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Promoting Good Government at the Local Level

Broadening Public Participation Using Online Engagement Tools

Choosing and Using Online Tools to Expand Public Participation in Local Decision-Making

PHOTO CREDIT: MIX BLOG POST *USING ONLINE ENGAGEMENT TO DELEGATE SALES TAX DOLLARS*

> *"People are engaged in the community in different ways. They are connected, just not always to us. How do we tap into people, where they are already engaged, about the things that they've already shown are important to them?"*

Maureen Tobin
Communications and Engagement Manager, City of Morgan Hill

The vast majority of local agencies in California use their websites to inform residents about upcoming public decisions. More agencies are also adding social media to their engagement tools. Now a growing number also are experimenting with online tools that facilitate two-way communications with residents. These tools present an important opportunity to expand the number and diversity of voices providing input to city or county decision-making.

As context, a common challenge facing local government agencies is the sense that they are only hearing from a narrow cross-section of their communities on local policy decisions. Some believe that this is because residents lack the time, transportation or inclination to get involved ([see research among city and county officials about public participation in decision making](#)). However, other research shows that 35% of U.S. adults have worked with fellow residents to "solve a problem in your community" (the Pew Research Center's Internet & America Life Project Summer 2012 Tracking Survey).

A growing number of "online public participation platforms" provide software that local governments are using to invite input from residents about upcoming policy decisions. Most jurisdictions are not assuming that online engagement replaces in-person contact, but is instead an important complement at the beginning,

alongside or after face-to-face communications with residents. Many cities and counties are in the early stages of adoption and experimentation with these tools and have yet to realize their full potential. The intent of this paper is to provide examples and guidance to local governments interested in enhancing public participation outcomes with these online engagement tools.

I. The Potential Benefits of Online Public Engagement

Providing ways for community members to learn about and express their views on local agency issues and decisions digitally, as well as in person, has the potential to dramatically affect the who, when, where and how of public engagement. Positive changes in scale, tone and impact are part of the appeal. Many cities and counties are pursuing online engagement to meet residents' expectations for digital communications. Some have larger goals of achieving staff efficiencies and/or increasing public trust. The field is still too young to have a large body of concrete evidence about the cost and benefits achieved or changes in public attitudes as a result of introducing online engagement. However, the following are examples of the more immediate benefits that are being reported:

Reaching More Diverse Residents

- Increase methods to provide input: any time of day, with less participant time required, no need for childcare or transportation; some processes are accessible via mobile or text
- Address evolving communication modes of those more oriented to online tools and residents' expectations of how they get information
- Allow use as a prelude or follow-up, or a real time complement, to in-person engagement

Generating more informed participation

- Provide essential background information with varying levels of detail for different issues and audiences
- Make responses only after a resident has viewed the background data if desired
- Modify information more easily, keep it current; and respond to questions as they arise

Inviting a broader range of perspectives

- Welcome community members fearful of public meeting format (due to personality style or tone of discourse)
- Present opportunities to include broader and possibly more moderate perspectives than public meetings/hearings often attended primarily by passionate advocates
- Offer many more ways to participate than a few minutes at a microphone; such as the ability to post a comment, upload photo or video, place a pin on a map and invite others

Producing concrete data for reporting and evaluation

- Make public input visible and transparent to all; some services offer geographic analysis and other ways to allow participants, decision-makers and the broader community to assess the representativeness of online participants
- Set and evaluate measures of success
- Aggregate and analyze input more easily than with many face to face processes

Setting the stage for sustained participation

- Create a transparent repository of all public input which can also be drawn on for later use
- Develop an audience of informed and interested residents across issues and agency departments; a ready group to invite to participate in future engagement opportunities
- Foster collaborative problem solving by making connections between community members and identifying resources from the community

While these benefits may be compelling, often agencies have limited staff time to devote to choosing and implementing public engagement software (or public engagement in general). Many local agencies have expressed hopes or expectations that the vendor can take on the bulk of the work because they have not yet developed the practices that will help them realize the full range of possible benefits.

