



July 21, 2009

To: Councilmember Tony Cardenas, chair
Councilmember Bernard C. Parks
Councilmember Herb J. Wesson
Information Technology and General Services Committee

Gentlemen:

We are extremely concerned that the City is rushing to move its email and many other computer applications onto Google's servers without adequate guarantees of safeguards for security and privacy. Certainly no one expects Los Angeles to remain tethered to an outdated email and computer system. But undue haste in moving the entire city's 30,000 users could well be worse.

So called "cloud" computing, where data is stored on a vendor's servers and accessed via the Internet, may ultimately be a solution for the city. The question is whether Google's 'cloud' as offered provides adequate safeguards. The city administrator himself raises that question. He writes:

"As with any significant change in City practice, there is potential risk, uncertainty, as well as advantages and disadvantages with this proposal. If the City decides to utilize these services by Google, it may be cost prohibitive to return to the current City-owned and operated structure. Several findings in this report, including the fact that the proposed system costs more than the current system, the potential operational impact from stopping to use Microsoft Office, the shift in control over the City's e-mail and office applications to an outside vendor, and uncertainty surrounding security issues, illustrate the potential risks of approving this contract."

Only last week we learned that confidential corporate documents from the Internet company Twitter were accessed by someone hacking into Google's servers.

You have received a letter from the widely respected World Privacy Forum raising questions about how the Google system would safeguard medical and health-related information, domestic and sexual assault information, substance abuse information and other sensitive data. Other issues relate to the implications of City data being stored on Google servers in other countries and who actually owns the stored data.

Before jumping into the Google deal, City Council needs to insist on appropriate guarantees -- for instance substantial financial penalties in the event of any security breach. Instead of committing the City's entire 30,000 users to Google immediately, there should be a trial and thorough assessment in only one or two departments. Rushing headlong onto Google's cloud will only ensure stormy weather in Los Angeles.

John M. Simpson
Consumer advocate