

The Town of Dedham, MA

Citizen Engagement

Summarized By: The Office of School & Municipal Technology

EOTSS | Executive Office of Technology Services & Security



Image: View of the Charles River from Dedham, MA¹

Introduction

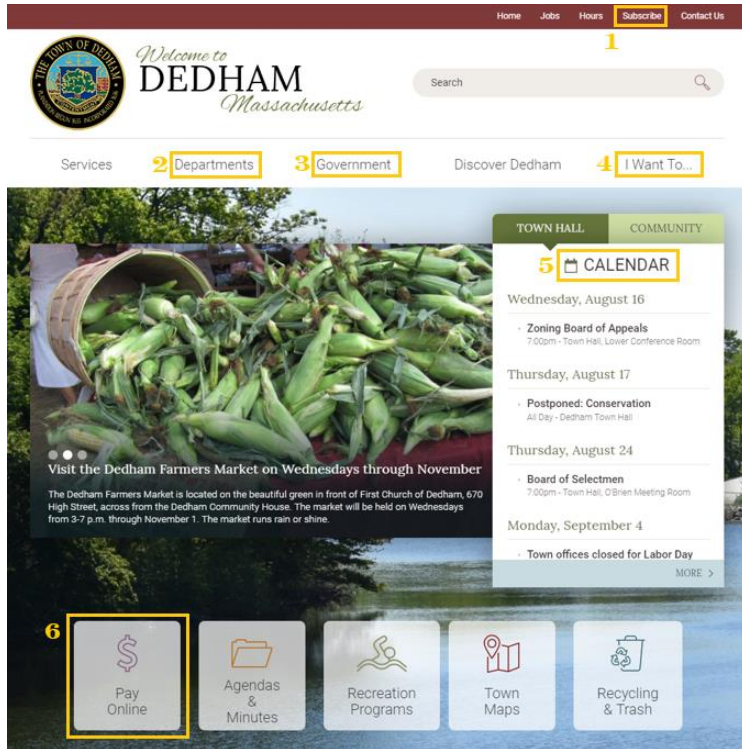
The Town of Dedham, Massachusetts, has a population of approximately 25,000 residents and is located in Norfolk County, on Boston's southwest border. This well-known community, has a charming downtown area, frequented shopping centers, and is home to districts with both historic and architectural significance. The Town of Dedham values community engagement and continues to seek opportunities for two-way communication with constituents. In February 2016, the Town entered into a Community Compact agreement with the Baker-Polito administration. In their Compact, the Town made a commitment to explore technology options and implement best practices to increase opportunities for citizen engagement. This report provides an overview of Dedham's current engagement initiatives and their plans for future advancement.

¹Anonymous 199. "View of the Charles River from Dedham." [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_river_dedham.JPG). Accessed August 2017. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_river_dedham.JPG

Current Initiatives

WEBSITE REDESIGN

In Fall 2015, the Town of Dedham initiated a complete redesign of their website to address concerns around outdated style and content. They hired [Vision Internet](#) to build a new site, designed to better support communication and business transactions between citizens and local government.



[Town of Dedham Website](#)

(Screenshot Taken on August 15, 2017)

Through the website's improved functionality and more user-friendly interface, the following amenities are now more accessible to the public online:

1. **Electronic Mailing List.** Citizens can "Subscribe" to Town news and opt-in to receive email notifications regarding calendar events, job posts, municipal news, and RFP posts from a department or commission of their choice.
2. **Overview of All Departments.** The "Departments" page of the new website lists all municipal departments in Dedham and offers simple, accurate, descriptions about what each of them does.

For more information, users can click into a department listing to view details about the department's functions, contact information, and office hours.

