

On Sunshine Week, a salute to data sharers

Article by: [JAMES ELI SHIFFER](#) , Star Tribune Updated: March 14, 2015 - 4:46 PM

Today marks the start of Sunshine Week, the annual exercise in chasing away the shadows of government secrecy. It's observed by citizens examining public records, showing up at public meetings and calling out bureaucrats who thwart the public's right to know what they're up to.

This column often features examples of the latter. Yet it's also important to recognize those in government who take the initiative to open their data to the public, knowing that we the people can actually help them do their jobs better.

Last year, commissioners in six metro counties did something remarkable. They made their land records free and available online, after years of selling that data.

After the twin votes of Hennepin and Ramsey commissioners in February 2014, Geoffrey Maas, the Metro GIS coordinator for the Metropolitan Council, popped the cork on a bottle of champagne. Maas had worked for months to persuade metro counties to share their data for the benefit of his own agency, as well as everybody else.



"Free and open data enables creative thinking, innovative thinking," Maas said. "GIS [geographic information systems] is no longer a priesthood of technologists. ... It really facilitates transparency in government, and it's an engine of entrepreneurship."

Indeed, the data enables "hackathons" such as the Hennepin County Geo:Code event last month, which produced all kinds of nifty ideas: Figuring out which vacant lots would serve best for urban farming and examining property values over time were just two of them.

Trained as an urban planner, Maas spent five years at the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy before arriving at the Met Council three years ago. To do regional planning, the Met Council obtains property data from each of the seven metro counties.

Maas realized that the practice of charging fees for the data, implemented two decades ago to recover the cost of GIS systems, was actually hampering good government. It was becoming a money-loser for counties, which had to provide tech and sales support. More significantly, the strict control of the data made it off-limits to the growing force of volunteer app developers.

In October 2013, a group led by Maas and Randy Knippel, the Dakota County GIS manager, handed over a report recommending the mass liberation of geographic data. Since then, Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota, Carver, Anoka and Washington have done so, with Scott County "hopefully" doing so later this year, Maas said.

Knippel called it a 180-degree turn for his county, but by last year, the counties were racing to become the first havens of open data.

It helps that land records are relatively noncontroversial. People have a basic expectation that they can find out who owns property and how much it's taxed. It goes back to at least 77 A.D., the origin of a fragmentary stone tablet called the Orange Cadaster. It shows property lines and tax valuations for a part of modern-day France that was then in the Roman Empire.

That venerable history did not prevent some county officials from trotting out the same arguments about the perils of open data: It would invade people's privacy, threaten national security, expose them to lawsuits. Maas and his allies were able to overcome each of those objections, and add another argument that's especially welcome these days: Open government is good government.

As a result, a growing number of Minnesota officials are enlisting the grass-roots "open data" movement, which is full of idealistic digital natives eager to make the world better with code. These are people who like to spend their weekends mapping storm drains, capturing data streams of bus arrival times or finding caretakers for local fire hydrants.

"We're really at a point where we can put the data out there ... and let people come up with their own ways of using it," Knippel said.

These days, when requests for public records are often met with denials, delays and liberal use of Sharpie markers, that's a shining vote of confidence in democracy.