

Pittsburgh Digitizes Procurement Tools

BY: Robert Zullo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette | November 4, 2015

(TNS) -- Procurement, how government purchases goods and services, isn't the most riveting of topics, Mayor Bill Peduto said.

But how the city bids and contracts for millions in spending every year was nonetheless a priority area that the mayor sought to modernize, make more transparent and open up to new businesses over the past nine months in what the city has dubbed the "Year of Procurement."

"It doesn't get more policy-wonky than the 'Year of Procurement,'" the mayor said at a news conference today. "The money that government spends is the last vestige of the political machine. You fund the campaign and then your company gets the contract."

Three fellows from the national nonprofit Code for America have been working with the city since February in an arrangement paid for with about \$100,000 in city money and \$330,000 from the Richard King Mellon Foundation to "break that last rusty chain of the old political machine," Mr. Peduto said.

The fellows, who finish their work this month, are Patrick Hammons, a cartographer and "civic hacker" from Oregon who worked as an analyst in Philadelphia's Office of Innovation and Technology; Shelly Ni, a designer from Richland, Wash., and a co-founder of Propel, which created a smartphone application for food stamps; and Ben Smithgall, a developer from Pine who worked on digital and data teams for President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign as well as at music streaming company Spotify.

Working with the city's Department of Innovation and Performance, they produced three digital tools:

- Scout allows city workers and the public to search existing contracts. With a city user logon, workers can stay apprised of changes in contracts.
- Conductor, designed to be used mainly by the city's purchasing agents in the Office of Management and Budget, tracks contracts through renewal, bidding and extensions, connecting previously separate databases.
- Beacon is designed for businesses looking to bid on city jobs. Users can browse city requests for proposals and other job opportunities and sign up for alerts relevant to specific businesses or jobs. More than 350 firms have signed up for alerts since September.

Beacon has already produced a larger pool of bidders for hard-to-fill city jobs, such as a contract cleaning recreation centers, said Laura Meixell, the city's data and analytics manager.

The new tools join a July report by consultants from the National Institute of Government Purchasing on improving procurement practices. Also, a related executive order issued by the mayor in August put the Office of Management and Budget in charge of enforcing financial and budgetary policies across city departments, including hiring and personnel, technology purchases and travel costs, among other changes.

"This is a journey," said Sam Ashbaugh, director of the Office of Management and Budget. "There are a lot of opportunities for improvement."

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