More Cities Enter the Tech Age and Budget Accordingly

By Paul Burton
November 23, 2016

Municipalities are increasingly making policy through data sets.

In New York, data sets range from the Taxi and Limousine Commission's use of technology from "hot seats" to track fares, to algorithms for first-and-last mile connections to mass transit – with implications for city and mass transit budgeting and capital spending.

In Pittsburgh -- the first U.S. city to allow commuters to ride in autonomous cars -- Mayor Bill Peduto's proposed budget for fiscal 2017 would further a rollout of sensors that indicate when trash cans are full and computerized alert systems for dispatching firefighters and paramedics.

Columbus, Ohio, winner of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Smart City Challenge, will combine its $40 million prize and up to $10 million from Paul G. Allen's Vulcan Inc. to supplement the $90 million the city has already raised from private partners to reshape its transportation system through data, technology, and creativity.

"Open data helps us know how to use our streets and sidewalks," Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer said during "Cities, Data and Mobility," a Nov. 15 forum at New York University's Rudin Center for Transportation.

"New York City is the most data-rich city in the country," said Brewer. "On a policy level, transportation microdata helps planners better understand the obstacles faced by low-income workers as they travel to their jobs."

Meera Joshi, whom Mayor Bill de Blasio named as head of the Taxi and Limousine Commission shortly after taking office, has modernized TLC operations in what could be a model for department planning, according to Rudin Center director Mitchell Moss.

"The underlying problem with the city's taxi system for 40 years was that policies were anecdotal," said Moss. "She turned anecdotes into policies based on data."

Joshi said TLC management has long discarded its clipboard-and-pencil regimen. "Here in New York, we measure with a much higher exactitude. Trip by trip. It's a much higher data set."

Technology is a key component in Peduto's budget proposal to the City Council as Pittsburgh looks to exit oversight by two state fiscal control boards by 2019.

The mayor said the city would spend $15.1 million on street paving and $12.6 million on rehabilitating dilapidated police, fire and paramedic stations. The budget includes $2.2 million to install a computerized station alerting system for Fire and EMS stations, intended to make the dispatch process more efficient through automation.

Peduto is also calling for activation buttons for lighting at Citiparks sports court facilities, which he said promote electricity conservation and improved quality of life in nearby residential areas.

During an October interview at the Pennsylvania Municipal League's annual summit in Lancaster, Pa., Peduto said data could enable municipalities to lobby for pension funding relief through a more measured approach.

"For too long we've dealt with this issue on emotion and on politics."

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, Columbus won the Smart City prize because it put forward "an impressive, holistic vision for how technology can help all of the city's residents to move more easily and to access opportunity."

Columbus proposed to deploy three electric self-driving shuttles to link a new bus rapid transit center to a retail district, connecting more residents to jobs.

It also plans to use analytics to improve health care access in a neighborhood whose infant mortality rate exceeds the national average by four times, by allowing local officials to improve transportation options.