

The Takeaway

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Texas Cities in the Era of Government Transparency



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We are in the Era of Government Transparency. Recently politicians from President Barack Obama to Texas Governor Rick Perry have touted a commitment to openness and transparency in their respective administrations. Citizens have also embraced the idea. No longer content to view government as a mysterious black box where taxes go in and services come out, taxpayers today expect and in some cases demand, to know how decisions are made.

As discussions ensue about the growing distrust between citizens and their government, some believe that increased transparency can offer a way to bridge this divide. According to one leading scholar, “transparency enables citizens and other stakeholders to watch government and, if transgressions are identified, challenge it through the media, courts or other institutions.”¹

WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Clear, organized and useful data posted online is a good indicator of a city's commitment to transparency.

On average Texas cities are more transparent about Money and Information than Infrastructure and People.

City governments should engage their citizens in a dialogue about what information they want, and what format will best encourage them to use it.

For information on transparency among Texas cities, visit: TexasTransparencyProject.org

The internet has also changed the relationship between citizens and government. Increasingly, governments at all levels have turned to their websites to provide citizens with data that just a short while ago would have been confined to an agency's filing cabinet. However, for this information to have value, government must do more than haphazardly post documents and data online. If we are to take advantage of this new era, the information provided to citizens must be clear, organized, and useful.

LOOKING AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Given the popularity of transparency and e-governance at the state and federal level, we wanted to know what was going on in local government. So in 2013, a team of Bush School researchers set out to address the issue. We started with a simple question about managerial practices: What information was being provided to citizens on the websites of Texas cities? Based on the framework established by Pew's Government Performance Project², cities' websites were evaluated on four significant dimensions of management: Money, People, Infrastructure, and Information. The researchers searched and scruti-

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nized city websites to find evidence of these managerial best practices—the approaches and tools that are widely considered by scholars and practitioners alike to be part and parcel of a well-managed jurisdiction. The working assumption was that a transparent local government is one that makes information about these managerial best practices easily accessible on its website.

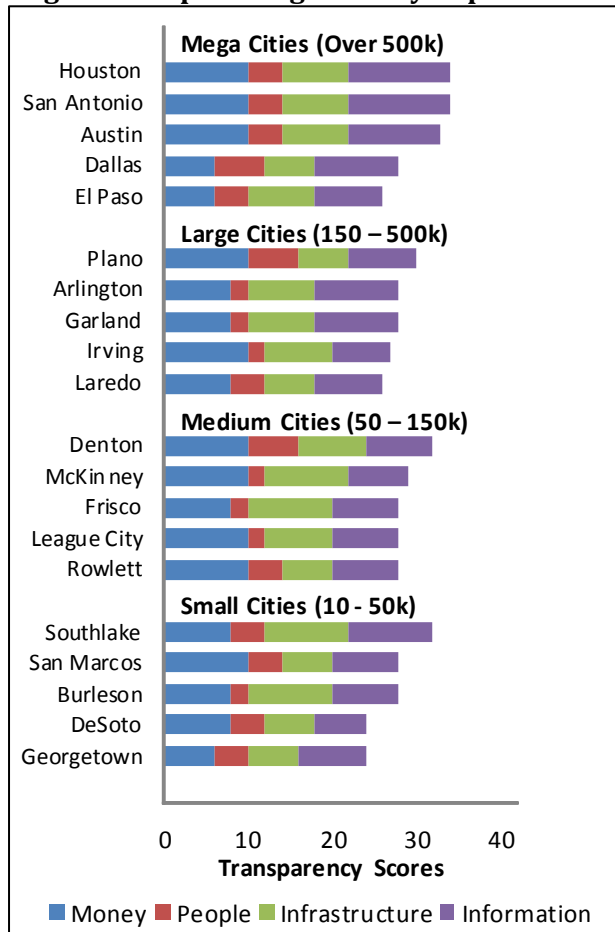
For this project, each category was represented by a series of indicators. For instance, in the Money category researchers sought evidence of a budget document online. Or in the People category, researchers might look for the workforce succession plan. All told, three of the categories—Money, People and Infrastructure—were represented by five indicators each, while Information was comprised of six indicators. Therefore, each category contributed nearly equally to an assessment of a city's commitment to transparency.

