



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

2015 Local Government Excellence Awards Program Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

(All programs nominated must have been fully operational for a minimum of 12 months, prior to January 31, 2015)

Deadline for Nominations: March 3, 2015

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (select only one):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Be Heard Harrisonburg

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: Harrisonburg, Virginia

Jurisdiction population(s): Approximately 50,000

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented for at least 12 months prior to January 31, 2015, to be eligible. The start date [on or before January 31, 2014] should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: November Year: 2013

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, September 2015. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Kurt D. Hodgen

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: Harrisonburg, VA

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Kurt D. Hodgen
Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: _____
Street address: 345 South Main Street
City: Harrisonburg State/Province: VA
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The 2015 Version of a Public Hearing

Getting the public involved should be a priority for every locality across the United States that wants to get a handle on the pulse of how they are performing in the realm of public opinion and perception. In Harrisonburg, that priority was made a reality through a partnership with a company called Granicus, City staff, and most importantly, the community.

Be Heard Harrisonburg (www.BeHeardHarrisonburg.org) is a platform that the City launched in November 2013. The goal of this resource was to increase citizen participation and facilitate dialogue between the City and the community and between community members themselves. Users were asked to register to the site and begin posting ideas, supporting what they liked, and joining in on the discussions.

Technology has opened doors in local government, enabling localities to reach a broader audience. The City of Harrisonburg has found it both necessary and beneficial to keep up with the technology and expand the way public input is received. *Be Heard Harrisonburg* is an ideal way for the City to engage citizenry during a time that is convenient to them – there is no attending a council meeting during an already busy weekday night. No public hearing where you have to stand in front of a crowded room to give your opinion. The citizen can stay in on a snowy, dark December evening and take time to formulate their ideas and responses and even edit before hitting the “send” button.

This platform has a variety of features for members of the community to take an active role in the decisions that are being made within the Harrisonburg community. Registered users are able to do the following:

- Create an idea for Harrisonburg;

- Support other ideas that have been created;
- Participate in an online discussion, survey, or forum; and
- Post eComments to the upcoming meeting agenda.

The city sees the approximately \$12,000 annual cost to operate the *Be Heard Harrisonburg* site as an investment. Staff members monitor the site, answer questions, and provide feedback online. Sometimes it involves correcting misinformation or directing users to information online in other sections of the City's website.

Although this site has been operating since the fall of 2013, it was a recent project that was posted to get ideas that sparked the momentum to grow the community's participation. For the second year during the budget cycle, a survey was created for the community to submit comments about the budget before a public hearing was held. By starting this survey early on in the budget process, City staff members were able to carefully review the suggestions and ideas in advance of the budget being presented to Harrisonburg's City Council.

The survey conducted last year, received 68 responses. Not only did the City receive an overwhelming response this year, the number of registered users grew significantly. This year, 113 new ideas were received through the online budget survey posted to *Be Heard Harrisonburg*. Although they did not complete the survey, it is significant to mention that 115 people went to the site and at least started the survey. It is encouraging to know that each year more people are interested in participating and seeing how the process of developing a budget works. Council members now have more information on which to base their decision-making and funding priorities.

The number of registered users grew from less than 200 to almost 350 while the budget survey was posted. It took one year to gain the following of those 200 users and two short months to add 150 more. That is progress!

Not only is this a tool to engage with citizens, it is a communication and outreach tool. When developing a communication plan for City projects, this is one of the many outlets available to communicate our messages and get more people involved and educated. The City promotes the same messages across a variety of platforms to reach more of the targeted audiences.

Although many ideas will come and go on this site and surveys will begin and end, the platform will be there 24/7/365 to collect feedback from citizens at their convenience. City staff members are constantly evaluating and analyzing what more could be done to improve the site and how to engage more people. Press releases and blasts on social media are consistently reminding citizens of the site and notifying them when a new survey or discussion is available to begin collecting feedback.

While this site is an additional investment, thinking outside of the box to get similar engagement within a community can be replicated. Other localities have a different citizen make up and could craft a tool to be as effective as *Be Heard Harrisonburg*. The end results for all localities should be the same; increase awareness, allow for citizen feedback, and educate.

We recognize our diverse community – some do not have access to a computer or the internet. Others do not prefer to use the electronic tools. The City of Harrisonburg is not taking away from best practices that have proven successful in the past. Rather *Be Heard Harrisonburg* is yet another arrow in our quiver. Home to James Madison University and Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg has a 20,000+ population that is very tech savvy. Yet a public school

system with 72% free or reduced lunch and a high ESL population may indicate a hurdle to accessing technology. Therefore, we have not discounted our tried and true measures that continue to garner the desired results. In fact, a recent survey on *Be Heard Harrisonburg* inquired about ways that citizens like to receive information. The promotion of this survey in the newspaper and television also indicated that residents could contact the public information officer directly to answer the survey.

From those who participated, there was not one single source of news but several different sources of news that residents follow. The City's targeted audience gets their news in multiple formats, which proves our theory correct in using a variety of tools to reach the intended population.

The City of Harrisonburg will continue to increase engagement and collect diverse feedback from the community. Creating and maintaining opportunities to be heard will be an ongoing process and one that takes time and creativity like efforts that are being done through the *Be Heard Harrisonburg* site. It will be fun to watch the next big idea unfold in Harrisonburg through this public platform.

