

Open Data, Open Government, and Montgomery County

At its March 2016 meeting the Montgomery County Civic Federation (MCCF) held a program on open government and open data. A summary of that program follows.

Background

In December 2012 the County Council passed the Montgomery County Open Data Act, joining the broader nationwide movement towards greater government transparency. In an effort to make information about its decisions and operations more accessible to the public and increase the opportunities for citizens to access information more easily, the county government developed several open data websites. These websites provide a range of government data to the public and can also support the development of computer and smart phone applications by individuals and nongovernmental organizations. These applications can provide users with information about such things as transit schedules, the locations of reported crime incidents, data about schools, and the relationship between political contributions and government contracts/subsidies.

The County's Open Data Websites can be found at the following:

- Data Montgomery. <https://data.montgomerycountymd.gov> Data portal that contains links to the following Websites for specific information categories:
 - Data Catalog—individual data files that County agencies have made available for viewing and downloading;
 - budgetMontgomery—interactive access to County operating and capital budget information;
 - spendingMontgomery—interactive access to actual expenditures made by County agencies; and
 - CountyStat—performance data reported by County agencies to assess their operations.
- OpenDataMCPS. <https://data.montgomeryschoolsmd.org> Provides access to school enrollment, budget, and student performance data from the County school system.
- MNCPPC Interactive Maps. <http://www.montgomeryplanning.org/gis/interactive> Various maps and search tools for finding information collected or created by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission-Montgomery County Division staff.

Examples of questions for which answers can be found using these websites

The questions below are typical of the kinds that can be answered when searching these websites. (The answers can be located in the links that follow.)

- When will KP elementary school addition be completed and how much is it estimated to cost?

- <https://reports.data.montgomerycountymd.gov/reports/CIP/Kensington-Parkwood-ES-Addition-P651505>
- What is the overall recommended budget for libraries in FY2017?
 - <https://reports.data.montgomerycountymd.gov/omb/Libraries%2C%20Culture%20and%20Recreation>
- How much is the County Executive proposing to raise the property tax rate for fiscal year 2017 and by how much does the County Executive estimate that this will increase property taxes for the average County homeowner per month?
 - <https://reports.data.montgomerycountymd.gov/omb> (See page 14)

Requirements and Issues

There are certain basic requirements that have to be met and issues that need to be addressed when putting government information online.

Requirements

- The data has to exist. Sounds obvious, but the County does not necessarily collect data on everything we might want to know about.
- There have to be resources available for publishing the data. Much of what a government collects is for its own operations and it is not always in a format that can be easily shared with the public. Data conversions can cost money.
- Data has to be documented so that users outside the government can understand and use it.
- There has to be an open data website/portal to make the information available.
- At best there should be some level of user support to assist the public. Again, this can cost money.

Issues

- Data often needs to be updated in a way that can be tracked and understood. Example: one local jurisdiction (not Montgomery County) creates an initial criminal record, then closes that record and opens a new one if the circumstances or results of the crime change. This can lead to a misunderstanding of what actually happened, such as whether there were one or two crimes committed, etc.
- Some government data must be on a need-to-know basis.
- Data privacy/confidentiality must always be addressed, e.g., social security numbers should not appear on property tax records, names of crime victims should not be listed, etc.

How is the County doing?

A representative of the Sunlight Foundation, an NGO that uses the tools of civic technology, open data, policy analysis and journalism to make government and politics more accountable and transparent (see <http://sunlightfoundation.com/>) said that

Montgomery County is ahead of many cities/counties in providing data and explaining how to use it. He also pointed out that:

- The County could do better with real time data, e.g., tracking buses in real time, and not just making their schedules available on a smart phone;
- Cross referencing data among departments needs to be improved - data can get “siloed”, that is isolated in one department and be inaccessible to other departments;
- More geographically linked data should be published;
- Outside contractor data can become “trapped” and therefore inaccessible because of contract regulations that may protect the contractor’s claim of proprietary data or systems; and
- Citizens must stay engaged to get better data.

What can MCCF do to encourage / enhance open government and open data?

- Push for a citizen advisory board to help with planning open data;
- Push for data on more devices (not everything is accessible on a smart phone);
- Publish data in non-propriety formats so that citizens can use it for their own analysis and development of apps. (For example, PDF is highly useable but is a proprietary format that cannot be reused in other applications.); and
- Encourage citizens to develop their own data and application wish lists – the MCCF will advocate for the best ideas.

Suggestions for specific data or applications as well as comments on the County’s open data websites can be emailed to Jeff Griffith, Interim Vice President and PRA representative to the MCCF: jeff@jandjgriffith.com