

Menlo Park City School District Rebutts Rumors With OpenGov



Since the 2016 national election, pundits have spent hours debating how social media impacted the results. From disseminating fake news articles to spreading misinformation in user posts, social media made it harder than ever for voters to obtain accurate information. This is an important national conversation.

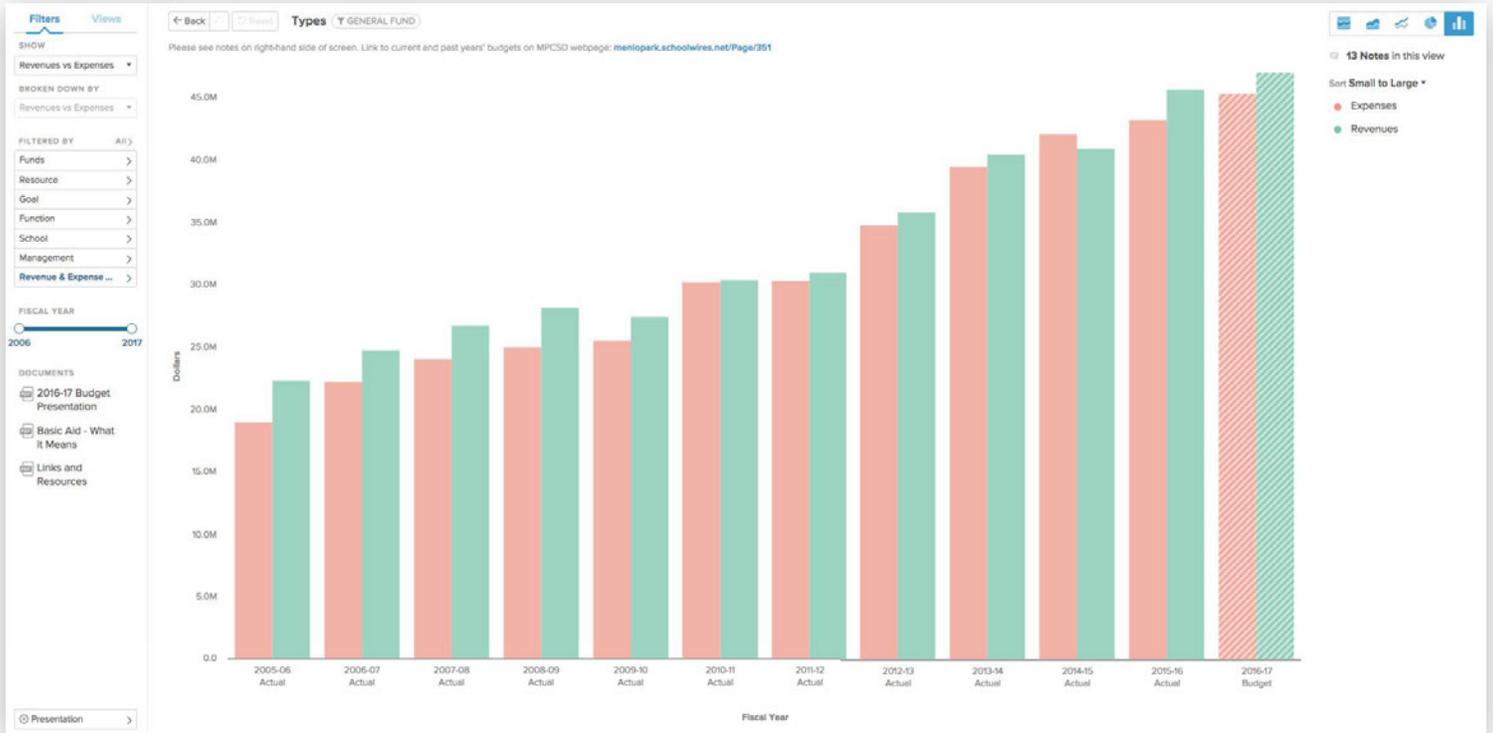
However, pundits miss another critical part of the social media conversation: the effects of rumors and misinformation on schools and local governments. The Menlo Park City School District learned how giving citizens accurate information is more important than ever in the social media era. In this story, you'll learn how the district lost an important ballot measure and how its leaders are implementing new software to ensure citizens have an accurate, easy to use place for information.

Voters Reject the District's Parcel Tax

Menlo Park's residents voted on two parcel tax measures in May 2016. The first was a renewal of an existing tax; the second was to help the district address a projected increase in enrollment. Both measures funded initiatives critical to student success such as small class sizes and teacher recruitment.

Ahmad Sheikholeslami, the district's Chief Business and Operations Officer, explains how the district "did what it normally does during a parcel tax election. We tried to get information to the public by putting a lot online in PDFs."

However, these traditional efforts proved ineffective in today's social media age.



