

Technology and Public Engagement

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Policy Brief



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Disruptive online technologies have reshaped industries in the decades since the advent of the Internet. Now, many of these technologies are coming to local governments and forcing city officials to rethink how they do business, particularly when it comes to engaging with their citizens. The Town Hall meeting style of civic engagement and public participation is older than the United States. But it presents challenges in representativeness, access, and reach. Civic innovators in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors have developed new methods, platforms, practices and goals for public engagement, often aiming to facilitate a more deliberative, iterative process. Many cities have embraced these new tools, but too often they stand apart from normal operations, both in

their integration into city functions and management structure.

Yet these trends should not discourage cities from incorporating new technology into their public engagement strategies. Rather, cities should go one step further in their planning process, fully determining engagement needs, designing ongoing management protocols and systems, and providing support to employees in both training and incorporation into operations to ensure that they not only get the most of their engagement tool investments, but that when taken with current practices the whole is greater than the sum of their parts.



Methods

This policy brief is based on research conducted on behalf of the City of Oakland Public Ethics Commission in 2014. Building on that office's internal report on transparency in city government, the project developed a framework for assessing engagement platforms. The effort identified best practices in engagement, focusing particularly on online platforms, in order to help the city develop a comprehensive public

engagement strategy. Conclusions were drawn from a literature review, a survey of city staff, observations at public meetings and key-informant interviews with Oakland city staff and successful engagement practitioners around the country. This brief distills these findings to provide lessons for all localities looking to effectively incorporate online methods into their public engagement systems.

What is Public Engagement?

There is little consensus on a conclusive definition of public engagement. For the purpose of this discussion, public engagement is defined as processes designed to facilitate communication and deliberation among citizens, elected officials and city staff about issues and decisions involving policy and service delivery. Key in this definition is the incorporation of the trend among both academics and practitioners to emphasize and facilitate a collaborative relationship between government and governed where all have both a stake and a role in decision making. Rather than simply sharing information with citizens, the goal is to actively empower citizens to control not just outcomes but also the processes to achieve them.

The International Association of Public Participation's (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation is a widely cited and

useful framework for understanding types of engagement and evaluating particular strategies. The Spectrum classifies engagement along a five-point scale:

Inform: To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.

Consult: To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.

Involve: To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.

Collaborate: To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision, including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.

Empower: To place the final decision-making in the hands of the public.¹

The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.



INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities, and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Figure 1: IAP2's Public Participation Spectrum

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Cities have a set of traditional tools for engaging with their residents, including public meetings, networks of city-linked neighborhood organizations, citizen boards and commissions, and websites through which citizens can take care of some routine business, like applying for permits or paying parking tickets. Some cities, like Oakland, have also codified their commitments to engagement. In addition to a statewide open meeting law, the Brown Act, Oakland passed its own Sunshine Ordinance in 1997 that carefully outlines open records, noticing and public meeting requirements. Yet, scholars and practitioners have long lamented that traditional forms of public engagement and solicitation of public input are outmoded and serve neither the public's interest in being heard nor the government's interest in understanding and acting on public sentiment.



Online tools can address some of the common problems associated with traditional engagement by bringing access to public decision-making into citizens' homes via the Internet for viewing at their convenience.² Techies also see potential for the online space to support platforms that better facilitate collaboration among citizens and government and ongoing deliberation on issues, rather than simply information sharing or late-stage airing of grievances. Software has created new access points into the policymaking process and systems by which public officials solicit various types of input.

Engagement Potential

Cities have liberally experimented with engagement tools along the IAP2 spectrum, ranging from sophisticated third-party run websites to lower-tech listservs and collaborative spaces. According to a 2009 National League of Cities survey:

- More than 90% of cities indicated they use basic online tools, such as city websites and publishing city employees' email addresses.
- 86% update their website regularly with agendas and proposed action items on which people can comment.
- Two-thirds of cities use special town hall style meetings to convene large groups to discuss issues of particular interest.
- 14% use online forums enabling a two-way conversations and deliberation.

In a January 2014 study, the New America Foundation analyzed various forms of digital engagement tools along a modified version of the IAP2 spectrum. This report, designed to help practitioners understand online tools, offered a comprehensive look at the different types of platforms available in relation to the type of engagement they generated.³ Utilized effectively alongside traditional methods, these platforms can help create a robust engagement strategy. Oakland, like many cities, uses several online tools suited to facilitating different types of engagement as summarized below.

