Tracking Progress & Building Trust: How Big Cities Share Capital Project Updates

From street repaving to library upgrades, capital projects shape our daily experience of city life. These long-term investments, often funded through borrowing that will be repaid over decades, aim to improve infrastructure, support economic development, enhance public safety, and boost quality of life. These critical capital projects are often complex, expensive, and can take years to complete.

That's why the way cities communicate about capital projects – especially how they track progress on construction and spending – is so important. Residents and business owners want to know when roadwork in front of their property will start and end. Policymakers need to monitor whether funds are being used effectively, efficiently, and equitably. Bond investors and fiscal oversight bodies look for signs of sound financial management. And community organizations often advocate for transparency in where and how public money is spent.

In recent years, many large cities have taken significant steps to improve the way they present updates on capital projects after the budget is passed. At the request of PICA, the City of Philadelphia started including updates on capital spending in the [Quarterly City Managers Reports (QCMR)](#) beginning in FY25. For the first time,

the City is publishing information about the spending of all Capital Budget dollars and PICA is including updates in its Fact Sheets on the QCMR. The City has long published its prospective Capital Budget and Program covering the upcoming 6 years, but unlike the City's Operating Budget, it doesn't include data about estimated and actual spending in the current and prior years. Some types of capital projects have had regular updates, like the Rebuild Progress Reports which combine spending and construction updates in a PDF document and StreetSmartPHL which shows the status of paving projects on a map (without budget data).

Why Capital Budget Transparency Matters

Capital projects are big-ticket investments that often span years or even decades. Transparency in the progress of these efforts is essential for several key reasons:

1. **Accountability and Public Trust:** Taxpayers and residents deserve to know how public dollars are being spent. Transparency builds trust and signals that government is being a good steward of resources.

2. **Informed Oversight:** Elected officials, oversight boards, and budget offices need reliable data to monitor delays, cost overruns, and shifting timelines. Without access to real-time or regular updates, it becomes harder to evaluate performance.

3. **Better Planning and Coordination:** Agencies that manage capital projects— like Streets, the Managing Director's Office, Commerce and others —often depend on coordination across government. Public-facing tools can help identify when schedules or budgets are at risk and facilitate proactive intervention.

4. **Community Engagement:** Residents affected by construction want to understand when disruptions will occur and how the final project will benefit their neighborhood. Accessible information can improve public buy-in and reduce frustration.

5. **Investor Confidence:** For cities that borrow to finance capital projects, transparency is a signal to credit rating agencies and investors that the city manages risk and executes on its plans.

Given these stakes, it's no surprise that large cities are investing in systems and platforms to keep the public informed. Philadelphia has expanded its reporting on the progress of capital projects, but other big cities are doing much more. They are using interactive dashboards, searchable databases, and detailed progress updates that make it easier for stakeholders to understand how capital dollars are being put to work.

The examples below show how three major cities are tackling the challenge of capital project transparency—each with its own approach and set of tools.

New York City: Capital Budget Dashboard

New York City is home to one of the most ambitious capital programs in the country, with billions of dollars invested annually across schools, parks, transit, housing, and more. In 2021, NYC's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) launched the **Capital Projects Dashboard**, a tool that provides very detailed insight into the City's capital spending.

Key features include:

- **Project-Level Detail:** Users can search by agency, project type, borough, or status. Each project page includes a description, budget, funding source, start and end dates, and a status indicator.

- **Timeline Tracking:** Projects are coded based on what phase they are in (ex. design, construction, close out), when that phase is expected to end, and the forecasted completion date.

- **Spending vs. Budget:** The dashboard shows both the total committed amount and actual spending to date, helping viewers understand whether a project is staying within budget.

- **Downloadable Data:** For researchers and analysts, raw data can be downloaded for deeper analysis.

The dashboard not only increases transparency but also supports internal management. By centralizing data from over 20 agencies, OMB can better identify patterns in delays or cost growth, enabling reforms to procurement or project delivery processes.

Impact: The Capital Projects Dashboard can be used by City Council members, journalists, and good government groups alike. It helps answer questions like: "How much of this year's capital plan has been spent?" or "Why is this school renovation delayed?"—without requiring a phone call or public records request.

