

TOOLS

About Us
Ash Institute
Webinars
Innovation Awards
21st Century Government
Innovators Insights Newsletter
Multimedia
Calendar
Groups

TOPICS

All Topics
Criminal Justice and Public Safety
Economic and Community Development
Education and Training
Environment and Natural Resources
Finance
Governance and Politics
Health and Social Services
Organizational Management
Public Infrastructure
Technology

GLOBAL THEMES

All Themes
*Access to Services and Social Justice
*Accountability
*Collaboration
*Education
*Environment
*Government Performance and Management
*Government, Civil Society, and Private Sector Partnerships
*Health
*Justice and Security
*Participation

Innovators Insights Newsletter

Select an edition:

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December 22, 2009

The Government Innovators Network Newsletter

by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard Kennedy School

News

- Higher Education
- Community Development
- Land Resources
- Education and Training
- Environment
- Human Resources
- Technology
- Civic Engagement
- Partnership

What's New

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New on our site

Better, Faster, Cheaper Smart Ideas for Government



Steve Goldsmith explains why **Chicago's privatization of parking meters**,

which critics have deemed an epic failure, might actually be an epic success.

Upcoming Events

Higher Education

When students at Texas State University exercise, they keep themselves physically fit and **their university fiscally fit**. Following the example of a few other institutions, the university has installed 30 elliptical machines that generate electricity—making it the world's largest human power plant—which can be fed into the campus grid. A thirty minute workout, for instance, could generate enough energy to power a desktop computer for a half-hour. The machines cost around \$20,000 to install, but could pay for themselves in seven or eight years.

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[Back To Top](#)

Community Development

Government officials **are finding technologically creative ways** to combat drunk driving and appeal to those age groups

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*Pluralism,
Diversity, Gender,
and Inequality

*Social Services

*Sustainable
Development

*Technology

least receptive to traditional advertisements. Washington state has advertised its message on virtual billboards in online video games. Maryland posts testimonials of relatives of drunk-driving victims on YouTube, New York is bringing a drunk-driving simulator to various public events, and Colorado has chartered an iPhone application that roughly estimates the level of intoxication of the user based on various data inputs. For those who need the stick method, the local district attorney's office in Montgomery County, Texas has stated that it would **"tweet" the names** of those charged with driving while intoxicated during the holidays. While this information is already a part of the public record, observers state that the practice may be overwrought.

Land Resources

While the recession has battered prices for commercial and residential real estate, conservationists and city officials have found a

"green lining": thousands of acres can be bought and preserved in perpetuity at dramatically reduced costs, safeguarding wildlife and green areas. Despite these opportunities, donations that could be used to purchase land are down due to the economy, and state and local governments facing fiscal difficulties are not always able to help finance or maintain acquired land.

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Education and Training

In the Philadelphia area, the Delaware Valley Industrial Resource Center has partnered with the U.S. Navy and the Chester County

Intermediate Unit to introduce the **Real World Navy Challenge** for middle and high school students. The simulation involves students teaming up to exercise their problem-solving skills by working through hypothetical evacuation scenarios that unify themes in their curriculum.

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[Back To Top](#)

Environment

Washington D.C. will become the first city to **initiate a five-cent fee** on each plastic bag used by shoppers at checkout, effectively

deferring the cost of cleanup to the customers who use them. While convenient, the ubiquitous plastic bag often ends up polluting water ways and the neighborhood. The new law also requires that each plastic bag sold be recyclable.

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[Back To Top](#)

Human Resources

As thousands of veterans return home in need of long-term medical care, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is exploring an alternative

model to the traditional nursing home: **foster-home programs**. Across the nation, the department is helping to implement such programs, which involve veterans taking up residence with paid homeowners who provide services such as meal provision, bathing, laundry, transportation, and medication assistance. Medical professionals make regular visits as needed.

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[Back To Top](#)

Technology

The National Weather Service (NWS) wants to enlist Twitter users **to help improve the accuracy of local forecasts** by posting notes,

pictures, or links to information about the current area. Concurrently, the NWS is piloting a system that would use moving cars as weather stations, gathering information that many cars already collect internally, such as barometric pressure, wiper speed, and even brake and headlight use to provide insights about the road conditions. The information, processed in conjunction with radar, satellite, and other data would then be reported back to drivers to inform them about the weather situation ahead.

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[Back To Top](#)

Civic Engagement

Through New York's NYC Service, the city has started **Time Bank**, an online initiative where users create online profiles, list their talents, and then trade their services with others; for each hour of volunteering, a user can earn a "time dollar" to spend on another service. For example, one could trade an hour of time teaching a foreign language to one person, and then spend that hour with another person learning how to

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[Back To Top](#)

cook.

Partnership

San Francisco is studying **new methods** for financing its parks, such as implementing partnerships between philanthropic sponsors and enlisting volunteers. The idea may include taking a page from Central Park, which has named benches and trees, as well as the addition of more concessions and an increase in special functions. Although fears linger that the public spaces would be unduly privatized, advocates argue that exploring alternate financing arrangements is preferable to cutting park services or laying off staff.

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[Back To Top](#)

Newsletter produced by: Jim Cooney, editor; Brendan St. Amant, researcher and writer.

[Back To Top](#)

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About the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation

The Roy and Lila Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation advances excellence in governance and strengthens democratic institutions worldwide. Through its research, education, international programs, and government innovations awards, the Institute fosters creative and effective government problem-solving and serves as a catalyst for addressing many of the most pressing needs of the world's citizens. Asia Programs, a school-wide initiative integrating Asia-related activities, joined the Ash Institute in July 2008. The Ford Foundation is a founding donor of the Institute. Additional information about the Ash Institute is available at www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu. For more information about the Government Innovators Network, please visit www.innovations.harvard.edu.