What Do the Best Municipal Web Sites Have to Offer

By Morris A. Enyeart

There are currently 204 official municipal web sites in New Jersey. Some provide great value to the community while others are little more than signposts in cyberspace. What's the difference between the two and what's next?

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While it is not possible to list all municipalities that have one or more of the characteristics attributed to a superior municipal web site in this article, I have provided a list of the sixteen municipal web sites I consider to be among the best in New Jersey. No single site contains all of the desired characteristics, but several come close.

Web site characteristics can be divided into format and content. Format is the look and navigation of the site while content is the information presented. Although format is not as important as content, a poorly formatted web site can overwhelm or detract from the information provided by the municipality.

Format Characteristics of a Good Site

- Think navigation.
- Coordinate backgrounds, font, color and type style.
- All browsers should be supported.
- Limit the use of graphics, animation and music on each page, especially on the Home Page.
- HTML format is preferred for printable forms.

Scrolling is a natural part of the web experience, but not side-to-side. Make sure your web pages are not too wide for the viewer's screen. Using frames makes navigation easier because menus are constantly available. If your web site does not use frames to make menus constantly available, make sure no page is more than 2 clicks from the main menu.

Site maps and search capabilities are also a valuable asset to a web site. Avoid the temptation to make a page too long. Not only will it take longer to load, printing a long web page can surprise someone when the printed version turns out to be 20 pages or more. One municipal web site used to have all of their information on one page. It took about three minutes to load and was 78 pages when printed. Complaints from viewers forced the municipality to divide the page in to numerous subpages.

Using backgrounds is only partly a question of taste. There is a reason most large commercial sites do not use graphical backgrounds. They make the page load slower and sometimes more difficult to read. The contrast between text and background should make text easier to read, not obscure it. Using white text on a dark background provides good contrast, but can be frustrating for a viewer who wants to print a page and doesn't know how to change his browser so it will print. Think about using pale colors for the background instead of graphics. Scrolling the page while the graphical background stays in place can be disorienting to the viewer.

When selecting fonts for text, stick to common fonts such as Aria], Times Roman and Helvetica. Using an uncommon text style will only ensure people do not see the effect you are trying to create. If you must use an unusu-

al font to get your point across, make it a graphic so people will see it as you intended.

Browser compatibility. Making sure your web site supports Internet Explorer versions 4-5 and Netscape versions 3-4 will ensure compatibility with about 93 percent of browsers being used today. Using features supported only by the latest versions is a mistake and will adversely affect almost 50 percent of your visitors. Also be sure to take a look at your web site using the America-On-Line browser. It typically shows a smaller screen area than using Netscape or Internet Explorer by itself.

Limiting large graphics, animation and music makes *for a faster loading web page.* This is especially important for the Home Page for obvious reasons. If a large graphic must be used, it should be

text. These forms are hard to read and very slow to load or print.

Content Characteristics That Add Value
There are basic elements that every municipal site should possess. These components include a listing of governmental officials, department descriptions and e-mail. Municipalities that have highly visible web sites find they receive more e-mail from residents than they do letters via the Post Office. Townships like Jackson even tell you who is opening the e-mail for each department. An announcements or news page along with community and government meeting calendars should also be considered a basic part of every municipal web site.

However, just as many local governments seek to go beyond providing basic government services to provide outstanding recreation, senior, and other resident services, a good municipal web

anyone who visits the site is an open question. Be sure to provide a facility to unsubscribe. The next generation of municipal mailing lists may well see bid notifications to vendors or issue surveys.
Post Job Openings. Many municipalities advertise job openings in publications such as the *New Jersey Municipalities* magazine as well as on the League's web site. Only a handful of municipalities advertise job openings on their own web site. South Plainfield, South Brunswick, Plainsboro, Upper Freehold and Wayne are among the few that have taken this step. Besides broadening the pool of talent from which to draw, advertising job openings on the municipal web site breaks the stereo-type that municipal hiring is a closed process.

Include **Property Tax and Budget Information.** Municipalities should market themselves to their residents and prospective businesses that may consider locating in the community. How does the municipality compare to surrounding communities? How is the money spent, what do taxpayers get for the money? Many people are surprised to find out that a municipal government typically only gets 25 cents or less out of each property tax dollar. Here is an area where graphics should be used because it helps convey the message. Include other financial information such as fee structures. Municipalities such as Sayreville have gone even further and placed a comprehensive report from the state's Local Government Budget Review on-line. Pemberton offers tax related on-line applications. The more information people have at hand the more likely they will be to understand a tax increase.

