

Collaboration Nation

Technology is
changing the way
citizens engage
with local
government.

By Rob Gurwitt

he unofficial motto of Austin, Texas, may be “Keep Austin Weird.” But surely “Oh, and One More Thing...” deserves space on its T-shirts too.

The city is famously argumentative. It took residents almost three decades to come to terms on a new airport after the Federal Aviation Administration advanced the idea in 1971. A water treatment plant first proposed in the 1970s sparked such a drawn-out battle that, although construction finally began in 2009, it is still not finished. Mass transit, highway projects, a new city hall—all are grist for robust public consideration. “Local government is close to citizens generally, but in Austin it’s *really* close,” says assistant director of planning Garner Stoll. “Austin folks have a long history of being blunt and outspoken.”

So it seemed like the blink of an eye when Austin needed only three years to arrive at a new comprehensive plan, approved last year. Especially since the planning effort, known as Imagine Austin, reached far beyond the usual crowd of community players.

Criticized initially for a public engagement process that roped in the usual land-use participants, the city’s planning department got creative. It developed “meetings in a box” that allowed groups in the community to use their own meetings to discuss questions that planners wanted asked. It worked with African-American pastors and the Asian Chamber of Commerce and took out ads on Spanish-language television network Univision to attract participants who didn’t usually show up at official city gatherings. It held countless workshops and four different series of community forums. It used social media to reach younger residents, and developed an online site, SpeakUpAustin, to solicit ideas and encourage public feedback on them.

The response was gratifying. Some 18,000 people wound up getting involved in the plan. It was a public-participation enthusiast’s dream. Except for one thing.

“When you have 10 people,” says Stoll, “they can discuss things in depth to their heart’s content. But if you have 18,000, you have to figure out how to manage those numbers. We hadn’t really thought about the consequences of having that many people involved. It’s like, what *does* happen when the dog catches the bus?”

This is not an idle question. Citizen engagement is coming of age. Local governments are experimenting as never before, pushed by the excruciating decisions that come with tight budgets, the ubiquity of social media and the development of new online deliberation tools. Behind it is a recognition that the time-worn public hearing may not be the best and is certainly not the only way to interact with the public.

There’s so much interest, in fact, that the International City/County Management Association’s new Center for Management Strategies—which focuses on what its director, Cheryl Hilvert, calls “emerging and trending practices”—has chosen citizen engagement as the first subject it will help members navigate. “There are opportunities to involve the community,” Hilvert says, “in a whole gamut of ways we haven’t traditionally done.”

Some cities are involving residents more fully in budgeting decisions—sometimes through “budget challenges,” which are mostly designed to help residents understand the complexities of what city officials have to face, but also through the interactive processes required by priority-based budgeting and participatory budgeting. Many of them are turning to startups like Peak Democracy and MindMixer to develop websites that let residents weigh in on issues confronting their cities. The open data movement is seeking to harness the creativity and talents of citizen-technologists to create applications that, in ways big and small, improve residents’ quality of life.

A number of cities—among them Philadelphia; Kansas City, Mo.; and San Francisco—have created “chief innovation officers” whose job descriptions include spearheading open data efforts and exploring new frontiers of engagement. Just as Austin has done, cities are beginning to create staff positions focused on helping their agencies deepen and broaden engagement efforts. In what may be a sign of things to come, one candidate for secretary of state in California next year—Pete Peterson, director of Pepperdine University’s Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership—is running a campaign based explicitly on using the office to promote civic engagement and civic health statewide.

Community engagement isn’t new, of course. Groups like the National Civic League and Public Agenda have been plowing this ground for decades. More recently groups pushing “study circles” and “deliberative democracy” have joined them. St. Paul, Minn., and Dayton, Ohio, for example, long ago developed formal structures for encouraging citizen participation. But local governments across the country now seem to be at a tipping point. “We’re in a period of great ferment,” says James Svara, a political scientist at Arizona State University who studies public engagement efforts. “Governments are trying all these things, and eventually it will become a standard practice and we’ll see a new consensus about what it all means.”

For the moment, though, it is anything but a standard practice. To put it in Garner Stoll’s terms, they’re just setting out now to solve the problem of the dog and the bus.

Right off the bat, two things should be made clear. The first is that “engagement” is in the eye of the beholder. As Swarthmore College political scientist Ben Berger put it in a paper on the subject a few years ago, “Like other buzzwords, civic engagement means so many things to so many people that it clarifies almost nothing.”

The second is that there is a wide spectrum of public participation. The International Association for Public Participation, known as IAP2, says that spectrum runs from a bare minimum of informing the public about problems and alternative solutions, to collaborating with them and empowering citizens to make the final decisions. Countless city officials still think that giving residents three minutes at the microphone makes for citizen engagement. They are “stuck in the check-box era,” says Larry Schooler, Austin’s civic engagement consultant—a city staff position—and

president of IAP2 USA. “They develop a policy and put it out for comment but are not willing to incorporate those comments into the policy.”

