OPENGOV

Converse County, Wyoming Navigates Boom and Bust Cycles with Fiscal Transparency through OpenGov

AGENCY TYPE
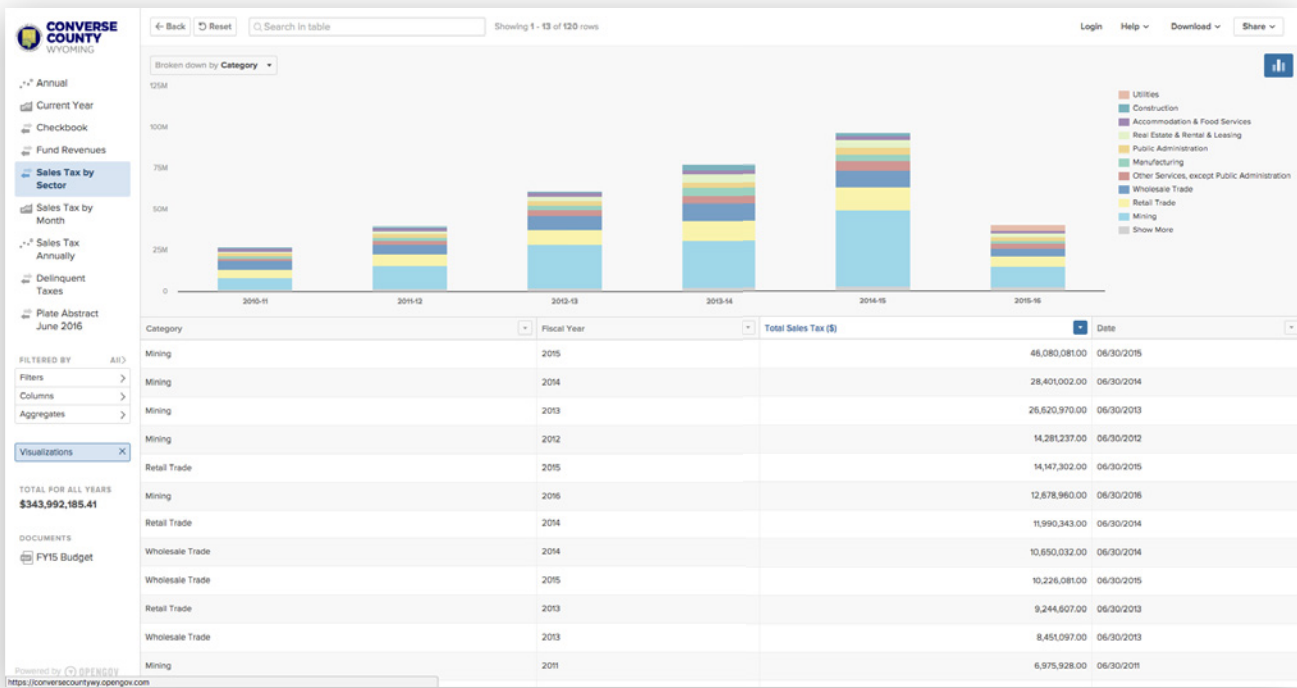County

POPULATION
14,000

ANNUAL BUDGET
$45 Million

Located in southern Wyoming, Converse County sits along Interstate 25, the main highway that runs from El Paso, Texas through Denver, Colorado, and on to Casper, Wyoming. The County hosts considerable freight rail traffic along the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe system, and its county seat, Douglas, is home to the annual Wyoming State Fair. The region's economy relies heavily on its energy sector – coal mining and oil, as well as gas and uranium production. This results in economic swings that respond to the changing demand for and price of those commodities. County leadership sought to better explain the nature of budgeting around these "boom and bust" cycles to reduce public information requests and increase citizen understanding of how the county generates, sets aside, and allocates revenue.

An Economic Boom Brings Infrastructure Strains

While most of the country was weathering a recession and slow recovery, Converse County was enjoying a boom economy that saw the county's unemployment rate decrease to 3.2 percent and property tax valuation rise by nearly $200 Million. An increase in high-paying jobs in the coal, uranium, oil, and gas industries strengthened the county's tax base and contributed to an increased standard of living.