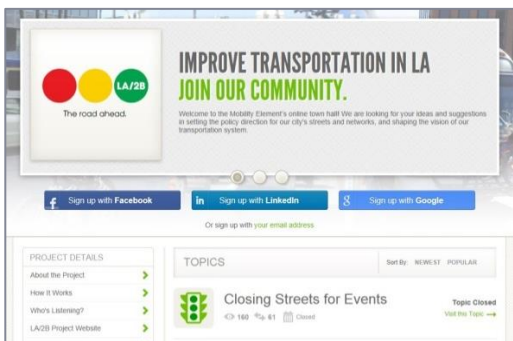### Leaders in online engagement shared some consistent advice:

- Let the public engagement purpose drive the tool, not vice versa
- Understand the staff capacities required for effective implementation
- Be strategic about syncing online and face-to-face public engagement to take advantage of the strengths of each
- Embrace a "continuous learning" attitude about these online tools across agency departments

II. Local Government Examples of Online Engagement

Over the past few years, an increasing number of local governments have experimented with different ways of conducting online public engagement and some with multiple formats and vendors. These examples were chosen to highlight a range of the most common topics and tools rather than specific impacts on decision-making. Within a given public consultation, some jurisdictions are combining different digital engagement tools, such as using a text-based invitation for residents who only want to comment in a quick way complemented by a more information-rich online platform that can provide various ways to participate.

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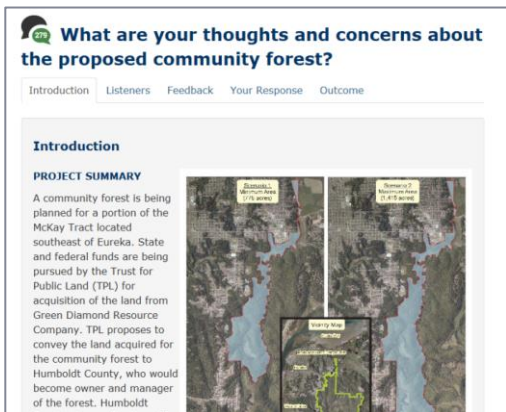*Promoting Good Government at the Local Level*

Planning/Land Use/Transit

- [City of Malibu](#) – Pacific Coast Highway Safety Study;
- [Marin County](#) – Housing Element
- [City of Morgan Hill](#) – Planning options;
- [City of Los Angeles](#) – Transit Planning:

Defining/Implementing Specific Policies or Quality of Life Issues

- [Humboldt County](#) – Community Forest;

- [City of Garden Grove](#) – Reimagine Downtown;
- [City of Ranch Cordova](#) – Policy about backyard chickens;

Strategic Planning/Budgeting

- [San Mateo County](#) – Allocating Tax Dollars;
- [City of El Cerrito](#) – Five Year Strategic Plan Process;
- [City of Salinas](#) – $500 Budget Challenge;

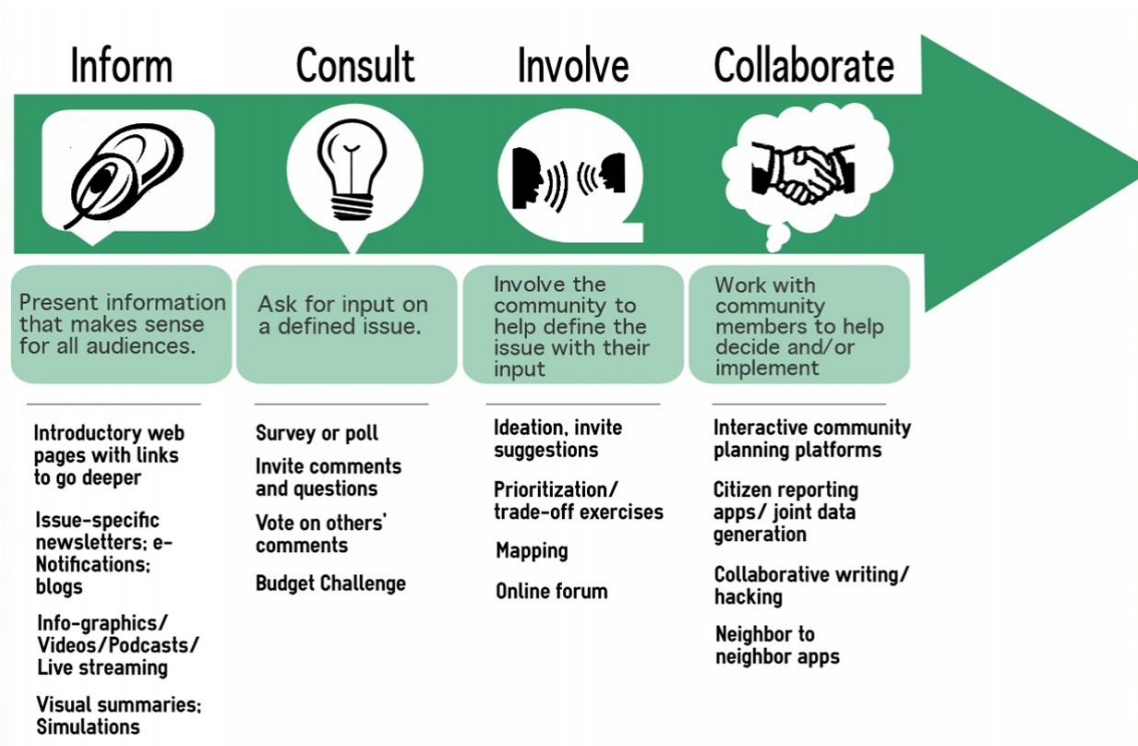- [City of Long Beach](#) – Budget Challenge;

