



**From Passive to Proactive:  
Best Practices for Citizen Engagement**

# Contents

- 1 Modern Government for Modern Citizens**
- 2 Passive, Reactive, Proactive: What Stage is Your Government At?**
- 5 The Benefits of Proactive Citizen Engagement**
- 7 Six Principles to Becoming Proactive with Digital Citizen Engagement**
- 9 Challenges of Legacy Technology**
- 10 Citizen Engagement with OpenGov**
- 13 Case Study - Winchester, Virginia**
- 14 What's next?**

# Modern Government for Modern Citizens

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Today's citizens have a dizzying array of information and services at their fingertips. With a few clicks and swipes, citizens can transfer money, get answers to the most obscure questions imaginable, and even find and arrange romantic dates. Given the ubiquity of private services citizens can easily, and quickly, access online, citizens have come to expect a similar level of access and ease of use from the services they rely most heavily on - government. According to the Center for Digital Government, 72% of citizens would like to access government information via their smartphone, while 62% of citizens would like to see their government adopt more innovative technology.<sup>1</sup>

These findings are consistent with our intuition about modern citizens: they increasingly desire transparent, accessible, and interactive government services, delivered to them on the devices they use most often. When governments fail to provide readily available and easily understood information, citizens are increasingly taking matters into their own hands. FOIA requests are at an all-time high<sup>2</sup>, as citizens crave government data to both hold their representatives accountable and serve as valuable information for building online businesses. Meanwhile, the rise of social media has allowed sensational and false stories about governments to proliferate with alarming speed, satisfying citizens' desire for easily digestible updates about how their governments are operating, but leading to false and divisive conclusions. Clearly, citizens' appetite for transparency, accessibility, and accountability are only continuing to increase.

Understanding the digital expectations of the modern citizenry offers an opportunity: proactive governments can provide citizens with the information they desire, surrounded by context that helps them understand the data they are receiving. Proactive governments can anticipate rising FOIA requests and work to make information easily available to satisfy citizens' needs without soaking up valuable staff capacity. Meanwhile, proactive governments can garner a presence on social media, burnished by informative and interactive websites, budgets, and data to help control the narrative and get in front of unfounded rumors.

In this eBook, we'll discuss how a government can shift from maintaining a passive digital presence to cultivating a proactive one.

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1 [http://bps.mrkt.conduent.com/rs/250-KMW-698/images/Report-Improving-the-citizen-experience-CDG-and-Conduent.pdf?mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiWmpaa01ERXIZemxqTXpJMlslNQiOiJEWWIsOVNLWkUrU1A1Rm9mdXR1U1NtaW5EbndGMjZzallrV0pxMU5t-NThSWXFGUGc5UDg3cnI3QkJaTVRHbHlpSzhRYWhGcFNCQ0ZPQUFRSVA3bFA2QmZ2VTg5VIJ1enBLS2xRVFwvbFprK1pySXdBStKN-1pVK1I2K1JNMEJmZUEifQ%3D%3D](http://bps.mrkt.conduent.com/rs/250-KMW-698/images/Report-Improving-the-citizen-experience-CDG-and-Conduent.pdf?mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWmpaa01ERXIZemxqTXpJMlslNQiOiJEWWIsOVNLWkUrU1A1Rm9mdXR1U1NtaW5EbndGMjZzallrV0pxMU5t-NThSWXFGUGc5UDg3cnI3QkJaTVRHbHlpSzhRYWhGcFNCQ0ZPQUFRSVA3bFA2QmZ2VTg5VIJ1enBLS2xRVFwvbFprK1pySXdBStKN-1pVK1I2K1JNMEJmZUEifQ%3D%3D)

2 <https://federalnewsnetwork.com/agency-oversight/2019/03/foia-request-volume-in-fy-18-well-on-pace-to-break-new-records/>

# Passive, Reactive, Proactive: What Stage is Your Government At?

Many governments comply nominally with transparency regulations, checking the boxes of typical citizen engagement features. But simply offering raw data and responding to FOIA requests is no longer sufficient. With the tools available today, governments should be fostering civic engagement through interactive, easy-to-understand data publishing and visualizations. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, governments should be couching their data in context, helping citizens understand published data and what it signifies.

