CITIZEN-GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN NORTH CAROLINA

How North Carolina's Local Governments Receive and Distribute Information to Citizens and the Potential Influences on Policy Making

PREPARED BY THE PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE AT WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Each year, the Public Policy Institute (PPI) at Western Carolina University (WCU) creates, conducts, and analyzes a survey of local governments on relevant topics affecting governance in North Carolina. In 2013, the PPI conducted a survey of North Carolina counties and municipalities involving citizen-government interactions. Our goals were to measure the types of communications between local governments and its citizens and assess officials' impressions of the influence of these communications on policy making. In order for a democracy to be truly representative of the people it serves, the public's ability to notify its leaders of problems in the community is crucial to good governance. The other necessary element is that the government responds to those concerns. The first step, however, is developing a systematic way to communicate those concerns. Our survey examines this important element of representative government.

We surveyed city and county managers or their designees in the spring of 2013. With over 100 respondents from county and municipal governments across North Carolina, the final data has been compiled in this report with key findings and recommendations for local governments. This report is publically available online (http://www.wcu.edu/9355.asp) and is intended as a resource for local governments, citizens, and community partners.

The survey results indicate that local governments are using numerous methods to gain feedback from citizens. The most common methods to acquire public input included public comments during elected officials' board meetings (100% as they are required by state law), planning boards (95%), surveys (70%), and feedback from newsletters/mass mailings (72%). Other frequent activities included open houses (64%), booths at public events (61%), and a comment sections on government web pages (61%). Less frequent activities include public workshops/charettes (54%), feedback from social media web pages (such as Facebook)(54%), and feedback from mobile phone applications (29%).

Those activities that appear most useful include those that also require the most effort – planning boards and citizen workshops. While these activities are more labor intensive than some, around 80% of our respondents indicated that they were very useful and influential in final policy decisions. Electronic means of communication were often used, but appear to be less useful and less influential. Most of respondents' impressions of comments at official meetings, although required by law, were that the information gained was neither very useful nor influential in policy making. When asked their opinion concerning the largest barrier to citizen participation, a large number (62%) of our respondents indicated that citizens' apathy and lack of interest in government affairs was the main obstacle to gaining more citizen input in the policy-making process.
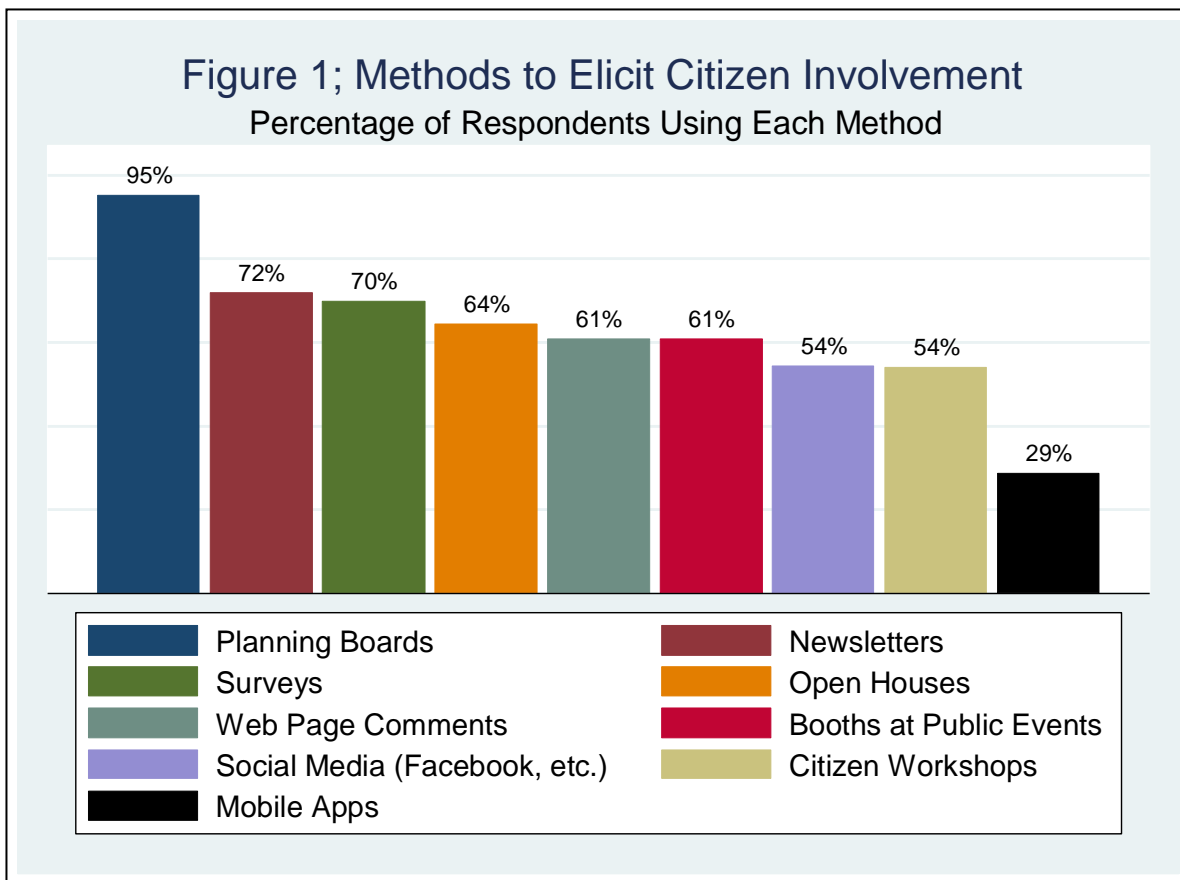
I. Survey Methods

