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Promoting Good Government at the Local Level

A Local Official's Guide
to Online Public Engagement

The Institute for Local Government's mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties.

The Institute's current program areas include:

- Collaboration & Partnerships
- Local Government 101
- Public Engagement
- Public Service Ethics
- Sustainable Communities

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All decisions about the final content of this publication are made by the Institute for Local Government.

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About This Guide

Local officials and staff in California's cities and counties are increasingly using web-based tools to inform and consult with residents, as well as to facilitate public deliberation and collaboration. While not all Californians have access to the internet or feel comfortable using computers to communicate with local agencies, an increasing number of residents do.[1]

According to a 2012 study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (http://pewinternet.org), 88 percent of American adults have a cell phone, 57 percent have a laptop, 19 percent own an e-book reader and 19 percent have a tablet computer – and about 63 percent go online wirelessly with one of these devices.

The digital age has changed public expectations related to agency transparency and communications. People increasingly expect to be able to access information and provide input online. Given this trend, local agencies in California are experimenting with different strategies to meet these expectations. One California local official has stated that the "rapidly shrinking digital divide offers opportunities for local government to reach and engage people in ways that have not been possible until now."[2]

Another observer comments that California local governments are responding "with experiments in technology that are both more expansive and citizen-focused than those that other states and countries generally have undertaken."[3]

Although local governments are embracing an ever expanding range of online tools and strategies for a variety of purposes, this guide has a rather narrow focus. *Its subject is the use of online tools and technologies that support the engagement of residents in local government actions and decision making.*[4]

Because technology and tools are so rapidly advancing and evolving, this guide's emphasis is on ideas and strategies that are not tied to any one online tool. The goal is to more generally provide useful guidance to local officials and others seeking to develop online engagement strategies.

Of course, any ideas about online engagement options are best integrated into a longer term and comprehensive plan for public engagement. As one author on the topic recently pointed out, "productive engagement is based on long term relationships between government and citizens (requiring) a long term plan for public engagement that includes online as well as face to face communication."[5]

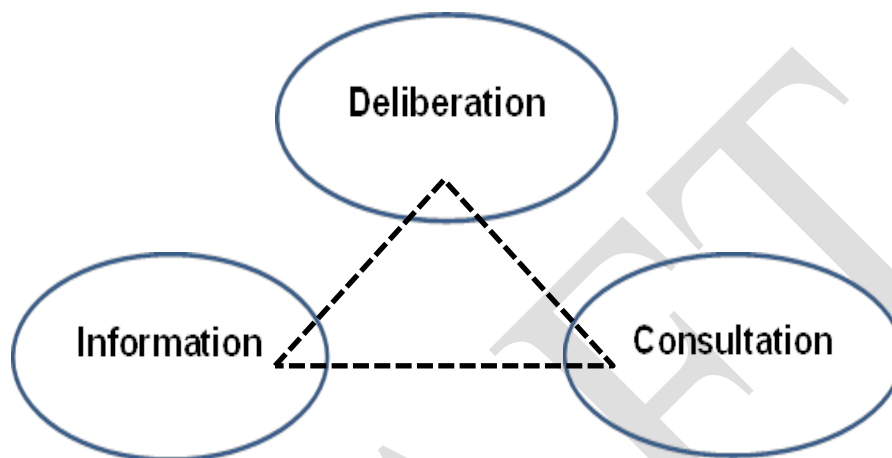> **A Note About Legal Issues Associated with Online Technologies**
>
> A number of legal issues can arise in the course of using online public engagement. These include issues relating to the open meetings law, records retention and protections for free expression.
>
> These issues are explained in the Institute's whitepaper *Legal Issues Associated with Social Media*, available at www.ca-ilg.org/SocialMediaLegalIssues.

This guide groups its online public strategies and recommendations into three general categories that we believe fall within the preview of public engagement by local agencies.

Public Engagement Activities by Local Governments

An *information* approach is characterized by one-way communication from a local agency to the public, especially (in this guide) as relevant to preparing the public to better understand a local issue or issues, and to participate in local public engagement activities and processes.

A *consultation approach* typically allows individual residents to respond to a local agency's solicitation for views and information, perhaps with some sort of local agency response in return.

A *deliberation* approach generally allows members of the public to interact online, share views and information and offer their collective ideas or recommendations to a local agency.

Any single public engagement initiative, face to face and/or online, might fall into one or more of these categories depending on the nature of the issue at hand, the time and budget allocated for the process and the array of engagement strategies employed. It also appears to be the case that successful examples of using online technology to engage residents often involve an approach that combines online processes with opportunities for face-to-face engagement.

1. An Information Approach: Use Online Tools to Inform the Public

A. Why Use Online Tools to Inform the Public?

Online forms of media, such as websites, email, Facebook, You Tube, and Twitter are fast becoming prevailing tools for disseminating information to the public online. A growing number of local officials recognize that a strong online presence will them help achieve their goal to keep residents more informed about and engaged with local issues. Therefore, local agencies are increasingly making efforts to develop communications and engagement strategies with a strong online component.

