

## Open Data: Embracing 21st Century Economic Development in California

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We launched an Open Government working group for the State of California earlier this year – with our most recent roundtable at San Francisco-based accelerator Runway last week – to increase collaboration between government and the civic startup community.

This group will benefit people and communities through enhanced services utilizing open data. The benefits to the public, including transparency and reduction in lag time to inquiries are astounding as are the benefits to governmental offices, which include a decrease in paperwork and staff hours on public information requests, for example.

The idea we espouse sounds simple enough, in theory. If government agencies and offices were to institute forward-looking open data policies statewide then the growing industry of civic-focused startups will grow exponentially. These civic entrepreneurs will create new products and platforms that will continue to increase government efficiency, while the reduction in costs to taxpayers will undoubtedly have a net-positive impact on society.

One example is BuildingEye, a civic startup that has created a real-time map with all of the locations that have building permits in the cities in which BuildingEye operates. The San Francisco Entrepreneur in Residence company makes it easier for the public to see what is going to be built in your neighborhood with a click of button. Currently, though, BuildingEye only works in a handful of cities that have opened their data.

At our second open data roundtable hosted at San Francisco-based accelerator Runway last week, we charted a roadmap to bring new policies to unlock civic innovation. While the geographic boundaries of our goals are limited to city, county and state agencies within California, what we accomplish can be shared and borrowed by municipalities across the country as a blueprint for collaboration between tech, government and its inhabitants.

Our diverse working group includes government leaders, open data experts, and civic startup founders, including, but certainly not limited to the innovative minds behind Accela, Appalicious, Code For America, GovFresh, OpenCounter, OpenGov and PopVox. These civic-minded innovators are coming together to help create more transparency, accountability, efficiency and economic development.

We've been lucky to count Kish Rajan, Director of the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development, as an active member of the working group. Rajan has been willing to engage in the important conversations necessary to drive an open gov

platform which, he argues, will undoubtedly lead to vast economic development and the creation of an industry in its most infant stage.

Rajan discussed strategies for implementing open data policies on the state level. He talked about how there is the potential for significant job creation when government agencies make their data more accessible. He also spoke about the importance of creating better, richer data systems and tools with open data that policymakers could use to make more informed decisions, which ultimately benefits constituents. But, he stressed the need for Californians to “re-envision” what economic development looks like, both at the state and local level, so that products and programs work from one city to another.

Rajan unveiled the term “21st Century Economic Development”. Here’s Rajan on what that means:

The group also discussed ways of getting cities throughout the state to start opening up their data at the local level. Jay Nath, San Francisco’s Chief Innovation Officer said, “All over the country in small towns and big cities, not just in California, we are seeing the success of open data policies and programs. You don’t have to have Silicon Valley in your backyard to build a civic startup industry. What we’ve done in San Francisco can be replicated anywhere in the country, at any level of government. It’s just a matter of opening up the data.”

Nath makes the strong case that open data policies can enhance cities and counties everywhere as long as policymakers embrace theory of better serving their constituents through new methods, such as tech and innovation.

One participant asked if an obstacle might be the common misconception that many small cities in rural parts of the state don’t think they have the ability, know-how, or enough tech entrepreneurs to create robust open data policies to benefit residents.

This simply isn’t the case, and many pointed to Manor, Texas, a small city of 6,000 people outside Austin. Manor’s CIO, Dustin Haisler, implemented innovative projects all over the city including a QR-code program that allowed people to get info on city buildings and tourist spots. Manor also partnered with Stanford University’s Persuasive Technology Lab to create a citizen idea portal where the public could suggest ideas, vote on policy and earn rewards. They were also one of the first cities to partner with SeeClickFix to help residents easily report potholes and other issues needing attention.

As Haisler has said, if Manor, Texas could pull this off, there’s no reason the civic tech industry in California can’t convince cities and towns all across the state to embrace the power and the business opportunity that civic innovation and an open government policy will bring.

Tim Woodbury, the head of Government Affairs for Accela, a civic tech company that works with hundreds of cities and agencies reinforced that cities want to get started, but

don't know how. " Every day, I hear from city officials that want to be part of this open data economy to bring new tools to help build a better community and a more effective government. But, many don't know where to begin. Free open data platforms, like CivicData.com, are critical components. And open data policies can fuel the creation of whole new local industries."

Another big issue that the group discussed was Proposition 42, an upcoming initiative on the California June ballot. Prop 42 could be the foundation for statewide open data policies. The measure establishes open government and transparency laws as core responsibilities at every level of government, not just the state. This means that if Prop 42 passes, every city in the State of California will be required to give their citizens access to public records, for free.

"Proposition 42 is a unique opportunity to increase access to government data across California and support civic innovation," said Robb Korinke of GrassrootsLab. "I'm very excited to link the work of this group to our efforts at California Forward and expand the capacity of civic start-ups to transform governance in our State."

While there is still a lot of work to do in order to bring civic innovation and open government policies to every city in California, we are well on our way. The working group is made of up the best and brightest in the government technology industry. We'll be meeting frequently in the coming months to figure out other ways to promote open data policies and programs all across the state, and at every level of government.

With continued forward momentum, the open gov movement will be coming to a municipality near you soon.

*Mike Montgomery is the Executive Director of CALinnovates, a coalition bridging California based tech and local, state and federal policymakers. Brian Purchia is a communications strategist who has served as a new media advisor for Fortune 500 companies and as a spokesman for social change organizations, tech startups, politicians, labor unions, and advocacy campaigns.*

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