The mayors of three US cities—Louisville, Santa Monica, and South Bend—discuss how local governments are making more data available to citizens and analyzing it to improve services.

**Opening dialogue**

**Pete Buttigieg:** All of this data belongs to the people. We created it while we were working for them. The challenge is to make it available—and not just available but intelligible. It’s not transparent if you just dump a giant, unintelligible, illiquid pile of data online. So we work really hard with trying to make it accessible and readable.

We’re proud to be the first city in our state, and we think the smallest city anywhere, to have an open-data portal. Because we don’t think you have to be a huge city in order to be able to take advantage of machine-readable data and use that to come up with solutions.

**Greg Fischer:** A lot of people focus on internal innovation, so how do we work with Code for America, how do we use apps to improve the delivery of citizen service? All of that stuff is extraordinarily important as we improve. But more important, I think, is civic innovation, social innovation of preparing peoples’ mind-sets or creating a platform where people can realize their human potential.
**Basic services, better**

**Pete Buttigieg:** It’s not flashy, but having the smartest sewers in the world—being the first city in the world to move our wastewater management into the cloud—has probably enabled us to avoid about $100 million in capital expense, just by better using the infrastructure we already have and staying ahead of some federal mandates while we were at it.

In this case, there was intellectual property being cooked up at the University of Notre Dame nearby, which, it turns out, could be applied to the case of South Bend. By being willing to be that beta city, being willing to pilot and experiment with that new and somewhat untested technology, we were able to find great benefits. And, we’re cultivating a homegrown business, which we think will be part of the story of economic development in South Bend going forward.

**Pam O’Connor:** We are right now working on a well-being index, and it’s to build resiliency in the community. And by that I mean it’s about wellness, physical health, but it’s also about mental health. It’s about social connectedness. It’s about economic vitality—how do we find that out?

Our resources are limited. We can funnel them, we can put them toward programs and challenges. But we need to know what those are. We can guess what they are. But if we have data, if we have metrics—if we have an understanding of how people are doing and their well-being and where the need is—we can make better use of our government resources to address those issues going forward.

**Greg Fischer:** So we put a process in place called LouieStat that’s all about working on the known problems that we have, reactive problem solving. If you’re not careful in government, you can just react all day long, because there’s so many things happening, from public safety to solid waste to social services.

Then we have dedicated resources for innovation. My private-sector experience tells me, unless you give dedicated resources to innovation or breakthrough improvement, resources just kind of get sucked into the daily work. In our emergency-management system, every call that goes into 911 is treated as an emergency. But only 3 percent are true emergencies.

So it’s very costly. How do we analyze those calls so that we can triage the nonemergency calls into a much more cost-effective solution? So we say, “Let’s put a nurse on each shift.” And that nurse takes the call and says, “You know, Mr. Jones, really what we’re going to do is send a taxi for you tomorrow at noon to take you to the doctor.” So it’s a $20 call as opposed to a $500 call of sending an ambulance there.
Fostering innovation

Pete Buttigieg: What if we learned that something in our utilities database—about when water cutoffs are happening—can be mapped onto our data about code-enforcement issues or vacant and abandoned properties? What if it turned into an early-warning system on the vacant and abandoned properties that we’re trying to prevent as well as deal with?

Greg Fischer: We’ve distributed 500 asthma inhalers around the city, with a GPS device on top of the inhaler, so we know when and where people are using inhalers. And then we overlay data on that in terms of where did it happen, what time of day did it happen, what was the pollen count, what was the temperature, was a road closed, what were traffic conditions like?

And so we can really understand the problem. Then you can overlay big data on top of that. What if we, for instance, expanded the tree canopy? What if we mitigated the traffic patterns? You can start seeing the effect, then, on public health in this case. So how do we smartly marry the areas of digital solutions with public health? It could be public safety, it could be social services. We just look at digital solutions as a way to really help us more deeply understand the problem and then come up with solutions at the same time by using other data sources on top of it.

Pete Buttigieg: I think perhaps the most important area where we’re, in the long run, going to see benefits from open data—and slicing and dicing data in creative ways—is going to be economic development. We have deals put in front of us as a city that depend a lot on whether you believe certain kinds of numbers. And the reality is, a city, especially a smaller city like us, doesn’t always have the same kind of due-diligence capacity as the people across the table from us.

So even just being able to game out or estimate. If a developer’s telling us that with X ROI, and this many parcels being cleared for this purpose, we get, at that tax rate, this kind of income, and it would all be worth it in X number of years, we have a hard time proving that out on our own terms.

Data could be the answer. Because, you can automate a lot of that math and use some of the real-world data that we have about what we know is going on in our city, mashed up with some of the assumptions, and then use that to test some of the promises that are made.

For more in our series on innovation in local government, visit McKinsey’s Government designed for new times collection, on mckinsey.com.

Pete Buttigieg is the mayor of South Bend, Indiana; Greg Fischer is the mayor of Louisville, Kentucky; and Pam O’Connor is the mayor of Santa Monica, California.

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