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Toronto's slow progress on open data is frustrating some tech advocates

The city is focusing on a strategic plan that will be delivered in September.



TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE

Ward 43 councillor Paul Ainslie at city council in March 2017.

By: **David Hains** Metro, Published on Tue Apr 25 2017

Mark Richardson is frustrated with city hall.

The open-data advocate wants to analyze more of the city's information — available parking spots, parks-and-recreation signup info — but the city hasn't moved on it as fast as he would like.

"There's a lot of concern about the risk of doing something but not enough about the risk of doing nothing," Richardson said.

When John Tory campaigned for mayor, the city had 175 open data sets, and he promised to double the number every year for 10 years, Richardson points out. That means the city should have had 800 by the end of 2016 and should have 1,600 by the end of 2017. But there's only 237 sets available right now.

That pales in comparison to other major North American cities: New York has more than 1,500 open data sets, Los Angeles has 1,567 and Chicago has 1,136.

For Richardson and civic tech activists like him, access to quality data matters. It's what enables private citizens and companies to develop apps that tell TTC riders when the next bus will arrive.

"A lot of people would say their experience of transit is better because of open data," said Richardson.

Siri Agrell, director of strategic initiatives for the mayor, agrees there's a lot of value to open data and that Toronto has lagged behind. But she says the main focus right now is establishing data standards for various city divisions, and that will set the stage for future releases.

An open-data master plan will be delivered in September, and Agrell expects the release of data to accelerate quickly after that.

"We do have to change," she said of city hall's approach. "I think we're getting there."

Projects in other cities have already borne fruit. In New York, open data was used to identify buildings at most risk of fire and which restaurants were dumping grease down the drain, causing costly "greasebergs."

Upon hearing Richardson's appeal to the city last week, Coun. Paul Ainslie moved a motion to request some of the open-data sets highlighted. But his motion was deferred until October.

"I don't think we're moving fast enough," said Ainslie.