Take the quiz on the following page to find out if your government is Passive, Reactive, or Proactive. For each row, give your organization:

- **1 point** if you fall in “Passive”
- **2 points** if you fall in “Reactive”
- **3 points** if you fall in “Proactive”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Three Orientations of Local Government to Public Engagement - [http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/3\\_orientations\\_0.pdf](http://www.ca-ilg.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/3_orientations_0.pdf)





## Passive (1 Point)

## Reactive (2 Points)

## Proactive (3 Points)

Public engagement efforts focus on the minimum legal requirements for public engagement, including public comment periods and public hearings.	Expectations exist that more extensive and deliberative public engagement will be used in identified local agency decision-making (such as land-use planning, local budgeting, transportation or economic development).	A longer-term and “co-produced” public engagement plan is developed by local agency officials/staff with community member input. The plan outlines how the local government may best develop and maintain a capacity for the ongoing use of public engagement approaches to address appropriate local issues.
No clear goals or metrics exist by which to track citizen engagement efforts.	Goals exist for public engagement, but they vary by department and aren't aligned under a central strategy.	Goals are created as part of a coordinated strategy for public engagement. Metrics are measured and results are monitored.
There are few if any commonly accepted local agency public engagement routines or protocols, and practices vary significantly from department to department.	The city, county or special district often turns to public engagement protocols and practices based on previous experiences; and some efforts are made to learn from and draw on both past and ongoing public engagement activities.	The agency adopts a set of principles that generally define and encourage the use of effective, inclusive and authentic public engagement as appropriate, often clarifying administrative oversight responsibilities for these tasks.
Advances made in public engagement practices generally arise from the pressure to meet existing statutes or regulations.	Advances made in public engagement practices generally arise from “champions”, people outside or inside the organization who push for increased engagement.	Advances made in public engagement practices arise from an individual or an office dedicated to improving public engagement.
There are few (if any) organized efforts to increase the agency's or the community's knowledge of public engagement practices.	Efforts to increase the agency's or the community's knowledge of public engagement practices relies on traditional media (local newspaper, TV news, City Council meeting announcements).	Efforts to increase the agency's or the community's knowledge of public engagement practices utilize new media practices: social media, interactive websites, etc.
Residents are not surveyed about their public engagement experience.	Residents are surveyed on an ad-hoc basis about their public engagement experiences.	Residents are surveyed consistently in an effort to meet and exceed public engagement goals.
Departments receive little guidance about how to conduct public engagement.	Departments are encouraged to pursue public engagement, but each department is responsible for determining their own strategy.	Departments have access to powerful and consistent public engagement tools that standardize and centralize public engagement efforts to minimize duplication.

## Let's check your results:

### 7-12 Points

**Passive Public Engagement.** Your government is meeting its legal requirements but is doing little to modernize its public engagement strategy. Your government likely needs an **updated toolkit**, combined with organizational initiatives to better foster public engagement. Read on to learn about how governments are harnessing technology to engage their citizenry.

### 13-17 Points

**Reactive Public Engagement.** Your government is taking initiative to foster public engagement, but efforts are rarely unified under a consistent and long-term strategy. Public engagement advances in intervals, usually when a department, agency, or elected official lead an initiative. Technology isn't unified across the government and different departments might be using different tools to reach the public. Read on to learn about how governments are crafting comprehensive public engagement strategies, utilizing unified **technological toolkits** to engage their citizenry.

### 18-21 Points

**Active Public Engagement.** Your government has a consistent and measurable strategy to foster public engagement. Your government has unified its public engagement strategy behind **modern technology** that offers interactive, easy-to-understand, and mobile-responsive data visualization, publishing, and story-telling. Read on to learn more about the technology that is powering some of the most effective public engagement efforts across the country.

Regardless of where your organization falls, you can always learn more about how to use the best technological tools available to power your citizen engagement efforts. In the next section, we'll outline some areas where a focused citizen engagement strategy is particularly beneficial.

# The Benefits of Proactive Citizen Engagement

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Cultivating a proactive citizen engagement strategy offers outside benefits, including fostering community trust and buy-in, reducing staff time spent on complying with FOIA requests, and helping to improve the success and adoption of public projects. Below, we explore two key use cases of public engagement: Capital Projects and Budgeting.

## Capital Projects

The nature of capital projects requires active public engagement and proactive government communication. Because capital projects involve large public investments and are often implemented over many years, maintaining public buy-in through active and informative communication and updates is crucial to the success of any project. The proper digital citizen engagement strategy will help consult the public on which capital improvement projects to prioritize, update citizens on the progress of projects, and enable governments to report and communicate the impact of a capital project.

