

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK: LOCAL GOVERNMENT R&D AGENDA WORKSHOP

**A MetroLab Network Report Out
October 1, 2025**



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Introduction

Cities are often at the forefront of tackling complex social, economic, and environmental challenges, balancing the need for innovation with the realities of limited budgets and political constraints. Syracuse, New York, is no exception and it sits at a pivotal moment of renewal. Mayor Ben Walsh's administration set a vision of Syracuse as a growing city that embraces diversity and creates opportunity for all. The city has positioned itself as New York's flagship smart city through the Syracuse Surge initiative, which is a comprehensive strategy for inclusive growth and innovation that blends digital infrastructure, workforce development, and equitable economic opportunity.

Recognizing that progress in these areas depends on strong partnerships between local government and research institutions, MetroLab convened a workshop with leaders from the City of Syracuse and Syracuse University to identify priority research areas and explore new ways to collaborate. The session aimed to strengthen the bridge between evidence and action, aligning academic expertise with the City's most pressing policy questions.

Together, participants explored where research could directly support Syracuse's work in economic development, housing, community engagement, sustainability, and public safety. Discussions surfaced not only specific research topics but also structural ideas for improving collaboration, such as creating points of contact, embedding researchers in City departments, and developing concise, actionable outputs aligned with municipal decision-making cycles.

This report is a summary of the discussion and input from the Syracuse stakeholders at the workshop held on October 1, 2025.

City of Syracuse's Research Needs

MetroLab convened this workshop with City of Syracuse leaders and Syracuse University faculty and leadership to surface shared research priorities, explore collaboration models, and strengthen the city-university relationship as a driver of evidence-based governance. Participants identified six recurring domains where applied research could directly support policy and operational decision-making:

- Economic development
- Community engagement and trust
- Public health and safety
- Sustainability and weather preparedness
- Service delivery
- Human services

Topic 1: Economic development

- How can the City of Syracuse optimize land use planning to balance sustainability, resiliency, and economic competitiveness?
- What indicators or methods can help evaluate whether workforce development programs are reducing poverty and producing lasting economic mobility for city residents?
- What factors prevent residents from accessing or benefiting from workforce investments, and how do participation patterns differ between those who remain in the city and those who move to surrounding areas?
- How can major investments (e.g., Micron's expansion, I-81 reconstruction, and neighborhood revitalization projects) be structured to promote inclusive growth that strengthens communities rather than displacing them?
- What fiscal impacts do sustainability and smart-city initiatives have on long-term resilience and the City's tax base, and how can those outcomes be measured and communicated?

Topic 2: Community engagement and trust

- How can the City of Syracuse design engagement models that sustain participation over time, ensuring residents remain involved throughout multi-year planning processes such as the Comprehensive Plan and Climate Action Plan?
- What strategies most effectively build and maintain public trust in government, particularly when communicating the need for increased costs of services or policy changes that require trade-offs?
- How do different populations, including non-English-speaking and historically underserved residents, receive and respond to City communications, and which

outreach methods most effectively reach each group and allow for two-way communication?

- What can Syracuse learn from other cities that have developed durable engagement structures to keep communities involved beyond one-time consultations or public meetings?

Topic 3: Public health and safety

- How can Syracuse modernize its fire suppression methods to better address emerging risks from new building materials, energy systems, and dense urban environments?
- What changes in fire prevention and response practices are needed to manage hazards associated with lithium-ion batteries and other modern power storage technologies?
- How can predictive modeling, GIS mapping, and sensor technology be used for early detection and faster response to fires and other public safety incidents?
- What technologies and data management practices can strengthen the security and resilience of the City's critical infrastructure systems?
- How can Syracuse develop tools to track and mitigate public health risks linked to extreme weather events, aging infrastructure, and other climate-related hazards?

Topic 4: Sustainability and weather preparedness

- How can the City of Syracuse generate and use localized climate data on flooding, heat islands, and air quality to inform infrastructure design and adaptation planning?
- What smart systems, maintenance strategies, or predictive technologies can strengthen infrastructure resilience and reduce vulnerability to severe weather events?
- How can Syracuse develop decision-support tools that visualize climate trajectories and policy trade-offs, helping planners and elected officials balance mitigation goals with fiscal and operational realities?

Topic 5: Service delivery

- How can Syracuse develop a comparative benchmarking framework that uses peer city data to assess return on investment, staffing levels, and service efficiency across departments?
- What innovative approaches have other cities adopted to attract and retain skilled municipal employees, particularly non-salary strategies that improve things like workplace culture, flexibility, and professional development?

- Which technology modernization strategies have demonstrated strong returns in comparable cities, and how could a trusted third-party validation process help Syracuse strengthen legislative and public confidence in these investments?

Topic 6: Human services

- How can Syracuse evaluate the outcomes of its neighborhood housing programs (e.g., Tipp Hill and Salt Springs) to determine whether they improve affordability, risk displacement, or should be adapted for expansion into other neighborhoods?
- What cross-sector strategies are most effective in reducing child poverty and household instability, and how can the City measure progress toward these goals over time?

