

WINTER/HIVER 2012

VOL. 52 NO. 4

SMART COMMUNITIES · LES COMMUNAUTÉS BRANCHÉES

PUBLICATION AGREEMENT 40010080

PLANNING CANADA

Connecting Smart Communities / Rassembler les communautés branchées



78/7

xx134(S)

Justen Harcourt
Colliers International Realty Advisors
1910-200 Granville Street
Vancouver BC V6C 2R6

BY MAUREEN MENDOZA

PLACESPEAK

21st Century Innovation

in Public Participation

SUMMARY This article discusses current technological innovation in public consultation, highlighting Vancouver-grown platform PlaceSpeak. It outlines how current consultation practices and the need for evidence-based decision-making lend themselves to the adoption of online consultation methods and the support for “Civic Technology”. The article considers how place-based, authenticated consultation in particular better connects citizens to decision makers. Further, the article highlights how the early adopters—both users and proponents alike—of PlaceSpeak have contributed to and benefited from online consultation. Finally, this discussion suggests how planners have the potential to innovate public consultation practices both on and offline.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article discute des récentes innovations technologiques en matière de consultation publique, en mettant l'accent sur la plateforme en ligne développée à Vancouver, PlaceSpeak. Il décrit la façon dont les pratiques actuelles de consultation et le besoin de prendre des décisions fondées sur des données probantes se prêtent à l'adoption de méthodes de consultation en ligne et au soutien de la « technologie civique ». En plus de considérer comment la consultation authentique adaptée au milieu aide à rapprocher davantage les citoyens des décideurs, cet article souligne la façon dont les premières personnes ayant souscrit à PlaceSpeak—autant utilisateurs que défenseurs—ont contribué à la consultation en ligne tout en en tirant profit. Enfin, il suggère que les urbanistes ont le potentiel d'innover les pratiques de consultation publique à la fois en ligne et hors ligne.

THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

One of the biggest challenges facing planners carrying out public consultation is gathering representative, qualitative, and quantitative data, in order to guide policy and development, through evidence-based decision-making. However, current engagement strategies often discourage certain voices and benefit others, leaving many citizens excluded from the dialogue and choices that affect much of their everyday lives. Indeed, the crisis in current public


consultation practices with its lack of accountability and participation can undermine democratic and civic engagement.^{1,2}

As planners continue to search for tools in an effort to create a more inclusive community engagement process, the Internet and social media have provided the opportunity for positive results. Today, traditional forms of public consultation such as mailers, telephone polling, and open meetings, are no longer satisfactory for citizens, planners and governments. The Internet provides a place where planners and municipalities not only have a presence,

but also provides almost unlimited potential for connecting with residents.

THE RISE OF CIVIC TECHNOLOGY

In June 2012, *The Atlantic* published an article citing “Civic Technology” as the wave of the future. It advised city administrations to produce “permanent industries” as a means of connecting their residents to government, and local decision makers.³ Cities have experimented with novel ways of creating collaborative democracy using civic lotteries and participatory budgeting



via the Internet. However, connecting to people online based specifically on where they live still remains a challenge, because many online consultation efforts allow citizens to remain anonymous.

Fortunately, Vancouver-based *PlaceSpeak*, founded by Colleen Hardwick and supported by the National Research Council, has entered the arena. *PlaceSpeak* is a “place-based” online public consultation platform that connects citizens with proponents on issues taking place in their neighbourhoods. Hardwick has first-hand experience with the problems of public consultation due to her position on the City of Vancouver’s Development Permit Board. She developed *PlaceSpeak* because of her involvement in the issues regarding transit development in her neighbourhood.

PLACESPEAK: CANADA’S CIVIC TECHNOLOGY


PlaceSpeak encourages residents to “Claim your place, speak your mind” and engage with local decision makers. *PlaceSpeak* users provide the addresses of where they live, work, and play, and by establishing their “place”, they are able to consult with leaders and decision makers on issues that directly affect them. By intentionally tying their online identity to a geographic location, people can request they be informed of proceedings concerning real estate development, transit expansion, liquor licenses, school closures, or any other discussions that could possibly affect their everyday lives.

PlaceSpeak gives supporters of various proposals geographic control regarding those with whom they wish to consult. By the requirement that each proponent specify places involved, the population in question has the ability to participate. This means data—both quantitative and qualitative—can be segmented spatially, comparing how attitudes may differ between different areas. For local decision makers, this ability to segment data adds to the accuracy of the responses and a more nuanced understanding of those responses instead of having to rely on anonymous comments. Consultations are conducted using a user-friendly platform with features such as discussion forums, polls and surveys, and notice boards. The use of social media allows proponents to deliver targeted notifications to residents about public

housing, report updates, and inform them of any new consultations taking place in their areas.

