Leveraging Technology to Promote Citizen Engagment

**2012 Transforming Local Government Conference
Alliance for Innovation**

Case Study Submission

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City of Olathe, Kansas

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Not content to announce public hearings and hope someone attends, the City of Olathe has found new ways to engage its citizens and obtain their input on two critical documents—the City's Comprehensive Plan and the Operating Budget and Capital Improvement Program for fiscal year 2012.

In seeking ways to make it easier for residents to voice opinions, preferences and priorities, the City has employed high-tech social media formats such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to take its messages directly to the people. It also has thrown in some old-fashioned, road-show acts, complete with up to 30 PowerPoint presentations tailored to different audiences.

The result has been unprecedented success in gaining citizen input—in some cases, from residents who have never participated previously—and the development of techniques and formats that are repeatable and transferrable to other City efforts.

For 75-year-old Mitch Eagan, a 26-year resident of Olathe, keeping up with City activities has become a regular component of his Facebook activity. Earlier printed letters to Mayor Michael Copeland gave way to Facebook exchanges about a range of issues and "friend" status.

"I really think the City does a wonderful job," Mr. Eagan says of the Facebook site and other efforts. "I'm really proud of this city."

Facebook and other social networks were key in building interest in an e-Town Hall session related to the City's $294 million 2012 budget.

The electronic town hall, believed to be the first of its kind in the Midwest, was developed to provide more residents a convenient way to share thoughts, ask questions or learn about how their tax dollars are being spent. The event utilized various forms of traditional electronic communications and social media outreach, including web-streamed video, blogging, Facebook and a live television broadcast/webcast.

Resident questions, solicited through social media channels, were answered by Olathe City Council members during the July 19, 2011, broadcast/webcast on the Olathe Government Network cable channel. About 40 questions were submitted for the event, which was moderated by a local TV political reporter. Answers to questions not addressed during the broadcast were posted on the City of Olathe website. Questions also were accepted following the broadcast through the website,

the City of Olathe Facebook page or by calling them in to Olathe City Hall. Citizens also were invited to two public budget workshops and a public hearing.

Transparency remains an Olathe City Council priority, and the e-Town Hall format provided one more window into the City's budget process. Additional budget information was available on the City's website as well as a forum for feedback and comments. Residents also were encouraged to contact the City's Budget Office with questions or concerns.

Citizen engagement also was a key component of an 18-month effort to update the City's Comprehensive Plan, a vision for the community, also known as PlanOlathe. And rather than wait for the community to come to them, Olathe city planners went on the road as they presented PlanOlathe to the community. Through a series of community events, forums, stakeholder interviews, visioning sessions, mobile workshops, phone and face-to-face interviews, emails and public hearings, a consensus emerged around a vision for the future of Olathe. Approximately 1,500 citizens participated, representing about one of every 84 Olatheans.

PlanOlathe is intended to be an interactive and user-friendly plan that sets the standard for public usability and accessibility. Graphics, maps, and diagrams in the Plan document illustrate the concepts embodied by the Plan. The Plan website, www.planolathe.com, enables the user to fully explore the Plan in a way that is visually interesting and specific to the user's interests. PlanOlathe is useful in different ways to different groups. Residents may be interested in the location of parks, schools, or community facilities. Business and property owners may be interested in land use recommendations or development policies for their property. Topics such as the fiscal health of the City are a priority for policy makers. Through the Plan's website, users can explore detailed information on its concepts, City services, demographic and development information, or neighborhood activity, all within the context of the vision and recommendations contained in the Plan.

In September 2008, the City's Planning Division kicked off a public outreach initiative to determine what Olathe citizens wanted for the future of Olathe.

City leaders, technical and advisory committees, the public, and other stakeholders gave decisive direction: decisions must be based on community values and must continue to enhance the quality of life of the community.

One of the basic tenets of PlanOlathe is the concept that, by working together we can develop new ideas to forge a distinct future. Great communities don't just happen: they require focus, commitment, and energy.

The end result was approval of a document that represents the community's vision for how it wants to see the City of Olathe grow and develop now and for years to come.

Supplemental Information:

Intent of the initiative

In each case, the intent of the initiative was to seek new methods of engaging citizens in the creation and approval of plans and budgets that impact them directly. Each sought to capture the community's vision for the City's present and future.