OpenGov charts the district’s revenues and expenses over time with one click access to specifics.

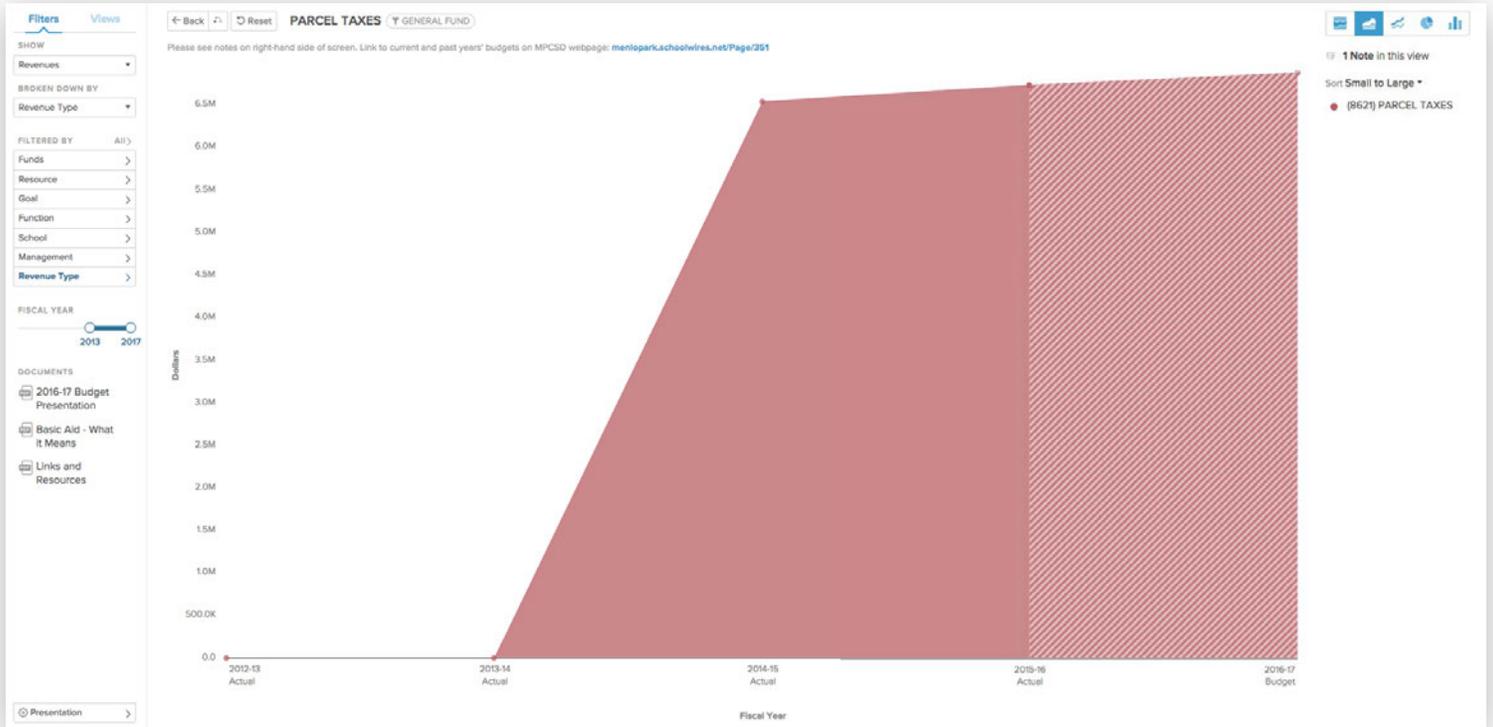
Sheikholeslami believes the Menlo Park City School District missed some key trends. First, as citizens increasingly expect the ability to find things on their own, there was no way for citizens to gain a contextual narrative around the data unless they attended a board meeting. Second, the district was not prepared to counter the spread of misinformation on social media and online blogs.

In short, the district had not accounted for how the world changed since the previous parcel measure passed in 2010. And on election day, both parcel tax measures failed by narrow margins. Although both measures earned a majority of voters, misinformation empowered

a vocal minority of residents to oppose the tax and prevented the district from obtaining the necessary two-thirds of voter approval to pass the measures.

The School District Re Engages Citizens With OpenGov

Sheikholeslami describes how “after citizens rejected the parcel tax, we began rethinking how we engage with our residents. It was clear the status quo wouldn’t work if we wanted to maintain support for revenue streams critical to serving students.”



