

PPI Metro Policy Play #1

By Mark Ribbing



Location: Kansas City, Mo.

Program: KCStat

Play: Harness the power of digital networks to assess constituents' priorities – and to deliver on them more efficiently and effectively than ever before.

Results: Gains in accountability and public satisfaction; overwhelming voter approval of an \$800 million bond issue that will address longstanding infrastructure needs.



In 2011, Sly James won election to his first term as mayor of Kansas City, Mo. Within roughly 48 hours of his victory, he was swept into a meeting room to close a long-anticipated deal: the approval of an agreement to make the City of Fountains the site of the first Google Fiber ultra-high-speed broadband network.

But, while the award of Google Fiber represented a unique civic opportunity, it could not change a basic fact: Kansas City was an aging Midwestern metropolis with a lot of very typical urban challenges, including worn-out infrastructure and tightly constrained public budgets.

As James put it, "We knew everybody needed more money, but there wasn't going to be any more money, so how do we get a better result?"

Even before the Google Fiber announcement, he was convinced that one way to wring better results from city government would be to radically improve its digital capabilities, which, at the time, were – in his word – "fledgling."

Prior to his election, James spoke with City Manager Troy Schulte about the municipal performance-management system, known as [KCStat](#). Inspired by other data-driven "stat"

initiatives such as New York's CompStat, the program focused on a limited set of metrics for individual departments.

James and his team knew that real urban problems tend not to confine themselves to the jurisdictions of any single department, but spill messily across several agencies at once. To take one oft-cited example, any serious effort to reduce crime almost immediately encounters issues as varied as neighborhood development, public health, housing, and education.

In this spirit, James's new administration swiftly transformed KCStat into a tool that could identify progress on specific goals, regardless of how many agencies might be involved. Assessments of public safety – and any other major municipal priority – would now incorporate data and insights from across city government.

In addition to shifting KCStat's focus, James expanded its mandate. It now includes not only the performance-management system, but also the city's 311 (non-emergency help) call service and citizen-satisfaction survey. These additions infuse KCStat with an ongoing awareness of the needs and concerns of the city's residents.

This commitment to transparency and interaction extended to the KCStat meetings themselves, which are both televised and thrown open to social media input from viewers. From his own seat at the sessions, James himself sometimes shares documents, charts, and live insights with the public via Twitter.

The city is not only sharing information like never before – it is also gathering it from new sources, thanks to rapidly evolving digital technologies abetted by a robust fiber network.

For example, digital sensors in road pavement

can alert the city to the emergence of potholes. City crews can then fix them before the holes begin causing accidents, blocking traffic, jamming 311 lines, and otherwise costing taxpayers far more money.

And, because KCStat now has an open-source, open-data website, residents can track the city's progress against potholes (or anything else) any time, day or night – and freely add their own observations or corrections, which in turn gives the city additional valuable information.

"We can save money and we can use those savings to reprogram tax dollars in other ways. That's been tremendously helpful for us, and it's becoming more and more embedded into our culture every year," said Joni Wickham, the mayor's chief of staff.

All of this has contributed to a cause that is dear to Sylvester James's heart – the elevation of data-driven criteria over the paralysis and parochialism that so often stymie local government.

Even without Google Fiber, he said, "I'd be looking for a way to make decisions that was justifiable, and that you could argue from a factual standpoint. Using facts and data to make decisions makes perfectly good sense because you don't have to justify it on some personal, political, subjective basis."

To a large extent, this approach has resulted in a city government driven not so much by City Hall initiatives as by public input, as measured (of course) by KCStat's citizen-satisfaction surveys.

So far, the culmination and crowning achievement of Kansas City's digital experiment has been the passage of a massive \$800 million general-obligation bond, which voters resoundingly approved in April 2017.

This bond issuance, the largest in Kansas City's history, will pay for long-deferred infrastructure needs, including the repair and construction of bridges, streets, and flood-control systems.

The triumph of such an ambitious public-works program is a reflection of Mayor James's expanded KCStat at several levels. First of all, as he points out, the improvement of basic infrastructure was hardly a priority that his government "pulled out of the air."

"It was something we knew people wanted, because that was a constant refrain in the citizen-satisfaction survey," he said.

Then there was the input from another arm of KCStat, the 311 phone line. "When we looked

at our 311 data, the number of complaints about those specific issues was significant," James said.

Finally, there was the data from the road-embedded sensors, which gave the city some leverage against the pork-barrel considerations that sometimes distort public-infrastructure spending.

"We could responsibly prioritize the repairs and the rebuilds in such a way that it wouldn't come down to, 'Hey, I want something in my district,'" James said. "We looked at doing things that made sense as opposed to doing things that were politically expedient."

LESSONS FOR LEADERS

- Before we get into the lessons that Kansas City drew from its digital experience, know that while some aspects of data-driven government are easiest to manage at the local level, states are also realizing the benefits: according to the [Digital States Survey](#), some state governments have made significant gains in efficiency and performance – and the innovations are by no means limited to the traditional tech hotbeds. The states with "A" or "A-minus" grades in the most recent survey were Michigan, Missouri, Ohio, Utah, Indiana, North Dakota, Georgia, Virginia, and Washington.
- At the federal level, the Obama administration's [trailblazing approach](#) to data-driven government has been replaced by uncertainty and even [rollbacks on policy information access](#) in the Trump White House – rollbacks that [in some cases have been redressed by enterprising, data-savvy city governments](#).
- We'll let Sly James describe Kansas City's own first lesson in his own words: "If I were to come in cold, based on what I know, and start over, the first thing I would do is contract for – and use – a citizen-satisfaction survey. I think that is absolutely crucial, because then your data collection and data usage are designed to meet the needs of the citizens that they tell you about, not the needs of the citizens that you guess."

- The second lesson? Take it away, Mister Mayor: “I would go to an open-data platform and ask people in the community to take a look at it and give some advice. You want to have a strong privacy policy, a policy about how that data can be used; who owns the data; and what’s going to be private and what’s not. And invite people to come in and hack it and tell you what they see and how it could be better.”
- Recognize what a trove of information cities have access to – and use that information much more intentionally and effectively. As James put it, “Cities collect a lot of crap; but, if it’s just sitting there in all these isolated boxes and drawers and nobody’s putting it together, it doesn’t tell a story.” To put data to better use, he encourages cities to hire statisticians and make more aggressive use of predictive analytics.
- Consider implementing something like Kansas City’s [Innovation Partnership Program](#), which gives entrepreneurs access to city data to test their ideas for potential products and services. In return, a city can receive discounted access to private-sector innovations – and burnish its own reputation as a forward-thinking, congenial place for startups to do business.
- Last but far from least: from the very start, factor equity considerations into innovation. When Kansas City officials were working with Google on the rollout of the new fiber network, they learned just how deep the “digital divide” was between affluent, well-connected neighborhoods and the poorer, more isolated parts of town. The city has responded by working to ensure that families in public housing have access to high-speed Internet – and by establishing a [digital-inclusion coalition](#) to address the problem.
- Finally, James advised, “Celebrate every success.” When a citizen survey result goes from dismal to dazzling, praise the individuals and agencies responsible for those gains – and do so as publicly as possible. As James pointed out, this practice tends to foster further gains down the road: “Now you’re encouraging people internally to get in line on the process, because they’re getting recognized for their contribution.”

To learn more about KCStat and how its lessons might apply to your community, visit kostat.kcmo.org or contact kostat@kcmo.org. ###



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