

# LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS: LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

A MetroLab Network Report Out  
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## Introduction

Cities are often on the front lines of solving difficult and complex social issues such as affordable housing, mental health, and digital equity. Universities can serve as a key partner, producing cutting-edge research, ideas, and technology that could help cities solve some of these complex issues.

And yet, there is a disconnect between research and local government programs and policies. Why? We believe for two primary reasons: 1) research is often pushed, not pulled from local government and 2) research output doesn't necessarily align with how cities and counties work – and so it's difficult to adopt.

MetroLab aims to equip cities with science and research. And with philanthropic support, MetroLab is producing a national body of work called the Local Government R&D Agenda: a list of identified priority research areas that can address local governments' complex issues and needs. MetroLab aims to do this by working with a select number of cities and hosting workshops with nearby universities and colleges to ask the question “if you could get research on [blank], what would you want.”

By intentionally bringing these key stakeholders together, we can produce actionable research addressing complex challenges. For example:

- What if R&D efforts reduced the cost of affordable housing in half?
- What if city councils received draft policy language to make starting a business as easy as getting a driver's license?
- What if we discovered ways to expedite recovery funds delivery to low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, reducing wait times after a disaster event?

As key government decision makers continue to be faced with difficult social issues and complex policy matters while being constrained by budgetary and political realities, MetroLab hosted a workshop at the University of Arkansas Little Rock to identify priority research areas and improve the dynamic between those decision makers and the local academic & research community in Little Rock, Arkansas. This report is a summary of the discussion and input from the City of Little Rock at the April 1, 2025 workshop.

At the conclusion of the city-hosted workshops, MetroLab will work with federal agencies and congressional stakeholders to fund projects that would directly support and address the Local Government R&D Agenda. We hope to bring those projects back to cities, with MetroLab serving as a matchmaker of research and programmatic outcomes back to the local communities we partner with.

# City of Little Rock's Research Needs

The City of Little Rock identified numerous research opportunities. A summary of these research priority needs include:

## **Topic 1: Social Services + People**

- How can the City of Little Rock better quantify unmet needs for early childhood care, especially in light of limited licensed capacity, a fluctuating population, and the presence of informal providers?
- What methods can be used to estimate future childcare demand, particularly in areas with a growing workforce that may not reside in the city?
- How can the City accurately assess the housing needs of vulnerable populations, such as re-entry residents or non-college or military high school graduates needing housing, and tailor supports accordingly?
- How does neighborhood revitalization influence public school enrollment patterns, particularly in neighborhoods where families are choosing private or charter schools over public options, and areas that have declining numbers of children with families?
- How can the City increase public school numbers in general, and retain enrollment, especially for the Little Rock Hispanic community.
- What tools or frameworks can the City use to implement quarterly neighborhood-level surveys to better understand resident perspectives on revitalization, schools, and housing priorities?
- How can Little Rock support neighborhood revitalization in a way that strengthens public trust and avoids social displacement or gentrification particularly in communities with a history of disinvestment?

## **Topic 2: Optimizing Services**

- What impacts do code enforcement initiatives have on public safety, particularly initiatives that target blighted properties and vacant structures?
- How can workforce development programs be leveraged to incentivize developers to rehabilitate vacant lots and buildings for affordable housing?
- What are innovative ways of financing the redevelopment of underused parcels of land?

- How can the City improve efficiency and equity in public service delivery, particularly in waste management, infrastructure, and 311 systems?
- How can the City showcase the existing successes of these services while also making improvements?
- What data strategies can help track the effectiveness and coverage of existing services, especially as city resources become strained?

### Topic 3: Incentives and Economic Development

- What are the long-term fiscal and service impacts of incentivizing development on the urban fringe? How would the fiscal outcomes and satisfaction rates compare to those coming out of existing core neighborhoods?
- How can the City evaluate the cost-benefit effectiveness of different types of economic incentives, from infrastructure investment to permit waivers?
- What mechanisms can cities use to attract commercial and residential developers to invest in historically disinvested neighborhoods? What relevant examples exist?
- How can peer cities, especially with similar political circumstances, inform Little Rock's approach to inclusive and sustainable economic development?

