

**City of Providence, Rhode Island
Office of Mayor Angel Taveras**

2014 Progress Report on Accountability & Transparency



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The Open Providence Commission:

In November 2011, Providence Mayor Angel Taveras and the Providence City Council jointly created the Open Providence Commission for Accountability & Transparency. The Commission was tasked with studying the current state of transparency in Providence city government and issuing specific, actionable recommendations to improve accountability to residents. The Commission included fifteen members – both private citizens and City employees – and was chaired by Common Cause Rhode Island Executive Director John Marion.

This commission's mandate included:

- Proposing a mechanism to make public information, hearings and votes accessible by suggesting changes to the way information is organized and presented on the City's website;
- Investigating current technologies and proposing the development of a state of the art citizen dashboard and applications to provide new capabilities that government departments can harness to improve services and responsiveness to its constituency at a lower cost; and
- Developing a feasible plan for implementation with consideration of the challenges inherent in the training and cultural change which is necessary for the adoption of new policies and technologies within city government.

The Open Providence Commission worked for eleven months and produced a final report of findings and recommendations in January 2012.¹ That report was divided into three categories: information accessibility; participatory and cooperative processes; and technology and collaboration. One of the report's recommendations was to submit an annual progress report on the City's accomplishments to date advancing the cause of transparency and openness in municipal government. This progress report represents the first such update.

Following the format of the final report of the Open Providence Commission, this update is divided into three sections: information accessibility; participatory and cooperative processes; and technology and collaboration. This progress report finds that, while work remains to be done to continue implementing the recommendations of the Open Providence Commission, substantial progress has been made on each indicator over the course of the last year.

This report incorporates information about next steps for the continued implementation of the Open Providence Commission's recommendations.

¹ Final report is available online here: www.providenceri.com/efile/4134

Information Accessibility

The final report of the Open Providence Commission called for new investments in the way the City of Providence makes available key information about city departments, public spending, and open meetings. As detailed below, this progress report finds that significant progress has been made with the launch of an Open Meetings and an Open Data portal, as well as the transition to online permitting.

- **Open Meetings**

Key information on all public bodies, access to meeting agendas and minutes

In November 2013, the City launched Rhode Island's first ever Open Meetings Portal – a single, public access point for public meeting information.² The portal will provide residents with key information about all public bodies, including member information, attendance and voting records. Agendas and minutes from public meetings are uploaded directly to the publicly accessible Open Meetings Portal. Prior to the portal, minutes to public meetings were only available upon public records request. In addition, for the first time, any supporting documentation provided to a council or commission member will also be immediately available to the public. All attachments are now included with agendas on the Open Meetings Portal. The City is continuing to implement the system across all boards and committees.

Training of staff increases capacity to provide detail in public records

Stenographers and staff in the Office of the City Clerk have been trained on IQM2 MinuteTraq software, increasing the city's capacity to produce detailed meeting content for the public related to legislation. In the past, agendas for each meeting were created in Microsoft Word and official legislative documents were scanned into unsearchable PDF documents. MinuteTraq allows users to create and track the lifecycle of individual agenda items as votes are taken and items are referred among City Council committees. Legislative documents are now created using templates and are generated into searchable PDFs, allowing the public to more easily search for records.

Tracking functionality, meeting notifications

As mentioned above, the Open Meetings Portal enables residents to perform searches for individual agenda items and follow an item through committee, votes, or public comment. The Open Meetings Portal also serves as a central calendar for all upcoming public meetings. Users can subscribe to a public body and receive notifications for upcoming meetings.

Digital audio recordings

To further enhance the accessibility of public meetings, the City Clerk's office has transitioned from using tape recorders to digital audio recorders in all public meetings.

² Available online here: <http://openmeetings.providenceri.com>

Previously, the only way to listen to a public meeting was to submit a public records request, and the only format available was a cassette tape. Now, digital audio recordings of public meetings are uploaded directly to the Open Meetings Portal and are posted to the website shortly after the meeting.

Video recordings of City Council

Video recordings of City Council meetings have also become more accessible in recent months. A videographer has recorded all meetings since August 2013, which are uploaded to the Council website and the Clerk's VIMEO account shortly after.

- **Open Data/Financial Practices**

Public access to City data

In the summer of 2013, Providence launched an Open Data Portal, hosted by Socrata, with the goal of making data, documents, and maps easily accessible to the public.³ In the span of six months, over 100 datasets have been published to the site.

Share data on public finances

City offices can share information on public finances through the Open Data Portal. Current datasets include salaries, pension payrolls, and the City budget, and the City takes ongoing requests for data. The site also allows users to save their own analysis, and link to or publish their own results.

