

Civic Insight's BlightStatus App

FIVE YEARS AGO, New Orleans resident Mandy Pumilia was concerned about the number of apparently blighted structures in her neighborhood, known as Bywater, where she is currently vice president of the neighborhood association. Despite post-Katrina recovery efforts, it was hard to identify and track truly troubled properties, and she didn't have access to city data that could have helped. Instead, she built her own Google spreadsheet and filled it in with the results of her own research and legwork. "It was an arduous process," she recalls. And despite her tech savvy and determination, it was a solution with limits: it wasn't easy to share the information beyond people she knew directly, and keeping up with property-specific city hearings was a chore.

Particularly useful: a "watch list" feature that lets someone like Pumilia keep tabs on specific properties, and sends timely alerts about hearings and other developments. "And it makes it easier for me to empower other residents," she adds, "so I'm not the only keeper of information."

When other cities noticed New Orleans' embrace of the app and expressed interest in a similar tool, Code for America adapted the technology to work elsewhere. "We seemed to hit a nerve," says Eddie Tejeda, one of the Blight-Status creators. Specifics varied from place to place, but grappling with official property data was clearly a widespread frustration. Lots of people want information about buildings and property, Tejeda continues, but what's available is often "really hard to work with"; digging through it requires knowledge and experience.

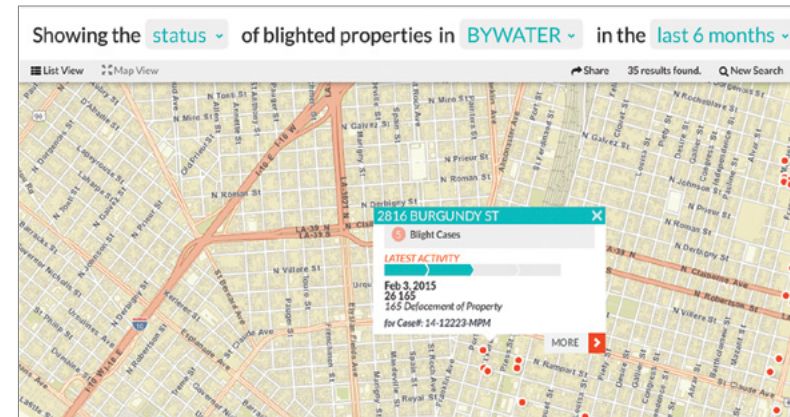
With an investment from the Knight Foundation, the group formed Civic Insight in 2013, using their New Orleans work as a template that could be scaled for other cities large and small, with varied needs and data sets. (Setup and annual subscription-like fees vary by population: roughly \$1,000 to \$10,000 for the base rate plus 20 to 70 cents per capita.) Among its newer clients, Dallas is proving a particularly important case study. A sprawling metropolis with wildly diverse neighborhoods, from pricey and thriving to severely economically challenged, it's helping demonstrate that this approach to open-data technology isn't just for triage in a place like post-Katrina New Orleans.

The connection came via Habitat for Humanity. The nonprofit's New Orleans chapter has been an enthusiastic user of BlightStatus. Members passed the word to colleagues in Dallas, where the city has been grappling with strategies for using data to define, track, and address blight and related issues, such as identifying problem landlords. Launched in late 2014 with data similar to the information collected in New Orleans, the Dallas version will incorporate additional crime and tax-related

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Since then, a web app called BlightStatus (blightstatus.nola.gov) has become a valuable new tool for her neighborhood recovery efforts. Created in 2012 by Code for America, a nonprofit specializing in open-source projects that benefit local government, BlightStatus makes it simpler for citizens like Pumilia to access property details, more deeply engaging them in managing blight and other planning challenges. The effort caught the attention of other cities and led to a spinoff startup called Civic Insight, which is now deploying its technology in Dallas, Atlanta, Palo Alto, Sacramento, and other places.

In New Orleans, BlightStatus aggregates information on inspections, code complaints, hearings, judgments, foreclosures, and more. This data is generally siloed or hard to access, but the app gathers and updates most of it daily. Users can search by address or use an interactive map to search at the neighborhood or citywide level.



Civic Insight's web-based app allows users to search addresses like this one in New Orleans for a history of code violations, foreclosures, and other signs of neglect. Credit: (above) BlightStatus, (right) © Google Street View data: New Orleans



statistics that locals want to access more readily, says Theresa O'Donnell, the city's chief planning officer, who spoke about the app at the Lincoln Institute's Big City Planning Directors conference in Cambridge in October 2014. "As we get these programs up and started," she says, "we can rely more on citizens to let us know if [our blight efforts] are working or not."

Atlanta and Sacramento are rolling out their own programs to make use of the app this year, and other Civic Insight efforts are forthcoming in Fort Worth, Texas, and elsewhere. Client goals aren't limited to blight issues, notes Tejeda, now Civic Insight's CEO: in Palo Alto, where zoning, development, and construction are hot topics, architects and homeowners use the app to keep up with permitting processes. That flexibility is by intent. "It's relatively quick for us to map [raw data] to our application," he explains. "The role we play is being the translator between what the city has, and what the public needs." (The app is also built to accommodate new data sets—and it's no surprise that active citizens like Pumilia, in New Orleans, have lots of suggestions that Civic Insight is working to accommodate.)

Comprehensive data sets and other digital tools have helped to guide planners and other city officials for years, but what Civic Insight is up to is the next logical step. "There's this great opportunity to harness this data—sort of hidden data, for many cities—and bring it to life" in ways that are useful to citizens and planners alike, points out Lincoln Institute fellow Peter Pollock, the former head of planning in Boulder, Colorado.

Such accessibility matters because policy makers must "coproduce the good city" with residents, Pollock continues. "Planners are in the business of harnessing community energy around a vision for the future," he says. That means zoning and permitting—but also maintenance and compliance. "It's not just building the city; it's care and feeding of the city over time."

Still, the Civic Insight proposition may seem confusing at first: How does a city benefit by hoping citizens will pore over information that it already owns? But that's the point. Opening up data to people who really know the neighborhoods where they live and work amounts to a kind of crowd-sourcing strategy for planning-level city maintenance.

Just ask Pumilia. This is the essence of what she was trying to do in New Orleans with her DIY spreadsheet and a whole lot of grit a few years ago. Now she can monitor her neighborhood more easily and direct others to BlightStatus so they too can quickly round up the information they need and prod the city about troublesome properties.

Dipping into the data as we speak, she calls up the history of one local address: "So there are one, two, three, four, five cases against this property," she says. In short, she has just whipped up a ready-made dossier of neglect—one that helped persuade officials to start a process that should lead to the auction of that property.

Sometimes, Pumilia says with a laugh, "It requires citizen action to inspire people to do their jobs." □

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