

Creating your site's look, content, and features is an evolving process. Even though your government may not have the time, staff, and funds to devote an entire team to the design effort, it's important to periodically check in with others in your government to make sure you're heading in the right direction.

Here are some things you need to do when designing your municipal Web site.

Keep your audience in mind

Knowing how your citizens use the Web can help you design your site around their needs. There is a great deal of research available about how people use the Web. For example, Jakob Nielsen, considered the guru of Web usability, says it should take no longer than 10 seconds for a page to load on a user's computer. If users must wait longer than that, traffic to your site will begin to drop off.

Take the high road

Citizens want solid, factual information presented in an unbiased manner. Give people the information and services they need to live, work, and do business in your community.

Communities can become emotionally divided over contentious hot-button issues. For example, communities along the Hudson River have debated heatedly over whether or not to dredge for PCBs. Other communities face similar contention over the environmentally sensitive land use and site development issues. Your municipal Web site is not the place to take sides, but can be a helpful source of factual information such as hearing dates and legal references.

Select features and content

Key features identified by focus group participants include:

- Public meeting agendas and minutes
- Community events calendar
- Department hours, phone numbers, locations, and staff directories
- Profiles of elected officials
- Government program descriptions and qualifications for participation
- Frequently asked questions (FAQs) about municipal departments, events, etc.
- Tourism information
- Municipal news
- A search engine
- Clerk services-especially downloadable forms and applications
- E-mail to officials and staff

The Town of Queensbury Web site lists the date, time, location, and agendas for its Town Board and Planning Board meetings.

Create Web documents

You don't have to be an experienced Web programmer to create documents for your site. Web site software packages are fairly easy to learn and use, even for novices. These tools provide templates for all types of Web pages.

One town clerk "cut and pasted" his municipality's original Web site. He took advantage of simple Web site development tools that provided him with all the infrastructure he needed to develop a good informational site. He learned a little programming along the way as he made site improvements.

The Town of Bethlehem lists its locally-elected officials with their contact information.

Provide links

Think about logical ways to link to pertinent information within your site and on external sites. You may want to cross-reference department listings with a map showing their location, or link the town board meeting minutes to an e-mail comments page. You may also want to provide links to other Web sites, like the local daily newspaper, weather service, schools, and community organizations.

Provide e-mail access

Providing e-mail access for citizens will expand the number and diversity of correspondence coming into your government offices. Decide whether to have a central e-mail address for all incoming correspondence or provide links directly to the e-mail accounts of elected officials, departments, or government employees. And decide how the mail will be managed. E-mail is still official correspondence, the amount of which will surely increase when it is offered on your site.

The Town of Queensbury Web site provides users with e-mail access to its various departments.

Build in access for people with disabilities

You also need to make sure your site is designed with all kinds of users in mind, including those with disabilities such as vision or hearing loss. New York State's technology policy regarding Web site accessibility calls for compliance with "priority 1" checkpoints of the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Accessibility Initiative. This includes providing text descriptions for video and audio content. (See New York State Office for Technology in the Additional Resources section on page 19.)

Tips from colleagues

- Keep the design simple and user friendly. Make the text come up first. Avoid overdoing graphics and pictures.
- Use simple navigation. Don't make users click more than three times, ideally just once or twice, to locate the information they want.
- Keep in mind that people have different abilities, hardware, and browsers, and design for these variables.

Build in access for all Web devices

Your users will be accessing your site with all types of different browsers, modems, monitors, PCs, and even cell phones or other hand-held devices. Your site will look and behave differently on all of these different displays. You can't control exactly how the site looks on all different Web devices, but there are ways to design your site for maximum functionality across the different platforms.

Use style guidelines

Just like any brochure or advertisement, your Web site makes a statement about your county or municipality. Citizens will judge it by its content, as well as its appearance and style. Here is some advice on style guidelines offered by state, county, and municipal Web masters:

- Identify yourself-Links from external sources allow visitors to enter your site at any point. Be sure every page identifies your municipality.
- Make it easy to communicate-Include forms and e-mail links. Forms may be used to solicit information, register for events, or subscribe to a newsletter. E-mail forms allow visitors to contact any number of people within your government.
- Use templates-Your site's pages should have a consistent look and feel. Use templates to create standardized headers, footers, fonts, graphics, and backgrounds.
- Date stamp your pages-Let visitors know when the material they are viewing was last refreshed by displaying

the most recent revision date on each page.

- Use graphics judiciously-Graphics are attractive, but often overused. Too many or too large graphics slow down the communications process and frustrate users.
- Give help-Use indexes, tables of contents, and search tools to help orient users and guide them to the information they want.
- Include useful links-Link to useful resources within your own site and on other sites. A few briefly described, well-chosen links are more valuable than a long laundry list.
- Avoid dead ends-Use navigation aids, like "top-of-page," "return-to-home," "next page," and "previous page" buttons, freely. Don't let your visitors get stuck in dead ends with no way to get around.
- Offer low-tech options-Not every user has the technology to take advantage of a graphical interface. Be sure your site is usable by the widest possible audience, which includes offering low-tech options.

Employ prototypes and a phased approach

Prototyping is an important tool for reducing risk in Web site development. It allows you to create a quick model and analyze the results before going further. A prototype is a tangible product that demonstrates how the Web site can support organizational goals, and may be an important factor in garnering necessary support and resources. Prototyping is a great way to bring users into the design process. You can show it at meetings or at community events to get users' advice before you make design decisions.

Allegany County offers links to a number of useful resources.