In the spring of 2013, we contacted all North Carolina county managers by email or mail and all city managers by email. We obtained the city managers' contact information from the North Carolina League of Municipalities. We received 32 usable responses from county managers (a 32% response rate) and 71 usable responses from city managers (a 21% response rate). We asked a series of both open-ended and multiple choice questions to elicit information regarding what practices each government used to interact with its citizens. In addition to what practices were used, we also asked questions concerning both the usefulness and the influence of each type of interaction. Our survey also asked about unique methods that local governments utilize to gather public concerns or gage public opinion.

II. Methods of Interacting with the Public

We asked respondents (county and city managers or their designees) to tell us whether they used particular methods of communicating with the public from a detailed list. We excluded public comments during elected commissioners' or board member meetings, as these are required by statute (although we did ask other questions concerning the influence of public comments at meetings). Figure 1 (below) displays the percentage of respondents in our survey that report using various methods to engage with the public and solicit comments, suggestions, and feedback on policy decisions. A few trends stand out:

- Almost all respondents (95%) indicated that they utilize planning boards. This was expected as planning boards for zoning issues are a common and encouraged practice.

- Respondents indicated a high use of traditional methods such as surveys (70%), newsletters or other publications mailed to citizens (72%), and open houses (64%) to interact with citizens and receive potential feedback.

- In our open-ended questions, many officials stated that they used the local media as a way to disseminate information to the public. One county official noted that their government used the "public access channel on TV, as well as weekly 'Staying Connected' newspaper ad."

- Citizen workshops and "charrette" activities were used by 54% of the responding governments.

- In addition to the traditional methods of interacting with citizens, a large number of respondents reporting using newer technology to engage with citizens. Well over half (61%) reported using a government web page with a comments or feedback section. Over half of the respondents (54%) reported using some form of social media/social networking web pages such as a government Facebook page, LinkedIn page, or Twitter account. Fewer respondents reported using mobile phone applications ("apps"), with just 29% of respondents utilizing this type of technology to interact with citizens.

- For those that use web page comments and social media pages, we also asked how often these pages were checked by a government official. Of those that reported using comment pages from the web, 61% said the web-page comments were checked daily, 20% said they were checked weekly, 10% said the web pages were checked monthly or less, and about 10% were unsure how often web comments were checked. As for social media web pages, 43% of