City officials are, in fact, of two minds on the subject. This became abundantly clear in the study “Testing the Waters,” released earlier this year by the nonprofit group Public Agenda and the Davenport Institute. Surveying 900 local officials in California, the study found that on the one hand, a full 88 percent of respondents said that the public already has “ample opportunity” to participate in local decision-making and that they considered typical public meetings to be effective. On the other, the vast majority also believed the public to be too busy to participate, too disengaged or ignorant to understand the issues facing their communities, and too angry and distrustful of local officials to be reliable partners. Three-fourths of the local officials surveyed believed that public meetings are dominated by people with narrow agendas. Nearly two-thirds said that public hearings “typically attract complainers and ‘professional citizens’” and don’t give the broad public a voice. Only half said that their typical meetings “generate thoughtful discussion among ordinary residents.”

Yet like it or not, city officials are being pushed to expand their engagement horizons—and not just because dire budgets are forcing them to go to the public for help or because citizens are demanding it. They are also, says Pepperdine’s Peterson, confronting well organized lobbying efforts on a range of issues. “The deeper engaged groups are louder than ever and better organized,” he says. Some city managers, he suggests, want to expand public engagement “to involve people who are more moderate or might have a common-sense perspective on these issues.”

They are also coming to believe that part of their distaste for what they’ve seen of public engagement in the past—the harangues, the parade of the same dozen faces at every public meeting, the angry exchanges with frustrated citizens—may stem not from the fact of public engagement, but from the public hearing model. “In our training sessions,” Peterson says, “we’ve heard public-sector officials say, ‘Wait, this three-minutes-at-a-microphone is enabling the behavior and inviting the kind of participation we’ve been seeking to avoid.’ That means the people aren’t necessarily the problem. Maybe it’s the process that needs changing.”

For many cities, new online applications offer an easy way to explore this idea. One of the earliest cities to do so was Omaha, Neb. A few years ago it created an online site, Engage Omaha, to provoke its residents to share their thoughts. The city happens to be home to MindMixer, one of the small crop of public engagement startups that are transforming how governments interact with their citizens.

“When I first got to city hall,” says Aida Amoura, who was communications director for former Omaha Mayor Jim Suttle, “they were afraid of public forums because the administration had been burned by them. I’d been thinking that there’s got to be a way to reach out to people who want to be involved in their community, where it’s not the same 20 people who always come in to complain.” It was around this time that she met Nick Bowden and Nathan Preheim, MindMixer’s founders, who were hoping Omaha would help them test their idea for a site that

would allow city officials to pose questions and for residents not just to respond, but also to respond to others’ thoughts and to propose their own ideas. The result was Engage Omaha. “We increased the number of people engaging by the thousands,” Amoura says. “We got moms on there, we got people whose schedules never permitted them to go to public meetings.”

But there are also risks to new initiatives, and Omaha stumbled on two of them. After an initial burst of energy, the site languished—mostly, Amoura says, because city officials weren’t focused on using the site to ask questions that were relevant to departments or to residents. This past spring, she and others in city hall were discussing how to refocus the site to better capture what department heads specifically wanted to know, when the second hurdle emerged: Suttle lost his re-election bid to challenger Jean Stothert. Since then, the city’s engagement efforts have been put on hold. “We are currently exploring all options and how they relate to the administration’s objectives,” is all that Cassie Seagren, Stothert’s deputy chief of staff, would say.

Meanwhile, other cities are forging ahead with online tools, using them to stoke conversations on everything from broad community visions to specific challenges. St. Paul, for instance, has been using its Open St. Paul site—this one powered by another leading engagement startup, Peak Democracy—to gauge citizen sentiment on bringing streetcars back to the city, and to solicit thoughts on how to make its recycling program more effective.

For the most part, these are baby steps. Cities are simply using technology to enhance, but not fundamentally change, the input local governments get from their citizens. “We’re definitely in the infancy of shaping how these technologies mediate interaction between a government and its people,” says Jay Nath, San Francisco’s chief innovation officer.

San Francisco has taken a broad view of how to use its ImproveSF site, mounting “challenges” for citizens to tackle. Its first venture asked people to create a new visual identity for the city’s transportation agency, and though the agency is happy with the result, Nath says it’s not something he’d do again. “What we learned is that the process should not be used to crowdsource efforts that we could pay for,” he says. “Instead, we should be focused on challenges that enlist people from the community in thinking about them and in solving them.”

