TALK OF THE

towns & TOPICS

MARCH/APRIL 2023

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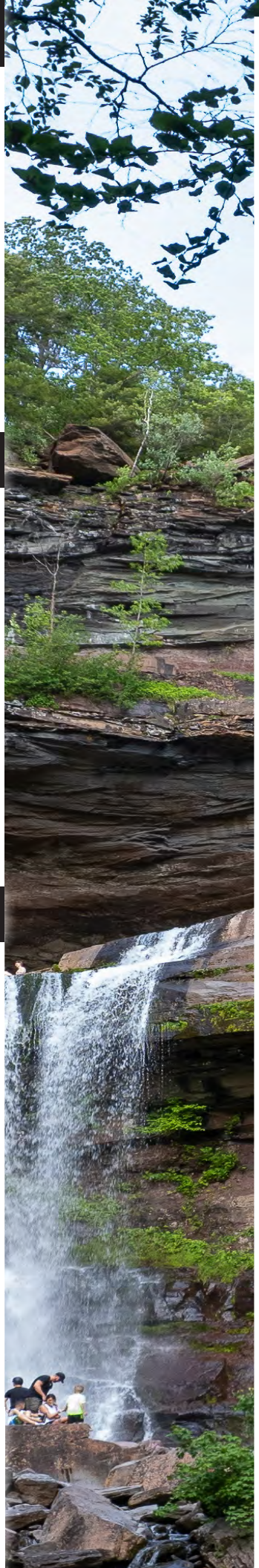

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Foundation of Affordable Housing Plan Should be Built on Trust

Incentives and Revenue Sharing over Mandates is the Way

By Executive Director Gerry Geist

As March turns into April, spring is officially upon us and with that, the return of daylight savings time, return of the national pastime baseball and the adoption of the New York State budget.

I am very pleased to report that our return to an in-person Annual Meeting and Training School was a great success. So many of our attendees and exhibitors stopped me and thanked the Association for returning to in-person meetings, and the attendees reported that the array of courses – including our first-ever, AOT-sponsored CLE programming – and certified Town Official programming was diverse and informative.

One of the highlights of our conference was working with town officials in formulating a response to the governor's proposed budget initiatives. Home rule has always been the foundation of the relationship between the state and local government, and for many of us, the appeal in serving as a town official is working to make a difference in our communities to ensure that the quality of life is preserved and protected while always looking to the future. The governor's proposal seeks to override local zoning, SEQRA, and other local planning laws and tools, if the towns do not meet the standards promulgated by the proposal. Once again, towns find themselves in a position to oppose the proposal, as the budget initiative does not take into account the costs of increased burdens on aging infrastructure, nor does it take into account the great work in adding multiple-family and affordable housing in our towns. For far too long, we hear about the state trying to pass down its obligations to the town by "unfunded mandates." If this proposal passes as proposed, it will be the "big ugly" of unfunded mandates. Your association has always welcomed the opportunity to sit down with the state legislature to explore new ideas in order to address the housing crisis in New York. We all agree that additional housing is needed but not at the expense of home rule. What is sorely needed is a direct infusion of dollars to towns to address their infrastructure needs, which for many, serves as a bar to all development and not just affordable housing. We will continue to be a voice of clarity and reason with the state and with your supportive efforts, I am confident that our message will be heard.

The state appears to have surpluses of monies, and the proposed budget has increases for everyone but local governments. After more than a decade of no increases, the state needs to commit additional unrestricted revenue sharing (AIM). Equally important is there has been minimal increases in highway funding (CHIPS), for the past decade or more, which your association will continue it advocacy for larger increases. ❐

The Future of Digital Payments for Governments

By Sukanya Madhavan, Vice President, Product Management and Engineering, CSG Forte

Today, you would be hard-pressed to find a retailer that did not offer a form of digital payment. The digital payments sector is well-established and expected to explode in the coming years. A study from Juniper Research has found that the number of unique digital wallet users will exceed 4.4 billion globally in 2025, rising from 2.6 billion in 2020. Not only is this the customer expectation, but it also helps the merchant provide and track customer purchasing patterns and can help mitigate the risk of fraud and cyberattacks. It's a win-win.

On the other hand, public entities have been slower on the uptake. Between concerns with personnel resources, budget, compliance, and cybersecurity, governments, for example, have historically been skeptical of the value that digital payment options would bring to their municipality.

Fast forward to this year, government leaders are more excited to explore digital payment options. Most cities have either begun to dip their toe in the digital payments waters or have dived headfirst and are exploring options for expansion. Let's take a closer look at the roadblocks to adoption and what's at stake for elected officials and constituents.

For a while, concerns about credit card fees and older processing infrastructure might have slowed a government's embrace of digital payment options. But that landscape is changing fast. Increased constituent demand for a more seamless online experience and capable tech stacks helps government agencies accelerate the move toward digital payments.

Digital payments also give governments more data that can help them form a holistic view of all customer transactions and enable them to create a more seamless experience. This, e.g., means that constituents can log in to one portal and see all due payments. They can also choose to opt in for automated text reminders about payment dates.

While digital payments might promise a seamless

experience and a path to modernization, there is one obstacle government agencies need to overcome: security of personal information.

How Government Agencies Can Overcome Security Challenges

Governments hold some of the country's most sensitive data and it's easily their top priority to ensure this information is kept safe. Many local governments have been cautious about adopting digital payment options due to concerns about cybersecurity and damaging data leaks. Despite these challenges, government agencies must find a solution.

Most importantly, they need to pay attention to security to:

- Ensure adherence to compliance measures. Payment Card Industry (PCI) and National Automated Clearing House Association (NACHA) standards dictate how businesses collect, store, and work with sensitive constituent information. Any digital payment solution will have to check off these boxes.
- Uphold the public's trust. Constituent confidence is directly related to the feeling of safety when making digital payment transactions. Attention to security will fortify defenses and help to develop and retain constituents' confidence.

To navigate this concern with caution, government entities should register a trusted payments partner who can protect constituent data while ensuring seamless digital payment offerings.

Fortunately, there are many

For a while, concerns about credit card fees and older processing infrastructure might have slowed a government's embrace of digital payment options. But that landscape is changing fast. Increased constituent demand for a more seamless online experience and capable tech stacks helps government agencies accelerate the move toward digital payments.

technologies available to prevent hacks and provide secure payments. Governments should ensure the digital solutions they adopt include cybersecurity protections like end-to-end encryption, multifactor authentication, and tokenization.

From there, they'd also need to establish clear lines of communication with constituents to help them understand the measures in place and the security of their data. Not only does this bolster constituent trust, but two-way communication can allow constituents to flag phishing schemes and scams they receive from fraudsters. Scammers that pose as government entities to gather payments are unfortunately common. With an open line of communication and these security must-haves in mind, governments can act against fraudsters and stop them from doing more damage.

Resource Allocation: Digital Payments Pay Off

Resource allocation is a significant concern for most government agencies. The adoption of cutting-edge technologies to prevent hacks may be an obvious expense for a large e-commerce brand, but government purchases are under more extreme scrutiny and necessitate a longer approval process. However, there are clear benefits to the adoption of digital payments. In many cases, the technology, e.g., pays for itself in the long term.