Outlining the components necessary for successful citizen engagement, the GFOA recommends, “Organizations [should] develop a communications plan for public participation focused on explaining capital needs, options, and strategies and facilitating feedback in advance of any major capital program.”<sup>1</sup> To leverage a successful public engagement campaign, it is crucial to get in front of the project. The GFOA outlines the following steps for governments to mount a successful capital improvement public engagement campaign:

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Communications should be directed at appropriate stakeholder audiences including citizens, businesses, and key government staff. Organizations should utilize tools to solicit feedback and facilitate a two-way discussion between citizens and government staff.
- **Developing the Messaging:** Organizations should take care to ensure that there is a clear and consistent message that delivers accurate information both on the costs of the project and its duration, impact, and benefit.
- **Communication of Project Information:** Organizations should clearly communicate project benefits, costs, impacts, and schedules at a level of detail appropriate for the audience and communication method. Organizations should communicate in a manner that is understandable to citizens, is interactive and engaging, and is available on the platforms citizens are using to seek information.
- **Start Early:** For all this to be effective, it's crucial to get in front of a project.

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1 Communicating Capital Improvement Strategies - <https://www.gfoa.org/communicating-capital-improvement-strategies>

## Budgeting

Involving citizens in the budgeting process helps foster long-term buy-in to the tough decisions, cuts, and new investments made in each budget cycle. By soliciting public feedback, demonstrating how that feedback was incorporated into the adopted budget, and communicating progress to goals, governments can better help citizens understand, in real terms, how their money is being spent and more informatively contextualize the results of their government's investments.

To this effect, The GFOA strongly recommends governments develop public engagement strategies around their budgeting process. Summarizing the benefits of such an approach, the GFOA reports, "Good public participation practices can help governments be more accountable and responsive to their communities, and can also improve the public's perception of governmental performance and the value the public receives from their government."<sup>1</sup>

The GFOA recommends the following steps to establish a strong budgeting public engagement campaign:

- **Facts.** Participants should have a common set of facts to work from. For instance, consider allocating budget dollars by discretionary and non-discretionary funds. Focus on the public process with the discretionary dollars (money not set aside for mandatory or fixed costs). Make your information readily accessible, such as through a dedicated web page.
- **Conversations.** The environment needs to be designed to facilitate the conversation. For instance, a school setting may be less formidable than city hall. Smaller group settings may be more amenable than larger groups.
- **Enjoyable.** Make public participation an enjoyable experience.
- **Trade-Offs.** Financial sustainability requires making hard decisions between competing uses of the community's resources. To truly engage the public in decision-making, they too must make hard choices.

Now that we better understand the importance of a focused citizen engagement strategy, we're going to discuss the principles to keep in mind as your organization looks to adopt modern engagement technology.

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1 Public Engagement in the Budget Process - <https://www.gfoa.org/public-engagement-budget-process>



# Six Principles to Becoming Proactive with Digital Citizen Engagement

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It is no longer sufficient to simply host data online and hope citizens can find and make sense of disparate datasets. The modern citizen expects sleek, interactive websites that consolidate information and couch their data in context. Below, we expand on six principles governments should keep in mind as they seek to become proactive with digital citizen engagement.

## 1. Align Data with Context

Data without context is meaningless to most citizens, who often lack the tools and analysis to properly understand what data signifies in the broader scope of a government's strategic plan. Digitally proactive governments present context along with their data to help citizens frame and ingest the data they are viewing. By providing context, proactive governments ensure that everyone begins the conversation with the correct information and the same set of facts.

## 2. Set the Norm for How Your Government Communicates

Find a single platform on which all government publishing of data, context, and soliciting of public feedback can be consolidated. When each department and agency is utilizing a separate tool, with different formats, and often hosted on different web pages, citizens can become lost, frustrated, and disoriented. Governments should instead seek to standardize their public engagement and route it through a platform where citizens can learn to seek important information.

## 3. Educate Residents Before They Get to the Table

When citizens arrive at a City Council meeting or a town hall to advocate for an issue, they have often made up their mind based on evidence that is now hard to refute. Rather than waiting for citizens to grow upset about an issue, proactive governments can ensure citizens have access to the data they need, surround that data with context so people don't draw the wrong conclusions about it, and communicate stories about that data on social media so rumors and fake news stories don't spread. By educating residents before they get to the table, organizations can ensure conversations between citizens and city officials are productive, collaborative, and based on a shared set of facts.

