

KEY FINDINGS:

*From Sustainable Jersey's
Strategic Public Information and
Engagement Technology Plans*

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2017, Sustainable Jersey provided technology management assistance to two pilot municipalities, chosen through a competitive application process. The first, Chatham Borough, a 2.5 square mile bedroom community in Morris County with a population of approximately 9,000 residents. The second, Franklin Township, a rural community in Hunterdon County of approximately 23 square miles and 3,000 residents. Each of these communities expressed interest in ensuring a high level of engagement with the public via modern technology methods. Both towns also participate in the Sustainable Jersey program with active green teams showing a desire to move forward on public information and engagement related actions.

This report will serve as a summary of findings, highlighting the common challenges faced by smaller municipalities throughout the state in utilizing technology to keep residents engaged and informed.

The way in which citizens interact with their world is rapidly changing, expecting access to information and responses to requests to be immediate. Meanwhile municipal government continues to lag behind in the way in which it provides services, collects input and shares information with its constituents. This lack of technological advancement has caused frustration among citizens and a growing call for advancement.

Recognizing these needs, Sustainable Jersey has released a suite of actions in the area of Public Information and Engagement (PIE) to provide towns with the framework to modernize these interactions and facilitate more sound governance practices. Many towns are adopting these initiatives as goals to further engage the public in the future of the municipalities in which they live and work.

GOALS AND CHALLENGES

With any new change, challenges can arise. For many communities, these challenges center around the level of technology sophistication needed to properly implement these helpful new solutions. Budget, staff support, skill set, and proper technology governance all contribute toward the slow growth of technologies in local government. The following key areas for improvement, found through the two pilot assessments, can be applied to most small-sized municipalities in New Jersey:

- Lack of understanding of the impact of technology as a method to improve internal efficiencies and citizen engagement;
- Absence of proper technology governance, administration and oversight which leads to poor utilization of existing technology solutions;
- Insufficient funding earmarked for both the implementation of appropriate technology solutions and the hiring/contracting of qualified staff and consultants to

lead technology and engagement projects;

- Nonexistent centralized control of communication channels which leads to fragmented messaging or underutilization of such channels, especially social media which is highly effective in reaching new demographics of citizens;
- Immature internal automation systems which result in missed opportunities to communicate efficiently with the public regarding their requests for information or services;
- Lack of online payments system which results in citizen frustration when attempting to access online services;
- Absence of the use of technology to engage citizens in the decision making process which reduces input from those most directly impacted by quality of life decisions; and
- Low awareness of the benefits of an open data strategy and accompanying tools.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES

IT Governance

For municipalities struggling with IT governance issues, certain principals should be followed in order to craft an effective governance strategy for your municipality. These are to be viewed as recommendations only. All municipalities are encouraged to conduct in depth strategic technology and PIE planning to identify recommendations that fit their individual needs. IT governance requires an open and collaborative environment to make organization-wide decisions as effectively as possible. This process often involves representatives from each department in a committee structure. The committee is responsible for prioritizing technology initiatives, developing IT policies, establishing an agreed upon service level agreement for the IT services group (internal or external), and working to ensure organization-wide adoption of new technology solutions. In order to make sure this process is effective, organizations must be sure that suitable

policy and procedures are in place that this committee is able to follow and enforce, as well as the appropriate IT leaders are involved and have the organizational authority to enforce organizational and security standards. This process will ensure that all departments have buy in and ownership to the process, and projects are being proposed with an understanding of how the limited technology funds are being utilized to better the entire municipal enterprise.

Specific Communications Oversight and Strategy

Due to lower staffing levels present in smaller municipal governments, many localities of this size distribute the communications task of the “public information officer” amongst many staff, and in some cases even volunteers. Distribution of the work with no centralized point of control leads to fragmented messaging to constituents. Quite often, a lack of coordination of communication efforts

results in redundancies and missed opportunities. Efficiency becomes essential as citizen demands for information continually evolve. It becomes important to understand how your residents wish to receive their information and evolve your municipal communications strategy accordingly. Local governments need to place control over all municipal channels centrally in one office with a qualified staff member. This staff member should be given editorial control over messaging and choice of appropriate channels to put in use by the government. Municipalities should consider not only traditional channels such as the municipal websites, newsletters and television stations but also social media channels, emergent notification channels, and community partners such as libraries, civic associations and hyper-local media. Often these responsibilities may fall on a municipal clerk, information technology director or an assistant business administrator, however in all cases this person should have full organizational authority to operate these media channels independently of control of others.