respondents that use these tools said the pages were checked daily, 35% said weekly, 17% said monthly or less, and 5% were unsure how often the social media pages were checked.
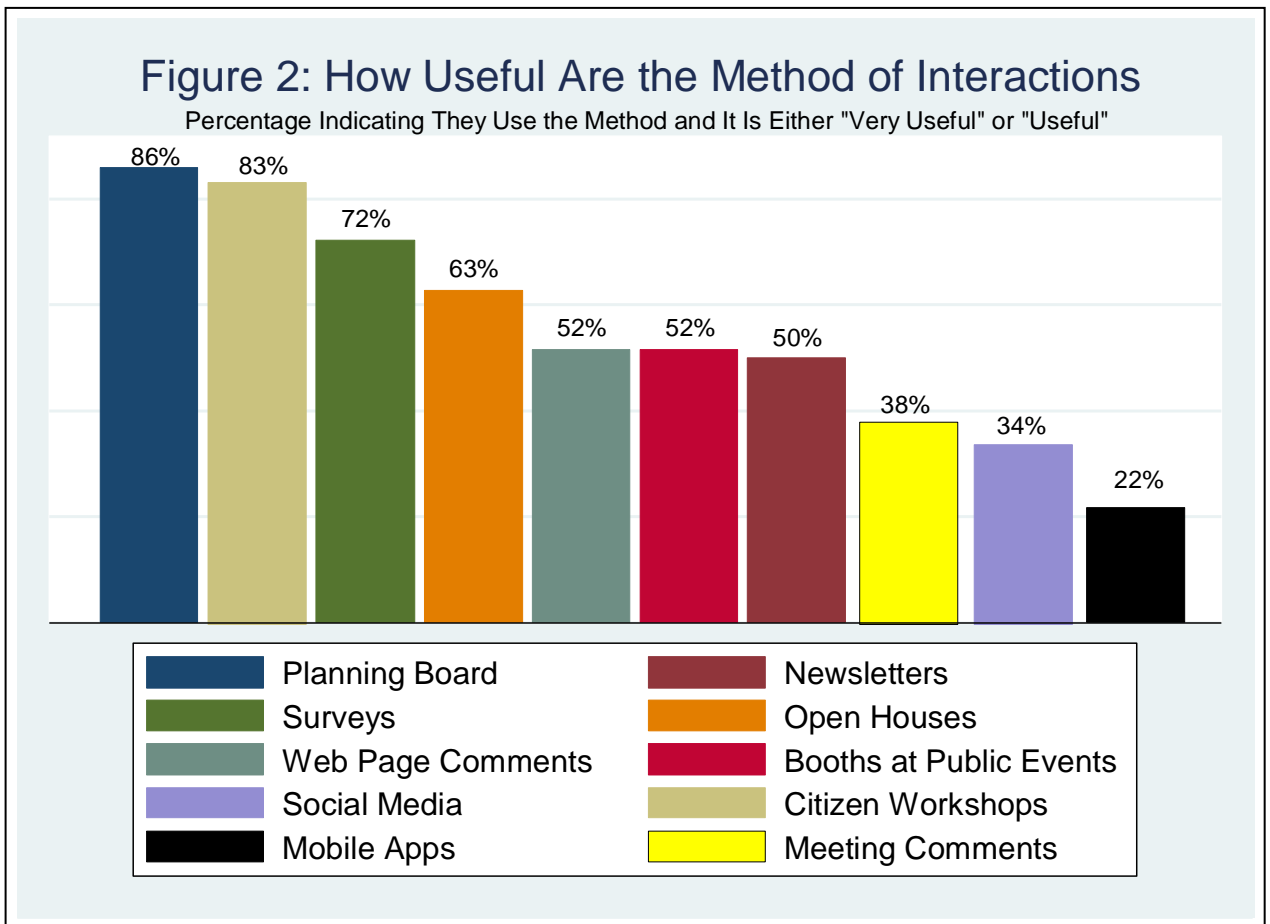

Figure 1; Methods to Elicit Citizen Involvement
Percentage of Respondents Using Each Method

- Planning Boards — 95%
- Newsletters — 72%
- Surveys — 70%
- Open Houses — 64%
- Web Page Comments — 61%
- Booths at Public Events — 61%
- Social Media (Facebook, etc.) — 54%
- Citizen Workshops — 54%
- Mobile Apps — 29%

III. The Usefulness and Influence of Various Methods of Interacting

Our survey also asked our government respondents whether they gained useful information from the various methods of interacting with the public. In a separate question, we also asked how influential the information gained from these methods was in the final policy or planning decisions. In this set of questions, we also asked about the usefulness and influence of public comments at elected officials' meetings. Figures 2 and 3 (below) report the results on the usefulness and influence, respectively, of each activity when the respondent reported using that activity. A few trends appear:

- One clear finding is that the more direct, intensive, and protracted interactions with citizens produce more useful and influential interactions that affect governmental policy. The two most laborious activities (particularly on the citizen's side) involved planning boards and citizen workshops. These two activities ranked the highest as to providing useful information and being influential in final policy decisions. As to usefulness, over 80% of respondents that used these methods reported receiving "very useful" or "useful" information from planning boards and/or citizen workshops. Nearly equal numbers likewise indicated that planning boards and/or citizen workshops were either "very influential" or "influential' in final policy decisions.

