http://www.vancouversun.com/news/launches+open+data+site/5129493/story.html

B.C. launches open-data site
Nearly 2,500 sets of government info available for download

BY CHAD SKELTON, VANCOUVER SUN   JULY 20, 2011

http://www.data.gov.bc.ca/
http://www.openinfo.gov.bc.ca/

The B.C. government launched its long-awaited open-data website Tuesday, making nearly 2,500 sets of data available on everything from public-sector salaries to school test scores.

The site, at data.gov.bc.ca, fulfils a promise Premier Christy Clark made during the B.C. Liberal leadership campaign to establish an open-data portal where residents can download large volumes of government information for free.

"Previously, governments have assumed other people's information belongs to us, and we get to interpret it and disseminate it to people," Clark said Tuesday. "I don't think that's right. I think the information belongs to the public, and as long as we respect people's privacy, we should make sure that we are giving that information back to people to be able to use and interpret themselves."

Kevin Jardine, an assistant deputy minister overseeing the open-data project, acknowledged that much of what was posted online Tuesday was information already publicly available in some form.

However, he said, the new site makes the data easier to access and added there will be much more to come.

"What the premier has committed to do is for the public service to begin taking risks, to be looking for opportunities to make information that people would have otherwise had to apply for available in a more routine way," said Jardine. "That is a significant culture shift in the public service."

Herb Lainchbury, a software developer and open-data advocate in Victoria, said the most significant thing about Tuesday's announcement is that the province has for the first time adopted an open-data licence that permits programmers to use government data without risk of being sued.

"Until now, we never had open data because we never had a licence," he said. "Yeah, some of the stuff was online. But you couldn't use it without fear of getting into some kind of trouble. What's really huge about this, I think, is it's a signal to the citizens to use the data."

David Eaves, an open-data advocate who has done consulting work for the province, said making raw government data available should also help level the playing field for small nonprofits and advocacy groups.

For example, said Eaves, a group unhappy with the Fraser Institute's annual school rankings can now download raw test-score data and create their own rankings. Or an environmental group could use forestry maps to better monitor how logging companies operate.

"What we now have is a commitment from our provincial government acknowledging that having things in an electronic form is the new bar for transparency," he said.

Victoria's new-found commitment to releasing raw data is in stark contrast to its position just a few years ago.

In 2008, while compiling its first public-sector-salary database, The Vancouver Sun filed freedom of information requests to more than 90 public agencies, asking for a list of their highly paid staff in spreadsheet format.

The B.C. government was one of only a handful of agencies that refused, only complying with the request after The Sun complained to the information commissioner.

Those salaries, in spreadsheet format, are now prominently available for anyone to download at the new open-data site. NDP open-government critic Doug Routley said he saw little progress in Tuesday's announcement.

"The reality remains there is a sophisticated culture of avoidance from scrutiny," he added, saying the public wants full disclosure on issues such as the decision to pay legal costs in the Basi-Virk political corruption trial. "Right now it's a lot of noise about very little progress."

In addition to the new opendata portal, the B.C. government announced Tuesday that it would begin posting records released through freedom of information requests online at openinfo.gov.bc.ca.

The government said it would give the original requester at least 72 hours to review the records before posting them online, to give journalists a chance to break stories on their own FOI requests before their competitors can access the information.

As Clark noted, B.C. is the first provincial government to launch an open-data site. However, it is following in the footsteps of the federal government and the City of Vancouver, both of which already have open-data portals.

cskelton@vancouversun.com