



Laredo, TX Case Study

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“As millennials we are driven to cities that are both data driven and backed by data and evidence. We want a hub of information that will allow us to create businesses and allow us to create applications that will promote different demographics in Laredo. . . . As a young person, I want the opportunity and resources to reinvest in my community in ways that are going to be beneficial to the economy and myself and others like me... What Works Cities will benefit the perception of the city.”

- member of the Millennials group at City Council presentation

Introduction

Making beneficial organizational changes is tough, especially in local governments where so much is at stake. The City of Laredo, TX, decided to take on this challenge during its What Works Cities (WWC) engagement. The Center for Government Excellence (GovEx) worked with Laredo to establish a data governance structure, increase internal access to data, create data standards for collection and definitions of data, and address staff concerns about data quality, all with a focus on elevating the City's data practice long term and building staff capacity to take on this work.

A Brief History of Data Practices in Laredo

Laredo initially heard about WWC from a group of active millennials who wanted to band together to address issues they saw in the city. “The millennial group [was] all about empowering citizens and staying innovative,” said Roger Garcia, a leader of the group. “We [had] an influence to bring programs [to Laredo],” he said. So, together, they presented the possibilities of participating in WWC to City Council. In their presentation, these young people enthusiastically expressed their hopes of starting businesses based in downtown Laredo, but they also relayed their need for access to reliable data in order to do so. Hearing this piqued Mayor Pete Saenz's interest in using data to know how to best allocate resources for current and future projects. Exploring and capitalizing on economic development opportunities in the downtown area through the WWC program was an immediate topic of interest. The Mayor enthusiastically lent his support to the City's application, and Laredo became one of the first 100 cities in the WWC program.

With a population of about 250,000 and growing, the City of Laredo, TX, recognized its need to be competitive and incorporate data into its decision-making processes. Since his election in 2014, Mayor Saenz has led the way in supporting economic revitalization tools, like a [Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone](#), [Neighborhood Empowerment Zone](#), and [Municipal Management District](#). Still, with staggering port logistics and plateauing growth, the Mayor and his team knew that in order to compete and collaborate





with other cities, they “need[ed] to [begin to] measure and analyze programs and make changes as the data indicate[d],” explained City Manager Horacio de Leon.

The first step was to take a hard look at the City’s existing practices. Like many institutions interested in revitalizing their data practices, Laredo’s, at the time, lacked dynamism, openness, and self-governance.

Analyzing data was time-consuming. Before Laredo’s WWC engagement, data was mostly kept in PDF format. Because PDFs are not dynamic, this meant that conducting any type of analysis would require significant time and manual labor, making it challenging to quickly and sufficiently draw insights.

Data was hard to access, or it just wasn’t there. Asking for data had been a norm in Laredo’s city government, but there was not always a clear understanding of who had what data. Nearly half of city employees surveyed said that most of the time, their access to information had to be coordinated by IT. There was a commonly held belief that having data from other departments would improve intradepartmental effectiveness, yet 73% of respondents expressed that it was difficult for them to access data from other departments. And, the staff of one department said that data they needed didn’t even exist.

Data was not well documented. An absence of institutional memory presents challenges and limitations when attempting to work with historical data. Laredo had a limited amount of well-documented data (i.e., data with accompanying dictionaries, metadata, structural information, etc.). More than half of the Department of Utilities survey respondents held that “[t]he City owns all collected data, but as the primary maintainers of it, my team and I are best suited to explain it to others.” Because data did not have the necessary accompanying documentation, getting past the barrier of accessing it often only presented another hurdle: not being able to easily use or understand it without speaking directly to the data stewards.

Laredo’s Evolution and Practice

The GovEx team facilitated a site visit in Laredo in October 2016 to get a better sense of the City’s priorities. Like many cities across the U.S., Laredo was hit by the Great Recession. Data and technology funding fell by the wayside, and there were staffing cuts throughout the city. Staff members across the city reiterated their data concerns, focusing on quality, access, governance, and understanding available data. Financial transparency and downtown revitalization were central themes of the conversation. From this session, the commitment from leadership and staff at all levels of the organization was apparent. Laredo became the first data management project of the WWC initiative.