3. **Municipal Government, Boards, and Committees.** The "Government" page provides details about Dedham's local government such as Boards, Committees, Bylaws, Town Meeting Information, and more. The "All Boards & Committees" page contains a list of Dedham's elected officials and appointed boards. Users can click on a specific board or committee for further explanation of the body's purpose, the Town Charter language empowering them, membership, meeting, and contact information.
4. **"I Want To..."** This page contains a list of quick links a typical resident might find useful, including but not limited to, voter and permit information, online bill payment, RFPs, permit/license applications, and non-emergency service requests.
5. **Calendar.** The Town Calendar is located centrally on the website homepage and lists events happening at "Town Hall" and within the "Community". This resource is very useful in that it conveniently separates the two types of events, making it easier for users to decide which they would like to attend. For instance, Selectmen Meetings, which take place at Town Hall, are listed separately from events at the Dedham Community House or Legacy Place, a popular shopping center in Dedham.
6. **Online Bill Payments.** Located at the bottom left of the website homepage, Dedham's online bill payment service enables residents to pay, or view, their bills and taxes from a remote location. As of this writing, the website gives citizens the option to make online payments for seven types of government services including Sewer, Motor Vehicle Excise Tax, and Recreation Programs. This tool provides an alternative, accessible, platform to residents that cannot access Town Hall during regular office hours. The Town is working to expand this service and has plans to incorporate more bill payment options in the near future.

The new website is as much an opportunity for employee engagement as it is for increased citizen engagement and requires constant internal collaboration to maintain. Most departments are trained on the Vision website platform; however, the Town has an employee that works half-time to assist

departments in the development of editorial content for the website. Another employee in the Town Manager's office is responsible for auditing the Town meeting calendar to ensure that meetings are published online once they have been scheduled. This individual also makes sure that finalized Town Agendas get published and are emailed to subscribers. The Town Clerk's office verifies that meeting minutes are published to the website and has a part-time employee scanning documents and completing the inventory. The website redesign remains a town-wide effort and achievement. Leadership believes there is still room for improvement and would eventually like to incorporate additional engaging content, like a more robust news feed.

PROJECT PAGE TEMPLATE

Dedham's Economic Development Director, created a project page template so Town staff know which departments are involved in which projects. In addition to the project description, the page also provides details about the area where the project is taking place. It is essentially a tool that allows departments to discuss and collaborate on economic development projects that will ultimately impact citizens.

YOURGOV - PUBLIC WORKS SYSTEM

The Department of Public Works (DPW) utilizes a YourGOV GIS system to locate and remediate non-emergency issues and service requests that are submitted by citizens. Depending on internet availability, citizens and DPW employees can access the YourGOV system from anywhere, via a desktop computer or mobile device (I.e. tablet, smartphone). This tool encourages residents to be proactive in helping to keep their community clean, well-maintained, and safe for everyone by informing local government of issues.

PUBLIC-SECTOR.ORG

In Fall 2017, leadership participated in a facilitated leadership course at The Public-Sector Consortium in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a nonprofit organization created by public leaders to educate and reinvent the current model of America's public leadership. The course consisted of four 2-day workshops and was attended by members of Dedham's leadership team to attain actionable tools that would help them develop and sustain a high-performing organization. The program tackles current and persisting issues impacting government by providing guidance around developing practical, long-term resolutions.

LIVABLE DEDHAM

The Town is collaborating with Livable Dedham, a grass roots organization that aims to get people involved in the community and local affairs. The organization recently received approval to hire a new coordinator that will be stationed at Town Hall. The following Facebook screenshot is of a recent event that was held in partnership with the Dedham Public Library and the Dedham Council on Aging. This is just one example of the great community engagement work Livable Dedham is doing.



Livable Dedham shares Dedham Public Library

Facebook post (Taken on December 12, 2017)

FY18 BUDGET

Another way the Town of Dedham prioritized communication was by reserving enough funds in their Fiscal Year 2018 annual budget to hire an intern. This individual would help the Town further their engagement goals by executing tasks such as creating new content for the website or coordinating material from various departments.

Conclusion

The Town of Dedham has displayed admirable dedication to the refinement of their citizen engagement methods. Among many endeavors that took place in these past two years to enhance internal and external communication, the website redesign project is a clear demonstration of the commendable efforts and daily collaboration happening across departments. These efforts resulted in a new and improved website that embodies citizen engagement best practices and is an accomplishment that town staff and volunteers should be proud of. Today, citizens are more likely to find what they need in much less time. Dedham plans to continue growing their online presence and adopt new and effective engagement techniques going forward.