#### 4. Use Technology to Garner Support

When a measure or initiative is crucial to government operations, but might be unpopular or easily distorted among the populace, transparent and informative technologies can often help garner necessary support. Present your best case by showing what-if analysis and helping citizens understand what is at stake. Demonstrate your commitment to results and accountability by pointing to past initiatives and the contextualized data visualizations that can help citizens understand the success of past, similar initiatives. Use surveys and feedback mechanisms to understand citizens' concerns and how the initiative is faring in the public eye.

#### 5. Present Commonly Requested Data to Reduce FOIA Requests

Many governments get bogged down by endless FOIA requests. But modern communications and reporting software offers a solution: host commonly requested information online so it is always up to date and easily searchable. By hosting information and making it easy to digest, modern technology can help reduce incoming FOIA requests and can expedite the resolution of FOIA requests.

#### 6. Build with an Eye for the Future

Whether you are choosing to overhaul your citizen engagement strategy or bolster your existing efforts, choose a technology partner with robust, integrated offerings that allow your citizen engagement efforts to grow effortlessly as your capacity increases.



# Challenges of Legacy Technology

One of the biggest pitfalls governments face when seeking to update their citizen engagement strategies is trying to reconfigure legacy technology to meet the needs of a modern, online citizenry. Today's citizens expect their information to be easy-to-understand, easy-to-find, and interactive. Best practice for improving citizen engagement entails utilizing technology that offers comprehensive solutions to a range of problems. With a unified technology suite, city staff won't need to acclimate to a number of ad-hoc solutions, each with different interfaces, and citizens will benefit from a comprehensive messaging strategy that provides a range of information in a similar manner and educates citizens on how to find and utilize information.

Now that we've (hopefully) dissuaded you from using clunky, outdated technology to address a modern problem, let's take a look at a solution suite that can satisfy all of your citizen engagement needs in one sleek, integrated platform.



# Citizen Engagement with OpenGov

The OpenGov Cloud™ is the only integrated cloud solution for budgeting, performance, communications and reporting. With OpenGov, staff can analyze and communicate complex topics and decisions in a simple manner that anyone can understand. Agencies are able to build trust with colleagues and residents by gathering input on key initiatives and aligning budget and the strategic plan to both performance objectives and public expectations.





When thinking about how to improve digital citizen engagement, some governments prefer to overhaul their current efforts and replace them with a high-level, overarching strategy. Other governments recognize they aren't ready to completely reconfigure their outreach efforts, but instead need to make key, incremental progress toward a more comprehensive digital citizen engagement strategy. Below, we've compiled a list of citizen engagement initiatives that can be bundled together to form a comprehensive strategy, or taken one at a time, to build toward improved outreach efforts. Regardless of whether you want to do it all or take it one step of the time, OpenGov's technology and world-class support team will be there for you throughout the process.

In the list below, we'll enumerate just a few of the many initiatives OpenGov can help your organization implement to improve its citizen engagement efforts:

## Surveys

Use OpenGov's survey capabilities to help your government put a finger on the pulse of its community by soliciting feedback before engaging in capital projects or the budgeting process. Use surveys to understand how the public feels about potentially divisive issues and follow-up to measure your government's success at outreach, education, and persuasion.

## Online Town Halls / Forums

Public hearings and town halls are often the primary method by which governments can explain their actions, tell their story, and share important information. However, attendance at public hearings is often inaccessible for the citizens who don't have the time, inclination, or the ability to attend. Supplement public hearings with OpenGov's Open Town Hall feature, which allows you to host forums and online meetings, making the information and conversations of public hearings accessible to everyone. OpenGov's proprietary technology will moderate the forums you create to help ensure everyone's voice is heard and that bullying/intimidating language is censored.

## Financial Transparency

OpenGov's financial transparency publishing and visualizations allow residents to access, explore, and understand how their government is allocating funds. OpenGov packages visualizations with context that can allow citizens to understand the data they are consuming.





## Participatory Budgeting

With OpenGov, your government can empower residents to influence a portion of the budget to foster greater trust. The OpenGov Cloud can help your government create participatory budgeting that incorporates public recommendations into their budget process. From surveys and online town halls to dynamic budget reporting and strategic initiative dashboards, OpenGov can help you take participatory budgeting to the next level.

