



MAKING CITIES BETTER.

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ROUNDTABLE

## The Data Dividend

When it comes to making cities better, accurate and abundant data are powerful tools. In New Orleans and Detroit, which share many challenges — including vacant property and high crime and poverty — open data can help citizens improve their communities, officials strategize for effective change, and foundations and developers identify investment opportunities.

**By Christian Madera**

Kurt Metzger is executive director of Data Driven Detroit (D3), founded in 2008 to track neighborhood-level indicators, create greater access to data and build a warehouse of comprehensive information.

Denice Ross is information systems designer at the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC), which has gathered, analyzed and disseminated data about New Orleans since 1997.

Both D3 and GNOCDC participate in the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership, a collaborative effort by the Urban Institute and local partners to further the development and use of neighborhood-level information in policymaking and community building.

Amy Liu, deputy director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution, works to improve metropolitan competitiveness, development and equity, and creates, in partnership with GNOCDC, the New Orleans Index, which tracks and distributes data in the city since Hurricane Katrina. Christian Madera, who writes the Open Cities column at americancity.org, interviewed these three experts about data use in their cities, breaching the digital divide and the path to open gov.

**CAN YOU PROVIDE A QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE STATUS OF OPEN DATA IN YOUR CITY?**

**Kurt Metzger:** Open data in Detroit is in its infancy. We have a variety of social media sites and public officials talking about new developments and new restaurants, directed at telling the story that there is life in Detroit and the region. We view our role at Data Driven Detroit as one of developing more detailed information in terms of housing patterns and public safety issues — trying to pull administrative data out of the various municipalities and make it more readily available to the public.

**Denice Ross:** The national movement toward open data, open government and gov 2.0 has really influenced our city in particular, and the national open gov movement has redefined what good government means at the local level. Our new mayor, Mitch Landrieu, knows that in order to be successful he has to embrace open gov. It's also redefined what the public expects from City Hall. The opportunity for New Orleans is to adapt the lessons learned from

Washington, D.C., Boston, San Francisco and Seattle, but the challenge will be that we can't assume that our path to open government will be the same as theirs.

#### AMY, WHAT IS THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION WORKING ON IN NEW ORLEANS AND DETROIT?

**Amy Liu:** Brookings has a five-year history of working in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast post-Katrina. The effort has been two-pronged: One is doing analysis to improve the federal role in promoting a quality recovery from the storm. The second is called the New Orleans Index, which tracks recovery trends across housing, the economy, infrastructure, services and population. The work has changed recently from focusing on post-disaster recovery to asking how to create a great American city, and how to change the metrics to track outcomes that really matter to city and regional success. So it's not just a data exercise, but also working with political, business and civic and neighborhood leaders in support of that. We don't have a history of deep engagement in Detroit, though it is an important part of the work Brookings is doing around how to help an older industrial city reinvent its economy following the recession. In a lot of ways there are similarities between the stresses that New Orleans and Detroit have overcome.

#### WHAT CHALLENGES ARE YOU FACING?

**KM:** The city of Detroit has never been one to make information readily available. This has been an issue at all levels of government, including the state. There's been a history of thought within government that data can be used against you, and that it's better not to share information because somebody will turn it into a negative. My response has always been, "Well, they're going to talk negatively about the city of Detroit and have been for years. Perhaps it would be nice if you started to use information to benchmark yourself and tell your own story, rather than spend inordinate amounts of time defending yourself and trying to blame the messenger." It's always better to be proactive than reactive. We created Data Driven Detroit to be a totally independent entity so no one would see us as having some ulterior motive or agenda.

**DR:** New Orleans' situation is uncharted territory. If you look at the Sunlight Foundation's cycle of transparency, it is this virtuous cycle where data is released to the people, great things happen, government is improved and more data is released. What's missing is the big step that happens before there are even data sets, and that's getting a city's gov 1.0 in place before it moves to 2.0. It's about finding business processes that work and make sense, and using technology as a course of doing business.

#### CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF DATA IN THE REVITALIZATION PROCESS?

**KM:** Right now in Detroit we're talking about reimagining, reengineering, rightsizing — any number of terms have been used to describe it. Along with partners including the Detroit Office of Foreclosure, Detroit Vacant Properties Campaign and the University of Michigan, we recently did a survey of all the residential parcels in the city to get a feel for what exists in terms of vacant land, vacant buildings, occupied buildings and building conditions. We're trying to develop a broad set of indicators so as to better understand and describe our neighborhoods. In this way, the process of city redesign will be informed by very detailed information, which will be available to decision-makers and community members alike. We firmly believe that people, armed with the most comprehensive data available, can come to consensus. So often it's a top-down approach. We also believe that better data will allow our strong philanthropic base and others who want to invest in the city to know the best places for their investments and be able to measure the results of those investments.

**AL:** Data is absolutely critical so that we can make informed decisions. It tells us both the challenges and the assets we have in our community. It also helps us identify outcomes. Once we see what we have in terms of our strengths and assets we need to ask, "What are our goals? What metrics do we want to change to help us achieve them?" If the goals are to increase the value of land, increase housing affordability or the mix of housing, or to improve retail investment in underserved neighborhoods — whatever the goals are, data can provide baseline understanding of our starting points and enable us to benchmark progress moving forward.

## WHAT ARE YOUR NEXT STEPS IN TERMS OF GATHERING AND PROMOTING DATA IN YOUR CITY?

**KM:** We continue to build upon this [land and building] survey. This will allow Detroit to get on the map with real-time, community-developed, primary data. We're starting to work with community groups to understand property ownership, which is one of the largest data voids in Detroit — the ownership records are terrible. We're trying to get communities to feed back information as homes get demolished, occupied or rehabbed. Our data are beginning to be used for public safety, they're being used by public schools to identify dangerous and vacant buildings around schools. They're certainly being used by the city for demolition plans, and we're even working with DTE Energy to identify areas where they should be concentrating some of their energy efficiency money.