- Public surveys also appeared to be both useful and influential in policy decisions. Of the 70% of respondents that reported using surveys to engage with the public, 72% reported that the information from surveys was either "very useful" or "useful," and nearly the same amount (69% of respondents that use surveys) said that surveys were either "very influential" or "influential" in the final policy decisions. For example, one town official noted:

    On-line surveys have been helpful at times. Another tool that has been used to get some feedback as to public opinion on an issue is a telephone system we use called Connect Cty. It is under a company called Blackboard Connect. One service . . . is a survey tool where residents can respond to a question posed with a list of possible responses.
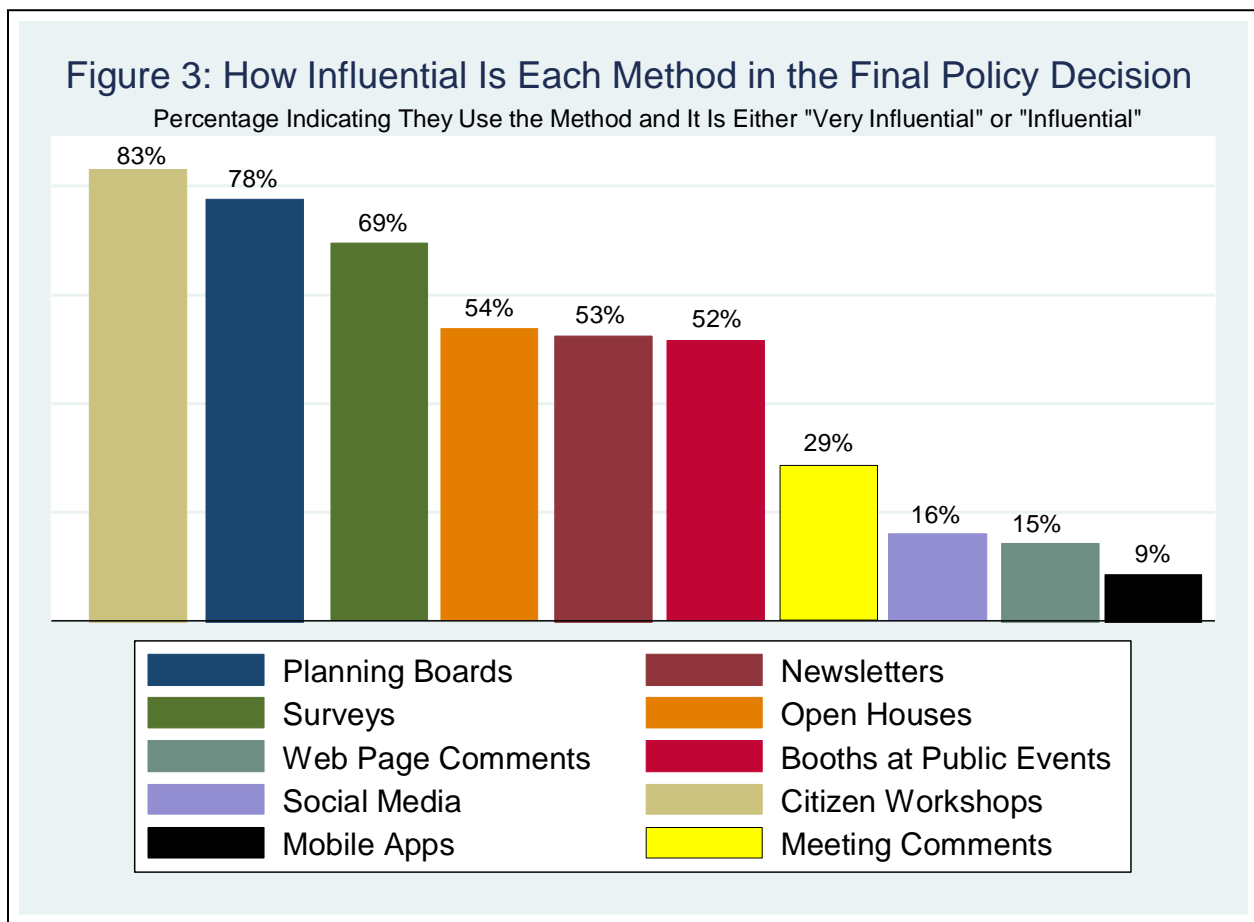

