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ITB9426

Chapter XI

Responding to the Information Needs of Citizens in an Open Society: The Role of Smart Communities

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ABSTRACT

The use of ICTs in community development areas has increased over the past 10 years. This chapter examines how the “Smart Community” concept can help areas of various sizes accomplish a variety of local and regional development processes. The chapter covers such issues the role of citizen participation, the roles of information technologies, the components of a “Smart Community”, the California Smart Communities Program, and the lessons learned to date from the program. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the “digital divide” between people with access to various ICTs and those without access any access to ICTs.

INTRODUCTION

Change appears to be a constant these days. You cannot pick up a newspaper, watch a television news program, or listen to a radio broadcast without hearing about how

something you use is changing. You might learn of something new that will help you work better, play better, feel better, or learn better. Many people embrace these changes, while others are leery of them. The latter individuals are skeptical of change and want to see results before they go along with the change. They may view technology as a threat to their jobs and ultimate well-being. Other individuals may totally resist these changes and continue to do things in ways that make them comfortable.

One area that appears to be in a constant state of change is information technology (Castells, 1989, 1996; Caves & Walshok, 1997, 1999; Doheny-Farina, 1996; Graham & Marvin, 1996; Moss, 1998; Negroponte, 1995; Tapscott, 1996). Experts have had a difficult time keeping abreast of the myriad of changes taking place in the industry and with the technology. A layperson finds it virtually impossible to keep up with the changes taking place and relies on others for information and advice. Many people, including myself, delay purchasing a computer or other products because of the seemingly weekly changes taking place in the computer industry. People are told by technology vendors to wait for a couple of weeks or months and then purchase their computers. Ultimately, we are told that computers are coming down in price, while they are becoming more powerful.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND THE PUBLIC'S NEED FOR INFORMATION

Citizen Participation

Citizen participation is an important part of the American tradition (Cole, 1974; Langton, 1979). Its role has been debated for many years (Cronin, 1989; Ford, 1924; Kelso, 1978; Magleby, 1984; Pateman, 1970; Pennock, 1979; Zimmerman, 1986). One question always posed is whether citizen participation should be limited to simply electing officials to make the necessary public decisions or should citizens be given the opportunity to have a larger role and be allowed to decide matters of public importance? The answer depends on how an individual views democracy.

The reasons for citizen participation, its benefits and costs, and the means used to encourage citizen participation have been debated for many years. Citizen participation could be defined in one case as simply giving citizens a voice in the decision-making process or, as Cunningham (1972) defined it, "a process wherein the common amateurs of a community exercise power over decisions related to the general affairs of a community" (p. 595). Arnstein (1969) defined participation as:

The redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future...it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society. (p. 216)

She observed that the opportunity to exercise power differed according to specific situations. Her famous "ladder of participation" illustrated the various degrees of participation that were potentially possible. As an individual progressed up the ladder,

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