The United States Conference of Mayors

Mayors AI Playbook

January 2026

THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

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Foreword: A Message to America's Mayors

January 2026

Dear Mayor:

Throughout 2025, the United States Conference of Mayors and our partners at Google collaborated on a series of Artificial Intelligence Workshops for Mayors, where innovators and technologists helped mayors and other city leaders understand and deploy AI strategies within city governments.

Over and over again, mayors expressed a desire to see real-world examples from their peers that were easy to deploy, secure, and effective. This playbook aims to satisfy that need.

This playbook is your guide, providing you and your team with practical guidance on AI and data governance, secure technology and strategies, and actionable best practices, with tips on measuring your own success.

We have only just begun to scratch the surface of AI, and the Conference of Mayors stands ready to support America's cities as they embrace new tools, allowing them to better support people where they live, work, play, and pray. We thank Google for its support in helping cities work better for everyone.

Tom Cochran
CEO and Executive Director
The United States Conference of Mayors

Chapter 1:

Building the Foundation for an AI-Ready City

As a city leader, you are in a unique position to harness the power of AI to enhance public services, improve efficiency, and your residents' quality of life. From optimizing traffic flow to delivering more personalized social services, the potential of AI is immense.

This chapter documents the necessary steps to help you and your city become truly AI-ready and capture its potential.

1.1 AI and Data Governance Framework

Powerful tools require strong guardrails. An AI and Data Governance Framework provides this by ensuring data is shared in compliance with your privacy laws, and that all AI systems are deployed safely, ethically, and in line with your city's values.

Building a comprehensive governance framework is a collaborative process that requires input from a wide range of stakeholders – including your city's legal and compliance teams as critical collaborators.

Step 1: Assemble your core AI governance team.

This team will be responsible for drafting the framework, engaging with stakeholders, and overseeing its implementation. As the biggest obstacles to data initiatives are often people, process, and culture – not technology – it is crucial to bring together a cross-functional team with the right influence.

The core AI governance team should include a high-level leader (e.g., City Manager, CTO), representatives from key departments (e.g., IT, Communications, Public Engagement), and culture champions to help encourage adoption. Importantly, it's important to include legal and compliance representatives to ensure you are building plans that align with the distinct rules and regulations of your city and state.

Step 2: Define your city's AI principles and AI use policy.

Before you can build the framework, you need to establish a set of guiding principles. These are the high-level values – such as commitment to fairness, transparency, and accountability – that will inform all of your AI-related decisions. This should also include a clear AI use policy that specifies which AI tools staff are allowed to use, guidelines on when and how to use them, and "do's and don'ts" about what data can be used.

During this step, it is important to identify your city's current data governance, privacy frameworks, and technology procurement requirements. Your existing policies could already cover a large portion of this work.

Look to your peers for inspiration, for example: the City of Sugar Land, TX has five AI Guiding Principles that apply across all departments, employees, and entities involved in the use of AI. The City of Boston has generative AI guidelines for city staff, including specific dos and don'ts for how and when to use it.

Step 3: Conduct a city-wide AI readiness assessment.

To effectively build a plan for the future, you need to understand where you are today. An AI readiness assessment will help you identify your city's current AI capabilities, as well as any gaps that need to be addressed first. Readily available and trusted tools such as Apolitical's AI Readiness Check can be used to help you and your staff gain a high-level assessment of your abilities across a range of areas, and provide tailored resources to support you and your staff build skills, depending on your starting point.

Step 4: Draft the framework.

Using the insights from the previous steps, your core team will draft the initial version of the governance framework. It's important to remember that this is a living document that will evolve over time. To help you get started, you can access resources from our guide, Building Your City's AI Strategy.

Look to other cities and coalitions for inspiration like the Government AI Coalition founded by the City of San José.

Step 5: Engage the community and revise.

This is a critical step in building public trust and ensuring your framework reflects your community's values. Share the draft framework with the community as a whole – from the general public to local businesses, non-profits, and academic institutions – and create multiple channels for feedback.

1.2 Establishing a Learning Environment

> "We're still only scratching the surface of what AI can do, so the most important step you can take now is to just start. Don't wait for the perfect moment, the opportunity is now."
>
> **—TOM COCHRAN, USCM CEO AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Prioritize training, education, and experimentation

First, establish a clear "AI use policy," this will serve as a roadmap and provide guardrails on AI best practices as part of your official workplace policy. It should include clear "do's and don'ts" about what data can be used, as well as guidelines on when and how to use the tools. These should be explicitly and organizationally tied to your Governance Framework and AI Principles.

Next, invest in training programs to build your workforce's AI skills. Identify internal champions and empower them to build out a team of cross-department AI enthusiasts to experiment with AI tools and lead training sessions with their peers. You can also leverage training programs from external vendors through public / private partnerships or universities to gain low-cost access to the latest tools and skills training.

Apolitical's Government AI Campus offers virtual AI training, free of charge, to public servants worldwide in 11 languages. Course topics include: AI Fundamentals, Smarter Procurement with AI, AI and Climate, and more.

Establishing an AI sandbox

In combination with a clear AI use policy, give staff a "playground" or "sandbox" to experiment. This is a critical first step in fostering a culture of AI adoption and mitigating employee resistance and any concerns about perceived permission to use AI. The goal is to demystify the technology and show your team how AI can be a capacity builder — a tool that expands the team's ability to get work done by handling time-consuming tasks, freeing them to focus on the more complex, high-value parts of their jobs.

