Welland and Niagara Region climb open data ranks

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Welland Mayor Frank Campion

Want to know where all the parking meters are in Welland? How about what kind of trees there are and where there are? Information about construction activity, bus routes, city parks, cemeteries, marriage licences?

Mayor Frank Campion said that data is available and it makes the city more open and transparent.

“We’re providing what we would classify as usable data, making it available to anyone who wants to look at it,” Campion said.

All of that open data saw Welland move up 37 places - from 57th to 20th - on Public Sector Digest’s 2017 Open Cities Index, earning it a most improved accolade.

Open Cities Index was launched in 2015 to benchmark municipal open data initiatives across Canada and saw 34 of the nation’s largest municipalities included that year. This year, the Open Cities Index included 61 municipalities, with nine brand new communities.

Campion said Welland started on the open data route in 2014, making digital maps available. Layers could be added to those maps, showing transit routes, road network, and parking lots.

“That was our initial foray and we’ve expanded it since then. We have 39 datasets available

now. It's a way of making information available to anyone, so they can read and look at it. They can see what we are doing as a municipality, see the different trends."

The mayor said it gives residents a way of interacting with local government. Residents, he said, can do their own analysis of the data and come back to city hall with information that could be useful.

He said a resident could look at road data, see how long a particular road is, how many potholes are on it and use other information to determine that it might be more economical for the city to resurface the whole road instead of just filling in the potholes.

The private sector can use the data to help their business, determine where they might want to set up a store or industry, see if the city has amenities it's seeking.

"It's an open way of doing government," Campion said.

The mayor said data provided by the city has to be beneficial, which is one of the criteria that have to be met to be on the Open Cities Index. It can't just dump information the site.

"We have a staff person dedicated to open data."

That staff person Jamie Leitch, GIS coordinator in the information services division.

"Most of the data we produce and use is paid for by the taxpayers. Anything we have should be open to the public," said Leitch, who implemented the open data program in Welland.

"In the beginning, we said 'Let's just put out a bunch of stuff see what feedback we get.'," he said.

Most of the datasets online, Leitch said, was information the city already had and had already worked with, it was just a matter of pulling it all together.

One thing the city was careful of when releasing the datasets was to ensure there was no personal or security information in it. The city also had to look at releasing the data in formats acceptable for open data.

"We didn't want to violate any privacy legislation. We have a decision tree we go through to determine if there are any security issues in the releasing of the information."

Since releasing that first bit of data back in 2014, other departments within the city have come on board and more and more information, useful information, was being released, said Leitch.

He said residents are able to submit requests for data they'd like to see released by the city.

Data - updated daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly or annually - to be found on the website, and requested by citizens, includes everything from zoning, transit routes, council attendance, recreation program information, official plan, election campaign finances, marriage licences, building permits, and the location of city parks and trails.

Trees, the location, and what type, is one of the most in-demand datasets, Leitch said, adding the city focuses on datasets that are in demand and ones Public Sector Digest looks at when

assessing at open data information.

Public Sector Digest's editor-in-chief Tyler Sutton said the Open Cities Index looks at the quality of data released by a municipality, not the quantity.

There are 36 datasets involved in the index rating, with 11 variables that assess the quality of the data, including whether it's readable, available for free, and up-to-date. It also measures readiness, implementation, and the impact of open data initiatives.

"Readiness measures the ability and capacity to build and have a sustainable open data policy, and whether there is one in place. Implementation looks at what datasets have been published to date, the breadth of data."

Impact, said Sutton, looks at any benefits to a municipality from the release of data, whether it is able to measure it and if the data has been used in any way.

Welland, he said, was the most improved community on this year's list. Sutton said the municipality had an advantage in being part of a region that is very advanced and collaborative when it comes to open data.

"Niagara Region itself has built a community approach to open data, partnering with lower-tier municipalities, school boards, and post-secondary institutions. It doesn't take a silo approach to data," Sutton said.

Niagara was the highest scoring upper-tier municipality on the index in Canada, moving up five places from 14th to 9th this year.

Regional Chair Alan Caslin said the ranking is a testament to the hard work from the region and partnering communities in providing the data and making government open and transparent.

"It is a community approach," he said, adding the region is striving for more transparency and community engagement.

Other communities that run open data programs include Fort Erie, Grimsby, Lincoln, St. Catharines and Niagara Falls.

The data, Caslin said, can be used to show that Niagara is open for business and highlight the investments made in the region.

"It shows Niagara is working. We demonstrate that by making all information we can available."

There are 279 datasets available through the region that can be used by anyone, Caslin said.

Connie McCutcheon, a senior business analyst in the region's IT department, said new data is added daily and the website is very active.

She said there are at least 5,000 visits a month to the community portal site, which also contains links to open data from lower-tier municipalities.

Datasets from the region include things like website stats, combined sewage overflows, airports, campgrounds, open landfills and more.

“We have Niagara weather systems information that is updated regularly and dates back to 1998,” she said, adding some of the legacy systems at the region aren’t designed to extract information.

Staff, she said, does its best to get that information put together and included in the datasets.

“The initiative is ongoing.”

Like Welland, the region puts the data together in formats that anyone can use, including software developers who can plug the information into apps.

How the data is used, McCutcheon said, is not up to region or anyone who releases it.

“There’s no requirement to tell us what the data will be used for or who you are.”

Also like Welland, McCutcheon said residents are able to request data they’d like to see released.