There’s an App for That: Mobile Applications for Urban Planning

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ABSTRACT

The number of worldwide mobile device users is increasing rapidly, as are the number of applications to serve these devices. Urban planners have the opportunity to use an array of mobile applications to increase productivity, share information, and engage with the public. This article explores a number of mobile applications that can add value to the work that urban planners undertake. It also considers the types of applications that could be developed to assist planners in their efforts to understand cities and engage with the public.

Keywords: E-Government, Mobile Applications, Mobile Devices, Smartphones, Urban Planning

INTRODUCTION

The way that planners understand our cities has come from field observations, surveys of residents, and other traditional methods. Mobile device users’ ability to collaborate through context-aware mobile applications has changed the way that they can interact (Hakkila & Mantyjarvi, 2005). A recent study found that at the end of 2010, more than 63 million Americans owned a smartphone (Burger, 2011). The increasing pervasiveness of smart phones will allow planners to collect data and to engage with the public in new ways.

Apple launched the iPhone in 2007. According to Apple, there were more than 300,000 new iPhone apps in 2011 alone (Viticci, 2011), and there have been more than 5 billion downloads of those 300,000 apps. Add to that the more than a billion app downloads on Android. A 2010 Nielsen survey found that the average iPhone owner has 40 apps installed, while Android users have 25 and Blackberry users have 14 (Duryee, 2010). One of the other apps that’s being downloaded is Angry Birds, which has been downloaded more than 350 million times according to Mobile Entertainment, making it the most popular application out there (Dredge, 2011).

MOBILE APPLICATIONS FOR URBAN PLANNING

As urban planners, why should we care about mobile phone applications? Apps can increase productivity and allow one to engage with one’s work outside of the office. For example, an app could give access to rezoning application information. It is also a way for planners to interact with others in their community. For example, a project management website subscription service called Basecamp allows users to access their projects from an iPhone app. By
paying a monthly subscription fee, planners can manage multiple projects with lots of different people in different organizations involved. The benefit is that project team members can inexpensively have access via their mobile devices to everything going on in a project. There are many productivity applications that work in a similar way, with a one-time app fee and then an associated monthly service fee for additional services.

Productivity of the planner is just one aspect of applications that can be used in planning. Apps can also be used to enhance the productivity and efficiency of commuters. In a study of the Translink Transit Authority in South East Queensland, Australia found that commuters’ experience can be improved through real-time passenger information that uses a mobile application (Foth & Schroeter, 2010). For example, a bus rider on Portland’s Trimet developed an app that offers a bus tracker that displays arrival times and includes a nighttime visibility flasher that a user can hold up so bus drivers can see them at night. Now Trimet has a whole suite of mobile apps, including a wayfinding system for the visually impaired (Trimet, 2011). Similarly, the Central Ohio Transit Authority’s app BusTracker tells users the nearest bus stops to their current locations as well as upcoming arrival information (Central Ohio Transit Authority, 2011). On cold days it is great to be able to stay inside and get in that extra five minutes of work.

While transit apps are widespread, there are lots of other types of information that can be shared. Maybe you want to catch up on your favorite magazine on your smartphone while riding the bus. The State of Louisiana made this possible with Louisiana EQ. The State contracted with Aysling Digital Media Solution to develop an app version of its quarterly magazine in which readers can keep current with the latest in economic development (Louisiana Economic Development, 2011). Another example of information sharing is CFA FireReady, created by the Victoria Fire Authority in Australia in partnership with Collaboraforge (CFA, 2011). This application shows emergency warnings and locations of incidents of brushfires. It also provides brushfire advice.

Most of the apps out there simply allow information sharing with the smartphone user. Yet, many planners are looking for more from e-government, they are looking to interact with companies, citizens and others (Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006). There are emerging examples of apps that allow for more interaction. You the Man is an app that was developed by the City of New York Transportation Department as a way to fight drunk driving among men ages 21 to 35. In focus groups, City staff found that drunk driving happens when friends fail to plan ahead, with the least drunk friend ending up driving at the end of the evening (Evans-Cowley, 2011). The City created an app with fun games to help determine a designated driver and a blood-alcohol calculator that gives amusing results if you’ve consumed, say, 20 drinks in an hour. Users can post on Youthe-Man’s Twitter feed; for example,” we partied, ate, drank and took a yellow cab home. That’s all I’m telling!” (YouTheManNYC, 2011). The best feature is the app’s ability to map the user and the nearest public-transit locations. It also has a button to call the nearest car service. The app is linked to the City’s Taxi and Livery Service Department’s database. Users love the app – “So glad this is finally here! Not just late drinking nights but late freezing nights. Been waiting for something like this!!!!” (YouTheManNYC, 2011) (Figure 1).

A number of cities have worked to create apps that allow users to interact in order to report code violations. In an experiment, researchers developed an application that allows residents to take pictures of code enforcement violations, attach a description, and submit the information as a request to their city (Foth et al., 2010). The study found that this type of application has high potential for broad implementation, and a number of cities are launching exactly these kinds of applications. Phoenix claims to be the first city to have launched a free app that allows users to interact with the city by sending photographs of graffiti and other blight violations to the city’s neighborhood
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