



Town of Eastham, MA

Transparency Best Practice

Prepared By: The Office of Municipal & School Technology
ETOSS | Executive Office of Technology Services & Security



Image: Eastham Windmill¹

Introduction

The Town of Eastham, Massachusetts is located on Cape Cod in Barnstable County. With a population of 4,956 and a median household income of \$60,760², Eastham is best known as a summer vacation destination and attracts residents and visitors alike for its National Park landscapes and classic Cape Cod charm. Eastham's administration seeks to preserve the Town's historic and natural resources, while keeping citizens informed about local events and changes in government. Eastham has been very proactive in becoming more transparent with citizens by making public information more readily available online. In alignment with these goals, the Town signed a Community Compact agreement with the Baker-Polito administration in November of 2015 and pledged to implement IT best practices around government transparency. This report summarizes Eastham's recent efforts around transparency as well as their future aspirations.

¹ m01229. "Eastham Windmill in ultra wide angle." First Encounter Beach, Eastham, Massachusetts. *Flickr*. Creative Commons ([CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)). Accessed on June 8, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2JoxSpW>

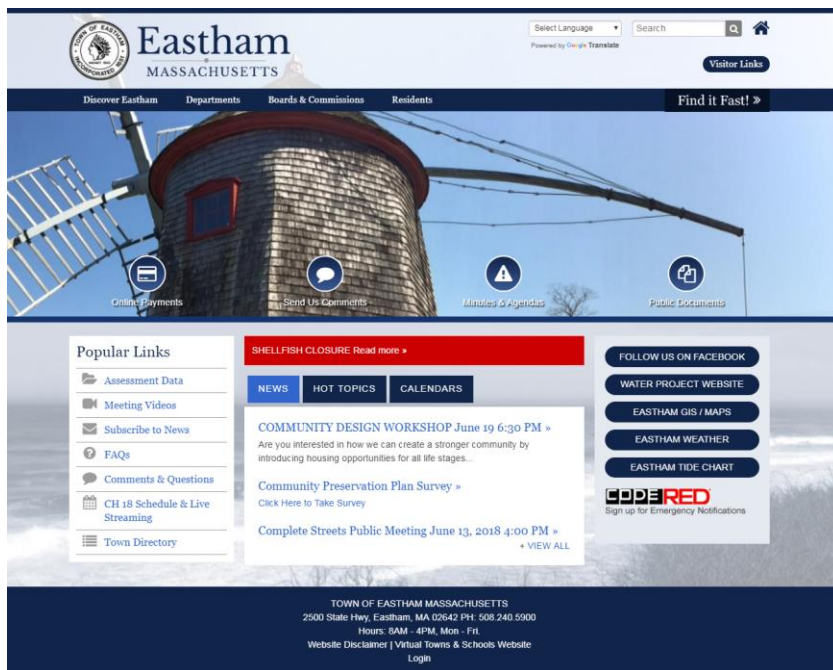
² "Community Facts." US Census Bureau. *American FactFinder*. Accessed on June 8, 2018. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

Transparency Initiatives

The Town of Eastham has taken significant steps to make public information more accessible and available to citizens. Below is an overview of Eastham’s most recent initiatives, as well as their future goals to become a more transparent and open government.

WEBSITE REDESIGN

With help from their vendor, Virtual Towns & Schools, Eastham upgraded their municipal website and migrated web content to a new Drupal powered Content Management System (CMS). Today, the website is more robust and has a more intuitive, user-friendly interface.



◀ Screenshot:
www.Eastham-MA.Gov
(Taken June 11, 2018)

With improved usability, data, and availability of information online, the Town’s new website enables residents to find the resources they need in much less time. Below are several features on the new website that are helping to promote transparency in Eastham:

- *Online Payments* – Eastham’s residents can pay their real estate, personal property, motor vehicle, and boat excise tax bills online using the Town’s online payment system. Powered by InvoiceCloud software, the bill pay system offers a quick, secure, and sustainable alternative to in person payments at Town Hall.

- *Send Us Comments* – Citizens can send any comments or questions to the Town’s administration by submitting them through a form on the website.
- *Minutes & Agendas* – The Town has an archive of Committee and Board meeting minutes and agendas on the municipal website. The public can easily access documentation from Board of Selectman or Health, Finance Committee meetings, and more.
- *Public Documents* – Another helpful resource residents have access to on the website is a list of commonly used documentation for various departments in Town.
- *Assessment Data* – The Town’s website has a web Assessor application that residents can leverage to look up their property information. All they need is an address, parcel id, or owner name to run a search that will provide property cards and real-time assessor data.
- *Subscribe to News* – Citizens can subscribe to news from a department of their choice and stay informed about relevant events and updates.
- *CH 18 Schedule and Live Streaming* – Another interesting set of resources that is available through the website is live streaming and video on demand. Town meetings and special programs that air on the community access channel can also be viewed online given Adobe Flash Player is installed in the internet browser.
- *News, Hot Topics, and Calendars* – The center of the website’s homepage is dedicated to news, hot topics, and the Town calendar. The calendar separates community and government events so users can easily find the activities they are interested in.
- *Municipal Water Project Website* – The Town of Eastham uses Weebly to build separate project-specific websites to provide progress updates to citizens. The Town created a site around their municipal water project which was initiated at a 2014 Annual Town Meeting, then later expanded in 2015, when the citizens of Eastham voted to establish the system town-wide.

