

# SBS IN THE NEWS

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### To Do More With Less, Governments Go Digital

By Steve Lohr  
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IN government, as in business, crisis can fuel creativity. These days, the pressure to rethink things is particularly intense for state and local governments, which have far less leeway than Washington to borrow in bad times.

“The economic pressures will force us to be more efficient and change how we deliver government services,” says Sonny Perdue, the governor of Georgia.

Mr. Perdue was one of more than 500 government officials, business executives and academics who attended a two-day conference in New York this month. Under the theme “Smarter Cities,” the meeting was sponsored by I.B.M. in partnership with the Brookings Institution, the City University of New York, the Urban Land Institute and other nonprofit groups.

That a giant technology company underwrote the gathering suggests that there is money to be made in helping governments tackle thorny problems in traffic management, energy use, public health, education and social services — and that technology has an important role to play.

Local governments, like many businesses, are struggling with a data glut. Agencies collect huge amounts of information about topics as diverse as building permits, potholes, Medicaid cases and foster-child placements. Technology, according to computer experts and government officials, can be a powerful tool to mine vast troves of government data for insights to streamline services and guide policy.

“The mistake people make is to think that collecting the data is the endgame,” said Michael R. Bloomberg, the mayor of New York. The real payoff, he said, takes another step. “We actually use the data,” he noted.

Indeed, New York has been a pioneer among cities in the use of computing firepower to sift through data to

improve services. It began in the 1990s with the city’s CompStat system for mapping, identifying and predicting crime. The system, combined with new policing practices, reduced crime rates in New York and was later adopted by Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Baltimore and other cities.

In 2002, the city began its “311” telephone number for answering questions about government services and to report problems down to missing manhole covers. The service receives 50,000 calls a day, and earlier this year began operating on the Web as well. Complaints, response times and resolved problems are tracked and measured to improve performance.

In 2006, the city began an online service, NYC Business Express, to make it easier and faster to start a business. The average time to obtain a building permit, for example, has been cut to 7 days from 40. Such seemingly mundane improvements can add up to big gains in the efficiency of government service systems, experts say, nurturing productivity and growth in local economies. The process, they say, is similar to “lean manufacturing,” a system first mastered by Toyota in which step-by-step changes on the factory floor, made repeatedly, translate into major advances in quality and productivity.

Linking government databases can be crucial. The New York Fire Department, in partnership with I.B.M., is developing a system that combines information on building floor plans, inspections and code violations from city agencies and then uses software to analyze and make predictions. Firefighters will be able to call up building information on hand-held wireless computers on their way to a fire. The real-time system, scheduled to be deployed next year, should help guide firefighting tactics and help firefighters avoid some dangers.

In Alameda County in California, the social services agency recently integrated information from several systems into a single data warehouse. Business intelligence software knits together the information on an individual — typically from multiple social service programs — and presents it

as a single Web page to the caseworker assisting that person.

The agency began using the system in July. It helps social workers, who handle more than 400 cases each, on average, to be more informed, save time and deal more effectively with individuals, said Donald Edwards, assistant director of the county agency. The agency estimates that it will save \$11 million a year from eliminating duplicated work and by detecting fraud, he said.

To do more with less, Mr. Edwards said, government services will be increasingly automated. "This is about the modernization and mechanization of services," he said.

The future of using an expanded array of digital technologies to create smarter cities is just getting under way in a project in Dubuque, Iowa. Over the next several years, the city will use sensors, software and Internet computing to give its government and individual customers the digital tools to measure, monitor and alter the way they use water, electricity and transportation. Computerized electric meters, for example, can track energy use and reveal ways to reduce consumption and trim bills, often by 20 percent or more.

in Dubuque as a manageable research project that can move quickly in a small city of 60,000 people.

"For us, it's a living lab," said Robert Morris, head of services research at I.B.M. "We want to learn things in Dubuque and then export the best practices."

ROY D. BUOL, the mayor, has export ambitions for Dubuque, too. A local company, for example, is making the computerized water meters for the project. And Mr. Buol views the initiative as a training ground for local people to develop technology and skills they can sell in other regions and, perhaps, other countries.

"We're not just a petri dish here," he said.

"We want the smart-city work to be a replicable model for other cities."

The city is paying for the initial stages of the initiative with a bond offering. I.B.M. is investing as well, seeing its work