Start by providing access to generative AI tools that are not connected to critical public-facing systems. Good first choices are tools for internal collaboration, research, and communication (e.g., tools that can be used for summarizing long reports, drafting emails, or brainstorming).

Next, encourage employees to experiment. In practice, this could look like encouraging an employee in the planning department to use an approved AI tool to summarize a 200-page environmental impact report into five key bullet points. This hands-on, controlled experience allows staff to test and learn safely, to build familiarity with AI's capabilities and – just as importantly – its limitations.

> "We worked hard to reframe AI as a productivity tool that makes our teams' jobs easier. For me, the punchline is simple: it's about getting to better solutions, faster."
>
> **— TIM KELLY, MAYOR, CITY OF CHATTANOOGA**

Human-in-the-loop

AI should be used to increase the impact of an employee's abilities, not replace their judgment. A human-in-the-loop approach is a best practice to AI implementation that keeps a person in the driver's seat to validate AI-powered suggestions and handle complex exceptions – a crucial step for ensuring accountability and maintaining public trust. In practice, this can be as straightforward as a public works employee reviewing an AI-drafted response to a resident's query before sending it. While capabilities have significantly improved, hallucinations are still possible so it's important that you verify all outputs from generative Al and understand the sources cited.

1.3 Unlock your data's potential

Data is only valuable if it's accessible to your team. City data is often stored in different formats and across multiple departments, making interoperability a challenge. Of course, there are always instances where you may want to silo specific sensitive data, but outside of those exceptions, true value comes from breaking down data silos which often can be achieved without expensive hardware upgrades by leveraging the power of the cloud.

The City of Chattanooga is centralizing dozens of datasets that were previously locked in separate systems, including internal operational data as well as public data from external ecosystems. This means the city can now do things like ingest NASA satellite data to monitor environmental factors like urban heat islands and air quality, or pull in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and census data to understand public health and demographic trends across different neighborhoods.

Start with a specific use case

You don't need to solve everything at once. Identify your most critical data assets – the information that, if shared, would solve your most pressing challenge – like improving 311-call response or speeding up permit processing. This "use-case-driven" approach allows you to focus on streamlining and centralizing critical data first, to deliver real value on a big challenge quickly. You can then learn from that process, and build momentum before you scale.

Avoid the "big warehouse delay"

Waiting to build one giant, central data warehouse for all city data can cause indefinite delays. Instead, you can follow a "data mesh" approach, which keeps data within each department's systems and makes each department responsible for maintaining it.

A data mesh is a decentralized data architecture. Instead of moving all data into one giant warehouse, each department (e.g., Transportation, Public Works) is responsible for owning, managing, and sharing its own data as a secure, high-quality, and ready-to-use "product."

From here, you can use a single analytics platform that acts as a central query layer, connecting to all these departmental systems. This allows your teams to ask questions about data from across the city, without having to first move it all into one place. With this method, the responsibility for high-quality data is shared by everyone, but you still get the power of a single, centralized view to find powerful new insights.

Let AI bridge gaps in unstructured data

Most city data is unstructured, locked in scanned documents, PDFs, spreadsheets, and legacy systems. Instead of a massive manual effort to standardize and format this information, AI can make sense of it as-is while even redacting PII data if necessary.

For example, specialized AI tools can read a scanned building permit, understand what's in it, and automatically pull out key information like names, dates, and addresses into a usable format.

Beyond documents, generative AI excels at finding connections within complex, disconnected data. It can summarize thousands of pages of public feedback, translate between legacy data formats, or analyze images to identify service needs.

The City of Mableton has a mantra: “digital first, paper less.” This applies to their internal data practices, as well as to the agencies and partners they work with, including Cobb County. As Mableton brings services over from the county, one of the requirements they have is for all data to be digitized before it’s integrated into their city workflows. This ensures that the City of Mableton remains committed to its mantra and digital-first foundation.

1.4 Optimizing your technology stack for AI

Your city’s “hardware” includes everything from employee cell phones to traffic sensors, and public safety cameras. Securing this entire stack is critical for protecting your data and services.

Employee hardware and software

Mobility is key to delivering city services and support, making devices like cell phones and tablets priorities. Below are some key considerations when sourcing and scaling these devices:

Prioritize built-in security:

When selecting devices, prioritize those with built-in operating system security. This means devices receive constant, automatic updates via the internet to protect against the latest threats. These devices should also run web pages and apps in isolation, meaning a single bad link can’t access your data or infect the entire device.

Apply a Zero Trust strategy:

“Zero Trust” is a security strategy that assumes no user or device is automatically safe, even if they are already on your network. This means every user must prove who they are and that they have permission every single time they try to access any file, app, or piece of data.

On mobile devices, a “work profile” is an example of Zero Trust in action. Most modern devices allow you to create a secure, separate container for work apps and data. This is often enforced by Mobile Device Management (MDM) software, which gives your team a central way to remotely manage and secure all city-issued mobile devices. This builds a digital wall between personal and work apps and data, meaning a personal app (like a game) can’t access sensitive work documents, and your city’s work apps can’t see a user’s personal photos.

Mableton has created a culture of virtual and physical security from the very beginning. The city uses a standard Single Sign On (SSO) across all systems used by staff, and extends this requirement out to third-party integration and systems as well. Additionally, even with a small team, staff wear security badges to unlock digital keypads at city hall. This creates a culture of security minded staff.