How to Strengthen the Ecosystem for Research Collaboration

We asked workshop attendees about ways in which universities can support policy development and the programmatic needs of the City of Syracuse, and how the City can support University innovation and economic growth. The responses from both local government and university participants were numerous, focused on strategically aligning the City and the University and improving the infrastructure and frequency around engagement between the two. Specific suggestions for how to strengthen the ecosystem for research collaboration include:

- Establish clear points of contact on both sides to build relationships and maintain continuity across projects
- Acknowledge capacity constraints within City departments and university research teams, and plan projects accordingly
- Deliver concise, actionable research outputs, with preference toward a one-page executive memo highlighting key findings and policy implications before longer reports
- Clarify and prioritize research needs, identifying a manageable “Top 10” list of focus areas to help the University target its support effectively
- Increase the frequency of check-ins between City and University partners to sustain communication and progress
- Capitalize on upcoming leadership transitions, with both a new Mayor and a new University Chancellor, to establish shared priorities and early wins
- Pursue joint funding opportunities through New York State, local foundations, and City-University partnerships that support mutually beneficial projects

- Recognize the City’s political context, ensuring research outputs include practical “what to do next” guidance that aligns with political realities
- Have academics along from the beginning and embed academic partners within City departments for longer-term fellowships or project residencies, including smaller, flexible grant opportunities
- Address the mismatch between research and political timelines, designing collaboration models that accommodate both cycles
- Create a shared data and knowledge infrastructure that simplifies data sharing, standardizes governance, and encourages student and faculty use of city datasets

Observational Takeaways from Workshop

- Demonstrated strong mutual commitment to collaboration and applied problem-solving
- There is a clear call for research that helps make decisions, not just describes problems
- Partnerships must confront mismatched timelines, capacity limits, and the need for shared prioritization
- There is a desire for transparency on needs and priorities
- Leadership transitions present an opportunity to institutionalize collaboration structures across administrations
- Federal funding uncertainties begged the question of how will Syracuse be impacted with shifting and reduced funds? Specifically, from an outcomes perspective, how will the supporting ecosystem of non-profits, county, and state budgets be affected and what impacts will that have for Syracuse residents?

About FAS and the Local Government R&D Agenda

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?

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.

Appendix: Notes Captured from the Workshop

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.

For local government, what is one word you think of when you hear “research”?

- Discovery
- Academic x2
- Esoteric
- Conceptual
- Science
- Data-driven
- Aspirational
- Contingent
- Methodical
- Data x3
- Complicated
- Luxury
- Expensive
- Time-consuming x3
- Investigation
- Abstract x2
- Hieroglyphics
- Informative
- Instructional
- Important
- Replicability
- Evidence

For university participants, what is one word you think of when you hear public policy?

- Regulation
- Carrots and sticks — incentives, legislation, support
- Human-centered
- Community impact
- Government
- Research
- Laws
- Systems
- Constraints
- Application

In five words or less, how do you know who to work with from the other institution?

For local government:

- Google
- I don't
- Google their name
- Use existing network
- Call/ask specific people I know at the university
- Personal connections due to prior affiliation
- Events like this
- Who has access to funding (grants, etc.)
- Previous research

- Practical application experience
- Search SU directory
- I ask other city peers
- LinkedIn
- Westcott Festival conversations
- Based on their field and subject expertise
- Enthusiasm and clarity of thought
- Will I have to babysit their work?

For university participants:

- Through collaborators
- Search organization chart
- Shared mission or knowledge gap
- Website check, personal network, or projects or problems appear in the news
- I have only one contact there
- Google
- Get in touch with someone to ask
- If need and access align with research

What myth do you want to bust to the other side?

For local government:

- We have money
- We can, in fact, get things done
- Uninterested
- Government employees don't care about impact
- Government doesn't know what it's doing
- If the council's not on board, we can't do it
- Innovation is not possible
- Public servants are not the brightest stars
- The public sector is full of people hiding away in the public sector
- If it's not politically popular, the city won't do it
- Red tape prevents or eliminates the opportunity for innovation in local government
- That local government is adverse to change (only true sometimes)
- That we enjoy the time-consuming change processes
- Local government is slow
- The city has no data
- We lack expertise and broad knowledge
- Bureaucrats just "push paper"

- Providing services is much harder than most people think
- Efficiency and effectiveness are not solely dependent on academic achievement
- We're aware of the problem but constrained in our solutions

For university participants:

- Research can be applied
- A lot of idle time
- Highly paid
- Data can be many things
- The university is also about training and learning that go hand in hand with research
- Academics don't have policy or real-world experience
- Academics don't want to turn their research findings into actionable insights
- Not all research is expensive
- They just care about publishability
- They don't understand the real world

For local government, if you could get research on [blank], what would you want?