New America (IAP2) Spectrum	Inform	Consult (Involve)	Cooperate (Collaborate)	Empower
Platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Websites • Infographics • Multimedia • Simulators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideation platform • Social Media - when used to exchange ideas and comments • Citizen reporting app 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wikis • Collaborative writing platforms • Mapping tools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Application Programming Interface (API) • Community planning games • Neighborhood networking sites
Oakland's Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oaklandnet.com • Legistar 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EngageOakland • Department-specific Twitter and Facebook accounts • SeeClickFix 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OaklandWiki (not managed by the city) • Oakland Answers (content based on citizen-generated questions) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some NCPCs support neighborhood-level listservs and networking spaces

Figure 2: Oakland Resources and New America Foundation/IAP2 Spectrum platform

Take this hypothetical experience of an Oakland citizen concerned about safety in her local park:

1. A citizen hears on her local Neighborhood Crime Prevention Council (NCPC) listserv that there have been several muggings in her local park. She and her neighbors discuss the issue over email with the participation of their local NCPC representative from the city.
2. Learning from the NCPC representative that park safety is an issue, the city creates a discussion topic on their online “ideation” website, a hub for citizens and city officials to post ideas and comments about civic issues. The citizen posts her concerns on the site and reads creative ideas to improve park safety offered by other city residents, such as better landscaping increasing visibility to discourage crime.
3. Interested in the city’s park maintenance schedule and activities, the citizen turns to Oakland Answers, a website that provides answers and resources to common user-generated questions. She doesn’t see the information she needs and submits a question to the city. Officials at the Parks Department see her question and then research and post an answer.
4. The citizen learns that there are no plans to improve sight lines at her park. She goes to the city website to learn when the Parks Commission meets next.
5. She attends the Parks Commission meeting to explain her concern

about park safety and to suggest that better landscaping may help.

6. With the help and support of the Parks Commission, the citizen presents her solution before the City Council. They agree and vote to fund landscaping work that creates open sight lines at parks to improve safety.

This hypothetical Oakland citizen thus uses tools at every stage of the spectrum. Empowered to act through her neighborhood listserv, she consults with the city and other residents on a discussion forum. She then collaborates with the city to improve access to information about park maintenance. Through this process she is informed about both existing policy and opportunities to talk with decision makers. She then attends a public meeting of a citizen commission to enlist their help and eventually she obtains a legislative solution.

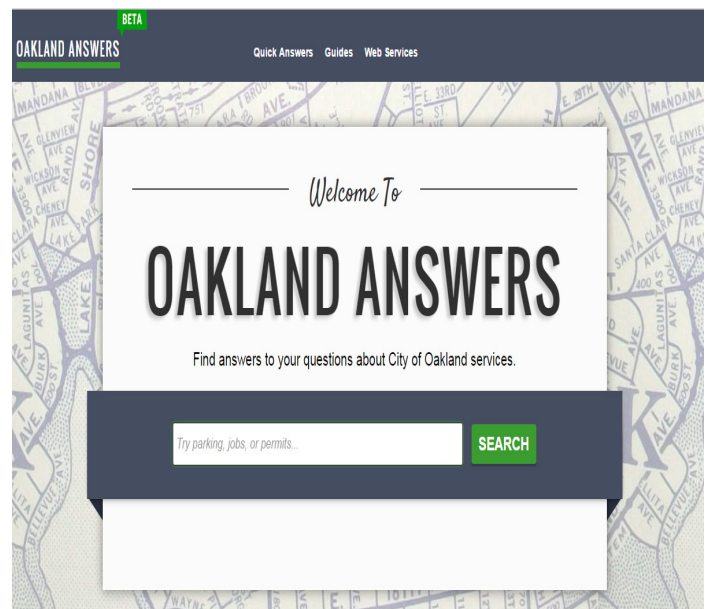


Figure 3: Oakland Answers

In practice, the system rarely works this smoothly. NCPC representatives may not have enough time to actively participate in listserv discussions. City officials may not monitor citizens' comments and questions on websites. The Parks Commission meeting schedule may be buried under several layers of information, making it difficult for citizens to determine the date and time, let alone attend. These constraints are symptomatic of the fragmented process by which online engagement has developed in Oakland. Tools were adopted individually, staff was not trained in their use and maintenance and monitoring was not incorporated into departmental job descriptions and expectations. Many cities face similar challenges and issues that point to one problem: the lack of vision about how engagement should work, and how online tools can best coordinate access, leaves holes in the process and potential untapped.

In a February 2014 meeting of the Oakland League of Women Voters, Susan Stuart Clark, founder of Common Knowledge, spoke about entry points to civic engagement. She described how a person's first interaction with City Hall can leave a lasting impact on both their trust in local government and willingness

to participate.⁴ As more people turn to technology, a city's online presence is increasingly that first point of contact. Investing in easy-to-use and integrated systems designed around and for the user can pay dividends down the road. Smart investment can allow a city to make its website a portal to rich and varied information, with platforms that encourage more and different kinds of participation and solicitation of input.⁵



Figure 4: Oakland City Hall

Challenges to Success

Integration and Coordination

With a plethora of online platforms adding to cities' already diverse public engagement efforts, it is critical that public information officers or other designated officials ensure new systems are designed to work in concert across departments and their needs.