However, the population surge also boosted traffic on main corridors and previously low-volume roads, producing new infrastructure and public safety concerns. Increased maintenance demands on roads and bridges coalesced with

Category	Fiscal Year	Total Sales Tax ($)	Date
Mining	2015	48,080,081.00	06/30/2015
Mining	2014	28,401,002.00	06/30/2014
Mining	2013	26,620,970.00	06/30/2013
Mining	2012	14,281,237.00	06/30/2012
Retail Trade	2015	14,147,302.00	06/30/2015
Mining	2016	12,678,960.00	06/30/2016
Retail Trade	2014	11,990,343.00	06/30/2014
Wholesale Trade	2014	10,650,032.00	06/30/2014
Wholesale Trade	2015	10,226,081.00	06/30/2015
Retail Trade	2013	9,244,607.00	06/30/2013
Wholesale Trade	2013	8,451,097.00	06/30/2013
Mining	2011	6,975,928.00	06/30/2011

housing and labor shortages, as well as increased school enrollment. The cost of living rose dramatically, and residents grew frustrated.

The public wondered where the county's windfall revenues went as they dealt with traffic gridlock, higher property taxes, and other community strains. County Treasurer Joel Schell explained, "We know we operate in a boom and bust sector. Every time things are good, we don't just spend and hire because we can, because we know there's eventually going to be a bust."
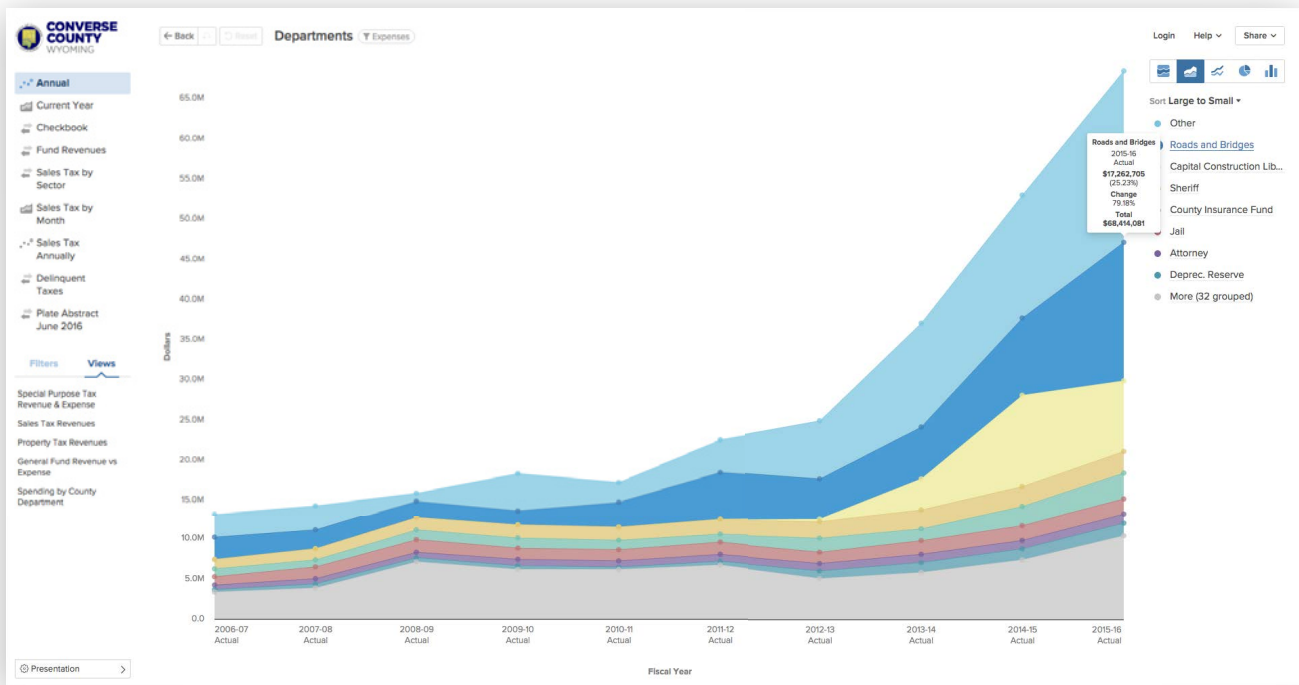
Consequently, the policy makers who viewed a bust as inevitable substantially funded the County's reserve fund while also investing in strained citizen services, but they struggled to explain to the public their rationale for saving versus spending. The substantial state, and national publicity surrounding the region's energy boom also generated a slew of new requests for information regarding the revenue from the public and the media.

A Bust Leaves Residents Questioning County's Fiscal Management

In late 2014, a "bust" period began with declining oil prices and new environmental regulations. The County's unemployment rate doubled, and its tax revenues plummeted. As public officials were left to fund core services with a drastically reduced budget, citizens and the media critically questioned how the County managed the revenues of the boom.

