Aspects of Successful (and Unsuccessful) Civic Hacking

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short link to this document: http://tinyurl.com/puuxw75

Introduction

1. Open Austin - all volunteer community group that supports open government, open data, and civic technology
   - member of Code for America Brigade
2. Two areas of focus:
   - policy
   - civic hacking
     - *hacking* is building in an informal way, having fun, sometimes working outside bounds of the system
     - our civic hacking is informed by our roots in policy advocacy
3. Objectives of civic hacking
   - build relationship between tech-focused community and government
   - provide use cases for open government data and related policies/initiatives
   - develop tools that government may not otherwise provide
   - provide a rewarding experience to our participants
   - *not an objective:* be a free job shop to the government or the community

Case Studies

1. Vote ATX
   - application for finding nearest available voting place
     - the wide availability of voting places in Travis/Williamson counties presents a challenge
     - "best place" solution varies from day to day – sometimes within a day
   - demo: http://voteatx.us/?time=2014-12-01T011:00:00
   - source:
     - https://github.com/open-austin/voteatx-app

- https://github.com/open-austin/voteatx-svc
    - classic "map it" civic app pattern
        - roots in very first local civic hack event (Code Across Austin, Feb 2012)
    - embedded in City of Austin website for Nov 2014 election
    - huge friction in the county process (no data portals, significant data load effort, very hands off)
    - objective fulfilled: b) provide use cases for open government data and related policies/initiatives
2. Data Portal How-To
    - resource for learning how to use the City of Austin data portal
    - demo: http://atxdataportal.wikispaces.com/
    - initiated at ATX Hack for Change 2014
    - excellent example of non-coder hack project
    - significant city support – linked on data.austintexas.gov, highlighted to peers
    - objective fulfilled: c) develop tools that government may not otherwise provide
3. TEC Filer
    - application for entering state-mandated financial reports for candidates, office holders, and lobbyists
    - motivated by City Council resolution to put these finances online
        - original staff response was 800K$ project
        - thought we could do better
    - demo: http://tec-filer.open-austin.org/
    - source: https://github.com/open-austin/tecfiler
    - prototype delivered but never completed
    - problem is a bad fit for a volunteer-developed solution
        - critical city functions probably shouldn't be done by volunteers
            - TODO
            - issues with ongoing support
            - issues with technology stacks
        - volunteer resources insufficient for scope of project
    - objective fulfilled: e) be a free job shop to the government or the community
    - a valuable lesson: don't hack infrastructure projects
        - the issue arises periodically, and hopefully we've learned to say, "no"
4. Pet Alerts

- application to create notifications on city animal shelter intake
- demo: http://www.pet-alerts.com/
- source: https://github.com/open-austin/pet-finder
- initiated at ATX Hack for Change 2014
- third attempt at a pet alerts app since 2012 – succeeded due to data focus
- city support challenged by staff turnover

Resources

1. Organization Email List
    - https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/openaustin/join
    - oriented to casual and passive participation – try to provide opportunities to ratchet up engagement (e.g. post upcoming events)
    - challenge – getting most engaged people to provide information to the broader group
    - aspiration – a periodic newsletter/update
2. Organization Website
    - http://www.open-austin.org/hack-team
    - looking for it to provide two things
        - historical archive of group activity
        - tool to engage public in our programs
    - severely underutilized – website rework in process
3. Slack
    - https://open-austin.slack.com
    - offers a mechanism for people to collaborate on issues and projects
    - good solution for most-engaged people, poor solution for casually engaged
        - synchronous - conversation is a linear stream
        - chatty - people chat, use emojii, respond on the #announcements channel
        - noisy - meta-information (people joining, leaving, updates) appear in-channel
4. Meetup
    - http://www.meetup.com/Open-Government-Civic-Technology-Meetup-by-Open-Austin/
    - all our events listed here
    - effective because Austin has a strong Meetup community
    - biggest concern: Meetup owns the relationship, not us
        - use it as a publicity outlet, not a group management tool

5. Github
   - https://github.com/open-austin/
   - ideas repo: https://github.com/open-austin/project-ideas/issues
   - open issue - what does it mean when a project appears in our repo?
   - emerging issue - documenting licensing, contributing
6. Hackpad
   - https://openaustin.hackpad.com/
   - collaborative documentation, lighter weight than (e.g.) Google Docs
   - limitation: not integrated into org website
7. Civic Project
   - database of civic projects
   - uses:
     - http://www.open-austin.org/hack-team/projects
     - http://data.open-austin.org/Civic_Project/cfapi-full.csv
   - source: https://github.com/open-austin/Civic_Project
   - important function, but needs deliberate action
   - simplicity was an editorial choice
   - curation (versus import) was an editorial choice
   - result: low cruft, requires ongoing maintenance
   - see also: civic.json by BetaNYC
8. Civic Tech Planning Canvas
   - https://github.com/open-austin/Hack_Summit_Project_Plans
   - pioneered at Code Across Austin V (Feb 2015)
   - 11 projects developed, 3 active (1 deployed)
9. Services
   - commercial providers have been good at granting us resources, either directly or through Code for America
   - examples: Amazon AWS, Microsoft Azure, CartoDB, Wiki Spaces

Lessons Learned from Hackathons

1. Typical result is a prototype, which requires significant additional work for deployment
2. Most successful projects require significant advance work
3. Value cooperation over competition
   - Prizes reward facile presentation over solution seeking
   - Values such as mentoring and collaboration should be nurtured
   - Don't glorify "deathmarch" efforts
4. Inclusiveness and code of conduct are important

- ○ http://www.open-austin.org/about/code-of-conduct
5. Hackathons are a lot of work
   - ○ logistics and funding
   - ○ outreach and publicity
   - ○ program preparation
   - ○ project curation
6. Identify projects that achieved some critical mass, and actively support moving the forward to deployment
7. The strongest outcome from a hackathon is community building and bringing new people into the process