Visibility and Uptake

It is not enough to invest in a new tool. Cities must ensure that citizens and staff know tools exist and how to use them. For example, Oakland purchased a third-party website to encourage public discussion in forums, but the lack of marketing meant that after two years the site underperformed, in terms of total users and discussions, relative to platforms hosted by the same company by cities of similar sizes.⁶

Performance and Evaluation

Public engagement is inherently difficult to measure. Its varying definitions make "success" indeterminate. Is an engagement activity successful if more people show up at a meeting and more people speak? Or has a city only truly engaged its citizens if their input actually influences policy decisions and processes? When cities overlook metrics, they sacrifice not only the ability to assess their investments, but also to use an iterative process to adapt engagement practices as circumstances change.

Resource Dedication

Understaffing and under-planning plague the adoption of both new engagement practices and new technologies. Online platforms require active management, not just in the maintenance of their infrastructure; they also require initial training in their use and ongoing moderation and incorporation of feedback into city processes. Though these are all potentially costly and time-consuming activities, they are crucial to maximizing the benefit of any online platform.

Legal Authority and Structure

The public disclosure and records laws guiding engagement are often not adaptable to new technologies and can create ambiguities around compliance. For instance, if an ordinance requires public notice of a meeting of a quorum of councilmembers when they discuss policy, should that same notice requirement apply to a discussion in an online forum on which all of them have commented over several days?

Lessons and Recommendations

1) Develop a concrete policy and legal framework for implementation first.

A 2013 report by the Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation worried that cities couldn't take advantage of new technologies due to unanswered legal questions. The working group offers draft language for both municipal and state laws to address some of these issues. Their efforts focus on broad, adaptable provisions that can cover more types of engagement while still operating under the original premise of these laws, namely, fostering transparency, open government and inclusion in the policymaking process. A key part of developing a citywide engagement strategy must include either revisions to laws that conflict with new technology or clarifications from the City Attorney's office about how new engagement platforms and practices can operate within existing legal frameworks.⁷

2) Develop a long-term investment plan and resource it now.

Some of the most successful cities have created systems to encourage use of online tools and have developed protocols to ensure feedback was put to use. The ideation

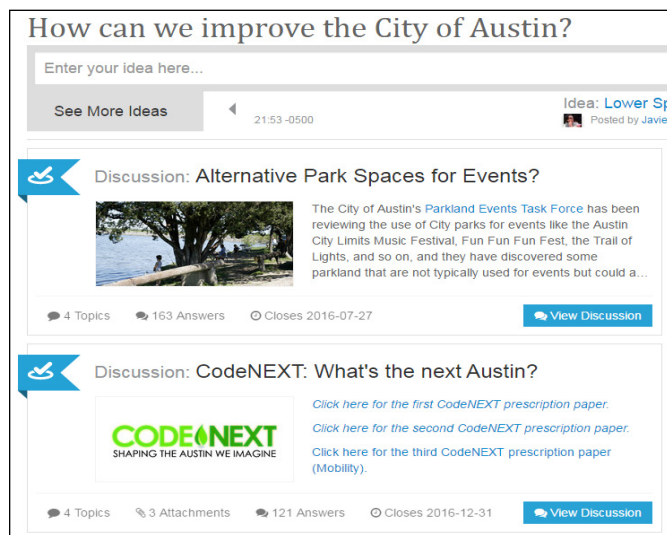


Figure 5: SpeakUp Austin website

site SpeakUp Austin (TX) has a dedicated manager in charge of its administration and its upkeep occupies several interns in his office. Public Information Officers (PIOs) from city departments are also expected to help with content creation and management for relevant issues. Austin city officials estimated they spent roughly five to ten hours each week on site management. The SpeakUp site is lauded for its success in engaging a large portion of the city and influencing outcomes. Feedback from SpeakUp Austin users helped shaped the city's plastic-bag ban and offered an outlet to discuss controversial zoning issues.⁸

How is Oakland doing on openness & transparency?

Assign a letter grade (A-F)

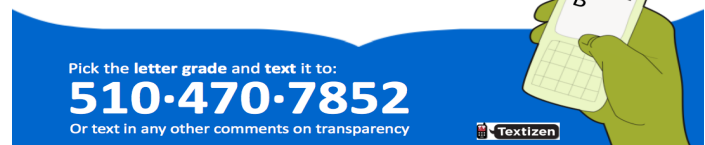


Figure 6: Textizen in Oakland

3) Recognize that platforms don't solve problems; they enhance strategies.

