COMMUNITY VOICE

Meet Some of Hawaii's Civic

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Are you digging into campaign finance data? There are apps for that. Here are the local geeks who built them.

AUGUST 22, 2014 • By Ryan Ozawa 𝔯   **Share** ‹ 88   **1**

Software developers and designers are a hot commodity. Constantly in demand, they could be building the next [Flappy Bird](#), or a sexy new platform to transform online retail. But some coders are willing to donate their talents to the greater good. And they just might be able to make government data sexy.

Over several geeky weeks, the **[CivicCelerator](#)** brought together a number of coders, designers, and community leaders to explore ways to make camaign spending data more accessible and interesting to the average citizen. Organized by **[Common Cause Hawaii](#)** and **[Hawaii Open Data](#)** (an organization I helped found in 2011), the event inspired the launch of several free online tools that worked with the same public data set, but offered different ways to explore it.

For an overview, see **[A Handy Way to Look at How Candidates Are Spending Campaign Cash](#)** by Natalie Iwasa.
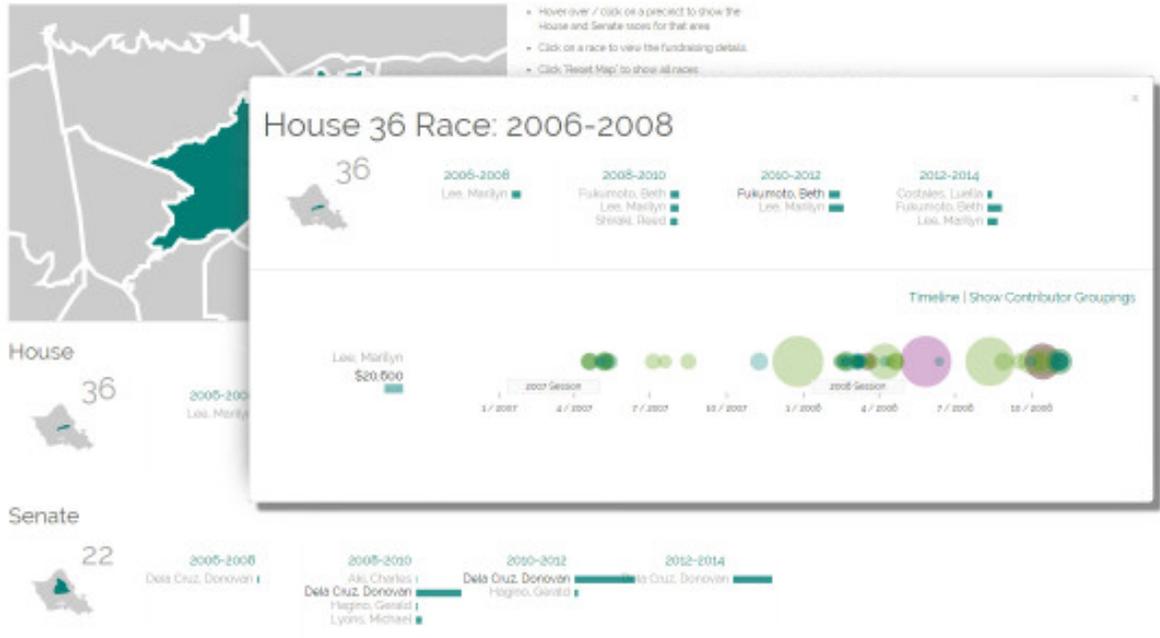
But I wanted to shine the spotlight on the developers behind the scenes. Here's a look at three of these free tools, and the people who built them.

Screenshot

The ap that Ben Trevino created to look at campaign finance and fundraising filings.

Funding a Campaign for the Hawaii State Legislature

Ben Trevino is a founding partner of Interisland Terminal, an arts and culture organization dedicated to advancing the role of the arts in innovation. Through Interisland Terminal, he has co-produced over 45 arts programs, including two major non-profit resources in Kakaako: R&D and the Kakaako Agora. He is also a database and web developer with the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization, known as UHERO.

What does your app do?

Trevino: Originally I had this idea that by highlighting the time and date of a campaign contribution and simulating that through animation, you might be able to recreate the hidden drama of a close race as it unfolded. Maybe you'd see a large contribution matched by another candidate or one large fundraiser matched by another. That didn't end up being the most interesting part of what we found, but it was the first idea.

Why did you build the app?

Trevino: In 2014, open data is the real second amendment. The second amendment was never about guns, it was about holding government accountable. Today the thought of using firearms to hold the government accountable is completely absurd, but holding it accountable with public data is arguably the only viable mechanism.

