

New app, website let public assess Boston's performance

By [Michael B. Farrell](#) | GLOBE STAFF | DECEMBER 04, 2012

Want to know how many parking tickets the city of Boston hands out monthly, or how many potholes it fills? Curious about graffiti complaints or whether shootings are on the rise?

Boston's record-keepers collect vast amounts of data that city bosses use to gauge the successes and failures across all departments, and to determine the city's overall health. Boston is making available a big chunk of that information on a mobile app and website to give the public tools for judging how the city is fairing.

The [Boston About Results](#) program will be unveiled Tuesday at a forum in New York City on technical innovations in city governments. The new performance management system includes a website and app called [Citizen Insight](#)— available on Apple iPad but not Android devices — that provide statistics from across city departments such as police, public works, and the school system. In all, these virtual score cards expose city data on more than 200 measurements, or about 10 percent of the total measurements the Boston tracks for internal purposes.

“This is a transparency program,” said Devin Quirk, Boston's citywide performance manager, who described the site and app as ways to encourage greater civic engagement.

On the website and app, the public will not be able to see just a snapshot of monthly crime

statistics or public school achievements, but also how those numbers compare with the city's own benchmarks and whether the numbers have changed from previous years.

For instance, it shows there were 456 incidents of violent crime in September, the most recent date that data is available, running above the city's own projection of 442. The figure also is higher than the 402 incidents logged in September 2011.

The program doesn't say how Boston compares with other cities in the state or nationwide. For example, you can't tell how prostitution complaints in Boston compare with those in Cambridge or Somerville.

"This data let the city see where it can improve performance," said Meredith Weenick, Boston's chief financial officer, and allow it "to keep an eye on the most important parts of our business."

Still, she said, what is being exposed to the public is just a portion of the overall data the city collects on a daily basis. But as the system evolves and the public has a chance explore Boston About Results, the city could add additional measures, she said.

The website and app are the byproduct of a \$650,000 contract with the business



Data from
September found
on Boston's new
website and app:

96.1 %
potholes filled

64.2 %
fire calls answered
in under 4 minutes

104,703
parking tickets
issued

software giant SAP America to improve the city's back-end data analytics system.

It also follows several other initiatives in the city to utilize new data analysis tools and mobile technology to improve services. For instance, Boston's Citizens Connect app lets users report potholes and other problems around town.

Over the summer, Boston worked with IBM to find ways to improve traffic flow, and the city also has outfitted its Public Works employees with smartphones to record trouble spots around the city.

The New York forum, which is hosted by SAP, will examine the use of technology for improving city management and include the Washington think-tank the Brookings Institution and the Center for Technology in Government, a public-private partnership based in Albany, N.Y. Representatives from the cities of Boston and Edmonton, Alberta, will also participate.

SAP is holding up Boston's About Results program as an example of what cities can accomplish by exposing data and innovating with technology.

"If you don't measure the things that you do in the city well — or badly — you can't do anything about it," said Sean Patrick O'Brien, head of SAP's urban management and public safety division. "A lot of cities are intensifying their focus on doing the right things well."

In terms of potholes and graffiti, it's a mixed bag in Boston. In September, the city responded to 96 percent of pothole cases within two days, but only about 7 percent of graffiti reports within three days.

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