The beginning of the engagement was focused on better understanding the pain points from front-line and leadership perspectives. To explore Laredo’s current data practice, assess ease of access to data, and to see what high-quality data were available, GovEx and Laredo’s core team of staff members supporting this work began administering surveys to staff members across the city. In the first week, the core team received 353 responses to the data quality survey and 228 to the internal access survey, representing all city departments. The next step was for the Laredo core team to facilitate workshops for staff members to explore the survey responses. This enabled the team to dig deeper into its concerns, devise a plan for addressing them, and engage participants in identifying data sources in their areas of expertise. Initial inventorying showed that most departments believed they would greatly benefit from increased access to reliable data related to economic development. This, coupled with the Mayor’s desire for residents to have

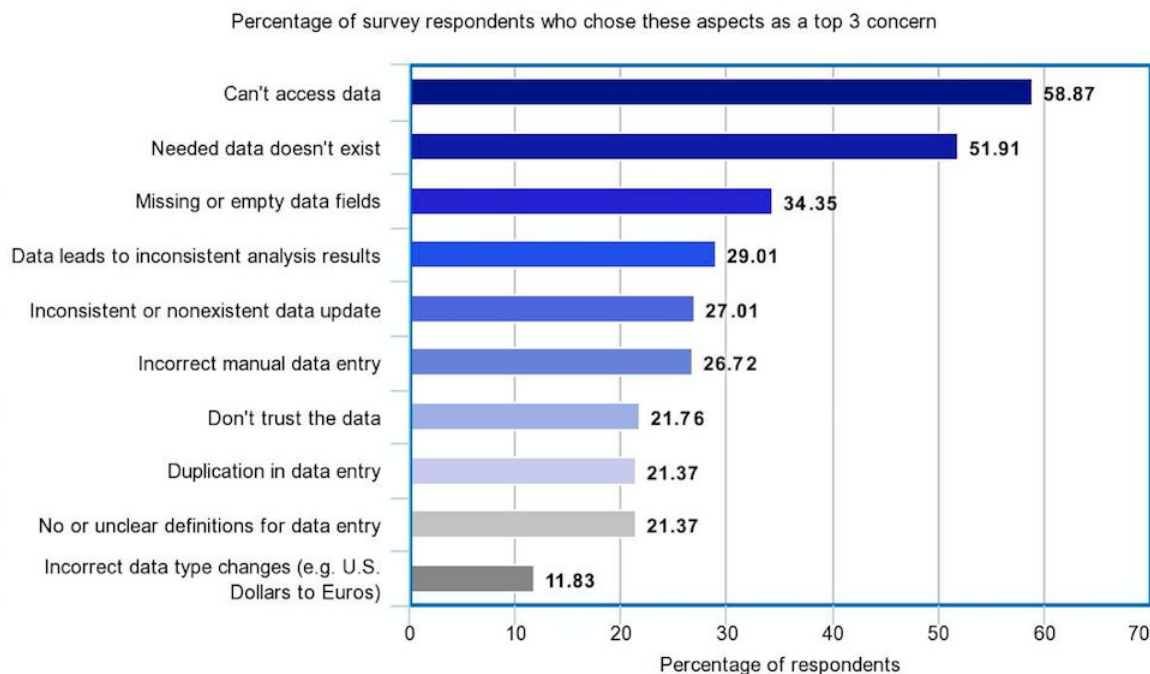


better access to more information, especially around downtown revitalization, permitting, and licensing, led to a collective focus on economic development. The core team and city leadership began to see the widespread potential in doing this work, recognizing that this was the first step in helping people who want to invest in Laredo, like the millennials who presented to City Council, do so.

Of the 228 respondents who completed the Internal Access Survey, 73% believe getting data from other departments is challenging.

Laredo's survey results told a story of dedicated city employees who wanted to work with data and improve the lives of Laredo residents, but who regularly ran into barriers. Common concerns were about systems that were not regularly updated by the companies that created them, availability of a limited amount of well-documented data, and the lack of access to other departments' data. City leaders and staff were somewhat willing to share data, as the survey responses revealed. Working to remove these barriers would help to develop a broader culture of openness, enabling employees to work together to achieve the city's goals. The Laredo team soon realized that achieving these goals meant focusing on improvements crucial to citywide staff and revisions of existing practices.

Data Quality Survey: What are your biggest concerns about data quality?



Despite sophisticated data practices being newer territory for Laredo, the city didn't let that stand in the way of its vision. Instead, with a drive to compete and collaborate with other cities, Laredo set out to better understand its current data practice, improve its data management, and establish a system of data governance. Data governance is the exercise of authority, control, and shared decision-making over the management of data assets.¹ Working with GovEx, the City Manager's Office, under the direction of Horacio de Leon, led the charge to address organizational structure concerns and form a data governance team, ensuring better alignment of staff skills with data priorities. "Horacio's willingness to

¹ [DataSF Research Brief: Data Governance, Quality, and Integration](#)



[make decisions] based on data and foster communication between the departments has made the biggest impact,” explained Andres Castañeda, Laredo’s Chief Data Officer. “The culture was, ‘This is our stuff. It doesn’t belong to anyone else. Why do you need it?’ Slowly but surely, the changes in upper management are breaking down barriers and lack of communication. We have to be in sync now.”

