Citizen Involvement in the Digital Age

by Dan Bevarly and Jeffery G. Ulma

The Digital Age is here. The way we communicate, share, and connect with others has changed drastically in the past decade. Although you may not know some of your neighbors, you might encounter them online in social networks, forums, and—through one or two degrees of separation—a professional network.

The private sector has been the bellwether of things to come in the public sector, but municipalities throughout the country are taking action to connect a new generation of citizens—always attached to a mobile phone, Internet connection, or an amalgam of the two—to their government, to spur participation in a way that is more feasible in an overscheduled, digital life style.

The function of a democratic government has not changed much since its inception. The voice of the people is as important as ever in the creation of law and the establishment of policy. However, capturing that voice has become the new challenge. The public forum—in an offline world—doesn’t have the draw of even ten years ago. Society at large has shifted to an online world, and public chief information officers and managers are beginning to use this societal trend to their advantage.

The Groundswell Begins

No longer is a single community meeting in the neighborhood with an “open microphone” enough, and a mandatory public hearing at the
end of a process is often viewed with skepticism. Some residents are intimidated by the crowd and don’t express their true opinion or, worse yet, don’t participate at all.

Citizens want—even demand—early, extensive, and convenient access to local government so they can play a part in planning decisions. As the recipients of the feedback, the government staff must decipher hundreds of paper forms, find the best way to sort these numerous comments, and quickly respond to citizen concerns. For these reasons, local governments need modern ways to manage public input.

Community thought leaders at all levels can now seize more opportunities to connect with everyday citizens by leveraging social networking as a tool to foster virtual “town meetings.” Across the nation, governments are opening lines of communication between their offices and the people of their respective states, counties, and municipalities. Using the Web to empower citizens and publish open calls for civic engagement and public comment, local governments are warming to true constituent engagement, but more can be done to harness the true power of the citizen’s voice. Social networking is no longer an area that the government can ignore. Visionary state and local leaders are adopting these consumer-adapted behaviors at a fast pace, but in ways that make sense at a government or enterprise level.

Many state and local governments are looking at the massive popularity of social networking as a way to encourage citizen involvement. By integrating enterprise social networking into their latest initiatives and implementing media-rich applications designed to meet the structured requirements of government, municipalities are striving to connect with citizens concerning crucial government functions like zoning, issues management, and tourism development.

Two uses of online engagement in the public sector come from the Carolinas. In each, the idea of community remains, while the way in which people convene—and share valuable ideas—shifts to the Web.

**Spartanburg County**

Home to more than 250,000 people, Spartanburg County, South Carolina, is no stranger to connecting with its populace concerning important community issues. Although experienced in traditional citizen engagement, the county is faced with key economic development goals to help modernize this segment of rural America and has responded with an innovative digital community.

Since 1987, the Spartanburg County Foundation, a public-private partnership, has published community indicator reports, effectively using citizen comment to raise awareness about the many issues impacting the growth, health, and quality of life of county residents. Traditionally updated every three years, the report has proven a valuable resource to the community: assisting organizations in their planning and encouraging conversation and dialogue among citizens to bring about community change. In fact, the most recent data collected and reviewed—concerning family, health, education, public safety, economics, and environmental issues—have led to the establishment of ten community goals, strategies to achieve them, and sixty indicators to benchmark progress toward each of them.

What began with focus group discussions grew to an imperative to find a better way to inform, connect, and update even larger audiences throughout the county. For this one-stop communication resource, the foundation adopted Neighborhood America’s enterprise social networking solution for its latest Community Indicators project to help foster citizen engagement. By implementing digital communities through a platform rich in features and functionality, coupled with experienced support, Spartanburg was able to avoid a large capital investment, all the while effectively collecting and managing scores of responses from its people.

The foundation has been able to scale its audience, engage citizens, and update them on progress toward achieving the long-term goals set forth in the Community Indicators project. In addition to offering citizens a convenient way to stay informed more frequently, the site encompasses all community members, including the county’s visually impaired. Spartanburg’s achievement in citizen engagement is a model for other counties, attracting community leaders from across the country to learn from its example. This initiative has received national recognition for its community-wide effort to develop a better future for the citizens of Spartanburg County.

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Town of Cary

Cary, North Carolina, with a population of 121,000, is located in the heart of the world-famous Research Triangle region. Recognized by publications like Money magazine as one of the best places to live in America, the community has a long history of cutting-edge planning and zoning approaches. The citizens in this high-tech location are not afraid of computers: more than 94 percent of the households have access to the Internet. Collecting data, studies, plans, reports, and ordinances from other places, they e-mail officials and staff members regularly to ask questions and express their opinions. Some have even created their own Web sites about new development proposals to communicate with each other.

