

Public Pathways

A Guide to Online Engagement Tools for Local Governments

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Introduction

The technology is available. Residents are using it to self-organize neighborhood groups. Non-profits are using it to campaign for causes. Even so, municipalities have been slow to adopt online tools to advance civic engagement. The challenge does not lie with the tools; it lies with the value placed on engaging the public.

Engaging the public can be a time intensive and costly endeavor, conditions that online engagement tools do not entirely alleviate. However, online tools, or engagement opportunities available through the use of a computer, can make informing the public and involving residents in the early stages of a project, through input and decision-making, more productive. Online engagement might require city resources to be dedicated to facilitating the exchange of ideas on an ideation platform, responding to questions or suggestions sent via text messaging, or establishing collaborative communication with residents around community issues. In all cases, the tools require government participation. Cities that are not currently using online tools to engage the public are often challenged by resource constraints, including staff time and technical skills.

Some of the obstacles to civic engagement from a resident's perspective might include time, transportation, confidence and information, all of which can also be reduced through the use of online tools by providing users

an opportunity to contribute or engage when it's most convenient for them. Additionally, residents who have access to the internet or a smartphone are able to participate from their home, or just about anywhere. Online tools also offer the advantage of allowing residents to contribute to a discussion or post an opinion without the pressure of public speaking. Some engagement platforms also offer an educational component so that users begin an engagement activity informed.

However, there are also drawbacks to online tools. The engagement experience can look and feel different than offline engagement. For example, an online survey asking residents to choose between two possible community development plans might result in hundreds of thumbs-up and thumbs-down, but only receive a handful of comments explaining why one option was selected over the other. Online tools allow varying levels of engagement for residents. A student might not have the time to enter his own idea for reducing carbon emissions, but he may take the time to scan the other ideas and "like" the ones that sound cool. On the other hand, a community member active in carbon reduction programs might spend a significant amount of time adding original ideas and commenting on others. While online tools reduce significant barriers for some, there are residents in every community who do not have digital access or literacy to engage online. According to the Pew Research Center, [15% of American adults ages 18 years and older do not use the](#)

[internet or email](#), making offline engagement strategies imperative to ensuring inclusion in government programs and services. The goal is to blend online and offline strategies so that everyone can participate in ways that are comfortable and accessible to them.

Civic engagement is a loaded term and one that encompasses many different aspects of public life. This report uses a broad definition of civic engagement -- the collective work of individuals and civic groups directed at positive community change. This report is meant as a guide for government staffers wishing to develop a civic engagement strategy for a standalone project or their entire city. It is most useful if the purpose for the engagement is already determined. For example, a county might want to inform property owners of new laws affecting property tax payments. One could also imagine a city instituting a community policing policy and wanting to empower the public to determine how to implement it for their neighborhoods. In each of these examples, a government staffer might use this report as guidance to inform a strategy, learn about online tools used in other communities, and determine how to measure the success of an online engagement.

As an organizational concept for evaluating online engagement tools, this report modified the International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2) [Spectrum of Public Participation](#), a five-point continuum of participatory processes: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. The modified spectrum used in this report was also informed by the engagement frameworks presented by Matt Leighninger in [Using Online Tools to Engage – and be Engaged by –The Public](#), and by April Manatt in [Hear Us Now?: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government](#). Both reports categorize online engagement tools by their engagement purposes. For example, Leighninger describes tools meeting the following objectives: collaborate, survey attitudes, and prioritize options. Within the three objectives, online tools such as

ideation platforms, wikis, gaming, mapping and shared workspaces are discussed. Similarly, Manatt's report provided a tiered framework for analyzing various online tools, distinguishing between the various levels of engagement each tool provides. The three tiers are information and service, service and engagement, and democratization and empowerment. These tiers move along a spectrum that begins with information and concludes with empowerment, very much aligned with the IAP2 spectrum.

Framework for Evaluating Online Engagement Tools

This report leverages the spectrum concept as a way of describing how tools and engagement strategies can build onto one another, often requiring more resources as they become more collaborative. The spectrum begins with informing the public. Information, when provided in easy-to-understand formats, can surface issues, describe points-of-view, and aid the public in making decisions, allowing for deeper engagement opportunities.

Starting at one end and moving along the spectrum illustrates a progression or deepening of civic engagement. For example, informing the public, the first strategy presented, is typically a one-directional form of communication where government "pushes" information or data out to residents. Advancing from informing to collaborating requires a feedback loop, whereby government is not only "pushing" information out to residents, but also receiving information from them. As one moves along the spectrum the engagement strategies shift from basic engagement, to co-production of policies and programs, to government as a platform for community empowerment.

The framework outlined in the table on the following page is offered as a method to begin thinking about how governments are currently engaging the public, the purpose for engagement (at a project or city wide level), and a roadmap for what's possible.

Online Engagement Spectrum

Engagement Strategy	Description	Common Tools
Inform	This basic level of engagement is critical and sometimes overlooked as governments strive to adopt more collaborative engagement strategies. Providing information about issues, services, meetings, decisions, and policies in a timely and easy-to-understand manner requires staff time, and in some cases coordination across multiple departments. Ensuring that accurate and relevant information is provided to the public can lead to more engaged residents because transparency generates greater trust in government, and the public will be better informed about upcoming opportunities to engage and better understand the issues being raised.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• websites• info-graphics• multi-media (video, images)• simulators
Consult	One of the most recent online engagement strategies used by governments is to crowdsource ideas and seek public input into proposed policies or programs. This trend of using online tools to gauge public opinion, or to identify creative solutions to a pressing community problem requires multi-directional communication. When implementing tools to consult with the public, government must be responsive to comments, ideas, and feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ideation platforms• social media - when used to exchange ideas and comments• citizen reporting apps
Cooperate	This strategy requires continual collaboration with the public throughout the life of a project, decision, or policy. Not only is the public involved in decision-making, but also residents are involved in exploring alternatives and implementing solutions. This form of engagement differs from the “consulting” strategy because it requires government not only to consult with the public, but also to collaborate with residents on the solution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• wikis• collaborative writing platforms• mapping tools
Empower	The community is a resource that should be leveraged by government to solve community issues. By empowering residents to solve local issues, and by placing final decision-making and implementation in the hands of the public, government plays a supportive role, rather than a lead role. This level of engagement is rare because it requires government to relinquish responsibility for a solution and trust the public to provide it. Tools that connect neighbors or support peer-to-peer networking are usually a community’s way of empowering itself without government intervention.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Application Programming Interfaces (API)• community planning games• neighborhood networking sites

