

CLIENT SPOTLIGHT | LOS ANGELES OFFICE OF THE CONTROLLER, CALIFORNIA

A pandemic recovery: How a city quickly launched a real-time financial dashboard

A Pandemic Need For Information

In cities all over the world, citizens are eager to engage in the financial decisions affecting their communities.

Yet it can be difficult for the average citizen to understand the workings of city finances. How much money is coming into the city and where is it going?

Financial transparency and accountability are hard. That much harder for a large city like Los Angeles, with a budget of \$11 billion. Throw in a pandemic and a rapidly escalating financial crisis, and the complexities multiply exponentially.

Keeping the Los Angeles city budget in check is the job of one man, L.A. Controller Ron Galperin. When the COVID-19 pandemic brought business closures, plummeting tax revenues, and cuts to critical city services, Galperin's job took on new urgency.

The pandemic hit Los Angeles' economy like a sledgehammer, and it dramatically increased the public's interest in the city's financial recovery. Charting a path to financial recovery would require timely, accurate information and tools to strengthen the public's trust.

Galperin and his staff knew they needed to respond — and respond quickly.

Recovering With Integrity, Opportunity, and Accountability

In his response to pandemic recovery, Galperin followed his office's guiding philosophy of bringing integrity, opportunity, and accountability to local government. He continually asks himself how his office can give Angelenos a trustworthy and open view of the city's finances, create tools that will improve residents' neighborhoods and lives, and ensure



Overview

- L.A.'s first real-time finance dashboard
- Tracks 800+ funds across the city
- Updated daily, bi-weekly, and monthly
- Greater accountability for public dollars
- **Location:** Southern California
- **Tyler Solution:** Open Finance

In Their Own Words

"In about four weeks, my team identified the city's most important financial information, built an online dashboard using the Tyler platform, and launched a real-time data resource to the public."

— **Ron Galperin**
Controller, City of Los Angeles

accountability for government spending — all the while seeking to innovate using 21st century technology to meet ever-increasing expectations for good governance.

Back in 2013 when Galperin took office, he put this philosophy into practice. In partnership with Tyler Technologies, he created Control Panel LA, the city's first-ever open data website. That portal gave Angelenos their first online view of city finance data including balances of city funds, revenues, payments, expenditures, contracts, and city employee payrolls. The site was a hit with the public, city leaders, and community advocates.

Fast forward to 2021. City finances moved to center stage as Los Angeles joined with the rest of the world in recovering from the pandemic's unprecedented and fast-moving health and financial crisis.

Galperin and his team understood that openly accessible, up-to-date finance data would be a critical asset for enhancing transparency and trust during the city's recovery. With an open data foundation and the Tyler data platform already in place, the team was able to act quickly.

"In about four weeks, my team identified the city's most important financial information, built an online dashboard using the Tyler platform, and launched a real-time data resource to the public," said Galperin.

The dashboard, "Inside L.A. City Finances," was envisioned as a sort of City Finances 101, a high-level entry point for people who do not have a lot of knowledge about the inner financial workings of government.

Taking many of the finance data assets that already existed, the dashboard puts them together in one place and organizes them thematically. Narrative descriptions and graphic visualizations give the public an easy-to-understand, up-to-date look at budgets, fund balances, revenues, and spending.

While the pace and shape of the recovery are uncertain, with the dashboard, Angelenos should have more confidence being able to see where money is budgeted and how it is being spent.

The dashboard should also prove useful to council members, policymakers, and city staffers when they are tracking funds and targeting dollars to areas of need.

"We wanted real-time information to be at the ready for people to use on a daily basis," said Galperin. "With data that is updated daily, weekly, and monthly, this dashboard gives residents a better understanding of L.A.'s financial health and encourages even greater accountability for public dollars."

Recovery Lessons: Taking a City's First Steps With Data Technology

What can local governments of any size learn from Los Angeles?

First, just because a city generates a 500-page finance report, it does not mean that people can readily use or make sense of it. Local governments can help lift the perceived veil of secrecy by making accessible information a key priority.

Second, building an open data foundation does not have to be expensive or take more than a few weeks. As Los Angeles shows, Tyler's purpose-built government data insights platform allows any city to transform financial reporting in short order.

Third, cities can start at a much smaller scale, adding in one or two open-data visualizations into a report. All it takes is one staff member with technical skills to create a bar chart or other visual aid from open data.

Finally, a city does not need to be the size of Los Angeles in order to embrace transparency, financial accountability, and innovation as key priorities.

Citizens want reassurance — especially during times of crisis — that their local governments are serving as good stewards of public dollars. Embracing smart solutions can give citizens the comfort they need.