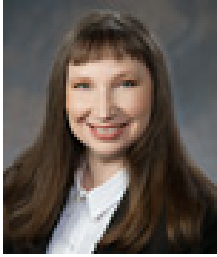


December: Open the door to open data

Written by By April Barker

Tuesday, 01 December 2015 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 01 December 2015 09:53



Scott Resnick, a former Madison alderperson, is proud of the work he's done to advance the cause of open data. In 2012, the city enacted what he says was [only the second open data ordinance](#) in the country.

Open data is the practice of releasing huge quantities of public information in electronic form so it can be put to other public purposes. Governments, citizens, companies or others may then discover ways to use the data to create technological applications or to identify public issues that should be addressed.

While the concept sounds tech-heavy, the potential applications of open data span any number of real-world applications. For example, in Madison, Resnick says, a "bus radar" application designed by a university student allows would-be riders to track the location of a bus in real time, making it easier to avoid missing the bus.

The city of Madison's open data initiative also led to development of an "adopt a fire hydrant" app that encourages citizens to locate and shovel out fire hydrants nearest them, Resnick says.

Nationally, the open data movement has increased access to geographic and weather data. Another "hot topic" in open data, Resnick says, is tracking police-related shootings and ensuring that data is standardized so that meaningful comparisons can be made.

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Open data is popular among a new generation of virtual volunteers, including what Resnick refers to as “civic hacking groups.” Businesses are also prolific users. Resnick, who serves as chief operating officer of a private company, sees both as “a worthy use of government resources.”

Some companies use the data to improve public health, Resnick adds, noting that a private California-based company has developed an application that works with local fire departments to locate the nearest hospital for individuals in need of CPR. While the company is for-profit, Resnick notes, “their goal is to save lives.”

And while some companies may offer services derived from open data for a charge, Resnick says that when those companies compete with others who offer the services for free, “almost always, the free one has won out.”

Critics complain that open data only showcases data that government agencies choose to share, not more controversial records and information. But Resnick calls open data a “first step” that reinforces positive attitudes within government toward publicly releasing data. (He stresses that government should be careful to consider individuals’ privacy when releasing data.)

Other Wisconsin communities, including Milwaukee, are taking steps toward open data initiatives, and there is interest on the state level, Resnick says. Many other states have legislation promoting open data.

With so much broad-based support for open data, those who seek to promote transparency in government need to be part of the conversation as it moves forward.

Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the [Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council](http://www.wisfoic.org) (www.wisfoic.org), a nonprofit group dedicated to open government. April Barker, the Council’s co-vice president, is an attorney with Schott, Bublitz & Engel of Brookfield.