Informing the Public

In 1994 the White House's website launched, making information about the executive branch accessible online. Now, almost 20 years later, city government websites are an essential component to informing the public about policies, events, council hearings, and services. The advantage of sharing information online is that it does not have to remain static; a number of cities are now providing real-time data and information to their residents via government websites. This stage of engagement is critical because higher levels of knowledge are statistically significantly associated with more civic engagement, according to a recent study published by researchers at Sacramento State University¹. In addition, most municipal governments have the resources to maintain a basic website, but their ability to offer a more robust engagement platform may be constrained.

Engaging Content

Some programs require informing the public beyond posting static information on a city website. For example, when a program requires understanding complex information or policies, utilizing video to provide information in an easy to understand format can be an effective strategy. Los Angeles County's Flood Control District created a [short illustrated video](#) to explain sedimentation and flood control tactics used throughout the county. The goal was to educate the public about sedimentation, a process with which most residents are not familiar. The project aimed to reduce public apprehension toward flood control policies.



Image 1: Los Angeles County Flood Control District's YouTube video on sedimentation.

Video production might be beyond the resources available in some cities. So, some alternative ways to develop engaging content include ensuring the content is accurate, easy to understand, includes images, and is easily searchable. Government information and data can also become more engaging by utilizing gaming as a way of educating the public about a specific set of topics, like city budgets or zoning requirements. The State of California and the City of Los Angeles used a game developed by Next 10. Entitled the [California Budget Challenge](#), the game is designed to provide the users (residents) with information about the government entity's budget, and then challenges users to balance the budget. The act of balancing the budget requires that the user make tradeoffs, understanding that a decrease in taxes will result in less money that might go to other government services like education. This budget game is used primarily as an educational tool that engages the public through simulating real tradeoffs that policy-makers face when striving for a balanced budget.

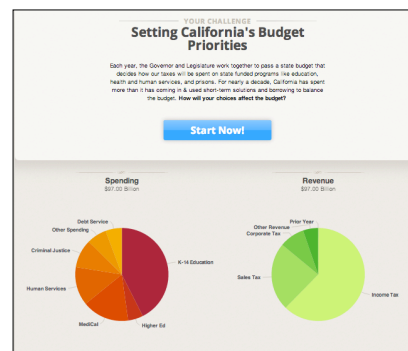


Image 2: Screenshot of California Budget Challenge.

¹ Barker, Nalder et al. (2013). [Civic Engagement and Local Fiscal Attitudes: 2013 Survey of Californians](#). Retrieved from Sacramento State University.

Budgets are not the only incomprehensible municipal document. Laws can be extremely challenging to read and comprehend because they are not written in easy-to-understand language. It can be hard to find specific and relevant laws because most ordinances are provided in PDFs (portable document format) that do not allow for simple document searching. To ease the burden of reading complicated laws [The OpenGov Foundation](#) built a tool used by the City of Baltimore that opens law to everyone. [BaltimoreCode.org](#) transforms the Baltimore City Charter and Code from unalterable, often hard-to-find online files and updates them into user-friendly, organized and modern website formats in accessible language. The goal of providing more accessible law is to add clarity, context, and public understanding of the laws' impact on Baltimore citizens' daily lives. The City of Baltimore was the first to become an open law city, but other cities are catching up. San Francisco is also working with the Foundation and residents to open [San Francisco's law](#) by making them user friendly.

Policymaking is another area where simulators and games can help residents and government officials to better understand the implications and impacts of policies. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts recently partnered with a civic tech company to launch [Outline.com](#), debuting in January 2014. Outline is a public policy simulator that helps people visualize the impact that public policies, such as health care reform and school budget changes, will have on local economies and communities. While this tool is planned for use at the state level, it can be used at all levels of government to inform and engage residents around policies that impact their communities.

Data and Real-time Information

Government, like private industry, is powered by data. Every service, transaction, legislation, and council hearing generates data that is useful to the public and government. When thinking about civic engagement, data offers transparency around government operations. As open data takes hold of government at every level, it is important for

local government to shift from simply making it “open” to understanding how to use it as an engagement tool. For example, the City of Palo Alto publishes its budget data online via the [Open Budget](#) website. The site contains raw data, which is most useful to software developers, journalists and others who know how to manipulate data. In addition, the site features charts and graphs that make it easier for residents to understand how the city spends and receives money.

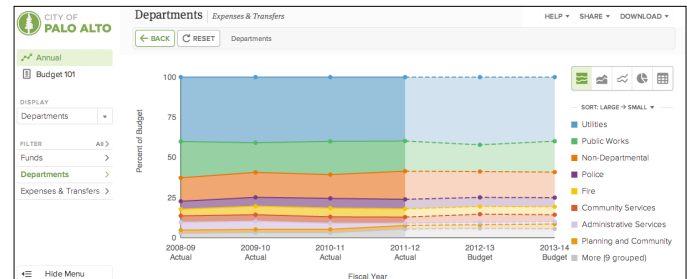


Image 3: Screenshot of the City of Palo Alto's Open Budget platform.

