

Summer 2008

Clark County town advisory boards and citizens advisory councils: Participation rates

Lucy Greger

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jason Hafen

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Aaron Mueller


University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Heather Rosich

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Rebecca Saoud

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations>

 Part of the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Greger, Lucy; Hafen, Jason; Mueller, Aaron; Rosich, Heather; and Saoud, Rebecca, "Clark County town advisory boards and citizens advisory councils: Participation rates" (2008). *UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones*. 803.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/2144620>

This Capstone is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Capstone in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Capstone has been accepted for inclusion in UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Running head: CLARK COUNTY CITIZEN PARTICIPATION RATES

Clark County Town Advisory Boards and Citizens Advisory Councils:

Participation Rates

Lucy Greger, Jason Hafen, Aaron Mueller, Heather Rosich, and Rebecca Saoud

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Master of Public Administration Capstone Project

Summer 2008

Abstract

Citizen participation rates in Clark County Town Advisory Boards (TABs) and Citizens Advisory Councils (CACs) were assessed. We measured citizen participation by analyzing attendance at TAB and CAC meetings over a two-month period. We designed a survey and distributed it to TAB and CAC meetings to profile volume of attendees, demographic characteristics, and other relevant data. Each member of our group also personally attended two TAB and CAC meetings to collect observations and conducted an interview with the Clark County liaison for that group. We also examined the Clark County website to determine if it could be better used to enhance citizen participation. Our results show that a substantial portion of the demographic in Clark County, including minorities and young adults, is not represented at TAB and CAC meetings. We also find that communication between citizens and government at TAB and CAC meetings can be further enhanced and optimized. We found the Clark County website somewhat difficult to navigate overall, which could impede citizens' electronic participation capabilities. We recommend that Clark County consider initiatives to reach out to minorities, take measures to enhance two-way communication between citizens and government at TAB and CAC meetings, and solicit and incorporate citizen feedback as they move forward with the restructuring and revamping of their current website.

Clark County Town Advisory Boards and Citizens Advisory Councils:

Participation Rates

Citizen involvement and participation is a hallmark of democratic governance. It is essential that citizens be engaged in their local communities to continue to ensure that Southern Nevada remains a great place to live. Community problems and challenges are best addressed with the input of the residents themselves, and the best solutions often come from those closest to the problem. With this premise in mind, Clark County has devised a structure of advisory bodies to facilitate communication between citizens and their local government. There are 13 Town Advisory Boards (TABs) and 6 Citizens Advisory Councils (CACs) serving unincorporated areas of Clark County. These bodies serve as a sounding board for citizens and make recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners (BCC). They assist the BCC in an advisory capacity with decision-making pertaining to their respective areas. Citizens can effectively channel concerns and recommendations for action through these advisory bodies and make an impact on the actions taken by the BCC to better the quality of life in their area.

Our primary focus is to assess the rates of citizen participation in TABs and CACs. Are citizens taking advantage of this resource the county has provided for them? Are current County practices sufficient to effectively engage citizens? How are citizen participation, interest and demographics tracked and assessed? We set out to collect data to assess actual rates of citizen attendance at TAB and CAC meetings over two months in the summer of 2008. We hope to learn about attendance patterns and notification methods and discover what might make more citizens participate in the process.

We also set out to assess the current Clark County website and explore e-government options for the County. All aspects of citizen and government life alike are being changed dramatically by technology. Systems are being overhauled, reworked, streamlined, and improved every day by adding more electronic and internet-based options for citizens and consumers. Our project falls at an opportune time in that Clark County is preparing to revamp its website. A secondary focus of our project is to gather comparative information and research options for the County to enhance its electronic capabilities to better serve citizens. We believe that TABs and CACs can also benefit from this technology. We will offer a set of recommendations for the County's consideration in adding value to their participatory processes by creating enhanced electronic options for citizens.

