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Award Application

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E-Town Hall Event

2.

The City of Olathe held its inaugural e-Town Hall event in July 2011, one month prior to the adoption of the FY12 budget. This event represented new and inclusive ways of engaging more segments of the community. Through a mix of traditional communications and social media tools, citizens were able to submit budget questions through a method most convenient for them. The City Council responded to the question submissions during a live e-Town Hall event, facilitated by a local news reporter, and broadcast live on television.

3.

With low turnout at the traditional public hearings, the City of Olathe held this event during a time when it was exploring new ways to successfully engage its citizens in the budget process.

4.

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 the 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.

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.

5.

- **How is it a quantum leap of creativity?**

This was the first e-Town Hall event in Olathe and is believed to be the first in the Midwest. Outreach through the e-Town Hall event represented new and inclusive ways of engaging the community. These efforts utilized new technologies to interact with segments of the community not commonly engaged in public dialogue with the City. Various forms of traditional electronic communications were utilized, as well as social media, 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.

E-Town Hall Event

- **Who has benefited from the innovation?**

The inaugural e-Town Hall allowed residents to engage in the budget process through new technology, and the 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.

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.

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.

- **How was the innovation initiated and implemented?**

Because the annual budget directly impacts Olathe citizens, the intent of this initiative was to seek new methods of engaging citizens in the budget process.

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 event produced increased citizen involvement in the budget process and a higher degree of transparency.

- **What risks were associated with planning and developing the innovation?**

Based on limited application and mixed results of electronic town hall events in other jurisdictions, the City of Olathe did not know what to anticipate from its event. 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.

E-Town Hall Event

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

- **What was the environment in which the innovation was created and sustained?**

This event was held during a time when the City was exploring new ways to successfully engage its citizens in the budget process. With low attendance at the traditional public hearings, the e-Town Hall event presented a new and interesting way for citizens to engage with the City.

- **What were the execution costs and savings?**

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.

Financial savings associated with the event 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.

- **What lessons were learned that could be shared with 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 information on how the e-Town Hall was structured can benefit other local governments that may be interested in hosting a similar event.

- **Which department and/or individuals championed the innovation?**

The Budget Office and Communication and Customer Services Department championed the e-Town Hall event.

Attachment

Not content to announce public hearings and hope someone attends, the City of Olathe found a new way to engage its citizens and obtain their input on 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 and Twitter to take its messages directly to the people.

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 transferable 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 the 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 were still 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 annual budget process.