Encouraging and helping to create a more informed public contributes to a stronger and smarter community overall and helps prepare residents who participate in community public engagement activities. Increasingly, especially with fewer traditional media covering local issues, information sharing by local agencies is imperative requiring ongoing attention.

All California counties and all but one dozen cities report having a web portal for their agency.[6] About half of all Californians visit local agency websites.[7] Others learn about local agency efforts through an increasing array of other online communication platforms. California's local officials report that a growing number of community residents now connect with them using a variety of online communication tools.

This is part of a national trend. More Americans now get news online than from newspapers. Sixty one percent of Americans polled said they get news online, while three quarters hear about news via email or social media websites and almost half of Americans get local news on a mobile device.[8]

In California, most websites identify elected officials, provide contact information for local agency departments and allow users to download local codes as well as agendas and minutes of the agency's elected body. Some, such as the City of Weed, include each department's mission statement and service levels, a weekly city administrator's report and the council's adopted priorities (http://www.ci.weed.ca.us/). Users of the Alameda County website can watch live broadcasts of the Board of Supervisors and access the county's Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts (http://acgov.org/index.htm). In the City of Santa Clarita, residents can use the website to sign up for "e-Notifications" relating to 30 topics of interest, or access the monthly city newsletter with local news stories, video clips and updates of city projects (http://www.santa-clarita.com/). [9]

Conversations with local leaders in California who are successfully using the internet to connect and communicate with residents suggest that their efforts have noticeable positive impacts. Their comments indicate that residents are more tuned in to what is going on in their own communities and exhibit more civic pride. Officials also observe higher levels of volunteerism and involvement in local events now than before the use of online communications. Residents in

communities that have access to electronic information provided by local agencies also tend to be more informed at public meetings and have more specific and relevant ideas to share with local officials.

Online communication with local officials can also provide greater access to local leaders and can help residents be more understanding when local leaders have to make difficult decisions.

B. Key Strategies

1. Identify and Prioritize Topics of Interest

There is an infinite variety of information that local agencies might provide to the public. It is important to consider - and prioritize - what news, information and resources should be shared in your city, county or community. It may be helpful to think in terms of creating informed and engaged citizens, as well as informed consumers of local agency services.

In addition to staff discussions about this question, online tools and social media can help local agencies to monitor the topics and messages that are of most interest to the community members. Some simple ways to find out those interests include:

- Determine what questions are being asked most frequently in emails or telephone calls?
- Review your web analytics data that help pinpoint the areas of greatest interest on a website.
- Talk with or poll residents and ask them, with an emphasis on those who may be heard from less frequently.

For instance, local officials in San Carlos found that people who were engaged online were interested in community events, farmers markets, recreation programs, and police activity; and they adjusted their online content accordingly.

At the same time, a local agency itself may have its own communication priorities. For instance, budget challenges and/or an upcoming public engagement effort on this topic may suggest an emphasis on information in these areas. Factor in both identified sets of needs and interests.

2. Make Sure Posted Information is Easy to Understand and Accessible

A local agency's online language should be clear, concise and focused. Avoid terms of art, acronyms, jargon and overly technical information to allow a broad and diverse segment of the community to understand its meaning. In addition, local agency staff may benefit from training in effective online language and messaging.

If a community is culturally diverse and contains residents who speak languages other than English, consider translation of your website and other online communications. In some

cases automated translation services may be appropriate however these are not 100 percent
accurate. Partnerships with print and electronic ethnic media serving non-English speaking
residents can greatly extend the reach of local agency information-sharing efforts.

3. Communicate Regularly

Effective online communications increases residents' expectations about receiving
information from their local agency. People appreciate timely information and will come to
expect it. Sending regular emails to listserve groups and continually updating websites and
social media networks will both maintain community interest and avoid complaints relating
to out-of-date information. This requires an upfront critical review of the time and resources
that a local agency can devote to maintaining online information activities. As one local
official states, "(T)here are online services and products available that can be picked up and
added to a city's existing services much more
easily today than a few years ago."

4. Make it Easy for People to Follow Specific Topics of Interest

Prevent residents from being overwhelmed or
confused by online communications by offering
issue or topic specific avenues for providing
information. For instance, in Ventura residents
can sign up online to receive agency information
on particular topics and can ask to receive that
information via e-mail, Twitter, Facebook or
mobile phone. In Santa Cruz, residents can
choose from among multiple topics and stay
informed about specific events, meetings or
employment opportunities.

5. Offer Online Information through Multiple Platforms and Formats

It can be difficult to determine the best online
platforms to reach your community residents.
One strategy is to use several popular
applications to reach as many different people as possible. For instance, the City of San
Carlos shares information using the website as a hub accompanied by email blasts to listserve
groups, brief Twitter updates and updates on the city's Facebook page. Periodically asking
residents in a community their preferred way of accessing information will help agencies to
remain responsive to their community and current on new and relevant online platforms.
While certain residents enjoy reading information about local agency issues, others may
prefer to access this information in video or audio format. By creating informational audio
podcasts and video content and posting the content on multiple communication platforms

> **Summary of Key Strategies to Inform the Public**
>
> - Identify and prioritize topics of interest.
> - Make sure posted information is easy to understand and accessible.
> - Communicate regularly.
> - Make it easy for people to follow specific topics of interest.
> - Offer online information through multiple platforms and formats.
> - Tailor messages to the appropriate online platform.
> - Promote transparency and engagement by making agendas, minutes and background information available to residents.
> - Use GIS Map Applications to Make Land Use and Other Information Easily Accessible and Understandable to the Public.

such as You Tube, Facebook or Vimeo, local agencies can broaden the appeal of online content and reach a wider cross section of residents.

