

CIVICSQUARED²

Name

CivicSquared

Requested amount from Knight News Challenge:

\$500,000

Total cost of project including all sources of funding:

\$500,000

Expected amount of time to complete project:

1 Year

DESCRIPTION:

"The same prudence, which, in private life, would forbid our paying our money for unexplained projects, forbids it in the disposition of public moneys." -- Thomas Jefferson

CivicSquared is social software that helps communities obtain and discuss information about local legislation, tax allocation, and voting records.

Most citizens do not know how their local taxes are spent. While it is true that citizens can voice opinions at the public meetings where these decisions are made, there are enormous barriers to effective participation. Some of these barriers include advance access to agendas, to information about issues, and to past deliberations on those issues. Even when agendas are posted in advance, there are often questions, and the impact of legislation on a community is often unclear without a public dialogue. One cannot assume that local media will offer multiple perspectives and unbiased views due to a lack of diversity in media ownership at the local level. Something needs to be done to make the process more inclusive towards the community.

Our project seeks to address these problems via CivicSquared¹, a simple, open source web application with the main focus of posting the local government's agendas well in advance of meetings, and the minutes of those meetings quickly thereafter. However, CivicSquared will provide services far beyond basic access to public meeting records. Our goal is to provide communities the simple, powerful tools to gather the facts, present the facts, stay up-to-date, and give the community an opportunity to foster a conversation and opinion around those facts before votes are cast.

CivicSquared will not only enable local governments to post and preserve these agendas and minutes electronically with no software costs, but it will have functions for harvesting the agendas and minutes from local government web sites, should they exist. Furthermore, CivicSquared will enable community access via a number of different mechanisms. CivicSquared will offer simple email reminders and personal calendar integration (iCal and Google Calendars) of meetings, while offering more complex subscription options to those who want them. Some of these options include RSS feeds, text messages, microformats, and filtered subscriptions.

Filtered subscriptions allow users to customize their CivicSquared subscriptions and limit them to commentary, specific legislation, topics, "controversial" issues, or any combination thereof. The atomization of resolutions and ordinances allows for a combination of controlled vocabularies and user tagging to "catalog" bits of legislation, enabling more refined searching and data extraction.

Finally, CivicSquared will be able to "talk" with other communities running their own instances of the software, so a single site could become a personalized, one-stop access point for users' borough, city, county, and even state governmental proceedings. Furthermore, a public API will be exposed allowing the aggregation of data on public meetings by a variety of data consumers like media, government, scholars, and public interest groups. For example, such dynamic data could drive a national site which allows a citizen to enter their address and see a dynamic listing of all the upcoming public meetings in their area. Another example might be that environmental groups (national, state, and regional) could search a centralized aggregation site to find and provide support to local districts that are facing

decisions that impact the environment.

CivicSquared will encourage public discourse, giving citizens and elected officials the opportunity to comment on legislation. Such commentary allows officials to answer questions, and allows pro and con arguments to be presented before the meeting occurs. Comments will be rated by the community so that insightful and useful information gains prominence in the dialogue. Media sources would also be able to harvest quotes from comments of consenting citizens to complement stories and help inform the "less-wired" population. Because decisions often span across several meetings, references to past resolutions or ordinances will be linked from the agendas, making it simple for a user to follow a topic through its life cycle, and less intimidating to citizens who may want to comment at a later stage. Not only will this provide valuable information to citizens, but elected officials can use CivicSquared to perform simple polling of their constituents to determine the popularity of upcoming decisions.

In addition, the paucity of information available on local candidates at election time often forces voters to cast ballots along party lines rather than from a full understanding of the candidates' stance on the issues. CivicSquared will allow administrators to both record the votes of elected officials on bits of legislation, and record the number of tax dollars allocated in ordinances. This will provide rich, publicly accessible datasets on the candidates voting record, and where tax money is being spent, so citizens can make more informed decisions at election time. CivicSquared will ensure that information about participants will not be publicly accessible and will be enforced through strict security measures. With CivicSquared, we aim to address all the principles of Open Government² and will work with the Open Government community³ to follow, implement, and produce standard formats for storing and sharing this data in a structured and semantic way.

CivicSquared will be a Django web application. It will be developed as open source and distributed under the Creative Commons GNU General Public License⁴. It will be easy to install and configure to minimize any obstacles to quick adoption by the anticipated administrators, who would be responsible for acquiring and posting agendas, minutes, voting records, and financial allocations. Although the aim is to have local governments adopt the software, other anticipated administrators may include: local/state government, local tv/radio/newspapers, independent media, public advocacy groups, historical societies, and public libraries. Outreach to potential administrators would be directed toward groups like The National Civic League⁵ and the National League of Cities⁶, among others.