City of Charlotte: Capital Projects Dashboard

Charlotte, one of the fastest-growing cities in the country, manages hundreds of infrastructure projects each year—from roadway improvements to stormwater upgrades and greenway expansions. To support transparency and public engagement, the city launched its **Capital Projects Dashboard**, a clean, interactive platform that provides detailed updates on active capital investments.

- **Project-Level Detail**: Each project listing includes a brief description, funding source, start and end dates, current status (e.g., planning, design, construction), and location.

- **Map Integration**: The homepage displays a citywide map with clickable pins for each project, making it easy to zoom into specific neighborhoods.

- **Filter & Sort Options**: Users can filter by department (e.g., Transportation, Storm Water, Aviation), geographic area (including by Council District), or status.

- **Contact Information**: Each project includes the contact information for the project manager.

Impact: The dashboard helps residents stay informed about infrastructure work in their neighborhoods while offering an opportunity to showcase the City's efforts to deliver projects on time and on budget. It may be a valuable tool for both internal coordination and external transparency.

City of Boston: Capital Plan Dashboard

Boston's approach combines detailed financial reporting with a focus on storytelling and accessibility. The City's **Capital Plan Dashboard**, launched by the City's Budget Office, lets users track construction projects funded through the City's five-year capital plan.

Key features include:

- **Categorized Projects:** Projects are grouped by category—schools, parks, public safety, etc.—and can be filtered by neighborhood or funding year.

- **Project Snapshots:** Each entry includes a brief narrative, estimated cost, phase (design, procurement, construction), and projected timeline.

- **Progress Updates:** For active construction projects, the tool includes regular updates and milestone completions.

Boston also publishes an annual capital plan that complements the online tool, including a project spotlight section that uses visuals and stories to highlight major projects and the benefits they'll bring.

Impact: Boston's platform prioritizes **accessibility and engagement**—not just technical transparency, residents and stakeholders can follow projects in plain language.

Key Takeaways

These three cities offer distinct but complementary models for communicating capital project progress, using tools that the City of Philadelphia already uses, like ArcGIS and PowerBI. Several best practices emerge:

- **Show Both Time and Money:** Stakeholders care about schedules and costs. Good tools present both in tandem.

- **Break Down Complexity:** Use clear status categories (e.g., planning, in progress, completed) and avoid overly technical terms.

- **Let People Search by What Matters to Them:** Whether it's by neighborhood, project type, or agency, flexible filters help users find what they care about.

- **Visuals Matter:** Maps, charts, and photos can dramatically improve user engagement and understanding.

- **Regular Updates Build Credibility:** Tools should be kept current—nothing erodes trust like a stale dashboard with outdated data.

How Philadelphia Can Level Up

To match the transparency standards of peer cities, Philadelphia might:

- **Launch an interactive capital dashboard**: Include project search, map views, timelines, and downloadable data about project status and spending.

- **Incorporate geospatial tools**: Highlight investment by neighborhood to assess equity.

- **Provide project-level updates**: Add narrative snapshots and photos to convey purpose and context.

- **Enable open data exports**: Make CSV, GeoJSON, or APIs available to researchers and civic technologists.

- **Coordinate across agencies**: Integrate data from Streets, Parks & Recreation, Water, etc., into a unified view.

Conclusion

Capital projects are the building blocks of strong, resilient cities. As tax dollars are committed to these investments, transparency is not optional — it's foundational. New York City, Charlotte, and Boston show how public dashboards, maps, and narrative tools can open government capital project construction and spending data to anyone with curiosity or concern.

Philadelphia has laid important groundwork: multi-year plans, targeted project updates, and sizable annual investments. But there's a clear opportunity to elevate public-facing tools with real-time updates, interactivity, and downloadable data. As community groups, journalists, and residents seek to hold government accountable, investing in transparency is smart policy—and good citizenship.

About this Report: This publication was generated with support from ChatGPT. All AI-generated content and images were reviewed by PICA Staff prior to publication.

PICA Pennsylvania Intergovernmental Cooperation Authority