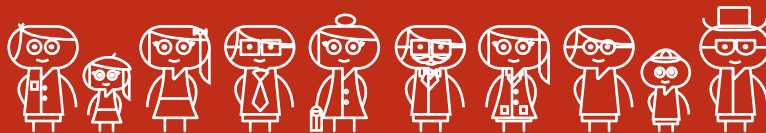03

+FOUR THINGS YOUR WEBSITE NEEDS BEFORE CITIZENS WILL USE IT

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FOUR THINGS YOUR WEBSITE NEEDS BEFORE CITIZENS WILL USE IT

Unlike all other levels of government, local government enjoys a high level of public trust in the United States. According to a September 2012 Gallup poll, 74% of those surveyed have a "great deal" or a "fair amount" of confidence in their own local governments. How can local governments help maintain and nurture this relationship for the benefit of residents and the stability of the government itself?

Obviously, having an ethical, fiscally responsible, and well-run local government is the only real way to maintain citizen confidence. But how does a local government demonstrate to its constituents that it operates along these lines? How do residents know their local government is fulfilling its duties and deserves the public's trust?

While there are many means by which local governments share information (and don't simply fulfill public notice requirements), a website is the primary means of public outreach. And it's in a municipality's interests to have a website that gets the word out. In a 2011 Pew Research Center study, people "who think local government does well in sharing information are also more likely to be satisfied with other parts of civic life such as the overall quality of their community and the performance of government and other institutions…."

*Citizens are looking for, and using, government websites in great numbers.*

And lest you believe that a government website is just a necessary evil that citizens will ignore as soon as it goes live, think again. Citizens are looking for, and using, government websites in great numbers. Forty-eight percent of Internet users have looked online for information about a public policy or issue with their local, state or federal government. Forty-six percent have looked up what services a government agency provides. Forty-one percent have downloaded government forms. And nearly one-third (31%) of online adults use blogs, social networking, email, video or texting to get government information.

According to that 2011 study, citizens "who believe they can impact their community are more likely to be engaged in civic activities and are more likely to be satisfied with their towns."
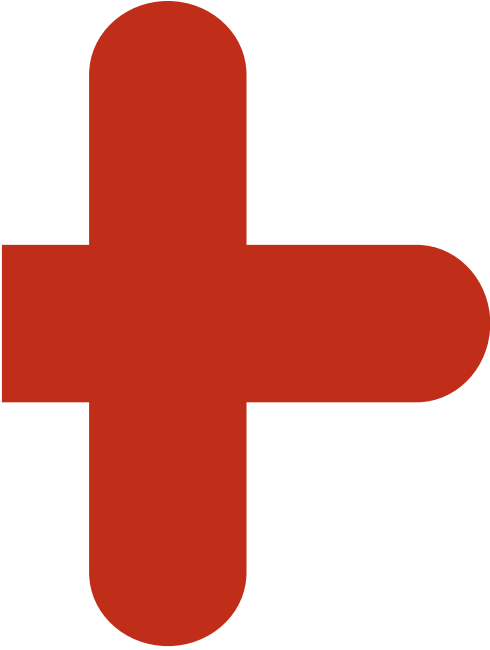
So, besides fulfilling an obligation to give citizens what they're looking for, do governments receive any other benefit from providing services and interacting with residents online? According to that 2011 study, citizens "who believe they can impact their community are more likely to be engaged in civic activities and are more likely to be satisfied with their towns." Giving residents a forum in which their voices can be heard, in a variety of ways, will increase the diversity of voices and lift the public discourse. Most local governments have a website. However, many aren't current, are poorly designed, or waste the opportunity to build public trust and increase public satisfaction with local government. Websites that citizens will actually use must provide:

- Responsiveness

- Transparency

- Currency

- Engagement

RESPONSIVENESS

Local government, perhaps more than any other level, is expected to respond quickly to citizen requests and input, and to serve as a reliable and trustworthy source of information. Attentive local governments provide websites that focus on what residents most need to do, or most want to know. A needs assessment at the beginning of the web-building process will help clarify exactly what a particular municipality's citizens expect and hope for, because this varies greatly from community to community. One size does not fit all.