Length of time it has been in place/when it took place

The update of the Comprehensive Plan started in September 2008 and was adopted by the Governing Body in October 2010. The City of Olathe's use of social media to engage citizens started in June 2010 with the launch of the City's Twitter account and the debut of the Facebook account in September 2010. The e-Town Hall took place July 19, 2011.

Anticipated and actual outcomes

The Comprehensive Plan is a living plan that will guide future growth and development. The Plan is being used to make recommendations on projects that seek approval through the planning process. The next steps will be to align the zoning ordinance and design guidelines with PlanOlathe. The living plan also will be reviewed annually and updated to meet the community's changing needs.

Based on limited application and mixed results of electronic town hall events in other jurisdictions, the City of Olathe didn't know what to anticipate from its e-Town Hall. Leading up to the event, the City ran a two-day advertisement on Facebook. During the ad's runtime, City of Olathe posts were viewed 14,872 times, representing an increase of 87 percent from similar periods. Additionally, City of Olathe posts received 50 percent more feedback in the form of comments or "likes" compared to similar periods. Although it is not known how many viewers watched the live e-Town Hall on Olathe Government Network, annual citizen satisfaction surveys indicate that about one in six residents consider the network to be their primary source of information.

Costs associated with the initiative

In addition to City of Olathe staff's time, the total cost to have a consultant update the entire Comprehensive Plan and for initial creation of the PlanOlathe website was $297,895. Follow-up work on planolathe.com has been performed by City staff.

Staff time was the primary cost associated with the e-Town Hall event. A two-day advertisement on Facebook in advance of the event cost $66. The TV political reporter who facilitated the event donated his time.

Savings associated with the initiative

Financial savings associated with efforts such as updating the Comprehensive Plan and hosting an e-Town Hall are not immediately recognized in the community. A better-informed community can be expected to make smarter decisions that lead to direct savings over time. Each event helps the community develop in a smarter way, leading to environmental and quality of life savings that are difficult to weigh financially.

Obstacles encountered, new issues, problems or unintended consequences

Expectations of the public and unknown results are always issues that must be considered when pursuing efforts that rely on engaging citizens.

Results achieved

The Comprehensive Plan was updated and adopted and exists as a "living" document that invites citizen scrutiny and input. The document's principles, policies and action items filter into each department so the goals can be achieved where the work is needed.

The effort to engage citizens in the budget process resulted in a better informed discussion of the overall budget and specific items of interest in the community. From the launch of the e-Town Hall until its live broadcast, the City's Facebook page experienced a 60 percent increase in post views, as compared to similar periods. While the FY11 Budget Planning webpage received approximately 300 views, the combined FY12 Budget Planning webpage and the e-Town Hall webpage received a combined 1,214 views.

Innovative characteristics

The update of the Comprehensive Plan and outreach through an e-Town Hall represented new and inclusive ways of engaging the community. PlanOlathe represents an easily accessible living document; the e-Town Hall efforts utilized new technologies to interact with different segments of the community.

Innovation Study Components

E-Town Hall

1. Innovation/Creativity

How did the idea/program/project/service improve the organization?

Citizen engagement in the budget process has always been a priority of the Olathe City Council. Yet, staff has wrestled with the best method to engage its residents. During the 2012 Budget Planning process, the Budget Team partnered with the Communication and Customer Services Department to engage residents through the use of social and new media. The resulting e-Town Hall produced increased citizen involvement in the budget process and a higher degree of transparency.

Were new technologies used?

The e-Town Hall utilized various forms of traditional electronic communications and social media outreach, including web-streamed video, blogging, Facebook, Twitter and live television broadcast. CoverIt Live, a live blog, was imbedded on the City's budget webpage to gather citizen inquiries related to the 2012 budget. The City Council responded live, during a television broadcast, to citizen questions and comments. This was the first e-Town Hall event in Olathe and the region.

Was a consultant used?

No consultant was used. However, Pinellas County, Fla., served as a reference because they had successfully used a similar format during their budget process.

2. Outcomes Achieved

What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled?

Residents could actively engage in the budget process from the comfort of their homes. In addition to traditional ways of weighing in on the budget, (public hearing during Council meetings, calling the Budget Office, email, etc.), citizens were able to submit questions and concerns through a blog, Facebook and Twitter. These questions were addressed by the City Council during the live e-Town Hall broadcast. Questions that did not make it on air were answered in a document posted to the website following the event. The event fit within the City's goal of transparency in decision making.

