Fostering Transparency in Local Government

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When a government is transparent its citizens can see its inner workings—its processes, procedures, budgets, priorities, plans, and decision making strategies. In a transparent government, the public's business is conducted in the public view, and is subject to review, discussion, dissent, and even corrective action through the ballot box. The current authors have recently published several comprehensive reviews of transparency in government. In this article we summarize some key findings of that research, propose twenty ideas local governments can implement to foster more transparency, and describe briefly three cases we believe exemplify best practices in enhancing governmental transparency.

WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY IN GOVERNMENT?

When a container is transparent we can see right through it to observe what is inside. Likewise, when a government is transparent its citizens (and other observers) can see its inner workings—its processes, procedures, budgets, priorities, plans, and decision making strategies. Transparent government is conducted "in the sunshine" so all can see what is going on; in a transparent government key decisions affecting the citizenry are not made in darkened corridors or hidden chambers. In a transparent government, citizens and business leaders can obtain the information they need to understand how important decisions that affect their well-being are made. Facts, figures, records, documents, and other important informational artifacts are made available for public inspection. In a transparent government, the public's business is conducted in the public view, and is subject to review, discussion, dissent, and even corrective action through the ballot box.

Some of the characteristics often associated with transparent governments include websites linking the citizenry to a wealth of information, including codes and ordinances, the budget, and information about every department and board (including contact information); media packets and information about

schools, businesses, and government services; maps, land use plans, and zoning information; agendas and minutes of council or commission meetings; job vacancies; codes and ordinances; and much, much more. These websites are designed to keep the citizens informed about what is going on in their local government. Citizen surveys and polls (the results of which are also posted on the government's website), "blogs," and "tweets" are other examples of ways local government can keep in close contact with citizens and demonstrate that the government considers citizen viewpoints when setting priorities and planning actions. City council, county commission, and committee and board meetings are open for the public to observe, and a time for public commentary is included within each meeting.

Transparency is also associated with citizens having knowledge and access to short- and long-term financial history; this includes revenues, expenditures, assets, obligations, and inter-fund transfers. As a prerequisite there should be clear laws that frame the budget. In short, the government actively seeks methods to do its business "in the sunshine" where everyone can see what is happening. In this manner, the local government seeks to keep faith with its citizens and build trust with those it serves, including the local business community.

Trust in government is a key issue in today's society, and efforts to establish transparency in government are designed to build trust and combat corruption. *The Public Manager*, in the Spring 2009 issue, published a forum titled "Transparency, Performance Management and the Public Trust" (see Clark & Veal, 2009, for an introduction to this forum). The forum introduced a number of issues associated with the effort to foster transparency in government. Since the forum, members of this team of authors have continued our own research on transparency and how governments across the nation—and the world—have sought to enhance it. In this article we summarize some of the key findings of that research, propose twenty ideas local governments can implement to foster more transparency, and describe briefly three examples we believe exemplify best practices for enhancing transparency.

CURRENT ISSUES IN GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Members of the current authorship team have recently prepared two detailed book chapters (Veal, Sauser, & Folmar, 2010; 2011) and a review article (Veal, Sauser, Sims, & Amedee, 2013) summarizing the findings of our research on government transparency to date. Readers interested in the details of our research are invited to examine the sources cited above. Our purpose here is not to restate this work in detail but rather to summarize briefly a few key findings from this research. Detailed citations of literature supporting our conclusions are omitted in this brief summary article, but can be accessed in full in the three works noted above.

PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT DURING CRISES

The prevailing issues surrounding the need for increased public trust in government are getting much attention from citizens, academics, business leaders, and government officials in the United States and around the world. This is largely the result of dealing with domestic issues such as the coordination failure of governments following Hurricane Katrina and the Myanmar cyclone and Haiti earthquake rescue efforts. The need for greater investments in communities, and the broad international crisis resulting from challenges surrounding Iraq and other nations in the Middle East, all helped to crystallize the need for more public trust in government. Challenges on Wall Street, potential healthcare crises, issues with the Affordable Care Act rollout, and other vital national and international problems also led to emerging concerns about trust in government. The discussion of the lack of public trust is often linked to the need for increased transparency in government. The overall condition is that citizens want to feel confident that government is both representing and defending their interests. Our research revealed that, due to these concerns, citizens and leaders worldwide are putting the issue of transparency "front and center" as a priority for action.

TECHNOLOGY, TRANSPARENCY, AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

As transparency in government continues to become an essential component of democracy, the empowering of ordinary citizens is essential so they can take a meaningful part in shaping the decisions

that affect their lives. In theoretical terms, transparency is valuable because it makes it possible to overcome what social scientists call "agency" problems. In any large society, principals—such as citizens or shareholders—delegate decision-making responsibility to agents—such as a government or corporate management. Problems arise because the principals are never able to monitor perfectly their agents. The whole point of having agents is, after all, that it is too costly and time-consuming for the principals to keep themselves fully informed on all important issues. Through the use of technology and transparency, citizens can become involved in solving problems faced by their government by providing input to difficult challenges experienced by various branches of government. Websites, computerized records and archives, and the use of social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) are ways modern governments are seeking to inform and involve citizens with respect to the workings of their government.