## Suggested Research Format & Structure

We asked workshop attendees about ways in which research (or the output deliverable) can be formatted in a way that is most useful to the City of Little Rock.

- **Clarity.** City staff would benefit from deliverables that clearly communicate the main ideas to the public. Materials that are short, visual, and straightforward are key. Infographics are especially helpful in delivering messaging.
- **Accessibility.** Materials that are delivered through accessible software and are created in editable formats are helpful as they allow repurposing and formatting as needed. Including *both* a short form summary and a longer more detailed appendix/deliverable will allow for widespread outreach, as well as deeper reviews as needed.
- **Co-creation.** Engaging City staff along every step of output development can help ensure accuracy, bolster storytelling, and strengthen future partnerships. Creating outputs that reflect this collaboration will ensure a more accurate reflection and will save time by lessening the need for changes post creation.

- **Alignment.** Awareness of City timelines can enable researchers to develop outputs in alignment with City deadlines and decision-making processes. Doing so allows for more reliable capacity, and better inclusion of community voices.
- **Actionability.** Although general analysis and evidence can be useful, the City has a more relevant and prioritized need for specific recommendations. Providing staff with next steps, actionable suggestions, and tailored options would turn analysis and findings into pilots and tangible solutions.

## Ideas for Follow up

Considering several factors, including: 1) the discussion from the workshop; 2) the level of urgency for the policy need; and 3) our experience working with funding, partnerships, and project needs, we recommend the university following up on the following:

- **What tangible first steps can be taken** to build this partnership between researchers and practitioners in Little Rock?
- **Can we incentivize more project-based learning** at research universities in collaboration with the City of Little Rock, where the projects are modeled on the pressing issues? Specifically, can we integrate community research into local colleges and universities?
- **How can we inject local government practitioners into the research space** so that they are a part of the research process?
- **How can we incentivize academic researchers at the university level** to conduct applied research with local government entities?
- **How can we create action?** Can we co-create concrete next steps, requests for technical assistance, or a menu of options for decision makers?
- **How can we ensure that the broader community of Little Rock is heard** and considered in this partnership work? What role does Little Rock's history play in this partnership?
- **How can we ensure momentum?** Once partnerships are in motion, how do we keep them moving forward? Would said partnerships benefit from formalized agreements, maintaining regular meetings, and/or evaluation?

## Observational Takeaways from Workshop

Local Government decision makers are grappling with questions far more essential than is generally understood; they are grappling with questions such as “what is an appropriate expectation of my department in my community?” They also want to be able to measure and quantify the impact their actions have. There is an appetite to work with the research community, but capacity is an issue. There is also a clear shared goal of wanting all decisions to be driven by data, and the ability to directly and clearly tie decisions to specific data. **Ways in which the university community can help:**

- **Using a research agenda** (like this!) or policy priority document (like a city comprehensive plan) to seek relevant research projects and understanding who at the City may “own” that area of work. Universities should treat research agendas like RFPs. Use them to scope specific project ideas that respond directly to questions City staff have already identified
- **Optimizing outreach.** How can interaction be at its most efficient, in order to limit strains on capacity for City staff and reach audiences that may be “missed.” University partners can work with City staff to map out which departments touch which issues, and when, how, and by whom each decision is made. This will help to identify where research should be integrated and increase efficiency.
- **Provide missing data.** The City wants to better use data to inform decisions. Researchers can provide City staff with the data necessary to support project reasoning, which will in turn help story tell projects to the community. Universities can help Little Rock build frameworks and best practices for using, tracking, and justifying data in decision making processes.
- **Build capacity through student support.** City Staff expressed interest in temporary or rotating internships, or embedded researchers who could support city departments without long-term hiring obligations. University students and early career researchers could fill capacity gaps while gaining experience.
- **Design and test tools with City staff.** Technical assistance to evaluate new tools or systems would help preserve capacity for City staff. Academic partners can help with this by designing dashboards, communication platforms, or planning tools. Universities can also support the live testing of new tools (such as GPS optimization for fire, and trash route efficiency).

