

The following four categories describe the dimensions of e-government and present examples of each.

E-services and citizens

In local governments across New York State, providing services and information to citizens via the Internet is the most common form of e-government. While some local government Web sites offer a range of information and services, most generally begin by posting information. They then expand to offer search capability on the site, and then move toward interaction - exchanging information - as they develop more technology infrastructure and skills.

Information local governments most commonly post on their Web sites includes descriptions of government departments and officials, contact information, economic development data, a calendar of events, meeting minutes, the local government law and code book, public safety information, special announcements, tourism information, polling locations, and local historical information. Sites that offer dynamic querying allow citizens to enter in key words to search through board meeting agendas and minutes, park and recreation reservation calendars, and real property tax information.

Some local government Web sites offer the ability to print forms, such as permit and license applications, that citizens can fill out and mail or bring to the government office. More elaborate sites offer interactive forms that can be filled out and submitted online.

E-management and government efficiency

E-management refers to the behind-the-scenes information systems that support the management and administrative functions of government, including data and information management, maintaining electronic public records, and using electronic tools to communicate and work together.

E-management is often slighted because it is mostly invisible to the public. But it is essential to every aspect of e-government. Without it the services, public engagement, and high quality, low cost operations that e-government promises cannot be realized.

New York State localities are using a variety of applications and technologies to transform their operations. The most common include interdepartmental e-mail, budgeting and accounting systems, Intranet-based meeting and scheduling systems, and geographic information systems (GIS). Accounting software, for example, is making work easier for clerks by allowing them to electronically track marriage, dog, and hunting license fee transactions, rather than manually tracking them in a heavy ledger book. Clerks are also streamlining the process for getting meeting minutes approved by disseminating them electronically, rather than copying and sending out printed copies.

E-democracy and public participation

E-democracy is the political and public participation side of the electronic revolution. It refers to activities that increase citizen involvement including virtual town meetings, cyber campaigns, feedback polls, public surveys, community forums, and access to meeting agendas and minutes.

Many NYS local governments use their government Web sites or e-mail systems to increase public participation at public meetings by posting upcoming agenda items. In one locality, citizens can e-mail council members during council meetings and have their questions or statements addressed during the meeting. This then becomes part of the official meeting minutes.

The Village of New Paltz is experimenting with live audio streaming of board meetings via the Internet. Citizens can access the live village board meeting from their personal computers and submit e-mail questions for the board's review. Other local and county governments are providing public access on cable television so citizens can watch public meetings from home.

E-commerce and government transactions

Electronic commerce is the exchange of money for goods and services over the Internet. Citizens paying taxes and utility bills, renewing vehicle registrations, and paying for recreation programs are all examples of e-commerce. Government buying office supplies and auctioning surplus equipment online are also examples of local government e-commerce.

While the federal government and many state governments are moving forward with electronic financial transactions, such as accepting tax payments, smaller governments face real obstacles to rolling out e-commerce applications. One challenge local governments face is dealing with credit card fees. Many are struggling to justify charging user fees for the small number of transactions they process. That doesn't mean, though, that they are sitting on the sidelines.

For example, Monroe County, in anticipation of online credit card transactions, has negotiated a deal with a bank that will pave the way for any future online e-commerce applications. The county's account balances are large enough that the bank can justify waiving the credit card fees. In a different example of e-commerce, four smaller counties in western New York - Genesee, Livingston, Orleans, and Wyoming - formed a consortium that allowed them to negotiate a group price on office supplies if they each ordered through an online application with a national office retailer. The ease of online purchasing and the 10-percent discount on supply costs makes this a win-win situation for both the localities and the vendor.