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(One universal requirement, however, is reliability. Citizens won't trust a website that isn't up virtually all of the time, so redundant power sources, regular hardware upgrades, and general system robustness are critical.)

In order to find what they need, citizens expect intuitive navigation and consistent page layouts, both of which can sometimes fall by the wayside if a site has evolved under many administrators. Local governments have their own idiosyncrasies and rules, so when a complete web redesign and rebuilding is in order, expertise and experience in how they work is particularly helpful.

We all buy goods, pay for services, manage our finances and do many daily chores online, which saves us time and frustration. When a local government allows citizens to do similar things, it saves the government manpower and resources (and makes citizens happier).

With specialized modules and features, a local government can, depending on budget and demand, offer many online services that will build citizen satisfaction and turn them into repeat customers.

- **Online bill payment center.** Local governments can create forms and take fees for permits, registrations, pool passes and so forth. Citizens (and the appropriate department) get an email notification, and they can conduct business with the municipality on their own time frame, at their convenience.

- **Citizen requests.** People appreciate the ability to report problems or make requests online. Request systems can generate internal documents and facilitate workflow among departments. Citizens can get up to speed on pending issues, reopen closed issues, or request more information about a particular matter.

- **Emergency alerts and notifications.** Few services will endear residents to local government better than emergency alerts and other notifications. With the right website capabilities, local governments can text or email constituents in the event of public danger, natural disaster, traffic back-ups, cancellations and so forth.

- **Personalization.** Some systems allow citizens to customize their local government website for their own viewing preferences, allowing them to focus on news, job postings, favorite pages or whatever is of most interest to them. And the site will recognize them when they return.

- **Facilities scheduling and rental.** The ability for citizens to view open dates, book venues and reserve equipment can be a very popular feature, one that also frees up staff time for other priorities.

- **Licenses and permits.** With a flexible form builder, local governments can tailor licenses and permit applications, issue paper versions immediately, and let citizens pay the fees online.
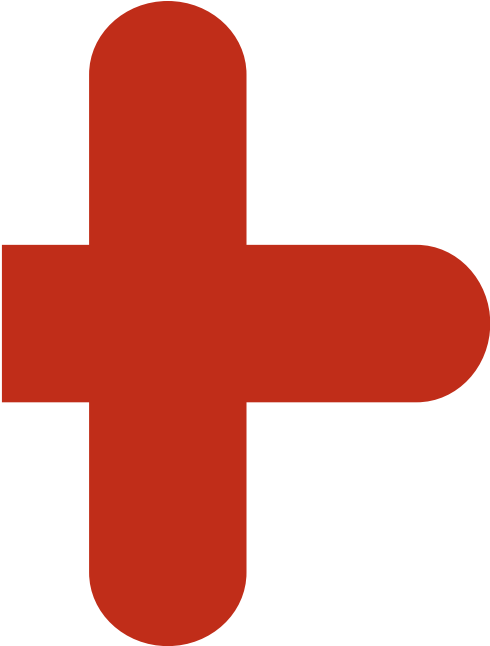
TRANSPARENCY

When we talk about "transparency" in government, we're talking financial openness and access to information about government activities such as meetings, bids, budget deliberations and so on. Transparency enables public oversight. According to the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), transparency builds trust, helps municipalities gain new ideas, increases community engagement, and empowers residents.

What are some characteristics of a local government website that promotes transparency?