One example can be found in Long Beach where local elected officials serve as journalists for a news program that informs residents about topics such as: healthy communities, planning, homelessness services, local events, and involvement in updating the city's general plan. This "The Heart of the City" program reaches residents through You Tube, Facebook, and local television stations. These videos often generate online discussions between residents, city staff and local officials.

In Belvedere, the public works manager posted a video showing the city's street sweeper from the street sweeper's perspective as a way of helping residents to better understand the importance of driving cautiously near the sweeper.

6. Tailor Messages to the Appropriate Online Platform

Different online platforms have different formats and attract different audiences. For example, Facebook may be more appropriate for information about certain programs and community events while Twitter may be better suited for sharing breaking news and police logs. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of a particular platform will help your agency get the most out of online public engagement.

7. Promote Transparency and Engagement: Make Agendas, Minutes and Background Information Available to Residents

There are two dimensions to public agency transparency: information transparency and process transparency. With respect to both, a local agency website is an opportunity to provide raw information (budget numbers and meeting dates) and also provide the public with background information on what the numbers mean for the services they receive and how they can participate in the decision-making process if they choose.[10]

Most local agencies have the ability to make local council, board, commission and other public meeting materials available for viewing and download to residents prior to these meetings. There are a number of online programs to help organize and make such documents available to the public. Providing written transcripts (or audio/video records) of past meetings online is an additional way to inform and engage residents.

For instance, the City of San Carlos, California maintains an informative and interactive website (www.cityofsancarlos.org/) that provides quick links to public meeting agendas, minutes and videos and also offers sign-ups for city email lists and an E-notify system that allows residents to choose topics on which to be kept regularly informed.

To support a new and significant public engagement activity, such as involvement in a general plan update, a special website or website section containing background documents,

meeting schedules, a survey tools and other information can be developed. This may include the opportunity to sign up for regular email updates on the topic.

8. Use GIS Map Applications to Make Land Use and Other Information Easily Accessible and Understandable to the Public

Applications powered by geographic information systems (GIS) allow local agencies to visually share geographic information. These GIS map applications allow people to view and in some cases manipulate different types of data that is displayed on computerized maps. This can be particularly useful to help the public understand land development projects. Marin County's site allows residents to locate supervisorial district and special district boundary lines and also view maps associated with the county general plan.[11] Yuba County's GIS portal allows users to see aerial photos of county officials and check topographical maps of different areas.[12] The City of Delano used GIS software to track the link between community health and access to parks and fresh food.

Using Social Media Effectively[13]

Local agencies and officials are increasingly using online community networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter to inform and involve residents. According to the League of California Cities, over 100 cities have a presence on Facebook and utilize Twitter. Such online platforms, when used well, can be powerful tools to reach and interact with targeted audiences. Here are a few points of guidance to keep in mind:

- **Learn From Others.** Social media can be effective tool if mastered. Learn from other individuals and local agencies to gain the skills and strategies required to use these tools wisely and well.

- **Know your Strategic Priorities.** Social media efforts should be consistent with an agency's strategic plans and priorities.

- **Identify Your Audience?** Clarity about who you want to reach is critical to success.

- **Whose Views?** As appropriate to the site, clearly identify whose views are being presented.

- **Content is Key**. Content generally needs to be presented in ways that are short, straightforward and interesting.

- **Commit to the Long Haul**. An effective social media presence takes time. Use the tools consistently and be patient.

- **Be Clear and Realistic about Rules.** Develop and post a comments policy and encourage civility; but understand that there are limits to the extent to which such policies can be enforced.

- **Manage Risks.** Local agencies can manage risks and challenges arising from employee use of social media by adopting a social media policy, regularly auditing and updating that policy and providing training to their employees about responsible social media use.

2. A Consultation Approach: Using Online Tools to Consult the Public

A. Why Use Online Tools to Solicit Information and Views from Residents?

Online consultation approaches typically allow individual residents to respond to a local agency solicitation for views and information, perhaps with some sort of local agency response in return. This can allow decision makers to benefit from resident ideas on topics ranging from local agency services to local planning, policy and budget decisions.

Such online consultation may be "built-in" (perhaps as a function of an agency website), be offered as a stand-alone online survey or poll, occur though an online suggestion box or cell phone app or take some other online form.

While not providing an opportunity for the back and forth discussions among residents as in online deliberation (see "A Deliberation Approach" below, p. 15) public consultation can offer local agencies important information to help shape services and decisions while providing members of the public with participatory roles and experience in their communities.

B. Key Strategies

1. Address Important Design Questions[14]

Answering three important questions will help determine the most appropriate online consultation approach. First, it is important to consider the issue of participation and representativeness in public online consultation efforts. Are you seeking a demographically representative sample of the public or are you hoping to hear from whoever is most interested, most affected and/or has capacity and access to respond? Most online surveys are not scientific opinion polls and respondents will tend to be the more informed and active citizens.