Figure 2: How Useful Are the Method of Interactions
Percentage Indicating They Use the Method and It Is Either "Very Useful" or "Useful"

- The results for more "modern" methods of interacting with citizens produced less encouraging results. Of the 61% of respondents that stated they had a comments or feedback section on their web page, only about half (52%) said that this method of interacting was "useful" or "very useful," and a mere 15% said that web page comments were either "very influential" or "influential." A similar trend appears with social media pages, such as Facebook. While over half of the respondents indicated their governments use social media, only 34% of those that use them indicated that social media pages are useful and just 16% said they were influential. Mobile applications, such as phone apps, fared even worse, with only 22% that use them indicating they were useful and only 9% saying that interactions through apps were influential

- Interestingly, the most traditional means of interacting with the public (and one that is statutorily required) also fared poorly. We asked respondents how often they solicited open comments at elected officials' meetings. The majority (55%) did so once a month, 39% left time for public comments at every meeting, and 6% said they did so multiple times per month, but not at every meeting. The vast majority (73%) indicated that the time for each speaker was limited during public comments.

  Only a small number (38%) of our respondents found information gained from public comments at meetings to be either "very useful" or "useful," and even less (29%) found public comments at meetings to be either "influential" or "very influential" in policy decisions.

  The lack of useful, consensus-building information gained from public comments was also displayed in the open-ended comments as well. One town official stated,

  > *No one comes to Board meetings or the public hearings unless they have a particular gripe or interest in that particular public hearing.*

Figure 3: How Influential Is Each Method in the Final Policy Decision
Percentage Indicating They Use the Method and It Is Either "Very Influential" or "Influential"

Legend: Planning Boards, Surveys, Web Page Comments, Social Media, Mobile Apps, Newsletters, Open Houses, Booths at Public Events, Citizen Workshops, Meeting Comments

Values: 83%, 78%, 69%, 54%, 53%, 52%, 29%, 16%, 15%, 9%

III. Perceived Barriers To Citizen Participation In Policy Decision Making

In an open-ended question, we asked respondents to tell us what they viewed as the main barriers in getting citizens involved in the policy-making process. As displayed in Figure 4, the results were quite telling. A large number of our respondents (62%) remarked that citizens' apathy and/or lack of

interest in government affairs was the largest barrier to getting the public involved in the decision-making process. As one city manager describes it:
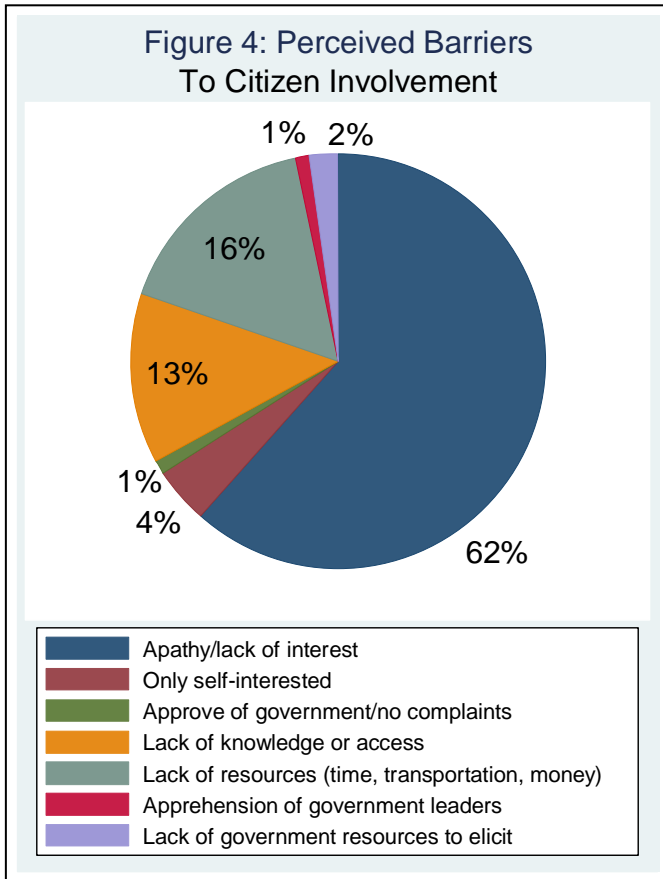
People's lives are just too busy, and most people don't have the time to get actively involved in local government unless they are upset or passionate about a particular issue. Additionally, people have an expectation that local government is somehow supposed to notify them directly about any specific issue that the local government may be considering that the individual may have some interest in - that's a great goal for any local government, but very difficult to achieve.