- **Access to documents.** Effective local government websites make it easy for citizens to find all the documents they need. With the right system, government staff can create, publish, email or text meeting agendas, then immediately post and index them — along with the applicable minutes. Government archives can be searchable by date, topic, or keyword. Bid postings, RFPs and RFQs — along with all the amendments, cancellations, and so forth — can be instantly updated and made public. With a website that makes it possible, citizens can easily and quickly download PDFs, spreadsheets, photos, videos, sounds clips, and more.

  Online document availability helps cut down on foot traffic and in-person requests — citizens can find what they want themselves. And government employees can easily add new documents and direct residents to pertinent information.
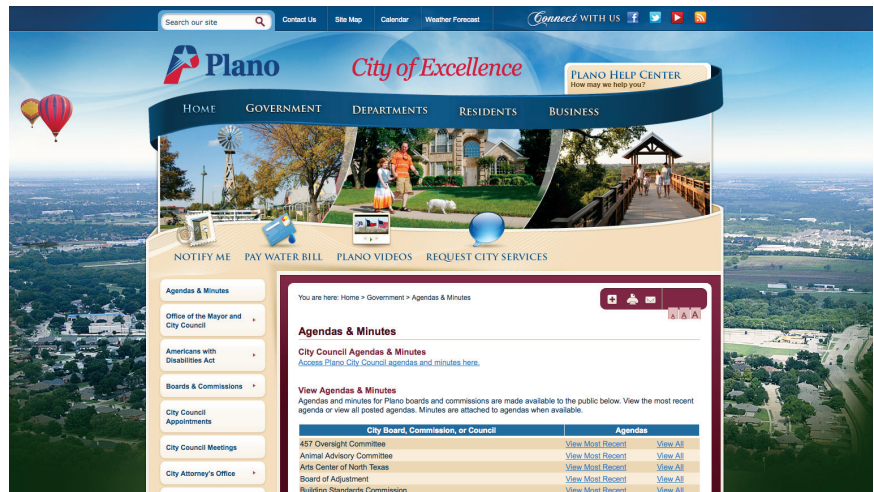
- **Search engine optimization.** You have to find a website before you can use it. According to a 2012 Pew Research Center study, 44% of those who could remember the last government website they visited found that site by conducting an online search; hence, SEO is crucial in helping citizens connect with local government.

- **Live streaming of meetings and events.** Probably no government communication effort fosters more transparency than the ability to watch government proceedings in real-time, or to view them later on a website.
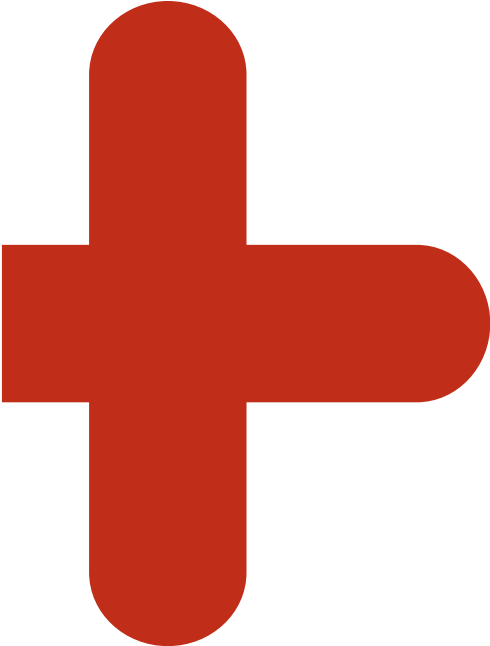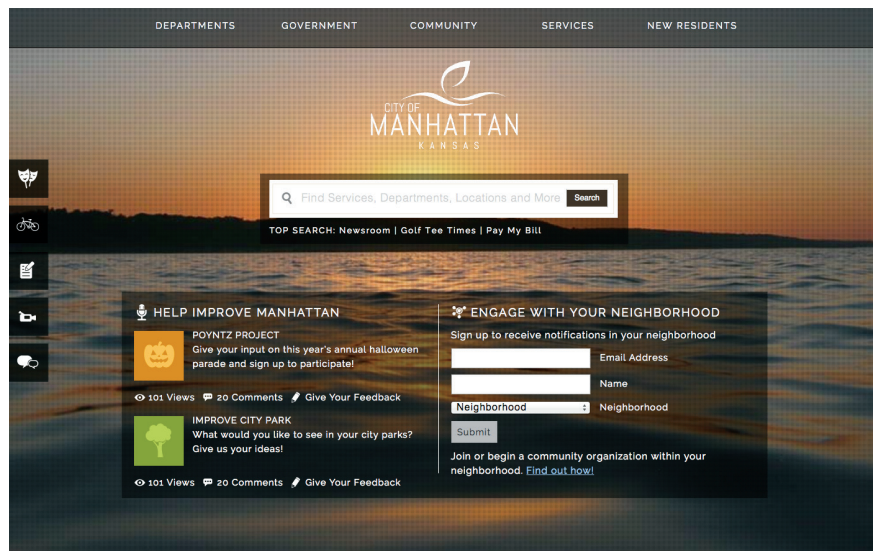
CURRENCY