> **Summary of Online Tools to Consult with Residents**
>
> - Address important design questions.
>
> - Be clear about how input will be heard and used.
>
> - Build consultation into the agency website.
>
> - Use surveys and polls.

It is also important to consider whether the intent is "outside-the-box" thinking about local agency actions or decisions, or whether you are requesting more basic information (such as asking for the worst potholes needing repairs).[15]

It is also important to determine if there is a need to aggregate and rank the ideas submitted.

This answer to these questions will help shape the most appropriate online consultation effort (or encourage a combination of online and face-to-face approaches). Please see *Using Tools*

*to Engage – and be Engaged by – The Public (*in Resources section, p 24) for more
information.

2. Be Clear About How Input Will Be Heard and Used

For any online consultation, outline the agency's needs and expectations, explain how the
offer or request for input fits into any broader engagement process, and let participants know
what to expect in terms of responses and actions in the period following their input. Those
offering their views or responding to a survey or poll will appreciate knowing how their input
will be received, heard and considered. A statement about the role and responsibilities of the
official, department or elected body that will use or act on the public's contributions is also
useful.

It can also be helpful for a local agency to provide certain identifying information for the
staff charged with receiving input from residents. Having a name, photograph, biography,
work phone and email can enhance participation and participant satisfaction.

Additionally, a personalized response and expression of appreciation (for comments) from
the local agency will make additional participation in the future more likely.

3. Build Consultation into the Agency Website

A local agency website can be a source and a repository for public consultation. This helps
bring residents to a local agency and allows users to both view and use the information
provided on the site and to offer their ideas or suggestions.

The City of Palo Alto has developed a web-based tool for tracking the progress of Council
priorities that allows users to access supporting and background information relating to
different priorities and to provide feedback on goals and progress.[16]

Another option is an online suggestion box. In 2010 San Francisco, facing a huge budget
deficit, developed an online suggestion box and solicited city workers for their best ideas
about how to save money and more efficiently provide services. A review panel reviewed
the hundreds of submissions and several suggestions were subsequently adopted and saved
the city hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.[17]

4. Use Surveys and Polls

Local agencies can use online surveys and polls for a range of purposes. Residents can be
asked to submit ideas, rank service needs, rate performance, or make recommendations on
agency decisions. This can be particularly useful way for local officials to understand
community concerns and receive guidance on forthcoming actions. As appropriate,
providing background information online about the survey topic can help create more
informed respondents and make the results more useful.

For instance, the City of San Diego has used an online survey tool to get residents' feedback about a proposed redesign of its water and sewer bills.[18] The Long Beach city council partnered with a downtown business organization to create an online survey to obtain information related to community support for the arts and how the city could be branded as an anchor for the arts.

The City of Belvedere designed a 20 question online survey to educate and collect input from residents about options for addressing the nuisance caused by the local deer population. The survey was accompanied with background information about the issue, and about how the resident committee addressing the issue would make a final recommendation to decision makers.

Online survey background information can help residents understand the challenges and trade-offs facing local officials. According to city staff in Menlo Park, the city's online budget survey helped residents better understand city services, their costs and the difficult decisions that had to be made.

In some cases, local agencies are using online surveys to assess the type and extent of resident public engagement and to ask community members to rate the local agency's effort to inform and engage the public.

While background information can be important, surveys themselves should generally be kept relatively short and focused. People can easily lose interest in a lengthy or complex online survey or poll. A shorter exercise is likely to significantly expand the number of participants.

5. Host Special Issue Forums

Local officials or agencies may wish to host a special online forum to solicit resident ideas on an important and timely topic, and ask participants to also vote on or rank the ideas submitted.

A Sonoma County Supervisor used an online collaboration platform that allowed for his ongoing structured dialogue with voters in his district about topics such as jobs, the economy, education, and the environment.[19] This online platform allowed the supervisor to pose and answer questions from residents, and residents could also submit ideas and show support or opposition to the ideas of others.

The City of Citrus Heights has hosted a live chat featuring the Citrus Heights Police Chief that provided an opportunity for community members to ask questions and voice concerns.

In 2009 the City of Santa Cruz hosted a feedback forum on the Internet to elicit community ideas on a $9 million General Fund Budget deficit. The city launched a website that provided background information about the budget issue, including primers and financial documents.

Residents were invited to register on the site with their email address, educate themselves on the topic, and propose solutions for raising revenues and/or cutting costs. Online suggestions generated a response from the city and were voted on by other users, with the top ten used by the city to guide budget strategies. City staff reported that this online project reached more constituents than traditional town meetings, with over 200 suggestions, a couple of thousand individual votes, and more than 2,000 views. And the community "bought into" the proposed solutions because they had originated with the public.