With more digital integrations, like a user-friendly customer portal and automated text messages to remind residents of upcoming payments, constituents are more likely to pay their bills on time. As a result, your town can limit resident frustration around late fee charges and save resources on resolving complaints and issuing late notices.

The pandemic made digital and touchless experiences vital for immunocompromised residents and critical for the health of all. It's important to note, however, that maintaining traditional payment methods is also crucial to accommodating all demographics and needs. With more tech-savvy consumers and a younger, digitally fluent population, the option of digital payments helps create a more seamless and positive experience for more people.

The increased digitalization also lessens the need for personnel to manage payments, allowing governments to reallocate staff to more strategic and impactful departments and missions. What's more, the move to digital means that tracking constituent payment and behavior will become significantly easier. Government leaders can even leverage the data to further improve the constituent experience and bridge a closer and more fluid connection with residents.

All said, elected officials have a real motive to meet this demand from constituents, and the reasons for government entities to hesitate to adopt the latest and greatest in digital payments solutions are quickly vaporizing. The ability to implement and carefully manage these solutions will be important to maintain constituent goodwill, generate revenue, and provide greater accessibility now and into the future. ❒

... From the Tea Leaves (Excerpt)

For the complete Town Tea on Mediums of Payment, including a direct link to the recording, visit https://members.nytowns.org/images/Documents/Training/Town%20Tea%20-%20Mediums%20of%20Payment.pdf

Direct Online Payments

General Municipal Law § 5-b and Real Property Tax Law § 925-c authorize local governments, by local law or resolution, to accept tax payments through a municipal website or through a third-party vendor that has contracted with the municipality. If the town authorizes online payment of taxes, a confirmation page must be provided to the taxpayer when the online transaction is complete that includes:

- **The date the internet transaction was completed and sent by the taxpayer;**
- **The amount paid;**
- **A unique confirmation number; and**
- **A notice advising the taxpayer to print out and retain the confirmation page as his or her receipt.**

Additionally, General Municipal Law § 5-b authorizes a town to accept payments of penalties, rents, rates, taxes, fees, charges, financial obligations, special assessments and interest via the town's website or a third-party vendor website. Note that the town is not required to accept online payments; rather, the discretion lies with the town board to offer this service to its residents.

If a taxpayer pays their taxes online directly using the town's website or a third-party vendor website, the taxes are considered paid upon completion of the internet transaction once the payment clears.

Other Forms of "Online" Payments (Paypal, Venmo, Zelle)

The umbrella of authorization provided by General Municipal Law § 5-b arguably includes online and app-based payment platforms including but not limited to Paypal, Venmo, Zelle and the like, so long as the town has entered into an agreement with the platform to accept payments via that medium. There may be a charge associated to using the platform (similar to that of a credit card); if so, this can be charged back to the taxpayer.

Mediums of Payment and Discretion

Town officials are required to accept cash and checks for tax payments and town charges, with the limited exceptions described above. The officials do not have the discretion to decline legal tender, although he or she may let the taxpayer know that the bank will not accept their form of payment, be it a third-party check or a check drawn on a foreign account. In contrast, the town board has the discretion to authorize credit card payments and online payment of taxes. Should the board authorize online payments and payments by credit card, the town official must accept these types of payments as well. ❒

Delivering a More Engaging, Accessible Digital Experience to Residents with SaaS Technology

By Kelly Davis-Felner, Chief Marketing Officer, PayIt

In today's economy, people can access virtually anything in just a few clicks. But the experience of accessing government services still lags.

In fact, PublicInput found that "The overwhelming majority (85 percent) of residents agreed that their local government has a responsibility to provide accessible ways for the community to engage."

Currently, most government offices find themselves in a balancing act between developing digital solutions that serve residents' needs and the agency's budget and people resource allocations.

Historically, offices have relied on paper-based processes to enroll, deliver, and collect taxes and fees associated with government services ranging from utilities to property taxes. This is neither efficient nor sustainable, and leads to longer wait times and a suboptimal experience for residents.

Accessibility continues to be a priority for the public sector, considering federal ADA regulations and a desire to serve all residents equitably. Offering options to allow residents to perform transactions in their preferred manner is of growing concern.

☆ **Cities look to adopt next-generation technologies to meet growing resident demand for digital access.**

The demand for digitization is there, however government offices typically have legacy IT infrastructure and back-office systems of record that are costly to replace and upgrade. And, of course, with new technologies comes new risk.

A Deloitte study reported that residents' digital experience with their local governments correlates with trust levels; easy-to-use digital tools translated to trust scores that were up to four times higher than subpar digital experiences. But Gartner found that only 45 percent of governments have scaled digital programs.

In response to these challenges, a growing number of government offices are turning to technology partners to deploy next-generation solutions.

Here's how a digital customer experience and payments platform can address these challenges.

☆ **Removing friction between government offices and the residents they serve is the primary goal of going digital.**

Through partnerships with private-sector SaaS (Software as a Service) companies, agencies can separate the resident experience from the back-office system of record to not only provide user-friendly web and mobile experiences for their residents, but also automate their workflows to increase efficiency and streamline operations.

With record numbers of people turning to online channels to interact and transact with local and

state governments, reimagining the front-end experience provides immediate and visible value to residents. In parallel, strategically implementing a back-office upgrade behind the scenes can, when ready, seamlessly integrate into the already-modernized experience.

A modern front-end experience can be deployed regardless of the system of record on the back end. This is where the benefits of a SaaS model specifically developed for government are realized.

According to a study done by a leading Saas provider of digital customer engagement and payments software for government, PayIt, many of the previously noted

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JUNE	5-7	**Highway School** Training on highway topics. Registration open now at www.nytowns.org.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Actual and necessary expenses incurred in attending training events and conferences (the Association of Towns training events, for example) including the registration fee are proper municipal charges under Town Law section 116(12) and General Municial Law section 77(b).

challenges are the exact reasons agencies are pursuing digital transformation of payments.

The top reasons cited were: additional payment options (56 percent), an improved resident experience (46 percent), more efficient back-office processes (35 percent), reduced delinquency (25 percent), and improved security (19 percent).

- Digitizing the customer experience offers an answer to many of the public sector's pressing challenges.Digital customer experience and payments technology automates previously manual processes, resulting in accelerated time to revenue with less margin for error and a reduction in delinquent payments.
- Digital solutions that are designed with the highest standards for resident and agency data protection offer a greater level of security and compliance than a sub-par digital or in-person experience.
- Governments that prioritize accessibility offer residents multiple ways to make payments, as there are still residents who prefer in-person or over-the-phone payments. But even in-person or over-the-phone interactions can be modernized with technology like point of sale (POS) and Interactive Voice Response (IVR). Digital offers residents who aren't able to travel to an office or pay over the phone the ability to easily and securely pay online.
- Replacing legacy IT infrastructure is time-consuming and expensive, so municipalities are turning to the private sector and partnering with government-focused SaaS companies. This allows them to quickly adopt and scale these proven technologies without worrying about compliance or security.

