



Improve Public Engagement in Municipal Government

10 Points

15 Points

New Action – October 2015

Public participation in governmental decisions is crucial to a sustainable society. To provide meaningful opportunities for people to engage requires proactive steps so that citizens know what decisions their governing body is considering, and understand how to be a part of the process to influence such decisions. By taking proactive steps to engage the public, municipalities can strike a balance between meaningful public input, and making efficient decisions in a way that can ultimately make big decisions less controversial and more predictable.

This action awards points for towns that address this challenge by expanding their promotion of governing body meetings, and making meetings more accessible, and more conducive to public participation, beyond regularly scheduled public meetings of the governing body.

This is a variable point action. As long as the necessary pieces of information are published, updated and easily accessible on the website, the processes are still actively being implemented, and the submission meets the recommended standards, a town can receive 10 points for this action. If the town is going for the extra 5 points, two alternative sources of collecting public input must have been used within the past 18 months. Because the intent of this action is for the governing body to keep these processes and information current, updates to the submission requirements need to be submitted with each certification cycle for towns to receive another 10-15 points.

For certified communities, this action can count toward a Gold Star in Health. See the Gold Star Standard section of this action for more information.

Why is it important?

Governance is a key dimension of sustainability. In order to maintain a healthy governance structure, people must feel empowered to participate in quality of life decisions within their communities. Empowerment comes through information and access to decision makers. These are the core elements to this action.

With digital tools such as websites and social media platforms, the reach of municipal governments is much broader than it was back in 2004 when the Open Public Meetings Act was passed into law. This action helps a town to capitalize on those various platforms, along with other additions to OPMA's minimum requirements to assist in getting the word out on upcoming meetings and important decisions being made in real time. A municipality will engage a broader audience within the community by going where the people are.

But the challenges do not end with simply promoting information on public meetings more broadly. With a growing apathy among the citizenry and participation rates declining, local government entities need to come up with creative ways to engage their community members. Budget cuts and other pressing issues make it more necessary than ever to keep the public informed and solicit input on proposed changes to programs, policies, etc. There is an opportunity here for municipal governments and residents to form partnerships within the decision making process, rather than the adversarial relationship we see all too often.

Making a concerted effort to reach all cross sections of the community, beyond the "usual suspects" through varied means of engagement can help a governing body tap into new skills and broaden its knowledge base. Collaborative problem solving can not only build stronger relationships and trust between the community and its government, but also can provide efficacy in the way that quality of life decisions are being made.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

Depending on the specific duties of the municipal clerk and administrator, one of these staff members should be the lead on this action. A town's IT person(s) will be critical in the development, analysis, and operations of some of these platforms. Municipalities will also need the buy-in from their governing body members, and assistance from community members that service socially vulnerable populations, including the green team and other specialized municipal boards.

Timeframe

Setting up the pieces to this action should not take more than 1-2 months to research appropriate platforms and create necessary materials. It may take several months, or up to a year to create the opportunities to implement the public input collection and interactions between public and government official pieces.

Project costs and resource needs

Because so much of this action relates to online engagement, municipalities will need tech-savvy staff to help with implementation, staff that are comfortable completing Internet research and doing cost-benefit analysis on various engagement tools, as well as an updated email and/or phone database. Depending upon whether a town will develop tools in-house or go with a third party provider for some of the action elements will determine what financial resources it will need. The greatest resource a town will need is the buy in and dedication from government officials to not only agree that this action is needed, but to be willing to continue following through on its components.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

This section lists the requirements for earning points for this action. It is a variable point action. **It is highly recommended that towns view this in depth guidance for implementing the action and examples from around the state and nation here.** ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#)) A town does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as the final product meets the requirements.

Required to receive 10 points: Make information regarding meetings and matters of the governing body more available to the public and create new opportunities for citizens to provide input to the governing body during regularly scheduled public meetings of the boards and beyond.