Financial data visualization

The Open Data Portal has financial data visualization tools, such as a tree map, for public use. Other open source tools are also being explored to expand the visualization features of the City's financial information.

Online purchasing

The City's purchasing process, through a collaborative effort hosted by the City of Newport, is conducted online. Vendors can register and receive notifications electronically when bids in their line of work become available. This process improves transparency and provides a more competitive bidding environment in an effort to reduce the costs of goods and services.

- **Permits, Zoning, and Departments**

Online permit applications

Since the release of the Open Providence report, the City's Department of Inspections and Standards successfully moved its plan-review and permit-application processes online. The new system, called "ProvSmart," allows online application submissions and electronic status updates. ProvSmart has improved efficiency and turnaround time for local developers.⁴ The website enables the City to review permits online while allowing developers to

³ Available online here: <http://data.providenceri.gov>

⁴ Available online here: <http://www.providenceri.com/DIS/provsmart>

simultaneously track the progress of their permit applications in real time. For developers with multiple projects, the external-facing website provides a customized dashboard that allows for the viewing and tracking of more than one project simultaneously.

65 years of building use cards soon to be published online

The City's Department of Inspection and Standards has also scanned approximately 100,000 of its building use cards for use in a publicly accessible online database. These cards are the sole record of legal use for all properties in Providence. The department is now in the process of populating a data base with this information. Once completed there will be a building use database that will be searchable by address, plat and lot, permit number, and date. The original cards were only searchable by address.

- **Elected, Appointed and Administrative Officials**

Directory of Boards and Committees

The Open Meetings Portal contains a comprehensive list of the members of boards and committees of the City Council. Staff in the City Clerk's office can make updates as new appointments are made. Board secretaries and stenographers in the City Clerk's office have also been trained to code the attendance and votes for each member of a public body. This will allow residents to easily view and track the attendance and voting record of members. This will be expanded to other public bodies over the coming months.

Next Steps:

Capitalize on the IQM2 Minutetraq software behind the Open Meetings Portal

As Board secretaries and stenographers in the City Clerk's office become trained to upload agendas, minutes, and recordings, the work of more and more public bodies will become immediately accessible to the public.

Timestamp audio files, video hosting

The Minutetraq software also has the ability to timestamp audio files, so that recorded meetings can be indexed with a table of contents. This function provides further convenience for citizens that are only interested in a single agenda item. Stenographers are currently being trained to include this feature on future online recordings. The Minutetraq software also has the ability to include video in place of audio recordings. The City is considering options and resources necessary to support video hosting of City Council and other important public meetings.

Purchasing process

As indicated above, the Purchasing department allows businesses to be notified of City contracts online. However, the results of those bids have not historically been accessible online. With the Open Meetings Portal, the Board of Contract and Supply will begin posting

agendas and minutes online. The public will then be able to view all vendors that responded and submitted bids, as well as the award results.

Comprehensive information on public bodies

As the Open Meetings Portal becomes populated with agendas and minutes, the City or Board officials can begin to include more comprehensive information about public bodies, such as mission, historical appointments, as well as contact and biographical information for members.

Participatory and Cooperative Process

The final report of the Open Providence Commission called for city government to rethink existing processes of civic engagement to allow for more deliberate public participation in decision-making. The report encouraged city government to engage in the “crowd-sourcing” of ideas, talent and funding for public projects and to consider other practices like “hackathons” and “unconferences” for public engagement.

- **Crowd Sourcing for Better Engagement**

Open Data Portal

Providence’s Open Data Portal is designed to help facilitate constituent engagement. The launch of the Portal has enabled the public to access and export municipal datasets. Data is presented in searchable and exportable formats, allowing for mapping of data, creation of apps to read data, and merging of different data sets into tables and maps. Users can embed dynamic data on their own webpages that is automatically updated when the City modifies it. The system allows the City to upload historical data and future forecasts for comparison. Users can also save visualizations they generate and compare Providence data to other cities’ data in the Socrata system.

Code for America

The State of Rhode Island is host to three 2014 Code for America Fellows. Code for America Fellows spend months embedded in municipal government, developing web and mobile applications that help residents better access public services. The City of Providence is in contact with Rhode Island’s Office of Digital Excellence regarding potential partnership with Rhode Island’s Code for America Fellows and the applicability of projects developed. A number of projects being discussed by Code for America Fellows could directly benefit citizen engagement. This includes a community engagement platform that could be utilized by a number of different cities and towns, and an online budget visualization tool.