This technology isn't a far-off future that public servants dream of — it's being used by local and state governments today, and delivering real results.

Real-world examples: How technology is being used by government agencies

Governments today have already established themselves as leaders in adopting digital technology, and the impacts include a reduction in manual processing and long lines — and an overall improved resident experience.

☆ Automating payment processing for the City of Grand Rapids

In 2015, the City of Grand Rapids, Michigan sought to transform the way it engages with residents by delivering a digital city hall that was available to residents on their own time. The city's goals were to enhance the overall user experience, decrease the number of checks mailed for payments, help customers to be compliant and avoid late fees, and eliminate long lines at city hall.

The city knew it had to invest in a website redesign to improve service delivery, and payments had to be a critical part of the solution since that's why most residents were visiting the site.

It started its digital transformation journey with four services: water, parking tickets, property taxes, and refuse, which combined, comprised about 90 percent of the city's collections. Once it proved the efficacy of the digital payments solution, it scaled to include accounts receivable, miscellaneous receivables, and community development block grant loan payments.

The city's digital solution allows residents to pay their bills online, from anywhere, on whatever device they choose. The city processes payments with no lag time, and because the process is automated, there is less room for error, resulting in improved accuracy in record-keeping. The reduction in paper, stamps, and even fuel residents use has had an environmental impact, as well.

Since adopting its digital payments solution in 2015, the city of Grand Rapids has seen a 61 percent decrease in manual payments, around a 25 percent increase in online payments (representing 5 percent YoY growth),

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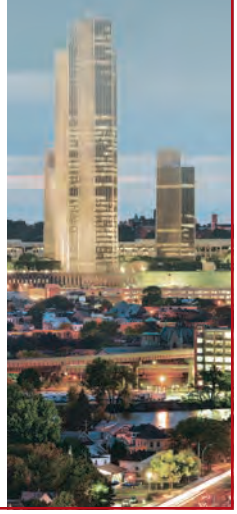

and approximately a 45 percent decrease in manual transactions. Ultimately, this has led to higher resident satisfaction with city services, lower CO2 emissions from fewer paper bills, and more efficient city operations (less paper, decreased mailing cost, less phone support costs).

With the reduction in manual processing realized, Grand Rapids' employees are freed up to focus on more pressing issues that have a greater impact on their community.

☆ Moving the City of St. Louis into the GovCloud

In 2016, the City of St. Louis, Missouri had a payment system that didn't integrate with any other systems used by the city, requiring the collector of revenue's office to manually enter each payment — an incredibly time-consuming process. Additionally, the payment system was only available on desktop computers, with no mobile-responsive options.

The city was looking to address these challenges while also consolidating property tax payments and water/refuse payments into one experience, which meant whatever solution it adopted needed to be scalable across several government services. With limited resources, this all needed to be done within a set budget and without a large customization effort by city staff.

In November 2016, the city launched its digital payments platform, which enables the St. Louis collector of revenue's office to provide a resident-centric, all-in-one digital experience. St. Louis residents can easily pay property taxes, earnings taxes, utility bills, and court violations/tickets from their preferred device — with desktop, mobile, and native Apple and Android apps available.

The city's solution was built to scale. Since launching in 2016, they have added new services and features to continue executingits vision of a unified resident experience. In 2018, it expanded the solution to include municipal court payments, which combined two typically separate back-office systems into a single experience for residents.

☆ Meet and surpass resident expectations with digital payments technology.

Government agencies are well aware of the growing demand to offer residents digital options, and public servants are facing daily challenges that make these options a mounting necessity. The cities and states of the future have already begun to adopt digital solutions for a variety of services, and collecting and processing payments are low-hanging fruit to modernize processes and improve the overall experience for residents and government employees alike. ❐

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New York State Department of Civil Service, Employee Benefits Division

Cyber Security: You are a Target

By Jeffrey C. Bryant, CPCU, Bryant Asset Consulting, jeff@bryantasset.com

Many of us may feel overwhelmed by cyber security updates and information we have been observing in the news in the last few years. What has changed the landscape so dramatically in the evolution of hacking?

There was a spike in hackers' success with fraudulent payments and social engineering in 2022, which will be the ongoing upward trend in 2023.

Fraudulent payments are usually defined as funds transfer fraud or electronic fraud, which is theft of your money or other financial assets from your bank by electronic means, or any fraudulent manipulation of electronic documentation while stored on your computer system.

Social engineering is also known as cyber deception or fraudulent instruction and is when you are tricked by a hacker. An example: the hacker sends an email to accounts payable that looks to be from the legitimate vendor but contains a manipulated invoice containing instructions to pay via ACH but the hacker has replaced the vendor's account number with their account number. The easiest way to avoid the success of this type of deception is to always have employees call vendors anytime something looks different or has been changed via email and always be sure to call the vendor with your information on file – not the phone number listed on the invoice.

Today's *ransomware* attacks are more targeted and sophisticated. It's no longer someone sitting in their basement waiting to see how many random companies will respond to their threat. Today, ransomware software is readily available to be purchased on the Dark Web for $25 to $35. In addition, more sophisticated hackers are using botnets to flood tens of thousands of organizations' email inboxes with phishing and crypto-locking software, making your network inaccessible until you pay a ransom.

Network Security Controls You Should Have in Place *NOW*:

- Multifactor authentication (MFA) for all remote access to the network
- MFA for all remote employee email access
- MFA for all privileged user accounts (i.e., IT admin accounts)
- Offline back-ups that are fully disconnected and inaccessible from the organization's live environment or cloud back-ups secured by MFA
- An adequate endpoint detection and response (EDR) solution deployed across all endpoints
- Phishing training and simulated attacks for all employees
- Data loss prevention and network monitoring solution

The above list of controls will be required and will need to be in place before your cybersecurity insurance policy is issued for a new policy or a renewed policy for 2023. Luckily, most cybersecurity insurance carriers have partnered with technology experts to help put these very important controls into place for free or at a discounted price.

The *NYS Information Security Breach and Notification Act* requires persons or businesses conducting business who own or license computerized data that includes private information must disclose any breach of the data to New York residents whose private information was exposed. This means that a cyber intrusion into your network that holds two combinable pieces of a customer or employee private information (name, driver's license, bank account number, etc.) of hundreds or thousands of residents could potentially require you to notify each person in your system. The average cost to notify one record (person) is $210. You will also be required to notify consumer reporting agencies: the NYS Office of Attorney General, NYS Division of State Police and the NY Department of State's Division of Consumer Protection.