Has service delivery been enhanced?

Yes. The inaugural e-Town Hall allowed residents to engage in the budget process through new technology. In addition, a Budget 101 video served as an introduction to the 2012 budget, which was posted to the City's website and Facebook page. This was the largest number of residents to engage in the budget process in Olathe's history.

Has the health of the community improved as a result?

When the City has more input from its residents on where to spend resources, better decisions can be made, which impact the financial health of the community.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

What practical applications will be shared?

Utilizing social/new media to engage residents is the main applicable result. We will share ways to replicate the success of the e-Town Hall format for similar purposes.

How applicable is the idea/program/project/service to other local governments?

The concept/program is applicable, as every local government creates an annual budget. Local governments are often looking for new ways to engage their residents, and this presentation will show the audience ways to replicate this event.

What results/outcomes will you share?

Statistics and analytics, many of which were cited in the above case study, will be shared with the audience.

Comprehensive Plan

1. Innovation/Creativity

How did the idea/program/project/service improve the organization?

When citizens get involved in shaping plans for their future, a higher level of buy-in is created. One in 84 citizens was reached during this input process.

Were new technologies used?

Olathe's Web Development Team created the living plan's website, which can be accessed at the following link: http://www.planolathe.org/tech

Was a consultant used?

A consultant was used for the Comprehensive Plan update and for the initial planolathe.com website that was used during the update process. City staff completed the living document website.

Consultant Information:

AECOM (formerly EDAW)

240 East Mountain Avenue,

Fort Collins, CO 80524

971-484-6073.

Cameron Gloss cameron.gloss@aecom.com

Bruce Meighen bruce.meighen@aecom.com.

2. Outcomes Achieved

What customer/community needs and expectations were identified and fulfilled? Has service delivery been enhanced?

The Comprehensive Plan was shaped around the community input received at all stages of the planning process. The visioning document, principles, policies and actions all were filtered through public viewing.

Did the initiative improve access to your government?

Yes, the Comprehensive Plan website can be accessed at the following link: www.planolathe.com. It is interactive, allowing a user to search the map, chapters or topics, based on interest. Citizens also may submit via email.

Has the health of the community improved as a result?

PlanOlathe is also unique in that it includes a complete build-out model to evaluate whether land use and development policies place the City on a fiscally sustainable path. The City needed a dynamic tool to update land use assumptions, revenues, service costs, service standards and infrastructure needs to

project the public costs and benefits to the City upon full build-out. This model was able to demonstrate that if the City continued to grow as it as it had in the past, the balance of infrastructure costs, service costs and City revenue put the City on an unsustainable path. In contrast, the land use framework of the Comprehensive Plan showed long-term fiscal viability if the City developed in a more efficient and sustainable manner.

The build-out model indicated that higher densities and mixed uses return higher tax revenues per acre than do lower density uses. For many City services, there are efficiencies in serving populations in compact geographies. Less street and utility infrastructure is needed, and service areas can be smaller, which reduces per capita costs for these services. A land use framework that includes an extensive network of open space also reduces the total area where it is necessary to extend development infrastructure. Higher density development also allows for a greater total population to be accommodated within the City, which can support more retail, service and other commercial uses that generate both property and sales tax for the City.

3. Applicable Results and Real World Practicality

What practical applications will be shared? How applicable is the idea/ program/ project/ service to other local governments?

The public outreach techniques can be used by any community for more than just a plan update. One of the key lessons the City learned was that it is important to go to where the people are. Unfortunately, there are few people willing to attend a public meeting, but they will listen if you show up at a function they already are attending. Also, an interactive website is an excellent portal for communicating a plan that will constantly change. It is important to break information down in such a way that the public can sift through it to obtain what is important to them.

What results/outcomes will you share?

The success of the public involvement process, with a particular focus on the road shows and PlanOlathe website will be shared with the audience. Specific data on participation throughout the public involvement process will also be available.

E-Town Hall & Comprehensive Plan

4. Innovation Study Presentation

The presentation will be an interactive experience, including live demonstrations of the technology and a video clip from the E-Town Hall event. Other presentation components will include a PowerPoint and handouts with charts and other supporting data.