

Transparency Demands Cost Governments Money

Sarah Rich | October 31, 2011



In May, Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer vetoed plans to create a website that would let citizens track state government spending. In a letter to Secretary of State Linda McCulloch, Schweitzer explained why the website would have been a wasted expense.

“Development of this website would cost almost \$400,000, but provide no return on the taxpayer investment,” Schweitzer said. “Montanans already have ample access to information about the state budget.”

But just one month prior to Schweitzer’s veto, South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley approved transparency legislation that outlawed anonymous voice votes by lawmakers in her state. Haley signed the measure after a controversial vote by the South Carolina House of Representatives last year to raise the state’s cigarette tax. The voice vote allowed lawmakers to hike the tax without recording individual votes for the measure.

“This is about the people having the right to know what their elected officials are doing all the time because elected officials work for the people — not the other way around,” Haley said in a public statement after she signed the bill.

More Demand, Less Money

To some degree, these events illustrate the conflicting pressures on transparency efforts as the open government movement matures. The idea that vast amounts of public-sector data should be publicly available at the click of a mouse is firmly ingrained in the minds of many citizens. And that demand has become even more pronounced as public officials make ever-tougher fiscal decisions spurred by the poor economy.

At the same time, dwindling revenue makes it tough to fund new transparency websites and similar efforts. This struggle is particularly apparent at the state and local levels, where just more than half of the states and even fewer localities operate full-fledged transparency sites, according to federal government data.

“Everybody is for [transparency],” said Scott Pattison, executive director of the National Association of State Budget Officers. “ [But] I think when you drop down a level and get to the specifics of what folks are planning at the moment, there probably isn’t urgency.”

According to Data.gov, the federal government’s transparency portal, 29 states and 11 local governments have already launched transparency sites with machine-readable data, but overall, government transparency is still in the early phases.

“The open government and transparency movement: It’s maturing. I’d say it’s sort of hitting its teenage years,” said Nicole Aro, organizing director for the Sunlight Foundation, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes government transparency. “ People are really trying to figure out how we can translate the conversations we’ve been having on a federal level down to conversations on a state and local level.”

Transparency initiatives gained momentum in 2009 when President Barack Obama released a memorandum requesting federal executive departments and agencies to use technology to disclose information about government operations and decisions online for the public to access.

Steve Ressler, a former federal government employee who founded GovLoop, an online social network for public-sector workers, called Obama’s action a key turning point for government transparency. “ Transparency isn’t an entirely new phenomenon, but I think there is an increased focus on the last few years really starting on the Obama open government memo,” said Ressler, who also writes a column for Government Technology.

Obama’s memo coincided with movement at all levels of government to be more proactive on the release of public information. Part of that activity was driven by the desire to reduce the amount of Freedom of Information Act requests that agencies must cope with.

Playing Catch-Up

Although states and localities trail the federal government on transparency, efforts are under way to close the gap.

This year, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s administration released data on employee salaries and more than 90,000 city contracts. Overall, more than 170 data sets have

been posted on Chicago's open data portal. To spur use of that data, the city in June launched Apps for Metro Chicago, a contest that connected community organizations to software developers in an effort to create useful applications for the community.

Like Chicago, New York City is using competition to encourage citizen software developers to create apps using city data. For the past two years, New York City has hosted the NYC BigApps competition to encourage developers and citizens to build apps using more than 350 data sets from 40-plus agencies.

"Transparency camps" are another mechanism for promoting transparency and government data initiatives at the state and local level, said Aro. These events bring together software developers, government officials, journalists and activists to discuss transparency issues.

In 2009, the Sunlight Foundation hosted its first transparency camp in Washington, D.C., to address issues around federally focused open data policy. The success of that event prompted the District of Columbia to hold its own camp, known as CityCamp.

And earlier this year, the Sunlight Foundation teamed with two other organizations — Mashable and Code for America — to hold Hack for Change in San Francisco. The event brought together 50 engineers and designers to compete against one another in a 24-hour contest to create an app for social good.

Teresa Harrison, a faculty fellow at the Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany, said these events and the applications they produce can serve as a catalyst for engaging citizens with government. But those apps must appeal to nontechnologists in order to have a significant impact, she added.

Show Me the Money

The rotten economy has focused public attention on government spending, Aro said, and that's driving one of the biggest transparency trends: making more legislative and budgetary information accessible to citizens. Pattison agreed that budget constraints are making citizens more concerned about government spending, especially as officials make tough decisions on where to allocate government dollars.

Although posting legislative data online isn't new, states are responding by beefing up the amount of information offered to citizens. For instance, the New Jersey Legislature website includes data on bills (outlined in chronological order), laws, votes, and bill tracking information from current and past sessions. And Kansas is adding historical committee meeting minutes to the state Legislature website.

A More Transparent Future?

So what lies ahead for the government transparency movement? One clear trend is providing greater amounts of machine-readable data that can be consumed by devices and applications without human intervention. But observers also say data needs to become more usable and understandable.

"In the rush to put data online, a lot of stuff is put up that's not well defined; it's not completely clear how to interpret the data," Harrison said. "You don't want to take the

risk that people will draw erroneous conclusions because they don't know where the data has come from [and] they don't know how it's been structured or put together."

According to Ressler, governments need to focus on determining what data citizens actually want and organize information around common themes. He added that many governments aren't conducting proper outreach and marketing for their transparency sites, which would help improve engagement.

"[For example,] if you're releasing some environmental data, maybe showing one cool infographic or one cool small project using the data is important," he said.

Ressler said the transparency trend will continue and the process in which transparency's carried out will evolve. Because citizens will continue to demand more government data, state and local governments will need to lead more efforts to respond to that demand.

"There will probably be a new iteration of apps contests and hackathons and things like that," Ressler said. "But I think the general trend toward openness, transparency and open data are here to stay, and it's a global movement."

<http://www.govtech.com/e-government/Transparency-Demands-Cost-Governments-Money.html>