



Social networking is gaining traction. It changes the way we share information and communicate with our friends. It provides the opportunity to meet people we might not ever come across in the physical world. Now we can track our proximity to just about anything on our cell phones. As a result, our physical and virtual worlds have become seamlessly blended.

Social networking is the dissemination of information to subscribers on a web site or mobile device. People are linked together in groups enabling them to share stories, photos, and video with each other. Planners can use social networks to disperse materials on the web and garner feedback from citizens. Community members who join your network can reply to your information with ease. Social networks drive virtual traffic to your web site for specific purposes such as surveys, FAQs, visualization, and mapping components of the project. In several cases it has greatly effected the level and quality of civic involvement.

Social media provides an opportunity to meet people we might not in the physical world. For example, using a program called TweetDeck, I follow the messages

(called Tweets) sent from Twitter by people I have never met in person. As these experts travel to conferences, they send messages about the speakers and notes live from the event enabling followers to “tag along” virtually.

Messages and updates can be sent to mobile devices as well. We can send and receive information on the go. As a result, our physical and online worlds are becoming seamlessly blended.

Once a technology becomes mainstream by consumers, it gets adapted for marketing and government use. Why? Because citizen expectations have been raised. President Obama’s vision for a more transparent, participatory and collaborative

government is becoming a reality. Conferences such as the Open Government and Innovations Conference, the Personal Democracy Forum, and the Gov 2.0 Expo are exploring how technology will make government more transparent and collaborative. One of the ways to maintain open communication is through social networks.

Existing and emerging technologies can expand your reach. Some can be used for participation, others for collaboration, but all of them help planners and citizens create a story to build a deeper sense of place together.

Consumers who have learned how to use these tools immediately see their benefit. The gap between citizen expectations and government is gradually narrowing. You might face barriers such

as access through municipal firewalls, privacy, and maintenance cost, however the benefits far outweigh the setbacks. A steward to support your online community participation can help you overcome these obstacles and gain higher levels of citizen involvement to create a better plan.

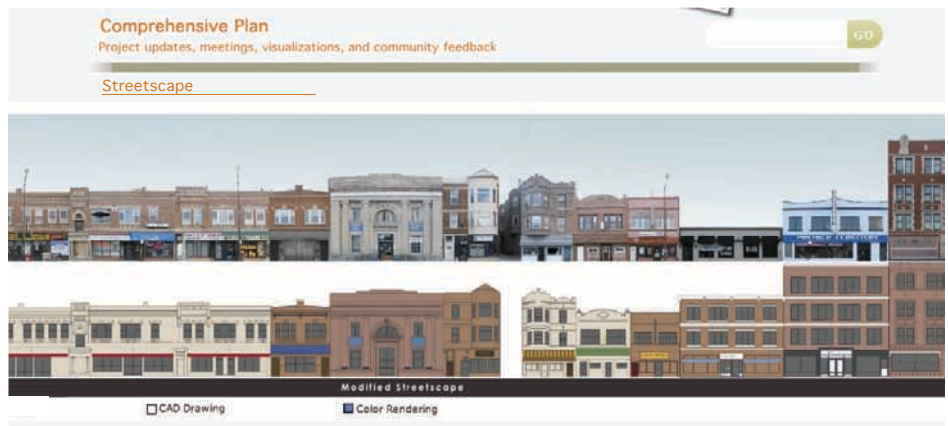
The Facebook group, “Online Social Networking Applications for Planning” was created as an extension of an APA Ohio webinar. Approximately 500 people attended and half joined the group to continue the conversation about integrating online tools into the planning process and overcoming obstacles. I’ve become active in this group by posting information about the benefits of Facebook and Twitter integration into web sites. As a result, I was invited to speak at the Grand Valley Metropolitan Council’s conference in Grand Rapids on June 5, 2009 and the National Association of Development Organizations conference in Chicago on September 1st, 2009. This article supplements these presentations.

Consumer driven tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are shifting our expectations; they are inevitably changing the way we communicate in business and with our government. Over the last year, municipalities and organizations have been creating groups and pages on Facebook and YouTube to engage participants. Social networks are being integrated into planning project web sites to reach as many residents as possible.

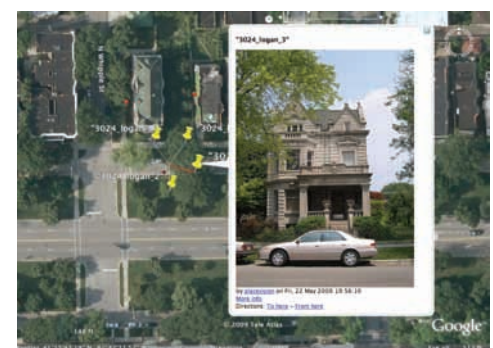
A comprehensive plan is the perfect project to engage citizens online through social networking and graphics that make planning fun. A web site, accessed 24 hours a day, can be linked to Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, and a blog to simultaneously push content onto multiple sites with little effort. The right infrastructure will save time and create a feedback loop where citizen comments

are consolidated on the project web site for response from a central location. A library of existing conditions can be built by community residents who post their photographs to Flickr. As a result, they could see their contributing images and stories featured on the project site. It has been proven that residents take ownership in a plan when they were able to contribute to the development of it, tell their story, and follow along passively or actively, even if they can not participate in person at a meeting.

Projects in Austin, Manor, and San Antonio, Texas, Kalamazoo, Michigan, and Orange County, California have increased the turn out at public meetings and captured interest in the future of their cities from more than just residents. They have creatively used web-based technology to construct a future vision, economically prosper, and provide services to residents more efficiently. You can be more effective while saving time with the right technology support. Is your city the next role model for successful community participation and innovation?



Social networking as a marketing tool for the plan will drive traffic. Visitors won’t stay at the site long or revisit if the content is not updated and engaging. Graphics explain streetscape, design, and economic development options. Before and after scenarios can be visualized then used to promote appropriate development and signage, as well as recruit businesses after the plan is adopted.



Google Earth can be linked to Flickr and Picasa image galleries to map community assets. Google products are a good alternative to complicated GIS maps and allow planners to import layers for presentation purposes. Community residents could potentially add comments directly to the map with a little programming.

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