

Benefits of Online Civic Engagement

Municipalities across the country share the challenge of mediating comments, suggestions, and criticisms from the public. Public servants must manage these concerns, while also preparing new policies and projects for their jurisdictions. Traditionally, our cities and towns respond to this challenge by offering public consultation sessions to solicit resident feedback. The effectiveness of these sessions, however, can be limited by a variety of factors including staffing, space availability, and a lack of diversity among participants. As the number of channels through which residents can contact municipalities grows, the methods government leaders can use to reach their citizens is also changing. With online public consultations, local leaders can connect with citizens efficiently and at a more in-depth level. This article will discuss the benefits new technologies offer, trace examples from municipalities who have already led online civic engagement projects, and provide resources for getting started.

Flexibility that Canadians Want

Online consultations offer incredible flexibility to municipalities as residents may contribute their opinions at a time and place (and using a device) that is convenient for them. Whether using the family computer or a smartphone during their commute, citizens can engage with the municipality without interrupting personal routines. Just as citizens no longer need to find

a babysitter to attend a public meeting, municipalities can save resources and time without having to arrange a meeting space or moderator.

Online, the diversity of voices engaging changes. In offline consultations, citizens may be uncomfortable speaking in public, or may simply be unable to contribute due to how the conversation is framed by others. An online consultation can reach more residents by letting participants use their own voices to express feedback on municipal priorities at their own leisure. Where a municipality's traditional public consultation strategy may stretch over many months to accommodate residents, with appropriate marketing, a typical online consultation receives the majority of its responses within two weeks.

Trends in internet use encourage an online approach in Canadian municipalities. Over 83 percent of Canadians living in cities and towns have regular access to the internet and recent public engagement study by Fleishman-Hillard indicates that 54

percent of Canadians would engage more with government if they could do so online. These trends encouraged two Canadian jurisdictions, the Plateau Mont-Royal borough of Montreal, QC, and Newmarket, ON to consult their residents online about budget priorities using a budget simulator tool.

Simulation of Budget Process

Online budget consultations can put residents in the public administrator's shoes by simulating the real decisions and tradeoffs that must be made to satisfy priorities and deliver a balanced budget. Interactive tools, like sliders, allow citizens to increase or decrease

Figure 1
Online Budget Simulation



Screen capture from the Town of Newmarket's budget simulator.



ELLIE MARSHALL is the Communications Manager for Open North, a Canadian nonprofit dedicated to helping citizens access the decision-making processes of government. Open North creates online platforms for civic engagement, including Citizen Budget. Ellie can be reached at <ellie@opennorth.ca>.

spending on particular budget items to try balancing the budget themselves. At once, residents are educated on the different aspects of a municipal budget, while providing their input. The activity also generates ownership over their civic engagement experience, furthering their relationship with their municipality. Each resident is given a link to his or her version of the municipal budget to share and discuss with personal networks.

The Plateau Mont-Royal borough of Montreal has offered an online budget simulation tool to their residents for the past two years. The annual survey, called “Budget Plateau,” resulted in about 700 responses from residents per year. In 2012, the survey consulted residents on 10 different budget areas, including snow removal, libraries, and cultural events, as well as new revenue sources for the borough. The consultation used real numbers from the budget to explain how resources are allocated to citizens. Richard Ryan, a councillor in the borough, explains, “This type of online consultation is a public education tool that allows citizens to take their place within government. Both citizens and elected officials appreciate the outreach and educational aspects of the web application, to better understand the budget and the difficulties in making decisions to achieve a balanced budget.”

The consultation generated important insights for the borough. For example, the Plateau learned that 72 percent of respondents are in favour of eliminating one waste collection per week and implementing a food waste collection instead. The Plateau also learned that residents are open to increased taxes if the additional revenue is tied to a specific project, such as repurposing an old church. The consultation also generated over 460 comments. As citizens adjusted the budget themselves, the activity stimulated ideas and encouraged them to voice their opinions. The results of the consultation were integrated into the borough’s budget presentation to residents in the fall, creating another point of contact for leaders and their

constituents, before it was finally submitted to Montreal’s city council to confirm the citizen-oriented plan.

Similarly, the Town of Newmarket, Ontario decided to launch their own online budget consultation to allow citizens to submit their own realistic budget. Newmarket’s approach differed from the Plateau as the town chose to show residents how their budget decisions would impact their property taxes (See Figure 1). Residents were encouraged to enter their property value into the simulator, which automatically adjusted the consultation to reflect how their share of property taxes supports local services. Cindy Wackett, corporate project consultant for the town explained the decision to go online: “2012 was Newmarket’s first year employing an online budget tool as part of the overall communications plan to engage the community in the annual budget process. The evolution of our survey into an electronic format provided our council with insight into service levels and tax spending choices, and helped to inform council when making budget decisions. The online tool helped us to increase our response rate, tripling it from the previous year’s budget, and the open-ended feedback was invaluable for planning projects and priorities for the year ahead.”

Steps to Successful Online Consultation

Some public administrators may be resistant to online consultation as it takes away the face-to-face interaction experience they have fostered for years in their municipality. As Cindy Wackett notes, though, online consultations are not to be thought of as a replacement for a city or town’s current engagement strategy, but rather an effective tool to augment and enhance their public offering. Three key steps can be identified to help a municipality that is interested in engaging residents online:

1. Make it easy

A public consultation should be accessible for everyone. Clear and concise questions help residents un-

derstand the questions you are asking. It is important to use language that people are familiar with and to avoid administrative jargon that is used internally. Focus on the key issues and questions that you are interested in, rather than trying to cover every aspect of the budget. The total should include clear instructions and visual cues to naturally guide the user through the simulation. This approach will increase the participation rate, maximizing the number of people who take the time to participate.

2. Share your consultation

A successful engagement strategy around a municipal budget relies on buy-in from elected leaders, finance administrators, and communications teams. Just like their offline counterparts, online consultations require promotion in local news, newsletters, libraries, and on community bulletin boards. Issuing a press release can stimulate the media to cover an online consultation. For example, the Plateau Mont-Royal borough released a few stimulating or controversial results a few weeks into the consultation to generate media buzz.

3. Follow-up with participants

Another great benefit of online consultations is that a list of participants is easy to generate and organize. This makes telling residents how the municipality used their opinions simple. By doing this, a local government can indicate to their residents that they value the time they took to participate and committed to representing their interests.

There are several different organizations that offer tools to help municipalities engage. Generally, these tools fall into three categories: budget simulators, dialogue tools, and traditional surveys. Some municipalities will have their own resources for creating these tools but various organizations also offer tools to help create engagement. Engaging online will help municipalities gather meaningful contributions from their residents and show their commitment to the community. [MW](#)