

## Embracing Open Data As A Startup

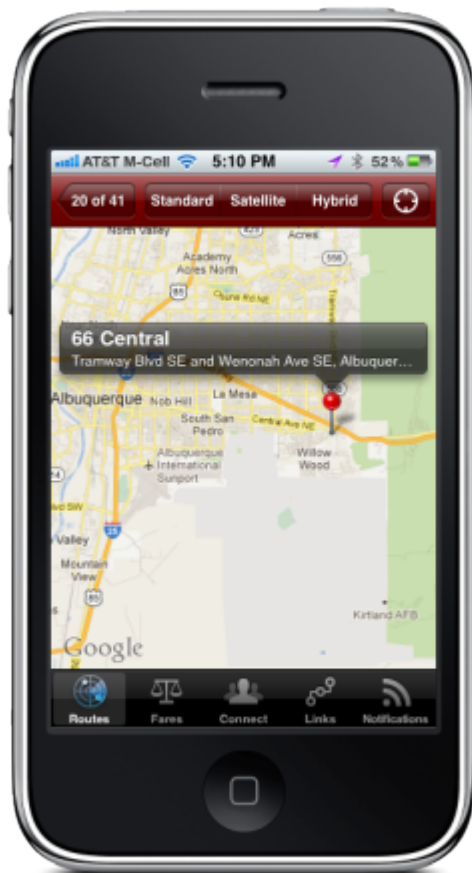


*by Lisa Abeyta, CEO/Founder*

When Albuquerque, New Mexico's Chief Information Officer first reached out to our company, APPCityLife, Inc. , in 2011 to find out more about the company I'd founded a couple of years earlier, I believe it was the first time I'd heard the words "open data" used. While our company had focused on the civic space from its launch, we were still approaching content curation from practices I had learned as a journalist. We were aggregating local event and news RSS feeds, working directly with public schools to publish basic contact information which was delivered in bulk via spread sheets and updated once a year. And we paid high school and college interns to research public information and transform the information into a usable format for our city guide mobile app.

After a series of conversations with city officials, we decided not only to work with the city as they launched their Open Data Initiative but to pivot the direction of our company to meet the needs of what we saw as a huge growing trend among innovative city leaders. We put a stop to the process of researching data and manually coding the content for future city guides, something that at the time felt

like a real step backwards on our roadmap to growth. Instead, we focused our energies on building out technologies and engines that supported the new data sets being curated at the source by city information technology leaders as well as features to help monetize these efforts to keep them sustainable and to engage communities through a creative twist on gamification in the civic space.



Our first open data project at APPCityLife was creating a mobile application for the City of Albuquerque's transit department. It was to be the first open data app published by the city and would be the flagship app to launch the city's Open Data Initiative. There was a lot riding on the success of the app, both for our company and for the city. And we only had three months to build the app and release it in time for Mayor Richard Berry's press conference announcing the open data initiative. The ABQ RIDE app, released just a year ago, now has almost 10,000 users and has enjoyed an enviable retention rate among users of well over 90%. And the best part is that estimated savings to the city are in the six figures only a year into the initiative.

From that early app project and the subsequent projects we've started with other city departments, we learned a lot about the challenges and barriers to creating open data apps that not only meet the needs of the city departments curating the data but also deliver content that users want and need. Open Data is a tremendously fragmented initiative, still in its early stages of growth. There is often no central agency in most cities to drive the technology development around open data, and many times different departments within a city are individually moving forward with open data initiatives that may or may not be in sync with other departments. Add to that the variety of approaches independent developers within a community take when working with open data and the myriad agendas of interest groups involved, and it can become quite a challenge to streamline the needs, agendas and interests of all involved. We spend a great deal of time analyzing the pain points of the process and have developed new technologies to support open data initiatives. Here are a few of the projects we've either launched or plan to launch within the next few weeks and months:

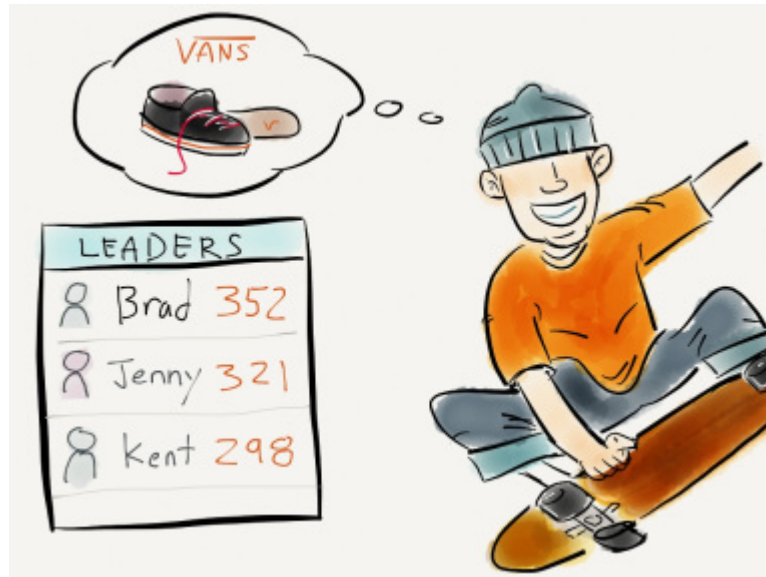
### **Mobile App Publishing Platform**

APPCityLife's mobile app publishing platform was developed by a team of engineers who have been solving enterprise-level challenges for over twenty years. Built to service entire suites of mobile applications, the platform allows developers and even non-developers to build apps quickly and easily. The engine allows for easy integration from a variety of sources, creating a streamlined approach for the end product despite cities using a variety of forms to feed the data into the platform. APPCityLife will launch its first incubator program in 2014 to allow independent developers access to the platform to build their own apps, and we expect a full suite of API's within the same year to be available to developers worldwide.

### **Real-Time Geolocated Coupon Server**

Our coupon server was actually developed in answer to several challenges our clients were facing as well as concerns that were being shared with us from local businesses. Mobile advertising wasn't meeting the needs of local businesses, and city departments were being tasked with bringing their content to mobile on very restricted budgets. We set about to create a solution that would allow open data initiatives to become financially sustainable without passing on the costs through taxes while simultaneously opening up new possibilities for local businesses to connect with the people who live there. We've spent the past six months readying our coupon server and expect it to go live in an initial beta trial late this month here in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Local businesses and advertising agencies will apply to become vendors for the civic mobile applications which make sense for their business, whether it is transit, museum, library, schools or a city guide app. Once approved, businesses are free to create coupons on the fly, deliver them in real time to approved apps and to control their own budget and even the number of coupons available. Consumers will be able to enjoy discounts at the businesses right around them through these geolocated coupons, businesses will curate local customers, and cities will earn revenue to sustain their open data initiative. We see it as a win-win-win for all involved. APPCityLife's coupon dashboard will be opened to beta clients in late September, 2013, and will launch in a beta test in the ABQ RIDE mobile app. Once the beta program ends, coupons will be opened to almost all businesses and delivered into all apps that are on the APPCityLife platform.

## Community Engagement Server



Gamification through Civic Challenges and Local Coupon delivery are just two of the ways APPCityLife is gearing up to help monetize open data initiatives across the country.

“How can we get more people to try out public transportation?”

“What if we could launch a scavenger hunt with real prizes to encourage more people to interact with public art?”

“Do you think we could motivate more students and parents to check grades if they could earn points towards rewards for doing it regularly through the app?”

One of the things we hear repeatedly from clients is a desire to better engage users not only within the app’s content but with the city itself, and our solution has been to build an integrated gamification engine that will allow communities to launch challenges within civic apps to encourage people to engage in activities that are good for that community. We understand that making a game out of life isn’t the way to drive engagement, because it ends up just being more work. What drives better engagement is providing real rewards and meaningful challenges. On our platform, you won’t find contests that ask you to fold your napkin into an origami swan, nor will you find challenges that just earn virtual points. If the goal is changing behavior for the better in a community, we believe tying real rewards to that goal is vital.

APPCityLife’s first challenge will launch this fall, and a full API is expected to be available for developers and cities late this year.

### **Analytics Engine**





ABQ RIDE team recognized for cost savings of over \$100,000 through Open Data apps. Pictured: APPCityLife CEO, Lisa Abeyta, With ABQ Ride team, UNM web applications team and Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry.

One of the biggest challenges of any open data initiative is tracking the success and adoption of the data being delivered. Our real time analytics engine gives vital data to city administrators to track a variety of things within civic apps. Where is the app being used? How often is a specific feature opened? How many people have opted in to receiving push notices, and, more importantly, how many people actually read the notice? Analytics change open data initiatives from being a good idea to a measurable initiative, and it is the number one request we receive from our clients within the city. Analytics are also vital for our civic clients, because it helps agencies and government leaders track the adoption rate of a specific set of open data and cost-savings over previous processes that were used before the launch of mobile apps deploying open data. It was gratifying to be invited to a recent press conference where Mayor Richard Berry announced that the launch of open data for transit has not only created new avenues for working with the University of New Mexico but has also saved the city over \$100,000 in a single year; it is exciting to see our efforts with the city not only create apps that citizens want to use but also save tax dollars that can now be used for other community improvement initiatives.

Working to launch and engage developers in the open data initiative here in Albuquerque has been an exciting challenge for us, and it's sparked a passion that has changed the direction of our company. We're

currently working on a new project, one that will bring fingertip access to community content, coupons and challenges wherever open data is available, first in the United States, and then globally. Our goal is to create tools that make open data easier to launch for cities, easier to integrate into meaningful tools for local developers, and financially rewarding and sustaining for everyone within the community.