Citizens aren't well served when local governments treat websites like a static, unchanging ==monoliths.== Conversely, when a site is kept current and fresh, residents come to rely on it as a source of solid information, which encourages repeat business.

Government websites should be simple to revise. Employees can have different levels of administrative rights to make changes, corrections and additions, allowing the overall maintenance of the site to be distributed among the logical administrative units.

Several features can help a local government keep its site current:

- **Content management system.** This is the mechanism by which government employees can easily keep the site updated, with no special knowledge of HTML needed. Oversight by an administrator ensures that content is appropriate. And the ability to add features and modules allows a local government to offer more online services to citizens over time.

- **Responsive design.** According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, "as of April 2012, 55% of adult cell phone owners use the Internet on their mobile phones; nearly double what we found three years ago." It's now crucial that websites be built with "responsive design," which means that the site can detect the browser or device screen dimensions — whether that's for a smartphone, tablet, or computer — and can display the content in the appropriate format.

- **Calendars, job postings and news updates.** A large part of keeping the public current about local government is simply letting people know what's happening, and when. Dynamic calendars can be set to preview upcoming events and delete past ones. Press releases, schedule changes, election results, rainout announcements and other updates help ensure that the public can get accurate information straight from the source.

ENGAGEMENT

According to a 2010 report by the Pew Research Center, "nearly a quarter (23%) of Internet users participate in the online debate around government policies or issues, with much of this discussion outside of official government channels [emphasis added]." Citizens will find a way to talk about their local government, even if the local government doesn't make it easy…or doesn't participate. **In forward-thinking communities, a social media presence and dynamic, interactive features on the local government website are the rule, not the exception.**

- ■ **Community forum and opinion polls.** If they have the forum to do so, citizens will submit ideas, discussion topics, and comments on the site, with the expectation that other residents, government employees and officials will participate. The local government can hold unofficial opinion polls, showcase new events and initiatives, gather opinions, and explain decisions or policies.

- ■ **Blog.** City staff or elected officials can submit blog posts and react to public comment on current events, upcoming projects, controversial matters, or behind-the-scenes happenings.

- ■ **Social media.** If a local government doesn't have a presence on Facebook or Twitter, it's definitely behind the times. Social media is the most immediate and intuitive way people today connect online. Savvy municipalities synchronize their social media channels with their website and online calendar to automatically push news and events to citizens.

In forward-thinking communities, a social media presence and dynamic, interactive features on the local government website are the rule, not the exception.

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+ABOUT CIVICPLUS

CivicPlus builds local government websites. But more than that, we create a powerful communication hub — enabling citizens to connect, learn and engage. That drive has made CivicPlus a leader in developing digital community engagement tools, always keeping in mind ease of use and community growth. We find better ways to communicate. For stronger, more engaged communities today…and tomorrow.