

Innovation in Government



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To many people, the idea of “government innovation” may qualify as an oxymoron. Governments are often viewed as plodding institutions that keep doing what they have always done and are unresponsive to ideas for change. In actuality, local governments can be seedbeds for new approaches. To be sure, more local governments could come up with new ideas and be more receptive to adopting new approaches developed in other settings, but many have a solid record of innovation.

Local governments may be more prone to innovation because they are different than their state and federal counterparts. They are closer to the people served and have a much greater potential for citizen engagement. Typically they are much less gripped by partisan conflict, and they are more likely to give professionals a chance to analyze problems and look for solutions.

Examples of Local Innovation

At the Alliance for Innovation, each year we see hundreds of examples of how cities and counties are remaking their communities for the better. The examples below are just a taste of what is happening across America.

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Puget Sound, WA

In early 2000, the eCityGov Alliance was formed by a group of city managers who sensed the opportunity and the demand from citizens for online services. None of the communities had adequate budgets to develop robust websites. Working together, they pursued cross-boundary Internet service portals to access permits, parks and recreation activities, maps and property information. In 2009, the partnership added portals for shared procurement, government jobs and human services. From the original nine partner cities, the Alliance is now serving 39 organizations—34 cities, one county, a fire district, two economic development councils and an airport—with a combined population of 1.3 million citizens across a four-county region.¹

Greensburg, KS

After a devastating tornado destroyed the entire town on May 4, 2007, the citizens, in partnership with their local government, decided to rebuild with sustainability principles governing all their actions. Three years later, the town has changed dramatically, with over 100 new homes, all of which are 40 percent more efficient than code, and many are aiming for LEED certification from the US Green Building Council. A wind farm with ten turbines produces enough power for over 4,000 households, making the town carbon neutral. Before the tornado, the town had little industry or economy to support the new generation. Now Greensburg is making its mark as one of the greenest towns in the nation.²

Washington, DC

In 2008, the DC Office of Technology hosted a contest to find new ways to make the City’s Data Catalog more useful for citizens. The Data Catalog, which contains open public data such as crime feeds, school test scores and poverty indicators, is considered the most comprehensive of its kind in the world. The contest resulted in the city having 47 different applications of iPhone,

Facebook and other web applications that citizens could download or install. The cost of the competition was \$50,000, but the value of the new applications is estimated to be in excess of \$2,600,000.³ Although Washington, DC discontinued future contests, the concept has been copied by other cities to advertise their transparency efforts and collaborate with citizens to address local issues.⁴



Photo courtesy Troy Dilport





Photo courtesy: One Block Off the Grid, 1blog.org

San Francisco, CA

Embracing the notion of sustainable power, San Francisco has issued local municipal bonds to allow local homeowners to purchase rooftop solar systems. The city's incentives, combined with state and federal subsidies, pay up to half the cost or more of a residential solar system, providing many San Franciscans the initiative to go solar.⁵ The city of San Francisco allocated \$9.5 million to fund the first year of the solar program, which launched in 2008. Since then, over 1,100 applications have been received, resulting in over 3.8 megawatts of solar power installed or soon to be installed.⁶

Chicago, IL

Based on evidence that children from all communities can achieve at the highest levels with strong school leadership, the Chicago Public Schools developed New Leaders for New Schools, a program to recruit and train highly effective principals. Launched in 2000, the program recruits individuals from both academic and corporate sectors. Then a rigorous training program provides the tools and guidance needed to lead underserved and underperforming urban schools. Preliminary findings indicate that students in elementary and middle schools led by New Leaders principals for at least three years are academically outpacing their peers by statistically significant margins. New Leaders principals were twice as likely as other principals to oversee 20-plus point gains in student proficiency scores. And high schools led by New Leaders show higher graduation rates.¹⁰



Photo courtesy: New Leaders for New Schools

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How to Expand Innovation?

These examples are the tip of the iceberg. Innovation is expressed in many different ways, but there are four shared elements that help spur innovation: aligning needs or opportunities with solutions, leadership; collaboration and partnership, and citizen engagement.

Taken alone, these elements that encourage innovation cannot promise success of a new venture. However, together they represent a willingness to solve tough problems, take advantage of new opportunities, get more people on board and produce new and amazing results.

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Karen Thoreson is the president/chief operating officer for the Alliance for Innovation (www.transformgov.org). Prior to working for the alliance, she worked in local government in Glendale and Tucson, Arizona, and Boulder, Colorado. Thoreson also is a trainer and a speaker on public-private partnerships, community revitalization, innovation and strategic planning.

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2000 CALORIES A DAY IS ALL MOST ADULTS SHOULD EAT



Giant apple raisin muffin

Healthy snack? Maybe not.



Photo courtesy: New York City Health Department

