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A WSP White Paper On:

Online Public Engagement & Collaboration

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Public Engagement & Collaboration

Meaningful public engagement aims to inform sound decision-making that incorporates the interests and feedback of stakeholders and the public, as well as meets the needs of the decision-making body. For municipal officials, planners, and/or public engagement practitioners, hosting public open houses and in-person stakeholder meetings are regular occurrences. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person engagement is not an option and it may take some time before the public will be comfortable to attend in-person events.

Online public engagement tools provide opportunities for individuals to participate in public decision-making and community life without face-to-face interactions. Online public engagement is commonly used in conjunction with in-person events, to support, enhance, or extend the public engagement processes, but rarely as a standalone form of engagement. With our new reality of physical and social distancing, we must now shift the way we think about public engagement as we look to online tools as a solution for continuing to move projects forward.
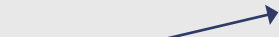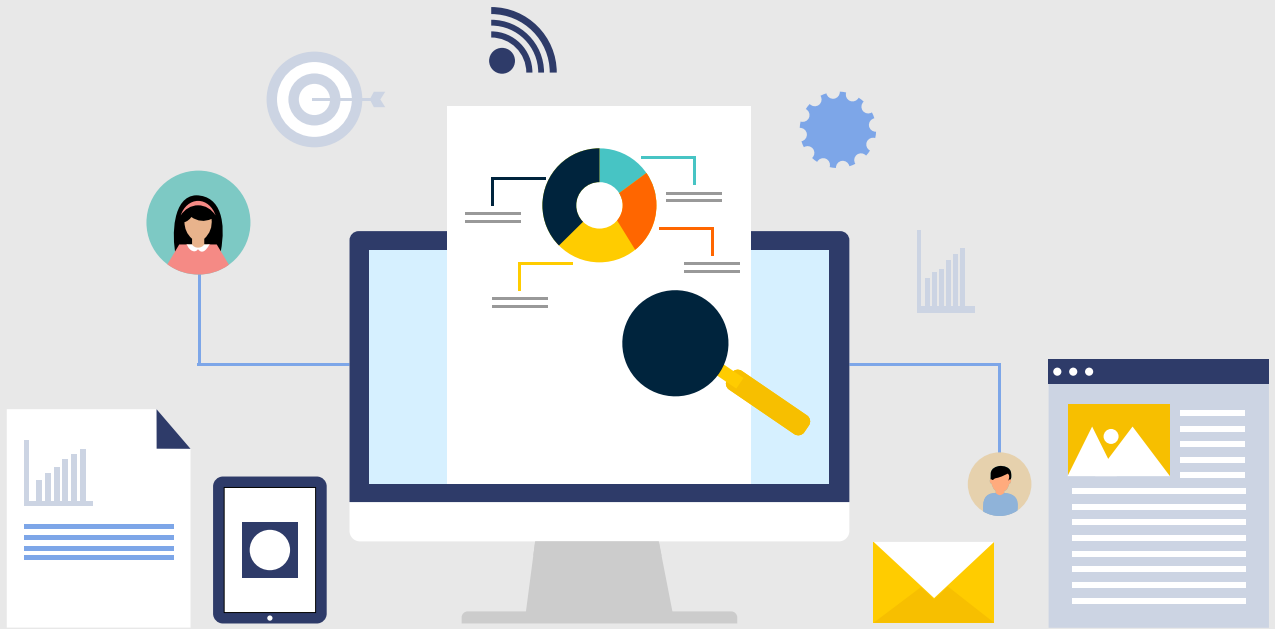
Selecting the Right Tool(s) for Your Project

There is no single public engagement tool that can meet the needs of every project. One tool, or a combination of many, can and should be used for individual projects, depending on the project's goals and desired outcomes. A helpful way to think about choosing public engagement tools (including online tools) is to consider them through the lens of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation. Knowing what you want to achieve at each stage of a project, and understanding what online tools are available, will enable you to identify where each goal fits on the IAP2 spectrum. This will help you to select the right tool(s) to meet each goal.

Online engagement does not replace in-person meetings and events. Human beings are social in nature, and the benefits of in-person events are often the intangible outcomes that cannot be achieved through online engagement alone. For instance, it is difficult to build trust and credibility without face-to-face discussion; however, the COVID-19 crisis has required us to rely on online tools more heavily to meet project objectives and stay in touch with a community.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

Increasing Level of Public Impact

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Goal	To provide blanced and objective information in a timely manner.	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives and decisions.	To work with the public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
Promise	"We will keep your informed."	"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the decisions made."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible."	"We will implement what you decide."

