Modern Tools for Effective Citizen Engagement
Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic
September 15, 2020

In response to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic many local governments are now offering new, virtual ways for citizens to actively and meaningfully participate in the planning process. 1000 Friends of Florida closely followed local governments' shift to remote citizen engagement and has identified a number of practices that should continue even after the emergency has passed. These practices will offer opportunities that are especially valuable for Floridians challenged in attending planning meetings in person because of work, transportation, family or other limitations.

We recommend local governments supplement traditional forms of participation with the following modern tools and technologies, many learned or expanded in response to the pandemic, that emulate real-time, in-person meetings.

- **Allow public comment via video submission.** In 2014, the Town of Miami Lakes became the first municipality in Florida to accept comments for public hearings via pre-recorded video. This innovative idea encouraged community members to incorporate visual elements into their comments. For example, a resident concerned about dangerous traffic patterns was able to film himself speaking in front of the local road, showing the cars speeding by in the background to emphasize his point.

- **Provide a wide range of methods for the public to attend and participate in public meetings**, **workshops and hearings**. For example, Gainesville's notices for meetings outline five ways to access (live coverage, web streaming, TV channel broadcast, Facebook Live, and Zoom audio conference) and five ways to provide comment (by mail, by email, by phone prior to meeting, by e-comment through website, and by telephone during the meeting).

- **Provide public notices and access through social media channels, beyond the traditional practice of publishing in the local newspaper.** For example, Nextdoor allows for hyperlocal messaging and development proposal alerts within a neighborhood (see for example, Pinellas County). Local governments are increasing their use of a variety of social media platforms to share and gather feedback on projects and proposals through features such as "likes," "shares," and comments.

- **Provide public notices and announcements by text alert programs**. For example, Collier County encourages citizens to opt-in to their e-notification system to receive alerts either by email or text message. Citizens can select from over a dozen types of calendar or news alerts, including topics such as county meetings and publications, county workshops and Growth Management Department news releases.

- **Adapt citizens' academies to an online setting in addition to in-person interaction**. These academies offered by local governments are key to improving residents' understanding of government procedures and educating citizens about their role in shaping their communities. A few examples of municipalities adapting these popular courses to an online setting include Palm Coast , Largo, as well as Pasco County.

Public Hearings: Virtual and Hybrid Approaches
- **Utilize virtual meeting platforms** such as Zoom, GoToMeeting, and WebEx, among others. These programs can emulate real-time interactions by allowing citizens to interact with their officials using features such as thumbs up, hands up, and provide video/audio comment.
- **Install public kiosks.** One innovative approach for socially distanced public comment is through a physical, public location equipped with CMT (Communication and Media Technologies) where members of the public provide comment by either recording a video in advance or participating over video in a live meeting. This option works for those unable to access internet services at home. Pasco County is an example of a local government utilizing kiosks.
- **Avoid "Zoom bombing"** through third-party meeting management solutions. To eliminate interruptions by people disrupting and/or hacking into virtual meetings, Alachua County contracted a third-party call-in moderator to operate its Zoom platform. Citizens call a phone number (advertised prior to the meeting) and are connected by the moderator to the live meeting. The moderator is able to screen for disruptions and can quickly pull the plug on an unruly participant.
- **Adapt workshops and charrettes.** Design and planning firms have shifted the collaborative, planning process to virtual formats using highly interactive websites, sharing sketches and modelling directly with citizens, and innovating a traditionally hands-on process through technology. The City of Neptune Beach's Community Vision Plan 2040 was underway prior to the pandemic, but shifted all workshops to a virtual setting.

Comprehensive Citizen Engagement Technologies

Civic engagement technologies provide a spectrum of options ranging from CMTs to computer programs and software. A local government's approach should match its goals, offer real-time participation options, and provide two-way engagement options through the entire planning process. Citizen engagement software technologies can provide local governments with the ability to inform officials of citizens' views, bring citizens together to deliberate on policy issues (e.g. the budget, proposed development), and allow citizens to influence the decision-making process. Numerous services currently exist and are experiencing a rise in demand due to the rapid shift to virtual participation. A few examples include:
- **BangtheTable's EngagementHQ, OpenGov** enterprise resource planning software**, ClearGov** budgeting software, **mySidewalk** city data tool, and South Florida-based **CivicPro**, among others.

For additional tools and examples of citizen engagement technologies, check out Government Technology's annual **GovTech 100** list of technology companies contracting with state and local governments for all-in-one citizen engagement services.

At the time of writing, local governments across Florida continue to adjust to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Responses vary by region and decisions have been made on a week-by-week basis. Some of the examples we have cited in this summary may turn out to be better in theory than in practice. We will remain interested in their performance. We will be learning lessons from this period of history for months and years to come and believe some adaptations should be here to stay for the long-term betterment of civic engagement.