How Technology Is Giving Town Hall Meetings a Modern Twist

Adam Stone | January 18, 2017

When it comes to the accessibility of government, some might argue that technology has been a mixed blessing.

Some municipalities are using the latest communications tools to make government meetings more available. In fact, some insist upon it: Texas for instance passed a law last year mandating that large school districts, cities and counties record audio and video of board, city council and commissioner meetings and post them online.

Most civic-minded thinkers laud such tech implementations as a means to open the doors of government. But some worry about the flip side of remote access. When meetings all go online, will people stop attending in person? That could be problematic.

"There is a dynamic that comes with social interaction. It's why people still go to shopping malls and churches. People need to interact, and that is heightened when you talk about democratic institutions, the ability to petition directly to your representatives," said Kevin Duggan, West Coast regional director of the International City/County Management Association.

"It's hard to imagine not having the opportunity to engage the public directly, to let the public meet directly with their elected officials," he said.

In fact, many in government continue to see value in the traditional face-to-face meetings. A strong majority of government supervisors (89 percent) say government meetings benefit citizens, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

While some see technology as a valuable way to connect with those who can't make it to the council chambers on a Wednesday night, others are looking in a different direction. They are exploring ways in which technology can be used to enhance in-person meetings. Around the nation, municipalities are implementing instant-polling technologies, sophisticated agenda planners and speaker registration systems, all in an effort to make public meetings smarter and ultimately more effective.

Document sharing

In Lucas County, Ohio, the Metropolitan Housing Authority is using virtualized computing to enhance its public meetings.

The housing authority represents the interests of some 17,000 individuals in 7,300 households. Its five-member board of commissioners meets at least once a month, and committees convene periodically to conduct business and hear from residents. Often the background materials needed to support a meeting can be overwhelming.

"The board members may get a packet a week ahead of the meeting, and it will be this 100-page document. If they are volunteering their time, it can be a challenge to comprehend that much information," said housing authority CIO Craig Patterson. That challenge is compounded for ordinary citizens, who may only be seeing that information for the first time when they arrive at a meeting.

Recently the board virtualized its desktops with Citrix XenMobile, a move that has made it easier for board members and the public to interact with information before and during meetings. "Now we can give you a link on your iPhone or your tablet or your laptop, and you will have full access to everything, including all the multimedia, just as if you were a board member," Patterson said.

Before virtualizing the network, technical limitations made it difficult to share data in support of meetings. "If I tried to stream graphic-heavy video, it was going to look pixelated. It might not work at all," Patterson said. "Now I can upload the video a week ahead of time, allow the public to look at it and think about it, and that in turn enhances their ability to actively and intelligently participate in the board meetings."

Not only does the virtualized solution improve the quality of meetings, it also bolsters the bottom line. "In the past I would have had to buy a physical server and pay for all that capacity if I wanted to do something like this," Patterson said. "Now with a virtual sever, for the days of the month when I am not having a meeting that server can scale down to next to nothing. So I am only paying for what I utilize."

On the agenda

Meetings are as much about form as they are about content. What gets talked about, who talks, in what order: The agenda itself is very much the substance of the meeting, and not merely its form.

The commissioners of Brunswick County, N.C., recognize this and they take it seriously. They hold two "agenda meetings" a month for the purpose of setting the agendas for their two monthly public meetings. Those regular meetings can draw anywhere from 25 to 150 people, depending on the topic at hand, and a regular meeting of the commission may include upward of a couple dozen individual agenda items.

That's a lot of agenda to manage.

"As a manual, paper process it was hard to update, it was hard to edit, it was not easy to distribute," said County Manager Ann Hardy. "It took a clerk in excess of 40 hours to put together agenda booklets, and as soon as the booklet went out, there would be a change that needed to be made, and there was no way to make a change."

Recently the county adopted a fix in the form of cloud-based NovusAgenda electronic agenda management software. Now commissioners can access agendas on their mobile devices. Agendas, minutes, notes and supporting documents can be searched via a Web portal. The agenda creation and distribution process has gone paperless, and citizens have direct access to meeting schedules, past and upcoming agendas, minutes and notes.

Any department head can access the system to create an agenda item through a workflow process of approvals that includes the county attorney, the finance officer and the county manager. In the past, this too was a paper-based system.

