

Glendale, AZ Stakeholder Interviews

Summary Insights Report

As part of our support for collaborative problem solving through open data in Glendale, AZ, the Sunlight Foundation has been interviewing frequent records requestors, both in general and with a specific focus on those involving the highly requested Development Services department. The goal of this exercise is to uncover insights about how better information sharing might provide added value for the city of Glendale.

The following is a summary of insights as of June 15, 2017, roughly organized by category of requester.

Media organizations

We have interviewed two frequent records requestors from media organizations to date.

Media organizations typically request records such as email exchanges on a particular topic, public safety or legal/claim records, as well as demographic statistics and databases. Media requestors interviewed felt the city does a mixed to good job responding to records requests. Both media organizations we spoke to felt that the records office was responsive, and appreciated receiving correspondence via email. There were some feelings that more sensitive records can take longer to respond to.

One recurrent theme was the value that journalists add by processing complex records or data and reusing it to tell important stories relevant to the public interest. For example, one journalist explained that “public safety is a matter of high public concern and is a particularly newsworthy topic in our area at the moment,” while another noted of budget records, “budgets are complicated and important. No one is going to read through the documents on their own. It can help to have a journalist go through and explain it.”

In both the above instances, journalists suggested that proactive release of information could help journalists tell these important stories to keep the public informed.

The first journalist suggested that it would be easier to tell important stories about public safety in Glendale if important police records, such as police response times, were online, as they are in nearby Tempe, stating, “I looked through the Tempe open data portal and I discovered that Tempe had their police response times on their open data portal, so I thought, 'Hey I don't even have to submit a records request' - so I'm all about that;” and continuing “Proactive record releases would definitely help my job, especially if it's relevant for the story. It just depends what's up there and if it's relevant or not. I do think that having more information is a good thing for context and getting to the truth of the situation.”

The second journalist explained that there would be less duplication of effort and more ability to add explanation if important information, such as budget data were shared in a machine-readable format: “We maintain our own budget databases and update it with public records requests...it would help if the city shared data like that so we didn’t have to remake the database.”

One journalist also noted that while media organizations have built websites like <http://azpublicinfo.com/> to help make it easy for the public to understand records law and how to request information, there is more the City of Glendale can do to link to those kinds of resources or provide those kinds of directions to residents using the city website. “If I was not a journalist but was just a resident that wanted to get additional info but wasn’t sure what’s public records I think it would be helpful to have that kind of information at the city level.”

Individual residents interested in land use decisions

The individual resident we interviewed was seeking Development Services records because of an interest in having relevant information to weigh in on a proposed land-use/zoning decision.

This resident frequent requestor sought records such as email correspondence related to a proposed land use decision, property information regarding the number of residential lots in the city, code compliance/complaint information, as well as comment cards and survey results from neighborhood meetings.

This resident noted that the materials received were sometimes difficult to review, and had to be reviewed manually, rather than being machine searchable, noting that they were typically was emailed “page after page” of PDFs continuing “No way to identify anything. No index,” and that the resident “ [couldn’t] search in a document like that.”

This individual resident shared ideas on how the city can make it easier for the public to weigh in on public decisions with the relevant information. “They [city hall] have an interactive zoning map, but I couldn’t see the figures behind it. Would have been helpful to be able to search those figures to figure out the number of lots affected [by a proposed zoning change] myself.”

The resident noted the value of a resident being able to access city records explaining that the desire was to make arguments that were “fact-based,” and to share those “facts” with other residents, especially because the “city did not always communicate well.” The resident stated that they “made flyers with facts, some of which [we] would not have been able to cite without access to the public records.”

An emphasis on all members of the community having relevant facts was something of concern for this resident: “I think it’s good to be open and good for the community to have the facts. And to know what’s going on in city government.”

This category of frequent requester might at first seems somewhat specific and non-generalizable; however, the more general scenario may be a resident seeking relevant

information in order to best play their role in a public decision making process (in this case a specific zoning change proposal). With this in mind there might be opportunities for the city think about the kinds of Development-Services-related decisions for which the public needs to/might want to weigh in (such as a proposed zoning change, but also feedback on a neighborhood plan, or on a specific development proposal), and encourage/provide guidance on how residents can go about requesting and/or accessing records/info/data potentially relevant to those decisions in a more streamlined manner.

Additionally of note for this interview: the interviewee's primary objective was to gauge public sentiment on an issue facing the city or being considered. Digital polling tools and/or digitizing the kinds of neighborhood surveys cited might offer an opportunity for greater access to information that could help provide such context.

