



The Town of Wenham, MA

Citizen Engagement Best Practice

Summary By: The Office of School & Municipal Technology

EOTSS | Executive Office of Technology Services & Security



Image: Wenham Lake¹

Introduction

In December of 2015, the Town of Wenham entered into a Community Compact agreement with the Baker-Polito administration to implement Citizen Engagement IT Best Practices in their community. Like many towns, Wenham is challenged with implementing efficient, effective, public facing technology while remaining within budget confines and motivated by resident buy-in. The Town saw their Community Compact as an opportunity to reach out to residents who were not as civically involved or knowledgeable about town services. In the summer of 2016, the Town Administrator and Permitting Coordinator/Special Projects Assistant discussed opportunities around digital engagement with the Commonwealth's Office of Municipal & School Technology (OMST). This report is a summary of Wenham's current Citizen Engagement initiatives and the technology used to execute them.

¹ Daderot. "Wenham Lake – Wenham Massachusetts." *Wikimedia Commons*. Accessed on February 5, 2018. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/Wenham_Lake_-_Wenham%2C_Massachusetts.JPG

COMMUNITY PROFILE

Wenham is a historic town in Essex County, located in the northeastern region of Massachusetts. With a population of 4,987² residents and a median household income of \$99,375³, Wenham is home to Gordon College, an excellent regional school system, and is known for its beautiful rural landscapes, historic homes, and active citizenry. Wenham’s goal is to preserve and protect the community’s historic gems while incrementally modifying the Town’s technology infrastructure to support more efficient, effective, and productive town-wide processes and procedures.

Citizen Engagement Initiatives

TOWN WEBSITE

Created by Revize Software Systems⁴ in 2013, Wenham’s municipal website is the face of their online presence and an important source of information for residents. The site is attractive, organized, and easy to navigate. The platform is responsive, making it compatible with smart phones and other mobile devices. The site contains a plethora of transactional tools and resources residents can leverage to interact with their town. The following features are especially citizen-focused.



[Town of Wenham Website](http://www.wenhamma.gov)

(Screenshot Taken on February 5, 2018)

² Town of Wenham, Massachusetts. "About Wenham." Accessed on February 6th, 2018.

http://www.wenhamma.gov/volunteer_opportunities_board_and_committees.php

³ "Community Facts." United States Census Bureau. American FactFinder. Accessed February 5th, 2018.

https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

⁴ Revize: The Government Website Experts. Official Website. <http://www.revize.com/>

- **Online Services.** This area of the website offers bill and tax payment options related to: Birth Certificates, Permit Applications, Death Certificates, Dog Licenses, Fire Department Plan Review, Marriage Certificates, Motor Vehicles, Personal Property, Real Estate, Water and Sewer. These online transactions are supported by City Hall Systems⁵.
- **AxisGIS.** By clicking on the “Assessors Maps & GIS” button on the homepage, residents can access the Town’s GIS data using the AxisGIS⁶ tool. Users can create different mapping views to display Property Data, DEP Wetlands, MASSGIS Data, Flood Data, Storm Water Systems, Tree Survey Data, Water Distribution Systems, and Zoning Data.
- **SeeClickFix.** In October 2016, the Town launched SeeClickFix, a citizen request and management application citizens can use to report non-emergency issues to the Department of Public Works (DPW). Requests can be made through the municipal website or the SeeClickFix mobile application. Prior to implementing SeeClickFix, Wenham’s DPW did not have an internal tracking system. Fortunately, Town leadership received buy-in from DPW staff to implement the software and today the tool is helping to improve the department’s workflow.
- **Essex Regional Alerts System.** Powered by Swift 911 software, the Essex Regional Alerts System is a product of the Essex County Regional Emergency Communications Center; a collaboration between the towns of Essex, Middleton, Topsfield, and Wenham. Residents in these communities can opt-in to receive alerts for severe weather and urgent life safety issues effecting Essex County. A link to this tool can be found on the website homepage and Facebook⁷.
- **Events Calendar.** Another simple, yet effective tool on the municipal website that promotes citizen engagement is the town calendar. Conveniently located on the homepage, the town calendar provides information about town events. Users can toggle between the different calendar views to see upcoming activities for a particular day, week, or month.

⁵ City Hall Systems. Official Website. <https://epay.cityhallsystems.com/>

⁶ CAI Technologies. Official Website. http://www.cai-tech.com/web_solutions

⁷ Essex County Regional Emergency Communications Center Official Facebook Page. https://www.facebook.com/ekrecc/?ref=py_c

Today, web content management is somewhat decentralized in Wenham. The Town Administrator and Executive Assistant are generally responsible for updating the website, in addition to 5 – 6 other employees, from various departments, who may or may not be full-time. Town leadership would eventually like to achieve a fully decentralized approach, and for all departments to receive training around producing dynamic content. A website refresh will be completed in late 2018/early 2019 to improve usability and accessibility.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Today, the Town's social media presence lives at the department level. The Town Clerk has a small following on Facebook⁸ and Twitter⁹. Content on these accounts mostly pertain to Town Hall, community events and local issues. The Police Department also manages their own Facebook¹⁰ and Twitter¹¹ accounts with over a thousand followers on each page. The Fire Department posts regularly on their Facebook page¹² to inform and engage residents.

