

The Priorities Facing Mayors Change. The Need for Data Doesn't

Route Fifty | Rochelle Haynes | September 28, 2026



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COMMENTARY | Cities across the nation are facing numerous challenges, and data-informed leadership is crucial in working to try to solve them.

America's mayors are governing through tumultuous times. Today, that ledger includes housing shortages in the millions, partisanship that hits home, unstable economic shocks intensified by rising interest rates and inflation, and an unprecedented level of natural disasters dominated by severe storms.

Mayors cannot simply manage daily operations; they must navigate these complex issues and build trust with residents in the process.

Today, mayors are discovering that growing their teams' data capabilities is critical to tackling any new challenge. Bloomberg Philanthropies What Works Cities has been working with municipalities on this obstacle for a decade.

More than 70 U.S. cities have earned recognition through our flagship Certification program, meaning they excel at using data to inform decision-making, allocate funding, measure results, improve services and engage residents. Strengthening these muscles makes cities more resilient and adaptable to fast-changing events, allowing city leaders to build and sustain trust as residents see results on their top concerns.

That is evident in the ways Certified cities are addressing the most pressing issues identified this year. Economic development, infrastructure and housing emerged as mayors' leading

priorities in the National League of Cities' 2026 State of the Cities report; echoing priorities we have been hearing directly from city leaders across the What Works Cities Network.

Newport News, Virginia., for example, is tackling economic development in part by building tourism. City leaders pulled anonymized cell-phone location data to get a detailed picture of current visitors, what sorts of activities they like to do and how long they stay. They used this data to create targeted marketing campaigns promoting the city as a getaway destination for people who enjoy history, food and culture. This initiative contributed to \$51,214 in local hotel occupancy, helping to drive bookings across the area.

Infrastructure is increasingly appearing as a top city priority as maintenance backlogs grow and a warming climate produces stronger storms and more flooding. In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, local government leaders are executing on a \$500 million stormwater plan built on detailed modeling and community engagement. To inform the plan, they not only gathered maintenance data on every drain and pipe in the city but also tapped residents' knowledge about where flooding tends to happen in their neighborhoods.

Taking this step shows communities their municipality is a partner in shaping solutions that translates to making the tangible upgrades the very people who live within them want and need.

Meanwhile, a national housing shortage has mayors across the country working to accelerate their cities' permitting and approval processes. In Philadelphia, Mayor Cherelle Parker set out to build and preserve 30,000 housing units, a goal based on an extensive analysis of local housing gaps.

Her team identified 39 steps necessary to achieve the goal; they're now utilizing a data dashboard to track progress toward implementation and maintain a sense of urgency. For example, they were able to use a performance management process to dramatically reduce the Zoning Board of Adjustment's appeal process from a high of 78 days to a low of 12 days.

What will be top of mind for mayors next year? I sense they will be figuring out how to leverage artificial intelligence-driven productivity gains across city departments. They may also look to prepare residents for AI-driven changes in their own jobs.

Cities across the What Works Cities Network are already doing this, in particular, when it comes to leveraging innovative technologies to address local housing challenges. For example, San Jose, California is applying AI to speed up the permitting and building process by prescreening housing applications. Similarly, Pittsburgh is using AI to automate voucher scanning processes, providing staff with more time to dedicate to helping residents find housing among other tasks.

Of course, priorities can shift. The top issues on mayors' minds will always evolve. The need for data-informed leadership does not.