Future Engagement Goals & Considerations

CONSIDER HIRING COMMUNICATIONS STAFF

Today, Departments are responsible for producing their own content for the website and ensuring the information is updated in a timely manner. While this approach is highly collaborative and cost-effective, staff can become overwhelmed when faced with growing communication duties, in addition to their day-to-day obligations. Presently, resources like Livable Dedham and the new intern are helping to lighten this load; however, the Town may want to consider creating a full-time position to support future digital communication goals and long-term citizen engagement. Dedham recognizes that having sufficient staff capacity is essential to any successful initiative. By establishing a communications position, the Town can increase their potential to carry out routine communication tasks, provide support to departments when they need it, and identify new ways to connect with citizens via cutting edge technology and research. Of course, this organizational adjustment would be subject to several key factors like staff buy-in, cost, and ease of implementation. Ultimately, strengthening communication capacity creates the potential to increase the number of opportunities for two-way interactions with residents.

CONSIDER CREATING TOWN-WIDE SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT

Social media popularity continues to grow, in fact, seven-in-ten Americans are using at least one social media platform to stay engaged in local and global news and events². The Town of Dedham recognizes

² Social Media Fact Sheet. *Pew Research Center*. Modified on January 12, 2017. <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>

the impact social media has had on public engagement and is communicating regularly with constituents, on these platforms, at the department-level. An overview of Dedham’s accounts can be seen on the Town’s website³. While they may want to remain focused on current initiatives in the near-term, it might be worth exploring opportunities for a town-wide social media account in the future. Should Dedham decide to pursue this idea, the following information may be useful in determining the right social media strategy.

- **Possible Advantages and Disadvantages of a Town-wide Social Media Account** – The following is a snapshot overview of potential benefits and setbacks typically associated with creating a government social media account.

| Potential Advantages | Potential Disadvantages |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many free media resources available to promote the Town of Dedham • Provides alternate channel for citizens to connect with their local government • Provides alternative to email notifications • “Official” news source to override fake, or unofficial, “Town of Dedham” accounts online • Can amplify important messages from other departments on town-wide account, and vice versa, by sharing, tagging, retweeting, etc. • An active community of up to 214 million users that can be tapped into • Can quickly disseminate important or urgent information • Strengthen the Town’s online presence • Many have built-in analytics tools • Automation tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need to budget for additional human or technology resource(s) to manage social media account • Requires extra time for planning and maintenance • “Town of Dedham” page needs to be linked to a personal account • Subject to receiving controversial comments from other users and/or your followers • Requires organizational consensus and internal coordination so information is updated regularly and not redundant or inconsistent |

- **Selecting a Social Media Platform** – Choosing from a plethora of social media sites can be daunting. Fortunately for the Town, many departments already have established social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter. We suggest looking to them for inspiration and guidance

³ Official Website of The Town of Dedham. “Social Media.” Accessed on January 16,2018. <http://www.dedham-ma.gov/services/advanced-components/misc-pages/social-media>

around accruing a healthy following. It makes sense that Facebook and Twitter are the most popular platforms departments are using. Both are long-established so there's a substantial amount of data, market research, and instructional resources available online that could help the Town develop their social media strategy overtime. Should Dedham create a town-wide social media account, we might look at the Town's demographic profile to form an educated guess around which platform citizens would prefer. Given that Dedham's median age is 43, median household income is \$87,108⁴, and male to female ratio is approximately 48.4% and 51.6%⁵; Pew Research suggests that the average Dedham citizen most likely uses Facebook as their primary social network.⁶ The study results in Appendix A show that the average American Facebook adult user shares demographic similarities to citizens in Dedham, which could imply that an official "Town of Dedham" government page might be more successful on Facebook than on any other social network.

