**Wise Economy Workshop &
New World Public Engagement**

Online Public Participation Platforms and Applications

Della G. Rucker, AICP, CEcD
Patrick F. Whalen

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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

The reader should note that the field of online public participation is a young one, and that new providers appear on a regular basis and may not be captured by this white paper. Existing providers also update their applications regularly and may add subtstantial capacities within a short time frame. Finally, the reader also note that online public participation providers are generally early stage firms, and vary widely in terms of their internal capacity and stabiliy.

Currently Available Online Public Participation Resources

<u>MindMixer</u>

With over 200 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, MindMixer encourages citizens to give feedback, generate and share ideas, and feel empowered by and connected to their communities. 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 it by using 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.

MindMixer maintains a high level of customization and flexibility for clients, and continues to add features to maximize effectiveness for users. 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 (SAS) 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, new features such as survey capabilities and photo sharing to respond to questions or comments demonstrate the adaptive nature and increasingly expansive list of MindMixer site features. MindMixer sites encourage users to engage with their own personal networks by sharing their ideas across all of the major social media platforms. Additionally, project leaders are able to acknowledge user feedback through categorizing and labeling input received with the "Idea Status" feature.

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 SAS-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.

Urban Interactive Studio

Urban Interactive Studio is a small, 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 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.

Another platform recently released by Urban Interactive Studio is called CommonSights. This platform is designed for the use of organizations interested in promoting neighborhoods, districts, or attractions in a city. Common Sights allows clients to choose a variety of attractions, restaurants, points of interest, etc. and place them on a digital map. Once the initial map is created, users can offer feedback and suggest additional places to be added to the map by the site curator. User ratings and comments are used to ensure that the best and most relevant places will rise to the top of the list of places highlighted. In addition to the digital mapping of spaces, Common Sights also places informational signs with

QR codes near attractions to make users aware of the digital network of places that can be found using Common Sights.

While the Engaging Plans and Common Sights platforms have very different purposes and features, they are both united under the UIS focus on module-oriented design approaches that allow higher levels of customization than many other providers without the extensive time and cost associated with completely custom web site design. Both platforms are well equipped for use on mobile phones and tablets- a core capacity and central practice for UIS. Additionally, both platforms are based on Drupal open-source software, which not only enables an extensive administrative functionality, but also allows clients with programming capability to revise the source code themselves. Pricing structures for both platforms are developed on the basis of specific client needs, but typically range from $5,000 to $15,000.

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, Delib uses a combination of largely ready-made apps and more customized consultation software to address a variety of public engagement needs. The following apps are currently available to Delib customers:

- **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.

- **Budget Simulator:** Used by more than 40 public sector clients in multiple countries, the Budget Simulator app outlines budget issues for constituents, increases users understanding of budget issues and ultimately guides participants to prepare and submit their own version of the public budget under consideration. The app allows users to adjust each budget allocation up or down, based on their preferences , and then informs users of the consequences of their budgetary allocation selections before they submit their proposed budget to agency officials. Data collected in the Budget Simulator can be exported to Excel for easy analysis and reporting.

- **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.

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Of the providers being discussed in this paper, Delib is arguably 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. A Software as Service (SAS) 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.

Crowdbrite

Crowdbrite is organized around the basic concept of the charette- 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 charettes 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 charettes. 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 charette experience both digitally and in person. Pricing starts at $2500 for their basic interactive canvasses, and $5000 for self led engagements.   Crowdbrite also trains clients on how to set up a project and use it live in a meeting. As a platform that digitally mirrors the in-person charette process, Crowdbrite can save their clients money and time by reducing the staff time needed for conducting, and documenting live charettes.

Change By Us

Developed by Local Projects, LLC, in conjunction with CEOs for Cities and the City of New York, Change by Us launched in Summer 2011 as a website for New Yorkers to follow and

track projects, provide insight and ideas about them, and turn ideas into action through the formation of project teams. Participants can either join an existing project or create their own project, where they are then free to share ideas, learn about the status of developments they are following, and build networks of project supporters to collaborate and help the project along in a variety of ways. Utilizing the sticky note meme similar to Crowdbrite, Change By Us allows for participants to post ideas of any

kind.   Each project page also features a mission statement, key word tags for search optimization, a project specific event calendar, a "resources" tab for admins to post relevant information regarding the project, a "needs" tab to demonstrate ways that members can directly help the project, and social media sharing buttons. The site also encourages participation in additional projects by including a 'projects like this' link at the bottom of every project page.