Open data is another form of engaging content, it can be offered in the rawest format, via data feeds, or it can be visualized into graphs and maps to make it easier for residents to understand. In the same way that informed residents are likely more engaged residents, open data aids in keeping residents informed. For more information on developing an open data policy, check out the Sunlight Foundation's [Open Data Policy Guidelines](#) and a subsequent post on the [dos and don'ts of copying and pasting boilerplate open data language](#).

Open Budget, the data platform used to provide transparency into the City of Palo Alto's finances, is only one of many open data portals used throughout the country. Socrata's open data portal powers open data sites at the federal and local level, including [Los Angeles](#), [San Francisco](#) and [Alameda County](#) in California. For cities like [Santa Cruz](#), California and [Lexington](#), Kentucky it was important to adopt an open source product, meaning the technology can be used without any license fees and ensures that the city retain all rights to the data and metadata entered into the portal. These cities opted to use [CKAN](#), an open source data portal developed by the [Open Knowledge Foundation](#).

Getting Buy In

According to the City of Palo Alto's Chief Information Officer, Jonathan Reichental, PhD, the difficulty with establishing a platform like Open Data Palo Alto is implementing a cultural change within a city government. He stated in an interview, "the technological aspect of establishing such a platform is not as difficult as one would imagine and once you begin the process you realize it has value. In addition, the cost is not very high and the platform can be up in a few weeks."

In Dr. Reichental's opinion implementing open data transparency is the right thing to do, not just for Palo Alto, but for all agencies. He believes, "Open Data Palo Alto is a mindset, a philosophy, a technology, a process, a culture – there are many aspects to it that you have to consider."

Dr. Reichental provided some tips for government staffers undertaking open data initiatives:

- **Start small** - There is no need to make all the city's data available at once. Launch with what is available and commit to opening more data over time.
- **Tell stories** - It is important to get the city manager and city council on-board and a good way to do that is through telling stories about how other cities and counties have been successful.
- **Show benefits** - When first launching an open data program there won't be benefits to tout so use evidence from the federal government's open data program that has been underway for almost five years. It is also important to demonstrate benefit to the public, and Palo Alto found that once the city embraced open data the community also got behind it.
- **Go for it!**

Taking open data even one step further, providing access to real-time information and data can be a powerful tool to engaging the public and keeping them informed. Real-time data is practical when the data are changing constantly, like public transportation departure and arrival times. But

real-time information can also be critical when responding to disasters and emergencies, like providing up-to-date information on evacuation center locations during a hurricane or providing real-time information regarding public safety during an emergency.

"Open Data Palo Alto is a mindset, a philosophy, a technology, a process, a culture – there are many aspects to it that you have to consider."

For cities and towns that lack the technical resources or skills to develop an open data portal, most of the examples listed in this guide are offered by civic technology firms as subscription-based services with minimal technical requirements from government administrators. As the City of Palo Alto's Chief Information Officer stated, the technology is the easy part; it's the process, culture, and mindset changes that will present the biggest hurdles. Making open data work requires persistence, strong leadership, resources, a concrete transparency vision, and a strong commitment to making open data a part of the city or county's civic engagement plan.

As an additional way of informing the public via real-time data, a number of cities, like [Fresno](#), California, broadcast hearings live from City Council chambers and provide recordings of council meetings through a video archive. Even some smaller cities, like Watsonville, California, provide audio recordings of council meetings for residents who are not able to attend meetings in person. [ChicagoCouncilmatic.org](#), a tool built by [OpenCity](#) and currently used in Chicago, allows users to search, browse, subscribe and comment on everything Chicago's City Council has done since 2011 using data scraped from [Chicago's Legislative Information Center](#). While a local government might not launch a Councilmatic site for its city, determining the best method for releasing data, as

well as the frequency and format of that data, are important considerations.

Consulting with the Public for Ideas or Advice

In existing local governance structures there is typically an opportunity to consult with the public and gather resident input at public forums, council hearings, and town hall events. While face-to-face engagement is an essential part of any government engagement strategy, oftentimes those forums -- particularly council hearings -- do not allow for the sharing of ideas at early stages of a project or while defining the problem. Most often members of the public are invited to speak for three minutes each during a hearing in which a final decision to adopt or reject a policy is being considered. Using online engagement tools has the advantage of making it easier to engage the public at earlier stages in the decision-making process.

For example, an ideation platform, or a website that allows residents to submit ideas to their local government, engages residents in the early idea formation stages of a policy or project, as opposed to collecting comments at the end of the process during a council hearing where the public input options are either “for” or “against” the proposed action. Online and SMS based tools also reduce some of the barriers to participation, like transportation to meetings, childcare, time constraints, and other inconveniences common to meetings held during business hours at government offices. However, there are also a number of drawbacks to these tools. In some cases, residents who participate online juggle multiple tasks, or fail to “listen” to others’ opinions in the forum or discussion. In other cases, residents may not have enough supporting information to make an informed contribution. Still, local governments ought to weigh these disadvantages against the possibility of engaging new, sometimes hard-to-reach groups. One government staffer told us that in his experience, online engagement tools attract people who may not attend an in-person event, and can open up the discussion to those with more moderate

viewpoints, as opposed to the narrow interests that often consume council hearings.

Social Media as an Engagement Tool

Social media can be a strategic tool for cities providing real-time information to the public. A large majority of cities use Facebook and Twitter not only to provide information to the public, but also to respond to comments or tweets directed at them. But information provided through Facebook and Twitter require residents to have accounts with those companies, so it is important for government to identify additional ways of providing real-time information; such as data portals, websites, application programming interface (APIs), and streaming video. These alternatives to Facebook and Twitter are important to ensuring the broader public has access to the information.