Some jurisdictions choose to have their first online public engagement effort focus on relatively less contentious issues, such as the City of San Ramon's request for Community feedback about how to celebrate Independence Day. Others use a topic that is just for the jurisdiction's employees so that staff members have an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the platform.

Some agencies have decided to invest in and maintain a broad engagement platform that accommodates input on many different features of city or county life, such as "Improve San Francisco" (www.improvesf.com/) or "Speak Out San Mateo County" (www.smcspeakout.com).

III. Selecting Online Tools and Features

A first planning step is to make sure to select an issue that lends itself to public input and that the policy decision makers and key community partners are ready to support the online engagement effort. The Institute for Local Government has a set of key questions that can help: Planning Public Engagement: Key Questions for Local Officials. Once the issue is defined, the International Association of Public Practitioners (IAP2) has developed a spectrum of public engagement that is a common reference point for gauging the role of the public in a given decision. To help local agencies consider how to select and combine various online engagement approaches based on their purposes, below is a simplified version of the IAP2 spectrum. This diagram is intended as a starting point rather than a limit on other ways to apply any of these tools.

Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate
Present information that makes sense for all audiences.	Ask for input on a defined issue.	Involve the community to help define the issue with their input	Work with community members to help decide and/or implement
Introductory web pages with links to go deeper	Survey or poll	Ideation, invite suggestions	Interactive community planning platforms
Issue-specific newsletters; e-Notifications; blogs	Invite comments and questions	Prioritization/ trade-off exercises	Citizen reporting apps/ joint data generation
Info-graphics/ Videos/Podcasts/ Live streaming	Vote on others' comments	Mapping	Collaborative writing/ hacking
Visual summaries; Simulations	Budget Challenge	Online forum	Neighbor to neighbor apps

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Within this broad overview, these are some basic planning questions to help choose online public participation technology and features within a given tool:

- Would quantitative closed-end answers or more open-ended qualitative input be more helpful?
- Is the agency inviting new ideas or gathering input on a specific proposal?
- Should people to be able to interact with what others share and/or direct their input to just the agency?
- How early in the decision making process is the public is being asked to provide input?
- What other types of public engagement are being conducted and what other input will be combined with the online results for use in the ultimate decision making?

Early in most processes, agencies tend to ask for more open-ended values oriented input. Digital interfaces allow people to upload photos or videos as well comments if the discussion centers around some aspect of the community that people want to keep – or change. If a survey is used at this stage, it may ask about general attitudes that will then inform later stages of policy development.

As the issue progresses, an agency may consider letting people "like" or comment on others' comments. However, experienced users of these tools caution against automatically equating the highest number of votes with something that genuinely represents the community's preference. It may be appropriate to ask people to answer more structured questions or participate in prioritization exercises to help look at trade-offs or hold an online forum to flesh out perspectives. As an agency moves toward a final decision, the online tools can also provide a way to assess how representative of the community participation has or has not been. As with face-to-face engagement, most often multiple approaches are combined to create a strategic sequence that cumulatively builds public understanding and constructive input. Most effective engagement efforts make clear where an issue is in the process and how public input is being used in interim and final decisions.

