# Open Data, Open City

With the economic collapse of 2008 came an intensified interest from the public in the governing and behaviour of large institutions, both public and private. Spurred by this enhanced scrutiny, the open data movement, which sees data as both a tool for accountability and a source of innovation, has been amplified. As part of the Cities Centre's Toronto 2010 Election Series we've looked at the positive externalities of open data and prepared *Open Data, Open City*, which establishes the value of political debate on municipal data policies.

Open data will open ideas

The availability and use of data by and for the public is an emerging municipal issue as cities realize the many benefits of "opening up" their data. Municipalities collect extensive data about the city and its residents, and the practice of freely sharing this data online is gaining ground in cities across the country and around the world. Vancouver and Washington, D.C. both have official open data policies, and many other cities are launching their own open data initiatives. "Data" here means everything from statistics to address lists and recycling schedules, from information on election results by riding, to the locations of schools or streetlamps. Since such information is important for both the governance and understanding of a city, a clear policy on how that data is stored, used, and presented to the public is necessary.

Open data is socially beneficial in three important ways: the first is that access to and sharing of data can increase the population's data literacy—a skill necessary for success in the digital economy. The second is that open data allows for the production and widespread dissemination of new and creative research motivated by the public's ingenuity. The third is that it reinforces both political and bureaucratic government accountability. Of all of these reasons to support open data, the production of new knowledge is one of the most compelling. The public sector spends billions annually to invest in expensive research & development initiatives with unpredictable returns. The open data movement has already demonstrated its anomalous ability to invent practical interpretations of seemingly innocuous datasets. Toronto software developer Mark Headd used data sets on location and space availability of child care centres to create a daycare search by postal code using texting or Twitter. This year, Jeff Aramini, a former epidemiologist at the Public Health Agency of Canada, developed *HealthAndSafetyWatch.com*, a website that tracks product and food recalls using aggregated federal and provincial open data in combination with media monitoring software. One of the most famous Toronto-based open data projects is MyTTC.ca, a trip planner "born out of a desire for free, open access to transit data" (myttc. ca/about). Examples of useful manipulations of open data abound and span a spectrum, from generic public service tools to highly specialized proprietary applications. What these programs have in common is their reliance on flexible, open data.

Exhibit 1: Open data uses City money wisely, promotes entrepreneurship, and enhances civic engagement
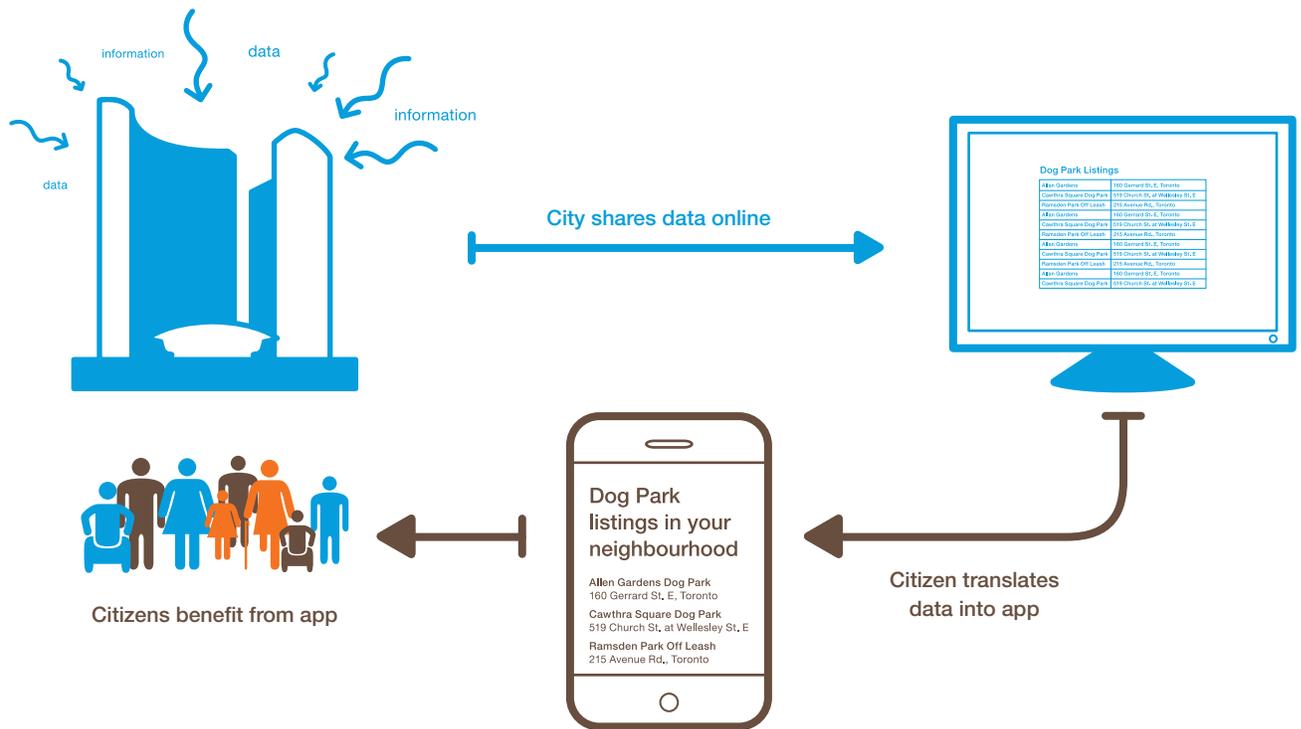
Source: Martin Prosperity Institute, 2010
Design & Illustration by: Michelle Hopgood

The move to open data in Toronto (and across Canada) could enhance journalistic reporting, university-level research, and encourage the creative exploration of city-level data and trends by engaged citizens. In an election where financial concerns are on the tip of every tongue, data should be considered as a municipal asset that will create value for every citizen. The government's embracing of the philosophy and practice of open data supports the formulation of new ideas and the identification of new trends and relationships at a low financial cost and is in line with compulsory accountability.

For more on the value of open data systems, examples of municipal open data leaders and associated policy ideas, see the full discussion paper.

The Martin Prosperity Institute at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management is the world's leading think-tank on the role of sub-national factors—location, place and city-regions—in global economic prosperity. Led by Director Richard Florida, we take an integrated view of prosperity, looking beyond economic measures to include the importance of quality of place and the development of people's creative potential.