Online Public Participation Platforms and Applications (Overview)

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Introduction

This white paper was developed to orient readers who are interested in local public participation to some of the existing online platforms and services available at this time, and create a base level of understanding with regard to each approach’s strengths and most appropriate applications.

General Issues

The reader should note that the field of online public participation is a young one, and that new providers appear on a regular basis. Existing providers also update their applications regularly and may add substantial capacities within a short time frame. As a result, the reader should realize that this document does not and cannot capture every potential tool and platform available at this time. The reader should
also note that online public participation providers are generally early stage firms, and vary widely in terms of their internal capacity and stability.

The first two iterations of this white paper, which were published in October and December of 2012, consisted of a simple list of tools and platforms with brief explanations, which was designed to assist local government professionals in understanding and assessing their options with regard to public participation platforms. The first two iterations were also primarily designed for the US market, and primarily examined these tools through the lens of project-oriented initiatives, such as community planning or transportation.

Over the course of the past year, it has become clear that this framing was inadequate on many dimensions. Between the international readership of the first white papers and the broad and expanding range of public engagement priorities, we felt that this version of the white paper needed to provide readers with an understanding that was both broader and more structured. For this reason, you will find the following changes:

• This white paper will include only those tools and platforms that are available for purchase or subscription to any user willing to do so. Several foundations, universities and non-profit corporations across the globe are developing innovative and potentially ground-breaking platforms, but in most cases these are not available to users outside of those supported by the funders. To follow news of these initiatives, you may wish to subscribe to the online magazine EngagingCities (full disclosure: the principal of the Wise Economy Workshop is also managing editor of that publication).

• Users will find that the platforms and apps summarized here have been divided into two large groups: Project-Oriented and Relationship-Oriented. Project-Oriented platforms are generally designed to support a specific project, such as a community plan or an infrastructure needs analysis. These tend to be designed for use over a defined period of time, and are typically driven in terms of content and activity by the objectives of the other in question. Relationship-Oriented sites are typically designed for more open-ended use and are often highly community driven, having the primary purpose of building connections rather than meeting a specific project objective.

Like any dichotomy applied after the fact to explain how something has developed, not all platforms fit within these divisions with perfect ease, and tools that are placed in one division of this white paper may be able to work in the other, given the right circumstances.

Finally, please keep in mind that this white paper will have a short shelf life and should be viewed as a work in progress. We are evaluating other methods of sharing this information in a more flexible and easily updated manner. We’d appreciate your feedback at della.rucker@wiseeconomy.com.
Selected Currently Available Online Public Participation Resources

Project-Oriented

MindMixer

With several hundred community clients and a growing staff, MindMixer is perhaps the most widely-used and most well-known public participation tool for local community initiatives in the US at this time. Founded on the idea that public participation should be facilitated in a more effective and efficient manner than it has been traditionally, the platform allows participants to share their ideas on city policy and development-related topics; give feedback; and comment on or "second" other's ideas, thus promoting the most popular ideas to the top of the list. MindMixer pages are meant to not only facilitate participation, but actively encourage users by through graphic interfaces and game theory elements to making the experience engaging and rewarding. Accordingly, high quality graphic design and graphic layout are trademarks of MindMixer sites, as the platform prioritizes aesthetics and the user experience.

City officials or project managers are responsible for maintaining, editing, and updating information and content through the Client Management Dashboard. Unlike some of the Software as Service (SaaS) providers discussed elsewhere in this paper, MindMixer maintains a relatively high level of company engagement with client communities, providing regular training and client management interaction and development and distribution of weekly email updates to participants. While the MindMixer platform functions primarily through the system of idea generation, seconding, and responding to the ideas of others, newer features such as survey capabilities and photo sharing have been recently added.

MindMixer was developed by urban planners and designers for the purpose of improving the public participation experience around long-range and relatively large-scale planning efforts, such as comprehensive plans, transportation systems planning and the like (some MindMixers do serve other purposes, such as one that supports a U.S. Representative).

Because of the high level of support that MindMixer provides to clients, MindMixer tends to represent a somewhat more costly approach as compared to SaaS-type providers, but the quality and best practices incorporation that MindMixer's approach enables results in a powerful and
easy-to-use tool that can be quickly and professionally implemented with minimal local government staff technical capability. Costs generally range from $10,000 to $20,000 for standard approaches.