- **Basic Social Media Policy** – Concurrent with any IT initiative, including the creation of a town-wide social media account, it's generally a good practice to have a policy in place that details the appropriate use of the technology. Government social media accounts are often seen as an alternative, yet official, source of information for many citizens. It's important to define the "Do's" and "Don'ts" of how to manage your new influential platform. Consult with department leadership to see if there are existing internal policies or sample templates that can be leveraged. Refine your policy by addressing issues that matter to your organization. For example, are you okay with having controversial comments linger on your page or are you interested in censoring, or hiding (but not deleting), them? What is your ideal posting schedule? Do you see a benefit in holding a biweekly meeting to discuss social media analytics? We've provided some steps below to help Dedham think about some key considerations for their social media policy.

1. *Review sample policies.* The Town of Dedham should review social media policies (that have updated within the past five years), either internally, or from other municipalities.

⁴ Community Facts. "2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates." *United States Census Bureau: American FactFinder*. Accessed on January 16, 2018.

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

⁵ Community Facts. "Profile of General Population and Housing Characteristics: 2010." *United States Census Bureau: American FactFinder*. Accessed on January 16, 2018.

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

⁶ Social Media Fact Sheet. *Pew Research Center*. Modified on January 12, 2017. <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/>

Below are a few samples from other communities, with a similar demographic profile, for inspiration.

| Name | Population | Median Household Income | Link |
|------------|------------|-------------------------|---|
| Norwood | 28,602 | \$83,883 | http://www.norwoodma.gov/document_center/Personnel%20Board/Policies/_P-410%20-%20Social%20Media%20Policy.pdf |
| Wakefield | 24,932 | \$90,911 | http://www.wakefield.ma.us/town-administrator/pages/social-media-policy-for-town-departments |
| Canton | 21,561 | \$93,672 | https://www.town.canton.ma.us/DocumentCenter/Home/View/1702 |
| Foxborough | 16,865 | \$95,665 | http://www.foxboroughma.gov/Pages/Foxborough_MA_HR/Social_Media_Policy_2017 |
| Bellingham | 16,332 | \$90,630 | http://www.bellinghamma.org/pages/bellinghamma_hr/SocialMediaPolicy.pdf |

2. *Create an outline.* The following outline includes some important considerations we believe should be included in every social media policy. The Town of Dedham can customize this list so that it reflects the organization’s core values.

- a. Introduction
- b. Purpose of Policy
- c. List of Social Media Platforms and Definitions
- d. General Guidelines - Do’s and Don’ts
- e. Acceptable Use of Social Media at Work
- f. Violations
- g. Acknowledgement Form

3. *Create an acknowledgement form.* Typically located on the last page of the social media policy, the acknowledgement form stipulates that municipal staff should sign the agreement to formally accept the policy's terms and conditions.

Appendices

APPENDIX A – Social Media Chart

% of U.S. adults who use each social media platform

| | Facebook | Instagram | Pinterest | LinkedIn | Twitter |
|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Total | 68% | 28% | 26% | 25% | 21% |
| Men | 67% | 23% | 15% | 28% | 21% |
| Women | 69% | 32% | 38% | 23% | 21% |
| Ages 18-29 | 88% | 59% | 36% | 34% | 36% |
| 30-49 | 79% | 31% | 32% | 31% | 22% |
| 50-64 | 61% | 13% | 24% | 21% | 18% |
| 65+ | 36% | 5% | 9% | 11% | 6% |
| High school or less | 56% | 19% | 18% | 9% | 14% |
| Some college | 77% | 35% | 31% | 25% | 24% |
| College graduate | 77% | 32% | 33% | 49% | 28% |
| Less than \$30,000 | 65% | 29% | 23% | 16% | 18% |
| \$30,000-\$49,999 | 68% | 27% | 27% | 11% | 16% |
| \$50,000-\$74,999 | 70% | 30% | 29% | 30% | 26% |
| \$75,000+ | 76% | 30% | 34% | 45% | 30% |
| Urban | 70% | 34% | 26% | 29% | 22% |
| Suburban | 68% | 24% | 29% | 26% | 21% |
| Rural | 65% | 25% | 20% | 15% | 19% |

Note: Race/ethnicity breaks not shown due to sample size.

Source: Survey conducted March 7-April 4, 2016.

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