6. Consider Smartphone Applications

Smartphone mobile applications have been principally used by local agencies to allow residents to report road hazards or public safety issues, and request local agency services such as graffiti removal. (See "Be Smart About Smartphones" sidebar). However City of Anaheim residents can now download the "My Anaheim" application for iPhone and Android phones in order to learn about city events and send comments to local officials. With the increasing capacities of smartphone technology, and its broad demographic use and availability, it is likely that smartphones will become a more significant part of public consultation efforts, perhaps routing public feedback and comments directly to local agency department staff.[20]

Be Smart about Smartphones

People are increasingly accessing information and communicating online using smartphones and small screen tablet computers. Consider how online communications may be adapted to these mobile devices. Having relevant local agency web pages available in a smartphone friendly format enables residents to easily access this information.

Mobile online devices and new applications (or "apps") can empower residents to play an active role in identifying developing issues. For instance, in the cities of Long Beach, San Ramon and Santa Monica, residents can use a smartphone app to report issues such as potholes, graffiti and code violations quickly and accurately to the appropriate department with a quick photo. Local officials also use smartphones to take photos of community events and share them instantly on social networks and to quickly back up important documents.

The Santa Cruz Police Department has developed an IPhone application that provides access to the Police Department's scanner feed, online crime maps, videos, photos and a departmental blog. In addition, consumers can submit crime tips from their mobile phone and view alerts.

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3. A Deliberation Approach: Engaging the Public through Online Discussions

A. Why Use Online Tools to Engage Residents in Public Deliberation?

Online deliberation approaches allow members of the public to communicate with each other electronically through an interactive platform (either in real time or as they have the opportunity to participate) in order to share views and information and develop ideas or recommendations for a local agency's consideration.

Online deliberation can generate informed and useful input to local officials that can result in higher levels of public support for the decisions reached. In contrast to opportunities for more limited online comments, feedback or survey responses, the deliberative exchange of information and consideration of trade-offs allow participants to construct more informed and broadly supported recommendations

Online deliberation may be a stand-alone activity but is often paired with a face to face process as a means to secure broader participation.

When a local agency hopes to scale up participation in a community forum or conversation, online strategies can enable people who may be too busy to attend public meetings to participate whenever their schedule allows.

B. Key Strategies

1. Address Important Design Questions

Somewhat similarly to the design questions in the Public Consultation section above, organizers of online public deliberation processes must grapple with the their goals for participation and representativeness, including the desired total number of participants. Other questions impacting design will include the complexity of the issue, the expected level of disagreement and contentiousness among participants, the degree to which the goal is a common or prioritized set of recommendations and the desired specificity of those recommendations. Some of these questions, and the determination of the best online deliberative approach, may also require a consideration of anticipated costs and staff time. [21] Additionally, it is especially important for online engagement that local officials clarify how any input received will be documented, where it will be available online and how it will be used by the local agency.

2. Plan for Participation

As one observer puts it, the Internet is full of "engagement 'ghost towns,' many of them created by government."[22] It is very important that any effort to develop an online deliberative forum have a thoughtful and detailed plan to recruit participants. Matt

Leighninger of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium suggests three strategies to this end:[23]

- Map the networks of possible participants within the community, including those most affected and those who have a personal or organizational interest in the topic;

- Reach out to leaders within those interested or affected networks, groups, organizations or congregations, and ask the leaders to help recruit participants; and

- Use conversations to develop a recruitment message that will appeal to people's core interests.

In addition, develop a recruitment communication/outreach plan that involves local agency and community print and electronic media. It can be helpful to create specific participation goals by neighborhood, community or demographics as this will help focus outreach approaches for those who may be harder to reach or traditionally less likely to be involved.

3. Develop Appropriate Online Deliberation Opportunities

As these are typically time and staff intensive efforts consider what issue or issues facing your local agency would benefit by online deliberation (or by an online component of a face to face public deliberation). This will typically be an issue that is a matter of some controversy, for which an easy or ready solution is not available, and which requires (explicitly or implicitly) an answer to the question "what kind of community do we want to be."

> **Summary of Key Strategies to Engage the Public Online**
>
> - Address important design questions.
> - Plan for participation.
> - Develop appropriate online deliberation opportunities.
> - Ensure facilitation and moderation of discussions.
> - Establish online networks to facilitate neighborhood discussions.
> - Combine online deliberation with other engagement opportunities.

The City of San Jose used a wiki-based (see Glossary, p. 19) process to incorporate the input of thousands of residents into the 2040 Envision San Jose planning process. This site attracted nearly 4,500 online participants in fewer than four months, with online participants posting over 100 images, completing 2,784 surveys, and leaving 240 pages of posted comments. Activities for participation included online surveys with instantaneous results, a blog or message board, a mapping exercise, background information including maps, plans, and recorded and video presentations, and more.

The County of San Mateo, facing a multi-million dollar budget deficit asked its staff and citizens for their ideas on how to decrease costs, increase revenues or improve productivity. On an Internet platform, staff and the public submitted ideas, commented on one another's suggestions and chose their top solutions.

In the City of Richmond, California, as part of its General Plan Update, an interactive
website with land use simulation exercises allowed residents to weigh in on planning options
in Spanish or English.