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sliced into several smaller graphics to reduce load time. Animation and music should only be used where they enhance the message being delivered. Very few people appreciate the "elevator style music" or rapidly flashing, pulsing graphics now being used on some sites. Graphics and photos do enhance a web site if properly used. For web developers, try to keep file size below 25kb. Remember, a municipal web site should be designed with repeated traffic by residents in mind. After all, how many times does someone want to wait for a large graphic to load to get the information they seek?

Printable forms are found on most good municipal web sites. Forms constructed using html are preferable to downloaded forms to ensure the viewer always has the most recent version of the form and is not using an out-of-date copy they downloaded previously. Printable html forms should not be wider than 535 pixels to ensure they print properly on 8 1/2" wide paper. Some municipalities scan forms and place the image on-line instead of converting it to

site will provide content beyond the basics. Following are elements that should be seriously considered for inclusion in every municipal web site.

- Site registration for update notifications and announcements
- Job openings
- Property tax, budget and public bid information
- Agendas and minutes
- Resident complaint & request for service forms
- Township Code Book & proposed ordinances
- Forms for printing and downloading
- Municipal goals
- Special target audience information

Use a site registration form to build a mailing notification list. Wyckoff and Ewing were among the first to reach out to their residents in this manner. This capability is now becoming more common. Mailing lists can be used for general notifications about web site updates, traffic advisories, important announcements, due dates, etc. The question of whether the mailing list should be reserved for residents only or

Advertising public bids on-line is underutilized on municipal web sites. Ewing and Plainsboro both take advantage of their web sites to publish bids and list the results of the bidding. Ewing even lists the dollar amount of the bids.
Township Meeting Agendas and Minutes. Posting agendas for public meetings has become fairly commonplace.

There are fewer municipalities like Fair Lawn who also post the minutes of meetings. One municipality had a web page listing links to minutes, but each time you click on a link a message appears indicating the minutes have not been posted. They would be better served not having the page in the first place. Don't forget to include agendas for Council Workshops, Planning and Zoning Boards as well as standing committees.

Forms provide a mechanism for residents to fill out a form to request services or file a complaint. Aberdeen and West Deptford have taken this step because they realize it is better to address a complaint than let it simmer and become a bigger problem. Some municipalities simply use e-mail for this purpose. It is important enough to warrant a dedicated form on the web site. However, be sure you get back to residents quickly. Not answering in a timely manner only adds insult to injury if a complaint is being filed.

Codebook. The municipal codebook can be placed on line for as little as $300 for most municipalities. Placing the codebook on-line enables people to answer questions for themselves. Posting new ordinances and resolutions,

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New J**ersey's Best Municipal Web Sites**

Aberdeen	www.twp.aberdeen.nj.us
Cherry Hill	www.cherryhill-nj.com
Ewing	www.ewingtwp.com
Elizabeth	www.elizabethnj.oig
Fair Lawn	www.fairlawn.org
Jackson	www.twp.jackson.nj.us
Jersey City	www.ci.jersey-city.nj.us
Little Egg Harbor	www.leht.com
Marlboro	www.marlboro-twp.com
Montclair	www.to.montclair.nj.us
Pemberton	www.pemberton-twp.com
Plainsboro	www.plainsboronj.com
Sayreville	*www*.sayreville.com
Stafford	www.twp.stafford.nj.us
Wayne	www.waynetownship.com
Wyckoff	wwW.wyckotf-nj.com

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like Marlboro does, is a worthwhile service, but very few municipalities do so. Stafford, Jackson and Ewing are three municipalities that have their codebooks on-line for residents.

Interactive and printable forms add value to a municipal web site by including forms that someone can print, download, or fill-in on-line and submit. Using interactive forms for licenses (dog, cat, merchant, vending, etc.) may seem like a good idea at first, but the extra work involved in watching for the associated fee to arrive in the mail actually causes costs to increase. Use print-

ed or downloadable forms instead. Municipalities such as Cherry Hill include a forms download in each department if appropriate. The most desirable form for downloaded forms is probably Adobe Acrobat PDF. However, there is no reason why you cannot also include DOC formats from your work processor. These should be posted in RFT (revisable format test) since it is somewhat universal. The problem with downloadable forms is that once downloaded they cannot be updated. That is why printing forms is preferable to downloading them.

Non-governmental information can also add value. Little Egg Harbor (a shore community) posts tide predictions, Jersey City has a Statue of Liberty section, Plainsboro (a commuter community) gives traffic advisories, train schedules and parking/shuttle information. Providing community specific information adds value and enhances the service the municipality provides to residents.

As noted previously, the web sites listed above and many more possess content formatted in a manner that brings value to the residents and represents the community well. It is time to review how your municipal web site is constructed and learn from others to improve the overall quality of your municipal web site. If you do not currently have a municipal web site, use this article to develop a blueprint for constructing one you will be proud of.