

MICHIGAN PLANNER 'E-dition'



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Government Transparency & Open Data

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A popular Government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.

-James Madison, 1822

The concept of open government in the United States first gained legal foothold on July 4, 1966, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), giving Americans the right to access public records (with some restrictions). By 1976, most states had followed suit, adopting so-called “sunshine laws” governing freedom of information and open meetings (see this guide to Michigan’s [sunshine law](#)).

Implementation of FOIA [has been rocky](#) over the years. Government agencies complain that FOIA represents a drain on resources. Those who try to gain FOIA access to records complain about roadblocks, costs and delays. Yet FOIA remains one of the cornerstones of American democracy, allowing journalists and citizens the right to know and report what is going on in their government, creating a presumption of transparency and accountability.

When President Obama took office, he issued a memorandum on [Transparency and Open Government](#), affirming FOIA, and calling on federal agencies to go beyond it and take initiative to embrace transparency, participation and collaboration. A single federal data portal, [data.gov](#), was established to provide a single point-of-access for federal data. As the Internet matures, a new wave of advocates is increasingly calling for governments to take the initiative in putting public records online in a readily accessible, searchable, downloadable format.

Open data advocacy organizations have sprouted up over the past decade, such as the [Sunlight Foundation](#), the [Open Knowledge Foundation](#), and the [Open Government Data Working Group](#). These organizations provide a variety of public information, policy, and granting activities to support innovative approaches to open government initiatives to engage citizens. The [Michigan Coalition of Open Government](#) was established, as a 501(c) 3 organization and local subsidiary of the [National Freedom of Information Coalition](#), with a goal of educating citizens about their right to access public records and attend public meetings. [Sunshine Week](#), an annual awareness week to promote open dialogue about government transparency was held for the first time in

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2013, and will happen again March 16-22, 2014. Events included student essay contests, "Sunshine Hero" awards, seminars on FOIA and open government data.

Government transparency received a boost in Michigan, when Governor Snyder's Administration initiated the [Economic Vitality Incentive Program](#) (EVIP), linking supplementary state revenue sharing (beyond constitutional requirements) to local government compliance based on three specific mandates: accountability and transparency, consolidation of services, and employee compensation. Local municipalities began posting online Citizen's Guides and Performance Dashboards, service collaboration/consolidation plans, and employee compensation plans and making them available to the general public.

According to the EVIP act, Citizen's Guides and Performance Dashboards must include data on liabilities including pensions and other post-employment benefits. Other quality-of life and economic data points, such as cultural and recreational assets, educational attainment, infrastructure quality, public safety, are encouraged but not required. Municipalities have a great deal of latitude in producing this documentation. Links to local government dashboards in compliance with EVIP requirements are [located on the Department of Treasury's website](#).

Implementing open data policies and technologies requires resources, whether internal or external, and new roles are being defined for the management and implementation of such programs, such as "[Chief Data Officer](#)." The skills needed to implement public agency open data programs are integrative. Technical expertise, including web development, database science and statistics must be combined with an understanding of governmental administration, operations and public communication.

Several private firms have cropped up to help local units of government meet these requirements and enhance their transparency. In Michigan, BS&A of Bath, Michigan offers a free [accessmygov.com](#) template for municipalities to plug into their websites. [Munetrix](#) of Auburn Hills, Michigan provides a multi-tiered product offering access to financial and quality of life data, financial management and forecasting tools for municipalities and school districts, and a networked service collaboration database. A subset of the data is available free to the public, including information on financial performance and government spending. Financial data from the State of Michigan F-66 database are pre-loaded into these systems, and local governments have the option to update or correct the data. [Masadda](#) is a Michigan firm focusing on school district financial and educational performance metrics, targeting school district administration.

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Several national firms are developing similar tools for open data targeting various sectors like academia, business, and the medial. [Govistics](#) offers local government access to public [U.S. Census](#), [American Community Survey](#), and [U.S. Census of Governments](#) data. [OpenGov](#) is a Silicon Valley based start-up geared toward building web applications to allow the public to visualize, analyze, and share local government spending data. [Socrata](#) offers education and products including open data portals for local governments, internal data-driven management tools for government employees, and custom development API tools.

As demand for easy, online access to public information, communities will need to evaluate the greatest tools available to identify the best available, most cost-effective solutions for migrating records from the basement file cabinet to the cloud.

RESOURCES:

[White House memorandum on Transparency and Open Government](#)

[Data.gov](#)

[Sunshine Week](#)

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