Unfortunately, the "digital divide" is partially thwarting these efforts. Considering that many communities throughout the United States may not have access to the resources and technology required to become an engaged citizenry in the era of transparency means that essential inputs could be left out of the democratic discussion of improving governments. Without the voices of those considered to be disenfranchised and under-privileged, American citizens, particularly the political elite, can more easily ignore issues vital to these marginalized communities. The problem is further exacerbated by the "Matthew Effect," the argument that communities and individuals that already have the best resources and best positions in society take the greatest advantage of every new resource, such as possession and use of new technology in government.

Municipal and county governments within the United States may also experience challenges because of the enormous digital divide. These governmental entities lack access to basic technologies that allow them to engage citizens in their communities as enjoyed by the local governments in the rest of the nation. The national broadband initiative for rural communities is an example of the current efforts to connect communities to the Web 2.0 movement that is leading the nation in the direction of transparency. For transparency to increase public trust, citizens in every community must be able to communicate with their governments. Until the broadband initiative is fully implemented within these communities, the goal should be to provide interventions through the use of immediate technology, rather than the long range goal of broadband. In order to continue to make progress in the direction of democracy for everyone, interventions to connect un-served communities to their governments has to be constant, short-term, and less dependent on long range solutions. Acknowledging the impact of the Matthew Effect on the digital divide should encourage a greater commitment to connecting technology in struggling communities, which is in keeping with the goals of democracy.

IMPROVED TRANSPARENCY AND LOCAL INVESTMENTS

Worldwide evidence from our research shows that a capable state with appropriate and transparent government institutions produces results in terms of income growth, national wealth and social achievements. Higher incomes and investment growth, as well as longer life expectancy, are found in countries with effective, honest and meritocratic government institutions with streamlined and clear regulations, where the rule of law is enforced fairly and protects the citizenry and property; and where external accountability mechanisms involving civil society and the media are present. International and historical experience, as well as ongoing research, also tells us that capable and "clean" government does not first require a country to become fully modernized and wealthy. Research on fiscal investments to communities makes it clear that transparency should be a goal for local governments as well as they attempt to increase their bottom line. According to the literature we reviewed, openness surrounding official information is said to boost the economic potential for a community (or a country as a whole) as the private sector looks for a host of indicators such as the availability of information on policies, programs, official rules, and the distribution of resources before making investments.

Corruption, defined as abuse of public power for private benefit, is a global phenomenon that affects almost all aspects of social and economic life. Examples of corruption include the improper use or sale of government property by public officials, bribery, embezzling public funds, patronage, and nepotism. Corruption distorts the allocation of local resources and the performance of local governments. The consequences of corruption are poor public services, increased social polarization, inefficiency in public

services, lower investment in the municipality, and decreased economic growth. There is resistance among businesses to locate in communities that are rife with corruption and poor accountability. Once transparency in government is appropriately achieved, increased ethical behavior (Sauser, 2010), transformative action (Sims, 2010), and investment in local communities will likely follow.

MEASURING OR EVALUATING TRANSPARENCY

Our research has confirmed that there is no single standardized instrument available that is designed to measure transparency. Measuring transparency is a difficult task due to the varied approaches that could potentially be used to view transparency, and transparency means different things to different people. Statistical measures, criteria and frameworks for evaluating governmental decisions, tracking progress against established targets, and ''grades'' all represent current efforts to measure government transparency. Finding an agreed-upon measurable approach to assess transparency in governments throughout the United States brings the reality of transparency closer to the rest of the world.

GLOBALIZATION AND TRANSPARENCY

Although there is a need to continue to improve research on transparency in state and local government in the United States, the need for transparency has been supported by governments around the globe. Globalization has had the greatest role on the international movement designed to promote increased access-to-information (ATI) legislation and institutions, which, in theory, are designed to advance government information flow and governmental accountability. The globalization movement has led governments in the world's two most populous nations (China and India) to adopt regulations or legislation to demonstrate and implement various levels of transparency. Again, on the global level, the biggest challenge to the increased support for governmental transparency is that there is not a mutually agreed-upon definition as to what transparency actually is.

Transparency is a fundamental component of democratic government and addresses the rights of citizens to know about activities of their government. Too much secrecy in government often leads to an abuse of power and a lack of accountability. Although ''too much'' openness can at times be as counterproductive as ''not enough'' openness, challenges such as Hurricane Katrina make the case that governments are probably not struggling with being too open. A definition of what appropriate transparency actually is seems to be the required discourse at this point in time for all levels of government.

FOSTERING TRANSPARENCY IN GOVERNMENT

We hope the research summarized above has made a strong case for fostering transparency in government. But how is this to be done? What are some tangible actions local governments can take to improve transparency? In the course of our research we have identified a number of ideas for providing more information to citizens, inviting them to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process, and building their trust in government operations. In Table 1 we present twenty of the best ideas we have encountered. Local government leaders should peruse this list, consider their current efforts to foster transparency, and implement any of these ideas that could enhance the level of transparency within the government they lead. These ideas will likely build public confidence and trust.

