Additionally Selected Technologies | 2008

Priority, Market-Ready Technologies and Innovations

Putting It In Perspective

Public comment is an integral component of an agency's ability to gain environmental clearance, advance proposed regulations, and launch many local, state, and national initiatives.

As technology has advanced, the gathering and management of comment has become increasingly challenging for administrative staff. With the advent of web-based communication and e-mail, agencies can expect to receive far more feedback than in the days of "snail mail."

Implementing a web-based application that will not only gather, but also parse, crucial data quickly will save time and money, give a more accurate overview, and enable a more directed response. The ability to respond immediately, and transparently, will save an agency time and money, provide a more accurate overview, and enable a more accurate response.

Web-Based Comment Collection

The Challenge:

A public comment period is a necessary component of many projects. Management of public involvement can add hours of labor to an already tight budget.

Constructive citizen engagement is sometimes a daunting process. A rising demand for stakeholder collaboration must be dealt with on a new scale. The town hall-style meeting has grown to encompass e-mail, text messaging, and web-based comment forms along with faxes and letters.

Conversely, the opposite situation, that of too few responses, can create future obstacles and delays for agency officials. If not enough people are able to participate in the planning phase, an agency can be blindsided later in the process.

Obtaining and organizing responses, creating summaries, and maintaining transparency is a time-consuming task. In order to move forward effectively, public comment must be gathered, summarized and addressed quickly.

The Solution:

A secure, collaborative technology solution for public participation can streamline the process of gathering and managing public comments. This tool facilitates the public's input in a way that makes it easier to analyze, summarize and formulate a response to comments.

In addition to reaching new audiences who may not have felt empowered to participate in community consensus-building, web-based subscription services such as CommentWorks® or Neighborhood America Web 2.0 can give an agency the tools to edit, summarize, post, categorize, and parse a huge amount of data in a short time.

Successful Application:
Michigan DOT explores web-based public participation

MDOT completed a two-year test of two online comment/response management systems in January 2007 that ranged from Environmental Assessments and Environmental Impact Statements, to the State Long-Range Plan and an extensive 5,000-response state map features questionnaire. Ease of use was notable with CommentWorks®. Unlike conventional IT projects requiring an extensive enterprise solution process before any actual development would occur, as a subscription service the agency was fully operational within 45 days of signing the contract.

Following this test, MDOT explored Neighborhood America, which was found to have a very user-friendly interface for building a customized comment tool. At the time of the test, Neighborhood America had yet to include the advanced sorting and parsing abilities available through CommentWorks®, though they could be found in a more complex tool called Communication Manager.

The Result:

During the pilot effort with CommentWorks®, various improvements and enhancements were made to the service to better accommodate MDOT's needs, including the roll out of a remote service that enabled staff to take a laptop computer to public meetings, gather public input directly and then upload the data to the system.

These comments were categorized by specific issues. Rather than sending all comments to the entire team, department heads were able to sort by issue and forward comments to study team members according to their area of expertise and interest. Streamlining the process allowed the downloading of data at any time in a format that could easily be used with any post-analysis software.

Though MDOT did not employ it, one feature the agency recommends is the ability to place comments on the web for the public to view. This could prove an effective feature for providing information back to the customer.

Additional Resources
- "About CommentWorks," ICF International
    http://www.icfi.com/Services/Enterprise-Solutions/CommentWorks/Overview.asp
- Hasson. "Can We Have a Word with You?" June 6, 2005
    http://www.fcw.com/print/11_23/news/89034-1.html
- "EIS and Public Comment Management Software." Discussion Topic
    http://nepa.fhwa.dot.gov/
- "Prototype Software for an Environmental Information Management and Decision Support System," Research Results Digest 317, Transportation Research Board.
    http://www.trb.org/news/blurb_detail.asp?id=7310
- Final Report for NCHRP Research Results Digest 317: Prototype Software for an Environmental Information Management and Decision Support System. Cambridge Systematics, Inc., 2006.
    http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/nchrp/nchrp_w103.pdf

Benefits

A secure, collaborative technology solution for comment gathering provides for more successful stakeholder engagement.

- *An increased number of responses may be realized by offering on-line means of commenting.*

- *The agency may tap the opinions of new segments of the public.*

- *When large numbers of comments are received, rapid parsing provides an opportunity for collaborative, timely response.*

- *Search features enable the user to identify and address issues raised by the public.*

- *Speedy responses can be formulated as information is categorized and summarized easily.*

- *Pre-scoping and scoping phases are easily shared among team members, thereby enabling comments, summaries and draft responses to be created collaboratively.*

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