



The Town of Orleans, MA

Transparency Best Practice

Summary By: The Office of Municipal & School Technology

EOTSS | Executive Office of Technology Services & Security



Image: Little Pleasant Bay¹

Introduction

In May of 2016, the Town of Orleans, Massachusetts adopted the Transparency best practice as part of a Community Compact agreement signed with the Baker-Polito Administration. Since this event, the Town has taken several steps in providing transparency around municipal spending and making timely information available on the Town’s website, including links to municipal financial materials, regularly-posted Board of Selectmen meeting packets, and on-demand video recordings of meetings. Having online access to these materials makes it easier for Town residents and seasonal visitors to stay connected and understand what Town leadership is working on. This report summarizes the Town’s recent efforts and considerations to improve internal operations around financial transparency. Today, residents have better access to municipal data and other online resources to help them stay informed and involved.

¹ “Little Pleasant Bay - Orleans, Massachusetts”. John Menard. *Flickr*. Accessed October 2017. <https://bit.ly/2r3aCSa>

COMMUNITY PROFILE

The Town of Orleans is located in Barnstable County on Cape Cod with a population of 5,890 residents and median household income of \$50,884. Orleans has historically been known for its fishing and whaling industries, along with farming of asparagus and cranberry crops. The establishment of the National Seashore by President Kennedy in 1962 helped build the tourist economy of today. The charm and beauty of the Town has created a large retirement population with a younger service population. Like many Towns, Orleans aims to protect and preserve its historical and local gems while incrementally improving town services and resources. The Community Compact is one of the many ways the Town has embodied these values.

The Challenge

Residents are increasingly expecting their local governments to function like the private businesses they interact with regularly and provide more transparency into Town operations. Municipalities are updating their websites and proactively providing more materials in response to these expectations. With limited staff capacity in many small Towns in Massachusetts, these raised expectations can be challenging to meet.

The Solution

In November of 2016, the Town of Orleans redesigned their website to make it easier for residents and visitors to find information quickly and easily. Minutes and Agendas, for example, were promoted to the top menu bar, so they can more easily be discovered. Dedicated buttons are also available for Schools (which redirects to the website for the Nauset Regional School District), Beaches (which includes a dedicated section for applying for a beach parking sticker), and Channel 18, which hosts the on-demand video recordings of Town meetings. The Town's website now functions as a transparency portal for Town information. Many documents are now proactively posted, including municipal finance items like the budget, Town policies, agendas, and meeting packets.



Before Website Redesign



After Website Redesign

Budget and Capital Planning documents have been posted since January of 2017. An archive of Board of Selectmen meeting packets from as far back as February of 2013 are now available for review. Town policies for Capital Improvement (from 2014), Municipal Self-Insurance (from 2005), and Free Cash (from 2012) are also now available, to name just a few. The Town has also begun posting a Budget Schedule so website visitors are aware of when important budget-related events are happening, including public hearing dates. This makes it easier for residents and visitors to follow the Town’s budget process.

Future Considerations & Recommendations

WEBSITE UPGRADE

Following the completion of this Community Compact initiative, the Town of Orleans plans to execute another website upgrade to make its user interface even more intuitive. The Town will be working with their vendor, Virtual Towns and Schools, to refresh the site’s layout, design, and enhance its features and functionality. This practice keeps the website looking stylish and up-to-date.

IMPLEMENT OPEN BUDGET/CHECKBOOK

Today, Orleans manually uploads financial documents to the municipal website to keep residents informed about government expenditures. While these documents are extremely comprehensive and useful, they often contain vast amounts of static information, which can be daunting for the average citizen to consume. Web-based 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 Orleans considers laying the foundation for their own potential Open Data solution, these projects can serve as examples and help them envision a path forward.

<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

POLICIES AROUND TRANSPARENCY

An important step in implementing new Open Checkbook or Open Budget solutions is the development of Financial Transparency Policies and Procedures. Orleans' Board of Selectmen has documented policies and procedures around Fiscal Planning, which can be found on the municipal website². 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 Orleans can explore the

² Town of Orleans. Board of Selectmen Policies and Procedures. Last Revised on September 11, 2017. https://www.town.orleans.ma.us/sites/orleansma/files/uploads/bos_policies_sept.2017_0.pdf

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/>

Conclusion

The Town of Orleans is clearly passionate about implementing transparency best practices. Even with municipal budget limitations, Town officials publicized financial data online, making it more accessible to residents. The website redesign was a success, and reinforces the Town’s vision of making the website a central repository of information for residents, visitors, and town officials. Going forward, the Town will continue to develop plans that will increase the number of resources and transparency tools available.

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