Research Question

Topic Selection

We had an initial meeting with Clark County staff to gather preliminary information and perform an informal needs assessment on April 25, 2008, at the Clark County Government Center. Present were Assistant County Manager Darryl Martin and Management Analyst Jennifer Hale with Clark County, who answered our questions regarding the various councils, boards, and committees that exist within the County and some of the challenges they experience with these groups. They provided us with a list of all of the boards, commissions, committees, councils, and districts within Clark County and some descriptive information about each one, such as statutory or other provisions establishing the particular bodies and their member appointment specifications. This listing contained a total of 41 active advisory bodies within the

County and 15 inactive ones. The span of these groups is very wide in that they range from wildlife and law enforcement issues to airport noise and housing issues. Some of the groups get their authority from Nevada Revised Statutes, some from Clark County ordinances, and still others from federal mandates. We found that attempting to compare issues from one group to the next would be impractical due to the disparate characteristics of the groups involved. We thus chose to focus on TABs and CACs throughout Clark County because they are similar in structure and function and therefore give a good basis for useful comparison.

Narrowing Our Focus

There are many different aspects of citizen participation in TABs and CACs that could be examined. One might choose to evaluate how board members are recruited and retained. Another direction might lead to trying to find out how frequently the recommendations made by TABs and CACs are actually followed by the Board of County Commissioners. However, we chose to focus our efforts on evaluating current participation trends and making recommendations for maximizing citizen participation in TABs and CACs for a couple of key reasons. For one, this is a constant across all advisory bodies. No matter what the subject of the specific board or council, attendance can be tracked in the same manner. Secondly, there are complicated political and structural issues involved in examining the other suggested research questions which could not be adequately addressed by our group given the time constraint. Furthermore, these items may vary considerably by area of the County and could prove nearly impossible to compare and contrast. Our group thus chose to focus on methods for increasing citizen participation in TABs and CACs across Clark County, with the hope

that the suggested methods might also transfer to other advisory bodies within the County. Our research question is thus two-fold: What are current attendance patterns at TAB and CAC meetings, and what could the County do to maximize citizen participation? The County's goal through TABs and CACs is to solicit citizen input on items of concern for forwarding to the BCC, and to create a neighborhood forum where citizens can gather and discuss community issues. Our principal objective in this study is to assist the County in meeting those goals as effectively as possible.

Criteria for Analysis

There are several different criteria on which to base the rate of success of a particular program or effort. In our case, the most relevant criteria for the County in the area of citizen participation is clearly effectiveness. Since effectiveness is a difficult concept to measure, we are using citizen meeting attendance rates as a proxy for effectiveness; the idea being that the more citizens attend, the more feedback and useful input the County receives. The County is seeking to gain the most effective form of citizen involvement possible. The foundation of TABs and CACs is based on a need for self-efficacy for citizens. This self-efficacy is obtained by having a meaningful impact on local government decisions and their ultimate outcomes.

The citizen's perspective may be somewhat different. We hypothesize that the average citizen is seeking maximum efficiency in contributing his or her efforts. In today's fast-paced society where double-earner households are the norm and everyone has many responsibilities and commitments, we theorize that citizens are interested in contributing in the most time-efficient manner possible.

Literature Review

Many aspects of citizen involvement and participation in government affairs and democratic processes are discussed and debated in the literature we examined. In 2000, Weeks illustrated that the provision of a broad scope of information to the general public and informed public judgment create opportunities for deliberation and more informed decision making for elected officials, managers, and citizens. Furthermore, Weeks (2000) found that involved citizens become more informed and eager to generate solutions. Wang (2001) found that collaboration between public managers, elected officials and citizens is associated with building consensus, meeting public needs and improving the general public's trust in government. Burby (2003) found that citizen involvement in planning initiatives can generate information, understanding, and agreement between citizens and government and give stakeholders a sense of ownership in projects.

Despite these advantages, there are some definitive challenges to implementation. Citizens can be cynical and distrustful of government and are typically comfortable participating in government from a distance (Berman, 1997; Callahan, 2000).

An avenue used to enhance citizen involvement in government is the use of citizen advisory boards, and the use of such advisory boards has been long standing. The Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, for example, has had over 120 years of active citizen involvement (Thomas, 1991).

There are a wide variety of issues and challenges that arise pertaining to citizen advisory committees. The typical problems that Greenwood, Breivogel, and Jester (1977) found when supporting a new advisory committee were: 1) developing

procedures for selecting members, especially those from low-income minority backgrounds; 2) helping the advisory committee develop a direction and purpose; and 3) dealing with negative attitudes held by some of the administrators. Other challenges attributed to citizen advisory committees include shortcomings of citizens themselves, such as limited interest in and/or ignorance about government and poor understanding of issues (Kweit & Kweit, 1980).