**EngagingPlans (Urban Interactive Studios)**

Urban Interactive Studio is a Denver-based consulting firm that specializes in web-based participation solutions for local governments, private planning firms, corporations, and non-profits. UIS offers a variety of platforms and tools that clients can select to create a flexible, customized public engagement system at generally modest cost.

The most useful and comprehensive of the UIS platforms for the purposes of public participation and engagement is Engaging Plans. This platform allows clients to disseminate information about projects or policies to stakeholders, as well as collect feedback and ideas about these projects and policies from community members. While the latest update to the platform ensures that it is generally ready to use 'out of the box', there are a large number of customizable features that clients can also use to maximize the relevance of the platform. Engaging Plans sites feature surveys, event calendars, document libraries for consolidating and sharing information with community members, and 'like' and 'share' buttons on all shareable content, to integrate with the various social media platforms. Moderators can control and edit content, and can grant different users varying privileges and levels of access based on their assigned role.

UIS is one of the oldest and most established of US-based online public engagement providers, and it is the most flexible and most customizable to a specific project, including such available functions as password-protected stakeholder discussion areas, PDF annotation and others. Sites are built on a Drupal platform, which accounts for the much higher level of flexibility, as compared to most “app” style sites. The Drupal interface allows for a much higher level of direct administrative control than most platforms, and the nature of the Drupal coding base means that administrators who have the capacity can revise the source code themselves. EngagingPlans sites are also designed to work seamlessly on both conventional computers and on mobile devices, making it one of few platforms in this space to have given substantial attention to date to the increasingly important mobile experience. EngagingPlans costs tend to vary widely based on the complexity of the proposed project.
CitizenSpace (Delib)

Billing itself as a “digital democracy company,” Delib is an established firm based in the United Kingdom. Serving a mix of national clients, such as federal agencies, and smaller clients such as municipalities in a variety of countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, Delib uses a combination of largely ready-made apps and more customized consultation software to address a variety of public engagement needs.

Of the providers being discussed in this paper, Delib is one of the most established, with more than 10 years’ experience, a broad range of experience, and operations in multiple countries. Because its approaches reflect the more formalized public engagement methods that are embodied in UK and Commonwealth planning and development regulations, the apps provide a relatively high level of structure, particularly as compared to some of the more open-ended idea generation and commenting platforms. Software as Service (SaaS) provider, Delib services are provided on an annual license subscription basis, and prices range depending on the product and level of customization desired. Prospective clients can expect to pay roughly $3,000 for a basic Budget Simulator app, to over $6,000 for the Dialogue App. Apps can also be readily combined and reconfigured, giving the platform a relatively high level of flexibility. Two of the more commonly used apps are outlined below.

CitizenSpace: A cloud-based software for managing, publicizing, and archiving all public feedback activity, this app features a topic finder with search function and a suite of online survey tools, and allows users to analyze, report, and export gathered information to Excel and SPSS. Administrators are empowered to edit and manage content, and to group users and assign them roles. This app is scalable and proven over a variety of diverse clients, but it may be particularly suited for large, complex projects, such as highway or other infrastructure engineering projects.

Dialogue App: Designed in collaboration with the United States’ National Academy of Public Administration, the Dialogue App facilitates policy-related discussion. Similar to the approach taken by MindMixer, the Dialogue App allows participants to submit their ideas on a policy, rate and comment on other’s ideas, and share content through social media platforms. A tag function aids in the identification of themes across topics.

Crowdbrite

Based in California, Crowdbrite is organized around the basic concept of the charrette - a participatory, design-oriented workshop in which community members play an active role in designing a project or plan. The Crowdbrite platform enables online users to participate in place-based charrettes by writing comments on virtual sticky notes and then placing them on the project canvass. Submitted sticky notes appear in real time, and the Crowdbrite Mobile app allows for
full functionality on mobile devices and tablets, which enables the platform to be used effectively in live meetings. Participants can use the sticky note function to upload written comments, photos or videos, and a voting function allows users to endorse ideas. All data submitted can be used to generate reports in real time.

Crowdbrite clients can use the platform in a variety of ways, from simply collecting ideas and recommendations to hosting online meetings and charrettes. While Crowdbrite can be used for policy-oriented, non-place-specific discussions, the design-influenced nature of the program makes it particularly well suited for design-oriented, place-specific projects. While many of Crowdbrite’s clients have been located in the Western United States, the company has expanded its project list to include clients in both Montreal and Toronto.