The City of Oakland is using an online ideation tool, [EngageOakland](#), to collect ideas from residents and gather responses to specific questions through the use of surveys. EngageOakland’s largest successes are those regarding community-specific projects that the city is developing or issues that include a public meeting component. For example, the city posed a question and survey about a dog park project and 314 surveys were completed -- a far greater response than the number of residents able to speak during a typical council meeting. In stark contrast to the dog park project, only 56 of the 1,300 people who viewed the site completed an EngageOakland survey asking residents to prioritize projects in Oakland’s budget. In this case the survey proved too complicated or time consuming.

While the exact numbers are unknown, the EngageOakland project team observed that online presence either motivated residents to attend a public meeting and/or workshop, or kept those who had attended meetings interested in the process. In essence, as a result of the

online engagement platform residents became engaged about a particular policy, ordinance, or issue early on, and the online presence allowed a forum for those who have other life obligations to stay involved.

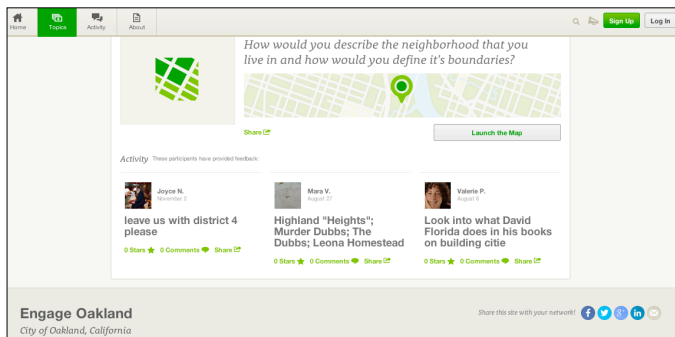


Image 4: Screenshot of the EngageOakland.

Another common tool used in local governments to gather online input from residents is Open Town Hall. The online platform allows governments to maintain control of the public engagement process, and focus on feedback from constituents. The City of Rancho Cordova, California decided to engage citizens through the use of [Open Town Hall](#) when residents requested that their City Council loosen restrictions on raising chickens. One of the reasons the city decided to use the online platform was to capture more moderate voices than those on the extremes who were most motivated to attend traditional hearings. A total of 335 people visited the site, the city received 46 comments from residents, and received an additional 20 comments through other channels. The city used mostly online resources -- like the city's website and NextDoor -- to market the forum.

City staffers in Rancho Cordova believe using Open Town Hall to consult with residents on this particular issue was a success because the online forum garnered a high level of engagement on an issue with a relatively low level of significance. In an email exchange, one city staffer stated that "input was broad ranging and many people with moderate opinions weighed in -- these people probably would not have attended an evening meeting at City Hall. The city was able to use the forum to keep people engaged and a follow-up public workshop drew 25 community

members -- this is a high turn-out for a relatively low level issue in our community."

Avoiding Pitfalls

We asked Nicole Neditch, the former City of Oakland Online Engagement Manager, to provide some advice to other government staffers considering using an ideation platform in their civic engagement strategy. Below is her advice to avoiding some of the problems Oakland encountered during its first few months using EngageOakland:

- ***Focus on community-specific projects*** - For example, asking broad questions about reducing carbon emissions throughout the city might not be specific enough. The question could be made more specific by asking "What ideas do you have for reducing X, the cause of the most carbon emissions in our city."
- ***Simple is better*** - Keep interactions user-friendly and uncomplicated.
- ***Tie campaigns together to specific activities occurring in the community*** - This will help drive participation on the site and provide some momentum to the campaign. For example, if mobile food vendor permitting is a topic for upcoming council meetings, ask the question to the online community in advance of the council meetings. This will bring an engaged offline community online and provide valuable information to the government in advance of decision-making.
- ***Don't put all your eggs in one basket*** - Besides online engagement, engage members of the community through in-person forums and venues.
- ***Bridge the public gap*** - Many residents fall off the band wagon because of life priorities but through online tools, if they have access, they can stay connected, informed and express their opinions without having to attend every public meeting.

Cooperating with the Public and Civic Groups

Determining the right engagement strategy can be difficult. However, by assessing the desired level of involvement and desired outcomes can help to begin narrowing down engagement options, strategies, and eventually online tools. If what the government is seeking is a process with public involvement in all stages of a project, and resident engagement in identifying and determining alternatives to a proposed plan or policy, then it might be looking for tools that allow it to collaborate with the public to determine locations for specific services, like bike share stations, or draft policies that impact residential quality of life.

There continues to be a significant number of people in the country that are not able to access the internet, even with the uptake of smartphones.

When it came time for the [City of Cincinnati](#) to implement its bike share program the local government used [Shareabouts](#), an online tool that allows residents to identify on a map where they would like bike sharing stations. Based on the over 300 suggestions, and nearly 2,000 votes, the city determined that 35 of the recommended bike share station locations could be implemented. Similarly when the City of Chicago wanted to collaborate with residents to identify the best locations for bike sharing, they also used Shareabouts to allow residents to drop pins on a map of Chicago, indicating preferences for bike share locations.

Because both Chicago and Cincinnati were committed to using the input from the public to determine the bike locations, within standard city planning constraints, the tool allowed for a cooperative relationship beyond just a consultative one. Had either city presented the community

with the option of ranking predetermined bike share locations, the tool would then have been limited to simply providing Chicago or Cincinnati with input from the public.

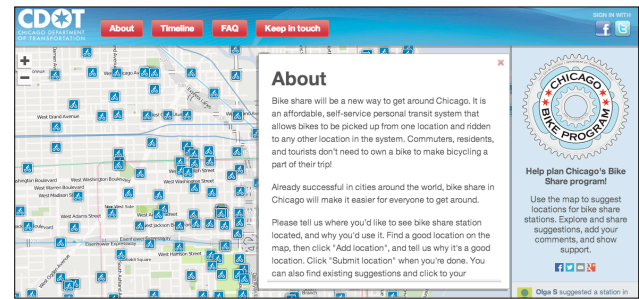


Image 5: Screenshot of the City of Chicago's Bike Share map.