THE PENETRATION OF TRANSPARENCY

According to our findings, it is clear that Texas cities have not engaged in a full-scale embrace of e-government transparency to date. Examining all cities with populations over 10,000, each indicator was given a score between 0-2 for a maximum possible score of 42. Total scores range from zero in a city that had not yet developed a website to a high of 34 recorded by Houston and San Antonio. Austin was close behind with a score of 33. Among the cities with the highest overall scores, one finds not only large cities but also mid-sized and suburban places. The lowest-scoring cities tend to be comprised of smaller communities with populations of 20,000 or less. With an average score of 16.7, the

typical Texas city is only positing about 40% of the indicators online. There is certainly room for improvement.

Figure 1: Top Scoring Cities by Population



Source: <http://www.texas Transparency project.org/>

DIGGING DEEPER

Deconstructing the scores into the four managerial areas shows similar average scores for the Money and Information categories; the average Infrastructure score and especially the average People score lag behind them. It is not surprising to discover that transparency with regard to finances is comparatively high given that Texas Comptroller Susan Combs has been a leader in financial transparency on the state level. In fact, in 2010, and again in 2014, the State of Texas

received an “A” grade for providing online access to government spending data from the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. Comptroller Combs also bestows awards on Texas cities that have placed budgetary and financial documents online. The similarly high score for information transparency is likely a result of the ease with which many informational items such as a comprehensive plan and meeting agendas can be posted, as well as the increasingly common usage of websites as mechanisms for service requests. Some performance measures can be found, but they tend to be less prevalent and more difficult to unearth on the websites.

Looking at the individual indicators, we find evidence of several trends.

- The overwhelming majority of municipalities offer a way for citizens to provide input on city services.
- Most cities provide a means for citizens to see how closely the organization’s spending is aligned with its revenues, which is typically reflected in the city’s annual budget.
- Some cities also include data related to a “rainy day fund” they maintain to cover unanticipated shortfalls.
- While most cities receive low scores in terms of “People,” almost all of the cities included in our evaluation provide a way for people to apply for jobs online.

Along with these positive trends, there are also areas where cities’ efforts fall short. Of the 217 cities reviewed, only one municipality provides any type of employee retention plan on its website. In a similar fashion, very few cities offer information concerning employee

development or training programs. Given the competitive environment for hiring and retaining talented employees, the low scores on both of these indicators appear to be a missed opportunity for local government.

The practice of placing performance audits online so that the public can evaluate the success or failure particular programs has not caught on with Texas cities. This may change in the future as demand intensifies for governments at all levels to provide evidence of program success or failure.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As the demand for information starts to grow at the municipal level, we may look back on this period as just the beginning of the Era of Government Transparency. Right now, it is best for city governments to engage their citizens in a dialogue about what information the public wants and what format will encourage citizens to use it. We offer our four category/twenty-one indicator approach as a

baseline to begin the discussion. However, it is our assumption that innovative actors in both the public and private sector will work together towards additional improvements.

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Sources:

¹ Welch, Eric W. 2012. "The Relationship between Transparent and Participative Government: A Study of Local Governments in the United States." *International Review of Public Administrative Sciences* 78 (1): 93-115.
² Pew Charitable Trust. 2008. Government Performance Project "Grading the States." http://www.pewcenteronthestates.org/gpp_report_card.aspx

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The Mosbacher Institute was founded in 2009 to honor Robert A. Mosbacher, Secretary of Commerce from 1989-1992 and key architect of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Through our three core programs—Integration of Global Markets, Energy in a Global Economy, and Governance and Public Services—our objective is to advance the design of policies for tomorrow's challenges.

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