VISUAL BUDGET

Wenham launched VisGov in late 2018, a visual budget and communication tool, to become more transparent with citizens and empower them by providing the Town's budget in a more user-friendly format. Leveraging this tool, residents can explore town expenses, revenues, debt, funds, and more. They can enter their annual property tax bill amount into the VisGov calculator and view the breakdown of their contribution to see where their funds are being allocated. Wenham's VisGov site can be accessed at the link below.

- *Town of Wenham Visual Budget Tool:* <http://wenham.visgov.com/>

COMMUNITY COMPACT IT GRANT

In 2017, The Town of Wenham received a Community Compact IT grant to implement a modern permitting system for all town departments. Doing so would reduce the amount of time it takes employees to manage permits and allow the public to apply for and track the status of permits online. Wenham selected an E-permitting software solution from Accela, Inc. after previously using GEOTMS. Wenham launched a shared

⁸ Wenham Town Clerk. Official Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/WenhamTownClerk/>

⁹ Wenham Town Clerk. Official Twitter Page. <https://twitter.com/wenhamtownclerk>

¹⁰ Wenham Police Department. Official Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/Wenham-Police-Department-209696049055338/>

¹¹ Wenham Police Department. Official Twitter Page. <https://twitter.com/wenhampolice?lang=en>

¹² Wenham Fire Department. Official Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/Wenham-Fire-Dept-186269834749180/>

inspectional services program with the Town of Hamilton in the summer of 2018. This new regional effort enabled the Town of Hamilton to utilize the new e-permitting system. Hamilton's addition to the permitting system allows the shared inspectors to receive their inspections and provide reports through one software system.

CITIZENS LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

In September 2016, the Town of Wenham launched a free 10-week Citizen Leadership Academy program to build connections between residents and municipal staff. The program takes place once a year in the fall and provides an educational overview of the services and functions of each Town department, board and committee. New and long-time residents benefit from the program by becoming more knowledgeable about Town services and personnel. It is also a great space to learn about upcoming volunteer, job, and leadership opportunities.

The program was very successful in its first year. Out of 15 residents that registered for the program, 14 attended. After completing the program, 4 participants joined committees and others continued to visit Town Hall more regularly. In 2017, Wenham completed their second round of the program. They promoted the event using a variety of communication methods including flyers, selectmen's agenda, word of mouth, local access channel, local paper, and council on aging. The Town also presented at the MMA Annual Conference in 2018 with the Town of Lexington, on the value of Citizens Academies and how communities can create their own program.¹³ Details about the Citizen Leadership Academy program can be found on Wenham's website.

INTERNSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Local high school and college students can apply for internship opportunities at Town Hall and the Fire Department. The Town regularly posts opportunities online with the Town Administrator and Permitting team. Details from a recent posting can be found below. The Fire Department developed their own Internship Program¹⁴ in March 2016. The program gives candidates the opportunity to respond to emergencies and train with Call Firefighters to get a feel for what is expected of them, should they decide to join the department. Since the program began, 8 candidates have been appointed as Call Firefighters following the completion of this internship program. The department plans to continue the program and maintain high quality training for recruits and veteran firefighters.

¹³ Massachusetts Municipal Association Official Website. https://www.mma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/citizens_engagement_academy_wenham-workshop2018.pdf

¹⁴ Wenham Town Department Profile: Fire Department. <http://www.wenhamma.gov/departments/docs/Town%20Department%20Profiles%20Fire%2008.16.pdf>

- *Spring 2018 Internship Opportunity at Town Hall:*

http://www.wenhamma.gov/job_and_volunteer_opportunities_in_wenham/docs/Internship%20Spring%202018.pdf

SELECTMEN'S LISTENING HOUR

The Selectman's Listening Hour is an opportunity for residents to meet with the Chairman of the Selectboard to discuss all things related to the Town of Wenham, and in return, Town officials learn about resident concerns and priorities. This reoccurring event is held at 1 pm on the first Tuesday of the month and is located in the Selectmen Chambers on the first floor of Town Hall. Additional details for this meetup can be found on the Town's website.

CLERK'S SHOWCASE OF LOCAL OFFICIALS

In 2017 the Wenham Town Clerk worked with other Clerks from Beverly, Hamilton, Gloucester, Lynnfield, Nahant, and Rockport at an event to educate and connect residents with public officials and staff, in celebration of Public Service Recognition Week and Clerk's week.

WELCOME TO WENHAM PACKET FOR NEW RESIDENTS

Wenham developed a 15-page document containing details about the Town Clerk, Department of Public Works, Finance (Treasurer/Collector), Hamilton-Wenham Public Library, Council on Aging, Recreation Department, Water Department/Cemetery Commission, Permitting/Planning/Board of Health, Public Safety (Fire & Police), Board of Selectmen, and area amenities. New residents can refer to this packet for a quick overview of government services including but not limited to, voter registration, trash pick-up, and library cards. Below is a link to the actual document in PDF format.