Social Media Use in Local Government

In order to effectively reach the community within municipalities, it is important to understand trends of how people choose to receive information. According to Pew Internet Research¹, 7 in 10 Americans use social media to connect with others and receive news. This is a vast change from 2005 when just 5% of adults in the U.S. utilized at least one form of social media. Further studies show that while adults ages 18-29 were primarily using social media at its beginning, more recent data shows that older age ranges now also utilize common platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. While adults ages 18-29 remain the largest consumer of these platforms (86%), the older generations are using at least one social media platform: Adults ages 30-49 age range (80%) and ages 50-64 (64%)².

Local governments must adopt these technologies as another method to reach the citizens they serve. Often times the integration of social media channels with the municipal website will provide efficient means to reach these platforms, offering a “click once, publish everywhere” functionality. If local governments are looking to start slowly, Facebook remains the most

popular platform. As of April 2016, 68% of those adults using a social media platform utilize Facebook³, with 76% of them using it daily. Social media adoption should not be looked at as an insurmountable task. Local governments are advised to consider a three-step process to begin using social media. First, identify the best platform to utilize and whether integration with your town's website is available. Next, decide whether your municipality will push out information only, or engage the public in two-way dialogue. Regardless, the adoption of both social media and governance policies are highly recommended. Lastly, begin using the platform and adopt appropriate archiving protocols. Remember, all information and comments published on social media are considered public records. A sample municipal social media policy can be found [here](#).

Immature Technology Systems and Payment Systems

Often, as a result of lack of funding, small local governments only invest a minimal amount of resources to their technology infrastructure. Even those municipalities that provide for ongoing investment do so tenuously and often do not provide for proper oversight of

the products through appropriate staffing or consulting contracts. Again, demands of the citizens will largely drive these investments, but common trends show the need for citizens to access their governments 24/7/365 from any location, on any device. In order to provide this immediate access to services and information, governments must first ensure a healthy baseline technology infrastructure consisting of PC devices for staff that are sufficiently modern, appropriate training of those staff using these new systems, and sufficient security and privacy controls to protect all involved with these processes from improper disclosures or loss due to an attack or breach. Some areas of investment noted as priorities of many local governments include:

- ✓ Citizen Request Management
- ✓ Online payment systems to fully enable other solutions
- ✓ Forms & permit processing solutions
- ✓ Agenda management solutions
- ✓ Website enhancement and redesign
- ✓ Internal workflow software often related to permitting and licensing
- ✓ OPRA request tracking and

transparency solutions

- ✓ Document management solution
- ✓ Survey tools & other commenting platforms
- ✓ Open data systems

Each public sector entity should explore these solutions through their technology & budget oversight process. Utilizing the best practices contained above, governments should prioritize required initiatives and ensure proper buy in, change management and project management are in place to maximize solution effectiveness.

Public Engagement Platforms

Attendance at public meetings continues to fall as the demand for individual's time increases. Work, family, vocational responsibilities take a front seat, while civic duty gets put on the back burner. Due to this lack of participation in the civic arena by constituents, local governments are missing out on input that can assist in the decision making of quality of life issues. Dozens of technology solutions exist that enable municipalities to digitally engage their residents on critical topics. Some examples include polling or surveying capabilities via text; livestreaming public meetings;

hosting real-time chats on Facebook or Twitter; or the ability to post a proposal, collect feedback and allow the public to cast votes on that proposal. Some of these solutions are free or have a small fee, so they are worth trying to gauge public interest. Whichever platform a municipality uses to engage the public, it must be monitored for appropriate use by the public, and regularly maintained so that questions or comments by the public do not go unheard.

Open Data Programs

The demand for open data is one of the newest trends that citizens expect from their government. The desire to be able not just to interact with government but influence and participate in the democratic process is a key concept in this process. Governments must first start this process with education as to the basic components of an open data program as well as the benefits, both internally and for the public. It became clear throughout the pilot assessments that many elected officials and staff members do not understand how an open data program can create internal efficiencies and save money. Should a government decide to attempt a program, a few options are available. Governments can publish a list and

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OPRA requests and responses onto their website, which allows for an easy way to begin opening data effectively and cuts back on the number of repeated OPRA requests made to the clerk's office and other departments. A more advanced step would be for municipal departments to begin inventorying and organizing their data, which will then be posted on the municipal website. Both of these options can simply be formatted in a simple spreadsheet, or through use of a third party platform. It is important to remember that the data stored in some files may contain sensitive or private information, which will need to be classified.

For a list of available technology solutions related to the findings within this report, visit Sustainable Jersey's PIE Solutions Catalogue. This digital catalogue is regularly updated, and does not serve as an endorsement for any product contained in the list.