

- Practices for making town websites more citizen-friendly -

What is e-Government? The use of information technology to facilitate useful and innovative ways of conducting government business and distributing community information.

I. Outline a Strategic Plan

A strategic plan outlines where your organization is going and how you will get there with a municipal website. It is written so that staff will understand it, and should be posted so the public can read it as well. Here are the parts to include:

- a. **Vision** – Describe what success will look like. What will citizens be able to do with your website? Incorporate how you will use different applications, new media, social media, etc. and be succinct.

Example - We will use the Web to serve citizens, to open government to our town's citizens, and support the business processes necessary to achieve our mission. Our website will offer complete information and efficient and secure processes to work with our business partners. When citizens interact with our website, they will be able to:

- i. Citizens should get information without having to guess what department provides it.
- ii. Get prompt, complete and understandable answers to questions.
- iii. Easily find and complete basic transactions: filling out forms, applying for programs.
- iv. Talk to a human when they need to.
- v. Get the same answers to questions no matter whom or how they ask: phone, email, Web.
- vi. Get clear and accurate instructions for procedures.

- b. **Goals and key objectives** – List your major strategic goals (no more than five). Goals should describe both what you want to do and why you want to do it. Under each goal, list specific objectives that describe how you will achieve the goals.

Example – Improve the quality and ease-of-use of the municipal website by identifying and enhancing the efficiency of the most used tasks, by making those tasks easier to find, and by eliminating content that is outdated, redundant and inaccurate.

Objective 1.a. Identify the most used or requests tasks.

Objective 1.b. Improve the efficiency of the top tasks.

Objective 1.c. Improve the design of the home page to make it easier to find the top tasks.

Objective 1.d. Establish a governance process for content approval and review.

- c. **Timeline** – Create for all phases of website development, from planning to completion.

- d. **Budget** – Do you need approval from the select board or department heads?

- i. The budget should include expenses for website development and an annual hosting fee, purchase of a domain name, etc.

II. Website Management and Governance

- a. No advertising to avoid any issues with conflict of interest.
- b. Ensure continuity of operations during emergencies; develop emergency procedures.
- c. Collaborate in developing cross-department websites and content.
- d. Avoid redundancy.
- e. Create operating procedures to manage the site and all the functions that support it: everyone in the governance structure knows and understands the policies and procedures.
- f. Establish responsibilities for each person that is involved with the website: everyone should know and understand their roles and be accountable for their content areas.
- g. Establish a policy for content approval with roles for staff that will approve and manage content.
- h. Management controls identified to ensure the town's website and Web operations are protected from fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement, and the controls are reviewed regularly.
- i. Measuring and tracking the effectiveness of the website should be developed including monitoring analytics for site visits.
- j. Domain name should be only for the municipal site (.gov, .org: .com is **not** recommended)
- k. Separation of municipal services from Chamber of Commerce, business associations, etc. The town website will not host pages for private organizations, but can link to them.
- l. Have a linking policy – as a government entity, make sure links only go to appropriate content off the town website. It is not your responsibility for where another website's links go, but the links off the town website should be checked not only for appropriate content, but to make sure they work. Add a disclaimer stating that you are not responsible for another website's content.
- m. Have a privacy policy – for government entities it is good practice to have a privacy policy that states what information is collected from their visit. If your website will collect analytics data, then the following example will be helpful:

Example privacy policy -

We do not use cookies on this website. (A "cookie" is a file placed on your hard drive by a website that allows it to monitor your use of the site, usually without your knowledge.)

We do gather and store certain information about your visit automatically, **but this information does not identify you personally**

- Internet domain (for example, "xcompany.com" if you use a private Internet access account, or "yourschool.edu" if you connect from a university's domain).
- IP address (an IP address is a number that is automatically assigned to your computer whenever you are surfing the Web) from which you access our website.
- The type of browser and operating system used to access our site.
- Date and time you access our site.
- Pages visited.
- If you linked to us from another website.

- n. Other possible policies – for Web casting, adding applications, mailing lists, calendars, blogs, wikis and social media: who can authorize and how they can be used.

III. Managing Content

- a. All content approved before posting.
- b. Provide dates and ensure content is current.
- c. Organize content based on audience needs.
- d. Follow handicapped accessibility guidelines for text and images.
- e. Write for the Web in plain language.
- f. Documents posted as PDFs
- g. Image resolution at 72pixels
- h. Have an uncluttered and usable home page.
- i. Use basic common content, terminology and placement.
 - i. Contact Us page (contact information)
 - ii. About Us page (organization information)
 - iii. Site map or A to Z index
 - iv. Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

Other content citizens (and visitors) may want to find on a municipal site:

Town committees	Town officers	Select board information
Laws and ordinances	Emergency information	Reports
Forms	Meeting agendas and minutes	Announcements
Events calendar	Land records	Community links
Job announcements	Town history	Videos of meetings
Social media	Pay taxes, fines and license fees	Jobs and employment information
Business, vacation or retirement destinations	View attractions and special event information	Learn about the community and its history
Searchable Grand List	Town demographics and data	Features on local festivals

IV. Options for Developing a Town Website

- a. Create and maintain the site through your office or with a town volunteer.
 - i. Purchase HTML software for building and maintaining a website. You will also need to choose a host server for the website.
 - ii. The municipal website address (or URL) should end with a .org or .gov, not a .com. This will need to be purchase and managed by the town office also.
 - iii. Use free applications such as Wordpress.org, Wordpress.com, Blogger.com, Weebly, Google Applications
- b. Outsource creation and maintenance with a vendor
 - i. Govoffice.com, Vermont Information Consortium
 - ii. Vendor options with a content management system
- c. A combination of both
- d. **Do not agree to a paid contract that states only the vendor may update content;** make certain the website has a content management system for town staff to update the website.

IV. Examples of Vermont Town Websites

- St. Johnsbury - <http://www.town.st-johnsbury.vt.us> (Gov Office)
- Ludlow - <http://www.ludlow.vt.us> (Gov Office)
- Montpelier - <http://www.montpelier-vt.org> (Green Mtn Network vendor)
- Essex Junction - <http://www.essexjunction.org> (Vermont Design Works vendor)
- Hinesburg - <http://www.hinesburg.org> (built with Dreamweaver)
- Windsor - <http://www.windsorvt.org> (Wordpress)
- Weathersfield - <http://www.weathersfieldvt.com> (Joomla CMS, vendor designed)
- Cabot - <http://www.cabotvt.us> (Yahoo! Sitebuilder)

V. Accessibility and Usability Resources

1. **Webcontent.gov** - http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/reqs_bestpractices/best_practices.shtml- an excellent resource for designing websites that are accessible and usable for all citizens.
 - a. Includes standards for handicapped accessibility, usability, plain language content writing, privacy, security, linking policies and more.
2. **State of Vermont Department of Information and Innovation**
http://dii.vermont.gov/Policy_Central
 - a. Many examples of policies for State of Vermont websites.

THE POLICIES LISTED ON THESE GOVERNMENT SITES ARE EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES, and for your reference when working with a vendor or volunteer to build or redesign a town website. Town websites should be accessible and usable: by incorporating basic best practices, website content will be easily found and understood by the majority of your town's citizens.