Feedback tools

A contact form has been added for each City Department webpage, which allows the public to directly email a member of that department. This allows users to ask questions and leave comments for specific City departments. Many City initiatives also solicit feedback as part of overall public outreach and crowd sourcing strategies. For example, the Providence Zoning Ordinance Update engages residents with a comment form on their website (<http://rezoningprovidence.com/>), an email list, and an active twitter handle (@ProvPlanning).

Next Steps:

Leverage “hackathons” and “unconferences” to facilitate access to public information

Providence based technology companies, business incubators and social entrepreneurs continue to host “hackathons,” multi-day events where computer programmers and software developers collaborate on developing mobile and web applications that serve a variety of purposes. Public agencies, including city government in Providence, have yet to channel this energy for the express purposes of creating new applications that facilitate access to public information.

Technology and Collaboration

The final report of the Open Providence Commission called on city government to strengthen its use of information technology to facilitate transparent, open and accountable government. By investigating current technologies, the commission made a number of recommendations to enhance government accountability through data and communications.

- **Accountability data and communications**

Open Data Portal, citizens' dashboard

As described in previous sections, the Open Data Portal enables the dissemination of data from across City departments. Members of the public can establish raw data feeds in API and machine-ready formats. Other advanced tools are also available for outside developers who want to build tools to use City data.

Accessibility of providenceri.com

At the request of the Open Providence Commission, the providenceri.com homepage now prominently features the most common City transactions, such as paying taxes online and accessing the vendor center. In addition, Google Translate is now available for every City webpage. Both of these added features improve the ease of use and accessibility for users.

Social media

The Mayor's Director of Multimedia and Social Media plays a significant role in collecting information from all City departments and sharing that information in a timely manner. All followers connected to the Mayor on Twitter or Facebook receive regular updates on everything from school closings to the state of the City's budget. The Director monitors constituents' concerns via social media and works with the Office of Neighborhood Services to respond to constituents' inquiries. The Director also creates infographics and other visuals to better communicate City information to the general public. In addition, "City News" emails provide a weekly City update to over 30,000 people.

Registering lobbyists

The City of Providence continues to implement a lobbyist registration ordinance most recently amended by the Providence City Council in February 2013. In compliance with the ordinance, lobbyists seeking "to influence a municipal decision" must register with the City Clerk, receive an identification badge and file periodic reports on their ongoing lobbying efforts.⁵ Registered lobbyists are listed publicly by name and by employer.

Use of mobile tablets for field inspections

The Department of Inspection and Standards is moving from pencil, paper and a digital camera to using mobile tablets to record field inspections for both permit inspections and violations. The new technology will be a big time saver. Inspectors have previously come

⁵ Available online here: www.providenceri.com/city-clerk/lobbyist-registration-information

back to the office to type in their field inspections and upload pictures from a digital camera to record their inspections. Now, inspections will be recorded in the field on a tablet device, pictures taken with the tablet will be automatically linked to the inspection, and the information will be available immediately through our cloud based system.

- **Webpage management**

The City of Providence has adopted standard procedures for website maintenance, with content owners for each department page identified internally and tasked with ensuring that content is updated on a regular basis. In addition, the providenceri.com homepage has an RSS feed, which allows the public to subscribe to updates on the site and view them through publicly available readers.

Next Steps:

Build on the success of ProvSmart

Providence's new *ProvSmart* platform lays the groundwork for a more robust citizen's dashboard. As resources become available, the City of Providence will continue to improve the functionality of this tool, allowing future users to engage in other transactions and service requests online.

Conclusion

Over the past year, the City of Providence has made significant strides to increase transparency in city government and improve accountability to citizens. Notably, the Open Data Portal has enabled the dissemination of data from across City departments. In the span of six months, over 100 datasets have been published to the site, and the portal will continue to become more populated with information.

The launch of the Open Meetings Portal has further enabled public access to City government. This portal provides key information on public bodies, access to meeting agendas and minutes, and digital audio recordings. Currently, the posting of information has begun for 24 Boards and Committees. It will also serve as a tool for the public to view and track the attendance and voting record of members of public bodies.

Most recently, the City's Department of Inspections and Standards has successfully moved its plan-review and permit-application processes online. This system, called ProvSmart, allows online application submissions and electronic status updates. ProvSmart has improved efficiency and turnaround time for local developers.

Moving forward, the City will continue to expand on the functionality of the Open Data Portal, the Open Meetings Portal, and ProvSmart, while also pursuing other opportunities for strengthening transparency and accountability in Providence city government. These tools have strengthened the City's ability to engage residents and facilitate a transparent and accountable government.

Thanks to the work of the Open Providence Commission for Accountability and Transparency, we have a path of what steps to take next to improve the interface between the City of Providence and any person seeking information from city government. With continued leadership, the City can continually reinforce a culture of openness and accountability to residents.