

# Tap the Internet to Build Public Participation

by David Essex

The Internet and its user-friendly browsing technology, the World Wide Web, changed everyday life in the 1990s. Now, with the advent of “e-government,” public officials are investing serious resources in hopes of exploiting the Web’s ubiquity to automate interaction with citizens, cut costs, and improve service. Washington state residents, for example, can apply online for boating permits. “E-filing” of taxes is increasingly common, and even online voting is being cautiously introduced.

But as a communication channel for land-use planning, the Web has generally been the province of well-heeled locales, especially larger states, cities, and counties. This is starting to change, thanks in part to the rise of computer software and service companies that are focused on the needs of local governments – and are willing to invest in smaller, less lucrative markets. Now the Web is within the reach of most communities, especially those with realistic expectations and a

few well-chosen strategies.

The “soft” benefits can be closer, richer relationships with constituents, and increased participation by people

“THE INTERNET CAN ENABLE FULLER, MORE INFORMED PARTICIPATION IN PLANNING DECISIONS.”

who would otherwise rarely make the trek to a public hearing. There are substantial cost savings in the printing and labor that can be avoided by making information available at little or no cost online. A well-organized online information system can help build institutional memories in organizations notorious for rapid turnover in both volunteers and staff. But more importantly, the new communication channels may help to further democratize a process that has often been dominated by highly motivated special-interest groups.

Web “pages,” became widely available, and then multiplied exponentially.

Technically, there are other communication channels that run over the public Internet and have little to do with the Web, per se – notably e-mail, Internet telephony, and newsgroups, which provide time-independent discussions carried out in e-mail. It doesn’t change the fact that in today’s world, the first mandatory step in creating an online presence for your planning department or program is to set up a Web site, or have a page (or pages) on the site of a host organization, typically your municipality. The site will function not only as your “portal” to welcome the public, but as the outward face of the central PC servers and the sophisticated networking and application software you need to manage content and communications.

Most small cities and towns can afford the following options, which typically are available on basic Web sites or with special application software that costs only a few dollars a month:

- **E-mail.** Visitors who click on a highlighted link on the page are taken directly to a form with the address of a general departmental e-mail box already filled in. They can type a message in a window, add their e-mail address, and send – often without ever leaving the site. Other links can go directly to the personal mailboxes of staff.
- **Feedback forms.** Similar to e-mail, they’re usually geared to a timely topic that the planning department wants input on.
- **Polls and surveys.** These pop-up forms look similar to those used for door-to-door, telephone, and mail surveys. Results can be tabulated in the department’s regular database (often Microsoft Access) or in a special database that comes with the Web software. Some sites also provide quick, unscientific polls

## NETWORKING WITH THE PUBLIC

It is important to understand the distinction between the Internet and the Web. The former is the decentralized network of millions of interconnected computers that had been a medium mostly for academics and government researchers until the early 1990s, when easy to use, colorful browsers such as Netscape and Internet Explorer, and documents hyperlinked on

The screenshot shows the homepage for the Blacksburg 2046 Comprehensive Plan. At the top, there's a header with the title and a search bar. Below that, a navigation menu allows users to 'Choose a Section of the Plan'. The main content area is divided into several sections: a welcome message, a 'What does the plan mean for...' section with a list of user types (Home Owners, Renters, Students, Real Estate, Business, Visitors), a map of the town divided into sectors (Downtown, South End, Northwest, North End, Midtown North, Midtown South, University, Extraterritorial Areas), and two columns of links for 'The Town as a Whole' and 'Townwide Topics'.

Home page for the Blacksburg, Virginia, Comprehensive Plan.

where people can voice their opinion and see an instant running total of results – also a common item on mainstream Web portals such as MSN.com.

- **E-mail newsletters.** You can ask visitors if they want to be informed of general news or highlights on topics of special interest. Newsletters can be sent as plain

text in the main body of the e-mail, or as rich text that looks almost like a Web page in newer e-mail packages that support the latest multimedia formats. As an alternative, constituents can be asked to click on a link inside the e-mail that then loads their Web browser, taking them directly to the newsletter on your site.

- **“Notify Me” options.** Visitors who click this link are asking to be notified or reminded in brief e-mails about important events such as upcoming hearings.