Protect privacy with on-device processing:

Prioritize devices with "on-device processing" capabilities. This means AI tasks such as transcription and summarization run locally rather than in the Cloud. This is crucial for privacy, as sensitive data never leaves the device.

Some questions you can ask your team and during vendor RFPs:

- "How do we ensure every employee device is automatically updated with the latest security patches?"
- "What prevents a personal app from accessing sensitive city data on the same phone?"
- "For sensitive tasks, can we guarantee resident data is processed on the device and not sent to the Cloud?"

Connected devices (Internet of Things)

Beyond devices for personnel, you will also have considerations around which hardware and software to leverage for your broader technology stack of connected devices.

Consider multi-use hardware:

You don't always need expensive, specialized sensors. Consider using commodity hardware – such as a standard smartphone – as a powerful, multi-purpose data collector. For example, a phone mounted in a city vehicle, like a bus or sanitation truck, can use its built-in sensors to collect raw data – such as gyroscopic motion, to detect potholes or sound levels to map noise pollution. This raw data, which you own, can then be used to build custom, low-cost AI models to improve city services.

Avoid vendor lock-in:

Your city's data is vital. When investing in new technology (such as cameras and sensors), avoid vendor hardware-software combinations that lock you into only accessing data through their platform. You must insist on full access to the raw data to use it for new projects. City data should be owned and controlled by the city, not resold by vendors.

Demand hardware that can be updated remotely:

A sensor that cannot be securely updated becomes a permanent security risk. Prioritize hardware that your team can centrally manage and update remotely against new threats. Additionally, prioritize partners who can prove the data flow – from the sensor to the cloud – is secure and controlled.

Some questions you can ask your team and during vendor RFPs:

- "What is our plan for applying security patches to all our sensors and cameras?"
- "How are we using on-device processing to protect public privacy and reduce data costs?"
- "Does this contract give us full ownership and access to our raw data? For example, does it explicitly state the City owns the data model and can export it in a standard format (CSV, JSON) at no cost?"

The City of Chattanooga's process for selecting and establishing its technology stack relies on leveraging strategic partnerships with universities and leading industry partners to de-risk innovation and access world-class R&D capabilities. Security and compliance is prioritized and built in from the edge to the core to the cloud, ensuring that the "Intelligent City" is also a secure city. Chattanooga also selects technologies that not only serve city operations but also act as a beacon for economic development, attracting venture capital and startups to the region.

1.5 Selecting Your First AI Project

Start with a challenge, not the solution

AI is only as effective as the city employees it empowers, and its ability to act as a tool that builds their capacity to better analyze, engage, and serve the community.

To demonstrate this potential of AI for your staff and community, your first AI project should address a clear need within the city. Start by identifying a known challenge (e.g., inefficient building permits) and position AI as one of many tools available to help solve it.

To find the right challenge, look for singular, definable tasks that would significantly improve if an unlimited number of people could perform them. AI agents excel at these repeatable tasks and can act as a capacity builder for your team, adding immediate value. Good examples include: reading documents, reviewing application forms, checking forms for completeness, or reviewing traffic citation footage to confirm proper identification.

Remember, not every problem requires a technical solution. It is important for domain experts to identify inefficient procedures and overly complicated policies initially (e.g., redundant approvals and wet signature requirements) before turning to an AI solution.

Establish clear expertise

Effective AI implementation in a city requires oversight from both city-specific domain knowledge experts – those with a deep understanding of the city's operations, regulations, services, and citizen needs – and technical experts. Involving both when defining challenges and selecting AI tools ensures you arrive at technologically sound, as well as genuinely helpful, solutions for the city and its residents.

Start small to win big

Once you have your list of definable tasks that AI could help with, assess the potential risks and benefits for each one. Detail the benefits of the project being successful and the risks if it goes poorly. Evaluating both aspects separately is essential to fully articulate each task's value.

For your first few projects, aim for the sweet spot: low risk with at least moderate benefit.

This approach avoids two common pitfalls. You don't want a project so "low impact" that AI feels like a "toy" rather than a helpful force multiplier. Equally, you don't want to overcomplicate your first initiative with something too high-risk.

As you and your city staff become more familiar with AI, you can take on higher-risk projects by integrating "human-in-the-loop" processes to manage that risk.

Q: What were your first AI projects, and why did you choose them?

A:
"An early AI/ML project initiated in the City of Chattanooga captured video footage inside sewer pipes and then used a computer-vision algorithm to identify cracks in the pipes so proactive remediation could be undertaken."

"Our first Generative AI project focused on increasing administrative productivity through making Gemini in Workspace available citywide. We chose this project to broaden access, deepen familiarity and enhance the Generative AI skills of our team. Close on the heels of that project we launched a NotebookLM project for the City's most senior leaders. The intention here was to spark creativity, speed learning and understanding of complex subjects and support improved decision making."

– Mayor Tim Kelly, City of Chattanooga

Q: How are you approaching selecting your first AI project?

A:
"To help identify the right opportunities to pursue, we start by asking ourselves four core questions

- *How does it improve a resident's experience?*
- *How does it save time, or reduce operational friction internally?*
- *How can we scale it and make it sustainable over time?*
- *Does it reduce risk, rather than introduce risk?"*

"You have to start off with those questions. There's a multitude of projects we could decide to dive into but my direction to my team internally, and my advice to other cities, is to ask these four questions first to see which one of those projects makes sense for you and your city."

