Town of Sturbridge, MA
Citizen Engagement Best Practice

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Image: Sturbridge Town Hall[1]

Introduction

The Town of Sturbridge is located in Worcester County, Massachusetts, and has a population of approximately 9,300 residents[2]. Sturbridge is home to several historical and recreational sites like Old Sturbridge Village (an 1830s New England Living History Museum), Wells State Park and the Grand Trunk Trail. The Town takes pride in its heritage, picturesque landscapes, and is constantly seeking new ways to interact with residents. In April 2016, Sturbridge became a member of the Community Compact Cabinet, an initiative created through Governor Baker's first Executive Order to strengthen relationships between cities and towns and the administration. Sturbridge entered the Cabinet's Best Practice Program, selecting Citizen Engagement as their area of focus. Through their Community Compact agreement, the Town pledged to implement citizen engagement best practices in the community to increase opportunities for two-way communication using a modern technology solution. This report provides an overview of Sturbridge's most recent citizen engagement efforts.

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[1] John Phelan. "Town Hall, Sturbridge Massachusetts." *Wikimedia Commons*. Accessed on March 12, 2018. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Town_Hall,_Sturbridge_MA.jpg

[2] "Community Facts." *US Census Bureau, American FactFinder*. Accessed on March 12, 2018.

Citizen Engagement Initiatives

UPDATED MUNICIPAL WEBSITE

Based on an initial conversation with Town leadership, the old website was described as outdated, clunky and difficult to navigate. Sturbridge is a well-known tourist town, with many businesses and attractions drawing in visitors from all walks of life. However, with no IT personnel on staff, it was a challenge for the Town to proactively engage their community and promote popular attractions online. In an effort to enhance the Town's web presence, the Board of Selectmen agreed to not only redesign the municipal website, but to make it a priority. With the help of Virtual Towns and Schools (VTS), the Town of Sturbridge was able to launch their new website in July of 2017.

Screenshot of New Website: www.town.sturbridge.ma.us (Taken on March 14, 2018)

The new website is attractive, well-organized, and offers a number of interactive tools to inform and engage residents. Leadership has received positive feedback from citizens regarding the effectiveness and user-friendliness of the new site and has been successful in making online transactions more convenient for constituents. Below are some examples of how the Town is prioritizing their citizens' needs, and visitors, via the new website.

- **Find It Fast:** At first glance, the "Find It Fast" button really stands out on the website homepage. Located at the top right, this drop-down menu provides quick links to commonly requested resources, including: Business Information, GIS/Maps, Library, New Resident Information, Bill Pay, Recycling Center Stickers, Senior Resources, and Voting Information. The menu also provides a list of departments that receive the most online traffic. Users can select from the list to visit the department's page.

- **For Visitors.** Given that Sturbridge is a popular tourist-town, having a dedicated menu item for visitor activities is appropriate and extremely helpful to residents and non-residents alike. This portion of the website stores resources like the Town Business Directory, Event Calendar, Monthly Event Newsletters, Information about Hosting Events and Weddings in Sturbridge, Annual Visitor Guide, Trail Guide, and Information about the Sturbridge Farmers Market and Tourist Association.

- **CodeRED.** Utilizing this technology, residents can opt in to receive emergency notifications from Town officials. The tool uses a multi-modal approach to communicate emergency situations to residents including evacuation notices, missing child reports, and more. Many towns are adopting emergency alert software, doing so provides an avenue for leadership to relay geo-targeted, time-sensitive information to their constituents.

- **Town Government.** Placed very prominently on the left side of the website homepage is a list of popular Town Government resources. The list contains links to Board and Committee Vacancies, Charter and Bylaws, FAQs, Forms and Documents, GIS/Maps, Job Opportunities, Minutes and Agendas, Bill Pay, RFP's, RFQ's, and Town Meeting information. These online resources help citizens stay informed and involved in government processes.

- **Subscribe to News.** Also located on the homepage, is the option for users to "Subscribe to News." This feature allows residents and visitors to receive email updates from various departments in Town. Users can choose to receive updates by topic or department. Topics include: Urgent Alerts, News or Announcements, Bid Updates, Uploaded Files, Meeting Agendas, and Meeting Minutes.

- **Town Administrator's Blog.** The Town Administrator does a great job of sending out announcements at least once a week on the blog. Topics include job vacancies, local news, and interesting departmental programs.

In addition to the Town's municipal web presence, the Joshua Hyde Public Library also has a separate website[3] where they post a variety of resources for children, teens, and adults. There is even an option to switch the website's user interface from desktop view to one that is more mobile-friendly. This is essential for viewing information effectively on tablets and mobile devices. Through the website, users can create a personal account,

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[3] Official Website for the Joshua Hyde Public Library in Sturbridge, MA. http://www.sturbridgelibrary.org/

run a catalog search, and view details about the Library's services. This is another example of how Sturbridge is proactively engaging with citizens at the department level.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Another way the Town of Sturbridge is connecting with their citizens online is through social media. Today, the Town Administrator manages a Twitter page for the Town, using the handle @SturbridgeMass. Since the page was created in May 2015, the Town Administrator has published over 1,000 tweets. The Police and Fire Departments manage their own separate Facebook and Twitter accounts. Sturbridge Police has 8,840 followers on Facebook (@SturbridgePD[4]) and 4,827 followers on Twitter (@Sturbridge_PD[5]). The Sturbridge Fire Department has 4,046 followers on Facebook (@SturbridgeFD[6]) and 2,307 followers on Twitter (@SturbridgeFD[7]). The Sturbridge Tourist Association also has a presence on Twitter (@VisitSturbridge) and the Sturbridge Library can be found on Facebook (@SturbridgeLibrary[8]).

Screenshot: Town of Sturbridge -- Twitter Page[9]

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[4] Official Facebook Page for the Sturbridge Fire Department. Accessed on March 15, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/SturbridgePD/
[5] Official Twitter Page for the Sturbridge Police Department. Accessed on March 15, 2018. https://twitter.com/Sturbridge_PD
[6] Official Facebook Page for the Sturbridge Fire Department. Accessed on March 15, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/SturbridgeFD/
[7] Official Twitter Page for the Sturbridge Fire Department. Accessed on March 15, 2018. https://twitter.com/sturbridgefd
[8] Official Facebook Page for the Sturbridge Library. Accessed on May 8, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/sturbridgelibrary/?ref=ts
[9] Twitter Page for the Town of Sturbridge. Taken on March 15, 2018. https://twitter.com/SturbridgeMass

OTHER MEDIA

Although leadership has mainly focused on developing the Town's web presence over the past two years, traditional media resources like the Sturbridge Community Public Access Television (SCTV) still offer value. Details about the SCTV Public Access Channel can be found at the center of the website's homepage, in the custom quick tabs menu.

Conclusion

The Town of Sturbridge is clearly invested in increasing opportunities for citizen engagement in their community. With a newly designed website and several other digital communication avenues in place, Sturbridge has set themselves up for success in this best practice area. Today, the Town has a stronger web presence and users can find what they need in much less time. Citizens can contact their local government officials directly and get involved in town events. Equipped with accurate, up-to-date information, Sturbridge residents can feel empowered knowing they have their town's support and can contribute to the greater good of their community.