A cybersecurity insurance policy will help policy holders with the expenses associated with a breach (e.g. the above-mentioned individual notification costs) such as:

- Forensic investigation to determine the cause of the breach
- Credit and identity monitoring services for the affected individuals
- Breach response call center team services to help with the breach response process
- Cyber extortion payments
- Legal and professional advice fees
- Fees and costs for negative publicity

Not only is understanding the importance of protecting your network security critical, but knowing how to protect your municipality by having the right cyber security insurance policy in place and adequate coverage to fit your needs is essential. ❐

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Snapshots from AOT's 2023 Annual Meeting, NYC

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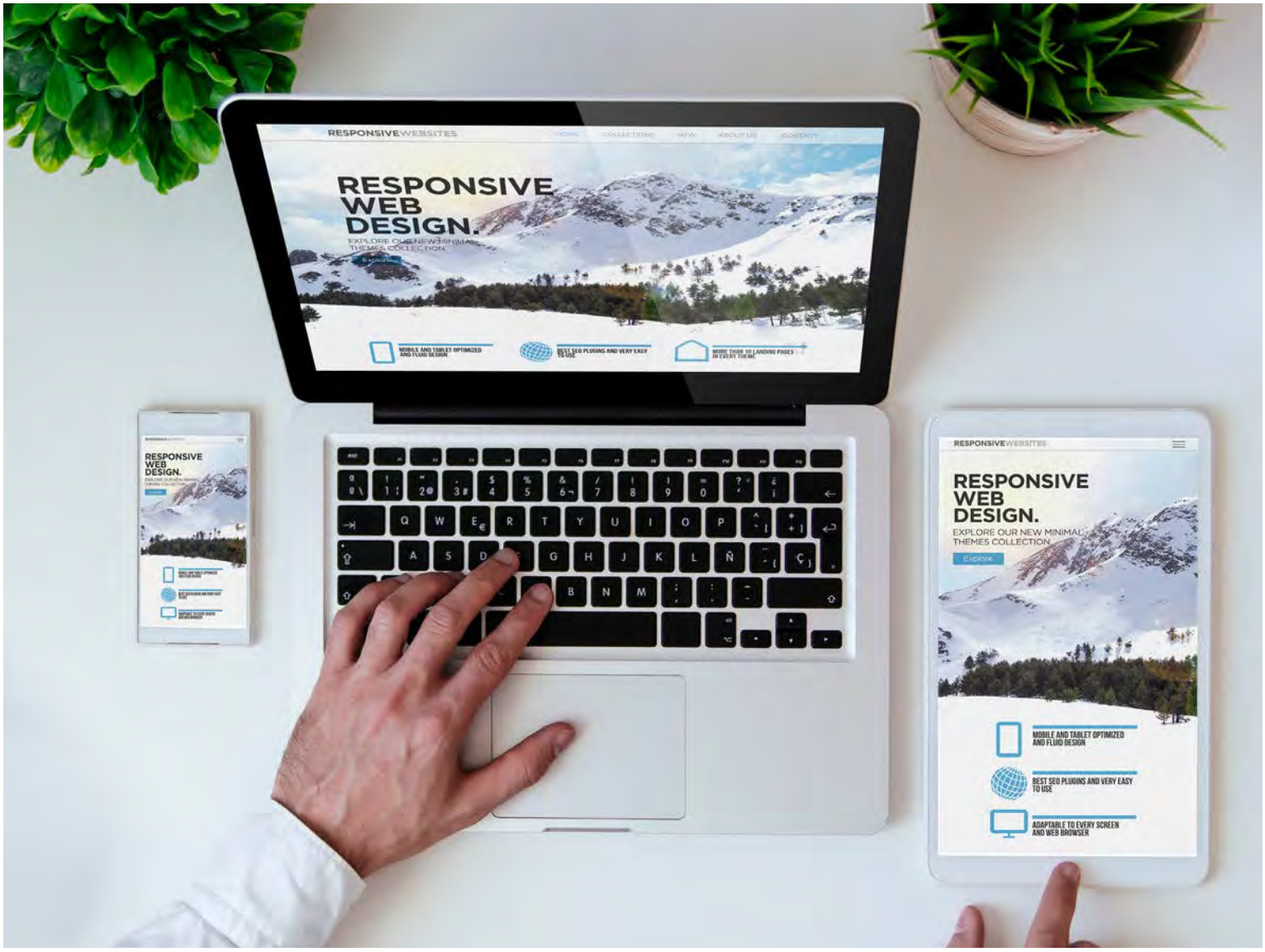
The Importance of a Website

Connecting Municipalities and Communities through Digital Technologies

By Wilson Pennell, Assistant General Manager, Coughlin Printing



When you want information, where do you start looking for it? Many people begin their search online since most information they need is right there at their fingertips. They will most often do research online before doing business, voting, getting involved in advocacy, interacting with others, relocating, choosing a career or field of study, and the list goes on.

Therefore, a website is an essential marketing and communication tool for anyone – from an individual to a large corporation or non-profit. And it should be one of the most convenient and accessible ways to build an image, present required information, share crucial details or facts, and give guidance.

Municipalities can and should have a website to keep citizens informed of services available to them, events happening within the community, legislation that affects them, and so much more. In fact, it should be the hub where citizens go to stay informed because doing so develops trust and transparency with them.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MUNICIPALITIES
Local governments are expected to keep the public informed and provide an environment in which citizens can get involved in the decision-making process. A website is an ideal way to communicate, educate and equip the public while building trust and transparency. It also encourages the residents to stay informed and take action using the information, tools, and resources made available to them.

Towns and villages, especially in rural areas, often have part-time staff and limited hours. Having a website allows 24/7 access. This convenience is a win for all involved!

IMPORTANCE OF MOBILE RESPONSIVE WEBSITES
Having a website is important. Making sure it functions well on mobile devices is imperative! Most of the people in your community are using their phones to find information.

A "mobile responsive" website will adjust the layout and shift content to make viewing easier on a phone, while still presenting the same information. This simplifies site maintenance and provides a great mobile experience. Test your website right now using your cell phone. It is easy to view and navigate? If not, this should be a priority.

WEBSITE TRAFFIC AND COMMUNICATION
Now that we are clear that you need a site and that it needs to work well on all devices (desktops, tablets and phones), the next big question is WHAT to put on your site.

Importance of Mobile Responsive Websites

Considering the following statistics:

- Zippia states that as of 2022, 85 percent of U.S. adults own a smartphone. The average American spends just under 5.5 hours on their device, checking in on it at an average of every 10 minutes, and that 62.06 percent of web traffic comes from mobile devices (https://www.zippia.com/advice/smartphone-usage-statistics/).
- According to a 2018 Pew Research study, 81 percent of Americans significantly rely on their own research to gather the information they need for big decisions, 46 percent of which is obtained online and through digital tools (https://www.socialtoaster.com/advocacy-marketing-statistics/).
- The FCC reports that a mobile device is the fastest-growing method of accessing news and information; 56 percent of all mobile device users and 47 percent of the population access local news by means of a mobile device (https://transition.fcc.gov/osp/inc-report/INoC-5-Mobile.pdf).

There are many digital tools that can enhance communication and collaboration between local governments and communities. Four common tools include alerts, public notices, email newsletters, and social posting. These are not the only options, nor are they a "one-size-fits-all." But properly leveraged and adapted, these can be extremely effective in engaging and informing residents and visitors alike.