- *Welcome to Wenham - New Resident Informational Guide:*

<http://www.wenhamma.gov/docs/FINAL%20WELCOME%20TO%20WENHAM-web%20ready.pdf>

“WENHAM AT WORK” FEATURE IN THE CHRONICLE

In 2016-17, the Hamilton-Wenham Chronicle published a monthly column in collaboration with the Town of Wenham, each featuring a different department profile so that residents could become familiar with the variety of services Wenham offers. They can be found on Wenham’s website¹⁵ and on the Chronicle’s online news platform, “Wicked Local”¹⁶. The Chronicle also posts the department profiles on their official Facebook page¹⁷, the screenshot on the right is of the Department of Public Works feature in 2016. This post received over 20 likes and several comments from grateful residents.



GFOA BUDGET DOCUMENT

The Town created its FY18 budget document to reflect Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) standards. The detailed 400-page document took nearly a year to create and is used today as both a communication tool for residents and a self-assessment on how the town can better communicate the budget process and the framework (i.e. plans and policies) that the budget is built within. The document contains a community profile and a Citizen’s Guide to the Budget, which thoroughly describes the budget process and important dates in layman’s terms. The link to the full GFOA report is provided below.

- *Town of Wenham – Proposed Budget & Capital Improvement Plan:*
http://cms4.revize.com/revize/wenham/important_documents/docs/GFOA%20Budget%20Document%20FY%202019.pdf

¹⁵ Department Profiles in Collaboration with Hamilton-Wenham Chronicle.

http://www.wenhamma.gov/departments/department_profiles.php

¹⁶ Hamilton Page. Wicked Local Official Website. <http://hamilton.wickedlocal.com/>

¹⁷ Hamilton-Wenham Chronicle. Official Facebook Page. <https://www.facebook.com/HWChronicle/>

STRATEGIC PLANNING EFFORTS

Formed in September 2016, Wenham’s Open Space and Recreation Committee is actively engaging residents in updating the Town’s 2001 Open Space and Recreation Plan. The Plan is a tool to help Town officials and residents better understand existing open space and recreational resources. It also establishes a clear roadmap to help the Town successfully fulfill the objectives listed in the plan and makes them eligible to apply for certain State grants.

In collaboration with consultants from The Ciccolo Group, Wenham hosted a public forum, which provided an early opportunity for residents to provide feedback on the plan and for the Town to better understand public needs and priorities. The Town gave an overview of the project then moved on to an interactive “World Café” style activity where constituents were broken into 4 groups and asked the following questions:

1. What should Wenham’s priorities be?
2. Are there needs that have not been addressed or new opportunities?
3. Are there opportunities for better connections to our recreational resources?
4. How can we increase use of our resources?

A final draft of the plan was sent to the State of Massachusetts in early fall 2018 for approval.

The Town’s Affordable Housing Trust also recently finished a planning process for an “Affordable Housing Trust Action Plan.” This process included outreach to stakeholder groups as well as a community workshop. The Wenham Affordable Housing Trust

The Town also recently committed time to becoming an Age and Dementia Friendly Community. An age and dementia friendly needs assessment was completed by UMASS Boston that included two public listening sessions, interviews with key stakeholders, and several focus groups. The Town is now leveraging this information into an outreach and community building initiative called “Wenham Connects.”

Ultimately the Town hopes to leverage this experience of updating the Open Space and Recreation Plan, Housing Action Plan, and Age & Dementia Friendly Status to educate residents about common practices in local government and empower them to get involved. More information about this initiative can be found on Wenham’s website¹⁸.

¹⁸ Open Space and Recreation Committee. The Town of Wenham’s Official Website. http://www.wenhamma.gov/boards_and_committees/open_space_and_recreation_committee.php

MMA PRESENTATION

In January 2018, Wenham's Town Administrator and Special Projects Assistant presented on their Citizen Engagement efforts including the success of the Town's Citizens' Leadership Academy at the Massachusetts Municipal Association (MMA). A copy of the presentation can be found at the link provided:

- *Massachusetts Municipal Association – Wenham's Citizens' Leadership Academy*
https://www.mma.org/sites/default/files/resources/citizens_engagement_academy_wenham-workshop2018.pdf

WENHAM'S 375TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS IN 2018

Founded in 1643, the Town of Wenham is excited to celebrate 375 years as an incorporated municipality and formed a committee to plan events and activities around this anniversary and milestone achievement. To name a few, the committee collaborated with the Wenham Village Improvement Society and Wenham Museum to create a calendar of events, a writing contest, and a series of "History Pages" to unify the public in this experience. We've provided a link to the 375th Anniversary Committee's webpage below:

- *Wenham Official Website – 375th Anniversary Committee*
http://www.wenhamma.gov/boards_and_committees/375th_anniversary_comm.php

Conclusion

The Town of Wenham has demonstrated tremendous dedication to the implementation of Citizen Engagement best practices. The Town is clearly invested in building strong connections within the community and has explored many avenues and technology solutions to help bridge any gaps that were identified at the beginning of this initiative. As Wenham celebrates its 375th year as an incorporated municipality, residents and staff can reflect on their achievements and the resources they have built together.