Other critics have pointed to challenges involving broader institutional and political limitations, such as embedded class bias, lack of consensus on goals, and unwillingness of bureaucrats and elected officials to share power (Kathlene & Martin, 1991). They have also given emphasis to design inadequacies of participation techniques, such as sociocultural barriers that make public hearings inaccessible to large segments of the community, domination of citizen groups by non-representative interest groups, and over-reliance on inaccurate opinion surveys (Kathlene & Martin, 1991).

Enhancement of citizen participation is a critical factor in the viability of citizen advisory committees. Citizen participation is now an important component in nearly all government planning and policy initiatives (Kathlene & Martin, 1991). However, citizen participation techniques used to inform policy makers of the people's will have proven to be less than adequate (Kathlene & Martin, 1991). Irvin and Stansbury (2004) also suggest that the actual benefits of citizen participation should be carefully examined, and recommend that agencies look at cost and benefit indicators before automatically involving citizens in decision making.

E-government

With the advent of new technologies and the rapid pace of online development, the internet world is changing dramatically, and government is no exception. Current literature is now focusing on taking web services to the next level in user services, which can be applicable to facilitating better communication and improved transactions between citizens and government. The OECD (2003) identifies three stages of governments' commitment to e-participation options: information, consultation, and active participation (as cited in Andersen, Henriksen, Secher, & Medaglia, 2007). Each refers to the degree of communication between citizens and government, with the information stage representing one-way provision of information to citizens, and the active participation stage referring to a full symmetrical two-way relationship wherein citizens are active participants in the policy-making process. Macintosh (2004) describes a similar evolution of e-government initiatives to involve citizens by identifying "e-enabling," "e-engaging," and "e-empowering" of citizens (as cited in Andersen et al., 2007). Andersen et al. (2007) termed this environment of active citizen participation a "digital village," (p. 37) but point to the costs involved. They indicate that substantial costs are involved in that there must be someone on the receiving end (government employees) to handle all the input received. They also indicate that this might not only take employees away from existing tasks, but may require altogether new skill sets that will not necessarily be present in government organizations.

Methods

Areas of Inquiry

As discussed earlier, our topic was determined by discussing areas of interest and concern regarding advisory groups and bodies with Clark County representatives. Based on the information obtained through our discussions and exchanges with the County, we decided to assess CAC and TAB rates of participation. Some of the questions that were raised were: How can the County get citizens more involved in these meetings? How are people hearing about these meetings? Which topics are attracting citizens to attend meetings? Can the redevelopment and/or enhancement of the County website help to involve more citizens? After review and consideration of the above questions the following research objectives were established.

Research Objectives

1. Assess citizen participation rates in the various TABs and CACs within Clark County.
2. Examine respondents' perceptions of the Clark County website.
3. Profile demographic characteristics of the citizens attending TAB and CAC meetings.

Methodology

Sample

Our sample group consisted of citizens who attended public meetings of CACs and TABs in Clark County in the months of June and July, 2008. Citizens who attend these meetings generally reside, do business, or wish to do business in the area governed by the council.

Process Overview

There are 13 TABs and 6 CACs. Our group designed a survey, and County liaison staff distributed the survey to the citizens who attended CAC and TAB meetings. Depending on the specific TAB or CAC, meetings were held once or twice during the study period. The self-administered questionnaire was designed to measure citizens' involvement and participation rates. Data collection procedures included statistical and content analysis of the surveys, anecdotal data collection by group members personally attending meetings, and personal interviews with the County liaisons.

Survey Design and Distribution

In order to understand attendance trends at CACs and TABs, our group developed a survey. Questions for the survey were developed by our group members with the collaboration of the County liaisons and the responsible management analyst to ensure the survey met Clark County's needs and expectations¹. Surveys were labeled with headers for each target meeting, including the group name and meeting date on both pages of the survey itself, to ensure that each survey could be tracked appropriately. Surveys were then distributed to the liaisons to distribute at each meeting. Each liaison received 25 copies of the survey for each meeting to be distributed at their meetings held during June and July. Bags of chocolate candy were given to the liaisons to dispense at each meeting as an incentive for citizens to fill out the survey. There were a total of 37 meetings we created surveys for, and of those 37, 16 meetings returned surveys.²

¹ See Appendix A for survey instrument used.