Alerts deliver time-sensitive emergency information, critical updates, and important notices. Things such as severe weather alerts, disruptions in utility services, traffic accidents can be quickly communicated in real time. Alerts should be displayed in a prominent location on your website. When people know they can find news and alerts easily on your website, they'll keep coming back. You may also send out alerts by email, and by placing a link within the email alert, you direct subscribers to your website for the full story and more information. People are willing to sign-up for alerts and notifications if the

content is helpful and relevant.

I suppose if you are interested in a moment of honest introspection, you could ask yourself, and your board, where do you go to get up to date alerts and information? If it is not your website, why not make that your website?

Public notices and community newsletters are a staple in keeping citizens current on the legislative measures, special events, announcements, and news on local issues and long-term projects. These should be posts or articles on your site written in conversational language. Not only will this help with your organic search results, it will make your site much more accessible to those with visual impairments. For these same reasons, you should avoid posting all your events as graphics and your newsletters as PDFs whenever practical.

One final, but certainly not least, method to enhance website traffic is the use of social media. Many municipalities have embraced social media to help find new and effective ways to build rapport, develop trust, and create transparency. Linking these platforms to your website is a quick and easy way to drive traffic between the two.

In your social media, we recommend you try posting something about upcoming meetings or events - and provide links back to your website. First, this will improve your search rankings. Second, it gets people used to going to your site for information and not just your social accounts. Do not underestimate that value, as people switch social media services all the time. Your site is stable; social media is not.

Other ways to engage might include uploading a picture when new people join your team and celebrating the wins in your community by reposting and sharing the successes of others. Collaborate with local businesses to help them connect with members of the community or engage in a joint advocacy effort that empowers the community. The possibilities are endless!

By now you are probably feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work this might take. However, with the right tools, much of this can be automated. For instance, you can have emails automatically go out to your subscribers when a new public notice is added to your site. Talk to your web developer about ways to automate.

Knowledge is power. You can empower the people in your community with the information you provide them, and your online presence is a great way to do just that. ❒

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SCAN FOR DETAILS

How Digital Government Enhances Efficiency

By HeyGov

Digital governance is the process of incorporating technology and digital resources in a municipality. It is an essential aspect of modern-day local government management, and as we'll see, plays a critical role in optimizing the time of municipal staff. As technology advances and becomes increasingly integrated into local government operations, the need for effective digital governance practices has become more pressing. Think of it as mayo to your chicken sandwich – without the mayo, the sandwich will still be pretty good but will go down slower. With mayo, however, the process is a lot easier.

The Bigger Picture

Let's work our way toward the fine details of the daily running of a local municipality.
The four pillars of public administration that are needed for a productive local municipality:

- Efficiency: how quickly and thoroughly we accomplish tasks while optimizing our resources: time, money, and human capital.
- Economy: how do we complete the work we need to do? Do we have enough resources (finances, time, humans, technology) to serve our community?
- Effectiveness: how good are we at what we're doing? Are there areas or systems that can be improved? Do we need more training?
- Social Equity: Are we treating everyone in an equal, fair and consistent manner, while considering their circumstances? Furthermore, are we including factors like socio-economic status, urban vs. suburban vs. rural, transportation accessibility, education, and being inclusive?

This, as you'll know, is a tall order! But, also a worthwhile one: one that runs communities.

The Importance of Digital Governance in Municipal Management

Whether or not any of us want it, we have technology in our lives: an answering machine or an email address and credit card payments. Those are all examples of digital technology that we seamlessly incorporate into our daily lives.

And, Covid-19 pushed us all toward more integration of technology.
The upside? It's really not bad: it's simply a new, more efficient way of doing.
Digital governance helps optimize the time of municipal staff by reducing the time and resources required to complete tasks. By establishing clear needs for technology, staff members are able to work more efficiently, effectively and economically with the support of technology, with less need for manual intervention and less risk of errors.
Additionally, digital governance helps ensure that local governments fulfill their tasks in a manner that is consistent with the goals of the municipality, which can help to increase staff productivity and improve the quality of services provided to residents.

Everyday Frustrations

There are several ways that municipalities can use technology to enhance their ability to provide efficient and effective service to communities and their residents. Let's chat through it.

1. Payments in local municipalities are synonymous with bank runs, call back to ensure the right information is filled out and dealing with

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application numbers, matching checks to the correct applications and boaters "sock-money." Although an integral part of the job, it can become tedious.

2. Reporting municipal issues have become a "Post-it" job and are passed along to the right individual or department to deal with it. Many times, the reporters aren't kept in the loop, and the report disappears down a big black hole - mostly unintended until they follow up or see it fixed. This is a continuous time-consuming task for town clerks: to log the details, pass it on, follow up and ensure it's completed.
3. Licenses, forms, permits – the bread and butter of most municipalities. A manual task that needs an eye for detail to check the information is correctly filled out, the check or cash payment matches the required fee and pushes it through a paper-based system while keeping the applicant up to date.
4. Reservations for parks and recreation facilities are traditionally done using a binder system. It means a couple of calls between resident and staff member to check if a facility is available, fill out the paperwork and drop it off with the cash or a check, double check rules and regulations, pick up and drop off keys and finally, receive the deposit.
5. Data! With technology comes data, they go hand-in-hand like peanut butter and jelly: data means information, which in turn means the opportunity to better understand, connect and deliver services to your residents and the community. But who maintains an updated, easily searchable database of the residents of the community?

How Do I Start?

This journey, fortunately for all of us, can be tailored around your local community and its needs.
Start by reading widely: blogs, white papers and recommendations. Also, be sure to go through your local "clerk-list." Then, compile a list of the daily tasks that take the most of your time. Below are a couple of suggestions:

1. Automating manual tasks can help optimize the time of municipal staff by reducing the need for manual intervention. For example, automating billing and payment processes can save staff members significant time and reduce the risk of errors.
2. Streamline services to residents, so that work can continue even after hours.
3. Broaden access for services residents; for example, pay with a credit card whether online or

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4. Integrate systems with each other, in order to make the data transferable from one to the other.
5. Set up a system that automatically collects data about residents like their address, telephone number and whether they have pets or have recently filed a building permit. A searchable database can be filtered to provide different groups of residents, each with specific parameters and that can be used to send out automated reminders for eg. utility bills, taxes or renewals of an annual boat launch permit.

Conclusion

Digital engagement for local government is essential in today's fast-paced world. Local governments are responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of communities, and it's crucial to keep up with the ever-changing technological landscape. In this way, digital engagement is not just a trend or buzzword, but a necessary tool to support municipal staff in their daily work.

Through digital engagement, local governments can provide services to residents and businesses quickly and efficiently. This can include anything from online payment options to digital permits and licensing. It also means that municipalities can communicate with their citizens in real time, keeping them up-to-date on important issues such as road closures, emergency alerts, or community events.

In addition, digital engagement can also help local governments save time and resources. By automating certain processes, such as applications and permit approvals, municipalities can reduce their workload and focus on providing better services to their citizens. However, it's important to remember that digital engagement is *not a replacement* for human interaction. Local governments are the glue that holds communities together, and it's essential to maintain personal connections and build relationships with citizens. Digital engagement is simply a tool that can support municipal staff to ensure they keep serving their communities in an effective and efficient way.