IV. Choosing Online Engagement Software and Suppliers

The marketplace of online public engagement is still in its early stages; however, many options for achieving desired goals already exist. An agency may already have public engagement functionality with tools in hand that they have not fully explored. For example, some agencies have used features on their websites or blogs to invite feedback or comments on proposed policies. Others may choose to use an off the shelf online survey tool with the link announced on the website or newsletter.

There are also dedicated Software as Service (SaS) suppliers creating online tools with a range of features designed specifically for local governments. Other vendors that are already helping agencies manage records and video of their governing body meetings, are expanding into the public input space. The range of suppliers and features they are each providing represent a dynamic situation. As one engagement manager said:

> *"You have the power to help shape the field.*
> *Ask tough questions about track records."*

Nole Walkingshaw
Institutional Engagement Manager, Salt Lake City

Technical Considerations:

These are some of the main criteria local government agencies are using when considering a software service for online engagement:

- The range of tools/features for public input and how the functionality of each fits anticipated public engagement purposes;
- Attractive, clean design with intuitive interface for the public;
- Technical interface with the local agency's website and any other relevant IT assets;
- Ease of use for local agency administrator(s) and the ability to coordinate the administrative function across departments (if needed);
- Reporting and export capabilities;
- The system's flexibility and ability to adapt to changing public engagement needs;
- What, if any, supplemental services are provided that match desired needs (e.g., graphic support, content production, survey design, etc.);
- Level of staff training required and anticipated amount of staff time for successful implementation.

Design Considerations:

As an agency gets into the design of the actual online engagement experience, there will be choices to make about the public participants' experience. Some software may have preferred features, depending on your agency's public engagement goals and capacities. For example:

- How much, if any, participant registration and information is required? Less means it's easier for people to participate, but more information facilitates a richer understanding of who is participating.
- Is there a limit on how many times people can participate? Controls can prevent spamming and enhance civility; on the other hand, less control may encourage continuous engagement.

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- What kind of facilitation is needed and will be provided? To what extent will the host agency intervene and under what circumstances?
- What, if any, kinds of incentives do participants receive to provide input? Points or other kinds of "gamification" can build traffic, but others question if this dilutes the quality of the input.
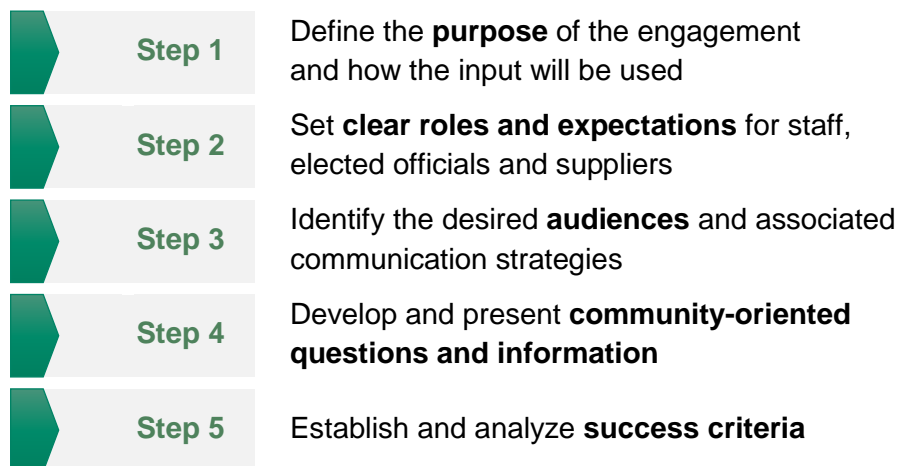
Many of the suppliers are constantly updating features, so agency officials and staff can ask whether and how soon they will be adding a particular functionality.

Cost Considerations:

The most popular software services in this field typically charge an annual subscription fee that allows for use across an unlimited number of topics throughout the entire agency. The amount of the fee will vary based on size of the jurisdiction and some suppliers will provide a discount for a multi-year agreement. As a rough benchmark, a city with a population of about 50,000 might pay a $5,000 annual fee while a county with a population of a half million might pay around $20,000. The subscription is likely to include both in person and online support to help with design and the post participation process. The providers will often offer consulting services for additional cost if desired. It is important to be clear about what level of support is in the contract.