Identifying tools that are accessible to residents and understanding the limitations of the community is important when developing an engagement strategy. According to a [Pew Research study](#), 56 percent of American adults own a smartphone, and of those smartphone owners, 34 percent mostly go online using their phones. For Americans with household incomes below \$30,000 the percentage owning a smartphone drops to 43 percent, and adults over 65 years or older, only 18 percent reported owning a smartphone. This data illustrates that there continues to be a significant number of people in the country that are not able to access the internet, even with the uptake of smartphones.

However, a larger majority of American adults, 79 percent, use their cell phones for text messaging. For the populations noted above, people with household incomes below \$30,000 and adults ages 65 and older, 86 percent and 76 percent reported owning a cell phone, respectively. Most communities have residents who are not able to access the internet, either at home or on mobile devices, and for that reason government should consider the use of engagement tools that offer SMS, or text messaging, as a critical part of an engagement strategy that is inclusive of those without internet access.

[Textizen](#) is an SMS-based engagement tool currently used by multiple cities to engage citizens in various ways, including polling community members to develop policies based on public input, and to gauge public opinion on

proposed service changes. Cities have used Textizen to gather input from residents on where bus routes should be located, to prioritize public school spending, and to generate ideas for cities' general plans. For example, in Chicago the tool was used by the Chicago Public Schools to plan facility and service improvements with two city-wide surveys. Over 2,000 people participated in the surveys. Based on the input from the public via the SMS tool, the school district developed a plan inclusive of the priorities identified in the surveys.



Image 6: Textizen poster - Chicago Public School campaign.

Increasingly, governments are also engaging organized groups, not just individual residents. Neighborhood associations and governments often collaborate to share data to make better policy decisions. The City of New Orleans recently partnered with [Civic Insight](#), a tool that leverages government and community data to identify at-risk and blighted properties throughout the city. Armed with the newly available government data, residents are better equipped at working together to determine how to proceed with safety, upkeep, and advocacy to ensure blighted homes are known to the city and action discussed and collectively pursued.

The result for New Orleans has been more resident advocacy for the removal of abandoned, blighted buildings and the rehabilitation of blighted properties where the owners are either hoping to return or need assistance to make improvements. By getting everyone on the same page, Civic Insight makes it easier for government staff,

motivated citizens, and local organizations to collaborate more effectively through the use of shared data, a common online platform, and pooled resources to improve the quality and value of their neighborhoods.

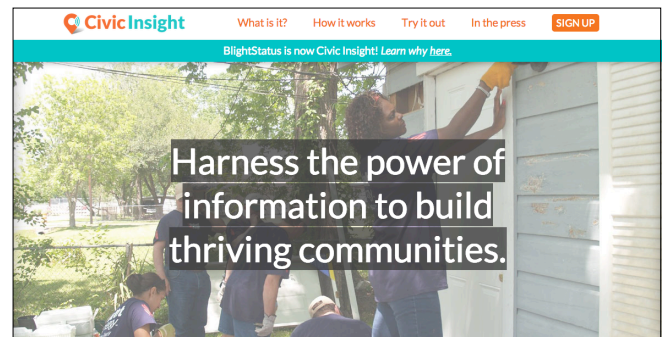


Image 7: Screenshot of Civic Insight.

Online engagement tools are more powerful than simply an outlet for determining governmental service provision. When used creatively, online engagement tools can extend their reach into the realm of collaborative policy making. This work requires significant resources, leading to few implementations at the local level. However, it has been tested at the federal level, with considerable success.

Online engagement tools are more powerful than simply an outlet for determining governmental service provision.

Following President Obama's Open Government memorandum in January 2009 the White House Office of Science and Technology launched a collective writing platform, [MixedInk](#), that encouraged people to comment and draft portions of the Open Government Directive, such as discussing transparency principles and defining transparency. The final version of the [collaborative writing projects](#) were then used in the Open Government Directive issued by the President.

This model of co-producing policy does not have to be unique to the federal government; there are numerous

Citizen Reporting Tools

Online civic reporting tools are often transactional in practice. A resident spots a pothole and submits a request via the city's mobile app and the city responds by either fixing the pothole or determining the level of importance the request warrants by the number of other requests received. While it may not sound like constructive engagement, the apps and websites that allow residents to submit requests for city services are a powerful way of engaging residents, not only in monitoring the city's assets, but in educating the public about city services and the processes that the city must perform to resolve the request.

These tools are most often leveraged by government to gather one-directional information from residents, and sometimes extended to consulting with residents on where to deploy city services and resources. In addition, citizen reporting also has the potential to impact and inform government decision-making by providing data on where the public wants services (via complaints) and data on where service is needed, aiding in identifying longer-term capital improvement projects.

One of the first apps to provide a forum for citizens to report non-emergency neighborhood issues and monitor the results of their report was [SeeClickFix](#). SeeClickFix users can report non-emergency neighborhood issues, such as potholes or graffiti and receive alerts of improvements made as a result of notifications. A similar app, [Citizens Connect](#), allows Boston residents to contact the city government at any time regarding neighborhood issues, such as potholes, litter, neglected sidewalks, damaged signs, and graffiti. Through their mobile phone citizens can use Citizens Connect to become the "city's eyes and ears." For example, a user can document a sidewalk overgrown with weeds and trash by taking and submitting a picture of the sidewalk to city officials.

Citizen reporting tools like SeeClickFix and Citizens Connect collect and generate massive amounts of data that government and residents can use to determine if performance is improving or declining in certain neighborhoods, draw correlations between types of requests and resulting crime in the area, and plan for future city projects to address chronic neighborhood problems. Only when cities leverage citizen request data to inform their decision-making do the citizen reporting apps truly become engagement tools.

opportunities for city staffers to revamp public commenting policies into collaborative writing exercises early on in a project's formation. Some policies that more easily lend themselves to co-production are those that involve areas or topics in which residents are inherently knowledgeable through their experience living in the community. These might include neighborhood planning, local ordinances, or other quality of life areas.