## Consistent Messaging Template

Data without context is often meaningless to citizens. The OpenGov Cloud will help your whole organization publish datasets with narrative and visual context to help citizens better understand the information they are consuming. To develop a consistent rapport with citizens, it is important to standardize how each department/agency communicates with the public. The OpenGov Cloud helps route all communications through an organization-wide software solution that allows all departments to easily craft data-driven stories, share them in a consistent fashion, and measure engagement.

## Social Media Presence

With all citizen engagement initiatives, it is important that they are communicated to citizens via the platforms on which they engage. As citizens increasingly look to social media for news, it is crucial that governments are able to reach and educate citizens on those platforms. That's why the OpenGov Cloud was designed to make all content created in the platform easy to share across all social media channels.

## Create a FOIA Request Hub

OpenGov can help you create a central repository of frequently requested data to help reduce incoming FOIA requests. With each new FOIA request, post the question and the information to the central repository to ensure no question will have to be answered twice. Surround datasets with context to help explain to citizens the context around the data they are requesting.

## Track Engagement and Iterate

The success of public engagement initiatives hinges on reaching the public and providing content that encourages them to engage. The OpenGov Cloud will allow you to track and report on citizens' engagement with initiatives. Internally, the OpenGov Cloud will help your governments communicate organization-wide goals, track progress to goals, and iterate on citizen engagement campaigns to improve outreach.

# Case Study - Winchester, Virginia

Winchester, VA uses OpenGov to create a better rapport between their citizens and government staff, improve trust and accountability, and reduce staff time spent on FOIA requests. The CFO of Winchester, VA, Mary M. Blowe, describes the city's strategy for how to best utilize OpenGov as her "Three-Pronged Approach to Citizen Engagement", which consists of Financial Transparency, Open Data, and Open Town Halls.

Before adopting OpenGov, Winchester city officials spent weeks arranging a glossy strategic plan, but often had difficulty getting people to actually read and engage with the document. OpenGov's capabilities helped transform Winchester's strategic plan into dynamic, powerful, and contextualized visualizations and reports that generated the engagement the city's thorough and detailed Strategic Plan always deserved.

Winchester, like many other cities, has been experiencing a massive spike in FOIA requests. Rather than passively accepting this trend, Winchester employed OpenGov to establish a hub for data frequently requested in FOIA requests, making data easily available to citizens and reducing staff time spent chasing down requests.

As Winchester builds on the initiatives above, it is using OpenGov's survey and online town hall capabilities to solicit public feedback and host online discussions to ensure the public is bought in to the city's priorities and plans.

Tying it all together, OpenGov's story-telling capabilities enables Winchester to surround their data with context, framing complicated information in a format that makes it easy for citizens to understand and engage with. Winchester found that OpenGov's story-telling features were the lynchpin to their Citizen Engagement strategy, as it allowed them to unify the communication behind each prong into one unified, consistent messaging template.



# What's next?

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Today's citizens have more data and services at their fingertips than ever before. As citizens come to expect information to be accessible and easy to understand, governments are facing increasing pressure to meet their citizens' digital expectations. While some governments aim to simply satisfy transparency regulations, proactive governments are utilizing new software solutions to foster citizen engagement and improve communication and trust. By creating a high-level citizen engagement strategy and finding a software suite that is capable of supporting each stage of the strategy, from creating social media-friendly content to soliciting public feedback to publishing interactive datasets, proactive governments are redefining what a modern government is capable of and helping to strengthen their communities. If you're interested in how OpenGov can help your organization develop a modern citizen engagement strategy, please visit [opengov.com](https://opengov.com) to request a demo.

# About OpenGov

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OpenGov is the leader in cloud-based solutions for government. The OpenGov Cloud™ is the only integrated cloud solution for budgeting, performance, communications and reporting. This multi-tenant Software-as-a-Service (“SaaS”) solution connects stakeholders to the budget process, engages them for real-time feedback, accurately forecasts personnel costs, and integrates with key government systems, resulting in improved outcomes, enhanced internal efficiencies, and more time for strategic planning.

Over 2,000 public agencies use OpenGov — including the State of Ohio; the City of Richmond, VA; Flagstaff, AZ; and Washington, DC. OpenGov was founded in 2012, and is backed by Andreessen Horowitz, Emerson Collective, 8VC, and Thrive Capital.

[Learn more at OpenGov.com](https://www.opengov.com)

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(650) 336-7167

[contact@opengov.com](mailto:contact@opengov.com)

[opengov.com](https://www.opengov.com)