ADOPTING PLACESPEAK

There are two main features which differentiate *PlaceSpeak* from other online engagement platforms. First, instead of creating websites for each consultation and expecting citizens to follow links, the platform creates a bank of citizens who have demonstrated a desire to be involved in the process. Those who want to participate in a particular consultation can be then notified of subsequent consultations which may concern them. The advocacy and use of geo-verification and validation of online identity to geography makes *PlaceSpeak* the leader among other similar technologies. Authentication has profound effects on the advancement of online consultation, because citizens who self-identify can be matched with advocates of particular projects, while still maintaining the privacy that they want.



PlaceSpeak encourages residents to “Claim your place, speak your mind”

Hardwick recognizes that the adoption and awareness of online consultation is best promoted through both online and offline methods that direct citizens to the consultation from as many points of connectedness as possible. Offline information could be disseminated via mailers, posters, handouts, and media outlets such as radio and TV to spread the word about the *PlaceSpeak* consultation process. Online, social media like Twitter and Facebook, e-mail, and widgets, can be employed to direct citizens to a specific *PlaceSpeak* consultation page. Further, the platform’s development team just introduced its new API (application programming interface), allowing third-party websites (other consultation platforms) to interact with the *PlaceSpeak* platform, taking advantage of *PlaceSpeak*’s geo-authentication technology. *PlaceSpeak*

has also recently integrated “Fluid Survey”, which is used by many local governments in their polling and research efforts.

At the end of the day, the objective of online engagement is to create a broader reach into the community. Information thus obtained is accurate, accountable, and verifiable, and an effective means of working towards building consensus. Even though users are online, they remain anonymous to the public, but the proponent will always know them, because as Hardwick explains, “You want to be taken seriously. In order to genuinely affect policy and decisions in your area, you need to be real.”

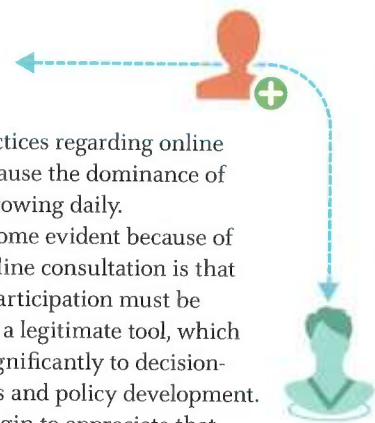
PLANNING OPPORTUNITIES ONLINE: A NEW FRONTIER

PlaceSpeak has gained momentum as planners use the platform with increasing frequency, demonstrating that new methods must be employed to reach citizens. *PlaceSpeak* was developed in British Columbia, and as a result, most online consultation using the platform was concentrated there, but it is steadily gaining a wider reach. Consultations to date have included a pilot project in Tofino on Vancouver Island, which concerned their emergency tsunami siren test area, strategic plans for the Corporation of North Delta, Chilliwack’s Official Community Plan, and BC Hydro’s Site C Dam in Fort St. John. *PlaceSpeak* continues to work with the City of Vancouver, most recently hosting its consultation project on behalf of the Mayor’s Task Force on Housing Affordability.

Because *PlaceSpeak* is scalable and reaches residents in their particular areas of work, home, and play, it is a great tool for planners in all areas: transportation, urban development, environmental concerns, heritage, community and social planning, as well as agricultural and beyond. *PlaceSpeak* can connect widely dispersed populations in a consultation that would have been nearly impossible before, because of the great distances involved. Thanks to the fact that Internet coverage is growing and more people are using it every day, *PlaceSpeak* has the capacity to engage and impact communities from the most cosmopolitan cities, to the most remote rural settlements.

Michael Epps, a municipal planner for the Township of Gibson tells how *PlaceSpeak* enriched consultations for





its Harbour Area Plan. "I was privileged to be one of the first to use *PlaceSpeak*," Michael explains. "The platform made setting up and administering an online engagement process simple and being able to map participants and track respondents by neighbourhood, provided a rich layer of information for use in our planning decision-making. The platform has fantastic potential to facilitate dialog and engagement."

PLACESPEAK USERS: ENGAGING, CONNECTING AND INFLUENCING

Key to the value proposition for users is that because of their contributions they are able to influence outcomes. The value of *PlaceSpeak* was amply demonstrated by the consultation hosted for the City of New Westminster's Master Transportation Plan, which included the redevelopment of the city's major transportation infrastructure, the Pattullo Bridge. By limiting users to the city's boundaries, and by segmenting the area into 14 neighbourhoods, the city was able to host a survey to gain accurate insight into the populations' feelings about the bridge.