Empowering the Community

By empowering residents to solve local issues together in partnership with government, and by placing final decision-making and implementation in the hands of the public, city leaders can construct a more adaptive, responsive government. When the community as a whole is empowered, governmental services more often reflect the community's will than when engagement tools reach only small segments of the population and when the government serves as intermediary. This level of

engagement is rare because it requires government to relinquish responsibility for a solution and trust the public to provide it. Tools that connect neighbors and support peer-to-peer networking are usually a community's way of empowering itself without government intervention.

Open data is not strictly about informing the public. It also extends to empowering residents to build apps using the data provided by the city. However, moving open data from informing the public to empowering takes a concerted effort on the part of the government, through offering clean and easily downloadable data, effective marketing, and programming that introduces data to the community. For example, the City of Palo Alto worked directly with a community member requesting building permit data to develop an application called buildingeye.com. This app plots building permits onto a map so that people can easily learn about building projects near them.

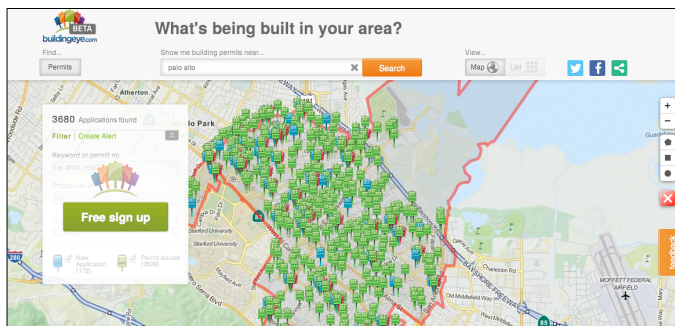


Image 8: Screenshot of buildingeye.com

Raw open data is not only utilized by app developers; researchers and community organizations also use open government data to inform policy recommendations and aid in researching community issues. In Oakland, California the [Urban Strategies Council](#) conducted research for the [African American Male Achievement Initiative](#) using data from Alameda County and the Oakland Unified School District, among other agencies. Without access to the data the research would not have been as comprehensive or as informed. In this case, open data led to policy changes at the school district level that addressed the issues identified in the Urban Strategy Council's report. The project resulted in a true data driven decision-making

process led by community organizations and foundations leveraging government data.

A number of tools used by neighbors to communicate and solve community problems have emerged over the past few years. These tools are useful for government staffers because they empower residents to tackle local issues without, or with limited government, intervention. Community networking tools, like [NextDoor](#) and [NeighborLand](#), are more emergent at the neighborhood level and less dictated by government. However, the City of San Jose partnered with NextDoor to provide the platform to communities across the city. The city's goal was to improve community problem solving by using its existing, limited resources for community building. It is too soon to tell the results of the project and available data from the city on whether it's achieved this goal were not found. The City of San Jose believes that empowering residents comes from a shift from treating residents like customers of governmental services, to respecting them as citizens who can be a part of the solution to deeply entrenched problems.

In New Orleans, [NeighborLand](#) launched with online and offline community building exercises, asking "What do you want in _____?" The online tool allows neighbors to post ideas, gather with other neighbors online and take action. The National Food Truck Coalition led a campaign that attracted [hundreds of neighbors to gather](#) on Neighborland, leading to offline meetings and agreement to push for changes in New Orleans' mobile food vending laws. The group of neighbors collaborated with an elected official and pushed legislation through. This engagement strategy in New Orleans was led by neighbors and community groups, relying on government for legislative reform, but essentially empowering the public to take action on issues that matter locally.

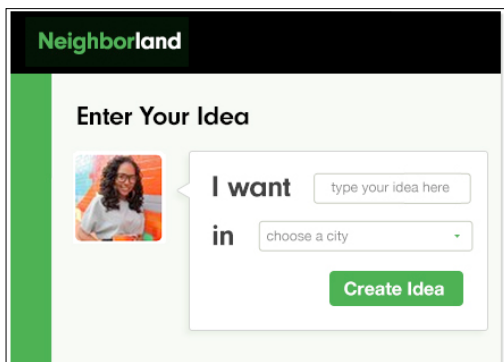


Image 9: Source NeighborLand.com

Gaming can also be a tool that empowers residents by including aspects of community social networking, education, and fun into government processes like community planning. [CommunityPlanit](#) makes collaborating with neighbors easy and fun. Users accumulate points and badges, encouraging a wide spectrum of the public to participate in the planning process. For example, CommunityPlanit was used in [Augustus Hawkins High School](#) in Los Angeles, California to empower the school community to determine how the high school's social media policies might help students determine their lives online. Through fun, interactive, and educational tools, residents are able to develop the school's social media policies and practices that have an impact in their lives.



Image 10: Screenshot of CommunityPlanit.

[Tidepools](#) is a project that was initiated by the community and eventually leveraged by government as a program to develop skills among residents in the community. Tidepools is a collaborative hub for mobile mapping and

social data, integrating feeds from multiple information sources into time-based maps, and re-skinable custom applications. The [Open Technology Institute](#), an institute CCIP is part of within the New America Foundation, incorporated an SMS texting system for residents to text their needs and resources to Tidepools maps maintained by the [Red Hook Initiative](#), the community organization that hosted tidepools and helped develop it. Neighborhoods use Tidepools to collect, store and visualize their data on local servers, merging the digital and physical space of their community. Residents can then access Tidepools and their community data over a local network, even without a permanent connection to the Internet. Residents of Red Hook, Brooklyn, have used it to bring together real-time transit data, stop-and-frisk police activity, community events and job opportunities.

