

PARTNER'S PERSPECTIVE: NNIP AND OPEN DATA IN BALTIMORE

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The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership is a network of organizations in 36 cities across the nation. Local partners work to make data about neighborhoods more accessible and help local stakeholders apply data to tackle issues in their communities. Over the past three years, with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership explored how its partners relate to the open data movement and the potential for the two communities to work more closely together in the future. The report *Putting Open Data to Work for Communities* documents the broader lessons from the project. This *Partner's Perspective* relates how the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance—Jacob France Institute (BNIA-JFI), the local National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership partner, is engaging with the open data movement in their community. It presents a rich picture of the information environment and how it is shaped by the local institutional and political context. We hope it provides lessons and inspiration for other localities interested in using open data to improve their communities.

CONTEXT FOR OPEN DATA

Housed by the University of Baltimore, BNIA-JFI was founded in 2000 by a coalition of citywide nonprofit organizations, city government

agencies, neighborhoods, and foundations. Its mission is to “democratize” public data by making community-based indicators available for those “who work, live, play, and invest in its neighborhoods, accountable for moving the city in the right direction.”¹ Its flagship project has been *Vital Signs*, an annual publication that takes stock of the city at a neighborhood level by collecting data from city and national datasets, as well as through a series of focus groups designed to capture the true experience of life in various neighborhoods.

Though the first *Vital Signs* report came out in 2002, the indicators became available on the BNIA-JFI website for electronic download as a spreadsheet or a GIS shapefile for the first time in 2008. This made BNIA-JFI one of the first sources of open data for neighborhoods in Baltimore.

Baltimore has changed its approach to data sharing radically in the past five years. Until the late 2000s, the city’s longtime Chief Information Officer maintained protocols for limited data-sharing opportunities to protect data security for the city. However, when the city leadership changed in 2010, the new mayor—Stephanie Rawlings-Blake—took steps to transform the city into a national leader in open government.

¹ *Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance. “History.” Accessed August 6, 2014. <http://bniajfi.org/history>.*

As part of her agenda, the city announced plans for the Open Baltimore data portal, to “provide, to the public, access to City data in an effort that supports government transparency, openness and innovative uses that will help improve the lives of Baltimore residents, visitors and businesses through use of technology.”² The portal went live in its beta version in 2011, using the Socrata platform to share data and power online visualization tools. With open data in public discourse, the new question among city agencies and the city’s law department became “what is truly open, what isn’t, and what should and shouldn’t be [online].” The city focused on the process of cataloging city data and determining what could be released while still complying with privacy laws. In the meantime, the agencies did not update the data online, so users had to wait for two years until the city updates resumed.

The city’s increased use of the open data portal has enabled BNIA-JFI to download datasets directly from the portal beginning in 2013. However, retrieving data online rather than collecting it directly from city agencies created unexpected challenges for BNIA-JFI’s *Vital Signs*. Staff turnover in Baltimore city agencies has meant that that new personnel often respond to BNIA data requests by directing them to Open Baltimore. BNIA-JFI still needs to commit staff time to negotiate with city agency staff for


custom data that was provided in the past and is not available through the portal.

The city’s embrace of open data also included compromising on the availability of fine-grain data. BNIA-JFI previously received crime data directly from the police department, which included all calls for service, all juvenile request data, and actual locations of crime incidents. Starting in 2012, BNIA-JFI experienced significant delays in getting the data it needed from the police department because its primary connection left the department. On the Open Baltimore portal, BNIA-JFI can only get the “rounded address,” which gives the location down to the 100-unit block– complicating geocoding and assignment to a neighborhood for aggregation. Consequently, BNIA-JFI’s most recent release excluded many crime indicators for the first time since its inception.

PROGRESS IN OPEN DATA

BNIA-JFI’s current work reinforces its position as a key data intermediary in Baltimore and an organization that both uses open data as inputs and serves as a source of open data for community-based indicators. Users can select data on the BNIA-JFI website either by indicator or by community and then can export the results in more formats than were previously available, such as CSV or PDF files. BNIA-JFI is currently developing new ways to query their data online to make it entirely responsive to the needs of the individual user. BNIA-JFI, with limited staff, has also decided to focus internal efforts on

² See the welcome message on Open Baltimore. “Homepage.” Accessed August 6, 2014. <https://data.baltimorecity.gov/>.



providing high-quality data, rather than expanding their activities in data visualization. Given the city's promotion of the Open Baltimore portal and BNIA-JFI's longstanding relationship with the city's Chief Data Officer, Open Baltimore has a dedicated section to host *Vital Signs*, visualizing the data through the portal's Socrata platform. In May 2014, BNIA-JFI released the 12th edition of *Vital Signs*, which was posted on both its own website and Open Baltimore. BNIA-JFI also has a strong connection with Maryland Institute College of Art's Information Visualization program, who "literally pick up where [they] leave off," in terms of making raw data communicable to the general public in engaging and accurate forms.

