To: Mayor's Correspondence Unit
From: Rebecca Williams and Alisha Green of the Sunlight Foundation
Re: Open Government Recommendations

What government information should be more readily available online or more easily searched?

All government information, not prohibited by local or federal law including The District of Columbia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), should be open by default[1] (i.e. proactively disclosed) and required to be posted online[2] with any exemptions balance-tested in the public interest[3]. This includes the release of new government information[4] in a timely manner and the release of past archival information[5]. A complete inventory of data holdings[6] should be conducted, naming all available data sets including those prohibited for release and citing the legal or regulatory reason for exemption.

Public input[7] should be considered when prioritizing the order in which datasets are released. Thereafter, datasets that shed light on governmental decision making processes should be prioritized, such as *political data* (campaign finance, election, lobbying, and conflicts of interest data, etc), *finance data* (revenue, budget, payroll, spending, procurement[8], and tax data, etc), *legislative data* (bills, votes, events, minutes, rules, code, and regulatory data, etc), as well as *public safety data* (crime, fire, evacuation zone data, etc). Data sets that provide legibility to the municipal built environment should also be considered, such as *geospatial data* (zoning, land use, building footprints, parks, and infrastructure data, etc), *transportation data*, *housing data* (affordability, foreclosure, and code enforcement data), as well as *data on civic services* (permitting, probation, etc).

Being "readily available online" should mean being released in open formats[9] (see below), with bulk downloads[10], APIs[11], permalinks[12], with a clear metadata schema[13] that provides for optimal searchability and interoperability.

Which document or data formats should be available for online information?

All data should be shared in open formats[14] online. These formats are machine-readable (structured), serve searchable, sortable data, and are non-proprietary. Examples of current (2013) open formats are: iCalendar, vCard,

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[1] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#open-by-default
[2] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#post-online
[3] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#exemptions
[4] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#new-information
[5] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#archival-material
[6] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#lists-of-holdings
[7] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#public-participation
[8] http://sunlightfoundation.com/procurement/opendataguidelines
[9] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#open-formats
[10] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#bulk-data
[11] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#public-apis
[12] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#permanent-access
[13] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#metadata

Rich Site Summary (RSS), Comma-Separated Values (CSV), Tab-Separated Values (TSV), Extensible, Markup Language (XML), JavaScript Object Notation (JSON), Resource Description Format (RDF), Keyhole Markup Language (KML). Open Geospatial formats include shapefiles (which to be complete should include all: .shp, .dpf, .prj, and .shx files) and Geospatial JavaScript Object Notation (GeoJSON). Portable Document Format (PDFs) should be used sparingly, open where possible, and primarily for image or archival information that is difficult to release in the aforementioned formats. Open format best practices should be routinely researched and updated as technology progresses. Moreover, where possible the code behind government software and websites should be open source[15].

How might advisory committees, rulemaking, public hearings, social media, or emerging technology be better used to improve decision-making?

Advisory committees, rulemaking, public hearings, and social media can improve decision-making by empowering greater public participation[16] in the process. Technology can facilitate all these mediums and cast a wider net reaching constituents previously unheard from, providing not only increased feedback, but more equitable governance. Greater public participation coupled with a civic engagement dialogue create a necessary feedback loop that improves civic services (everything from infrastructure issues to—potentially—budget prioritization via participatory budgeting). Public participation provides public opinion and community expertise and also provides citizens with a "heads up" and legibility to the process tempering future confusion and/or complaints. Transparent government data and analysis made possible via technology can improve vital civic services. Analyzing 311 data, for example, has helped improve the decision-making process around how to respond to non-emergency situations in the community.

What alternative models exist to improve the quality of decision-making and increase opportunities for citizen participation?

We applaud the effort to make public participation[17] part of the decision-making and policy implementation processes. Other models of city-level efforts to include public input can be seen in Oakland, California's legislative drafting process,[18] Philadelphia's Open Data Race[19] and use of SMS engagement[20], Montgomery County's Open Data Town Hall[21], and Madison, Vancouver and other cites' use of idea ranking[22] and New York City and other cities' use of participatory budgeting[23].

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14 http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#open-formats
15 http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#open-code
16 http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#public-participation
17 http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#public-participation
18 http://oaklandlocal.com/2013/10/oakland-city-council-approves-open-data-policy-community-voices/
19 http://opendataphilly.org/contest/
20 http://planphilly.com/articles/2012/06/05/city-philadelphia-and-code-america-launch-textizen
21 http://www6.montgomerycountymd.gov/apps/News/press/PR_details.asp?PrID=13107
22 http://madison.ideascale.com/, http://vancouver.ideascale.com/
23 http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2013/07/15/open-budget-open-process-a-short-history-of-participatory-budgeting-in-the-us/

What are the limitations to transparency?

The substantive limitation to transparent government information addressing privacy and security issues are well defined by local and federal law, including but not limited to: The District of Columbia Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The practical hurdles to transparency include effective implementation. Implementation of a transparency program that includes opening government data should include: creating an oversight authority[24] with binding regulations[25], a process for quality data release[26] with ambitious timelines[27], and appropriate funding[28]. Transparency promotes accountability, provides legibility, and supplies analytical breakthroughs unavailable via opaque systems.

What policy impediments to innovation in government currently exist?

The lack of a municipal open data policy that supports the open by default data release of all government information online in open formats, reinforced with a clear oversight authority, binding regulations, a process for quality data release with ambitious timelines, and appropriate funding not only prevents the possibility of a transparent and accountable government, but also prevents innovation across government departments and within the District. A complete set of Guidelines to support an Open Data Policy, can be found at http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/ and have been referenced throughout our responses.

What changes in training or hiring of personnel would enhance innovation?

The District should hire supportive personnel to assist the Open Government office and city agencies in the execution of an open data plan. The District should also train personnel on the benefits of open data and how it can improve internal processes as well as benefitting the public. For help with this conversation, look to Sunlight's series[29] that lists the reasons government workers might be wary of open data, which includes tips on how to address all of these concerns.

What performance measures are necessary to determine the effectiveness of open government policies?

An implementation process[30] that provides ambitious timelines[31], prioritization of data release based on public input, and routine policy and release review[32] and appropriate adjustments is imperative. Measuring data set demand,

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[24] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#oversight-authority
[25] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#binding-regulations
[26] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#data-quality
[27] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#timelines
[28] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#funding
[29] http://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/tag/why-open-data/
[30] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#data-quality
[31] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#timelines
[32] http://sunlightfoundation.com/opendataguidelines/#future-review

government efficiencies, and the level of engagement help inform adjustments to an effective open government plan.