Ways of Measuring Success

Government staffers typically measure the success of online engagement tools by recording the number of participants, the level of participation, and the outcomes of that engagement. Evaluating civic engagement success is dependent on the applied engagement strategy and purpose for engagement. For example, governments that want to do a better job explaining the budgeting process to residents by opening budget data and providing an easy-to-understand infographic might measure success by evaluating the number of people who downloaded the infographic or downloaded the budget data. However, cities wanting to generate ideas for specific projects might evaluate the activity on the city's engagement platform and measure success by whether a resident's idea resulted in the city pursuing a project. Measuring success of online civic engagement tools is also determined by engagement strategy (informing, consulting, empowering, etc.) and the city resources available to measure impact and outcomes.

As with the IAP2 Public Engagement Spectrum, the continuum for measuring success is not completely lateral. It is possible to jump between informing the public in one

phase of a project to launching an online tool aimed at resident empowerment in the final phases of the project. With that in mind, when reviewing the measurements on the following page, please be reminded that projects could include any or all of these as evaluation criteria. Determining the metrics in advance of the engagement is

ideal because it allows for gathering any necessary baseline data and allocating appropriate resources to post-project information and data gathering required for a proper evaluation.

Success Measurements

Engagement Strategy	Engagement Goal	Possible Success Measurements
Inform the public Providing information to the public about government services, council meetings, upcoming events, and resources is the first step to developing an engaged community.	Make government information easy to understand, accessible, and available to residents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) number of users, analyzed by desired audiences/groups b) number of pageviews c) number of shares or pingbacks d) number of data downloads e) repeat visitors • Outcome measurements <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) reduction in requests for information (requires baseline data on volume of requests on the subject or content that is being used for the specific engagement) b) more informed residents at offline event/meeting regarding specific topic (i.e. flood control policies) c) more informed residents in subsequent online engagement projects (i.e. providing ideas about general fund spending) d) targeted groups reached/informed? (i.e. seniors, youth, etc.)
Consulting on Ideas or Advice Seeking input from the public about upcoming policy decisions, service changes, or project ideas is a way of engaging the public in the early stages of a project. Consultation can lead to public involvement in the decision-making process at various stages of a project. To ensure proper engagement in decision-making, residents must be included in the early stages of a project or policy formation, provided with adequate information, and be consulted.	Generate ideas and feedback on local government projects, community programs, or spending. This strategy can also lead to better, more informed decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preceding engagement strategy measurements (see above) • Level of online engagement - resident <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) number of activities on the site, including: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i) number of profiles/accounts created ii) number of ideas posted iii) number of comments iv) number of likes • Level of online engagement - government staff <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) frequency of comments or responses by government staff b) revisions to the project resulting from resident comments or ideas • Level of offline engagement <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) number of participants at corresponding offline events/meetings • Outcome measurements <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Did a city project result from a resident idea? Did a resident idea inform a project or process? b) Was resident feedback utilized in making a decision? c) Is the public involved in decision-making?

Success Measurements (continued)

Engagement Strategy	Engagement Goal	Possible Success Measurements
<p>Cooperating with Residents and Civic Groups</p> <p>This strategy requires continual involvement with the public throughout the life of a project, decision, or policy. Not only is the public involved in decision-making, but they are also involved in exploring alternatives and implementation.</p>	<p>Work side-by-side with the public to ensure the project or policy reflects community needs and desires. Public opposition is minimized.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preceding engagement strategy measurements (see above) • Frequency of discussion between users (dialogue) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) civility of exchanges b) diversity of points of view represented • Frequency of discussion between users and government staff (dialogue) • Staff moderation of discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) dedicated moderator? • Ways in which collaboration is occurring <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) online - are online methods appropriate? b) offline - is it also happening offline? • Outcome measurements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) were alternatives created and reviewed with the public? b) did a better project result from the collaboration? (better could mean: reflects the community, faster, cheaper, less opposition, better ideas, better alternatives) c) were new relationships/ connections formed? d) were new partnerships with the city and civic groups created?
<p>Empowering the Community</p> <p>The community is a resource that should be leveraged by government to solve community issues. By empowering residents to solve local issues, government plays a supportive role, rather than a lead role. This stage of engagement exemplifies government as a platform.</p>	<p>Promote community resilience and community building by supporting community problem-solving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preceding engagement strategy measurements (see above) • Outcome measurements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Number of apps built from open data b) Number of neighborhood projects resulting from online collaboration and connection c) Assess government role in each project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Did government staff appropriately facilitate? ii) Were required resources provided? d) Does the public feel empowered by the process? (through surveying residents)

Visibility Measurements

One of the most common mistakes when deploying online tools is the notion that “if you build it, they will come.” That is just not true. Marketing and visibility are crucial to ensuring that the government engages residents online. Strategic marketing can aid in targeting specific groups of people to engage, such as residents from specific neighborhoods or young people. For residents who might not have home access to the internet, partnerships with community organizations can help in publicizing online tools and complementary offline meetings and events. The visibility of the platform is one of the strongest determinants of the number of participants.

“If you build it, they will come.” That is just not true.

Vast amounts of research and best practices have been produced on community outreach and targeted marketing, this report does not attempt to provide those here, rather the bulleted list below serves as a guide to developing metrics for outreach.

- Number of times site/program mentioned in the local press
 - a) Local media is an important partner in civic engagement. Most towns also have a number of smaller, local blogs that could be useful partners as well.
- Number of tweets using program hashtag or mention program
 - a) Some cities create hastags (ex. #hashtag) for projects they are promoting and seeking engagement with the public.
- Number of likes on Facebook page/ government Facebook page
 - a) If the local government has a Facebook page promoting the online tool through posts, pictures, and resident comments could lead to

more people visiting its online engagement tool.