- Improvement of trust/engagement for with residents, government, and partners
- Automated mobility solutions, especially focused on low-income users
- Critical systems and infrastructure security and sustainability
- Organizational theory best practices to foster cross department collaborations
- Real time traffic analytics to promote pedestrian and cyclist safety
- Models for incentivizing and enabling community engagement
- Changes in property conditions and maintenance
- Job retention and how to keep talented and passionate employees given our constraints
- Cost-benefit analysis on maintaining old IT systems vs. investing in modernization
- How to avoid funding stupid stuff
- Child poverty and hunger
- Change management in a highly unionized workforce
- How to get non-English-speaking residents access to city government services (where do they get information and what misconceptions exist?)
- Are there 3D renderings that could be easily accessible at a command post or emergency scene that could benefit scene management?
- Providing comps for large change management efforts like payroll modernization and Surge Link
- Is there sensors or data collection that could be used for early detection of fires
- Successful, representative data and inputs from constituents

- Biggest levers to pull for economic development
- Proven policies and case studies for improved educational outcomes
- Most effective policies that have reduced poverty
- Organization structures and inter-department communication best practices
- Capital project coordination and long-term planning
- Research on how to approach property tax parity in a community with so much tax exempt property
- The city's role in moving the needle on systemic, generational poverty
- Economic implications of sustainability efforts (i.e., given our size, budget and organizational complexity, what initiatives make the most sense?)
- Politically possible investments that strengthen the tax base
- How to implement actually useful outcome measurements with external partners
- Resiliency and fragility of systems audit and recommendations
- Optimal and strategic use of vacant or under-utilized land
- Innovation ecosystem needs and wants
- Data management best practices
- More data on municipal best practices for climate change mitigation
- Peer city working groups to foster collaboration and increase rate of adoption
- Most effective way of reaching constituents where they are
- Sustainable, equitable human development strategies to address negative impacts of poverty
- Utility management best practices for broadband
- How can we most effectively reduce poverty without increasing displacement?
- Are our policies and programs mitigating unnecessary displacement?
- Peer city results or frameworks for technology adoption
- How to build a strong state education system in the vacuum left by a vanishing Department of Education
- How to incentivize landlords to maintain properties well?
- Micromobility destination trends and needs
- Resident satisfaction

For university participants, what research do you think local governments need?

- Cities need cybersecurity awareness and privacy by design
- Reducing carbon emissions from buildings
- Automation of manual data processing
- Democratizing traditionally expensive services such as determining issues with building
- Public messaging

- Hyper-local data
- Resource allocation (2)
- Citizen sentiment regarding individual social services
- Disaster response resilience by design
- Community engagement strategies and input
- How AI can help the city (2)
- Climate and environmental concerns
- How to help underserved communities
- Job creation and workforce development including for most impoverished by design
- Local government probably knows best what research they need and we need to listen to them
- How to effectively analyze and collect data
- Safe and effective use and implementation of free and open software solutions
- How to use AI to facilitate communication and collaboration across different groups of communities
- How to apply AI for learning on the job, not just automation
- How to help companies and organizations to manage things like sustainability data by developing common resources
- Alternatives to housing voucher system for public housing
- Heat island mitigation strategies that are cost effective and timely
- Flood projections that incorporate new science and models
- Neighborhood improvement for aging in place, particularly among low income households
- Common addressing system
- Capturing institutional knowledge of aging baby boomers (e.g., the Department of Public Works knows where all the infrastructure problems are)
- Return on investment of the open data portal, tax incentives, and housing plan
- Vacant housing problem is prevalent and research can help address how to reverse this trend and revitalize the city
- Mobility challenges of low income residents
- How to collect data and make use of it - a data pipeline for applied research
- Evaluating impacts of I-81 removal qualitatively and quantitatively
- Syracuse may see increased immigration as the climate and economy favors this area in the long run. How do we prepare for population increase?

For university participants, how can local government support university innovation and economic growth?

- Research funding

- By identifying problems and providing the data
- Workshops like this to understand faculty research
- Listening to faculty and administrators
- Share capacity issues or resource gaps we can help fill
- Create symbiotic partnerships that benefit both government and universities
- Fellowships and internships for faculty and students to facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing
- Get involved in teaching a broader curriculum and through ad hoc seminars to increase discussion
- Network with universities to brainstorm, collaborate, and build trust
- Create fellowship programs to allow faculty to integrate into systems
- Communicate with universities on research and training needs
- Willing to build partnerships
- Participating in workshops to discuss problems and identify solutions
- Publish and share identified research and data needs to provide opportunities for faculty and student projects
- Share your data
- Be willing to partner on large grants which may be time-consuming but can have important benefits
- Continue to participate in events like this and tell universities directly how they can help
- Openness to projects that cross city and county processes and interagency projects
- By maintaining openness to flexible and dynamic partnership arrangements
- Give access to data
- Maintain connections between city and researchers
- Have point of contact person to match policy problems with researchers
- Maintain pool of problems that you want help to understand and solve

Thank you to the City of Syracuse, Syracuse University, and partners for their participation in this effort.

Acknowledgements

The Honorable Ben Walsh, Mayor of the City of Syracuse, New York

Lois Agnew, Interim Vice Chancellor, Provost and Chief Academic Officer, Syracuse University

Katherine McDonald, Associate Vice President for Research, Syracuse University Office of Research

Sevgi Erdogan, Associate Professor, School of Information Studies, Syracuse University

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