"HACKING" WITH OPEN DATA

The second purpose of Open Baltimore was to enable the local developer community to develop applications that will help the city solve problems. The Greater Baltimore Tech Council (Gb.tc) was created in 1999, but since 2012 it has begun actively championing open data by both promoting networking across the tech community and building community through open-source programming events. Through a growing collaboration with the Gb.tc network, BNIA-JFI was offered the opportunity to be a featured "local project" during the Grace Hopper Women in Computing conference, held in Baltimore in 2012. As part of this event, the Institute hosted a hackathon for attending women engineers from such companies as Google, and Facebook, it charged with creating

a more user-driven query tool for their website. In order to prepare for the event, BNIA-JFI had to build its own capacity to serve as the data source by creating an account with GitHub (a website for collaborating on and sharing code), getting data into a usable database format, and defining a project with a clear civic purpose relatable to the tech community. Though no publically available tool came out of this event, it led the way for BNIA-JFI to effectively participate in other Gb.tc hackathons, including the National Day of Civic Hacking. In June 2013, a team of civic hackers used BNIA-JFI data in the creation of baltimorevacants.org, an online mapping tool that pinpoints vacant buildings in the city, and links them to neighborhood-level demographic indicators. This team won the Sunlight Foundation's Award for Transparency.

In July 2013, with the assistance of the Gb.tc, BNIA-JFI combined a hackathon with their annual Baltimore Data Day workshop, which brings together community organizations in the city to share ideas and data available to the public through a series of presentations and interactive sessions. BNIA-JFI also makes all presentations from prior Data Days available on its website. This year, the fifth annual event was on July 25, 2014.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Gb.tc disbanded because of funding difficulties in February 2014. Its board reportedly has plans to restructure as part of Betamore, a local for-profit start-up accelerator, but the timing for

reviving the organization is unclear. Without Gb.tc to organize the tech community, BNIA-JFI may need to have a stronger voice in the city for open data. Though BNIA-JFI doesn't engage in broad policy advocacy, it views advocating open data as a key component to their own work, government operations, and informed decisionmaking.

While BNIA-JFI's main mission continues to be improving data literacy in disadvantaged communities, the greater availability of open data has meant broader connections with the tech community (civic hackers) and local entrepreneurs who recognize ways of monetizing the value of open data. This may result in unforeseen competition for resources in order to remain a sustainable project in Baltimore. Recently, a Baltimore consulting firm launched an online resource called Baltimore Datamind, which includes maps and visualizations using the *Vital Signs* data through an ESRI online platform. The mapping website does acknowledge BNIA-JFI as the primary source of data, but not directly on the homepage. The unique value of BNIA-JFI's work in developing the neighborhood indicators may be less apparent to users when they access visualizations of the data through another source, such as Baltimore Datamind. However, BNIA-JFI staff strongly believe that the project does align with the core value of open data in its role in supporting new innovations. The experience has led BNIA-JFI to investigate establishing creative commons licensing when releasing data in the future.

The other primary users of BNIA-JFI data are faculty and students from the many colleges and universities in the Baltimore region and beyond. Students at all levels have accessed their data, either as part of their research, or through community-based learning assignments. BNIA-JFI has received funding to develop formal curricula supports for use in the classroom that is modeled after KIDSCount in the Classroom, an educational extension of the KIDSCount program funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Overall, open data is a critical component of a positive and sustainable future for BNIA-JFI. When *Vital Signs 12* was released in May 2014, the 2013 version of the baltimorevacants.org website was updated within a week of its posting, indicating increasing interdependence within the Baltimore open data ecosystem. An increasing number of people and organizations who want BNIA-JFI to provide open data solidifies BNIA-JFI's role in the broader conversation on data-driven decisionmaking for neighborhoods.



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