A group of eager staff members appointed by the City Manager became the foundation of the data governance group and began its work by determining barriers to internal data sharing and devising a temporary workaround to increase access to building permit data, a high-value dataset according to survey respondents. Laredo is currently implementing a technology solution to ensure regular access to necessary data across the City.

City Manager de Leon continued this organizational revisioning by creating an entire [economic development department](#) and is in the process of hiring for two positions after GovEx clarified the need to assign staff members to focus on this priority area. He also included important investments in his budget proposal to City Council, recommending the funding of the economic development department, chief data and chief innovation officers, and \$150,000 in technology investments to support the city’s data program. City Council soundly agreed with the recommendations. Laredo staff members quickly got to work implementing these changes and making use of these investments.

With these accomplishments underway, perhaps the most noteworthy is the culture shift still unfolding among city staff in Laredo. “[Our] work with What Works Cities has gotten through to various departments,” proclaimed Mr. Castañeda. “There is a willingness to cooperate, share, and get what is needed. Departments are buying in more quickly than they originally thought.” Mayor Saenz’s “focus on transparency [has made it] easier for staff to buy into and get behind certain projects,” Homero Vazquez-Garcia, the Director of Information Services and Telecommunications Department, said. “The budget process, including performance measures, has really exemplified that. Being objective while using data to make decisions [makes it] easier for a staff member to justify programs and make the case [to share data],” he added. What is more, this culture change isn’t all top-down. According to Mr. Castañeda and Mr. Vazquez-Garcia respectively, “some of this [change] is coming from the bottom-up,” and it’s “starting to permeate other levels of the organization.”

What’s Next for Laredo?

The City of Laredo knows its work to develop its data management practices is continuously growing and evolving. By establishing a data governance team while partnering with WWC, Laredo has the foundation to do just that.

Expand capacity. The team in Laredo will focus on increasing its capacity by continuing to hire for data governance team positions. The city also recognizes the importance of increasing existing skills by exploring educational benefits for staff members and providing more opportunities for trainings with community partners.

Start from the inside. Data-driven outcomes begin with good data management. The Laredo team will focus on improving its data quality and continue breaking down barriers to sharing data internally. In the long term, the city team will work to bring its data into a data warehouse, which will help them better understand their existing data analytically and continue to make quality improvements.



Get the community involved. Laredo is hard at work preparing for the launch of its first open data portal in March 2018. With the procurement of an open data portal, residents, community stakeholders, and City Council members will be able to get more insight into city operations and spending. “When this process starts and the community begins getting engaged, the City will continue to involve them more and implement programs [with them] in mind,” explained Mr. Castañeda. One of Mayor Saenz’s top priorities in working with WWC was to focus on attracting businesses to downtown Laredo. Laredo believes that sharing related data (e.g., business permitting, public safety, economic growth data) via the open data portal and beginning to engage the community in discussions with data as the foundation will inform residents and businesses of their misperceptions downtown and lead to more active development.

Keep the ball rolling. Despite its quick successes in cleaning up existing data and establishing new data practices, the City of Laredo has big plans to continue working to meet and exceed its goal of competing and collaborating with other cities. Currently, the core team is connecting with individual departments to set expectations around data governance and determine what issues should be tackled next, and it plans to address data standards in its upcoming data governance meetings.

Why This Matters for Your Work

Although this work is in the beginning phases and not all the outcomes have been fully realized, there is a lot to learn from how the City of Laredo pushed beyond its position as a mid-sized border city and embraced its role as a data-driven organization. The story of Laredo’s data journey is the classic underdog tale. After the 2008 Great Recession, the city was understandably risk averse in its investments in technology and data. But with new leadership came new energy and priorities, and the city started looking to get back on track by focusing on its use of a data.

As the first data management project of the initiative, city leaders established a solid foundation for a citywide data practice, made important sustaining investments, addressed culture change concerns, and set the course for continued advancements.

Governments, local businesses, and community groups should all take note of Laredo’s quick progress and effective methods of culture change. Particularly, cities interested in making similar investments in their data program, resource-strapped cities, and businesses and community groups looking to partner with local governments can look to Laredo as an example of how persistent focus can lead to impressive results.

How to Bring These Practices to Your City or Department

Want to work on your city’s or department’s data management practices, but don’t know where to start? Check out GovEx’s resources:

- [Data Management Resources](#)
- [Focus Areas for Data Governance](#)
- [Changing Culture Guide](#)

To keep up with the work Laredo’s doing and read about What Works Cities:

- [City of Laredo, TX](#)
- [What Works Cities](#)