4. Ensure Facilitation and Moderation of Discussions

In some cases, communication through online forums and discussions will have the potential
for rude comments or inappropriate language, anger and personal attacks or random
comments unconnected to the topic. Increasingly, online services are becoming more
sophisticated with structures, rules and perhaps moderation built in to help maintain an
effective, welcoming and appropriately controlled forum. However, few tools or platforms
will eliminate the need for an informed agency staff member to actively monitor and (at
times) moderate online deliberative forums. In some way, shape or form, participants must
be welcomed, ground rules explained, questions addressed, the process guided, discussions
kept on topic and input synthesized. As appropriate to your goals and approach, be sure your
online deliberation process is prepared to address these requirements, with clearly outlined
staff responsibilities.

5. Establish Online Networks to Facilitate Neighborhood Discussions

A number of California cities are signing up with new social networking site that allow
residents to create virtual communities and to communicate with one another about activities
and issues pertinent to their respective neighborhoods. While the focus is often on non-policy
issues such as gardening tips, yard sales, needed street repairs and the like, these forums can
help build social capital among residents.

Redwood City, California, uses one such social networking site. According to the city
manager, the network helps "bring true neighbor-to-neighbor community building to
Redwood City… and is a channel of communication between the City and our residents."

Additionally, these networks can also inform residents about local agency services and
events. For instance, in one community a staff member from the planning department
became the regular "go-to" source to answer questions about building permits.

Neighborhood networks may also provide a potential online forum through which residents
can discuss and offer feedback to local officials on proposed policies or other decision
making.

As one observer has pointed out, online recruitment to these sites is "neither broad nor deep
enough to be effective in high immigrant, low-income, racially/ethnically diverse
neighborhoods."[24]

However in some cases these neighborhood-based forums may not allow those from outside
that neighborhood (including local officials) to become a "member" and participate. And at

times residents have been anxious to *not* have "city business" become a topic of
neighborhood network discussions, wanting the network to stay focused on "non-political"
neighborhood news and events.

With a growing number of firms providing such neighborhood networks services, local
officials may be put in an uncomfortable position of being asked to endorse one or another. It
may often be the case that a local government will make information about a neighborhood
network available to residents but not specifically recommend its use.

6. Combine Online Deliberation with Other Engagement Opportunities

Online deliberation can effectively supplement efforts to inform and involve residents
through other means, from surveys to face to face public meetings and community
conversations. Online approaches are especially useful to help inform and educate residents,
expand participation opportunities and add to the effectiveness of an overall public
engagement effort.

These two forms of communication - online and face to face - each have unique strengths and
limitations: nothing can beat the convenience and choice of online tools, and nothing can
beat the emotional impacts of a face to face meeting.[25] The authors of a report from Public
Agenda, *Promising Practices in Online Engagement,* suggest that "(t)here's a growing body
of evidence that suggests the most powerful applications merge online and face to face
interaction, switching seamlessly from one to another."[26]

For instance, information gathered from a resident survey might suggest topics for an online
deliberation, which in turn might help to frame choices or scenarios for a series of face to
face public discussions.

The City of Menlo Park used an online forum along with phone and mailed surveys that
informed residents about the city's budget situation and asked them to balance the budget by
prioritizing strategies to reduce costs or increase revenues. Local officials used the results
from the surveys to develop budget-balancing strategies, which community members
discussed face to face in follow-up workshops.

4. Glossary of Selected On-line Terminology

Application (App). A software program that runs on your computer, smart phone or other technology device. Examples include web browsers, e-mail programs, word processors, games, and utilities.

CAPTCHA. This term, used as a way to prevent spam, refers to the letters and numbers that ask a user to type in when filling out an online form.

Cloud / Cloud Computing. Allows a user to use the internet as an application platform, or a service that can store data instead of storing the data on a hard drive.

Crowdsourcing. This is an agency presentation of a particular task to the public for their collaborative input. This process outsources a task, usually assigned to an individual, to a group or community of people through an open call for assistance[27].

Geotagging. Using the GPS on a cell phone to provide location information.

Government (or Gov.) 2.0. Refers to the use of technology to engage the public, creating a more open line of communication.

Instant Messaging. A form of real-time text based messaging between parties that can be used on a computer, smart phone or other electronic device.

Metadata. A set of data that describes and gives information about other web data. It could be used to describe the length, author and date created or describe the composition and size of a web image[28].

Mobile 2.0. A term used to describe when a websites recognizes a mobile device and then uses the phone's GPS to indicate where a user is located. Facebook uses this technology when you "check in".

Online Chat. Any form of real-time text based communication occurring over the internet.

Online Ideation. The use of computer software or web applications to engage in a type of online public participation session that asks participants to brainstorm and come up with new ideas and problem solutions.

Online Engagement Tools.

A series of tools available to agencies that can be used to make internet information available to residents. Below is a list of some of the most widely used online engagement tools:

- **Blog.** The term "blog" is a combination of the term "web log". This online tool allows agencies to maintain an up-to-date commentary of important agency matters, information and important events. A blog can combine commentary, graphic images and links to other information that the public might find useful on the subject matter.

- **Facebook©.** Allows staff to use short bursts of information to keep the public informed on current areas of interest and upcoming events.

- **Podcasting.** A combination of the words "iPOD" and "broadcasting", podcasting is a method of broadcasting audio or video programs via the Internet. Podcasting software allows users to receive automatic updates of a particular podcast and then decide when and if they want to listen to it.