– Mayor Michael Owens City of Mableton

Get started: Quick win ideas

Below are simple-to-deploy AI applications that deliver immediate, noticeable benefits for city staff and residents, demonstrating AI's potential:

Translation services: AI can address the challenge of communicating with residents who speak numerous different languages and dialects. Implementation can leverage existing platforms for real-time translation of text and speech. For critical or legally binding communications, remember to follow the "human in the loop" approach to verify translations and communications.

Call Center and 311 modernization: Focus on improving the interaction experience and providing quick, consistent answers to commonly asked citizens' questions. AI can also be used to intelligently route residents to the correct service, which is critical, especially during times of crisis.

Document and form Review: Use AI for definable, singular tasks, like taking code enforcement manuals and making them searchable by officials. This eases the completion and management of government forms, and assists workers with note-taking and report writing,

Research assistant: Use AI research tools to take the first cut at researching and answering complex policy questions. It can deliver results in minutes, compared to the weeks of work previously required by analysts, and gives your staff a helpful launch pad.

Chapter 2:

Solving Real-World Urban Challenges with AI

As the saying goes, "good mayors borrow, great mayors steal." This chapter provides proven, replicable AI solutions to universal challenges city governments face every day. Each is paired with an example from a U.S. city using AI to tackle the challenge, offering an inspiring blueprint for achieving similar results in your community.

To make these solutions easy to navigate, we've organized them into five focus areas that represent some of the core functions of a modern city: AI Governance and City Administration; Cyber, Climate, and Emergency Resilience; Planning and Economic Development; Transportation and Mobility; and Community Engagement.

2.1 AI Governance and City Administration

Powerful tools require strong guardrails. This section will explore how U.S. cities are ensuring their AI adoption is safe, ethical, and aligned with community values. With that foundation, we will also explore how AI can act as a capacity builder for staff to improve internal operations and overcome resource constraints.

Building guardrails for responsible AI

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
City Administration and Governance	As powerful AI tools become widely available, cities must establish strong guardrails to ensure their adoption is safe, ethical, and aligned with community values.	Establishing a formal data and AI governance framework is the most essential first step a city can take before broadly deploying AI. This helps cities mitigate risks, build public trust, and empower staff to innovate responsibly.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

Cities across the U.S. have created comprehensive public-facing plans and internal guidelines for their AI use, combining high-level governance with practical tools to foster responsible innovation. In **New York City**, their plan outlines seven initiatives, including an AI Steering Committee and a public website for transparency and accountability. **San José, CA**, provides employees with a clear inventory of approved tools and specific "dos and don'ts" for using generative AI to prevent the misuse of sensitive information. In **Washington, D.C.**, their plan emphasizes the city's core values, ensuring all AI deployments are purposeful, equitable, and transparent.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Establish a governance framework.** Create your city's official AI and data strategy by engaging stakeholders and community members to define core values, establish clear oversight, and create a public action plan.
2. **Connect with your peers to accelerate learning.** Reach out to cities with published AI plans to learn from their successes and challenges, adapt proven frameworks, and avoid common pitfalls, saving your city valuable time and resources.
3. **Establish guardrails to empower responsible experimentation.** Create a straightforward usage guide with clear "rules of the road" for AI. Once in place, encourage staff to experiment with approved tools.

How to measure success

- **Public trust and transparency:** Measure community engagement with your public-facing AI plan through metrics like website traffic, document downloads, and attendance at public forums on the topic.
- **Take an AI readiness assessment:** Assess your team's abilities across a range of areas, and then reassess them as you go to measure progress.
- **Employee adoption and engagement:** Monitor the percentage of staff who have completed AI ethics and usage training, and track the number of new, innovative AI use cases proposed by employees, as well as time saved/satisfaction metrics with the new tools.

Using AI for internal capacity building

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
City Administration and Governance	Cities are often forced to innovate with limited staff and shrinking budgets.	Generative AI tools can understand complex information and help you draft new content based on specific inputs and instructions in real time. Access to these tools is often built into a city's existing technology product suite, so your staff can immediately start using these collaboration tools to claim back time on internal, repeatable tasks like drafting correspondence or summarizing reports.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

In **Chattanooga, TN,** the city government has equipped staff across departments with generative AI tools to help them uncover key insights faster, make better-informed decisions, and summarize and draft communications. These tools have reduced correspondence drafting time by over 75% and accelerated regulatory research from hours to seconds. Additionally, the city is training an AI model on its entire municipal code. The goal is to empower city permitters with the ability to ask simple, natural language questions and be provided with direct, cited answers in seconds – speeding up a process that previously could have taken hours of complex research.

The City of **Los Angeles, CA** deployed AI-enabled collaboration software to 27,500 employees. This enterprise-wide adoption will equip workers with the power of AI to accelerate communications, automate time-sensitive tasks, and streamline complex project planning, which will ultimately deliver faster and more accessible public services for the city's four million residents.

Similarly, the City of **Dearborn, MI** is using AI to help departments collaborate more seamlessly. By replacing manual, paper-based systems, employees can now collaborate on projects in real time without chasing paperwork. This shift also turns buried information into clear insights, helping city leaders make smarter, informed decisions for their residents.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Audit your existing toolkit:** Before buying new software, review your current enterprise contracts (e.g., for your email, office, or collaboration suites). Many vendors are embedding powerful generative AI tools directly into these products. You may already be paying for capabilities that just need to be activated and introduced to your teams.
2. **Start with internal productivity to build momentum.** Deploy AI-powered collaboration tools to your workforce to deliver immediate benefits and gain the buy-in needed for more ambitious public-facing projects. Access to these tools is typically already built in and available to you through your leading internal technology provider.
3. **Pilot an AI agent to make internal knowledge accessible.** Identify one dense, frequently used document set – like public works codes, zoning regulations, or permitting guides – and develop an AI agent to answer frequently asked staff questions. This accelerates internal research, ensures consistency, and empowers employees to make faster, accurate decisions.

