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10 Tips for Web-based Citizen Participation

By Kim Patrick Kobza

Engaging the public in an atmosphere of mutual trust and collaboration is crucial to the success of any public planning initiative. Sounds simple on paper. But when it comes to public involvement, planners face two challenging questions: How can you engage citizens in a meaningful way, and how can you manage the process without stretching staff and diverting resources away from the project at hand?

Web-based systems can provide planners with highly effective solutions. Here are some tips to help ensure that the system you implement can support your public involvement objectives.

1. Think in terms of web "systems," not just web "sites," as a means to manage information and communication. Typically, websites provide little more than an information resource for the public. But web *systems* can provide the infrastructure for managing public comment, internal communication, documents, images, CAD files, and videos.
2. Keep in mind that people organize around issues, not institutions. It's much more appealing, for example, to market "We want the public to have a voice in the future of our downtown district" than "Visit your local government's website." By recognizing this preference among citizens, planners can maximize their outreach efforts and create issue-based websites that will drive traffic, and thus increase involvement.
3. Establish transparency rules early, and develop a full plan for information rights management. Even before the public planning initiative begins, project teams should answer the following questions: What content should be accessible to project team members only? What content should be available to the public? Who has authority to make decisions regarding the publishing of content?

Once these questions have been answered, post the project goals and guidelines for sharing information on the website.
4. Identify communities of interest — citizens and stakeholder groups that unite with a common interest — and tailor messages to them, keeping them informed and involved throughout the project's lifecycle. This interactivity forces participants to be factual, collaborative, and accountable, and less likely to rally opposition based on raw emotion or uncertainty.
5. Do not confuse public comment standards with voting. Voting is absolute, with one vote holding as much weight as the next. But public comment can be subjective. Decision makers have the discretion to consider the manner of delivery and assign different values to comments.
6. Keep electronic public communications and website information current. When meeting and project updates, images, calendars, newsletters, press releases, and other communications are timely, the public begins to rely upon the site as a central source of critical and up-to-date information.
7. Opt for electronic database collection as opposed to e-mail collection. E-mail viruses can effectively end an e-mail public comment program — as well as the electronic communication for those administering it. E-mail collection also burdens the staff — someone has to retrieve, filter, and organize all the submissions.

Using a web-based system heightens electronic security, eliminates the risk of viruses and spam, automates the comment collection process, and raises accountability by creating an electronic trail.

8. Entrust the management of web systems only to a credible provider. Servers break and systems go down. If your project site is not continually up and running, the entire planning process is undermined — both internally and from the public's perspective.

9. Involve the media, which can be a powerful partner in helping to increase participation by publicizing efforts and driving people to the project website.

10. Commit to continued meaningful public involvement processes and look for opportunities to expand electronic citizen participation into other areas of government. The public has grown to expect easy, 24/7 access to information and will likely be open to web-based services.

Offering these convenient services to citizens may also mean significant cost savings for governments. Small work teams can more efficiently manage large projects and minimize paperwork and the associated administrative costs of duplicating, mailing, and storing hard copies.

Web-based systems can enhance your outreach efforts and improve the amount and quality of public feedback you collect. When citizens believe their input is valued, they are more inclined to participate constructively. And in the end, the ultimate project outcome is strengthened when your decisions represent the real needs of the public.

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