Rather than looking at technology as a way to replace traditional public-engagement methods, savvy cities use new technologies to enhance what they are already doing. The planning department of Phoenix, Arizona solicited feedback on its general plan development via its dedicated website, MyPlanPHX. The department then used basic user-demographic information (e.g., age, gender and zip code) to track participation in the plan-development conversation. This allowed the city to target offline outreach activities toward specific underrepresented communities.⁹ Oakland has used services like Textizen, a text-message based service that allows cities to poll residents through mobile phones, prior to and during public meetings, to gauge sentiment on various issues.¹⁰

4) Develop a tiered plan and platform-assessment framework to make the best of use of resources.

Oakland is an excellent example of how a city can be ahead of the curve when it comes to engagement-technology adoption, yet still suffer from lack of engagement investment. Oakland's myriad of platforms reach people in many ways, yet no single one nears its full potential as an engagement tool. Furthermore, the proliferation of platforms using different URLs, hosted by different companies, and tailored to specific issues or meetings, without a central strategy for coordination, has the potential to fragment resource-distribution and to confuse citizens. Technology moves quickly, but government is often deliberately slow. Thus, rather than spend public money and political capital on a new trendy platform, cities can benefit from evaluating, enhancing and reinvesting in the platforms they already use,

in order to keep them current and ensure they reach their full potential.

A specific framework that incorporates local context should guide resource investment. Criteria such as cost, ease of adoption by staff, measurability and equity are useful considerations for all cities. But cities should also consider their idiosyncrasies and particular vision. For example, in Oakland, where the city wants to focus on more deliberation and process-participation of citizens, the opportunity each tool or practice provides to foster collaboration and community engagement may be the paramount criterion.

Conclusion

New technologies create many new possibilities for local governments to change the way they interact with citizens. But before a city makes investment decisions, it must take the time to develop both a long-term vision for local engagement and an ongoing strategy that allows the city to realize the full potential new platforms offer.

Finally, as technological tools for civic engagement evolve, it is crucial to remember who benefits. While a growing share of Americans have Internet access and smartphone availability, Federal Communications Commission data from 2012 shows that in parts of East and West Oakland, there are fewer than 500 home broadband connections for every 1,000 residents. Relying too heavily on online-based engagement tools can exclude these communities.¹¹ Thus, while this policy brief focuses heavily on civic-tech solutions, cities must remember that new approaches can only be successful when combined with offline formats.

Footnotes

¹(International Association of Public Participation 2007)

²Susan Stuart Clark, Broadening Public Participation Using Online Engagement Tools, (Sacramento: Institute for Local Government, 2014).

³Alissa Black and Bitu Neyestani, Public Pathways: A Guide of Online Engagement Tools for Local Governments, California Civic Innovation Project, New America Foundation (Washington, D.C.: New America Foundation, 2012).

⁴Susan Stuart Clark, "February Hot Topic: Broadening Participation in Local Government" (Oakland, CA: League of Women Voters of Oakland, February 26, 2014).

⁵James K. Scott, "'E' the People: Do U.S. Municipal Government Web Sites Support Public Involvement?," Public Administration Review, May/June 2006: 341-53.

⁶Kate Grohmann (March 18, 2014).

⁷Matt Leighninger, Terry Amsler and Mike Huggins, "Making Public Participation Legal," Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation (2013), 3-35.

⁸Larry Schooler, interview by Emily Vaughan, Community Engagement Consultant, (April 25, 2014).

⁹Mark Thornton, interview by Emily Vaughan, Village Planner, Department of Planning and Development, City of Phoenix, (April 8, 2014).

¹⁰(Public Ethics Commission 2013)

¹¹Federal Communications Commission, "Census Tract Information Mapped for Internet Access Services faster than 200 kbps in at least one direction: As of 12/31/12" (FCC, December 31, 2012).

Figures

Figure 1: <http://www.iap2.org>

Figure 2: The New America Foundation/IAP2 Spectrum and Oakland resources.

Figure 3: <http://oaklandanswers.oaklandnet.com>

Figure 4: Photo by Sanfranman59 is licensed under the Creative Commons BY-SA 3.0.

Figure 5: <http://speakupaustin.org>

Figure 6: <http://www2.oaklandnet.com/oakca1/groups/ceda/documents/form/oak041606.pdf>

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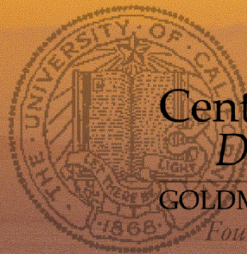
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