- **Twitter©.** Allows staff to use short bursts of information to keep the public current on upcoming events and other areas of public interest. More instantaneous than other forms of online communication, it can be used as a type of mini blogging platform. Additionally, Twitter can be used to find out residents and visitors are saying about a community, provide breaking news, to locate material, and research topics and issues[29].

Twitter Terminology

- **Tweet**: A message sent through Twitter that is 140 characters or less. Character counts include punctuation, spaces and links.
- **Follow**: Twitter users can follow other Twitter users and are referred to as "followers". When you follow someone's Twitter account, all of their tweets will appear in your news feed. The more accounts you follow, the more tweets you will see in your news feed.
- **News Feed**: The news feed is a chronological list of all of the tweets sent by the various Twitter accounts you follow.
- **Retweet**: When you see a tweet from someone else that you would like to share with your followers, you can retweet it. Retweeting helps the original tweet reach a wider audience. Retweets are abbreviated in tweets as RT.
- **Mention**: When a tweet includes a complete user name, that tweet is then visible to that user, regardless of whether or not they subscribe to the feed. Mentioning a user in a tweet is a way to connect with them directly.
- **Hashtag**: A hashtag is a way of tagging a tweet so that it is searchable by topic. When a word or code is preceded by the # symbol, it becomes a hashtag. When you want to tag your tweet, include the hashtag somewhere in the tweet. For example, #cabudget is a hashtag used to track tweets that are related to the California state budget. www.hashtags.org lists popular hashtags.

Open Source. This refers to a collaboratively created, free software program. The source code of these programs is made available for general use and/or modification by other users in order to customize to fit their individual needs.

Smartphone. Refers to a mobile phone with internet, computer and application capabilities.

Social Media. Refer to various activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and content creation. Social media allow people to create web content, organize content, edit or comment on content, combine content, and share content. Social media and Web 2.0 use uses many technologies and forms, including RSS and other syndicated web feeds, blogs, wikis, photo–sharing, video–sharing, podcasts, social networking, social bookmarking, mashups, widgets,

Web Analytics Data. The process of measuring, collecting, analyzing and reporting internet data for purposes of understanding and optimizing web usage.

Web 2.0. Web applications that facilitate participation, interaction and collaboration.

Webcast. This is a web-based, one way broadcast of information on a particular subject and does not provide a way for the presenter to interact with the audience.

Webinar. This is a short, web based seminar that is used to share information in real-time and includes an interactive element that allows for discussion and party participation.

Wiki. This term refers to a website that allows a collaboration of users to add, delete or change information on the site, creating one place that an organization can create, share and various projects and ideas[30].

5. Further Readings and Selected Resources

A. Institute for Local Government Resources:

Best Practices and Resources - Publications, best practices, reports and other resources to help counties and cities engage their residents using online engagement, technology and social media.

Local Agency Website Transparency Opportunities – The June 2012 *Western City* magazine article describes ways local agencies can increase transparency efforts through their website.

Social Media and Public Agencies: Legal Issues - Chronicles legal issues that local public agencies face relating to the use of social media and offers advice about reaping the benefits of social media while minimizing the pitfalls.

The Ethics of Public Language - A recent *Western City* magazine article describes the benefits and costs of local officials using technical terms, and provides advice on how to communicate in a clear, direct manner with members of the general public.

Understanding the Basics of Public Service Ethics: Transparency Laws - provides a plain-language explanation of laws relating to public officials and transparency.

B. Other Resources

Building Democracy through Online Citizen Deliberation: A Framework for Action
Peter m. Shane
2008, Center for Interdisciplinary law and Policy Studies Moritz College of Law

Community Information Toolkit: Building Stronger Communities through Information Exchange
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Monitor Institute
March 2011,

Designing Social Media Policy for Government: Eight Essential Elements
Jana Hrdinová , Natalie Helbig, and Catherine Stollar Peters
May 2010, Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany, SUNY

Designing Successful Online Consultations
Tim Bonnemann
March 2011, Intellitics Inc.

E-Democracy Improves Trust
Evelina Moulder
March 2012, International City/County Management Association
Engagement Commons: Sharing Technology for the Public Good

Code for America
2012

Five Ways Crowdsourcing Can Transform the Public Sphere
William D. Eggers and Rob Hamill
May 2012

Government Online
Aaron Smith
April 2010, Pew Research Center

Hear Us Now? A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and
Local Government
April Manatt with Stephen G. Blake, Joe Mathews & Troy K. Schneider
October 2011, New America

Inclusive Social Media Project: Participatory Evaluation
Strategic Effort Supported by The Ford Foundation
2010, E-Democracy.org

Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age
The Knight Commission
2009, The Aspen Institute

Introducing Government Agencies to Web 2.0
Joe Peters and Joe Goldman
November 2009

Making the Most of Social Media: 7 Lessons from Successful Cities
Chris Kingsley
March 2010, Fels Institute of Government, University of Pennsylvania

Neighbors Online
Aaron Smith
June 2010, Pew Research Center

Online Deliberation: Design, Research, and Practice
Todd Davies and Seeta Pena Gangadharan
November 2009, Stanford, CSLI Publications

