

Case Study: The Durham Neighborhood Compass

Case Study Category: Technology Advancements



Jurisdiction: Durham, NC

Population: 228,330 (US Decennial Census, 2010)

City Manager: Thomas Bonfield

We are requesting that this project be considered for an Innovation Award and for a Rapid Fire Session.

Contact

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Synopsis

The Durham Neighborhood Compass is a neighborhood indicators project that integrates Census Bureau and local data in one tool to measure the thriving, livable qualities of neighborhoods. The objective is to provide a data tool that allows local government and residents to target neighborhood improvement efforts and track changes in our overall quality of life. Through its use government, neighborhood & homeowners associations, nonprofits, businesses, academic institutions, and others can align resources with data to create policy, tailor program development, and target resources.

The Neighborhood Compass and its analysis will direct both short and long-term objectives for neighborhood revitalization, policy, land use planning, location of resident services, accessibility, safety, and growth management.

Project Costs

Costs for this project include salary for one dedicated full-time staff member, as well as annual budget allocations. Additional staff contributions of time and expertise are arranged through interdepartmental agreements and do not exceed standard support obligations.

Project Savings

The City saved the cost of developing a new API by using what we think is a brilliant open source product. Additionally, by dedicating a full-time, permanent employee to the project, annual budgeting for a consulting team became unnecessary. Beneficial outcomes for the project include greater service efficiency, transparency, and accountability for government; access to meaningful, pertinent information, and ultimately improved quality of life for Durham's neighborhoods. Key performance measures will include continued improvement and stabilization in Compass data dimensions and greater citizen satisfaction with City and County services (as reported by Durham's biannual Citizen Survey).

How is the Neighborhood Compass Innovative?

I. Democratic Data Means Community Engaged Data

Democratizing data means not only making information available to the public, and making it readily accessible. Residents should actually have a hand in determining what gets measured and how it is presented. The Compass is a neighborhood indicators project created by the City, with County and Public Schools support, but we are not developing this product behind closed doors. Residents, businesses, nonprofits, citizen advisory boards, advocacy groups, teens, aging adults, government employees and department directors – each have contributed to the product's construction. Development of the Compass has been treated as a community engagement opportunity.

II. Strategic Planning Mandate and Measurements

The Neighborhood Compass is an initiative of the City's Strategic Plan, which mandates the Compass be provided "as a tool to assist with the alignment of City resources with City priorities." 47% (34 out of 72) of the variables selected for inclusion reflect the goals of or are measurements designated by the City Strategic Plan. The remaining measurements reflect

departmental operations goals, the County Strategic Plan or the Durham Public Schools Strategic Plan.

III. Multiple-Agency Collaboration

The project is guided by a Policy Team composed of City, County, and Public Schools representation. This group was initiated to make executive-level decisions related to project implementation, but with the project's development it has taken on the additional function of making policy recommendations based on the data found in the Compass. Partners that help drive the production side of this project include City/County Planning, Technology Solutions, most City Departments, the County Manager's Office, Durham County Social Services, Durham County Public Health, and Durham Public Schools. Many other agencies contribute to its success, however, by providing data, research expertise, or administrative guidance.

IV. Government Offices, Not External Research Offices

Most neighborhood indicators projects are hosted by university- or non-profit-based research offices that are independent of local government. This has the advantage of apparent objectivity and dedicated resources. But the development of a project like the Compass from within the City government reflects an innovation in municipal thought: this City values research and invests in it. It also invests in using its data to analyze performance, furthering the City as a thinking, reflective business that transparently assesses its service to clients.

V. The Gentle Imposition of Data Collection Standards

The process of engaging City, County, and Schools for the development of local indicators requires data standards – standards of quality, frequency of collection, geocoding and documentation. You may have already guessed that departments don't each approach these concerns in the same way. But departments do understand how valuable standardization is. They want to contribute their data not only because it is something they should do, or that it will help them target resources more effectively, but also because doing so takes the burden of analysis off of them. With some upgrades and oversight in data management, each participating department gets a significant return in analysis that would oftentimes require a much greater investment of staff time. In the process of developing shared data standards, Durham further becomes a government whose culture *values* analysis.

Obstacles

In addition to the documentation and automation of workflows, it is incumbent on us to ask the contemporary questions that will keep the project fresh in its service to government and citizens alike. Projects that open the doors to government data are fashionable now. But what happens when, despite its utility, the idea has become less sexy? Will the impact of the project still speak for itself? Can this project maintain funding through election cycles and staff turnover? Asking the right questions about the role and expectations of the Compass and having firm answers to them will be essential.

Consultants

Private consultants were not hired for this project, but the City has consulted informally with several public entities that are doing similar work. (University of North Carolina – Charlotte, and

the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance, for examples.) Of these, UNC Charlotte provided the most support. They were initially intended to conduct the work of the project and would have been a paid consultant to the City. Staff changes prevented that from happening and the City took on the responsibility for creating the Compass. Even then, however, staff at UNC Charlotte (particularly Tom Ludden and Owen Furuseth) offered technical and moral support in the first couple of months of development.

To learn more about their role in our work, contact the following consultant:

Owen Furuseth, Associate Provost Metropolitan Studies, UNC-Charlotte
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Presentation Style

A Neighborhood Compass case study will include a presentation (using Prezi) and an interactive demonstration of the Neighborhood Compass application. Special attention will be given to the partnerships and relationships that undergird the project.