² See Appendix B for a complete list of TAB and CAC meetings surveyed.

Meeting Attendance

In addition to the survey instrument, each member of our group personally attended two meetings, one urban and one rural, to gather anecdotal data and obtain an overall perception of the meetings. A rubric was developed to record observations of meetings³. Group members gathered basic demographic data and other anecdotal evidence at the meetings each of us attended. Items that were examined included the number of attendees, demographic characteristics such as ethnicity, age, and gender of attendees, the subject and nature of comments given by citizens. We also looked at the attitude and demeanor of the speakers (angry, frustrated, positive, neutral, etc.) in an attempt to characterize the overall tone of the meeting.

Website Evaluation

To determine what steps the County might take to improve the effectiveness of its website, we evaluated the website in the following manner. Each member of our group visited the website several times and performed several different searches to attempt to determine how information is organized. We asked survey questions pertaining to citizens' perceptions of the website as well, which will be covered below under survey findings. We conducted an interview with the County's director of public communications pertaining to the current website redevelopment efforts, and he provided us with information from a Web Usability Assessment that was performed for the County in January of 2006 by an outside consulting company⁴.

³ See Appendix C for rubric used.

⁴ See Appendix D for detailed interview notes.

Results/Findings

Survey Results

Data analysis.

Surveys returned to us from each meeting were given group numbers ranging from 100-1600 (for instance, all Enterprise TAB meetings were numbered 100-199)⁵. The individual surveys were the numbered within the group numbers. Meetings that had more than one data set were numbered with the same group number followed by “.1” to distinguish one meeting from the other (the maximum number of times the same TAB or CAC was surveyed was two).

Each survey question was coded to facilitate entry into an SPSS 15.0 spreadsheet.⁶ Questions with multiple answers were coded so that each option (every combination of answers given) was coded as a yes or no response.

Data analysis was run using SPSS to determine significant findings and charts and graphs were then created using Excel for a better visual representation of the findings.

Descriptive statistics.

A total of 216 surveys were returned. The data analysis disclosed some significant findings. The results showed that 88% of attendees were Caucasian, in comparison to the 55% Caucasian make-up of Clark County. The Clark County demographics for 2008 report a 27% Hispanic and a 9% Black/African-American composition, as opposed to only a 5% attendance rate for each of these groups at CAC and TAB meetings. The attendees of the TAB and CAC meeting were primarily citizens

⁵ See Appendix E for group numbering breakdown.

⁶ See Appendix F for coding spreadsheet.

over the age of 55 (47%), with 18-25 year olds only making up 1% of the attendees across meetings.

We looked at the ways in which citizens heard about the CAC and TAB meetings. Twenty-seven percent of respondents said that they heard about the meeting by receiving a mailer or announcement. The next most prevalent response was “Other.” Examination of the “Other” responses provided showed various things, such as “just driving by,” “applicant,” or “representing an applicant.”⁷ We found it to be of significance that less than 10% of attendees heard about the meeting through the website, because we assumed that with the popularity of the internet and electronic media, more citizens would have heard about the meeting in this way. Also, 77% of survey respondents stated they had attended previous public meetings. We interpreted this to mean that “new” people are not being drawn to meetings. We will discuss the implications of this and offer recommendations pertaining to reaching out to more citizens later in the paper.

We also looked at what prompted citizens to attend TAB and CAC meetings. Aside from the “Other” category⁸, the most prevalent answers were “Neighborhood issue” and “General concern.” We felt that perhaps our survey question lacked validity, considering the large number of “Other” responses we received. In hindsight we realized that we should have included an option related to “zoning and/or planning.” “Environmental” and “Economic interest” were the least popular reasons that citizens attended meetings.

Fifty-seven percent of respondents said that they had visited the Clark County website. Of those who had visited the website, 82% said that the information they were

⁷ See Appendix G for a complete breakdown of “Other” responses for this survey question.

⁸ See Appendix H for a complete breakdown of “Other” for this survey question.

looking for was easy to find. The three most common reasons that respondents said information was not easy to locate were that agendas were hard to find, archived information was hard to locate, and the website was hard to navigate⁹.

Meeting Observations

Urban v. rural.