In conclusion, the move toward incorporating digital engagement is a necessary tool to support municipal staff, provide efficient services to residents and businesses, and save time and resources. By taking small steps toward digital engagement, local governments can improve their operations and continue to be the glue that holds their communities together. ❐

What to Look for in a Municipal Website Provider

By Nelet Kok, Town Web

If, when sitting down to scope out municipal website providers, your eyes glaze over and you wonder whether you need (another) coffee or you just start planning your next trip, this article is meant for you! It's a daunting process, especially when tech-talk makes you feel like Tense-Twiggy!

Fear not, in no time you'll be Adventurous-Andy! In this article, we'll look at 10 key elements for scoping out government website providers.

1. **Easy to use**

The first thing to consider when selecting a government website provider is user experience; in designer terminology, this is called (UX) design. For the rest of us, it's how easy a website is to navigate, where to find certain tools and information and how it flows from one page to the next. The UX design should be simple, intuitive, and easy to navigate. The website should be designed with the resident in mind. The layout should be visually appealing and easy to read, with a clear hierarchy of information. We humans are visual beings, and so if a municipal website is well-designed, it's a joy for residents to use – even if the content can be administrative-based at times.

2. Accessibility

Accessibility is another crucial factor to consider when selecting a government website provider. The website should be designed to meet accessibility standards and comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The website should be accessible to all users, including those with disabilities such as vision or hearing impairments. The provider should also ensure that the website is compatible with assistive technologies such as screen readers, text-to-speech software, and keyboard navigation.

3. Security

Security is a critical factor when it comes to government websites. The website should be designed with security in mind to protect sensitive information, such as personal data and financial information. The website provider should have robust security measures in place, including firewalls, SSL encryption, and intrusion detection systems. Additionally, the website provider should conduct regular security audits and vulnerability assessments to ensure that the website is secure.

4. Mobile-Friendly

This is practically non-negotiable; mobile-friendliness is crucial in today's digital age. The website provider should ensure that the website is optimized for mobile devices, as more people are accessing the internet through their mobile devices. During the fourth quarter of 2022 just over 59 percent of all web traffic worldwide was on mobile phones. This is especially important when thinking about accommodating visitors and travelers. The website should have a responsive design that adjusts to different screen sizes and resolutions.

5. Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of optimizing a website to rank higher in search engine results pages (SERPs). It is essential for government websites to be easily discoverable on search engines such as Google. Therefore, the website provider should ensure that the website is optimized for SEO. This includes using relevant keywords, creating high-quality content, and optimizing the website's structure and layout.

6. Analytics

Analytics is another essential factor to consider when selecting a government website provider. Analytics allows government officials to track website traffic, subscribers and other important metrics. The website provider should offer analytics tools such as Google Analytics to enable government officials to measure website performance, identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven decisions.

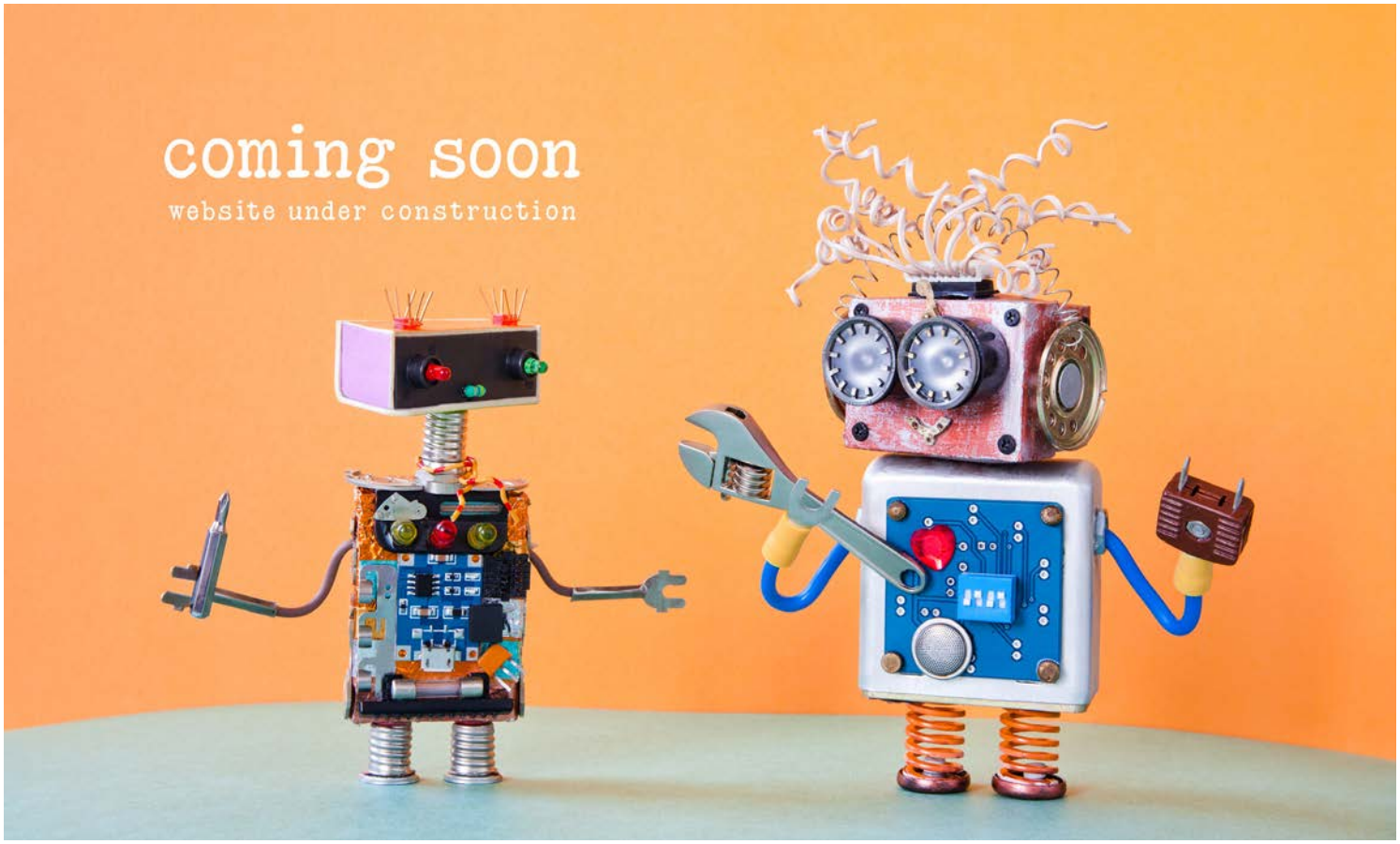
Ultimately, data helps guide us on where to improve, where community members are and troubleshoot accordingly. When we know better, we do better, and data helps us know better.