TABLE 1
TWENTY IDEAS FOR IMPROVING TRANSPARENCY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1. Implement open meetings and open records policies.
2. Invite the public to attend all commission, board, and council meetings.
3. Include time for citizen commentary and input during every meeting.
4. Pass a budget, make it public, and manage the government's funds in accordance with the budget.
5. Make available to the public short descriptions of the chart of accounts and all restricted funds so they can understand and interpret financial records.
6. Make audited financial statements available for public inspection.
7. Conduct public bid openings for all capital purchases and contracted services.
8. Make available to the public all records of tax abatements and inter-fund transfers.
9. Conduct polls and citizen surveys to gather public viewpoints and track public satisfaction with government services.
10. Involve citizens in strategic planning sessions.
11. Provide media packets and information about government services, schools, businesses, and health care facilities.
12. Maintain an up-to-date and informative website.
13. To overcome problems with "the Digital Divide," place dedicated computer terminals in public places (such as City Hall, public libraries, the County Courthouse, shopping malls, and public gathering places) so all citizens can have access to government websites.
14. Post facts, figures, records, policy documents, and other information on the website.
15. Post codes and ordinances, the budget, and information about every department and board (including contact information) on the website.
16. Post on the website maps, land use plans, flood plain diagrams, and zoning information.
17. Post on the website agendas and minutes of council or commission meetings.
18. Post job vacancies, job descriptions, and hiring policies on the website.
19. Use blogs, tweets, and other social networking media to keep the public informed.
20. Hold departmental open houses, citizens' academies, and "ride-alongs" so members of the public can meet government employees, learn about what they do, and observe them in action.

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS

We now close our article with a presentation of three cases we believe exemplify success in fostering transparency in local government. Interested readers are invited to visit the websites we highlight below to examine closely these selected examples.

The first example is the website for the City of Auburn, Alabama, hometown to four of the present authors: www.auburnalabama.org. This attractive website provides a wealth of information to citizens and visitors alike, with links to detailed information about all City departments, meetings, and activities. Links to a variety of maps, to City codes and ordinances, and to the annual citizen survey are provided. The City's budget is laid out in detail. Visitors to the City's webpage can learn about local businesses, the school system, recreational activities, and the latest news about the City. All City job vacancies are conveniently posted on the website, as are the various licensing and business forms required by the City. This is, in our opinion, an excellent model for other local governments to follow when seeking to share information with their citizens.

As a second example we offer the website for the Personnel Board of Jefferson County, Alabama: www.pbjcal.org, and its associated sites for (a) applying for jobs in the twenty-three jurisdictions that are part of the Merit System of Jefferson County (JobsQuest), (b) arranging for employee training programs

provided by the personnel board (CareerZone), and (c) communicating with fellow members of the Merit System of Jefferson County (MyMeritMatters). This comprehensive set of websites provides everything needed for an individual interested in public sector employment in Jefferson County, Alabama, to peruse all jobs currently posted, fill out an application on-line, and track status throughout the application process. What makes this site such a powerful example of transparency, in our opinion, is the affirmative effort taken by the Personnel Board of Jefferson County to overcome the "digital divide" by providing a bank of computers and personal assistance at a downtown Birmingham "walk in" site to anyone who wants to apply for a job through the Merit System of Jefferson County. The fact that the website can also be accessed by computers located in schools, libraries, shopping malls, and career fairs makes it particularly valuable. For the ultimate in convenience, the website allows a single application form to be used for all jobs (thus it must be filled out only once, and may be updated from any computer attached to the Internet), retains the application in a database, and even sends notifications via email whenever jobs identified to be of interest by the applicant become available in any of the 23 jurisdictions served by the board.

Our third example is the website of the Pew Center on the States: www.pewcenteronthestates.org. Clicking on the "Government Performance" tab found in the list of initiatives displayed on this homepage will direct the reader to detailed reports—including "Grading the States"—where each state government's performance on a variety of criteria is laid out in detail. In our opinion, this is an excellent example of a system of accountability that can be used as a model for local governments to follow as well. Perhaps in the future a similar site will exist that provides a standard methodology for evaluating transparency in local government. This is a goal that all supporters of greater transparency in government should appreciate and strive toward.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Transparency in government—at the national and local levels—is becoming an essential expectation in the modern world. If its citizens are to maintain trust in government, gain some understanding of its inner workings, and sustain a continued belief that government is serving their needs effectively, it is important that governments seek to maintain a high degree of transparency. This is true certainly for investors, prospective new industries, and existing businesses as well. While issues such as the "digital divide" and the "Matthew effect" inhibit universal transparency, we believe innovative techniques such as the 20 we list above can go a long way toward promoting increased transparency. The three case examples we cite show how government agencies and researchers alike are seeking to enhance transparency and measure the level of effectiveness in doing so exhibited by local governments. We encourage continued efforts in this respect.

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