

Sustainable Jersey's Municipal Public Info & Engagement Needs Assessment

Summary of Findings – Spring 2016

Introduction and Summary:

In the spring of 2016, Sustainable Jersey conducted a needs assessment in order to learn about the stages of experience that local governments across the state have with regards to Gov 2.0 technologies. Through an online survey and two regional focus groups, we explored the various levels of interests by NJ towns to incorporate such technologies into their everyday operations, as well as the challenges they face in doing so. Participants included municipal administrators, communications and technology staff, and green team members. While the responses provided no surprising revelations, they did support our existing assumptions that towns are highly interested in making the transition to a more modern form of governance, while lack of manpower, financial resources and change resistant workplace cultures are the main hindrances.

Below are the major findings of the completed surveys and focus groups—which helped refine the focus of our work plan.

Major Findings From Online Survey (<50 respondents)

- Almost half of the respondents would participate in “an event that would work to develop apps and tools to increase user friendliness for the public and internally”. (36% not sure)
- When asked what type of help towns could use in order to advance government technologies, or wish list items, many towns answered that they would like funding for the actual technologies and mentoring to help learn how to use that technology.
- Several times participants were asked about their challenges to sharing information and engaging the public with digital technologies and the overwhelming responses each time were budget constraints and limited trained staff. Other prevalent issues included not having the right technology and a perceived lack of citizen participation.
- The majority of respondents utilize technology tools to collect public input, including surveys, Facebook, and Twitter. Most towns that do not utilize these tools plan to in the near future.
- Traditional means of engaging the public in decision making are still being used by many towns, including in person public information sessions on specific topics, and collaboration with municipal boards.
- The majority of responding towns (40%) have some sort of online function where residents can report problems and request services, with automated workflows set up in almost all of those towns.
- Responding towns are generally doing well regarding diverse municipal communications. While most towns do not have websites that are mobile-compatible, the majority are regularly communicating updates with their residents through social media, print media and the website. Interestingly, only a small segment of respondents use email to share news with the community.
- Almost every respondent said their communications efforts have improved over the past two years, and added that it was because they invested more time and money into their social media outreach efforts.

- The majority of respondents said there is a genuine interest in moving forward with open data amongst key staff and decision makers. A handful of towns have begun sharing datasets online by posting spreadsheets. Another handful has completed an inventory of existing data within departments.

Major Findings From Focus Groups (15 participants):

- Towns are interested in learning about the available technologies (software and platforms) and best practices.
- Some towns want to incorporate more technology but have concerns about legal issues. Best practices for social media and technology policies are needed.
- Several participants in a focus group expressed interest in shared services for technologies in order to expand resources and overcome financial and man power challenges.
- The need for state guidelines regarding public records requests and retention was a theme at one of the focus groups.
- There is an interest in doing more regarding open data and online collaborative decision making technologies. Basic understanding of how to use open data, the benefits, etc. is needed.