For-profit Real Estate and Related Businesses

Sunlight has interviewed two for-profit real estate-related businesses. Records typically requested include: building permits, documents associated with a specific use of a property, land use records, planning and zoning records, violations, certificates of occupancy, and development approvals.

For both organizations interviewed, access to city information was needed to provide documentation for financial institutions to make accurate appraisals of city real estate, and to secure loans for real estate projects in the City of Glendale.

Permit records are used to compile an appraisal report which lenders will use to assess the value of a home or building. For appraisers, the need for timely access to data was clearly stated: "The biggest issue is time. Sometimes there is a delay [in access to records] which can delay the process and could affect the assessed value of the house."

The potential value of better access was also clearly stated: "If getting permit information was easier, then [we could] do more and better appraisals . . . Our business would be more efficient. Something that will allow [us] to find the permit info for any address online, would be very beneficial."

In addition to appraisal reports, zoning reports to lenders are also dependent upon real estate businesses being able to access city information. As one requester explained, "The information that comes from the city is used to develop a zoning report that is sent to lenders to answer questions such as whether certain types of insurance are needed for a commercial property or if a loan should be approved." As was explained, zoning reports are usually completed for clients that are lenders, and sometimes the title company. The business explained that in Glendale, roughly 75% of projects are loan transactions, mostly involving the sale or refinancing of a property in the city.

The real estate business, which often prepares zoning reports, further explained that "metadata" about permits, violations, certificates of occupancy, etc. is often all that is needed to complete a

transaction. This business would “love” for property data or even metadata to be available online, particularly as a downloadable and/or searchable database, as it would save a lot of time. This business explained that when they prepare zoning reports for properties in New York City, because the information is online, that process only takes about 30 minutes, whereas in a city like Glendale, that process takes days or weeks.

This business wanted to make clear the value of the information being requested, stating “Each one of these requests is a loan . . . cities sometimes don’t realize that [by providing this information] they’re helping a project access financing and helping the community in general.”

Both real-estate related organizations interviewed by Sunlight expressed that providing better access to property data would make Glendale more business friendly.

One stated “Improving the process of getting permit data would help with doing business in the city, smoother real estate transactions. It’ll help with the customer service that the city provides.”

Another said of the prospect of having better access to relevant property information online, “It would be helpful for everybody. Good for development, good for businesses, good for those who want to do business with the city.” This requester continued that it would additionally save the city time and “if we can free up some of their time and let them work more on the important aspects of their jobs that will support businesses and community redevelopment.”

This requester summed up their perspective as follows, “Access to information is a signal for business friendliness and a critical part of economic development.”

Real Estate non-profits

Sunlight has thus far interviewed one non-profit organization with a mission related to real estate. This organization had requested certificate of occupancy, zoning, and building violation records from the City of Glendale. The requester reports their experience with the City of Glendale as “excellent” but notes that sometimes there is a delay in receiving documents.

This records requester explained that they requested records in order to provide documentation for a lender to secure loans used for parcel acquisition and affordable housing development.

When asked whether proactive, online access to relevant records or data would help with their process, this requester stated, “the biggest value [of such a system] is saving time.” The requester did however note that they did not like the online system in Phoenix as “often times information was missing.”

Instead of incomplete access to information this requester had a clear idea of what is most helpful to their process: “documents provided in an easy, accurate, and comprehensive way [will help] make the transaction go smoother. Financing [will go] faster and the whole process [will go] smoother.”

Other Businesses

Sunlight emailed one business that was not clearly classifiable as a real-estate-related organization. This business is more specific still in that it was a litigant in a lawsuit with the City of Glendale. This requester often requested permit records and was sometimes satisfied, sometimes unsatisfied with the experience of working with the city to access these records. Overall the stakeholder expressed that the records department was more helpful than department staff.

This requester stated that the interest in building permit records was related to a desire to “understand what the building department is doing behind the scenes,” and specifically related to building plans that were used in a hearing against the requestor.

Criticism of the building department was especially blunt “Glendale has a reputation for being one of the worst for providing data/records from the building department. Often saying they’re lost but then will magically find them if push comes to shove.”

This requester did not enjoy accessing physical records in person, describing a mold problem in a basement where records are kept that caused health concerns (runny nose, itchy eyes, headache, etc.) following a visit to retrieve records. As this requester made clear, online access to records or emails “would have been much better.”

This requester stated that they would like to have records and city data online because it would be easier, stating that it is helpful to have access to building plans when you need them. This requester “has doubts” that this will happen, believing Glendale to be “fairly corrupt.”

This requester perhaps represents the opportunity to mitigate risk of future lawsuits and/or rebuild trust in city hall via open data.