How to measure success

- **Employee productivity:** Capture employee feedback and document the amount of time saved on administrative tasks and faster completion of standard, repeatable work to show leaders and budget officials the value of using these tools.
- **Internal time-to-answer:** Measure the reduction in time it takes for staff to answer questions using the AI agent versus traditional methods.
- **Decision-making speed:** Measure the time saved on key internal processes that use the knowledge in your pilot AI agent. For example, track the total time it takes to complete a permit application review or provide a policy clarification, from start to finish.

2.2 Cyber, Climate, and Emergency Resilience

As a city leader, ensuring your community's well-being is your primary charge. This pillar focuses on using AI to enhance security for both digital and physical threats, helping you build a safer, more resilient community.

Enhancing cybersecurity response and threat prevention

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Cyber, Climate, and Emergency Resilience	Enhancing security response and threat prevention with limited staff and resources, without compromising privacy or operational continuity.	AI-enabled security systems can detect patterns and automatically correlate signals from dozens of sources – such as network traffic logs, security alerts from employee devices, and suspicious login attempts. These systems can then proactively analyze threats, filter out false positives, and present human analysts with prioritized, actionable intelligence, increasing a security team's ability to move from a reactive to a proactive posture.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

In Pasco County, FL, the Pasco Sheriff's Office was caught in a reactive cycle they called a "vicious game of whack-a-mole," manually chasing alerts across siloed systems. They adopted an AI-enabled security operations platform that consolidated their tools into a single interface. This empowered analysts to stop chasing alerts and instead act on credible, system-identified threats. Tasks that once took a team hours or days are now handled by one person in under an hour, freeing up personnel for other critical safety initiatives.

In **New York City**, the Office of Technology and Innovation – which is charged with protecting the digital services of over 8 million people – faces 100 billion cyber threats weekly. To combat this, the NYC OTI deployed an AI-enabled security platform. This platform analyzes threats in real time, assesses risks, and prioritizes responses, to help distill those billions of threats down to 50 or 60 events staff can focus on.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Consolidate your tools:** Start by auditing your security software to find redundancies. A single, unified platform offers better visibility and greater efficiency than managing multiple disconnected tools.
2. **Automate triage:** Use an AI-powered system to investigate and prioritize alerts automatically. This frees your team from chasing false positives and allows them to focus on real threats.
3. **Empower, don't replace:** Frame AI as a tool that extends your team's capacity. By handling the manual, repetitive tasks of verifying threat detections, AI enables your skilled staff to focus on the critical task of managing responses to credible threat alerts.

How to measure success

- **Time to resolution:** Track the average time from when an alert is first flagged to when it is fully resolved, both before and after implementation, to measure how much faster your team is resolving security incidents.
- **False-positive reduction:** Track reductions in non-critical alerts your team must investigate. This is a direct measure of reduced alert fatigue and increased focus.
- **Critical system uptime:** Measure the reduction in system downtime caused by security incidents.
- **Staff reclaimed time:** Measure how many person-hours have been saved from manual, repetitive tasks. This "reclaimed time" is a powerful metric for ROI and can be reinvested into more strategic security initiatives.

Protecting communities and critical infrastructure

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Cyber, Climate, and Emergency Resilience	Protecting communities from unpredictable threats and enabling first responders to act decisively in times of crisis.	AI excels at identifying subtle patterns human eyes and analog analysis may miss. By analyzing vast data streams from sensors or satellite imagery, AI-powered geospatial platforms and computer vision can detect anomalies and provide early warnings to predict and prevent issues or disasters before they escalate.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

AI is helping cities build resilience against climate impacts, such as urban heat islands. In **Austin, TX,** the city has a goal to cover 50% of the city with tree canopy by 2050 to help reduce the impacts of extreme heat. To achieve this goal, they are using AI-powered geospatial tools to analyze satellite imagery of the city. This allows them to understand the city's existing tree coverage and hot-spot areas, model the impact of planting new trees, and direct resources to communities most vulnerable to heat islands.

The same principle of image analysis and alert is used to **combat wildfires.** By analyzing satellite imagery, AI models can generate near real-time boundary maps of active fires. This gives first responders and the public critical, up-to-the-hour information on a fire's location and scale, supporting more effective evacuation and containment strategies.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Combine public data with human experience:** Use free public data, like satellite and weather, to inform proactive responses to environmental challenges such as planting for heat islands. Always validate these data-driven insights with the lived experience of your team and community to ensure the generated insights align with your reality.
2. **Deploy sensors across critical systems:** Identify an acute problem within a critical system (e.g., transit, water, power) that you don't currently have a lot of data on. Deploy low-cost sensors to collect operational data at this site. **Crucially:** When investing in cameras or sensors for tasks like this, insist on your city gaining full access to the raw data. This is essential to unlock its true value for new insights.
3. **Define and communicate your measurement plan:** Define your hypothesis for the problem and what the sensors will measure. Then, communicate this plan publicly. Residents in the area must understand what the sensors are, why they're there, how the data will be used, and how it will benefit them.
4. **Make data accessible with natural language:** Implement AI tools that allow staff, like inspectors or emergency managers, to query complex data using simple questions to get immediate, actionable answers.