When selecting the right tool(s) for your project, consider the following:

What is the role of the public in your public engagement process? Are you trying to inform the public, engage them in a discussion, or involve them in some of the decision-making aspects of the project? Does online engagement meet the spirit and intent of the project's goals? Is the engagement part of a statutory process? Are there ways that you can utilize online engagement tools to replace in-person events? If not, then it may be best to consider placing the project on hold and use regular communications to stay in touch with all interested parties.

Who are the interested parties? Do the interested parties have access to computers and internet? Are there socio-economic factors that need to be considered? Is it possible that the interested parties may not be internet-savvy? If these gaps exist, other complimentary strategies should be considered, such as mailing information, newspaper articles and/or conducting telephone calls.

Do you have access to the necessary resources? Are the necessary resources (e.g. funding, time, technical knowledge, etc.) available to deliver effective online engagement? Will the online engagement be something that can be reasonably delivered in a professional manner? Are there bandwidth issues that could hamper access to the internet for interested parties? Online tools can add some costs to the process, and at other times, can be very cost-effective, depending on the tool.

What are the limitations of the tool? Will a single tool have the capability to meet each of your public engagement needs? Is the tool accessible for all? Is the tool easy to operate and modify? What will you do if a technical issue arises? How can you strive to protect the privacy and data of interested parties and mitigate any privacy issues that arise? WSP has experience using various online tools and can assist with helping to determine which ones would enhance your project.

How will stakeholder and public input affect the decision? Reporting back what was heard and how the feedback influenced the outcome is key. If stakeholders and the public are going to give you their time and attention, you should make a commitment to inform them how their feedback made a difference or explain why it was not incorporated. Posting the information on a website, sending the summary report, or mailing the information are ways to effectively report back.
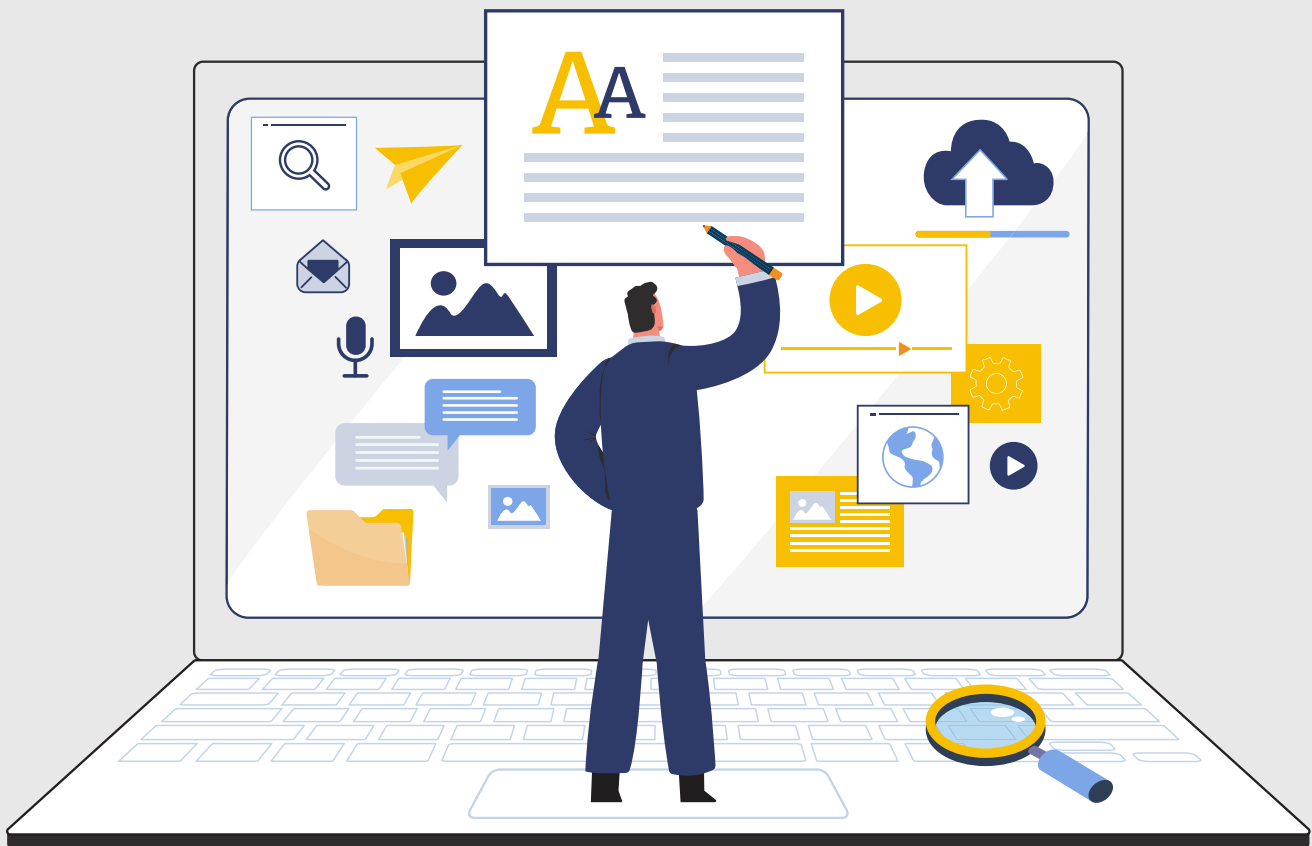
An Online Engagement Toolbox