Over 1,000 *PlaceSpeak* users viewed the consultation, and almost 200 New Westminster residents took the survey. The online participation scored a higher response rate than the in-person open house, which hosted about 300 residents and resulted in only 30 survey responses. After the consultation, Metro Vancouver's transit authority, TransLink, agreed to work collaboratively with the City to explore alternative options for transit development.

These results were reported to users of the platform. Consultations where citizens' voices are taken into account shows that their opinions not only matter... they can affect decisions. Because the consultation developed an online database of users, New

Westminster residents were notified and asked to participate when *PlaceSpeak* was used to engage the populace in budgetary consultations for the city.

Jerry Behl, a transportation engineer for the City of New Westminster and key contact for the consultations, affirmed the necessity to provide multiple ways for citizens to connect. "We gave people the option of turning up at an open house or participating via *PlaceSpeak*." He said he was very "surprised by the sheer number of people who logged on and took a look, we covered a lot of bases this way."

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND DECISION MAKERS

Mike Harcourt, former mayor of Vancouver and premier of British Columbia, recognizes how innovative technologies like *PlaceSpeak* can provide solutions for some of the major flaws in current consultation methods. He says, "Many people see public meetings as dominated by ideologues, self-serving people, rude behaviour, and addressing only one issue. Door-to-door polling and its benefits is severely hampered by the fact that many people live in large buildings featuring tight security, making it very difficult to conduct door-to-door surveys. Conducting a phone survey is also a problem today, because many people are using cell phones, which feature private numbers and caller ID to screen unwanted callers."

Of course with new technologies, questions regarding public engagement still remain: how can planners connect with constituents encompassing a wide range of opinion? Can e-consultations attract new involvement by the public rather than simply provide another platform for those already engaged online? Even with an increasingly networked society, there are still definite challenges to overcome—problems similar to those of traditional consultation methods, including language and cultural barriers and especially concerns over privacy and security. The debate of the digital divide still lingers with concerns about self-selection and whether participation in online consultation is biased towards highly educated participants of advantaged socio-economic position or is everyone's opinion equally considered. Local governments must

modify their practices regarding online consultation, because the dominance of social media is growing daily.

What has become evident because of the growth of online consultation is that verified citizen participation must be acknowledged as a legitimate tool, which can contribute significantly to decision-making outcomes and policy development. When citizens begin to appreciate that their voices are being heard, and they can influence decisions, is when citizen participation will increase rapidly. Harcourt hopes that online interaction can foster connections offline as well, acknowledging, "*PlaceSpeak* can be a way to connect people electronically to issues and to neighbours, hopefully leading to face-to-face individual and community interaction."

PlaceSpeak relies on the premise that the consultation process can be open, accessible, dynamic, and transparent. Proponents and planners are uniquely positioned to be innovators in public consultation, not as a means to an end, but as a unique opportunity to empower and inform citizens. Online consultation is not meant to replace in-person, face-to-face methods, but to enhance those interactions when and where online consultation is appropriate.

For planners, *PlaceSpeak* has not only demonstrated its impact on best practices for online consultation but also its potential to reconnect with citizens who have grown wary of how decisions are being made. Furthermore, those citizens who have never participated in consultations previously now have the ability to connect with decision makers. Planners now recognize that *PlaceSpeak* isn't merely about including more voices through better technology, but also a way to create better conditions for these voices to be heard, online and offline. ■

MAUREEN MENDOZA is a 2nd-year MA student at the University of British Columbia's School of Regional Planning. Under the MITACS Accelerate Research Internship Program, Maureen was *PlaceSpeak*'s summer intern, focusing on the potential opportunities for online engagement in the property development industry. Contact *PlaceSpeak* at info@PlaceSpeak.com and reach Maureen at maureen.mendoza@alumni.ubc.ca.

REFERENCES

1. Coleman S, Götz J. *Bowling Together: Online Public Engagement in Policy Deliberation*. Hansard Society. London: London School of Economics; 2001.
2. Gurstein P. *Creating Digital Public Space: Implications for Deliberative Engagement*. In: Gurstein P, Angeles L, editors. *Learning Civil Societies: Shifting Contexts for Democratic Planning and Governance*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 2007.
3. Badger E. *The Next Big Start-up Wave: Civic Technology*. *The Atlantic*; June 13, 2012. Available at: <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/technology/2012/06/next-big-start-wave-civic-technology/2265/>