How Cities Can Use AI to Support Data-Driven Policy Decisions

Without Replacing Human Judgment

City leaders make decisions every day based on complex data: resident feedback, service requests, budget trends, infrastructure needs, and more. Artificial intelligence (AI) can help cities analyze that information faster and more consistently, but only when used as a decision-support tool, not as a decision-maker.

Research and early municipal experience show that residents are generally open to AI in government when it improves services and keeps humans in charge. Surveys from organizations like Pew Research Center consistently find that public trust depends on transparency, privacy protections, and clear oversight.

This article outlines how cities can responsibly use AI to support data-driven policy decisions while maintaining accountability, equity, and public confidence.

> **Before using AI to support a policy decision, ask:**
>
> - What question are we trying to answer?
> - What data do we already have?
> - Who will validate the AI's output?
> - How will we explain this to residents?

What "Data-Driven" Really Means for Cities

Using AI for policy support does not mean automating votes, replacing professional judgment, or letting algorithms decide outcomes. In practice, cities are using AI to:

- Identify trends across large data sets
- Surface patterns that may be hard to see manually
- Summarize public input at scale
- Support scenario planning and forecasting

The final decisions, such as budget priorities, ordinances, zoning changes, or program design, remain firmly in the hands of elected officials and staff. Residents are far more comfortable with AI assisting in analysis than in making binding decisions, especially in areas involving rights, services, or enforcement.

Real-World Examples of AI Supporting Policy Decisions

Listening to Residents More Effectively

Some cities use AI analytics tools to analyze thousands of open-ended survey responses, emails, and public comments. Instead of replacing public meetings, these tools help staff understand recurring themes, identify underserved voices, and summarize “what we heard” in plain language.

For example, Florida cities such as Tampa and Fort Lauderdale have used AI-assisted sentiment analysis platforms to better understand community priorities around housing, transportation, and redevelopment. In these cases, AI helped contextualize feedback, allowing officials to see beyond the loudest voices and make more informed policy discussions.

Informing Resource Allocation

Cities are also using AI to analyze service request data (like 311 calls or work orders) to identify patterns over time. This can help policymakers ask better questions:

- Are certain neighborhoods experiencing recurring infrastructure issues?
- Are response times improving or slipping?
- Where might preventive investments save money in the long term?

AI helps surface these insights, but staff still validate the data, and elected officials decide how to act on it.

Supporting Scenario Planning

In budgeting and long-range planning, AI can assist with forecasting scenarios, such as estimating demand for services under different growth or funding assumptions. These tools do not pick a "right" answer. They help leaders compare options more clearly and understand tradeoffs before decisions are made.

For example, suppose your city is projecting revenue under three growth scenarios: flat growth, moderate growth, and rapid population expansion. An AI-supported forecasting tool could model how each scenario affects multiple systems simultaneously – emergency call volume, road maintenance backlogs, permitting demand, and transit capacity – rather than analyzing them in isolation.

Staff might discover that moderate growth allows incremental hiring of 2-3 EMTs over five years, while rapid growth triggers a threshold requiring a second fire station by year four – a $15 million capital decision that changes today's budget priorities. Instead of spending weeks building disconnected departmental spreadsheets, planners can compare these crosscutting impacts in hours and test sensitivity to different assumptions (What if migration patterns shift? What if state revenue-sharing changes?).

Elected officials still decide which risks to accept, which assumptions to prioritize, and how to balance competing needs across departments. But they do so understanding the compounding effects of growth scenarios across service areas and fiscal years, connections that are difficult to map manually.

What Residents Care About Most

Public opinion research consistently points to four core concerns when it comes to government AI use:

1. **Transparency**

Residents want to know when and why your city uses AI. Cities that clearly explain AI's role as an analytical tool are more likely to earn trust. Publish plain-language explanations on your website or in agenda materials describing how AI supports analysis and where human review occurs.

2. **Privacy and Data Protection**

People are wary of how their data is used, stored, and shared. This concern increases if AI tools ingest personal or sensitive information. Use a "minimum necessary" approach to data, avoid sensitive inputs where possible, and clearly state that city data is not used to train external AI models.

3. **Fairness and Bias**

Residents want assurance that AI does not reinforce inequities or disadvantage certain neighborhoods or groups. Treat AI outputs as hypotheses, not conclusions. Regularly test results for disparities and pair quantitative findings with local context and staff expertise.

4. **Human Accountability**

Residents want to know who is responsible. Be explicit that AI does not make policy decisions. Identify the department, role, or official accountable for reviewing and acting on AI-supported analysis.

Practical Do's and Don'ts for City Leaders

Do:

- Use AI to inform questions, not finalize answers
- Keep humans in the loop for all policy decisions
- Share "what we learned" summaries with residents

- Pilot AI tools on low-risk use cases first
- Coordinate with legal, IT, and records staff early

Don't:

- Present AI outputs as objective or definitive
- Use AI to automate decisions affecting rights or benefits
- Assume residents understand or trust AI without explanation
- Ignore public records and retention obligations
- Overpromise results or cost savings

The Bottom Line

AI can help cities make more informed policy decisions, but only when it is used responsibly. The most successful local governments treat AI as a research assistant.

By focusing on transparency, privacy, fairness, and human oversight, cities can use AI to better understand their residents, explain their choices more clearly, and strengthen public trust, all while keeping local voices and local decisions at the center of governance.