Others saw larger structural problems that went beyond the individual. For example, one town manager stated:

Most school districts do not teach civics anymore, and [a] transient population has no concept of local government. Many of them think local government acts like our [C]ongress and [they] treat all government as bad, corrupt, or inept.

The only other factors mentioned in significant numbers by our respondents included a lack of resources of citizens to participate (16%), such as individuals' lack of time, lack of transportation, lack of knowledge, or access of the public to government events. Other factors mentioned by some respondents included that most citizens were mainly self-interested and would only participate when they were directly affected (4%), that the local government lacked the resources to elicit more public involvement (2%), apprehension on the part of government officials of citizen involvement (1%) , and that citizens are generally happy with the decisions of their government, therefore they do not feel the need to participate (1%).

Figure 4: Perceived Barriers To Citizen Involvement

1% 2%
16%
13%
1%
4%
62%

Legend:
- Apathy/lack of interest
- Only self-interested
- Approve of government/no complaints
- Lack of knowledge or access
- Lack of resources (time, transportation, money)
- Apprehension of government leaders
- Lack of government resources to elicit

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KEY FINDINGS

Local government leaders in North Carolina appear willing to use many methods to interact with their citizens. However, not all of these methods are as useful or influential on final policy decisions. In assessing our data, the Public Policy Institute provides the following specific recommendations (which may or may not be already happening in your county/municipality):

1. Participate in more intensive activities with smaller groups: Labor-intensive activities, such as planning boards and citizen workshops, appear to provide the greatest benefits to local leaders. For important decisions, formulate planning boards, citizen committees, focus groups, or means to elicit feedback. This may be a daunting process on both sides. It may be difficult to recruit citizen volunteers to participate in extended, multi-hour sessions or multiple sessions over an extended period. However, according to our results, these efforts may have a larger payoff in terms of useful information. One possibility would be to increase the incentives for citizens to participate in these

activities through tokens of appreciation. Even small rewards, such as a catered lunch, t-shirts, coffee mugs, or other gift packages, can greatly increase citizen's positive feelings toward the process.

2. <u>Understand what formats may be most helpful for your citizenry</u>: Not all forms of communication may be helpful in all communities. For example, on-line resources may miss a large section of the citizens, as noted by one town official's comment that a "lack of internet connections leads to a lack of citizens using internet to see [the] Town website and Facebook page." Older populations may be less familiar with apps and on-line surveys as well. Related to the suggestion above, your community many need more targeted strategies, like focus groups in senior centers or apartment complexes, to gather useful information.

3. <u>Understand the usefulness and limitations of modern technology</u>: While smart phone apps and flashy software programs may look impressive, they can only do what they are programmed to do. More virtual interactions, such as through social media/social networking web pages, web page comments, and mobile apps appear to provide less tangible benefits, according to most respondents that use such means. Perhaps this is to be expected with any new method of communication. Both citizens and government officials may not be aware of the usefulness of these tools. Perhaps these sources, with their ease of use, potential anonymity, and instantaneous nature, have become a means for citizens to merely "vent" their feelings without providing much in the way of constructive comments. While many of these resources may not be that expensive, communities should carefully investigate whether new technology will do what they need it to do.

However, as society becomes more engaged through electronic means, the use of on-line technology may become much more useful in the future. While respondents in our survey did not find phone apps particularly useful, their importance could greatly increase in the future.

4. <u>Utilize a Variety of Means to Communicate</u>: While it may already be a common practice for many local governments, it does need to be stressed that multiple means of communication are needed to obtain more useful information and a better gauge of public opinion. As many of our open comments attest, those that have the most complaints are often the loudest. However, as we know these may be a very small section of the community. A government that relies on no other input than comments at open meetings may receive a very slanted view of the true community opinion on an issue.