**DR:** The path everyone talks about is the path that big cities have taken: First there is mayoral commitment, then a deep-dive team goes in and liberates the data, then they put it in an open data catalog, you sponsor an app contest and the magic happens. The pressures on New Orleans and Detroit are very different from those on New York and D.C., and that's why I think the path that cities like ours should consider taking is one that's really incremental, focused on prioritizing the data that will have the greatest impact for the public, and taking advantage of apps that already exist.

During the lead-up to his inauguration, Mayor Landrieu convened 17 task forces. What we have from that is documentation of the public's priorities. For example, neighborhoods want an early notification system. There have been many documented cases of surprise land use changes where citizens don't find out about something until the very last step in the process. If data on new building permits, for example, were released to neighborhoods early, then residents would have a chance to be proactive and discuss plans with the developer, and get in place a community benefits agreement or a good neighbor agreement. The other clear message was not that citizens wanted reams of broad data; they want government to have better performing services and be more responsive. There are existing apps for those two needs that are being used successfully in other cities — EveryBlock for early notification and SeeClickFix for a 311-like interaction. Innovation is risky, and if EveryBlock and SeeClickFix are already doing this, it would be wise for cities to tap into what they already know works.

## HOW DO YOU APPROACH THE ISSUE OF LACK OF ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET AMONG CERTAIN SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION?

**DR:** It is crucial that gov 2.0 not increase disparities in access to government. Something like an early notification system would work pretty well in New Orleans because we have very engaged neighborhood associations. The electronic dissemination of the information is just a starting place. For example, if a neighborhood association gets an email about a proposed bar going into the neighborhood, community leadership can print that out, include a snippet about it in their newsletter they mail and then talk to people in the neighborhood. The technology is just a starting place for a lot of real-world interaction. One role that government could play is to strengthen the neighborhood associations and formalize that process a little bit so that people are not getting left out.

**AL:** The current conversation about broadband access has to move away from rural broadband. We need policy that's also focusing on underserved areas in our urban community. The quality of Internet connection does not always exist there. There's also a generational gap. A lot of younger people regardless of income have access to handheld devices. How we bridge that gap and take advantage of handheld devices to empower citizens is something to consider.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO HAPPEN AT THE STATE OR FEDERAL LEVEL TO SUPPORT YOUR WORK WITH DATA?

**AL:** The most important thing the federal government can do is fund data collection and make it available to the end user, not just a government agency. We're in the midst of a major Census count, but we continue to defund the Census and defund their capacity to get accurate counts. We are not funding economic agencies to collect economic

data. So in an environment where the public is demanding more transparency and more engagement, we need to find a way to empower the marketplace, whether it's citizen action or private-sector decisions, through better, more regular and more accessible data across the entire government. It's not just about demographic, environmental or economic data, but also about spending information. We need to do a better job of being transparent about where federal dollars are going.

#### HOW DO YOU MAKE THE CASE FOR FUNDING?

**KM:** The message from the federal government since Obama has been in office has been data-oriented. In order to qualify for funding, you have to have information. You have to be able to show the need, but you also have to show that you can monitor what's going on. You have to be able to track programs as they unfold. We've been working with a couple of groups locally around Promise Neighborhoods, and it's clear that data, information and real-time systems for reporting have to be in place. The clarion call is that you have to be able to provide the data to support the programming that you want. You can't just say, "Woe is us, give us money." You have to be able to show why you need the money, how you will prove the outcomes and how you will show that the money has been well spent. Detroit has not done that well in the past.

**DR:** In an ideal world the move to open gov will make city functioning more efficient and effective. Theoretically there are cost savings there, if it's done well. There's certainly been philanthropic investment in the nonprofit sector to help build the civic will for open data, and I think that's been successful. The public expects more data in a more meaningful context. The demand is there in large part because of the philanthropic investment in neighborhood groups and nonprofits working in the civic arena.

#### WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER CITIES AND COMMUNITIES THAT WANT TO USE DATA TO DRIVE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND REVITALIZATION?

**KM:** We get very teary eyed when we see places like San Francisco, where the mayor says, "I'm going to put data sets up, and I'm going to look for folks to come and develop apps to make this available to do what you want with it." I do think that social media is going to make it easier for groups to start putting this info together, even if it's neighborhood groups just sharing information. We're trying to build the case for government information sharing by getting stories from the community as to what information they need, why they need the information and how the information can be used, rather than just us saying, "it's critical." I think eventually the technology is going to overwhelm administrations across the country and they're going to have to comply, more or less.

**DR:** Cities should take an incremental approach and always focus on the users and the tasks they need to accomplish. Phase in some early successes so those who are providing the data see it making a positive difference. It's tempting, if you listen to a lot of the transparency discussions, for the public to want to take a watchdog approach or journalists to take a "gotcha" approach to open data, but the process of opening government data at a fundamental level has to be a collaboration between government and the public.

**AL:** There is tons of data out there. But data has to be nested in a conversation about goals and aspirations, and only then can we use it to guide our decisions and actions. Both New Orleans and Detroit are at a point where they have received a lot of federal resources. At the end of the day the future depends on how citizens and local leadership decide to act. Data are really important to help them determine the path forward. What investors in these cities are looking for is the stewardship of money and the delivery of outcome, and the capacity to do it in an ethical way. If New Orleans and Detroit want to continue to be beneficiaries of federal, philanthropic and private-sector investment, they have to show leadership, which can't be quantified.