How Web 2.0 Will Transform Local Government

by Bill Schrier

http://www.govtech.com/dc/articles/417520?id=417520&full=1&story_pg=1

A set of technologies called Web 2.0 is transforming the Internet. Web sites such as YouTube, MySpace and Facebook, in addition to RSS feeds, blogs and wikis attract hundreds of millions of people. Yet this Web 2.0 transformation of government is just beginning. How might it occur?

Web 2.0 and government are both about building community and connecting people. Web 2.0 technologies are transforming the Internet into connected communities that allow people to interact with one another in new and distinct ways.

Government is, by its very nature, all about community. Government is a group of people - citizens or constituents - doing together what they can't do as individuals or otherwise obtain from private business. I believe most of us wouldn't want individuals or private businesses to manage street networks, maintain parks or operate police and fire departments. In the end, government is community.

Therefore, Web 2.0 - community building tools - seems tailor-made for government, at least theoretically.

Potential Web 2.0 Uses
How can government use Web 2.0 tools to make a better community? Here are some ideas and examples:

Social Networking
MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn and Second Life have broken truly new ground. These online spaces allow individuals to establish a new presence for interacting with members of their online community. Government also promotes small groups in communities, such as anticrime block watches, neighborhood disaster recovery groups and legislative districts. Having secure, social networking sites for community groups to interact, learn from each other and educate themselves has great promise.

Blogging
Moderated blogs with interactive comments are potentially a good way for elected officials to garner input from constituents and interact with them. They might supplement communities' public meetings. We have many kinks to work out because too many blogs - and public meetings - are monopolized by a few citizen activists. And moderating a blog requires a lot of time and effort for a government agency.

Video and Images
YouTube is the new groundbreaker in this arena. Governments could use such Web sites to encourage residents and visitors to post videos of their favorite places to visit in the jurisdiction, special events and dangerous places (eg., intersections, sidewalks and overgrown vegetation).

For instance, it could help build community if video was posted of the Northwest Folklife Festival - a popular music and crafts festival held at the Seattle Center each Memorial Day weekend. People could share videos and post "sound off" video bites with their opinions about certain subjects. The Seattle Channel, a local government access TV station, often videotapes people on the street with questions for their elected officials, and then poses those questions online in Ask the Mayor or City Inside/Out: Council Edition.

Interactive Surveys
Online surveys via Zoomerang and SurveyMonkey are everywhere. Surveys could help elected officials gauge the mood of a city's residents on a range of topics. Like all online surveys, however, activists and special interest groups can rig the results by voting early and often. Such surveys won't be statistically valid. It might be possible to combine online surveys with traditional surveying techniques (e.g., calling residents by phone, which is itself becoming less valid as people shed their published, landline phone numbers in favor of cell phones).

Wikis: Internal Processes
Wikis certainly hold great promise for government internally. We divide government into departments, each with unique functions. Departments tend to be siloed groups, so cross-departmental communication is difficult. Wikis, or products like Microsoft SharePoint, could be used to standardize many business processes, functions and terms across the entire government. Simple processes, such as "how to process a public disclosure request" and "how to pay a vendor invoice," are inclined to documentation and improvement through wiki. Certainly such procedures

can be documented and put on a government intranet's static Web pages. But the advantage of a wiki is that many more employees are involved in creating and editing the content, so the process happens faster and employees actually read and use it because they're involved from the start.

Wikis: External Processes
I believe there are a couple fundamental uses for external wikis, and one is processes for interacting with government. How do you recycle a computer? What do you do if a refrigerator is found on a boulevard's median? How do citizens apply for and use food stamps? This information can be posted online via public Web pages maintained by government employees. But the advantage of a wiki is that the "whole story" of questions like these can be much broader than a single government agency. In the computer recycling example, many people have many ideas; some are involved in recycling, others are environmentalists and there are employees from multiple agencies who might contribute ideas to "recycling a computer." An interactive wiki will give new dimensions to the ideas.

Wikis: External Deciphering
Most government workers have at least some idea of how to build a budget and what their own budget contains. But for many constituents, government budgets are just gobbledygook. A budget wiki could not only foster voter understanding, but might also provide meaningful input to it, rather than having special interest groups come to the table and demand funding for their unique programs. Individuals inside and outside government could contribute to editing those kinds of wikis.

Mash-Ups
Governments are fundamentally about geography - the city limits or county lines. Much of what government does is geographically based through functions like providing water and solving crimes. Data mash-ups against maps or other information can give new insights. One specific example is mapping 911 calls of fires and medical emergencies in Seattle on My Neighborhood Map, a city-run Web guide to city services.

Next-Generation 911
Though it isn't technically Web 2.0, next-generation 911 has many possibilities. Nowadays if you need police, fire or emergency medical services, you call 911. But with cell phone cameras, cheap video cameras, text messages and other ways to connect and interact technologically, 911 has the potential to do much more. The day will come when someone witnesses a crime, snaps a photo of the criminal, transmits it to the 911 center that sends it to police officers, who make an arrest while rushing to the crime scene.

Blogs and Wikis: Customer Service and Feedback
Although this isn't technically a single technology, I believe it merits special mention. As government's ability to interact with constituents and customers improves because of Web 2.0 tools, government agencies and employees will get more feedback about things we are doing right and wrong and what we've chosen to do but isn't universally loved. Do we really want to be that transparent?

Common Web 2.0 Challenges
Many Web 2.0 technologies pose special challenges for government, which we'll have to work through.

The "Frequent Flyer" or "Citizen Activist"
Every elected official knows the folks who grab your arm at a public meeting to rant about the crosswalk in their neighborhood or the lack of affordable housing. They monopolize public meetings and rally their supporters with mass e-mail campaigns. Most Web 2.0 tools are susceptible to the same techniques. All I can say is that with these Web 2.0 applications, the "normal" constituent has additional paths for interacting with elected officials.

The Digital Divide
Many people with limited income oftentimes lack access to computers and the Internet. Web 2.0 may give the well-off an even more disproportionate voice in government.

Overload
Though extra feedback and input are good, it also will require more legislative assistants and other government employees to moderate blogs, dispatch requests for service and respond to constituents.

Offensive Content
Some people feel compelled to use offensive language to express their ideas or characterize elected officials and government in general. This means blogs, social networking sites and video

and photo submissions will need to be monitored and moderated, which may lead to charges of censorship.

Censorship and Public Disclosure
Most jurisdictions have Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) or public disclosure laws that require archiving public records. Web 2.0 technologies will increase the volume of material to be archived and potentially turned over to the public through FOIA requests. This will require better and more expensive archival and search technologies.

A Balanced Picture
Elected officials seek constituent input on all matter of public issues. And the response from the public - overwhelmingly - is apathy. Obtaining a true picture of what constituents think, even with Web 2.0, will be difficult. I hasten to add that all techniques have this problem, including traditional ones such as public meetings and e-mail (I guess it's "traditional" now). There are only so many issues an individual or government official can pay attention to.

Web 3.0

While governments grapple with the possibilities and implications of Web 2.0, it's worth noting that Web 3.0 is hot on our heels. It's a subject for another time, but I'll tantalize you with this tidbit: Truly high-speed broadband is coming with fiber-to-the-premises, 100 Mbps symmetric networks, which would make a whole host of new tools and techniques possible, such as two-way HDTV and high-quality interactive gaming. What a wonderful world the 21st century is becoming.

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