Depending on the type of board (urban or rural), the types of issues discussed differed considerably. In urban areas, citizens and/or their representatives presented zoning issues to the board for approval, including long-term planning, requests for variances on ordinances, and work projects. Rural areas discussed a wide variety of issues from summer recreation programs to improving landscaping in the town. We found a much more community-oriented atmosphere at the rural meetings. The attendees seemed to know each other well and share a common community spirit. The urban meetings generally had less public comment and were much less lively.

Liaison Interview Results

We each interviewed the liaison for the meetings we personally attended. These interviews gave us a unique perspective into how the liaisons view their jobs. Specifically, we learned that the majority of the liaisons have been in their positions for eight years or more and have been with the same board or council for that length of time. Newer liaisons have been in the position for three years or less. Concerning meeting attendance, all of the liaisons except one said the attendance at the meetings was normal. However, the number of attendees varied at each meeting. Whitney and Winchester had the lowest number of attendees (with 7 and 12 respectively) as compared with the other meetings with attendance over 20 people.

⁹ See Appendix I for a complete listing of responses for this survey question.

When asked, “Who are the majority of the people that attend?” and, “Are there any regulars?” the rural liaisons said mostly regulars attend. In contrast, the urban liaisons said people who attend usually have a specific concern or an issue that affects them personally.

The liaisons in the urban meetings reported that they only knew the citizens in the area somewhat well or not very well. In contrast, the liaisons for the rural meetings responded to the same question with “well” or “very well.”

When asked, “How often is the website updated?” the liaisons gave a variety of answers. Some stated the website was updated according to public meeting laws. Others stated it was daily or whenever the two liaisons responsible for updating the website get around to it. One of the liaisons responsible for updating the website stated that it is updated weekly.

Design Limitations

Attendees vs. non-attendees.

The plan of surveying meeting attendees came about when considering our time constraints and how to obtain the most information possible given our limited time and resources. We wanted to determine who is attending these meetings and how they are finding out about them. We were aware going into the project that there were immediate limitations inherent in the method we used, but given our time constraint, we chose to proceed with the aforementioned plan.

The primary limitation that we recognized at the outset of our project was that we were only surveying attendees of the meetings. To get a full picture of the actual level of citizen involvement (or lack thereof), we would ideally like to get feedback from those

who do not attend meetings as well. Surveying non-attendees, however, would amount to essentially embarking on a county-wide survey, and would require extensive time and resources. Since we had such limited resources we decided to opt for surveying only attendees.

Need for Further Research

A recommendation for future research would be to take the opposite approach of this study and conduct a community survey to find out why citizens do *not* attend TAB and CAC meetings, and what might entice them to participate.

Another issue that was apparent in our survey data was a definite underrepresentation of minorities at TAB and CAC meetings. This is another area that could be addressed through future research, especially given the rapid growth rate and rate of demographic change that has occurred and continues to occur in Clark County. Exploring what measures could be taken to reach out to minorities and engage them in local government would be fruitful research for the County.

Survey Limitations

We wrote our survey with the intention of gathering as much information as we could from the attendees at the meetings. With the assistance of the liaisons at the meetings, the return rate of the surveys was high and we were able to obtain a lot of data for analysis. As the surveys were being returned, we discovered a few areas of concern that we had not anticipated, which had the potential to skew our data and results.

One thought that came to us too late in the process was the idea of including a cover letter of instruction for each packet of surveys for the liaisons to distribute. We could have outlined who the survey was intended for (primarily only citizens in

attendance, not TAB/CAC board members, County staffers, etc.) and thanked everyone again for their participation.

Another issue that came to light was the fact that we had no way of determining whether some respondents took the survey more than once. Since surveys were sent to multiple meetings of the same TAB or CAC in some cases, there is the potential that some people went to both meetings and took the survey both times.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations that our group would like to extend to Clark County to help boost attendance and citizen involvement in the TABs and CACs that represent them.

Reaching Missing Demographics

From the survey results and our own personal experience in attending some of the meetings, it is clear that only a certain group of people typically attend these meetings. We found that older and middle aged males make up most of the participants. Older and middle aged females are second, and those two groups accounted for the vast majority of those in attendance. Younger participants were underrepresented.