- **Documents.** Most sites make planning documents, such as ordinances, maps, minutes, and master plans, available in popular formats for viewing online or, depending on the organization’s policy, for downloading on the visitor’s own PC.

- **Discussion Groups.** Residents can toss around ideas and argue hot issues by typing comments into a dedicated “space” on the site (also sometimes called a bulletin board or chat room). Planning officials can join in; sometimes they must to maintain order and correct factual errors. (On the mainstream Web, owners of very active discussion groups assign real moderators to keep order.) Experts say many planners forego discussion groups because they’re concerned that potentially libelous statements and misinformation will open them to



The Abilene, Texas, Comprehensive Plan Site allows for easy downloading of documents

legal liability, or at the least create negative publicity. Steps must also be taken to ensure that any Web mechanism advertised as part of the formal public-input process meets legal requirements – typically by requiring participants to identify themselves.

#### “BLEEDING-EDGE” INTERACTIVITY: GIS AND STREAMING VIDEO

With more money comes the latest technology, and for the most part, that means new, gee-whiz ways to interact with audiences. But the lack of New York-size budgets isn’t the only thing keeping next-generation features off the sites of small localities. In many cases, the technology simply hasn’t evolved to the point where every home PC user can tap a rich, multimedia pipeline to the planning department.

Take geographic information systems (GIS), the interactive layered maps and databases that are taking land-use

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Internet instruction at a Seattle senior center.

Editor’s Note:

## The “Digital Divide”

One of the most important issues facing communities providing online government services is how to ensure access by all segments of the community, including lower-income citizens and seniors. The concern is to avoid a “digital divide” between citizens with access to (and know-how about) the online world, and those without.

“Community networks” are one response. These networks are typically partnerships between local governments, schools, libraries, chambers of commerce, and other organizations, designed to provide online access and training. Richard Lowenberg, Executive Director of the Davis, CA, Community Network, notes that community networks are especially important for rural communities, “since they provide a means of aggregating demand.” This, for example, allows for more beneficial arrangements with Internet service providers, as well as for the development of shared use facilities.

Some localities, such as Seattle, have drawn on cable television franchise fees to help support online access by residents. In Seattle, free Internet access terminals can be found in 22 branch libraries and 21 other public buildings. According to David Keyes, Community Technology Planner in Seattle’s Department of Information Technology, the City also has a growing network of neighborhood “community technology centers.” Under the guidance of a citizens advisory board, the City provides matching funds that have allowed these centers to open in low-income housing projects, in senior citizen centers, and in the offices of other non-profit community service providers. Community technology centers not only provide for access, but also train residents in the use of computers and how to access online resources.

For more information, go to the Web sites of the Association for Community Networking <www.afcn.org> and the Community Technology Centers’ Network <www.ctcnet.org>. Both offer a wealth of resources. Also definitely worth a visit are the Web pages of Seattle’s Community Technology Program <www.cityofseattle.net/tech/> (including their excellent Information Technology Indicators report, available for downloading) and the Davis Community Network <www.dcn.org>. You can also reach David Keyes at: <david.keyes@seattle.gov>, and Richard Lowenberg at: <rl@dcn.org>.



## Some Quick Tips

Local officials and technology experts with experience

building and maintaining effective Web sites offer the following advice for planners:

- **Market your site** – Promotion can start as simply as adding the site's Web address to tax bills or sticking it on trash receptacles.
- **Design a site that is easy for the public to move around in**, which usually means following the "three-click rule": no page should take more than three mouse clicks to reach.
- **Look for software that makes it easy for non-technical staff to publish standard office documents to the site.** Otherwise, it will be too time-consuming to keep timely information up on the site.
- **Keep information fresh.** "If your site's not current, forget about it – people will not come back," warns Kim Patrick Kobza, CEO of Web software vendor Neighborhood America. "The idea is to create a community of interest, and you won't have community of interest if you don't have currency." For example, if you're going to be posting meeting notices, agendas, and minutes, it is essential that you keep them up-to-date.
- **Budget adequate resources.** In order to have a useful site, with fresh information, you'll need to allocate sufficient staff time and budget dollars. Develop a realistic game plan for your Web site, with adequate resources, before you launch the site.