How to measure success

- **Reduction in unplanned downtime:** Track the decrease in service disruptions or critical infrastructure failures (e.g., water main breaks, power outages).
- **Improved maintenance efficiency:** Measure the shift from reactive (emergency) repairs to proactive (planned) maintenance, reflected in lower costs and better resource allocation.
- **Faster emergency response:** Monitor key response-time metrics, such as the time to dispatch resources after an alert, the time for emergency responders to arrive on scene, or the time to restore services.
- **Increased public safety:** Quantify a reduction in incidents, injuries, or property damage related to infrastructure failures or environmental disasters in the monitored areas.

2.3 Planning and Economic Development

A thriving city creates opportunities for its residents and businesses. This section explores how AI can help simplify access to benefits for your residents, streamline bureaucratic processes like permitting and zoning, and prepare your community for the future of work.

Streamlining and simplifying bureaucratic processes

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Planning and Economic Development	Complex, analogue processes for permits, licenses, and city services frustrate residents and stall critical work, like housing development.	AI can understand and process human language and complex rules enabling it to instantly translate information into multiple languages, respond to questions, and extract data from applications. This can help automate repetitive bottlenecks, break down language barriers, and make services more accessible.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

In **Charlotte, NC,** residents struggled to access essential services through a maze of disconnected paper applications and informal referrals. To break down these barriers, the city created a “one-stop shop” universal housing application using CiviForm – an open-source application tool used in multiple cities across the US. This system streamlines the benefits process by consolidating eligibility information from multiple programs into one simplified, more accessible, and compassionate process for both applicants and staff. Looking ahead, CiviForm is designed to evolve alongside government needs, leveraging AI-powered features on the roadmap to ensure flexibility, sustainability, and resilience.

Similarly, cities are leveraging AI to streamline administrative processes that can help address housing delays. In **Miami, FL**, the city is piloting AI to automate zoning verification letters for the city’s urban center, or T5 Transect Zone. As urban populations expand, automating the zoning verification process aims to reduce bottlenecks and accelerate the construction of much needed mixed-use, higher-density housing projects.

Beyond simplifying applications, cities are using AI to make public information more immediately accessible. **San José, CA**, uses AI to provide real-time translation for its 311 portal, allowing residents to access 24/7 support for common inquiries in their native language. Similarly, in **Sullivan County, NY,** they introduced a virtual AI agent on the website for the County Clerk's and Treasurer's offices to answer frequently asked questions. The chatbot has reduced call volume by 62%, giving teams time back for complex issues.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Create a unified digital portal:** Consolidate multiple applications (e.g., housing assistance, health insurance, etc.) into a single integrated-eligibility platform that applies application information across multiple benefit processes, eliminating the need for residents to re-enter the same data for multiple applications. Look for open-source technology, like CiviForm, to do this "out of the box" without extra development fees.
2. **Automate document intake:** Use document processing AI to automatically extract and digitize information from uploaded forms. This reduces manual data entry for applicants and staff, minimizes errors, avoids duplications, and significantly speeds up processing times.
3. **Embed automated translation:** Integrate translation AI directly into your city's websites and application forms to ensure that essential services are accessible to all residents in their primary language.

How to measure success

- **Application completion time:** Measure the average time it takes to complete and submit an application, from start to finish. Compare application times against old processes or other applications.
- **Application abandonment rate:** Monitor the percentage of users who start an application but do not complete it, as a high rate can indicate friction in the process.
- **Accessibility and equity:** Measure the number and percentage of applications submitted in languages other than English and track user satisfaction scores from non-English speaking communities.

Preparing the community for the future of work

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Planning and Economic Development	Bridging the gap between the existing skills of your residents and the evolving demands of the digital economy to ensure they have pathways to sustainable careers.	AI is only as powerful as a person's ability to use it. Cities are providing on-demand digital skills training to their communities, to help them meet the AI moment and train for high-growth industries. This strategic investment breaks down traditional barriers to education and training, empowering communities to adapt through economic shifts, fostering greater economic mobility for all.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

Cities across the U.S. are forging public-private partnerships to access and deliver digital skills training developed by third-party organizations to their residents. For example, cities such as **Quincy, MA**, **Pittsburgh, PA**, **Dearborn, MI** and **Boulder, CO**, all provide access to programs that help adult learners earn industry-recognized credentials in high-demand fields through accessible online courses that require no degree or prior experience. To ensure graduates succeed in the job market, regions like **Cook County, IL**, also provide access to AI-powered interview coaching, helping prepare residents to transition from training into the workforce.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Forge strategic public-private partnerships.** Work with third party organizations to bring leading digital skills and career training programs to your community at little or no cost. This approach allows you to rapidly scale skilling initiatives and address immediate talent shortages identified by local employers.
2. **Integrate no-cost training programs with existing workforce development services,** such as career counseling and job placement support. This creates a comprehensive ecosystem that guides residents seamlessly from the learning phase directly into earning opportunities.
3. **Prioritize training that results in industry-recognized credentials for in-demand roles.** This ensures that residents are investing their time in learning practical, marketable skills that local employers are actively seeking, creating a direct win for both residents and the local economy.