Some of these steps will supersede the minimum requirements in the Open Public Meetings Act (P.L. 1975, c. 231)

1. Establish a process for the public to sign up on the municipal website for email and/or text announcements about public meetings (i.e. requests for public comment, public meeting location or scheduling changes, agenda modifications, etc.) Routinely publicize its availability, and make sure the signup procedures are clear and accessible to the broad public. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))
2. Regularly and broadly publicize the date, time, and location of all regularly scheduled public meetings (including the annual list of scheduled meetings) of the governing body in digital and hard copy formats, at least two weeks before the meetings. Although emergency meetings and last minute meetings of special nature are excluded from this requirement, it is important to notice these meetings as soon as possible through digital channels in order to get the word out quickly. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))
3. Develop and post the rules for citizen input at public meetings in an accessible and easily found location, such as the municipal website, public bulletin boards, in the municipal clerk's office, and meeting rooms of the governing body. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))
4. To complete this action please implement 3 of the 5 options listed below (4a-4e):
 - a. Post draft agendas and relevant supporting material on the municipal website within an appropriate amount of time for the public to review material, by at least the Friday before the meeting. You may want to note that the agenda is in draft form and changes may still be made up until the meeting. When supporting materials are in a format unable to be posted online, provide notice that the additional supporting material is available for review at (location).

Some examples of supporting materials for regular sessions of the governing body that a town might include are minutes, resolutions, proposed ordinances, regular monthly reports, supporting information on public hearing items, bill lists, and any correspondence or communications received.

b. Write meeting agendas so they clearly and concisely summarize what is being acted on by the governing authority, and include ordinance titles in the agenda item. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

c. Place public comment portions at a time relevant to when most working people can participate (at the beginning of all evening public meetings, and closer to the end of afternoon meetings).

d. Livestream and/or record public meetings and post online within two weeks following the meeting. If posting the video on a third party site, a link should be prominently placed on the municipal website. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

e. Expand public input opportunities between the governing body and the public by utilizing one of the following approaches in the previous year:

- Establish office hours when elected officials can be reached by the public.
- Post email addresses for elected officials on the website.
- Host online conversations via social media channels between residents & elected officials.
- Hold meet and greet public events where the community can talk with the mayor or governing body members, for example, holding open houses with elected officials before public meetings, holding “office hour” road shows or meet and greets around town.
- Hold teleconference or online “meetings” to gather public input on proposals or visioning processes using software applications such as TelephoneTownhall and TeleTownhall.

Note: Remember to public notice any of the above interactions where there is a quorum. If the governing body plans to use any of these means to hold an official public meeting, public noticing requirement via the Open Public Meetings Act must be followed, and opportunity for the public to watch and participate must be provided.

5. **Governing bodies can earn an additional 5 points (for a total of 15 points)** by undertaking two additional public input activities in the 18 month period prior to submitting for certification. Activities such as those listed below would meet this requirement:

a. Utilize a questionnaire, survey or polling tool shared through email or mobile phone to gather input on a municipal program or initiative. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

b. Allow for public comment on proposed agenda items using a formal web based input process. The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission has a great model for a simple commenting form used to collect public input on actions related to upcoming board meetings, along with other options for public comment.

c. Host online conversations via social media channels with residents on topics of community interest. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

d. Utilize an online collaborative decision-making platform to solicit input and ideas from the public on upcoming proposals or quality of life decisions. This is different from platforms that ask the public to report an issue or request public services. See “Tools for Public Engagement – Online Collaboration” under “Resources” for examples. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

e. Collaborate with municipal advisory boards or agencies within your community to gather input. This goes beyond a related municipal board existing, towns must work with such a board to engage and collect input from the public. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

f. Host public information sessions in multiple locations to assure session reach diverse geographic, cultural, and socio-economic populations. ([Click here for additional NJ municipal examples and guidance.](#))

Remember to public notice any of the above interactions where there is a quorum. If the governing body plans to use any of these means to hold an official public meeting, public noticing requirement via the Open Public Meetings Act must be followed, and opportunity for the public to watch and participate must be provided.

What to submit to earn points for this action

In order to earn points for this action, the following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met. This is a variable point structured action. As long as the necessary pieces of information are published and easily accessible on the website, the processes are still actively being implemented, and your submission meets the recommended

standards, a town can receive up to 15 points for this action. Towns must complete the downloadable [submission checklist](#).

To earn the base 10 points, towns must complete steps 1-4 in the "What to Do" section. To earn an additional 5 points towns will need to complete step 5 in the "What to Do section."

