Civic Tech Forum – KCMO City Council Candidates

Digital Divide

Over the last few years, we have seen an increased focus on the digital divide--the lack of access to computers, Internet connectivity and other digital tools that are increasingly necessary for full participation in civic life and the modern economy.

What do you think the city's role is in bridging the digital divide? What goals do you believe Kansas City should set in bridging the digital divide, and what strategies should we adopt to achieve those goals?

I believe there are additional challenges related to the "Digital Divide," beyond that posited in this question. It is more than lack of access; it also includes a lack of digital and internet literacy.

Clearly accessibility is a challenge. There are a number of approaches that could be explored to increase accessibility. Computer banks, kiosks, etc. could be made available to the public in various public facilities and private facilities that see the value of such connectivity, either for business reasons or as a matter of public policy. Programs could be explored to provide funding to provide hardware and software capability to individuals and groups to whom such technology was not otherwise available.

The lack of digital and internet "literacy" presents a couple of challenges and would require a different approach than merely making the technology accessible. Some of the individuals – in governmental and private sectors – are not fully competent to provide information and training to assist persons attempting to navigate the various online programs and options. Moreover, too frequently, the online instructions are not readily understood by the users most in need of assistance. Additionally, many systems make it difficult, if not impossible, to easily reach a live human being for assistance.

The digital divide in terms of access falls significantly along socio-economic lines, while the "literacy" issue falls not only along socio-economic lines, but also is related to age. This age differential, in many cases, provides additional challenges.

Of course, investment in solutions must be measured against other needs of the City. This area presents an opportunity for public-private partnerships. Additionally, creative funding options should be explored and considered.

[Illustrative of the above challenges was the experience I encountered in attempting to answer this questionnaire. As a first step, I attempted to access your web site. Using Google, Bing, and also attempting to connect to kcdigitaldrive.com and kcdigitaldrive.org, I was unable to connect directly to your website. Exploring the first several options provided through my searches, I was regularly informed: "No Results Found – The page you requested could not be found . . . ." I had marginal success by being referred to a "feed" that appeared to list a number of events and/or news items, but again no direct connection to your organization.]

Open Data

In the past couple years, Kansas City has established an open data policy and launched data.kcmo.org to make city data more accessible and usable. This is important because it enables citizens to do things like monitor 311 requests online, look up property records through GIS, and even create new applications to make the city work better, such as what the Code for America brigade does in its "civic hacking" meetups.

Have you ever used Kansas City's open data portal? Do you support an ongoing commitment to open access to city data? What are the biggest opportunities that a philosophy of open data offers, and what are some of the risks? What approaches do you support to manage those opportunities and risks?

I have, on occasion, used the City's open data portal. In fact, such use has informed some of the comments included above. The open data portal provides an opportunity for greater transparency, which is a positive. While the technological potential is there, still too much of the City's business and too many public documents and records are not easily accessible to the public.

To the degree these "opportunities" are pursued and expanded, greater efforts need to be made regarding their availability.   As alluded to in the question, user security and privacy must be carefully addressed.

Economic Development

Traditionally, economic development has been defined by real estate development and the ability to attract and retain large employers. Technology is changing the nature of work and jobs in some ways that we understand and others that we don't fully grasp yet. The ability to freelance and do "project work" is increasing, large employees don't offer the long-term stability they once did, machines are able to do more jobs once done by people, and the technology skills needed to find jobs change more quickly than the educational system can adapt.

How do you think the city's economic development toolkit needs to change in order to compete in the current economic environment?

As with a football team, one must learn to "block and tackle" before mastering more complex formations and plays. In my view, there is much the City needs to do to improve its current economic development model and its practices. Perhaps these improvements could be made in conjunction with expanding the technological toolkit and current and future economic environment. Again, the potential for positive progress clearly exists, but with it comes the potential for abuse. Changing employment models provide the opportunity for misclassification of employees, non-payment of certain taxes, licenses, fees etc. On the other hand, it offers an opportunity to pursue good paying jobs, without subsidizing investments in large brick and mortar developments. Part of this discussion should also study the long term economic impact upon the community of a major shift to a new employment model.

Progress in this area presents an opportunity – indeed, a requisite – for public-private partnerships, public-public partnerships, and involvement of the non-profit sector and the academic community.

Smart City

The city announced a groundbreaking "smart city" partnership with Cisco early last year, but details are still being worked out and specific information has been scarce. The idea behind "Smart Cities" is that data collected from digital devices--whether electronic sensors and cameras managed by the cities or the mobile phones and wearable devices that citizens purchase--can benefit the entire community in areas like public safety, traffic management, health care, and energy efficiency. Specific examples may range from red light cameras to street lights that dim when they can sense that no one is around.

How proactive do you think the city should be in developing these sorts of solutions? How would you balance the priority of the city to support the common good with the preferences of individuals who may not want to participate or worry about their privacy?

Again, the potential for great progress is apparent. As noted, balancing legitimate privacy interests with maximizing the public good is no easy calculation. One area of great benefit is in health care management. Groups such as Cerner have already demonstrated the contributions that can be made with regard to computerizing individual medical records, which, among other things, facilitates sharing among and across health care providers, to the benefit of the patient. Certain public safety and law enforcement applications also provide ripe opportunity. But, as the City learned with its "Red Light Camera" experience, scrupulous assessment of the prevailing law must be accomplished in concert with any proposed advancements. And again, the concern for individual privacy cannot be overstated. Of particular concern is who would collect the information, by whom and how such information would be stored, and who and/or what entities would have access to the information.

Sharing Economy

There is a phenomenon sometimes called the "sharing economy" or the "collaborative economy" that encompasses car services like Uber and Lyft (which recently caused some controversy in their entry into the KC market), lodging companies like Airbnb, coworking spaces, community gardens and other activities that blur the line between personal and commercial. Municipal regulations and tax codes often aren't set up to deal with these sorts of services.

How should the city treat deal with these emerging business models in a way that is friendly to innovation and also respects the need to protect the public and fund city services? Which collaborative economy activities, if any, do you participate in (e.g., do you use Airbnb when you travel?)?

Along with concerns mentioned previously, I believe it is important to address another significant challenge: applying existing laws and regulations to these new models and adapting and modifying such laws and regulations to the emerging changes. Obviously, this is no small feat and deserves far greater study and a more comprehensive response than allowed in the space of this questionnaire.

The Playbook

KC Digital Drive's charter document is [the Playbook](#) that resulted from the Mayors' Bistate Innovations Team recommendations in 2012, which has been [updated and released in digital form](#).

Have you had a chance to review the Playbook? Where do you think we've seen the most progress and where do you see the greatest opportunities?

At this time, I have not had time to review the "Playbook."

Personal Tech Adoption

We all have to find balance in how much we choose to incorporate technology into our personal lives.

How do you decide when to absorb new technology tools into your life and work? What social media channels are you most active on? What are your favorite tech tools that you've recently started to use?

I will be happy to address this question at the forum.

Respectfully submitted,

Louie A. Wright /s/

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