7. Support and Maintenance

It is important to select a website provider that offers excellent support and maintenance services. Cannot stress this enough: excellent support for town clerks means one less thing to worry about and one less thing to follow-up on. The website provider should have a dedicated support team that is available 24/7 to provide assistance with technical issues and website updates. Additionally, the website provider should offer regular maintenance services, such as software updates, security patches, and backups to ensure that the website is always up-to-date and secure.

8. A Municipal-Focused Supplier

One that is established with specialized knowledge to recognize what details need to be a part of every municipal website. And, one that understands the accessibility of the documents that local government officials work with. This means that the website has to be able to carry, send and host agendas, minutes, packets, as well as quick links to YouTube meeting videos. This



repository sounds simple enough, but a well-organized repository will go a long way in making clerk-work easier!

9. Communication with Residents

A local municipal website is an essential tool for municipalities to effectively communicate with their community and residents in a variety of ways. With the increasing importance of the internet in people's daily lives, having a website allows municipalities to reach a wider audience and share important information quickly and easily. The website has to be able to accommodate email/text notifications and integration with social media platforms. A well-designed website can provide residents with access to up-to-date and breaking news, announcements and events, as well as necessary contact information.

Additionally, the website can be used to share vital information such as emergency alerts, public health information, and local government services. By utilizing a local municipal website, communities can foster a more engaged and informed population, leading to increased community participation and a stronger sense of belonging.

10. Tech Stuff

Linked to No. 8 in this list, is a supplier that understands that municipal clerks are the glue that keeps municipalities running – they are very clever, but they don't want to worry about the tech stuff. An experienced and accommodating municipal web design company is one that migrates content from old to new websites, allows API integration for current and future needs, is forward-thinking and can help update your website as the needs of the municipality and the community change.

When searching for a municipal website provider, it's essential to consider various factors to ensure that the platform meets the needs of the government, can communicate effectively in a variety of ways with the community and last, but certainly not least, support the municipal staff by offering a document repository, tech guidance and top-notch support.

By prioritizing the elements that make the town clerk's work easier, offering a reliable and trusted service, and encompassing all the tech, admin, and accessibility requirements, a website provider can contribute to building strong, informed communities. Additionally, providers that offer security, excellent support, analytics, and SEO services can help ensure that the website is functional, accessible, and visible to residents. Ultimately, the right municipal website provider can play a crucial role in supporting local government, increasing transparency, and facilitating communication with residents. For Tense-Twiggy, our advice is that you follow these guidelines, chat it over with a fellow clerk and get to work: the world (read: municipality) is your oyster!❐

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Tracking Technology's Impact on Workplace Safety

By Robert Blaisdell, Director of Loss Control, Comp Alliance

Technological advancements have a long history of improving workplace safety. In many instances, improved safety is the intended goal of the technology, such as adding seatbelts, airbags, and anti-lock brakes to vehicles to make them safer. In other instances, changes in technology have been primarily motivated by non-safety-related factors, such as increased efficiency and productivity, and improved workplace safety as an ancillary benefit.

Technological advancements in areas like personal protective equipment (PPE), vehicle safety and facility upgrades, have had a major impact on workplace safety. By continuously monitoring and incorporating technology, municipalities can improve their operations' efficiency and safety.

Personal Protective Equipment

Developments in PPE directly contribute to enhanced worker safety and reduced injuries, providing an immediate barrier between employees and hazards. Hard hats, safety glasses and goggles, gloves, and hearing protection are cost-effective means of injury prevention. For example, an eye injury may cause permanent damage, prohibit an employee from driving a commercial motor vehicle, and result in an extended absence – life-altering for the employee, this could also be costly for your town. However, with the use of proper safety glasses, costing as little as $0.99 a unit, the likelihood of such an injury decreases significantly. Slips, trips, and falls are the most common workplace injuries the Comp Alliance sees. To prevent these injuries, employees should have proper footwear. Nonslip soles, reinforced upper soles, breathability, waterproof technologies, and improved wearability all contribute to improved comfort for workers and reduce injuries.

Some of the more common examples of improved PPE through technology are:

- Plastic composites that strengthen and improve the durability of hard hat shells.
- Kevlar materials used in chainsaw chaps.
- Lighter protective clothing and boots that are more comfortable and can be worn for longer periods.
- Gloves that help protect from cuts and provide vibration resistance.
- Breathable fabrics with cooling properties to aid in comfort, contributing to a positive psychological outlook on completing work.
- Footwear upgrades including long-lasting soles, slip-resistant materials, and gel insoles to provide comfort.
- Reflective clothing upgrades that make workers more visible to drivers in the work zone.

In the past several years, some industries have incorporated

"smart" PPE to communicate, monitor vitals, provide visibility, monitor the environment, and enable emergency stop devices. It's also used to link employees and machinery to warn of potential contact and alert administration as to what PPE is being worn and where to maintain inventory. For example, Flint Bishop Airport implemented smart helmets for airport police to detect temperatures and run facial scans. In Georgia, firefighters wear smart PPE to track their movement, location, and gas levels.

Vehicle Safety

Automobiles constantly incorporate new technologies to improve safety. Accident-avoidance detection systems, auto braking, backup cameras, blind-spot monitors, engine diagnostics capable of monitoring a multitude of vehicle components, and advancements in comfort make it safer to operate and maintain municipal fleets. Even general maintenance can be improved with the use of technology. When an engine analysis system can pinpoint a mechanical failure quickly, repairs are handled without delay. Predictive analytic systems report failures before they occur, saving downtime and repair expenses. Future vehicle technology will likely include self-driving trucks and better collision avoidance and detection systems.

Facility Upgrades

Implementing some simple, physical security measures within municipal facilities can also provide enhanced protection. Video surveillance systems with remote monitor features can inform staff of who is accessing facilities. LED lighting inside and outside the facility can enhance visibility. Motion-sensitive devices can provide automation and reduce blind spots, utilizing photometric layouts to achieve proper foot candle measurements inside buildings, all of which can reduce slip-and-fall injuries and provide clearer visibility in parking lots, equipment staging areas, storage locations, and office stairwells. Technology also offers improved office ergonomics to reduce the likelihood of several injuries. Using sit-stand desks, antiglare monitors, eye protection computer applications, and high-tech comfort chairs with heat and massage features can prevent carpal tunnel, eye strain, and more. Improved seating with lumbar support and adjustable armrests and seat height can help to align the spine, neck, and head when sitting for an extended period.

Additional technological advancements have been introduced to reduce fire damage potential, improve firefighting operations, and reduce worker fire susceptibility. Self-monitoring and connective fire alarm detection systems, with remote technology to alert of system failures, assures the detection system always remains active. Improved addressable fire detection systems can identify exact hot spots within a building to concentrate firefighting personnel, reducing firefighting time on-scene and protecting more staff and facilities. Also, fire detection devices are now able to detect smaller smoke particulates to alert building and emergency personnel quickly before a fire erupts. Lastly, the use of emergency evacuation planning and safety with improved fire compartmentation provides for more efficient emergency departure from buildings, reducing injuries to occupants.