1. Description of Implementation – Please use the text box provided on the submission page for this action to share of any details on what has been accomplished and the impact it has or will have on the municipality beyond what was contained in the submission checklist.
2. Upload the following documentation:
 - a. A completed [submission checklist](#)
 - b. A copy of the rules adopted for citizen input at public meetings, unless a link is provided to where this can be found online (#3)
 - c. A sample agenda to show evidence of how agendas are written clearly so that the public understands what action is being taken (#4b)
 - d. Any screen shots that provide evidence of submission checklist items where links are not available. Please not in the appropriate spot on the checklist if a screen shot is being uploaded instead of a link to the web location.

This is an annual program action and your documentation will need to be updated annually to continue to receive points for this action.

IMPORTANT NOTES: There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Gold Star Standard

Successful completion of this action at the 15 point level will meet the requirement of an Additional action for earning a Gold Star in Health. For more information on earning a Gold Star in Health see the [Gold Star Standards](#) section of the website.

Spotlight: What NJ municipalities are doing

While we have not yet found a town that is doing everything included within this action, there are several examples of towns executing certain portions, as listed here ([hyperlink to document](#)).

Resources

See the "What to Do" section for links to resources specific to steps listed in this action.

GENERAL RESOURCES:

[Deliberative Democracy Consortium](#) – brings together practitioners and researchers to come up with reports and case studies of how governments can connect with citizens through public participation

[Govtech.com](#) article on "[4 Ways to Get Citizens Excited to Engage](#)" provides strategies for thoughtful public engagement

[Institute for Local Government](#) – provides practical, impartial and easy to use resources related to public engagement, including with immigrants, through technology, how to respond to challenges, etc. (916) 658-8208

[Municipal Clerks' Association of New Jersey](#) – assists in setting up uniform methods of procedures in New Jersey towns: Joel Popkin - ExecutiveDirector@NJClerks.org | 732-609-6441

[Municipal Research and Services Center \(MRSC\)](#) – a nonprofit focused on supporting local governments through consultation and free resources; provides a comprehensive list of best practices, tools, case studies and research geared around effective communication and public participation, from using technology to reach the citizenry, to engaging volunteers, to communication strategies, and more. mrsc@mrsc.org | (800) 933-

National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation – created a 9 page “Engagement Streams Framework” which outlines proven practices to introduce new information to the public and get their input, and breaks down each technique to show who should participate, length of time and size of group

New Jersey Foundation for Open Government – a nonprofit focused on protecting and expanding public access to government records and meetings, and a good source of information on implementation standards of the Open Public Records Act: info@njfog.org

New Jersey State League of Municipalities – an advocacy organization for NJ municipal governments: 609-695-3481 | <http://njslom.org>; “Common Issues Concerning Municipal Issues and the Open Public Meetings Act”

Nonprofit Tech for Good – offers free webinars, blog posts and other resources providing tips and advice to effectively use social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, Google+, etc.). While it is geared around nonprofits, the information can easily apply to local governments. heather@npotechforgood.com

Open Public Meetings Act (P.L.1975, c.231)

Open Public Records Act (P.L. 2001, CHAPTER 404, N.J.S. 47:1A-1 et seq.)

PlaceMatters – a Denver based non-profit think tank for civic engagement and process in planning, creating opportunities for informed, inclusive decision making in the planning of vibrant cities and communities. info@placematters.org

The Participatory Budgeting Project – a nonprofit that supports municipalities in participatory budgeting with toolkits, trainings and other resources. For a fee they will also provide advanced training, on the ground support and facilitation of the public process. info@participatorybudgeting.org | 347-652-1478

The Sunlight Foundation – a national go-to resource for best practices on open government: 202-742-1520

TOOLS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT -EMAIL, MOBILE & PHONE:

Google Forms – a free way to create a form or questionnaire that can be embedded into an email or on a website

GovPilot – fee based platform that allows departments to go paperless and connect through an internal dashboard, share data, set up work flows, communication with constituents through notifications, create map visualizations using GIS and create forms online so residents can submit requests, pay obligations, register for services, etc. 201.222.1155 (NJ users: Morristown, Passaic City, Union Township)

Nixle – a mobile and email application that will provide community announcements and emergency alerts to the public, some for free including emergency and public safety alerts

Periscope – a platform to live broadcast from a smartphone

Poll Everywhere – a fee-based polling platform based on size of audience; allows for real time polling

Survey Gizmo – a fee-based email & mobile survey tool

Survey Monkey – a fee-based survey tool for email & mobile

TeleTownhall – allows users to hold public meetings over the phone and web

Telephone Townhall – allows users to hold public meetings over the phone and web

Textizen – a fee-based (set up and training fees) platform that allows sending project updates, event reminders, surveys or polls to the public; uses a web based platform where towns can easily analyze data. Get [examples of cities](#) using the tool.)

