

# Online Community Engagement Platforms as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Public Assessment Tool

by John Rainey



Nearly every public project requires some sort of public assessment and information sharing in order to provide complete transparency, reduce and/or eliminate bias, and improve the prospects of successful outcomes. There are numerous methodologies used to gather and disperse this information, and one of the most exciting is the emergence of Online Community Engagement Platforms.

“Good public participation results in better decisions,” according to the International Association on Public Participation (iap2). “Public participation means to involve those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process. It promotes sustainable decisions by providing participants with the information they need to be involved in a meaningful way, and it communicates to participants how their input affects the decision.”

Other benefits of public engagement include:

- Better identification of the public’s values, ideas and recommendations.
- More informed residents – about issues and about local agencies.
- More community buy-in and support, with less contentiousness.
- More civil discussions and decision-making.
- Faster project implementation with less need to revisit issues.
- More trust – in each other and in local government.

Traditional forms of public engagement have always faced the problem that most community members are not aware of or don’t have time to go to public meetings. But the future of neighborhoods are decided at these meetings – what gets built, and ultimately, for whom. Another common problem is that community leaders are only hearing from a narrow cross-section of their communities who may not represent the majority viewpoint. Also, with the decline of newspaper readership, communities are finding it increasingly difficult to inform their residents about projects and help them understand the impact of these projects on their communities.

To address these communication challenges, most communities employ some form of traditional outreach including public meetings, surveys, open houses, workshops, polling, and citizens advisory committees. Also, a majority of local agencies use their websites to inform residents about upcoming public issues. They also use press releases, email lists, newsletters, blogs, and government-access TV. More and more agencies are also adding social media, like Facebook and Twitter, to their engagement tools. This enables more citizens to get involved, because technology has enabled them to do more while going about their normal lives. Anyone with a computer, smart phone, or tablet can



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easily contribute input on projects. In fact, Textizen (textizen.org) doesn't even require an internet connection, since it works on any mobile phone with text (SMS) messaging.

Now a growing number of communities are also experimenting with "online public engagement platforms" that facilitate two-way communications with residents. These tools present an important opportunity to expand the number and diversity of voices providing input to community decision-making. In most cases, these platforms enable community members to express their own viewpoints and examine (and/or comment on) other points of view – the premise being that civic engagement improves the collaborative planning process through deliberation, accountability, and empowerment by encouraging knowledge sharing and discussion.

Other benefits of using online public engagement software include:

- Reaching more diverse residents
- Generating more informed participation
- Inviting a broader range of perspectives
- Enabling participants to view and react to others input
- Producing concrete data for reporting and evaluation

There are many online civic platforms from which to choose: MindMixer, MetroQuest, Neighborland, CitizenSpace, and CrowdGauge to name a few. They all have the simple goal of "harnessing collective intelligence" to help communities expand citizen engagement and assist in identifying creative ideas and approaches to public policy issues.

Local government agencies may want to consider some criteria for selecting a software service for online engagement:

- The range of tools/features for public input
- Attractive, clean design with an intuitive interface for the public
- Technical interface with the agency's website and other relevant IT assets
- Ease of use for local agency administrator(s)
- Reporting and export capabilities
- Flexibility and ability to adapt to changing public engagement needs
- What, if any, supplemental services are provided that match desired needs (e.g., GIS capabilities and demographic analysis)
- Level of staff training required and anticipated amount of staff time for successful implementation

There are cost considerations, too. The most popular software services in this field typically charge an annual subscription fee that allows for use across an unlimited number of topics throughout the entire agency. The amount of the fee will vary based on size of the jurisdiction, and some suppliers will provide a discount for a multi-year agreement. As a rough benchmark, a city with a population of about 50,000 might pay a \$5,000 annual fee, while a county with a population of a half million might pay around \$20,000. The subscription is likely to include both in person and online support to help with design and the post-participation process. The providers will often offer consulting services for additional cost if desired. It is important to be clear about what level of support is in the contract.

One of the most popular public engagement platforms is MindMixer. (In March 2015, MindMixer announced a name change to mySidewalk.com. For this article, we will be referring to the company as MindMixer to avoid confusion.)

***“Don't ask a question unless you can live with ANY answer you get.”***

Teresa Penbrooke, CPRE, CEO GreenPlay, LLC.