## Tap the Internet...

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planning, and government generally, by storm. Although some jurisdictions make their GIS maps available to the general public over the Web, most home PCs and browser software can't efficiently handle the electronic files, which are many times larger and more complex than the average Web page. What's more, the "bandwidth" of the pipeline between the Web site's servers and the consumer's PC is often too "narrow" to handle GIS.

Until the digital divide shrinks and high-speed broadband networking becomes more widely available, especially in rural areas, the GIS experience will be almost intolerably slow on the Web. This is changing, however, as companies such as computer-aided design (CAD) vendor Autodesk Inc. and others release software that creates GIS files expressly to run on Web browsers.

Live video – even the "streaming" kind that can be fed in bursts over the narrow dial-up pipelines of the Internet – may not be feasible for most localities because of the complexity of setting up a live, Web-connected video feed. But some city halls make videos available instead in digitized files that work somewhat like videotapes for replay on popular, downloadable-for-free programs such as Windows Media Player and RealOne Player.

### VENDORS, ASSOCIATIONS PROMOTE AFFORDABILITY

A small handful of companies have sprung up to make it easy for governments with modest budgets to set up and maintain rich, interactive Web sites. Neighborhood America Inc. (Naples, FL), for example, says it has outfitted 70 localities nationally with its Public Communications System. The company built the Imagine NY Web site that was used to manage public communications for the contest to design the former site of the World Trade Center: <[www.imaginewyork.org](http://www.imaginewyork.org)> According to company president and CEO Kim Patrick Kobza, another customer, Myregion.org,



*This community tech center, in Burlington, Vermont's "Old North End," offers computer and Internet training.*

a comprehensive planning site for seven central Florida counties and nine other public and private organizations, says it saved \$85,000 on printing, shipping, and labor.

CivicPlus (Manhattan, KS), gears its Web system to small municipalities, counties, and chambers of commerce, according to CEO Ward Morgan. The typical small city can have a site for a \$800 setup cost, plus \$50 a month thereafter. "We eliminate the need for a Web master," says Morgan. Web site development firms, as well as architectural and other design consultants, are another common source of assistance.

Other steps are being taken to help small municipalities afford not only the costs of designing and setting up Web sites, but the more onerous demands of keeping their content current. Banding together for economies of scale and group purchasing through regional planning commissions and other associations is one promising solution. The National Association of Counties, for example, partnered with the National League of Cities and IBM Corp. to create Totally Web Government, a suite of e-government programs that are run and maintained on centrally located servers, saving customers the hassles of buying their own equipment and software.

Around two-dozen counties have used it, says Nancy Irish, program manager of the association's financial services center.

### VOX POPULI

Some observers even claim that a well-designed planning Web site, especially one bolstered with the data and visual information of GIS, can bring civility and rationality to public discourse, serving as a sort of virtual mediator in contentious land-use projects.

"The Internet can enable fuller, more informed participation in planning decisions by citizens and public officials alike," writes Jonathan Cohen, AIA, owner of the Jonathan Cohen & Associates architectural firm in Berkeley, CA, in his book, *Communication and Design with the Internet* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000). Cohen cites the Web site of the Blacksburg (VA) 2046 Comprehensive Plan, and its popular sister site, the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV), as models of how to use the Web to involve and inform the public.

The Blacksburg sites actually complement existing processes by helping citizens to better prepare for traditional public hearings, asserts Darren Coffey, a Blacksburg town planner. "They're trying very hard to ground their arguments in the town's planning document," Coffey says. "They're not just saying 'not in my backyard.'"

Despite its technical cache, the Web might best be treated as just another communication tool. "You can't use the Web in isolation," Cohen cautions. "It has to be part of a larger participation strategy. It doesn't substitute for the other things you do." ♦

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## Kansas' "Little Apple" Plies Big City Connections

Perhaps one of the best examples of how small cities and counties can build a viable e-government and planning presence on the Web is Manhattan, KS, a small city of 44,831 and center of a tri-county region of 108,999 people. Calling itself the "Little Apple," Manhattan – despite modest resources – seems to have much of the chutzpah of its Northeast namesake when it comes to telling its story on the Web.