As a result of a partnership with Code for America, Change by Us has expanded to Philadelphia, Phoenix, Chicago, and Memphis. This partnership is bringing a plethora of engineering and open-

source expertise to Change by Us, which should allow for the platform to be adopted more affordably and efficiently across the country in the future. Change by us will be interesting to watch in terms of its evolution and whether it turns into a more broadly available vehicle. However, Change by Us was designed for broad, user-directed participation, and is not well-suited to structured, directed engagement of the type typically needed for planning, development or engineering initiatives. Due to its limited availability, pricing is not available at this time.

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 Software as Service 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.

Users Submit Ideas   Others Vote On The Ideas   The Best Ideas Bubble Up

PlaceSpeak

Still in beta stage, PlaceSpeak is a young, growing company 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. PlaceSpeak is a modest operation with minimal staff, and most of the projects the company has been involved with have been in the greater Vancouver area. There are different stratas 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.
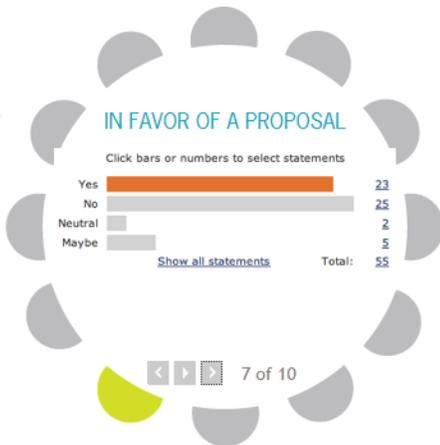
Open Town Hall

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.
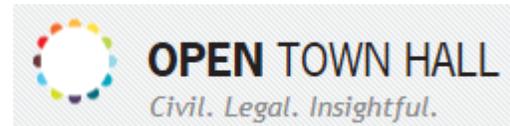
While Open Town Hall's prioritization of decorum makes the platform more rigid in its approach to soliciting input and generating ideas from the public, Peak Democracy continues to roll out new features that help optimize the utility of the platform for its clients. Prioritization widgets have been created 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.
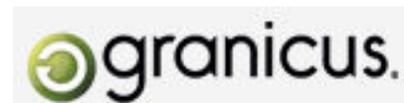
Open Town Hall has been used by over 50 government agencies across the United States, serving over 80,000 online attendees. Open Town Hall is compatible with mobile devices, and users can even participate via text message or the scanning of QR codes, where available. The platform can be effective for 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.

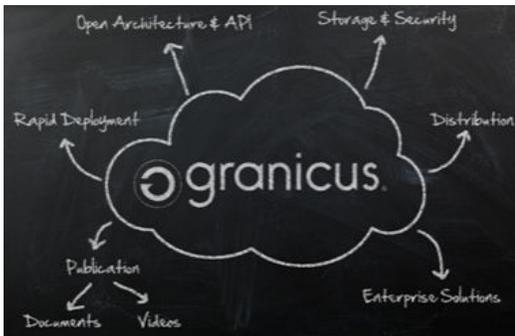Citizen Participation Suite by Granicus

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 start up 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.
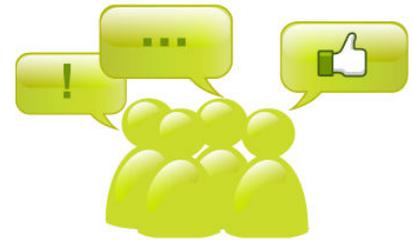
MetroQuest

Owned and developed by Vancouver-based Envision Sustainability Tools Inc., MetroQuest aims to help clients create broad based support for planning initiatives. 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. Admins can also set up opinion polls to gage 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.

MetroQuest has been used throughout the US and Canada. In addition to traditional web and tablet capabilities, MetroQuest also uses 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. Additionally, MetroQuest can augment meetings with their interactive workshops, which provides users with wireless keypads for live polling. MetroQuest 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; however potential clients interested in purchasing the MetroQuest platform must contact the company for pricing information, as none is publicly available.