V. Framework for Successful Implementation

Whichever supplier or software is selected, the local agency is responsible for the overall strategy and staff follow through that will be essential in achieving the potential benefits of online engagement as a means to more inclusive, informed and effective public decision-making. Interviews with city and county officials and leading suppliers yielded the following framework for effective implementation:

Step 1	Define the **purpose** of the engagement and how the input will be used
Step 2	Set **clear roles and expectations** for staff, elected officials and suppliers
Step 3	Identify the desired **audiences** and associated communication strategies
Step 4	Develop and present **community-oriented questions and information**
Step 5	Establish and analyze **success criteria**

These are some of their specific points of guidance:

Step 1 Define the purpose of the online engagement and how the input will be used

- Match the specific online tool(s) to a specific purpose(s)
- Integrate the digital invitation for input with other planned public engagement and public meetings to help build awareness and context
- Establish clear expectations for what role this public input will have in the policy development process
- Prepare elected or appointed decision-makers to be able to use and understand online public input in their decision making process

Step 2 Set clear roles and expectations for staff, elected officials and suppliers

- Identify the formal and informal "listeners"
- Assign online engagement administrator(s) that develop and oversee the audience outreach strategies, monitor public input, facilitate where needed and are responsible for efforts to encourage a range of resident responses and timely follow-up
- Set clear parameters for the role of the supplier and define the scope and timeframe for any support
- Determine how other staff at the agency will be brought on board

Step 3 Identify the desired audiences and associated communication strategies

- Offer the digital input interface on multiple platforms if possible – e.g., website, mobile, kiosks and in person meetings where possible
- Announce the link through all relevant agency communication channels – e.g. email listservs, press releases, newsletters, social media, neighborhood networking platforms, staff email signature blocks and flyers
- Seek partnerships with other groups and organizations to help promote, or in some cases perhaps co-host, the online process
- Invite the relevant leaders and members to help develop online audiences and to participate in getting a robust online conversation started
- Continue communicating before, during and after public input has been received; follow up with residents to explain what happened with the decision and keep building an informed and engaged community

Step 4   Develop and present community-oriented questions and information

- Assess if the background information is easy to understand for newcomers to the issue and/or people of different educational backgrounds. Is it provided in languages other than English if appropriate to local demographics?
- Identify what questions would work well. Make them specific enough for people to focus but open enough to get new perspectives; this will vary by stage in the decision process; see simple opener asking people what they love about Southeast Long Beach.
- Do not underestimate the power of visuals; use faces/graphs/photos/maps as well as text to help meet different learning styles and enhance appeal.
- Use videos to help make dense information more accessible. Alameda County's budget info video is one example.
- Explain where an agency is in the decision-making process, how public input has been used to date and how current input being requested will be used.
- Create modularized excerpts to extend the reach of in person meetings and workshops. For every one of the meeting segments, community members can listen to a recorded video clip, view the slides, and then enter comments and questions. Contra Costa County is one example Trilink Virtual Meeting.

Step 5   Establish and analyze measures of success

- Determine if the participant input is presented in a way that's easy for the public to follow. For example, are comments nested? Can survey responses be viewed in different formats?
- Identify what metrics are going to be tracked and reported. In addition to participation numbers, measures could include:
  - Frequency of participation
  - Diversity of participants; how many are new to city/county discussions
  - Number and/or quality of ideas
  - If the public reports enhanced comprehension, feeling more informed
  - Amount of new connections established between community members
  - Number or quality of new engagement champions/networks
- Share findings as appropriate across the agency's leadership and departments.
- Create a "learning community" within the agency to examine what worked well and what can be improved for next time.

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NOTE: The Institute for Local Government does not endorse specific software or technology suppliers. Examples provided here are for illustration purposes only. To learn more about different online participation platforms, Engaging Cities editor and Wise Economy blogger Della Rucker wrote a helpful overview: Online Platforms for Public Engagement.

Other resources of interest include:
- A Local Official's Guide to Online Public Engagement
  Prepared by Institute for Local Government staff and consultants.
- Public Pathways: A Guide to Online Engagement Tools for Local Governments
  An overview of digital engagement from the California Civic Innovation Project
- Engagement Tech for All: Best Practices in the Use of Technology in Engagement of Underrepresented Communities in Planning
  Prepared by PlaceMatters for the Ford Foundation
- The Sustainable Cities Institute Guide to Engaging Residents Online

About the Institute for Local Government

ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on Public Engagement visit www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement. To access this resource directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/post/broadeningpublicparticipation.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:
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