Comparison with demographics charts obtained from Clark County's website (www.accessclarkcounty.com) shows that there is a significant discrepancy between those who live in the areas and those who attend TAB and CAC meetings. A discrepancy is also evident when it comes to race and ethnicity and the lack of representation of minority groups. We have developed several recommendations to help bolster participation within these two groups.

E-government options.

For the younger group of citizens that we are trying to reach, we believe they tend to be more technologically savvy than some of the older participants. It is our suggestion that the County use this to reach out to them. Through the use of the website, and other methods of communicating electronically such as e-mail or text-messaging, the County might have greater success in reaching this group of citizens.

Meeting notice placement.

To reach the minority groups that were also greatly underrepresented at the meetings, a different method should be employed. It is possible that they are not receiving the information through the mail, or that notices are not posted in places they frequent. In order to reach these groups of people whose voices are not being heard, we recommend two possibilities. The first option is changing the locations where notices are posted or adding additional locations, which should include establishments frequented by the target minority groups. For example, the County should consider posting notices in ethnic specialty supermarkets or restaurants. The second method of reaching minorities that we suggest is to create some form of minority outreach program. This could be a forum where minorities could go and have their voices heard and give their input on decisions that affect them and their communities.

“Send it to us, don’t make us find it.”

Through our research, we found that the normal procedures for placing meeting notices consists of posting in areas with a high density of pedestrian traffic like public libraries and convenience stores. This method could perhaps be supplemented with

“direct delivery” options to better fit with today’s fast paced society, in which citizens might not stop to read posted notices.

In today’s society citizens may be less inclined altogether to seek out information. With the advent of enhanced communication mechanisms, we are constantly stimulated with information of all types coming at us from all directions, and we have grown accustomed to having things delivered directly to us, through avenues such as text messages and e-mails.

We found through our survey results that mailers delivered directly to citizens’ homes are very effective notification mechanisms for the demographic that attends TAB and CAC meetings, and we argue that electronic personal notifications could also be utilized to help inform the public of upcoming meetings and encourage them to attend.

Meeting Structure/Format

Track attendance.

When our group members attended the meetings, one of the first things we noticed is that the majority of meetings do not track attendance. The County thus cannot effectively track or compare meeting attendance. Therefore, the simplest recommendation we offer is to use a sign in sheet for every TAB and CAC meeting. This would give the County a record of meeting attendance trends and if they do choose to target initiatives to increase meeting attendance, they will have a concrete measure of success.

Give systematic feedback.

When citizens attend meetings, there is often a specific item of concern on the agenda that they want to learn about or voice their opinion on. After they say or learn

what they want to, they often leave. Some do not say anything at all at the meeting, but rather simply listen to the information that is given.

We believe that when citizens participate in a meeting, they will be more likely to attend another meeting in the future if they perceive that their opinion counts and is considered in decision making. Even if the ultimate decision goes against their wishes, the fact that their ideas were heard in the process would give them a better sense that their participation mattered. What we found is that sometimes citizens voice their opinion and then do not know the outcome of the issue. This can leave citizens feeling unfulfilled or confused. We suggest that the County strive to build more effective two-way communication between citizens and their local government. We believe that they can accomplish this by bolstering the role of the liaison, who serves as a messenger between TABs and CACs and the County. The liaison could use the designated agenda time to systematically provide brief updates on the progress of all items discussed at the previous meetings and continue to do so until the completion of each item. We feel that this would create a better sense of genuine citizen involvement and participation in the democratic process.

Website Redesign

Our research, interviews, and experiences substantiated what was found in the Web Usability Assessment performed for the County in 2006. There is a wealth of information and data available on the website, but its organization is not always logical from the user's perspective. Finding information often requires the user to be familiar with the County's organizational structure, and some information is accessible through multiple channels. We second a recommendation offered in the Web Usability

Assessment, which is to replace the current multiple navigation schemes with one simplified and consistent design.

Need for citizen input.

One other key recommendation that we offer regarding the restructuring of the website is that the County solicit and incorporate systematic citizen feedback throughout the website redevelopment process. We believe that this will help the County maximize the user experience and more effectively meet citizens' needs and expectations for online processes, transactions, and communications with government.

Future Recommendations

E-government/Web 2.0.