Technology Town

As a result, town government has had to keep pace with digital methods for communicating and offering additional involvement opportunities, including Web-based public participation. For example, agendas and detailed staff reports for rezoning cases for the town council and planning and zoning board meetings have been available on the Web for a decade. These include maps, photos, and color renderings of the proposed development. The town also provides Web pages for special planning projects and publishes monthly reports listing all approved and pending development plans.

Further reflecting its unofficial nickname, Technology Town, Cary has moved to the next stage—"going interactive"—providing online surveys and threaded discussion boards for some of its planning efforts. Although the results have been mixed (and limitations like the self-selection of participants are recognized), the town council is still committed to offering an ever-expanding array of involvement methods for Cary residents.

Neighborhood America

To extend its repertoire, Cary recently acquired Neighborhood America’s Public Comment system. Although this Web-based approach was designed for long-term projects, like the preparation of transportation plans, Cary is going to use it in a new way: applying the system to short-term processes like rezoning.

For complex rezoning cases that last about six months, handling the intense flurry of input directed to different people or arriving scattershot at town hall is difficult. Concerns are shared with the staff, council members, and planning and zoning board members. They arrive in a variety of formats (phone calls, letters, walk-in visits, and e-mails). Cary sought a mechanism where it could funnel comments through a single portal on the Web, and Public Comment fit the bill.

This focused social network (or online community) serves as a one-stop communication tool with the planning department for Cary citizens concerned with town zoning. Through citizen feedback to one portal, town officials are able to manage and respond quickly and effectively. These responses are then published on the Web site to serve as a reference for residents, preventing the repetition of questions that planning department officials have already answered. This streamlined communication results in an increased response rate and enables officials to devote more time to constituents.

As it now readies to test this emerging technology on the first few cases, Cary hopes to use it to better manage information and feedback. The town should also gain insight into participants by asking them questions like where they live in relation to the project or which specific aspect of a development proposal generates the most concern. In the end, Public Comment will give Cary a tool to share information, collect citizen input, provide timely and consistent responses, and facilitate improved decision making.

Web-Based Engagement

Cary is just one example of technology’s facilitating engagement in local communities. Town hall meetings have been enhanced, even replaced, by boundary-spanning, interactive online forums, and press releases and posting campaigns with limited reach have given way to bidirectional, Web-based engagement sessions—all in a concerted push to include the voice of the populace.

The traditional media have latched onto this trend, as well. ABC, CBS, Fox, and other networks have stepped up their user-generated content campaigns to enable viewers to participate in political discussion by submitting video—via mobile phones if they so choose—directly to the news agency. ABC has used this effective avenue to elicit citizen comment for on-air interviews with President Bush and other high-ranking political officials.

Public managers have the tools that reflect time-honored standards of public comment—standards designed to support constructive public dialogue. Yet, at the same time, new technologies now enable governments to collect and manage multiple forms of public feedback, through any type of device, and to organize that feed-
back in a way that makes it useful and reportable. If these innovations transcend geographical and socioeconomic boundaries, allowing for instant engagement and bidirectional communication in a secure, structured Web-based environment, then why aren’t these new interactive technologies ubiquitous across the public landscape?

**Enterprise Social Networking**

The technology that makes citizen engagement possible represents the next wave in data organization and information delivery. Known as enterprise social networking (ESN), this Internet-native software as a service (SaaS) solution is designed to enable governments to manage structured public involvement. The solution provides a complete enterprise content management system that incorporates state-of-the-art management of user-generated content, that is, all forms of multimedia content created and submitted by citizens. System capabilities are comparable to or exceed those of large-scale technology development projects in major corporations and are comparatively affordable for even smaller government offices. Figure 1 shows an example of a display of citizen feedback.

![Figure 1. SaaS Solution](image-url)
Most important, because the system is delivered in a Web-based SaaS model without the need to install hardware or software, ESN can be quickly launched to meet all project needs. The Web delivery makes the ESN easy to use—particularly beneficial to municipal governments since the staffs tend to be small and nontechnical. Small teams can manage large outreach initiatives in real time. These systems can also be very affordable. Many planning offices are able to redirect budgets for traditional community outreach items—mailings, meetings, etc.—and gain efficiency and citizen responsiveness at the same time.

ESN systems enable the public manager to effectively manage all work processes related to community projects—such as press releases, census lists, and other forms of documents and collaboration—all while considering organized feedback from the municipality’s many constituents. These next-generation technologies will enable campaigns to “turn on a dime” with hypersensitive listening to those in touch with public zoning policy and statute issues.

Conclusion

Interactive technology that offers traditional rules of structure is the future. It allows governments to better understand their constituents and invites reasoning. After all, public dialogue helps to build relationships, expectations, and policy over time, rather than at a point in time. Most important, it enables governments to establish long-term relationships with citizens on the basis of clear, accurate, and structured communication. Indeed, this is the future of citizen participation.