Year One: Oakland Rising

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In just twelve months, the City of Oakland's first CIO made the city a model of municipal IT. Here's how he did it.

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Bryan Sastokas
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When he spoke of the "information superhighway," former Vice President Al Gore envisioned a national IT infrastructure spanning the United States, connecting schools, libraries, hospitals, businesses, and homes to on-demand information and communication. As crews of IT professionals constructed Gore's vision, one node at a time, prominent exits emerged in tech-savvy cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and San Jose. Approximately two decades later, however, the superhighway's most promising destination isn't Portland, Boston, or Chicago. It's Oakland, California, which in December 2013 appointed Bryan Sastokas as its first-ever CIO.

"The entire Bay Area is a tech mecca," says Sastokas, who previously served as CIO of Modesto, California, and prior to that, Coral Springs, Florida. "It's not just San Francisco and San Jose. It's also Oakland, which is going through a renaissance. In fact, rents in San Francisco are so astronomical, and buildable land so scarce, that Oakland is seeing a real-estate boom as more companies decide to move their headquarters here."

Among the tech companies already based in Oakland are streaming music service Pandora and Internet search engine Ask.com. With Sastokas in charge of municipal IT, however, Oakland's most exciting tech enterprise isn't a corporation; it's the city government, which is in the midst of a major technological transformation initiated by Sastokas during his first year as CIO.

"I want to make Oakland a 'smart' city," explains Sastokas, whose goal isn't using technology to run the government, but rather to serve citizens. "At the municipal level, IT shouldn't be an internal resource. It should be a community asset. It's all about giving the community access to government."

Sastokas plans to leverage that access to drive progress. Consider, for instance, crime data. Cities with progressive IT agendas have open-data policies making crime data readily available to the public. Citizens, of course, can use that data to monitor safety in their neighborhood. More than that, they also can pioneer new ways of manipulating, presenting, sharing, and utilizing it, which might form the basis of a new mobile app. If the app is well received, it could spawn a full-fledged company that pays local taxes and hires local workers, enriching the entire community in the process.

"Cities need to use data and technology to provide economic development and community growth," says Sastokas, who was recruited by Oakland after an exhaustive three-year search for the perfect CIO. "Three years from now, I envision IT being a service that municipalities provide, like water, garbage collection, and street sweeping. It should be something governments provide to help citizens start a business, for instance, or to help communities foster an educated workforce. That's what we're trying to do here in Oakland."

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Although achieving his vision will take time, Sastokas spent his first twelve months as CIO laying important groundwork for the changes to come. Step one was cultural. "The first thing I did when I got here was create a very open office. I want to demonstrate that there are no boundaries," he says.

To further strip the IT department of boundaries, Sastokas also instituted peer reviews and recognition for staff, the result of which has been a more collaborative and entrepreneurial IT department.

After culture, Sastokas's main priority was infrastructure. "Although we're seeing a lot of economic growth in Oakland now, the city was a victim of the economic downturn," he says. "As a result, a lot of applications and systems failed to be sustained. . . . If you don't care for your car with proper maintenance, the engine starts to fall apart, and you have to rebuild it to make it work again. Technology is no different."

Rebuilding Oakland's technological "engine" began with consolidating data—previously stored in data centers federated across the city—in the cloud. It subsequently continued with a large-scale ERP migration. "We're moving to Oracle to bring us in line with better work flow and mobility," says Sastokas. "So that people, for example, can submit and improve their employees' time cards with mobile devices."

Sastokas's first year also yielded numerous public-facing solutions, including a new records management system, RecordTrac, that allows citizens to submit public-records requests online, then track them through to fulfillment. Because all requests are stored publicly and permanently, the system eliminates redundancies and creates efficiencies for citizens and government alike.

Although he's seized many opportunities in his first year, Sastokas has also faced several challenges, the most significant of which was the departure of the city administrator, who was succeeded by several interim administrations. "I would have liked to see even more radical and disruptive growth in technology, but growth in any organization is tempered during transitional leadership," Sastokas says. "Once our new mayor hires a full-time city administrator, growth will be exponential."

Sastokas is planning ahead. On his wish list for the next twelve to eighteen months is a "North Bay 3-1-1" system run jointly by Oakland and San Francisco, as well as more sophisticated big data analytics capabilities. In particular, he wants Oakland to leverage "sentiment" data in order to drive municipal decision-making. "I'd love to trawl people's sentiment on Yelp or Facebook," he says. "A lot of people don't communicate directly to the city, yet it's valuable for us to know, for example, if a community is upset about road construction. If we know that, maybe we can direct our next capital improvement project to another neighborhood, because this one has had back-to-back capital improvement projects and deserves a reprieve from the construction."

That sort of intersection between technology and community might just turn Oakland from the Bay Area's biggest blight to its brightest star. "For a long time, there has been a digital divide in Oakland between the technology 'haves' and 'have-nots,'" Sastokas says. "By bridging that divide, we're going to make Oakland a better place to live for generations to come."

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