

THE PUBLIC SECTOR OPEN SOURCE PROJECT

The Public Sector Open Source Project, convened and sponsored by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will facilitate and loosely organize the sharing of software owned and developed by or for the public sector. This project will commence with a meeting held in Cambridge, Mass. on December 9th, 2003, of individuals from U.S. state and municipal governments who are interested in discussing and creating a relatively informal collaboration among public sector entities.

The initiative is premised upon the need for taxpayer information technology dollars within and across public sector entities to be used frugally, and the economic and engineering desirability of pursuing reusable software code. For example, code sharing has the potential to ease application interoperability issues across jurisdictions. The momentum behind use and development of open source software within governments domestically and abroad is considerable. In the IT sector in general, open source promises to transform the way software is designed, sold and supported.

Public entities invest significant funds annually in software development. Some of the code developed by these entities is owned entirely by them. At the same time, all these entities are in the same "business" -supporting licensing, permitting, voting, corporations administration, public safety, health and welfare programs and education. Public entities could save a considerable amount of the money that they now spend on software development by sharing with each other source code that they own.

To maximize the benefits of public sector code sharing, public entities should license their code to one another under "open source" licenses permitting licensees to access and modify the source code. The licenses should also require that all modifications and enhancements to the code be made available for free to all public entities participating in the open source project. One of the first tasks for the collaborative will be to review the potential open source licenses (such as Mozilla and GPL) to determine a small subset that will meet members' needs. An online web based code repository of some kind will be selected for this initiative. The repository, along the lines of www.sourceforge.net, will facilitate the initiative by making a forum available for participating governments to post information about new open source code they are contributing to the community and to facilitate other collaboration.

During the next month, Massachusetts will continue to reach out to state and local governments to identify a core group of interested participants in the MIT kick-off meeting and for potential membership in this emerging initiative. It is envisioned that no entity will be in sole control of this project, though the government of Massachusetts and MIT are initial organizers. It is also envisioned that the repository will not remain under the dominion of any single party, but will be subject to the will of members of this collaborative. These and other organizational topics will be addressed in a Memorandum of Understanding developed by and agreed to by participants in the collaborative.

For more information on this initiative, and to find out how your government can participate, please contact Daniel Greenwood, Director of the MIT E-Commerce Architecture Program and coordinator of this project for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, at opensource@civics.com