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—POLITICAL SCIENTIST
JAMES SVARA

Toward that end, his office asked citizens to help design a new public library card. “Our library,” he says, “wanted a creative way to enroll more students and adults in building the library community.” The challenge drew thousands of responses, and even expanded to an effort that asked people to come up with ideas to improve access to fresh food in the Tenderloin, a low-income central-city neighborhood. “It’s really about harnessing the capacity to do good in our community,” Nath says. “These emerging technologies give us a great way to do that. They allow people from a geographic distance and with different time constraints and with different backgrounds to collaborate.”

For any local government interested simply in engaging more people, there is plenty to learn. Not least, says Austin’s Larry Schooler, is how to frame things in a way that compels people to turn out. “If you say, ‘We want to talk about bonds,’ people yawn,” he says. “But you’ll get a different reaction if you say, ‘We have \$1.5 billion in capital needs but only \$400 million in money, so how do we spend it?’”

This suggests what may be most intriguing about current citizen engagement efforts: They offer the prospect of rewriting the relationship between citizens and government. As Svava, the political scientist, puts it, new forms of collaboration “involve a level of communication and a type of communication that is different from what we’ve known in the past.”

Perhaps nowhere has this been tested more fully than in Vallejo, Calif. In 2011, the city of 118,000 north of San Francisco—known for its 2008 bankruptcy—voted to institute a 1 percent sales tax. A new city council majority decided to make the city the first in the country to use participatory budgeting to allow citizens to propose and vote on their own priorities for a portion of the proceeds. “After everything the citizens of Vallejo had been through, this gave them a chance to step up themselves and say how this money should be spent,” says Marti Brown, the city council member who proposed the idea.

Not surprisingly, the venture was not embraced by the city staff. “I was dismayed,” says Dan Keen, Vallejo’s city manager, who’d been brought in to dig the city out of its fiscal mess. “Given my quick read of the needs of the city, this was not one of the things I was going to put at the top of my list.”

Nonetheless, the city went ahead with the process last year, which involved a volunteer steering committee and a set of citizen-run task forces sifting through ideas gathered online and at nine public assemblies on how to spend \$3.6 million in new tax money. There were hiccups. Some city staff members still believe the money should have been used to rebuild an organization that had been decimated by the bankruptcy. The process took far more effort on the part of city staff than they’d anticipated. And while some of the spending ideas citizens ultimately approved were straightforward—expand library hours, fill potholes, put money into science and technology education in the public schools—others have been more controversial, such as providing four-year college scholarships to needy students.

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But those issues can be dealt with on the next go-round, Keen says, by more narrowly defining the projects that will be eligible for funding. More important, he says, the budgeting process brought the city some crucial benefits, and he now counts himself a guarded supporter. “Our staff was engaging with ordinary members of the public at a level we don’t typically get to,” he says. “Traffic engineers were engaging with residents who asked for information about what does it cost to fill potholes, or how far would this amount of money go for paving or for new streetlights. It created a forum for a conversation that typically doesn’t happen between the city staff and the community.”

The result, Marti Brown believes, is that the process has changed the relationship between city staff and residents. “City staff are used to the public being angry, and in this process they were curious, patient and good listeners,” she says. “It’s increased the public’s understanding of how government works.”

The biggest payoff for communities may, in fact, lie in changing how public conversations work. That is what Austin is exploring now.

After a time-consuming effort to distill the thoughts of 18,000 people and use them to shape the city’s priorities for the next few decades, city officials are convinced that they have a comprehensive plan that reflects the city’s enduring concerns. “We were following the idea of a plan driven by the values of residents—not staff or consultants or

city council or the planning commission,” Garner Stoll says. “The problem with following only the values of your elected officials is they will change. This plan needed to have continuity.” The challenge, of course, is what the city does with what it learned.

Toward that end, City Manager Marc Ott has been driving a five-part process to implement Imagine Austin, including wide-ranging efforts to simplify and align the city’s land development regulations and to continue reaching out to residents. Ott has also created a series of teams, made up of staff from a mix of departments, to make sure the city’s departments are talking to one another about how best to pursue the eight overarching priorities produced by the plan, such as keeping the city compact and connected, investing in the city’s creative economy and keeping housing affordable.

The result, he argues, will be a city that has a “collective understanding of who we are as a community and how we see ourselves growing over time.” When city officials propose a bond program or put together its annual operating budget or consider transportation investments, “people will understand better and be better able to participate,” Ott says, “because that understanding and those conversations will be based upon the set of shared values that are embodied in Imagine Austin.”

Ott doesn’t say this, but it’s hard to avoid one other thought. If he’s right, perhaps the real payoff of Imagine Austin will be that the next time the city undertakes a big project, it won’t take three decades to get it done. **G**

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