Polling Center

Special Report: E-Governance and County Governments in South Carolina

Since the mid-1990s, e-government, or the movement to place government information, forms, documents, and services onto the World Wide Web, has become an important political topic. Although South Carolina lags behind most states in terms of households with internet, a majority of households (approximately 60%) have broadband internet access.\(^1\) And, since the use of the internet for a host of functions continues to increase, the trend is for greater internet use in the coming years. Governments will need to respond to this increased demand, whether it is people accessing information via their computers or through other digital means, such as telephones.

County governments are no exception. As the intermediate level between town and city governments and state governments, counties help to administer a host of government services (including many state programs). Thus, they need to be able to provide a host of services in the digital landscape to better connect elected officials with citizens and businesses.

With this in mind, we ask the question: How do South Carolina counties fare when it comes to connecting with citizens? The answer is that these governments often have inadequate websites that are hard to navigate, with limited and sometimes inconsistent contact information for their elected officials.

**Contacting County Councils in South Carolina: A Brief Look**

In organizing a dataset for a recent survey of county council members in the state, it came to our attention that there is a serious lack of consistency and quality when it came to the appearance and content of county websites. Some were up-to-date, modern websites with government emails provided for each member. Others, however, were not up-to-date and

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lacked appropriate contact information; some included home addresses and phone numbers, along with personal email accounts (or emails for some, but not all, members). Though many were .gov or .org sites, some were .com. In one case, a county had links to some quite outdated websites on its page, such as one link to the search engine Alta Vista (which was purchased by Yahoo! and shut down in July 2013).

Critically, some counties provided no or only partial contact information for county council members. Email addresses were especially lacking. Based on our search, 14 counties provided no emails for county council members, and 11 provided only partial coverage (which included listing a generic email for several different members). And, for those that did provide some or complete emails for all members, some of the emails were personal accounts and not attached to a .gov or .org account. Finally, while phone numbers and addresses were provided in many of these cases, sometimes home phone numbers and even home addresses were listed; in a few cases, even phone numbers and addresses were not present.

These differences, and the nature of the contact information provided, could hinder the ability to attract the types of businesses that South Carolina needs to move into the 21st century economy. Additionally, this lack of professional web presences also influences the ability of constituents to connect with their representatives and learn more about government. In our survey, most county council members listed that they were contacted by constituents by phone, yet they also wanted citizens to be more active. Local governments stand to gain from such involvement. Studies suggest that governments that do a better job of connecting citizens to politics get positive benefits in the form of increased citizen support, approval, and participation.

Ways to Improve

Considering the state of South Carolina, and its counties and municipalities, want to continue to improve the state’s image throughout the nation, amending these problems would be a beneficial step in the right direction. However, limited funds and lack of digital expertise might

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2 If it was not for the kindness and goodwill of some responsive county clerks, we would have been unable to reach many of these members effectively.

hurt some counties. Still, research has suggested that counties can innovate by pooling resources.\(^4\)

It is our suggestion, then, that efforts are made to update county websites in terms of content and appearance. This may require the state government to offer IT services to the counties, helping them to create easy-to-navigate, modern webpages. Along with this, county council members should, at minimum, be trained in the use of electronic mail (e-mail). Though many of the county council members could be new to the tools of e-government, it would certainly help county councils to stay in touch with a variety of constituents. Younger residents tend to rely more on e-mail than other communications technologies, and this seems to be a skill that would also make the state look like a professional, modern place to live and do business.

To help with resource problems, our suggestion is that counties work together with colleges and universities in their areas, allowing college students involved in programming and web design classes to help maintain and create up-to-date websites. The types of information provided need not be extensive, but user-friendly interfaces, coupled with email addresses for elected officials and key bureaucrats, important documents in Word and PDF formats that can be printed out, and a calendar of meetings, would be a good start.

As we progress deeper into the 21\(^{st}\) Century, the need for a well-developed web presence is growing even stronger. To connect citizens with government officials, and to create an image of a county that will potentially attract businesses and future residents, developing better county government websites throughout the state of South Carolina is a small but critical step.

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