Open City Hall

January 27, 2010

Introduction

The City of Decatur has implemented Open City Hall - an innovative online program that facilitates citizen engagement in critical community decisions.

The basic idea is simple. The City selects upcoming decisions on which it requires citizen input, posts background information about those topics on its website, and invites residents to submit comments on its website. All comments are monitored for civility. Decision makers use the online comments, along with input from other channels for participation, in their decision process.

Background

When the decision to pilot Open City Hall was made In September 2008, Mayor Bill Floyd set out these objectives for the program:

> We would hope it would augment and diversify civil, civic engagement, and more specifically:

- facilitate easy and convenient participation in community issues,
- impede a single voice from dominating the public discourse, and
- improve the efficiency of decisions makers to synthesize large amounts of diverse feedback.

> The goals of this Open City Hall Pilot program are to assess the extent to whether this suite of services can:

- Assist local governments in addressing important problems with the key stakeholders;
- Increase and diversify the amount of public participation on important community issues;
- Augment the tools that government leaders and decision makers use to analyze and synthesize the opinions of citizens; and,
- Improve the quality of citizen participation and the public's perception of government-led decision processes.

Open City Hall has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations in this community of 18,000 residents. As of this writing, more than 2600 residents have visited the online forum and over 500 statements have been posted online by 340 participants. This is equivalent to more than 25 hours of public comment.

The online comments have been instrumental in informing our decision process on strategic issues. Our first Open City Hall topic asked "Do you support increasing the city limits through annexation?". The opinions expressed by 171 participants were articulate, thoughtful, and helpful in clarifying the concerns that citizens had about the annexation (mostly around preserving the quality of Decatur schools). These comments helped inform our decision process and gave decision makers confidence in their decision to defer the annexation until better economic times.

Requirements

We had four main requirements when we started Open City Hall.

- Minimal Staff Resources: The program must take a minimum of staff resources to implement and maintain.
- Civility and Free Speech: We need to ensure that the online statements are civil and constructive without violating free speech rights.
- Geo Awareness: We need to know which statements are from inside city limits and which originate outside city limits.
- Authentication: We need to ensure that no one person dominates the forum. In particular, we need to authenticate statement authors so that no one can post multiple statements under fictitious identities.

Minimal Staff Resources

Since the beginning of our Open City Hall program we have worked closely with Peak Democracy (www.PeakDemocracy.com) - an Alliance for Innovation partner based in Northern California - to implement Open City Hall and to meet those requirements. Peak Democracy provides all the support services required to implement Open City Hall. Though the Open City Hall forum is displayed on our city website, the forum is run on Peak Democracy's servers. Our IT requirements are almost non-existent: after spending a few minutes embedding Peak Democracy's HTML code on one of our website pages, Peak Democracy has handled the rest.

Civility and Free Speech

Using staff and software, Peak Democracy inspects every statement for disruptive content. If they find problems, they move the statement off the forum and email the author, inviting him or her to change the disruptive content. To respect the free speech rights of participants, Peak Democracy never edits or deletes any statement - only the statement author can do that.

Peak Democracy's standards are clearly documented, and participants know that the forum is monitored. This has made the statements remarkably civil and constructive. To date, none of the 503 statements have been held for disruptive content.

Geo Awareness

Peak Democracy requires each participant to confidentially provide their full name and address before posting their statement on Open City Hall. They do this for several reasons:
- to help ensure that no one person dominates the forum, each participant is limited to just one statement per topic; collecting name and address helps enforce that limit.
- to identify which statements come from inside city limits, and which originate outside.
- to enable participants to subscribe to receive announcements pertaining to their own community.

In the case of Decatur, identifying the city of residence is particularly tricky. The Decatur mailing address is used by many residents, both inside the city limits and outside, in neighboring unincorporated portions of DeKalb County. Looking for 'Decatur' in the address provided by the end user would not identify whether the user lives inside or outside city limits.

To overcome this difficulty, Peak Democracy geocodes the addresses of all the participants and determines the latitude and longitude of each address within about 100 foot accuracy. Using that, and the boundary data for the City, Peak Democracy's geocoding algorithm determines which statements come from inside the City and which come from outside.

Both sets of statements are available on the website - and users can input search criteria that subset displayed statements to inside and/or outside the City. Peak Democracy also generates printed reports that tally statements in those separate categories.

Authentication

Using software and staff, Peak Democracy also inspects the name and address of every registrant to ensure that there is no systematic fraud in registration information. Addresses must be legitimate and pass a battery of tests to be accepted (e.g., address cannot be the city hall address, which Peak Democracy has found to be a typical address used when a user tries to falsify their address). If Peak Democracy finds a potential problem, they contact the author and ask for verification.

Though the authentication process cannot detect every instance of fraud, it does detect and eliminate systematic fraud in user registration, and prevents any one person from dominating the forum.

Social Media

Peak Democracy also makes routine improvements to their Open City Hall service. Recently they started a service that enables users to subscribe to receive notices of new topics and/or residents' statements in email, Twitter, Facebook and/or RSS. We were initially concerned that posting comments on City-affiliated Facebook pages may require constant monitoring and occasional responses by city staff. However, those concerns proved moot - Peak Democracy configures the Facebook pages so that only copies of the monitored statements from Open City Hall are allowed on the pages. This means that our Facebook pages have the same order and decorum as our Open City Hall page on our City website.

Residents' Response

Open City Hall is enthusiastically received by residents. After posting a statement for the first time, each participant is asked "Do you like using Open City Hall" in an online user satisfaction survey. As of this writing 96%, (185 out of 192) of the responses are 'Yes'. The five most recent reasons for satisfaction are representative of the reasons given for this satisfaction:

- It makes me feel connected to the discussion of what's going on in the arts in my community
- The populace needs to voice their opinions otherwise government officials do not know what the people are thinking.
- Convenience
- Very easy!
- With two small kids, it's really hard to get to the night meetings - an online option is great!!

Cost Effectiveness

We have found Open City Hall to be a very cost-effective way to increase and diversify public participation. After an initial setup fee of $2500, the ongoing cost of monitoring, authenticating and supporting end users is only $200/month. We believe this modest investment is well justified by the many benefits of building public participation in our decision process. In particular, the cost of a custom-developed system and of administering the process with in-house staff would far exceed the price of Open City Hall.

Conclusion

Given this experience, the City of Decatur is enthusiastic about continuing Open City Hall. We have launched another five topics on a wide range of subjects from a railroad crossing redesign project to helping us formulate our cultural arts master plan.   We are confident that Open City Hall has increased and diversified public participation, helped decision makers analyze and synthesize citizen opinions, and improved the quality of citizen participation and the public's perception of the decision process here in Decatur.