I support open data initiatives, and write data apps, because I'm very optimistic about the role of government in our lives. And furthermore, I think people want to be able to figure government out, especially here in Hawaii where we're all closely affected by it. As a community of developers I hope we can make things that demonstrate what open data can mean to people, and inspire more people to get into the data, learn about government and change things for the better.

"In 2014, open data is the real second amendment." — Ben Trevino, founding partner of Interisland Terminal

What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

Trevino: I thought it was interesting how different each candidate's breakdown of contributors was. The contribution type ended up being the most interesting view in the application, I think.

The six categories for contributions are immediate family, individual contributions, political parties, other candidates and non-candidate committees, and other. Looking at a candidates profile by those groups is pretty interesting when you want to understand who they're allied to.

What government data set do you wish were available online?

Trevino: Residential title transfer and tax records. Housing costs are the hottest issue in the state right now. Housing is, of course, a huge financial commitment, with strategic implications as an investment vehicle as well as emotional ones. People's lack of information tends to create a situation where emotional factors take precedence over rational ones. I'm not saying introducing more rationality into home-buying would lower prices overall, but I believe it would redirect discussion toward more productive conversations.

Screenshot

Hawaii Campaign Spending Data

Jason Axelson is a dedicated software engineer with a passion for Linux. A co-founder of the HiCapacity makerspace. He enjoys solving technical problems and creating automated solutions. He has been using Linux for four years and enjoys writing scripts to simplify his workflow. He is interested in computer security and is also exploring Android development.

What does your app do?

Axelson: My app gives an overview of candidate's spending, while allowing easy drill-down into the specifics of the spending.
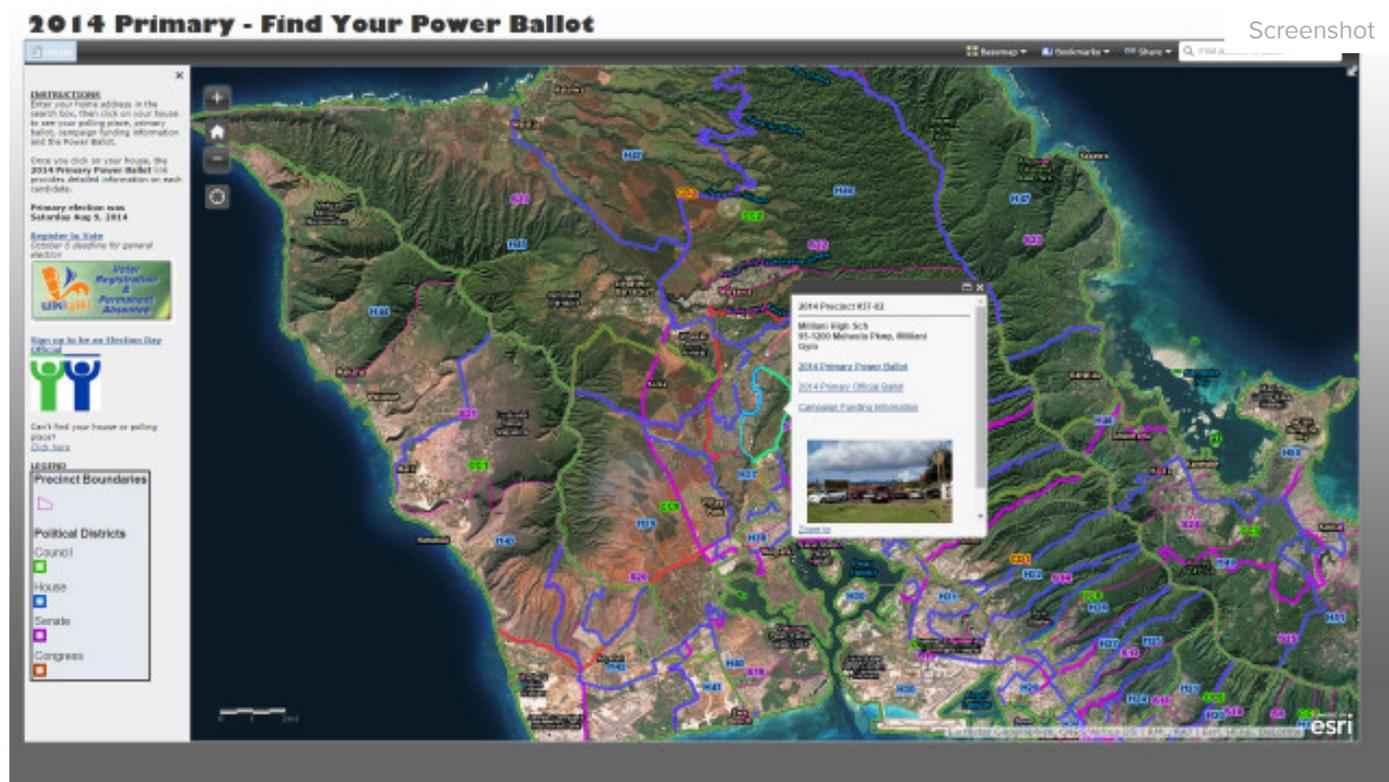
Why did you build it?