E-PERMITTING – Another way Eastham has become more transparent and accessible is by digitizing their permitting process. Currently, Eastham is using PeopleGIS and PeopleForms for electronic permitting. They plan to add health and conservation permitting to the system in the near future. PeopleGIS/Forms have the capacity to generate ad hoc reports and even has a Public GIS mapping tool which can be found on Eastham’s website. Contractors and property owners have given very positive feedback to the Town about the system’s mapping feature.

DOCUMENT SCANNING – To make public documents more readily available, the Town of Eastham has been scanning municipal documents with General Code and Laserfiche so they can be digitally archived and shared. Eastham’s permitting software has its own cloud-based storage so e-permitting and document scanning are currently separate. However, the Town would eventually like to explore merging the two processes. Currently, all new permits are digitized, and older files are being scanned box by box.

Future Considerations

In addition to Eastham’s current initiatives, the Town is brainstorming and planning for future technology enhancements that will enable them to implement even more transparency best practices going forward. The following are several initiatives the Town is considering adopting.

- *Regionalization* – Eastham is very interested in regional IT projects such as shared procurement, IT support, and training opportunities. They would like to increase their capacity for IT and use economies of scale with procurement to find cost effective solutions.
- *Fiscal Transparency* – Eastham would also like to post more fiscal information online, especially regarding water taxes to accompany the Town’s current water project. Today, the Town budget is created and maintained internally; however, the Selectmen’s budget policy and 5-year capital plan are available on the website.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The Town of Eastham has clearly demonstrated their commitment to the Community Compact transparency best practice. The Town's website redesign, e-permitting and document scanning processes are all important, proactive steps they've taken to better support their citizens and strengthen trust. Eastham should be proud of their efforts. By digitizing municipal information and making it readily available, the Town is empowering thousands of residents, business owners, and visitors with the resources necessary to participate in government processes in the most efficient and effective way possible. The following sections contain best practice recommendations that Eastham may find useful as they publish more municipal data going forward.

OPEN DATA POLICY

An important step in making data more open to the public is the development of Transparency Policies and Procedures. Eastham's Board of Selectmen has several policies available on the Town's website. These resources can be expanded by adding a Financial Transparency Policy or Open Data Policy in the document. For guidance and sample documents around open data in government, the Town of Eastham can explore the Sunlight Foundation's website³. This Washington D.C. based national, nonpartisan, and nonprofit organization aims to empower communities and citizens by providing access to civic technologies, open data, policy analysis, and journalism to help facilitate government transparency and accountability. In alignment with their core mission, the Foundation offers resources for local government entities on their website including the following areas:

- Tactical Data Engagement
- CrowdLaw – Including resident input into the policy making process as much as possible
- Open Data Projects
- Open Data Policies

These resources can all be found on the Sunlight Foundation's website, at the link provided:

<https://sunlightfoundation.com/policy/open-cities/>

³ Sunlight Foundation – Making Government & Politics More Accountable & Transparent. Official Website. <https://sunlightfoundation.com/>

TRANSPARENCY TOOLS

Eastham has posted several financial documents on their website, including the Board of Selectmen’s Budget Policy⁴, Article 12 of the FY 18 Operating Budget⁵, and Article 14 of the FY 19 5-year Capital Improvement Plan⁶. While these documents are extremely comprehensive and relevant, they often contain vast amounts of static information, which can be daunting for the average citizen to consume. Web-based Open Data tools like Open Budget and Open Checkbook software help to bridge this knowledge gap by creating dynamic data visualizations that simplify the municipal finance process for users. These tools make it easier for residents to digest financial information by giving them the option to view the data at a high level or drill down to see the details. A number of Massachusetts communities have deployed Open Budget and Open Checkbook tools that have a broad range when it comes to cost and features. Below are several examples from other Towns that have implemented an Open Data solution on their website. As Eastham considers laying the foundation for their own potential Open Data solution, these projects can serve as examples and help them consider the options available.

<i>Town Name</i>	<i>Link to Open Data Tool</i>
Barnstable	http://budget.townofbarnstable.us/#!/year/default
Cohasset	http://www.cohassetvisualbudget.org/
Chatham	https://www.chatham-ma.gov/budget-central
East Longmeadow	https://www.eastlongmeadowma.gov/637/Online-Open-Checkbook
Wayland	https://www.cleargov.com/massachusetts/middlesex/town/wayland/2018

⁴ Town of Eastham Board of Selectmen. “Budget Policy Fiscal Year 2017.” Accessed on June 13, 2018. https://www.eastham-ma.gov/sites/easthamma/files/uploads/bos_budgetpolicyfy17.pdf

⁵ “Article 12.” Accessed on June 13, 2018. https://www.eastham-ma.gov/sites/easthamma/files/uploads/article_12_fy18_operating_budget.pdf

⁶ “Article 14.” Accessed on June 13, 2018. https://www.eastham-ma.gov/sites/easthamma/files/uploads/article_14_fy19-23_five_year_capital_improvement_plan.pdf