March 19, 2009

The Honorable Earl Devaney
Chair
Recovery Act Transparency and Accountability Board
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Vivek Kundra
Chief Information Officer
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

The Honorable Peter Orszag
Director, Office of Management and Budget
725 17th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20503

Dear Mr. Devaney, Mr. Kundra, and Dr. Orszag:

We welcome the administration's efforts to make more public information available online to increase the transparency of the federal government. In particular, we believe Recovery.gov provides an excellent opportunity to allow citizens rapid and unprecedented access to government information about stimulus spending. We've previously commented that by promoting the *reuse* of publicly available data, government can further promote citizen awareness of the stimulus process. Under the current plans for Recovery.gov, however, it is not clear that this principle is being fully realized. We write you asking for clarification on some technical points concerning Recovery.gov—points that may also be broadly applicable to other government transparency efforts.

Publicly available data will be most useful when third-parties can download complete machine-readable copies of the data. For example, the data available on the website could be put into XML form (a widely used and useful data format) for downloading. Users could then combine this data with other sources to create "mashups" of data, allowing citizen participation and collaboration in ways that may go beyond what any of us could imagine today.

The Frequently Asked Questions section of Recovery.gov stops short of promising machine-readable downloads:

"Q: Is the spending data on recovery.gov available in a format (like XML) that developers can use to create mashups and gadgets?

A: Not at this time. But, as new systems are developed to capture the allocations and expenditures under the Act, we plan to make that data available in exportable form."

This seems to recognize the value of the reuse principle, but it does not specify the scope of the data available nor the downloading mechanism. We would like more detailed information about the site's implementation plans:

1. What is the timeline for developing the systems that will capture the data required by the act?
2. How long after these systems are deployed will the data be made available in machine-readable form?
3. Will users be able to download all the data made available on this site, or will only part of it be available for download?
4. What are the data elements that will be made available through Recovery.gov either through an Application Programming Interface or other mechanism?

Clarifying these issues is important because allowing users to easily download complete copies of the publicly available data will allow them to maximize the innovative presentation, visualization, and collaborative discussion of the data.

Thank you for reviewing our questions, and we look forward to hearing from you. As you move forward with your responsibilities for this website, and other websites intended to provide government information to the public, we are available to provide any assistance you need. Please contact the ACM Director of Public Policy, Cameron Wilson, at 202-659-9711, should you need any information.

Sincerely,

Eugene H. Spafford, Ph.D.
Chair, U.S. Public Policy Committee of the ACM
Professor of Computer Science, Purdue University

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