

FCW Magazine: Where is Where.gov?

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Where is Where.gov?
A basic tenet of good government is knowing where our 'stuff' is

By Christopher K. Tucker, Sep 23, 2009

We have seen Recovery.gov and Data.gov, but where is Where.gov? Clearly, the Obama administration understands the power of place because it has already thrown interactive maps into the first two applications. Its commitment to place has even resulted in a powerful new approach to budget planning and programming, outlined in an Aug. 11 memo titled "Developing Effective Place-Based Policies for the FY 2011 Budget";

So why do citizens, civil servants, our uniformed service members and political decision-makers, including the president of the United States, need to go to so many mapping portals to see where things are, only to come up short?

From the lowliest citizen to the president of the United States, we should all be empowered to fire up an application I will call Where.gov. At that portal, you could draw a bounding box on a map, declare a slice of time and instantaneously discover everything our government knows about that place. And we should be able to marshal that data instantaneously to support our needs.

When bad things happen, they happen in places and at times you cannot anticipate. The ability to instantaneously achieve situational awareness is essential. Knowing what risks you face and the resources you have at your disposal at a specific location brings an immediate cost savings in less time spent, fewer errors made and opportunity costs not incurred. Even outside a crisis environment, we are discovering that the location of anything is quickly becoming everything.

Knowing the location of our "stuff" is a basic ingredient of good government. The Obama administration came to Washington with a clarion call for transparency, accountability and transformation of how government does business. Where.gov could help achieve those goals.

It would quickly and clearly demonstrate to everyone which government organizations can properly locate their people, assets, mission challenges and the services they provide — and which cannot. The portal would immediately strike a major blow to the out-of-sight, out-of-mind habits of Washington. Our successes and failures would be placed on the map and made accountable to open and democratic processes, which would inevitably empower people to demand better, more responsive government and encourage public/private partnerships that could lead to a better tomorrow. It would be the ultimate Sunlight Foundation.

Vivek Kundra and Aneesh Chopra, our new federal chief information officer and chief technology officer, respectively, are barnstorming the country advocating the rapid transformation to a government that uses open standards and cloud computing. I couldn't agree more. Where.gov could take their impulse and transform it into concrete guidance to agencies, telling them to publish all their data to the cloud via Open Geospatial Consortium standards, with security as appropriate.

That approach would not be limited to traditional geospatial data. The Where.gov guidance would finally communicate to agency leaders and their chief financial officers that a basic tenet of good government and effective management is knowing where your stuff is and understanding the places on which your mission must be focused. President Barack Obama understands that place matters in a fundamental way. It's time for Where.gov.