comparison to performance in previous years. In 2012, the city launched a corresponding app showing statistics and scorecards by department. The Boston Police Department's COMPSTAT program tracks crime statistics against historic trends and helps BPD make smart decisions about targeting resources.

With this week's open data initiatives, Boston is pushing even more vigorously ahead. What turns civic engagement into true civic participation is the opportunity for the public to access data directly, accelerating the pace of collaboration and innovation.

In Chicago, which has had an open data policy since 2012, a weekly "open government hack night" connects web developers, civic leaders, and innovators around new solutions. They have produced a Vacant & Abandoned Buildings Finder, a map to check the zoning for any building in the city, and—my favorite—an app to search any City Council legislation filed in recent years.

San Francisco's open data policies have evolved from a 2009 executive order, to a municipal ordinance passed one year later, then amended and expanded in 2013. The city's website highlights several apps developed using open data, including sfpark.org, to see real-time availability of parking spaces, and EcoFinder, to identify locations for recycling or disposal of different materials.

Open data brings transparency and accountability to government, but even more importantly, it brings the opportunity for collaboration and breaking down silos – between departments and between fields. Imagine apps to help match food deserts with urban agriculture, to better serve our special needs students with programming, or to connect our seniors to events around the city. The possibilities are without boundary and without limit.

We have a long list of open data champions in city hall, starting with Mayor Marty Walsh, principal data scientist Curt Savoie, Chris Osgood, and Nigel Jacob of the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics, and Chief Information Officer Justin Holmes. Their work has been amplified in collaboration with advocacy groups and volunteers such as Code for Boston, a Code for America Brigade that brings together techie innovators to tackle civic and social problems.

Opening up municipal data means that residents, advocates, students, web developers, journalists, businesses, government watchdogs and government employees alike can be civic innovators for our city.

Today's Boston beautifully connects our history and tradition of open access with our present and future focus on innovation. As we enjoy lunch from food trucks on Boston Common and download movies from the Boston Public Library's streaming media collection, City Hall has opened up even more for public collaboration and new solutions from open data.