

How many public beaches are there in the city, and which of them are the dirtiest?

How much salary does Michael Bloomberg draw as mayor of New York City?

The answers to these questions are available online, thanks to [Local Law 11](#), which since February 2003 has required all city agencies to post official documents online. The [first law in the nation to do this](#), Local Law 11 was aiming to "improve the efficiency and accessibility of municipal government"

New Yorkers can now go to a [government records page](#), where there are links to 15 general categories, from Business and Consumer to Transportation.

A little tooling-around in the Environment category yields the information (by linking to a report from August, 2004 called ["Swimming in Trash? A Look into Cleanliness at NYC Beaches"](#)) that there are seven public beaches in New York City, covering 14 miles of shoreline, and South Beach and Midland Beach, both in Staten Island, were found to be the dirtiest. The Labor Relations category ([section 1 in the civil list](#)) offers up the information that a certain "MR Bloomberg" receives "\$1.00" a year for "mayoralty."

Unfortunately, it is not easy to find this information, or much anything else, without stumbling upon it. The implementation of the law has not lived up to expectations. Almost four years later, some city agencies have barely provided any of their documents at all.

### Why City Agencies Are Not Following The Law

In Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy, the character Arthur Dent's home is demolished because the notification from City Hall that they were going to bulldoze it "was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door that said 'beware of the leopard.' "

## Putting City Hall's Documents Online

by Marcus Banks

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New York City's bureaucracy might not be quite as impenetrable. But many city agencies do not provide easy access to their official documents online; they are in effect breaking the law, local law 11. There are several reasons for their lack of compliance. For one, there is no enforcement mechanism; the law does not discuss penalties for agencies that do not comply. On a practical level, it is not possible for agencies to upload their documents directly to the online portal. Although this capability was envisioned from the beginning, as of this time all agencies must submit their documents to the [City Hall Library](#), which does the posting. The most significant barrier to full compliance may be that the state's

[Freedom of Information Law](#)

is structured around physical documents. To be fair, some provisions of the 1978 law -- which is the underpinning of open government in New York State -- did take account of society's

[move into the computer age](#)

. But as of 2006, the law is still so oriented to responding to Freedom of Information Law requests for

*physical documents*

that it even specifies the maximum cost for photocopies that agencies can charge, while having little to say about electronic versions.

### Some Agencies Better Than Others

A limitation of the online site run by the City Hall library is that documents are only arranged by category and not by agency as well. This makes it difficult to determine precisely the extent to which each city agency is complying with the law. Nevertheless, the categories are logical enough that it is possible to get a good sense of how various agencies have responded to Local Law 11.

Both the [Office of the Comptroller](#) and the [City Planning Commission](#) stand out in their compliance with the law. The Comptroller began posting documents online even before the law was passed, and keeps up to date within a month or so. More than 500 records from the comptroller's office, mostly within the

[Finance and Budget](#)

category, are available online.

The bulk of the City Planning Commission's documents are within the [Housing and Buildings](#) category.

There are more than 750 documents in this section, most from City Planning. The earliest report from the City Planning Commission is from July 2003, not long after passage of Local Law 11. The latest was last month.

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By contrast, the [Recreations/Parks](#) category has no reports at all. Although this appears to be an indictment of the [Department of Parks and Recreation](#), a glance at the department's attractive web site reveals that they do wish to communicate with City residents. Among other things the department's own Web site provides are access to park maps, permit applications, and information for businesses. But compliance with Local Law 11 has not been a priority for the Parks Department. The [Cultural/Entertainment](#) category is almost as bad. There are only two documents here, both published in 2003.

### How To Enter The Modern Age

The Department of Records estimates that the government records page receives as many as 3,000 unique visitors per week. There clearly is a constituency for this information. If City Hall sincerely desires that all official agency documents be available online in a centralized location—which, after all, is the point of Local Law 11—there are short-term and long-term ways to bring this about.

The short-term approach is to provide access to documents by agency as well as by category. This would not guarantee that agencies would submit documents, but at least it would be harder for them to avoid the spotlight if they did not.

Another useful enhancement to this page would be to set up a simple search function for the documents that works like Google. Right now you have to determine in advance which category a document is likely to fit within, and then scroll through pages of results.

The Freedom of Information Law needs an overhaul, so that the presumption underlying the law equates open government with free *online* access to government documents. Physical copies of documents should continue to exist, both for purposes of preservation and for the benefit of state residents without online access. With such a law in place, interested city residents could have the confidence to know that they can go online and find what they are looking for.

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