"There had to be a better way to tell the story of the boom and to show citizens how the

Anyone has the ability to drill down and visualize specific revenue sources on demand.

County was using hard-earned tax dollars to repair roads, upgrade schools, and encourage inclusive economic growth. We wanted a way to demonstrate both how the oil boom impacted public finances and that we were putting their money to good use," Schell and Deputy Treasurer Kim Hiser have since written.

OpenGov Allows Residents to Connect Fiscal Mechanics to Boom and Bust Cycles
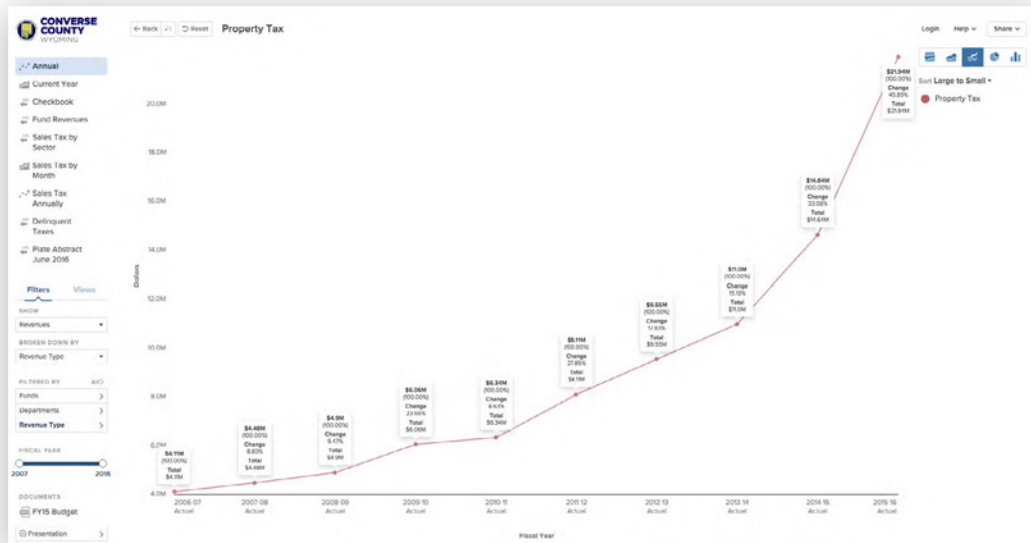
To better educate the public on Converse County's unique budget story, Schell introduced the OpenGov Smart Government PlatformTM. The web-based platform provided a solution for proactive information sharing with on-demand access to the County's financial information,

even down to transaction-level detail. For instance, in response to public concerns about whether the county was experiencing a significant increase in delinquent tax accounts amid the bust, the County published a report showing that delinquent tax levels had risen only slightly, even during the downturn. It also presented saved views, such as Spending by County Department, dating back to 2006-07, which allowed visitors to visually see changes over time.

"For the first time, interested citizens could see the visual, interactive story of how the oil boom affected County finances, including what revenue came in and where it went," Schell and Hiser said. "They could see that although revenues doubled, so did the costs of maintaining roads, retaining employees, housing additional prisoners, and combating higher crime."

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Journalists, too, gained instant access not just to the financials, but the story behind them. Time-consuming records requests dropped, saving valuable staff resources. In fact, editors from the Casper Star-Tribune publicly thanked County staff for implementing the OpenGov platform, calling it a solution for a "new era of transparency and accountability."

By partnering with OpenGov, Converse County was able to effectively articulate and illustrate the real-life dynamics of the budgeting process to residents and non-financial staff. "We use OpenGov to explain why we can't just spend" during boom times Schell explained. "All of a sudden, we could put the visuals in front of people. That helped articulate the story."

The County's expenses rose amid the oil boom, especially given increased expenditures on strained infrastructure, such as roads and bridges.

RESULTS

✓ **Increased Public Knowledge and Support.** Through the OpenGov platform, residents gained a new understanding of the budget process in both boom and bust times. Revenue sources and the impact of expenditures on the community were available on-demand in an interactive, easy-to-understand format.

✓ **Reduced Public Information Requests.** The County Treasurer referred inquiries about the County's finances to the OpenGov platform instead of providing the data verbally or by e-mailing numerous, cumbersome documents.

✓ **Increased Public Trust.** Using the OpenGov platform enabled the County staff to tell the story of the boom and explain ensuing budget decisions. County Commissioners and residents, using the same up-to-date information, worked through the issues together to better understand the nature of the County's energy economy.