Besides running its main site <[www.ci.manhattan.ks.us](http://www.ci.manhattan.ks.us)>, the city partners with Riley County on a site dedicated to the Manhattan Urban Area Comprehensive Plan Update. It provides maps, plan documents, newsletters, e-mail routed directly to staff and the advisory committee, a community forum, a feedback form, and a special link to the city's InTouch software for requesting e-mail notification of important events.

Manhattan Urban Area Comprehensive Plan Update					
BACKGROUND	PROJECT AREA	GET INVOLVED	SCHEDULE OF EVENTS	WORK PRODUCTS	CONTACT US
<b>Manhattan Urban Area Comprehensive Plan Comments</b>					
Forum List   New Topic   View Threads   Search					
Topics	Author	Date			
WALMART (4)	Geoff Doyle	2002-12-13 13:01:58			
Transportation Planning (4)	Richard Bailey	2002-12-13 12:42:12			
Anderson Ave. Development (4)	Tim Musch	2002-12-13 12:32:06			
Prime Agricultural Lands (3)	Planning Team	2002-12-13 12:19:02			
K177/Gateway Area (4)	Planning Team	2002-12-13 12:11:48			
Development in Flood Prone Areas (3)	Planning Team	2002-10-05 08:49:36			
US 24 Corridor (1)	Project Team	2002-07-08 11:59:25			
Land Uses along the K18 Corridor (2)	Planning Team	2002-06-13 19:52:47			
Fire Protection (2)	Bill Dempsey	2001-10-10 08:43:24			

*Bulletin Board on the Manhattan, Kansas, Comprehensive Plan Web Site*

Eric Cattell, assistant director for planning, says he likes the ease with which the system, developed by VPI Technologies, a Manhattan-based Web software vendor, lets staff quickly convert existing Microsoft Office documents for publishing on the site.

Another useful feature is simultaneous posting of meeting notices on the city's cable-TV access channel. Nearly 200 people have signed up to receive notices of the Planning Board's meetings, and 141 asked to get e-mail on the comprehensive plan. Cattell says the e-mails are effective in keeping the public informed. And since the site is "self serve," it has led to a reduction in phone calls requesting information.

Since January, the Manhattan Chamber of Commerce has used CivicPlus for a separate site with a somewhat unusual feature: a searchable database of available properties.

Local realtors who have been issued electronic identities and passwords can post properties themselves, though chamber staff checks the information before publishing it, according to economic development director Stacy Kohlmeier. She soon hopes to save on phone time and mailing expenses by routing through the site special notifications and other information targeting high-value investors. "A lot of the things we want to send to this group of people are things we want to put on our Web site," Kohlmeier says.

If all this weren't enough, Riley County runs still another planning-related site (<[www.gis.cico.org](http://www.gis.cico.org)>), which provides interactive GIS maps.



## Communities of Interest

Visit these sites to see some exciting examples of how local officials are using the Web to broaden public participation and make land-use planning a richer, more user-friendly experience.

*Abilene (TX) Comprehensive Plan*  
<[www.abilenecomplan.com](http://www.abilenecomplan.com)  
</abilene\_comp>

*Blacksburg (VA) 2046 Comprehensive Plan*  
<[www.blacksburg.gov/comp\\_plan](http://www.blacksburg.gov/comp_plan)>

*Blacksburg Electronic Village*  
<[www.bev.net](http://www.bev.net)>

*City of Santa Monica Communication Center*  
<<http://pen.ci.santa-monica.ca.us/communication>>

*Imagine NY*  
<[www.imaginenewyork.org](http://www.imaginenewyork.org)>

*Imagine Manatee*  
<[www.imaginemanatee.org](http://www.imaginemanatee.org)>

*Lenexa (KS) Comprehensive Plan*  
<[www.ci.lenexa.ks.us/planning/compplan](http://www.ci.lenexa.ks.us/planning/compplan)>

*Manhattan (KS) Economic Development*  
<[www.manhattaned.org](http://www.manhattaned.org)>

*Manhattan (KS) Urban Area Comprehensive Plan Update*  
<[www.manhattanareaplan.com](http://www.manhattanareaplan.com)>

*Myregion.org (Central Florida)*  
<[www.myregion.org](http://www.myregion.org)>

*Neighborhood Knowledge Los Angeles*  
<<http://nkla.sppsr.ucla.edu>>