**Problem assessment; the challenge or need that prompted the local government to develop the program:**

In early 2014, Douglas County had a website much like other county websites – information was available by department, and citizens had to have an understanding of how county government was structured in order to understand where to go to get the services they needed. Additionally, if services overlapped county and city boundaries, a citizen or business often found themselves passed between different departments and different government entities just to complete a single task; such as purchasing a building permit or submitting a plan review. Responses to requests for information were also varied and inconsistent. Our challenge was to find a way to provide service or information to our citizens in a better, more personalized way, without the silos. This challenge would require us to completely rethink our public data, and come up with a new solution to gather, store, and make this data available.

In 2015, Douglas County leadership embraced Open Data as an opportunity to fundamentally change how government services and information were provided to our citizens. Open Data provides a foundation to make machine readable, continuously updated information available to serve public access needs, department data sharing and analysis, vendor interaction, and intergovernmental data sharing. Data is gathered in an automated fashion from the multiple software systems in use by County departments without change or disruption to their core business. This data is then made available both directly and through an Application Programming Interface (API), which enables the County and third parties to build applications that deliver this data to citizens in a personally actionable and relevant way.

**Program implementation and costs:**

The initial cost for the setup of an open data portal was $46,500. The County also invested $50,000 in consulting time to develop automated Extract, Transform and Load processes (ETL) that pulled updated public data from core County systems and loaded that data in to the portal every night. This investment also served to enhance the skills of existing County talent, enabling our data management team to continue to build ETL processes long after the vendor consulting engagement had ended.

The implementation of the initial portal was complete within 90 days, and addition of target datasets continued throughout 2015. High-demand datasets were made available first, including the entirety of parcel data from the Assessor system, and current year tax roll information from the Treasurer. Active and closed building permits from the County system of record were also included in the initial set of data offerings.

**Tangible results or measurable outcomes of the program**:

There is a general desire to share public data between government entities, however questions of data ownership, data stewardship, integrity, and availability always surface. A key benefit in taking the Open Data approach has allowed jurisdictions to retain ownership and exercise stewardship of the data they own and manage, while making it easily available and consumable by partners and public alike.

Many recent public information requests could be completely fulfilled using the Open Data portal. This has reduced employee workload in responding to these requests, and citizens are delighted that the data they seek is already available, and in a format that allows them to easily parse and analyze.

We had a case in which adult services data existed as a spreadsheet on an employee’s computer, and nowhere else. If someone wanted that information, they had to call and inquire. That data was also at a high risk of loss if something happened to the computer. By making the data available on the Open Data portal, we solved problems around accessibility, integrity, and continuity, all at once.

By making Open data available in a machine-readable format, we gained the ability to build needs-specific applications quickly, and at a fraction of the cost of full application development. In the adult services case above, we were able to develop an application that allowed citizens to use that data – not as a spreadsheet, but as a location-enabled map application, making it easy and fast to find the information they needed.

**Lessons learned during planning, implementation, and analysis of the program**:

There is a prevailing assumption that “data is data”, however we quickly learned that everyone collects data differently, and you can have considerable differences even in similar datasets. Development and agreement upon standards is key to success. Building permits are a great example, and we leveraged an existing open data standardization effort (permitdata.org) to establish our baseline for a data structure. Since then, we’ve successfully used this framework with several cities within the County to start sharing data both between our governments and with the public.

Automating the data gathering and posting process is critically important to ensuring data is up to date and relevant. Data owners do not generally have spare time to curate and maintain open data in addition to their normal duties. By establishing automated ETL processes, we were able to ensure that our Open Data datasets were kept current and correct while the data owners conducted their normal business routines.

Lightweight Memorandums of Understanding work well when exchanging data with government partners. With these agreements, we can establish a minimum expectation for data currency and quality, while also affirming data ownership and stewardship remains with the respective data owners.