Axelson: I built the app because I believe that people should understand better how money is spent in politics and the amount of money that is spent on individual candidates.

What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

Axelson: I was very surprised how the Democrats outspent the Republicans in the state almost 8-to-1.

What government data set do you wish were accessible online?

Axelson: More detailed crime data.

Screenshot

Power Ballot

Royce Jones manages the Esri office in Honolulu, where he and works with federal, state, county and private users of Esri's mapping and analysis software. He has a B.S. in Geology from Stanford University and an M.Ed. in Education Technology from the University of Hawaii. He has served as a community volunteer on many different projects and has served on non-profit boards, including the Hawaii Geographic Information Coordinating Council and the Hawaii chapter of the East-West Center alumni.

What does your app do?

Jones: The Power Ballot allows voters to easily discover which candidates will be on their ballot and quickly find links to more information on those candidates.

Why did you build it?

Jones: I've voted in every election since I turned 18. I like to study my ballot before I vote so I can research candidates and make an informed vote. I thought it would be great to quickly find info on the candidates, including campaign finance data. Thus was born the idea for the Power Ballot. I sketched the idea on a whiteboard and then developed a prototype, which Jason Axelson helped build into the final product. Corie Tanida at Common Cause Hawaii coordinated volunteers who researched the candidate information. It was truly a team effort.

What's the most surprising thing you've learned?

Jones: I know maps and election data really well, and how to get them online for group collaboration and sharing with the public. When it comes to coding, however, I mostly write programs by myself, for my own use. For the Power Ballot, Jason set everything up on the Code for Hawaii GitHub account, and it was great! I could see what he was working on and what changes he was making. Likewise, he could see what I was doing for my part. I learned from this experience that GitHub is really a great tool for code collaboration.

What government data set do you wish were accessible online?

Jones: For this project, it would have been helpful if the candidate filing data had been available via an API (Application Programming Interface). The data was available from the Office of Elections, and updated weekly, which is a good thing. But it was only available in PDF format. One of my contributions was to take that data from the PDF and make it available via an API. The Office of Elections is modernizing their entire election management system, so hopefully by 2016 we'll see candidate filing and other election data directly available via an API.

Check out all the CivicCelerator apps here.

Community Voices aims to encourage broad discussion on many topics of community interest. It's kind of a cross between Letters to the Editor and op-eds. This is your space to talk about important issues or interesting people who are making a difference in our world. Columns generally run about 800

words (yes, they can be shorter or longer) and we need a photo of the author and a bio. We welcome video commentary and other multimedia formats. Send to news@civilbeat.com.

About the Author

Ryan Ozawa ⁂

Ryan Ozawa is a life-long geek, avid media maker, and community builder focused on the Hawaii tech and innovation scene. He is the communications director for local tech firm Hawaii Information Service, a former newspaper editor, and proud husband and dad of three. He is a co-host of Bytemarks Cafe on Hawaii Public Radio. You can follow him on Twitter at @hawaii.

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3 Comments

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Natalie Iwasa

Thank you to all of the volunteers who worked on these apps! For anyone who's interested in seeing a demonstration of how they work, Burt Lum and Royce will give a presentation to the Hawaii Kai Neighborhood Board Tuesday evening. Hopefully chairs of other neighborhood boards will have a presentation soon as well.

Like · Reply · 👍 2 · Aug 22, 2014 3:44am

Russell Castagnaro · President/General Manager at EHawaii.gov

Nice Article! I do want to point out that there are many more visualizations available that leverage Hawaii Open Data:

The http://data.hpu.edu site has many cool visualizations. It would be great if the datasets that drive these visualizations were being updated more reliably. If that were happening the visualizations would automatically be updated too.

More from the only government web site that loves you:
Farmers Markets: https://portal.ehawaii.gov/residents/farmers-markets/.
Public Libraries: https://portal.ehawaii.gov/residents/libraries.
Near Me (lots!): https://portal.ehawaii.gov/page/near_me/.
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> **Russell Castagnaro** · President/General Manager at EHawaii.gov
> Nice work Jenly Chen Rosie Warfield
> Like · Reply · Aug 22, 2014 1:02pm

Ben Wagner

The Campaign Finance tracker is priceless!

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