TOOLS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT - ONLINE COLLABORATION:

Google Moderator – a free way to start discussions around topics; gain access through a free Google

account.

Granicus – a fee-based citizen participation tool that allows people to comment on upcoming public meeting agendas through an online form

IdeaScale – a free online forum to vet ideas, vote, and discuss feedback. (Example: [Austin, TX](#) uses for public voting on issues)

Loomio – a free collaborative decision-making tool where anyone can suggest an idea and others can vote and comment on that idea; municipal officials can use it to share policy proposals with their constituency

Mind Mixer – a fee-based tool to crowd source input on policy or planning proposals or visioning processes

- Examples: [“Sustainable Southfield”](#) (MI) uses Mind Mixer to gather input as it is updating its master plan; [Maplewood, MN](#) leads discussions with residents around various quality of life issues using the platform; [“Inspire Boulder”](#) (CO) uses Mind Mixer as a 24/7 digital town hall; [Maryland’s bus network](#) asks residents to join the discussion on its transportation planning process

NeighborLand - collaborative tool between neighborhood and city officials and planning departments in order to pose questions, collect feedback, and create actions out of proposals. (Examples: San Francisco, Houston, Portland and Lowell, MA use for visioning and planning projects)

NextDoor – a free private website for neighborhoods to connect and share information; people must show proof of address to gain access in order to keep the membership genuine; police departments use it to post updates, news, safety alerts, tip requests, etc. (Example: New York City uses NextDoor to provide residents with updates and generate discussions around issues)

Open Town Hall – a fee based platform for officials and citizens to post proposals, and others can comment on the ideas

PLANETCIVIC - an online platform for civic engagement where elected officials and town residents can collectively and constructively set the priorities for their town. Requires proof address to gain access. The platform also includes a utility to highlight all available volunteering opportunities in town.

TOOLS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT - SOCIAL MEDIA:

Facebook – a free site where a town can engage its residents by starting discussions, sharing events, etc.

Instagram – a free photo sharing (Sacramento Police Department use for their “Day in the Life” series: <https://instagram.com/sacramentopolice/>)

Twitter – a free platform to share news, updates, photos, and start conversations through live Twitter chats

YouTube – a free video sharing of speeches, TV appearances, archived public meetings, PSAs, etc.; use Insight function to see who is viewing videos; second biggest search engine after Google

TOOLS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT - VISUALIZATIONS:

Google Fusion – a free, easy to use application that creates maps that tell stories from the simple uploading of a spreadsheet. Examples: [NYC Comptroller](#); [NJ Spotlight](#); [WNYC](#)

Info graphics – a powerful way to tell a story through visualizations. There are sites you can use to create info graphics for free: [Tableau Public](#), [PicktoChart](#)

UStream – a free way to livestream public meetings; also have monthly plans that provide customizable support; equipment to attach to your camera in order to broadcast live will still be needed, such as Cerevo Live Shell which has been found by some as cost effective and reliable

TOOLS FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT - INCLUSIVITY & ACCESSIBILITY:

Municipal Engagement for People with Disabilities: Strategies for Communication and Inclusion, developed by the **New Jersey Institute for Disabilities** and Sustainable Jersey, in cooperation with the Progressive Center for Independent Living, DAWN Center for Independent Living, and Resources for Independent Living. This guide shares ways for municipal governments to effectively communicate with and engage persons with disabilities in decision-making and consensus building. Funded by an Inclusive Healthy

Communities Grant from the Division of Disability Services, New Jersey Department of Human Services.

The Supportive Housing Association of NJ's [Toolkit for Municipalities](#) provides practical advice and guidance for local government inclusion and accessibility within the physical environment, cultural and recreational opportunities, civic participation and engagement, communication, transportation, and housing access.