Crowdbrite offers dozens of templates and toolkits to facilitate and enhance the charrette experience both digitally and in person. Pricing starts at $2,500 for their basic interactive canvasses, and $5,000 for self-led engagements. Crowdbrite also trains clients on how to set up a project and use it live in a meeting.

Ideascale

Ideascale is the least public-policy centric platform discussed in this paper. Created for commercial clients around the idea of using crowd sourcing to manage and moderate the information about a project, policy, or company, Ideascale compiles information and user feedback into a single online location. Users can post their own ideas, and comment, vote, and agree/disagree with the comments of others. Much like the MindMixer system, topics with the most votes and comments bubble to the top of the page to prioritize the best and most relevant ideas. Ideascale is accessible in a variety of ways, including basic websites, web widgets embedded into other sites, and a Facebook Ideascale App. Ideascale is also fully accessible from mobile devices and tablets. The Ideascale platform can be used for both external (public) and internal (private) data and information gathering purposes. Privacy and levels of restricted access to the site can be determined according to the intent of the client.

Ideascale is sometimes used by local governments that are attracted by its very low costs (in some cases less than $100/month), but this SaaS tool provides only
simple written feedback methods, lacking the ability to provide background information, deal with geographic or design issues, address budgeting or otherwise address public policy issues.

**PlaceSpeak**

Based in Vancouver, PlaceSpeak, like many of the other platforms discussed, is an online community engagement and public consultation platform designed to connect people with issues affecting their local communities. As such, the platform allows for participants to post and share ideas, and administrators to post background information and survey constituents.

However, the distinguishing characteristic of PlaceSpeak is that it requires users to first input their residential address so the program can link user identities with geographic locations. This allows administrators to focus a dialogue on residents in targeted, specific neighborhoods, and helps to ensure that feedback received is from the people who will be most affected by the project or policy in question. Additionally, the geo-tagging feature facilitates future notification and engagement of residents in the event that another project necessitating extensive public engagement should arise in a neighborhood that has already used the platform. The majority of the projects the company has been involved with have been in the greater Vancouver area and other provinces of Canada.

There are different strata of PlaceSpeak platforms. Plans range from the most basic level Bronze ($200 annual fee + $20 monthly), to Gold ($5000 annually + $500 a month). There is also an Enterprise level boasting the most features; however the pricing for this plan is customized per the needs and wants of the customer.

**MetroQuest**

Owned and developed by Vancouver-based Envision Sustainability Tools Inc., MetroQuest aims to help clients create broad based support for planning initiatives. Perhaps more so than any other platform presently operating, MetroQuest focuses on strategies for community priority-setting MetroQuest is comprised of four configurations, each designed for specific engagement tasks:

- **Community Priorities:** This configuration is designed for use at the beginning of the planning process, to assess the community before ideas and alternatives are proposed. Users can rank their policy priorities, rate community performance and comment on how the city is performing.
Transportation and Urban Planning: Also targeted for the beginning of the planning process, this configuration allows for users to identify issues and share opinions on transportation projects and planning initiatives. A mapping feature allows users to use Google Maps to identify issues and locations needing improvement. Administrators can also set up opinion polls to gauge the opinions of the community on particular issues.

Funding and Budget Alternatives: This configuration provides users with an interactive platform for learning about and evaluating budget decisions. Participants can use a sliding scale to explore funding allocations for projects and the composition of the budget, as well as the impact of their budgetary decisions.

Scenario Exploration: Once a community has established its set of priorities and project alternatives have been proposed, the Scenario Exploration configuration can be used to educate the public and gather feedback from community members. Users can again rank their priorities, submit input on their preferred options, and experiment with various local and regional scenarios.

Each MetroQuest configuration is specifically developed to suit the projects engagement goals, branding, and phasing. A MetroQuest configuration is comprised of a series of 4 to 5 screens that guide participants through the process of learning about the project, evaluating alternatives and identifying their priorities.

In addition to traditional web and tablet capabilities, MetroQuest also provides the capability of using kiosks and interactive workshops presented as live meetings. Kiosks are placed at meeting locations and government offices, where desired, to allow stakeholders to give their input while attending meetings or civic functions.