- Visibility on government homepage
 - a) Government homepages can be great places to advertise the site.
- Ad placement on community television and radio, and number of viewers
 - a) A significant number of people still hear about politics and government news through television and radio. Consider promoting the government’s engagement platform on a community access channel.
- Click-through rate on Facebook, Twitter, Google ads
 - a) If the residents the town wants to engage are on Facebook then consider placing Facebook ads and monitor the click-through rate to determine if it is a successful marketing strategy.

It is important to recognize that while visibility can drive getting people to the online engagement tool, there are a number of other factors that determine the level of engagement on the site. Check out the City of Oakland’s Tip Box on page 8 for ways to engage the public once they show up.

Conclusion

As online engagement tools evolve and new tools come to market, government will be under increasing pressure to create opportunities for online engagement. As discussed in this guide, the advantages and impact from engaging the public are a result of the overall civic engagement strategy, of which online tool selection is only a small piece. For starters, government staffers pursuing civic engagement should determine the purpose for engagement, such as planning for park improvements or determining how best to allocate a federal community block grant. Once the purpose for engagement is clear, this guide will help in determining an online tool to use and planning for evaluating the engagement program.

Some may believe that online engagement tools are cheaper and easier to deploy successfully than offline engagement approaches. Neither belief is true. Some online engagement platforms are relatively inexpensive when compared to large-scale town hall events, but they do have associated costs and require staff time for moderation, community management, marketing, and evaluation.

Depending on where your city is on the spectrum of engagement, starting with a plan to better inform the

community can have a significant impact and positive results. If your city is already doing a good job of keeping the public informed with accessible and easy-to-understand information and data, then planning for a deeper engagement that requires consulting or cooperating with the public could benefit not only the local government, but also build connections among residents in the community, moving one-step closer to empowering the community.

Appendix 1: Research Methodology

Research for this report was conducted primarily through online searches for civic technology currently used by local governments and residents to enhance engagement. In addition, research included a review of literature focusing on online civic engagement and interviews with local government leaders and online tool creators.

Appendix 2: List of Online Civic Engagement Tools Mentioned in Report

Online Tool or Company	Known Uses in United States	Link to tool	Cost
Informing the Public			
BaltimoreCode.org	Baltimore, MD; San Francisco, CA	http://baltimorecode.org/	Free or fee for service
CKAN Open Data Portal	Santa Cruz, CA; Houston, TX; Denver, CO; Lexington, KY; Virginia; Colorado State	http://ckan.org/instances/	Free or fee for service
California Budget Challenge	Federal government; California State; Los Angeles, CA; Oakland, CA; County of Alameda, CA; Wellington, FL; Philadelphia, PA	http://next10.org/california-budget-challenge	Fee for service
ChicagoCouncilmatic	Chicago, IL	http://chicagocouncilmatic.org/	Free or fee for service
Engaging video content	Los Angeles County Flood Control District	http://bit.ly/1jKsZir	Fee for service
Open Budget	Palo Alto, CA; Salinas, CA; Monterey, CA; Riverside, CA; Bishop, CA; Thousand Oaks, CA; Simi Valley, CA; Dublin, CA; Bell, CA; Sierra Madre, CA; Richfield, MN	http://bit.ly/1jKw2qT	Fee for service
Outline.com	State of Massachusetts	http://outline.com/	Fee for service
Socrata Open Data Portal	San Francisco, CA; Baltimore, MD; Austin, TX; Metro Chicago, IL; New York City, NY; King County, WA; Cook County, IL; State of Oregon; Seattle, WA; Chicago, IL; Wellington, FL; Alameda County, CA; Somerville, MA	http://www.socrata.com/	Fee for service
Streaming Council Video	Fresno, CA and numerous other municipalities	http://bit.ly/18HAHrY	Fee for service

Civic Engagement Tools (continued)

Online Tool or Company	Known Uses in United States	Link to tool	Cost
Consulting with the Public for Ideas or Advice			
EngageOakland	Oakland, CA; San Francisco, CA; Las Vegas, NV and over 400 communities.	http://www.engageoakland.com/	Fee for service
Open Town Hall	Rancho Cordova, CA; Fremont, CA; Douglas County, NV; Marin County, CA; Metropolitan Transportation Council, CA; and numerous other communities.	http://www.opentownhall.com/	Fee for service
Cooperating with the Residents and Civic Groups			
CivicInsight	New Orleans, LA	http://civicinsight.com/	Fee for service
MixedInk	White House Open Government Initiative	http://www.mixedink.com/	Fee for service
Shareabouts	Chicago, IL; Cincinnati, OH	http://openplans.org/work/shareabouts/	Free or fee for service
Textizen	Chicago Unified School District, IL; Milwaukie, OR; Philadelphia, PA; Hillsborough, FL	https://www.textizen.com/	Fee for service
Empowering the Community			
APIs and open data can lead to various apps, websites, and research	Ex. Open311 API	http://open311.org/	N/A
Community PlanIt	Los Angeles, CA; Salem, MA; Philadelphia, PA; additional international projects	https://communityplanit.org/	Unknown
NeighborLand	Numerous municipalities	https://neighborland.com/	Free or fee for service
NextDoor	Over 100 cities	https://nextdoor.com/	Fee for service
Tidepools	Red Hook, Brooklyn; Gezi Park Protests in Turkey; Allied Media Conference in Detroit	http://tidepools.co/	Free

California Civic Innovation Project

The California Civic Innovation Project (CCIP) aims to diffuse innovation in California local governments through researching and recommending organizational and emerging practices that enable the creation and adoption of innovative policies, technology, and programs that deepen community engagement and accelerate civic innovation. Our research and practical exploration aims to break down barriers to innovation within municipalities allowing for deeper relationships between residents and government. CCIP was launched in the Spring of 2012 with support from the James Irvine Foundation.

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