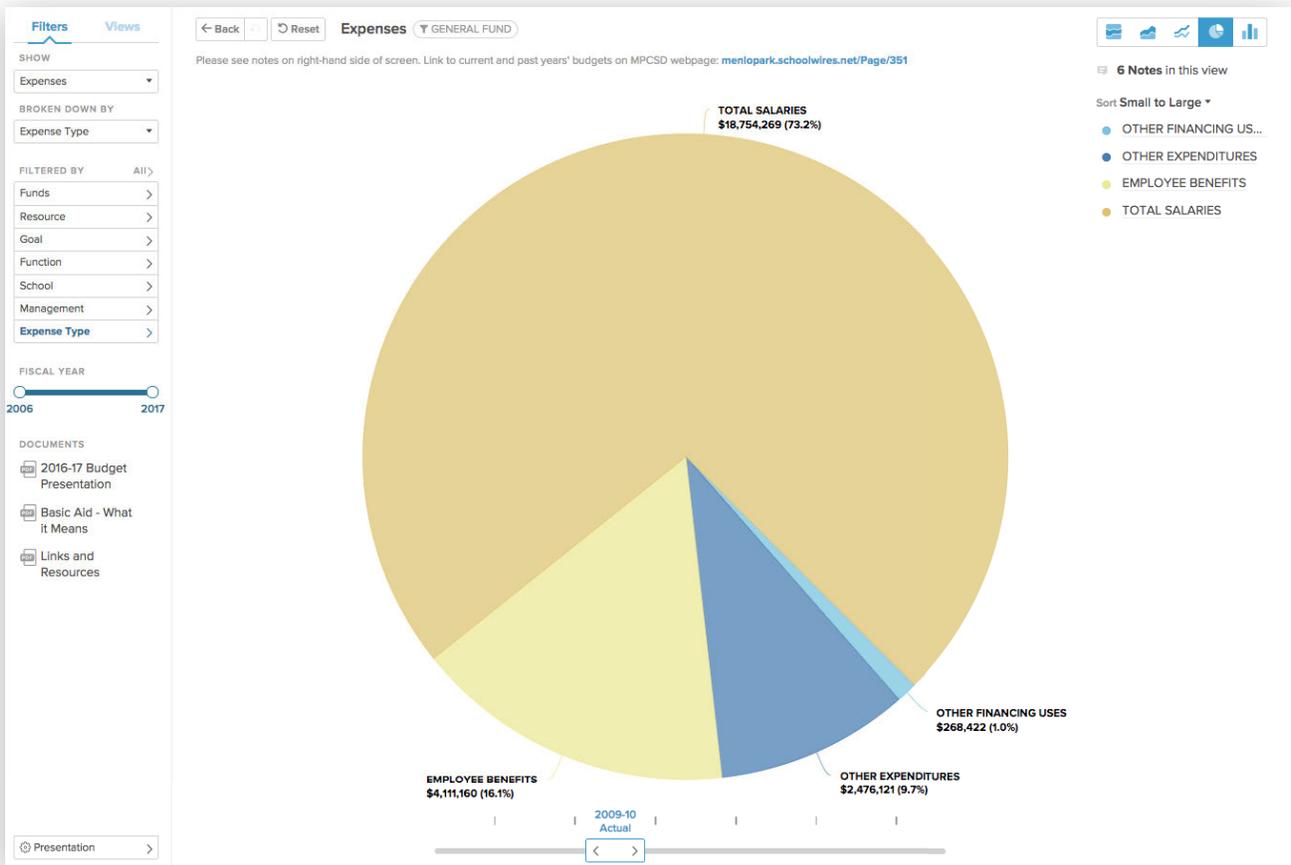
Visualize the impacts of parcel tax revenue in seconds with OpenGov.

The district soon decided to use OpenGov to give residents a place for accurate information. Sheikholeslami and his team uploaded multiple years of financial data into OpenGov and added annotations and narrative context to reports. Now, citizens can access interactive information on-demand and explore information on their own – drawing conclusions supported by narrative context.

When combined with a new detailed website and FAQ, OpenGov gives the school district a powerful tool to convey accurate information to citizens and rebut rumors. Even the tax’s opponents appreciate the district’s increase in transparency.

Menlo Park School District Begins to Use OpenGov for Internal Operations

Sheikholeslami does not plan to use OpenGov just for citizen engagement. The district is preparing to use OpenGov to inform the board, departments, schools, and other internal stakeholders. And as the district begins budgeting and strategic planning, OpenGov’s ability to display multiple years’ of information will increase organization-wide insights and buy-in for difficult decisions.



OpenGov empowers citizens to see expenses and revenues in perspective and compared to other costs.

CONCLUSION

The Menlo Park City School District is considering returning to its citizens with a new parcel tax measure. This time, however, the district is prepared to earn its residents' support with their new website and interactive reports built in OpenGov. With these new tools, residents will have a way to easily access information about the district's finances, see the intended use of the tax revenue, and gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of not passing the tax. Regardless of the parcel tax's ultimate fate, the school district is well on its way to forming a responsive, transparent, and 21st century agency.