MetroQuest has been used throughout the US and Canada. It is a small firm of less than ten employees, and has been in business since 1997. MetroQuest offers a free trial of their standard configurations, and the platform is provided based on a monthly subscription; a software-as-service platform is replacing the firm’s previously consulting-based fee structure. The most recently-available cost data indicates that a one-phase project is typically priced at $9,000, while a two-phase project is priced at $13,500.
E-Deliberation positions itself as an “online collaborative platform for decision making and strategy building… to solve multi-stakeholder & complex challenges.”

More than any other platform overviewed in this document, Vancouver-based E-Deliberation is designed to not just share information or gather ideas, but to enable decision-making among a large group of participants. To do this, E-Deliberation project participants move through a very specific process that was designed on the basis of academic and practitioner best practices in group decision-making, comparable to what is used in high-capacity corporate or organizational settings. As a result, the E-Deliberation process directs participants through a series of phases of activity, each of which have different rules of engagement, background materials, decision-making processes and decision points or criteria. Different variations on the process are available depending on the complexity of the issue and the desired outcome.

E-Deliberation platforms are ideally suited for smaller groups of highly engaged participants (an upper limit of about 40 is identified). The level of engagement required by the E-Deliberation process makes it most suited to situations where a smaller subset of people have been tasked with evaluating an issue and making a decision; both the intensity of the process and the need for high-level written communication skills make it less suited to broad community participation.

Projects are set up and priced on a case-by-case basis.
Communication-Oriented

Open Town Hall

The flagship product of Berkeley, CA-based software developer Peak Democracy, Open Town Hall is an online public engagement forum aimed at augmenting and enhancing routine civic engagement. Open Town Hall forums stress adherence to the rules and decorum of traditional government hearings to ensure engagement is orderly and coherent. In addition to having content monitored for relevance and civility by both software platforms and Peak Democracy account managers, user authentication is required and participants are only allowed to comment once per topic - a measure that helps ensure participants cannot dominate conversation, or argue and attack one another. Similar to other platforms discussed in this paper, Open Town Hall forums allow users to vote for ideas they support, with the top vote getting ideas rising to the top of the page for prioritized viewing. Users can post pictures and videos to supplement their ideas, and forum admins have the ability to respond to participant ideas either privately or publicly.

While Open Town Hall’s prioritization of decorum makes the platform more rigid in its approach to soliciting input and generating ideas from the public, Peak Democracy continues to roll out new features that help optimize the utility of the platform for its clients. Prioritization widgets have been created to enable participants to give their opinions on budget issues, including the prioritization of government spending, budgetary cuts, and policy issue priorities. Additionally, Open Town Hall enables admins to post jurisdictional maps, correlate input with the geographic location of the commenter, and generate 'heat maps' of where comments are coming from. Admins can search for terms as well as view a word cloud which shows the most used words in the topic comments. All comments can be downloaded and saved as PDFs, and clients can download and export data easily through the program.

Open Town Hall has been used by over 50 government agencies across the United States, serving over 80,000 online attendees. Open Town Hall is compatible with mobile devices, and users can even participate via text message or the scanning of QR codes, where available. The platform can be effective for routine public engagement, such as that surrounding council or budget deliberations, but the platform is not designed for extensive idea generation such as is common among the more planning-oriented platforms. Annual subscriptions start at $2,500 a year, and Peak Democracy handles all of the IT issues on their servers, as well as all help requests from constituents using the platform.
Citizen Participation Suite by Granicus

San Francisco-based Granicus is a cloud platform and suite of applications designed to boost transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation in government. The Granicus community engagement platform is called the Citizen Participation Suite, and it is comprised of two individual programs: CivicIdeas and eComment. CivicIdeas is the program aimed at generating and sharing ideas among community members. Like many of the other platforms discussed in this paper, CivicIdeas allows participants to post ideas, and vote, share and comment on the ideas of others. The use of crowd sourcing allows for the most relevant topics and biggest issues to rise to the top of the discussion. Admins can also change the status of posted ideas, which allows for participants to follow the progress and evolution of their contribution. Users of CivicIdeas can promote the site through the fully integrated Facebook platform, or by placing widgets on websites.

The other program that comprises the Citizen Participation Suite is eComment. This program integrates with government meeting agendas, and allows for citizens to leave either written or video messages on the various agenda items. Proposed as a method to help ease the barriers to participation in local government, eComment provides a way for citizens to voice their opinions without having to attend meetings in person. eComment also provides users with comprehensive reports of all the comments received.