The web application is comprised of 3 main components:

1. Admin

Web application solution for administrators to add content (ie. legislation, agendas) in a well structured back-end data store. This will allow for printing material, searching, archiving, etc. It will be more than just a data entry point, but a tool for the communities that employ CivicSquared - a true application for managing local information. Ideally it will also allow for the easy sharing data and pulling data out of the system via our API.

2. Public/Consumer website

This is where citizen and elected official can communicate with each other and manage their profiles, registration, notifications, feeds/subscriptions, commenting, ratings, etc.

3. Public API

Data input/output, data mining, data reuse, research, creative solutions, etc.

How will your project improve the way news and information are delivered to geographic communities?

Only a small fraction of local governments (borough, town, city, county) throughout the United States have web sites where agendas and minutes are posted⁷. However, following tax dollars and local legislation is probably the most important information a community could have to grow and prosper. Taxes are public funds which should fund services that are important to the community. Many states have "Sunshine Laws" which ensure access to public records, and many states are currently updating laws to reduce barriers to this information⁸. Such interest in the freedom of government information provides a unique opportunity to deliver a tool that will serve their needs to improve access.

Furthermore, most small towns have only a single, and sometimes biased, news source to learn about local government proceedings. If these events are covered at all, the stories are frequently published after it is too late for the public to express their opinions. The barriers that prevent citizen participation also inhibits coverage by financially-strapped local media. CivicSquared will foster more communication between elected officials and their constituents, and will empower both citizens and local media to assess the direction of their communities. Finally, as mentioned earlier, the subscription and aggregation possibilities are endless in terms of providing news and information to surrounding communities at all levels.

How is your idea innovative? (New or different from what already exists.)

We have tools like Thomas.loc.gov, Public.Resource.Org, and OpenCongress.org to track legislation and government documents at a national level. Furthermore, according to the Librarian of Congress, Dr. James H. Billington, the Library of Congress is planning on expanding the NDIIPP network to include the preservation of state legislative records⁹. While these tools and plans deserve praise, **no service currently exists at a local level to publicly track legislation and tax dollars**. Moreover, none of these projects go as far as they could in terms of personalized information or exposing structured data for further analysis and reuse.

CivicSquared is innovative because it creates a mechanism for local politics to connect with larger political bodies and issues. This would be an incredible evolutionary leap in government infrastructure and would provide the foundation for citizens to truly "act local, and thing global". It brings government into the modern world by applying innovative, Web 2.0 concepts such as transparency, collaboration, and information sharing to public discourse. The transparency it provides would impede corruption, which has led many to disengage from civic activities due to apathy and hopelessness. The collaboration would ensure that government officials are acting in their communities best interests. The information sharing will allow for exponential improvements more informed elections, more civic engagement, and more scholarly research.

What experience do you or your organization have to successfully develop this project?

Shaun Ellis is a community organizer in his town and has worked extensively with local and regional peace and justice groups. Mr. Ellis also has over 10 years of Web application development experience, and holds an undergraduate degree in New Media Design from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University. He is currently finishing his Masters of Library and Information Science degree with a concentration in Digital Libraries, while he works as a full-time web applications developer for the Rutgers University Libraries. Mr. Ellis' education and profession have made him keenly aware of information access to government documents, grey literature, and complementary projects being undertaken by the Library of Congress, Open Government, and other organizations.

Kevin Fricovsky is the founder of Monty Lounge Industries, LLC his web application development, design, and web strategy consulting company. Mr. Fricovsky has 9 years of experience in the web application development industry. He graduated, with honors, from Rutgers University, class of 2000, with a B.A. degree in Journalism. Before forming his own consulting company, Kevin created, and shortly later sold, a small online advertising platform he designed/developed/marketed from the ground up. Recently, as Vice President of Technology for a NYC startup, Fricovsky's passion and experience in technical research, solution architecture, development, quality assurance, information design and usability lead both the technical and web strategy vision for the company. Prior to that venture Fricovsky lead one of the premier online Broadway ticketing websites as Senior Developer. In his spare time Kevin also acts as the Community Evangelist for the popular Django podcast/community site This Week In Django (www.thisweekindjango.com) as well as actively participates in the open source community whenever possible.

1. The name of the project was selected because it implies an "exponential" increase in civic participation and responsibility. In addition, it provides a way to "square up" our taxes with local government. Finally, a civic square is another term for public space::
http://www.pps.org/newsletter/Dec2002_Feature.

CivicSquared aims to serve four corners (a square!) of a successful democracy: 1) Government Transparency 2) Public Debate/Dialogue 3) Independent Media and 4) An Informed Citizenry

2. http://public.resource.org/8_principles.html
3. <http://groups.google.com/group/open-government/?pli=1>
4. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/GPL/2.0/>
5. <http://www.ncl.org/>
6. <http://www.nlc.org/>
7. 1. http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/Portal:My_Government_Website
8. http://sunshinereview.org/index.php/State_sunshine_laws
9. <http://www.loc.gov/about/welcome/speeches/digital/digitalage.html>