## Appendix: Notes Captured from the Workshop

### **Additional research areas identified by the City of Little Rock:**

During the workshop, additional policy areas of concern were identified by the City of Little Rock as topics on which they want to make a difference, but were not articulated as an issue for which research could be provided.

### **Workshop Question responses:**

During the workshop, several interactive questions were asked of the participants. Those answers informed the summary above and are listed in full below.

### **What is one word you think of when you hear “research.”**

- Learning
- Academic x2
- Data x4
- White paper
- Numbers
- Empirical
- Knowledge
- Data
- Deep dive into specific information
- Information x2
- Verified Information
- Theoretical
- Explanation
- Resource
- Government
- Nerd
- Dense (Material)
- Interview
- Long investigation
- Time consuming
- Helpful information
- Specific Data
- Detailed information

### **“In five words or less how do you know who to work with from the other institution?”**

- Via established contact (colleagues/mayor)

- Asking others at institution
- Ask peers
- Find a contact name/email online
- Call general number to inquire
- Articles
- Shared policy interest
- Past relationships
- Reputation
- Professional associations
- Contact info from internet
- Subject matter expert
- LinkedIn
- Leverage contacts
- AI
- Asking resourceful person
- Google
- Body of knowledge experts
- Google the staff
- Consulting with board member
- References

**“What do universities get wrong about working with local governments?”**

- Actionability
- That we have unlimited funding!
- Logistics
- Budget impact
- Politics
- Funding problems
- Usable or applicable outcomes
- Understanding the political arena (board of directors)
- Specificity of locale
- Availability of resources, time, money
- Service “outcome” data
- Needed capacity
- Funding
- Process
- Univ. decides what to help with. No city input
- Integration

- Funding expansion requirements
- Over generalizations
- Not always reflecting a true representation of the population.
- Challenge with moving money to cover costs
- Lack of understanding of politics involved
- Accurate feedback (selective data)
- The role of grants in driving projects

**“How can universities support policy development and programmatic needs?”**

- Simply reaching out with ideas/thoughts
- Sponsor team to attend conferences
- Attend public meetings
- Knowledge of city-wide programs
- Externs
- Offer interns for subject areas of interest
- Partners for providing academic support in schools and teachers upon graduation
- Survey research
- Offer work study with city jobs
- Taking part in the conversations at the beginning
- Provide a body of knowledge for potential change “what works...”
- Partner and actively participate in intern recruitment
- Source of expertise in field
- Can bring funding sources to assist with needs
- Join boards
- Share data and research immediately
- Provide interns
- Partner grant funding

**“If you could get research on [blank], what would you want?”**

*Social Services/People*

- How to improve school readiness for children not in formal/early childhood systems
- Non-college or military high school graduates needing housing
- Number of re-entry residents needing housing within 60 days
- Community revitalization and Value vs. infrastructure investment
- How to get folks to move to struggling neighborhoods
- Deep dive into enrollment patterns, priorities

### *Incentives and Economic Development*

- Impacts financially from investment in various services
- Economic development impacts | cost v. benefits
- Robust incentive programs
- Monthly foreclosures within the City under \$250,000
- Monthly data on eviction

### *Optimizing Services*

- What is the impact on public safety when code enforcement enforces new ordinances?
- How do we leverage workforce development to encourage...
- How other cities found money to pay for data systems
- Number of vacant structures
- Code enforcement and how the city enforcing ordinances reduces crime
- Optimization of public safety services
- Workforce deployment v. funding/service request

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