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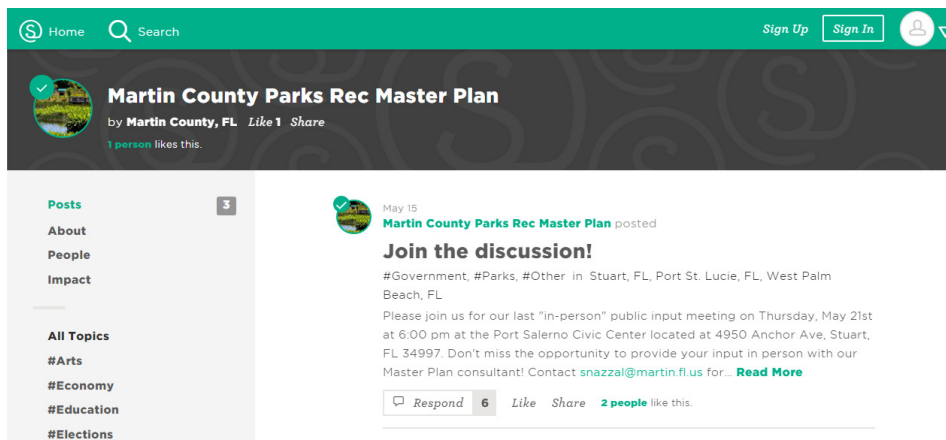
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GreenPlay has used MindMixer for several years. “We’ve had good experience using MindMixer,” said Art Thatcher, a consultant with GreenPlay. “On a recent project with Wake Forest, North Carolina, we got a good response rate allowing us to drill down into important community issues.”

In some communities GreenPlay consultants have seen topics generate 500-800 unique visitor interactions. The process needs to be marketed effectively, and works best when there is someone in the agency that is willing to push the message out through their multiple avenues of communication. “We tell our clients it is another tool that shows public process transparency,” says Teresa Penbrooke, CEO of GreenPlay. “It’s not for everyone, and the results are not always positive, but we feel that whatever the result, it provides a valid finding.”

The consultants at GreenPlay are public engagement experts. They understand that accomplishments in the public arena require involvement and “buy-in” from the community. They also know that conveying positive, and valid information to stakeholders is one of the most important parts of running an agency. GreenPlay can help to engage your stakeholders and help them to feel involved in the process.



GreenPlay works to build relationships. They design strategies that reach out to your most important markets, including those in the political, internal, and public arenas. Whether you need approval, increased participation, better staff involvement, or just a higher level of recognition in the public eye, they can create and implement all aspects of a public process program that will help you accomplish your goals.

GreenPlay services include:

- Community Outreach Programs
- Surveying and Information Management
- Outreach for specialized markets (i.e.; seniors, youth, ethnically diverse, etc.)
- Marketing Strategies
- Partnership Facilitation
- Public Relations Programs
- MindMixer Virtual Town Hall

The following are some sample MindMixer sites from GreenPlay projects:

Bethlehem, NY  
<http://bethlehemparks.mindmixer.com>

Boulder, CO  
<http://www.inspireboulder.com>

Loveland, CO  
<http://lovelandparks.mindmixer.com>

Martin County, FL  
<https://martincountyparks.mysidewalk.com>

Plainfield, IL  
<http://plainfieldparkplan.mindmixer.com>

Superior, CO  
<http://www.engagesuperior.com>

Wake Forest, NC  
<http://www.engage.wakeforestnc.gov>

West Palm Beach, FL  
<http://westpalmbeachmasterplan.mindmixer.com>

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For more information about online civic engagement platforms, check out the resources below:

References:

Institute for Local Government (<http://www.ca-ilg.org>)

Community Matters (<http://www.communitymatters.org>)

MindMixer (<http://mindmixer.com>)

mySidewalk (<https://mysidewalk.com>)

Engaging Cities (<http://www.engagingcities.com>)

Online Public Engagement Emporium (<http://www.onlinepublicengagementemporium.com>)

PlaceMatters (<http://www.placematters.org>)

Code for America (<https://www.codeforamerica.org>)

International Association for Public Participation (<http://www.iap2.org>)

Civic Engagement in the Digital Age. Aaron Smith, Pew Research Center, April 2013.

Comparing Three Online Civic Engagement Platforms using the “Spectrum of Public Participation” Framework, Matti Neilmarkka, et al, University of California, Berkeley, 2014.

Online Public Participation Platforms and Applications, Della Rucker & Patrick Whalen, Wise Economy Workshop, Nov. 2012. (<http://wiseeconomy.com>)

“Capturing the Wisdom of Crowds” Kevin C Desouza & Kendra L Smith. Planning (American Planning Association), December 2014.

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