There are many public engagement platforms and providers to choose from, making the selection of the right tool an overwhelming experience. Some platforms offer a suite of online public engagement services, while others provide a single service. Essentially, the tools or platforms available can be broken down into the following categories:

Online live meeting/video-conference/webinar (audio and video multi-way communication) – used to host live meetings online, including audio and video, to engage with a group of people in real-time. This type of platform could be used to replace a scheduled public meeting or present the findings of a project to stakeholders and the public.

Telephone town hall/teleconference (audio multi-way communication) – used to host live meetings via telephone to engage with a group of people in real-time. Like the online live meeting or video, this type of platform could be used to replace a scheduled public meeting. In fact, this tool may be preferable in communities where internet access is variable or inadequate.

Pre-recorded presentation (audio and video 1-way communication) – used to present information to a group of people, with no opportunity for feedback in real-time. The advantage of this tool is timing – stakeholders and the public could view the presentation at their leisure, rather than trying to attend a pre-scheduled meeting. This tool could be coupled with a survey, poll, or discussion forum to collect feedback.

Polling – used to collect feedback by inviting participants to respond to a series of simple questions. The advantage of this tool is that it is easy to collect quick and simple feedback (e.g., yes/no questions, identify your preference).

Survey – used when responses are required to a series of questions. A survey may include a combination of simple and detailed questions that allow a participant to elaborate their viewpoint. A survey could be used as a follow-up to an online meeting, video conference, or to receive comments on a website posting. The advantage of a survey is that it allows for the collection of feedback over time and could be completed by a participant at their leisure. A survey can be hosted online, or hardcopy surveys could be mailed out.

Discussion forum/message board – used to hold conversations in the form of posted messages, providing an opportunity for participants to share their comments in an open forum. This tool allows for the sharing of stories and brainstorming of ideas.

Place-based commenting – used to collect comments about a specific place or community using a mapping tool. Many of the place-based commenting tools are interactive and engaging, allowing participants to see and comment on one another's opinions.

Social media – for the most part, social media involves one-way communication, which is good for information sharing. There are also some platforms that offer tools for sharing project information and engaging with participants during live discussions. Social media is a great way to inform the public of an initiative but is usually limited in the volume of data that can be shared.

Communication is Key

Strong communication has always been a cornerstone of a successful public engagement process, but in today's context, it will be of the utmost importance. It will be integral to identify ways to direct stakeholders and the public to the selected methods of information sharing and collecting feedback. Without advertising or project promotion, interested individuals will not know where to go or how to access an online tool. To expand your outreach, you should:

- Ensure the project and engagement tools are effectively advertised and project timelines adjusted, as necessary;

- Increase the number of advertising methods used (newspapers, email lists, mail, press releases, etc.) and frequency in which they are advertised; and

- Connect directly with key stakeholders via telephone.

Real Challenges

These are sensitive times. Understand that many people are very anxious within the community. This may affect the timing of when you involve stakeholders and the public. Also, your project may not be considered a top priority, so you may not receive the response or level of involvement you had initially hoped for, until our current situation begins to normalize and return to business as usual.

For some, this unprecedented time of physical and social distancing may present an unplanned opportunity to explore the unfamiliar territory of online public engagement. For others, it may be an opportunity to build upon past online public engagement experience.

WSP is Ready to Assist

WSP has accumulated a list of the various service providers of online services in each of the categories identified above and we can assist you with making the best online service choice for your project. We have experience using many different tools for different projects and we will share our experiences with you. Once you have had a chance to consider the points above, please contact WSP to discuss further. We look forward to assisting you.

To discuss further, please contact:

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