The combination of two disparate participatory programs in the Citizen Participation Suite makes the Granicus platform unique. While more limited in scope and features than some of the other platforms discussed, and more oriented to routine public engagement around council or commission meetings, the Citizen Participation Suite can serve the diverse needs of local governments by offering two programs that seek to enhance and augment public participation in different ways. The software is offered as an SAS, which means that company engagement with the client following the purchase is relatively minimal. The largest firm by number of employees discussed within this paper, Granicus’s core business revolves around video streaming, archiving and document management for local governments and agencies. Granicus offers monthly subscription pricing, starting at $300 a month, with no startup fee. Pricing is flexible and dependent on the scope and needs of the organization, so the company asks potential clients to contact them to request a quote.
OpenNorth

OpenNorth is a Montreal-based non-profit that builds online tools to enhance the transparency of government and transform democratic engagement. Serving three primary groups of clients—citizens, government, and journalists—OpenNorth’s collection of online tools aim to connect segments of the population for the purposes of sharing information and opinions. Perhaps the most relevant of OpenNorth’s tools to public engagement is Citizen Budget. Much like other budget simulators, Citizen Budget aims to educate citizens about the tradeoffs involved with creating a budget. Participants use a sliding scale to allocate the levels of funding they believe should be given to various projects, departments, and categories of spending. The platform requires users to enter their age, which allows for the municipality to gather information on the budgetary priorities of different segments of the population.

In addition to Citizen Budget, OpenNorth has created a variety of tools, each serving a unique and singular function. Some of the more relevant tools include: Open 511, which is funded by the Canadian government to manage and publish road events and closures throughout the country; and Represent, which is an open database of elected representatives at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels in Canada. Prices vary widely depending on the platform. While Represent is a free service, Citizen Budget begins its pricing at $4,000 (Canadian) per budget.

EngagementHQ from Bang the Table

Australian-based Bang the Table is a company that offers online services to engage stakeholders in collaborative learning, discussion, and debate. The company believes that the internet is the key to generating increased levels of public engagement and attracting a diverse and holistic array of feedback, which in turn allows leaders to more accurately assess community sentiment. To facilitate such online engagement, Bang the Table offers EngagementHQ. Featuring an array of customizable tools for gathering input, sharing information, and analyzing data, EngagementHQ allows users to tailor the site for their specific needs.

Smart Forums are described as “the heart of EngagementHQ,” and the place where participants can post ideas for discussion and comment on the ideas of others. Users can choose to click either “agree” or “disagree” buttons on any post—a feature that encourages participation from individuals who are unwilling or unable to comment. All content in the ‘Smart Forums’ is moderated, and comments can be tagged and categorized by the site manager. In addition to the Smart Forums, EngagementHQ offers a guestbook where users can post comments without generating dialogue, as
well as a Q&A tool which provides users an outlet to ask questions to the elected official or site manager. The site manager can then choose whether to answer the individual directly via email, or post the answer publicly in the Q&A tab. Surveys and quick polls are also supported by the EngagementHQ platform.

EngagementHQ can also be a valuable mechanism for dispensing information to the public. The platform offers dedicated blog space for clients and allows for site managers to store, organize, and share relevant project files in an on-site document library. Calendar and frequently asked questions widgets can also be imbedded in the. Users can share information and posts from the EngagementHQ site through social media platforms and email.

EngagementHQ allows clients to get a better sense of how many people are engaging via the site through the quantitative reporting that the platform offers. Site managers can see an overview of activity of the site at large, or at the individual page level. The demographic information required when signing up allows for site managers to evaluate who their main online stakeholders are, and what demographics are the most interested in the project. Additional services offered by EngagementHQ include best practice advice from the Bang the Table team. The basic version of the site can be up and running in as little as a week. EngagementHQ has been used for over 200 projects representing 60 clients, with costs depending on the complexity and scope of the project.

Textizen was launched from a team of Code for America Fellows to enable residents who do not have internet access or smart phones to participate in online public engagement. Textizen uses texting (SMS) capability available on any mobile phone to enable ongoing communication with residents through surveys, follow-up capabilities, and ongoing opt-in communication. A large number of engagement responses can be automated, and the administrator platform allows for detailed analysis and review of results.

Textizen has been used for visioning, idea generation, needs assessment, general feedback, benchmarking, and for signing people up for services. It also supports translation into Spanish. Currently based in Philadelphia and San Francisco, Textizen is operating in several cities, but services and pricing are still developed on a project-by-project basis.