There is no question that technology changes and gets better and more sophisticated all the time, and the way people communicate also changes in stride with the new technologies available. In today's fast paced society people do not always have the luxury of taking the time to attend public meetings, but they still have a right to be able to participate in the discussions and find information on issues that directly impact them. The best solution would provide a way of accessing the information that one would hear in a physical meeting from the comforts of your own home and on your own time. We encourage the County to continue to make improvements and enhancements of options such as live streaming video to accommodate virtual participation in TAB and CAC meetings.

In addition, many innovative organizations both inside government and in the private sector are implementing new features in web design known as "Web 2.0" or "the new internet." This is not new technology per se, but rather more dynamic usage of the

internet characterized by “user-generated media.” One of the buzz words du jour is *blogs*. Blogs, short for “weblogs,” are user comments posted in a particular forum. This allows for instant communications and exchange of ideas.

The County could also add value to its website by creating a blog forum for citizens. In this way, citizens could exchange ideas with each other and with government officials, without having to leave their homes or offices. Whole discussions could be facilitated between citizens and government officials that would help create sound decisions that represent the community. The County could also easily track which subjects are getting the most attention. They could also use this forum to post information which would help people better understand current issues or debates that they may not quite grasp.

We qualify this as a future recommendation because successful implementation of features like this would require a significant commitment of resources. One key concern with user-generated content being posted is the need for a moderator to review and monitor posted content. Because it is a public website, there would need to be a method to prevent inappropriate, harassing, offensive, or pornographic items from being posted. Because the information that is posted would ultimately be used to help make decisions, the moderator would also need to ensure the posted material is accurate and conduct adequate research to provide correct responses to inquiries. While this can be a very resource-intensive venture, we recommend that the County keep it in mind for future website enhancements. If the right resources are in place, this could prove to be a very fruitful addition to the website.

Conclusion

It is every citizen's democratic right to voice his opinion and have his say in his local government affairs. Through the research we have done this summer, we have found that a surprisingly low percentage of the population of Clark County is actually utilizing this right, as evidenced by the low attendance rates we found at TAB and CAC meetings.

We have offered several recommendations, supported by the literature we examined on citizen participation, the survey results we obtained, interviews we conducted with County staff, and our own observations. We found that a large segment of the population of Clark County is not being represented at TAB and CAC meetings, including minorities and young adults. We have proposed recommendations to reach out to these groups, including suggestions for new meeting notice posting options and website enhancements. We have also suggested methods for optimizing communication between citizens and governments in ways that will make citizens more confident that their voice is being heard and hopefully increase their level of trust in local government.

We believe that as our society changes, government must also adapt and think creatively and innovatively to keep pace with the current world we live in. What worked 20 years ago, or even 10 years ago, may no longer be relevant. Government should strive to reach out to citizens on their level to generate productive participation and involvement.

References

- Andersen, K. V., Henriksen, H. Z., Secher, C., & Medaglia, R. (2007). Costs of e-participation: The management challenges. *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy*, 1(1), 29-43. doi:10.1108/17506160710733689
- Berman, E. M. (1997). Dealing with cynical citizens. *Public Administration Review*, 57(2), 105-112.
- Burby, R. J. (2003). Making plans that matter: *Citizen involvement and government action*. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 69(1), 33-49.
- Callahan, K. (2000). Citizen participation run amok. *Public Productivity & Management Review*, 23(3), 394-398.
- Greenwood, G. E., Breivogel, W. F., & Jester, R. E. (1977). Citizen advisory committees. *Theory into Practice*, 16(1), 12-16.
- Irvin, R. A., & Stansbury, J. (2004). Citizen participation in decision making: Is it worth the effort? *Public Administration Review*, 64(1), 55-65.
- Kathlene, L., & Martin, J. A. (1991). Enhancing citizen participation: Panel designs, perspectives, and policy formation. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 10(1), 46-63. doi:04072008

Kweit, R. W., & Kweit, M. G. (1980). Bureaucratic decision-making: Impediments to citizen participation. *Polity*, 12(4), 647-666.

Thomas, C. L. (1991). One hundred twenty years of citizen involvement with the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board. *Environmental History Review*, 15(1), 61-81.

Wang, X. (2001). Assessing public participation in U.S. cities. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 24(4), 322-336.

Weeks, E. C. (2000). The practice of deliberative democracy: Results from four large-scale trials. *Public Administration Review*, 60(4), 360-372.