Chapter 11
The E–Citizen in Planning:
U.S. Municipalities’ Views of Who Participates Online

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ABSTRACT
Municipalities that plan have both a legal obligation and a professional directive to incorporate citizens into the planning process, but garnering sufficient and diverse citizen participation is often a struggle. Online participation tools as a component of e-government provide a potential venue for enhancing the participation process. However, e-government participation raises challenges pertaining to trust, exclusion, and responsiveness. This chapter contributes to the understanding of these issues by analyzing how municipalities in the U.S. view the e-participant. The analysis is based on an ongoing longitudinal study that examines planning department web sites for U.S. cities with 2000 census populations of 50,000 or more. The authors’ findings highlight respondents’ views of online tools as a means to further efficiency and citizen satisfaction, rather than as a means by which to potentially enhance discussion of community issues.

INTRODUCTION
Local governments engage their citizens to provide them with information and gain support for policy initiatives, to identify unforeseen concerns, and to recognize potential conflicts (Conroy & Berke, 2004; Conroy & Gordon, 2004; Wild & Marshall, 1999). Questions remain, however, on how best to engage citizens in local planning efforts when work, family, and other issues constrain both time and interest (Chess & Purcell, 1999; Day, 1997). While planners are obligated to at least inform citizens of and, preferably, to engage them on land use issues through, for example, the comprehensive planning process, it is often difficult to get input (Conroy & Gordon, 2004). This lack of active participation has created a challenge for city planners, who are responsible for engaging citizens in making decisions about the future of their communities (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby, 2004; Laurian, 2004).

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The Internet has transformed the manner in which people get news and information, shop, find entertainment, and interface with their government (Waldon, 2006). In the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign, a survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that “46% of all adults are using the internet, email, or phone text messaging for political purposes” (Smith & Rainie, 2008, p. 2). Another work by that same Project noted that “the Internet is the second most popular way for Americans to contact their government” (Dimitrova & Chen, 2006, p. 174). This increased use of the Internet is global, crossing Europe, Africa, and Asia (see, e.g., Wohlers, 2009; Tiamiyu & Ogunsola, 2008; Kalu, 2007; Paul, 2007; and Holliday & Kwok, 2004). For example, according to Wohlers (2009), “In 2000, the federal government in Germany initiated a series of policy initiatives … to spread the implementation of e-government throughout all levels of government” (p. 112). Local governments in the U.S. and elsewhere have been increasingly adopting applications ranging from simple document delivery to more complex interactive online mapping in order to increase responsiveness and community input and to enhance community renewal (Al-Kodmany, 1999; Conroy & Evans-Cowley, 2006; Kingston, 2007; Lee et al., 2005). Therefore, incorporation of information and communication technology (ICT) into public planning processes represents an area of great promise in which better relationships between government and its citizenry can be built (Lodge, 2003; Weber et al., 2003).

While some studies have suggested that access to the Internet for information and local government services may increase local participation levels, there is little clear empirical evidence one way or the other (Komito, 2007, p. 81). Local governments across the U.S. have been increasing online information and participation opportunities (see, e.g., Evans-Cowley & Conroy, 2004; Evans-Cowley & Conroy, 2009). However, the impact of technology on increasing civic participation with governments remains unclear at best (Komito, 2007). Additionally, there is little insight on how governments themselves perceive the influence of the technology on participation.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the use of e-government participation applications and insights for public participation in planning processes in municipalities in the United States. Specifically, we build upon previous studies’ reviews of online municipal planning offerings by incorporating a survey of planners in certain municipalities to understand their view of the e-participant and the impact online technologies have had on their relationships with citizen participants. The study begins with a review of the citizen participation and technology literature to assess the potential of e-participation and the key models that have been proposed. We then examine planner views of the e-participant with a review of our methodology and a discussion of the survey results. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future trends in e-participation and a summary of our key findings.

BACKGROUND

Citizen Participation and Technology

The goal of citizen participation in planning is often to enhance the outcomes of policy and project decisions in a community. There is a decades-old body of literature that points to improved outcomes, both anecdotally and empirically, when there is successful citizen participation. According to Kingston (2007), “Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that active citizen engagement is likely to improve the effectiveness of neighbourhood regeneration projects both in building personal and community capacity, and in achieving tangible regeneration outcomes, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods (Beresford and Hoban, 2005)” (p. 138). E-government, the use of technology such as the Internet “to enhance access to and delivery of government information...
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