Chapter XIV
Local Government Experiences with ICT for Participation

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ABSTRACT

Municipalities often struggle to provide citizen participation opportunities that are informative and engaging. E-government tools hold the potential to enhance traditional forms of citizen participation. This chapter examines the use of information and communication technology tools to promote citizen participation. The analysis includes an examination of planning department Web sites over a five-year period (2003-2007) for a sample of U.S. cities with year 2000 populations of 50,000 people or more. This is supplemented with a survey of planning department heads regarding plans for implementation of e-government technology to increase citizen interaction opportunities. The principal findings, while most of the reviewed Web sites provide basic information, an increasing number of cities are adding features to allow for true interaction rather than just information sharing. In fact, some cities are intentionally launching interactive campaigns. The chapter concludes by offering insights into challenges local governments face in implementing e-government technology for citizen interaction.

INTRODUCTION

A participatory citizenry provides local governments with insights into local knowledge, priorities, unforeseen concerns, and conflicts that may arise during a policy preparation process (Conroy & Berke, 2004; Conroy & Gordon, 2004; Wild & Marshall, 1999). Challenges exist regarding the best way to engage a community in a public process such as planning, which relies on citizen input to establish visions and policies for the future of the community (Brody et al., 2004; Laurian,

2004). Traditional venues such as public meetings can be an inefficient and ineffective means of activating citizen interest, as their timing and form are often to blame for low participation levels by the general public (Chess & Purcell, 1999; Day, 1997). Technology-enhanced participation tools provide an alternate and/or supplementary means for citizens to participate in public processes and build better relationships with their governments (Lodge, 2003; Weber et al., 2003). Information and communication technology (ICT) provides citizens who want to participate the flexibility of doing so in the location and at the time of their choosing (Kwan & Weber, 2003). Therefore, governments who can harness ICT e-government tools can potentially expand opportunities for citizen participation.

Many municipalities across the U.S. are using e-government, the government's use of the Internet, as well as other forms of technology for enhanced information and service delivery to citizens. A rapidly growing set of municipalities actively use technology to engage citizens in dialogues on how to improve their communities.

Information and interactive technologies, such as those available via the Internet, offer promise for improved participation opportunities in municipal government. The purpose of this work is to assess the use of e-government applications in municipalities in the United States for public participation in planning processes. This chapter examines the adoption of e-government technologies by municipal governments over the five year period between 2003 and 2007. The analysis is based on a review of planning department websites for U.S. cities with 2000 census populations of 50,000 or more. Samples of 582 cities for 2003 and 409 cities for 2007 were utilized in this study. Websites have been evaluated based on the types of citizen participation opportunities provided, ease of navigation, design, and depth of information. While almost all of the cities in the analysis have a web presence (all but one in the 2007 study), the degree to which they provide

on-line participation opportunities for citizens varies from primarily providing information to a growing group that encourages active on-line civic engagement.

First, there is a review of the types of citizen participation opportunities in municipal planning and the availability of technology for e-government. The results of the review describe planning department websites for communities with populations over 50,000. This is followed by the results from a survey of planning directors on their plans for future adoption of e-government technologies. Finally, conclusions are drawn on the challenges of and opportunities for the adoption of e-government technologies.

Citizen Participation in E-Government

The engagement of a citizenry in the governmental decisions that will impact them is a hallmark of the democratic process. There are cited benefits of citizen participation for both the citizenry and the government agency, including increasing the education and awareness levels of the citizenry, civic engagement, government responsiveness, and citizens' commitment to implementation (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Berry et al., 1993). Participation research provides ample evidence that when people are involved in decision-making processes, they are more likely to support the development and implementation of related policies and projects (Potapchuk, 1996). Government agencies also note less opposition and better policies when there is a high level of participation in policy development (Berry et al., 1993).

However, engagement opportunities vary considerably as far as their significance and the level to which citizens can be involved in the policy or planning process (Arnstein, 1969; Burke, 1979). In the U.S., citizen participation has often been simply an agency's notification of a decision that was already final. Agencies have tended to emphasize simple, one-way forms of communication that

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