Online Community Engagement Wiki
TechSoup Global
2012, Tangient LLC

Open Policy Making 101: 10 Questions to Ask Before Launching Your Online Public
Consultation
Joe Goldman and Joe Peters
November 2009

Planning for Stronger Local Democracy (2011)
Matt Leighninger and Bonnie C. Mann
2011, National League of Cities Center for Research and Innovation

Promising Practices in Online Engagement
Scott Bittle, Chris Haller and Alison Kadlec
November 2009, Public Agenda

Tools for Online Engagement
National League of Cities
2011, Arvada, Colorado

Using Online Tools for Engagement
Matt Leighninger
May 20, 2011, Deliberative Democracy Consortium

Working the Network: A Manager's Guide for Using Twitter in Government
Ines Mergel
2012, IBM Center for the Business of Government

This document is a service of the Institute for Local Government (ILG) whose mission is to promote good government at the local level with practical, impartial, and easy-to-use resources for California communities. ILG is the nonprofit 501(c)(3) research and education affiliate of the League of California Cities and the California State Association of Counties. For more information and to access the Institute's resources on public engagement, visit www.ca-ilg.org/engagement. To access this guide directly, go to www.ca-ilg.org/online-engagement-technology-social-media.

The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:
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- *Fax*: 916.444.7535
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6. Endnotes

[1] PEW Research Center Publications (April 27, 2010) *How American's Interact with Government Online*, available online http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1575/how-americans-interact-with-government-online

[2] Western City Magazine (June, 2012) *Putting Technology to Work* by Mike Kaspersak (President's Message).

[3] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* available at www.Newamerica.net.

[4] For a broader array of local government initiatives see New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* (pps 10-15) available at www.Newamerica.net.

[5] IBM Center for the Business of Government (2011) *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public* (p. 4) available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[6] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* available at www.Newamerica.net.

[7] *See* report by the Public Policy Institute of California (2008) *Californians & their government* available at http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/survey/S_308MBS.pdf

[8] *See* Pew Research Center (2011) *State of the News Media Report* available at http://stateofthemedia.org/

[9] Examples drawn from New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* available athttp://www.newamerica.net/

[10] Western City Magazine (June 2012) *Local Agency Opportunities for Website Transparency* available at http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2012/Local-Agency-Opportunities-for-Website-Transparency/

[11] More information about GIS mapping applications available on the Marin County website at http://www.co.marin.ca.us/depts/is/main/gis/

[12] More information about GIS mapping applications available on the Yolo County website at http://gis.co.yuba.ca.us/

[13] These points draw from a number of sources including: *Western City Magazine* (June 2011). *Meet Twitter: Social Media for City Officials*, available at http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/June-2011/Meet-Twitter-Social-Media-for-City-Officials-Short-on-Time/; *Western City Magazine* (August 2011) *Social media: Balancing the Rights of Employers and Employees* available at http://www.westerncity.com/Western-City/August-2011/Social-Media-Balancing-The-Rights-of-Employers-And-Employees/; Acentum and AmericaSpeaks (November 2009) *Introducing Government Agencies to Web 2.0: When a Visitor Becomes a Community* available at http://ascentum.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/Introducing-Government-Agencies-to-Web-2.0-When-A-Visitor-Becomes-A-Community-by-Joe-Goldman-and-Joseph-Peters.pdf; The Institute for Local Government (June 2010) *Social Media and Public Agencies: Legal Issues to be Aware of* available at http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/resources__Social_Media_Paper_6-24-10_Rev.pdf; League of California Cities *Twitter Basics, Signing up and Best Practices* and *Facebook Basics, Signing up and Best Practices*

[14] IBM Center for the Business of Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public: Ten Tactics for Engaging the Public* (pps. 8-9) available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[15] IBM Center for the Business of Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public* available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[16] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* available at www.Newamerica.net.

[17] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* (p. 8) available at www.Newamerica.net.

[18] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* (p. 4) available at www.Newamerica.net .

[19] See *Town Hall Online* developed by Democrasoft, Inc. and available at http://www.collaborizeclassroom.com/townhallonline.

[20] New America Foundation (2011) *Hear Us Now: A California Survey of Digital Technology's Role in Civic Engagement and Local Government* (p. 30) available at www.Newamerica.net.

[21]IBM Center for the Business Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public*(see "Ten Tactics for Engaging the Public," pps. 8- 9) available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[22] IBM Center for the Business of Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public (p.5)* available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[23] IBM Center for the Business of Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public* (p. 5) available at www.businessofgovernment.org.

[24] E-Democracy (2011) *Inclusive Social Media Project: Participatory Evaluation* available at http://e-democracy.org/if/edeminclusivefordeval.pdf

[25] IBM Center for the Business of Government *Using Online Tools to Engage–and be Engaged by–the Public* (p.5): available at www.businessofgovernment.org

[26] Public Agenda *Promising Practices in Online Engagement (*Occasional Paper No. 3) available at www.publicagenda.org

[27] Wikipedia online Encyclopedia available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crowdsourcing.

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[30] IBM Center the Business of Government Using Technology Series (September 11, 2011) *Using Online Tools to Engage and Be Engaged by the Public* available at http://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/using-online-tools-engage-public.