How to measure success

- **Number of residents enrolled** in and successfully completing certification programs.
- **Growth in the local talent pool** for specific, high-demand tech and digital sectors.
- **Surveys measuring resident satisfaction** with the accessibility and quality of the training programs and associated career support services.
- **Percentage of program graduates who secure employment** or receive a wage increase within six months of completion. You can use graduate surveys, as well as work with local employers to aggregate this data

2.4 Transportation and mobility

Your city's physical infrastructure and mobility are the backbone of daily life – critical for a functional and competitive city. Here, you'll learn how AI is helping increase road safety, relieve traffic congestion and enhance public transportation.

Enhancing road safety

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Transportation and mobility	Cities struggle to proactively maintain vast transportation networks, leading to safety hazards, and reliance on reactive, often inefficient, citizen reporting systems.	AI unlocks new insights from vast streams of physical and operational data. By processing visual feeds from cameras or integrating siloed datasets, computer vision and advanced analytics can automatically detect infrastructure defects and uncover hidden patterns in safety data. This allows cities to spot emerging issues, like potholes or high-risk intersections, and move from reactive complaints to proactive, data-driven solutions.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

In **Memphis, TN**, the city moved beyond its slow, complaint-driven system for road repair by outfitting public vehicles with cameras. Computer vision now analyzes the footage to automatically detect, pinpoint, and generate service tickets for potholes, significantly improving the speed and accuracy of repairs.

In the same state, the City of **Chattanooga** was drowning in disconnected data, with crash analytics trapped in static spreadsheets that required hours of manual analysis. To solve this challenge, the city is centralizing crash data from state and local systems into a single, dynamic discovery tool. The vision is to empower analysts to confidently visualize crash data on interactive maps and apply dynamic filters to uncover deeper, hidden patterns. The ultimate aim is to empower the city to make more informed, life-saving decisions, such as prioritizing which intersections need new traffic signals or redesigned crosswalks, and reallocating police patrols to high-risk corridors during specific times of the day.

How you can “steal” these ideas

1. **Leverage existing city fleets/assets:** Mount cameras and sensors on municipal vehicles like buses, trains, or garbage trucks. This turns routine routes into data-collection opportunities, creating a city-wide sensing network without the cost of a dedicated fleet.
2. **Unify disparate data sources:** Break down departmental silos by consolidating operational data (e.g., maintenance records, traffic counts, 311 reports) into a centralized analytics platform. This enables cross-functional analysis to uncover hidden patterns and root causes of systemic issues.
3. **Start with a focused pilot:** Begin with a well-defined problem, such as pothole detection or analyzing a specific high-crash corridor. A successful pilot builds institutional confidence and provides a clear blueprint for scaling the solution across other departments and challenges.

How to measure success

- **Reduction in infrastructure-related incidents:** Track the year-over-year decrease in the number of traffic accidents in targeted corridors, vehicle damage claims from potholes, or service disruptions caused by track-level defects.
- **Improved maintenance efficiency:** Measure the average time from issue detection to resolution for infrastructure repairs and compare the volume of proactive repairs (identified by AI) versus reactive repairs (reported by citizens).
- **Return on investment (ROI):** Calculate cost savings from reduced damage claims, optimized allocation of repair crews, and the deferral of major capital projects through improved traffic flow and predictive maintenance.

Relieving congestion and enhancing transportation

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Transportation and mobility	As city populations grow, so do the demand on roadways and public transportation systems, leading to congestion and often reactive repairs to infrastructure	AI can be used to analyze crash hot spots, traffic signal timing, potential failures and identify patterns to prevent crashes, infrastructure failures, and optimize traffic flow. This allows cities to move from fixed schedules to dynamic, responsive transportation operations.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

In **New York City, NY**, the MTA is piloting an AI-powered inspection program that uses vehicle-mounted smartphones to capture real-time vibration and audio data from its subway cars. This data is analyzed by machine learning models to predict and flag potential track defects, allowing crews to prioritize inspections. Early tests show this innovative approach can pinpoint 92% of defects, promising fewer delays, and a better ride for millions.

Further north in **Boston, MA**, commuters were burdened by significant traffic congestion, resulting in some of the highest delay times in the world. To alleviate this, the city adopted an AI-powered traffic management system to optimize traffic flow. After a successful pilot, the system has been expanded to over 100 intersections, using real-time data to adjust signal timing. This has created a more responsive transportation network, reducing average delays by over 13% and unnecessary stops by 20%, leading to less frustrating commutes and significant fuel savings.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Find your "Inspection Force Multiplier":** Ask your department heads, "what is one, tedious, manual inspection task that, if automated, would save your team potentially hours a week?" Use this feedback to create a pilot – whether it's using AI to scan satellite imagery for zoning violations (like unpermitted construction) or using acoustic sensors to "listen" for underground water main leaks.
2. **Identify a high-visibility bottleneck.** Instead of setting out to tackle the entire city's congestion issues, identify high impact bottlenecks or crash areas around sites like stadiums, schools, or large venues where you can pilot AI solutions. Measure the impact on congestion and report back to your community on the successes and learnings before expanding.
3. **Consider using commodity hardware to pilot and scale quickly.** You don't always need expensive, specialized sensors to collect valuable data. Start small with a phone, basic dashboard camera or sensor mounted in a city vehicle (like a bus or sanitation truck). Work with your IT department and external partners to leverage AI to see what problems you can spot from the footage, for example potholes, faded road markings or damaged signage.

