

City moves toward open data for apps

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Want to use the mountains of data compiled by the City of Saskatoon to help in your everyday life?

How about a new application reminding you that its garbage or recycling pickup day? Or what about an app that shares real-time views of available parking meters or the location of the nearest public toilet?

There's not an app for that - yet. But city hall is ready to play catch up with the dozens of municipalities across Canada that have forged ahead with releasing huge amounts of city-held information through open data initiatives.

"We are getting there," said Kevin Peacock, the city's manager of corporate information services.

"From my perspective I want to find out what developers want from the city rather than putting out data that's of no use and wasting taxpayer's money. We're going to start developing data sets that people are going to want to consume. We're asking, 'What data do you want?'"

An open data policy is centred on the idea that city-collected and managed data should be readily available to anyone without copyright restrictions, patents or other controls on its use. Advocates say open data policies increase government transparency and make it simpler for independent developers to make interesting and helpful applications.

A group of city hall staff met with some Saskatoon-based app developers in late May to explore what information the city can make more accessible online and in what format it should be in. The brainstorming session led to dozens of ideas from garbage collection or transit route information to property assessment, crime and census data. The plan is to open up some key data this year using the city's own servers before moving more data sets



CREDIT: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix
College Mobile software engineer Francis Chary, left, and CEO Chad Jones discuss open data opportunities to make Saskatoon more transparent by providing information that people want.

to Microsoft's open government data initiative.

"This has been a priority (for the city), but not as high as it probably should be," said Chad Jones, CEO of College Mobile, a Saskatoon-based app development company. "This is the spirit of the times - everybody is doing it across the country and even across the world. We wanted to pursue this and make sure it actually goes forward."

The potential is there, Jones said. Saskatoon has an active app development community that would put the information to good use, he said.

Developers are already anticipating Saskatoon Transit's move to real-time GPS tracking of buses in 2013. The transit department is piloting global positioning technology on 30 of its 155 buses right now. Once that goes citywide, developers will be able to create apps that let riders know on their phone how far away their bus is from their stop.

Opening up government data has spawned dozens of apps and websites in other cities, including an Australian app that tracks the nearest public toilet and a Washington, D.C.-based app that correlates crime and traffic data and calculates the safest way to walk home when drunk.

Apps have been used to mine and track the voting records of politicians, allow citizens to simulate changes to government budgets or tell users how often buses or flights arrive on time.

"I think we have to ask what the community at large wants to see," Jones said. "I don't think they'd want to see a council minutes app. But there could be a one-stop shop for City of Saskatoon. Find out about garbage pickup, find out about my neighbourhood, even register for events. You can go to the City of Saskatoon website and try to find the right page, but it's a bit of a mess, especially on mobile devices."

Peacock said the city wants to freely share as much useful data as possible while respecting privacy and security concerns. The city is considering offering prizes for a hackathon, where programmers collaborate on projects, with the intent of handing out cash to the best app developed with city data.

"I really see the value in this," he said. "There's lots of opportunity here, but it's not the only focus from an IT perspective. It's a side project and not the highest priority."

"This year, we're trying to get the framework in place."

Jones said it can't happen fast enough.

"It would be really nice to have some measurable goals in terms of timelines," he said. "Plenty of people have approached the city prior to this meeting and it's never really gone anywhere, so we're trying to create a community movement, a grassroots movement. The city is open to this - we want this. It's good for everybody. It's a winwin."

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