Case Study
City of Pittsburgh

Fiscal Focus

features a trio of public apps
— Budget Explorer, Checkbook
PGH, and Payroll Explorer

Financial apps

allow key decision-makers
within the government access to
detailed reporting

Users can
delve into details,

identify trends, and search
data without placing a undue
burden on city staff

PITTSBURGH

As with most cities, Pittsburgh is swimming in data. And while having this large quantity of details, databases, and stats can be advantageous, it can also overwhelm, especially if the data isn't readily accessible.

Data might be stashed in binders, files, or siloed on an employee's desktop.

However, by implementing a modern approach to its data management and analysis systems, policymakers can begin to gather insights, find a narrative, and ascertain which data is most beneficial for making better decisions.

Pittsburgh found that by making the financial picture clear, the city — and its stakeholders — can invest with confidence in the city's future.

CHALLENGE: USER-FRIENDLY FINANCE DATA

For the city of Pittsburgh — growing in popularity, but still recovering from painful years and a shrinking population following the collapse of the steel industry — it's particularly important to publicly share a view inside the city's financials.

That's not always easy.

> **"We use the word 'transparency' a lot. We can put all the records out there in the world, but if you're not providing context to those documents and that information, you're really not helping anyone."**
>
> **— Michael Lamb,** city of Pittsburgh controller

"Too often we can get swamped down in long, exhaustive reports or budget conversations that have to introduce entirely too much information," said Pittsburgh Controller Michael Lamb.

That is, the quantity of data isn't the issue. It's the ability of the city to free it from silos and spreadsheets, and share it in a meaningful way. This task is particularly important for Pittsburgh. While headlines about the city's resurgence are often exuberant, the financial realities are complex. For example, while residents' incomes are rising, the overall population is not. Meanwhile, the cost to build and maintain infrastructure, or provide other city services, is increasing.

The options often come to two choices: cut services and programs or increase taxes.

As controller, Lamb oversees the city's finances.

"A big part of my job is breaking down some of the myth," said Lamb, separating hype from reality when it comes Pittsburgh's financial outlook and recovery. "The city is recovering. We're not quite back yet, but we're doing better."

Powerful tools — that allow the city to put this data on display to the public, while also allow budget analysts to dig in and view trends — are essential to Lamb's priorities, as well as the city's continued ability to flourish and attract new residents.

SOLUTION: OPEN DATA PLATFORM MAKES SHARING EASY

Pittsburgh turned to Tyler's Data & Insights in 2018, but began its drive toward transparency back in 2014. However, its first open data portal had some challenges.

Lamb notes that the greatest limitation was that the city could only display operating budget data and only the city's general fund. It didn't provide the experience the city — or the comptroller's office — had in mind. Generating better internal reporting was also an objective, noted Andrew DeWitt, Legislative Projects Analyst.

Pittsburgh turned to Data & Insights for a comprehensive solution. In April 2019, the city launched Fiscal Focus, which has three applications:

1. Budget Explorer — This interactive, user-friendly application lets residents see where tax dollars are spent.

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"The truth is, when giving a data-backed presentation, it's not enough just to throw some well-designed data visuals on a screen. To truly communicate effectively, you have to use the data to deliver the story you are trying to tell."

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2. Checkbook PGH — Details on all goods or services purchased by the city are shared here, broken out by department, vendor, and more meaningful categories.

3. Payroll Explorer — Here, site users can delve into city employee wages and benefits.

Through these apps, it's possible to view years of historic budget data, spot trends, and create filters and visualizations to make following finances easy. Payroll Explorer updates when payroll is processed biweekly, and the other apps update daily.

"[Tyler's Open Data Platform] was the one system that allowed us to provide an easy-to-use interface for public users, outside users, the media, or general public to go in and look at the city's budget, track it over time, and drill down to the line-item level," said Lamb.

Each one of these applications has much to reveal.

Take city employee salaries. The police department, fire department, and emergency medical services may be some of the highest-paid departments in the city, but the median income is not very high, Lamb pointed out. The overtime factor is tremendous, and Lamb is eager to use the applications on Fiscal Focus, what Pittsburgh is calling the site, to communicate the nuances.

"Our next steps for our site include the implementation of Perspectives and other visualization capabilities for adding the necessary contextual narrative and commentary to the financial trends and analysis," said Lamb.
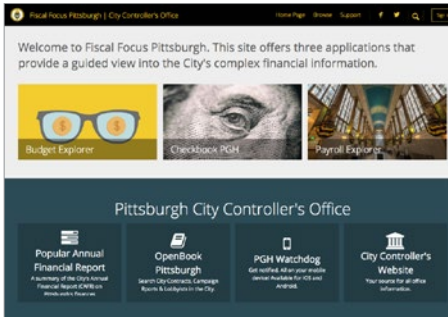
This kind of storytelling is one of the city's goals — and a key reason Pittsburgh opted for a Tyler solution.

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RESULTS: SAVE TIME AND MONEY WITH A MODERN APPROACH

The trio of applications has been live for only a few months, but already, Lamb and the city feel positively about Fiscal Focus.

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Fiscal Focus Pittsburgh is powered by Tyler's Open Data Platform

"In our ongoing effort to enhance transparency and public engagement in city government, Tyler provides something that gathers the city's financial data and organizes it into visually appealing and clear graphics," said Lamb.

Tyler helps Pittsburgh visualize the financial factors behind big debates in the city, said Lamb, and see their impact through visualizations, charts, graphs, and maps.

Lamb said the Open Data Platform helps the city do two things: communicate with the public in an accessible, understandable way, while also providing tools for more detailed analytical forecasting that they use internally.

"That helps us in so many ways, and so that's really the way Pittsburgh is moving forward with this platform," Lamb said.

Fiscal Focus delivers practical benefits, too. Community groups are using the site to view the budget, looking for services they can improve or funding opportunities to access, Lamb shared.

"We hope to expand upon our ability to connect and transform data throughout the city of Pittsburgh," said Lamb.

That means going beyond the budget, and using data-driven decision-making in other processes. Lamb shares one example where dynamic data can lead to process improvement: Sometimes the lag time between occupation permits in building and assessment is so long that the city loses out on several years of increased property taxes. Improving that process will increase the city's revenues and transform a sluggish process into an efficient one.

"We use the word 'transparency' a lot," Lamb said. "We can put all the records out there in the world, but if you're not providing context to those documents and that information, you're really not helping anyone."

Bringing data out of boxes and spreadsheets stored on services, and making it widely available to the public and decision-makers within government, where it can be used to drive conversations and policies, is one of the major benefits derived from Tyler's applications.

"Some of the best ideas we get, whether it's in our performance audits or in fiscal audits, some of the best ideas come from citizens who've been online looking at the information we're providing," Lamb said.

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