Beyond merely paring back a labor-intensive process, the electronic system has enhanced democracy. "Now the public can check the website, they can see what is on the agenda and have the chance to speak before the item is voted on," Hardy said. "It is a huge improvement."

Still, the county has come to recognize the limits of its technology fix. "There have been dramatic moments when the Internet has gone down during a meeting, or the equipment has gone down," she said. "We have learned to plan for those things. You always save a PDF of the agenda packet on your local drive."

Counting clicks

Here's a problem with public meetings. Hand a microphone to just anyone, and you quickly attract a self-selecting group of loudmouths and narcissists.

"In public meetings the person who walks up to that microphone is the one who thinks they have it right, the one who thinks they know the answer, and who therefore has the greatest bias," said Martin Carcasson, a senior public engagement fellow at the nonprofit Public Agenda.

As a professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University, he trains students to facilitate public meetings and he said one of the most effective tools available to the government meeting-planner today is the simple clicker.

A clicker gives you a way to organize a meeting quickly and efficiently. "Imagine I put up a PowerPoint with 10 things and everyone with a clicker can indicate their top three,

in rank order," he said. "If a bunch of people want to talk about No. 2 and only a few people want to talk about No. 7, then I can assign tables quickly and organize around that. It allows us to balance breadth versus depth by finding out what people really want to talk about."

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Carcasson put this principle to work in Fort Collins, Colo., a big bike-riding community that came together for public meetings after two riders were killed on the road in the span of a week. Using clickers, meeting organizers were able to quickly sort out priorities and initiate brainstorming.

"At the end of the meeting we could say: Here is the list of actions, here is the list of people interested in those actions," he said. "Changes have actually been implemented since then by both the city and the biking community."

Carcasson promotes the clicker as a way to get people working together, unlike other technologies that may enhance the volume of a public gathering, without really improving its quality. "We have lots of people talking, but very few people listening. Democracy requires us to interact, to actually listen to each other," he said. "Too often, technology just makes it easier for you to express your opinion, to 'get it out there.' And that can just create a lot of noise. Public processes cannot just be about input. They need to be public learning processes, where we get a more nuanced vision of the issues than we had at the beginning."

Look who's talking

Who gets to talk when? This is no trivial question in a large public gathering. Take for instance Orange County, Fla., where a robust government meeting may draw hundreds of participants. It's hard enough to keep track of everyone who might want to stand up and be heard. Now add in the fact that by county rules, any participant can "donate" his or her allotted speaking time to someone else, and the logistics of the meeting will quickly swamp any paper-based registration system.

CIO Rafael Mena has his eye on an electronic register that would replace the present paper-based system. A collection of responsively designed Web pages would be deployed to mobile tablets on standing pedestals for on-site sign-ups. The moderator and meeting-room monitors would manage the queue and text registrants to let them know the anticipated wait time until their turns.

The electronic system might also give county board members a way to recognize at a glance which speakers had come to the meeting as individuals, versus who would be speaking on behalf of companies. " This would be an electronic way to see exactly

who the speakers are and how much time they have to speak. It's a way to handle the meetings more efficiently," Mena said.

Mena has no set timeline for the new system, having already contracted with a vendor once, only to have the project fall apart when the vendor ran into unexpected technical hurdles. "They found out it was more complex than they thought it was going to be, and now we are going to bid it out once more. But if we don't find a good solution out there, we will build it in-house," he said.

Visual aids

In his previous role as city manager in Mountain View, Calif., Kevin Duggan saw a number of technologies emerging that promised to improve the quality of public meetings. He is particularly fond of new presentation tools that help participants visualize proposed plans and projects.

"It used to be that someone brought in blueprints and sketches, or maybe built a model, but it wasn't a really good representation. For a big development project people want to get a deeper sense of what they are supposed to be looking at, what the real scale of it is," he said.

"Today you can have a computer-generated simulation where you literally walk around a project, walk through the buildings," he said. "It becomes a whole different kind of experience."

As with many of the meeting-enhancement tools now emerging, these kinds of presentations do more than just give people a better sense of what a project looks like. In the best cases, technology reinforces the very nature of the public meeting as a place where government and citizens come together for a meaningful exchange of ideas.

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http://www.govtech.com/policy/How-Technology-Is-Giving-Town-Hall-Meetings-a-Modern-Twist.html