Increased Awareness

Technological enhancements have also made safety training and awareness more accessible to employees. Training your staff on proper safety procedures and protocols is a long-standing norm, especially for those involving high-hazard operations (and has never been easier). Incorporating virtual training programs and online educational opportunities will make your staff more alert and aware of common hazards in the workplace. Training

includes knowledge of associated hazards, how to avoid such hazards, mending operations to reduce hazards, and notification procedures should an unsafe condition be identified. Current procedures may call for annual training for full-time and part-time staff on required training programs such as workplace violence, sexual harassment, chemical use (Right-To-Know), bloodborne pathogens, and HAZWOPER to be completed onsite via an accomplished trainer. This schedule limits training to specific dates and locations and requires all staff to attend at one time.

By making training resources available to employees at any time, (such as those offered through the Comp Alliance Academy), employees can view training videos at their convenience, and department heads can schedule and monitor training without disrupting operations. The improvement in safety and efficiency makes this one of the simplest and most affordable ways to use technology to improve the safety of municipal operations.

Technology with Safety as an Ancillary Consideration

Not all developments in technology that improve workplace safety were designed with that goal in mind. There are several instances where technology was developed for a specific purpose other than safety, and improved safety was secondary.

Garbage Trucks

Initially, garbage collection required significant manual labor. In 1937 and 1938, advancements to improve efficiency simultaneously reduced worker injuries. Mechanical arms eliminated loading trash manually into the truck and the invention of the packer produced rear-loader garbage trucks. However, these designs still involved riding on the back of the truck, jumping off, and repeatedly lifting heavy cans. By the 1970s, automated side-loader garbage trucks made it unnecessary for workers to leave garbage trucks at all, which ultimately decreased muscle strains due to lifting, falls from the truck, and jumping-related injuries.

Wearable Biometrics

Originally designed to encourage fitness and a healthy lifestyle, wearable technologies are being incorporated into the workplace to monitor stress levels, skin temperatures, heart rates, and other safety considerations. For example, the Oura Ring was used to help detect the early contraction of COVID-19 among employees. Other features like glucose monitoring, blood oxygen saturation (SpO2) monitoring, and mood and stress monitoring could also contribute to improving employee health, safety, and productivity.

Electric Vehicles

Electric vehicles were initially created to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels and the carbon monoxide emissions from internal combustible engines. Fortunately, these vehicles also brought about advanced safety features like blind-spot monitoring, 360-degree camera views, forward collision warning and automatic braking, lane departure and lane-keeping assist, and adaptive cruise control aid. Many of these features have since been introduced to ICE vehicles, dramatically improving safety for drivers and pedestrians.

By providing a safer work environment through an educated workforce, better protective gear, and safer facilities, you can minimize workplace injuries, improve efficiency, and boost employee morale. If you have questions related to utilizing technology to enhance safety within your municipality, please feel free to contact Robert Blaisdell at rblaisdell@wrightinsurance.com.❐

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Municipal Zoning Codes & Energy Storage Technology

By Hannah Stewart, Communications Specialist, H2M architects + engineers

> Certain types of renewable energy, and utility-scale energy storage is one of them, should be designated as a 'public utility' in municipal zoning codes ... The phrase 'public utility' itself typically isn't defined within the codes, and siting flexibility cannot be achieved without that designation.

As interest in renewable energy and natural disaster resiliency increases, the need for energy storage increases as well. However, some municipalities lack the zoning guidelines necessary for any kind of energy storage infrastructure larger than a single-family home. While zoning codes vary from town to town, all municipalities would benefit from a better understanding of the technology and its siting needs. This is especially true for places like Suffolk County's North Shore, where upgrading transmission infrastructure and installing fossil fuel-burning "peaker" plants are more traditional solutions to power demand. Phil Schade, P.E., Energy Market Director at H2M architects + engineers, offers his expertise on the state of energy storage, what municipalities should keep in mind, and the concerns that residents may raise.

Some renewable energy sources, like solar and wind, are not constant. The purpose of energy storage is to store excess energy when demand is low so that energy is available either when demand is high or when intermittent sources are not producing.

According to Schade, energy storage can come in many different forms: "Batteries are a common form of energy storage and have been around for a long time. It's only recently that they've been applied on a utility scale. Additional energy storage technologies include pumped hydro and the application of hydrogen gas."

Pumped storage hydropower uses two water reservoirs at different heights to pass water back and forth through a turbine. When the sun stops shining or the wind stops blowing, the moving water generates electricity instead. Pumped hydro is the best choice for areas with significant changes in elevation.

Hydrogen gas can be another way to store energy. Electrolysis can convert water into hydrogen, which is easy to store and can be used in fuel cells to generate electricity. The conversion of water to hydrogen to electricity is less efficient than pumped hydropower, but it is more versatile. The electrification step can also be skipped entirely and the

gas can be used directly as a fuel source or as a greener supplement to natural gas.

Battery storage systems typically use metal-ion technology to store electricity. These systems can stack individual storage cells to meet the needed capacity. There are currently plans in the region to build battery capacities exceeding 100 megawatts. Battery storage systems are attractive for a number of reasons: the technology is readily available; batteries can complement renewable energy systems; they can be cost-effective and more easily sited than fossil fuel plants; and, lastly, they have little to no impacts on traffic or carbon emissions because most facilities are unmanned and monitored remotely.

The application of utility-scale energy storage is still relatively new.

"It's not something that most municipalities had contemplated in their current [building and zoning] codes," Schade said. "Most municipalities, if we were to do a poll [on current storage regulations], would likely be silent on the subject. It becomes difficult to site and properly evaluate an application for development if your town or village code has no wording that addresses that particular topic."

Schade advises municipalities to consider how much sound energy storage facilities produce when approving energy storage siting applications. Electrical equipment and cooling fans can contribute to the background noise level of a community. Municipalities should mandate that developers check existing background noise levels and determine if a new storage system would significantly increase noise impacts. If so, sound mitigation measures may be required.

Patricia DelCol, assistant vice president and municipal market director at H2M, added that energy storage projects can face additional siting challenges due to the codes' often outdated language.

"Certain types of renewable energy, and utility-scale energy storage is one of them, should be designated as a 'public utility' in municipal zoning codes," she said. "The phrase 'public utility' itself typically isn't defined within the codes, and siting flexibility cannot be achieved without that designation. Case law supports relaxed zoning requirements when a facility is designated as a "public utility" in a municipal zoning code. Without this designation, developers can be limited in where they are permitted to build."

Municipal zoning codes also need to understand the location needs of energy storage systems, i.e., proximity to a substation or other utility connection infrastructure, in order to draft rules that make sense for both the technology and the community the technology will benefit.

Many tools are available to support municipalities as they learn about energy storage technology and prepare for installations within their jurisdiction. Entities like NYSERDA have published guidance on both the technology and on much-needed municipal code revisions. Professional support from experienced consultants is also available. Whatever the approach, municipal officials need to be well-versed and informed of the somewhat unique siting requirements and technology needs of energy storage, as they look to embrace alternative technology and its inherent benefits to the residents and businesses within their borders.❐

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