How to measure success

- **Reduced travel time and congestion:** Track the average commute time, number of vehicle stops, and total delay within the targeted pilot corridors to quantify congestion relief.
- **Improved infrastructure reliability:** Measure the shift from reactive (emergency) repairs to proactive (planned) maintenance, and track the corresponding decrease in unplanned service disruptions or asset downtime.
- **Staff time reclaimed:** Quantify the reduction in staff-hours spent on manual reporting or inspection tasks. Document and quantify how that time is reinvested into more strategic work.

2.5 Community Engagement

Building public trust means listening to your constituents and allowing them to be heard and provide feedback on city plans and services. This pillar focuses on how AI can help you find actionable insights in community feedback, bridge language barriers, and better engage all populations to deliver more effective, equitable services.

Gleaning actionable insights from community feedback and data

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Community Engagement	Cities collect vast amounts of public feedback but struggle to efficiently analyze unstructured data like open-ended comments to inform strategic decisions and policy.	AI's ability to process and analyze language and sentiment can help you automatically transform unstructured public opinion from surveys and digital feedback into quantitative, actionable insights. This empowers leaders to quickly identify key themes, understand sentiment, and make data-driven decisions that reflect community priorities.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

To help develop its 20-year plan, **Bowling Green, KY** engaged their community in one of the largest online civic conversations in the U.S. Using AI, city officials analyzed feedback from over 7,700 participating residents, identifying and categorizing key themes. This allowed planners to base their long-term strategy on a clear, quantitative understanding of the community's voice.

In **Chicago, IL,** the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) uses an AI-powered approach for a real-time rider feedback loop. By launching a multi-lingual conversational AI agent on its website, the CTA gives residents a 24/7 channel to ask questions and report issues in their native language, allowing the agency to identify and respond to trending problems more quickly.

How you can "steal" these ideas

1. **Apply AI to existing feedback channels:** Use natural language processing to analyze unstructured data you already collect – like 311 comments, social media, or open-ended survey responses – to pull out actionable themes.
2. **Deploy a "digital front door":** Implement a conversational AI agent on your main website as a constant listening post. This gives residents immediate answers while capturing and categorizing their concerns for internal analysis.
3. **Visualize community priorities:** Connect your analysis to data visualization dashboards. This lets policymakers see trending topics, sentiment scores, and geographic patterns at a glance, making community feedback central to every strategic discussion.

How to measure success

- **Time-to-insight:** Measure the reduction in time required to process and understand public feedback from major community engagement initiatives (e.g., from months to days).
- **Policy and budget alignment:** Track the number of new policies, service adjustments, or budget allocations that are directly justified by insights derived from AI-powered feedback analysis.
- **Citizen satisfaction scores:** Monitor changes in public trust and satisfaction surveys, specifically on questions related to whether residents feel the city listens to and acts upon their input.
- **Engagement volume:** Track the number of resident interactions handled by automated systems, indicating an increase in accessible channels for civic engagement.

Better engaging under-served populations

Focus area	Challenge	The AI approach
Community Engagement	Language barriers and difficult-to-navigate systems can prevent under-represented, non-English-speaking populations from accessing vital city services and information.	Combining real-time translation with conversational and generative AI platforms allows cities to create an accessible "digital front door." This empowers cities to be available 24/7 in dozens of languages, providing intuitive, on-demand resources for everyone.

In Practice: examples from across the U.S.

Dearborn, MI is building more responsive, accessible government services using AI-powered virtual agents and translation tools. The city now provides 24/7 online access to core services, like applying for permits and licenses. Virtual agents on the website facilitate these processes, delivering personalized information in multiple languages, which expands the reach of vital government services to the city's diverse populations.

Similarly, **Hartford, CT,** is improving access to city services and enabling more resident participation in local government by providing AI-powered, two-way, real-time translation in 80 languages during City Council and Board of Education meetings. Now, non-English-speaking and multilingual residents, previously disconnected by language barriers, can better access city government and participate in their community.

How you can “steal” these ideas

1. **Audit your accessibility:** Use data to identify your city’s primary languages and where residents face the most friction when accessing services. This data will show you which services to translate first.
2. **Start with frequently asked questions:** Identify the top 10-20 common questions your staff handle (e.g., trash schedules, park hours, paying a water bill). Building a small, verified knowledge base for these inquiries lets your AI agent immediately provide accurate, multilingual answers to most resident questions, delivering quick, tangible wins.
3. **Deploy a multilingual agent:** Implement a conversational AI agent on your website with real-time translation. This provides an immediate 24/7 resource for residents to get answers in their preferred language, dramatically improving equity and service quality.

How to measure success

- **Reduction in call volume** for simple, repetitive questions at city call centers.
- **Increase in website and portal usage** from residents using non-English browser or language settings.
- **Resident satisfaction scores** (e.g., CSAT) specifically for interactions with the new digital tools.
- **Number of unique languages** successfully served by the conversational agent each month.

The Path Forward

Technology has always helped society push ahead, and today, we are at an historic inflection point where AI will redefine national competitiveness and societal well-being. To seize this opportunity – and ensure communities broadly share in the opportunities of AI – governments have a powerful moment to lead by example.

This guide provides the definitive blueprint to do just that. It equips you with the foundational steps for responsible adoption – from establishing strong governance frameworks and ethical guardrails, to creating a learning environment and selecting your first project. All while offering proven, replicable examples of how your peers are already using AI to solve universal urban challenges.

Cities are on the frontlines of delivering services that shape our everyday lives, and the opportunity AI presents as a capacity builder for your teams to better serve your communities faster and more equitably is immediate.

Don't wait for a "perfect" moment; the most important step you can take today is simply to start.

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