COMMUNICATING RESULTS THROUGH OPEN DATA DASHBOARDS

In recent years, the push for greater transparency in government operations from citizens and groups such as the Sunlight Foundation has led local governments to assess how to best share the wealth of data that they collect. Elected officials and city and county managers acknowledge that it is important to track how tax dollars are being spent in the community and communicate the results of local plans, programs, and services to taxpayers. However, collecting and displaying data from disparate and often siloed government agencies and departments in a meaningful and interpretive way can be a real challenge for local governments, many of which have limited funds for information technology and performance management solutions.

An increasingly popular and user-friendly way to display and communicate local progress is through an open data dashboard on the local government’s website. Dashboards allow local governments to display information through graphs, charts, and narrative formats. Once a local government has decided to create an open data dashboard, the first step is to identify metrics and data to load onto the site. The first metrics commonly placed on a dashboard include data on 311 calls, crime statistics, and building permits.

Once all easily accessible data has been loaded onto the dashboard, the next step is to integrate data and metrics to track progress towards goals identified in strategic and comprehensive plans and other quality of life measures. This is where communities often run into trouble, as many plans lack defined metrics and targets. The quantitative outcome measures and performance thresholds in the STAR Community Rating System can be a useful resource for communities looking for standardized and vetted metrics and methodologies to power an open data program and dashboard.

In this case study, we share ways that certified STAR communities are using the STAR framework and evaluation measures to support their open data efforts and integrate certification results into dashboards.

Above: Evanston, IL used the 7 STAR goal areas and Innovation & Process section as the framework for organizing indicators on the City’s Open Data Portal.

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AUSTIN, TX

The City of Austin, TX maintains a citywide performance dashboard hub to track progress in areas such as transportation, energy, and emergency management services. Since 2011, the Austin Office of Sustainability has also maintained a separate sustainability dashboard to measure and share information about municipal and community-wide sustainability performance.

“The sustainability dashboard accomplishes three key organizational objectives. First, it advances transparency to the public to promote trust, as well as civic engagement and participation in making Austin more sustainable. Second, it provides quantifiable metrics to track performance toward meeting major sustainability goals for municipal operations and the community as a whole. These metrics provide policy makers and city management with better information to make decisions in relation to those goals. Finally, reporting consistent data over multiple years helps to identify larger trends and opportunities for improvement in programs and initiatives,” says Zach Baumer, Climate Program Manager for the City of Austin.

The City of Austin has been able to use the results of their 2014 STAR certification to provide an in-depth analysis of their dashboard goals, which have been tailored specifically for Austin. “Participation in the STAR certification process helped to broaden and deepen the level of understanding around our community’s sustainability performance. Many of our KPIs align well with the STAR outcomes and actions, and we will continue to utilize STAR as a resource as our own performance measure efforts continue to evolve over time to meet strategic objectives and goals,” says Baumer.

CLEVELAND, OH

In Cleveland, the Office of Sustainability utilizes an online progress dashboard to connect and share their work. The dashboard is designed to help the Cleveland community gauge progress in the following four environments: business, personal/social, built, and natural. The dashboard is updated on an annual basis to provide up-to-date and accurate information. “Along with tracking progress, the dashboard serves to communicate what defines a sustainable city for Cleveland. The goal is for our community partners, and the work they do, to be reflected in these indicators,” says Matt Gray, Cleveland’s Chief of Sustainability.
Collaborating with the community has been integral to the development of the City’s dashboard. In 2014, the City worked with community partners to develop its dashboard at the same time as it was working towards becoming a certified STAR community. After receiving their certification results, the City identified key gaps in their dashboard that STAR outcome and action measures could fill.

For example, one data gap that was identified through STAR certification was an indicator for transportation safety, which tracks the number of pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities annually. This metric comes from STAR’s Transportation Choices objective within the Built Environment goal area. The metric was then integrated into the sustainability progress dashboard and is now being tracked annually (see image to the right).

Moving forward, the City will continue to assess where the STAR Community Rating System can help address gaps. “As we look to re-certify in 2019, we expect STAR to play a similar role in helping Cleveland establish those key indicators for tracking sustainability progress in the community,” says Gray.

WEST PALM BEACH, FL

The City of West Palm Beach’s performance dashboard provides the city and its residents a data-driven platform to track progress of the City’s Strategic Plan. “The performance dashboard provides the public with a transparent view of how the City is striving to improve the health and resiliency of the West Palm Beach community at large,” says Nicole Wolfe, the City’s Sustainability Program Coordinator.

The City’s new 2018-2022 Strategic Plan (image at left) directly aligns with the STAR framework; the STAR goal areas serve as the plan’s chapters. “West Palm Beach chose to streamline its new Strategic Plan with the STAR rating system in order to utilize STAR’s data-driven assessments to track the progress of the goals set forth by the Strategic Plan. In essence, the STAR Community Rating System provided a way to establish targets the City wanted to achieve for its vision of the future: a thriving, resilient, sustainable community,” says Wolfe.
Each of the seven chapters in the strategic plan identifies key performance indicators and which municipal department is responsible for the indicator. These indicators are then integrated into the City’s performance dashboard (image below). By including these metrics the City will be able to track and communicate their progress in a straightforward manner.

“Currently, there are 19 measures on the performance dashboard that are part of the Strategic Plan, and each measure is located in a section of the dashboard that denotes the seven STAR categories. The dashboard is updated quarterly, and all City departments are continuously working on additional measures to be included on the dashboard, in an effort to illustrate progressive targets and to increase data transparency for West Palm Beach citizens,” says Wolfe.

ABOUT STAR

The STAR Community Rating System (STAR) is the nation’s leading comprehensive framework and certification program for evaluating local sustainability, encompassing economic, environmental, and social performance measures. Local leaders use the rating system’s evaluation measures to assess their current level of sustainability, set targets for moving ahead, and measure progress along the way.

For more information on how to get started using the STAR Community Rating System to track and communicate local progress in your community, please contact:

- Aaron Lande, Member Relations Manager
- Email: aaron@starcommunities.org
- Phone: (202) 742-3232