

Commissioner trying new community chat service

By JOHN KLINE john.kline@goshennews.com | Posted: Monday, March 9, 2015 3:00 am

GOSHEN — Ever wish you had a more secure, authentic and productive way to communicate with your local government representatives online? If so, a new online community dialogue tool being tested by Elkhart County Commissioner Mike Yoder may be right up your alley.

The program, called PlaceSpeak, is described by its developers as a location-based community consultation platform aimed at promoting dialogue on local issues. Yoder launched his own version of the online tool, www.placespeak.com/elkhartcounty, last week. The site is free to use, and open to all Elkhart County residents.

“Essentially this organization has taken some of the attributes of social media, and has added a layer of verification and authentication that really approaches a voter registration or ballot box,” Yoder said, noting that he stumbled upon the site by accident several months ago, and immediately became intrigued by the site’s potential for creating a safe, secure, and highly customized interactive space for community dialogue and idea sharing.

“It takes a little bit of effort to get on the site because you have to be verified. It’s not like just popping onto Facebook, putting in a name and password and off you go,” Yoder said. “But once you’re signed in, and you connect with a discussion, you can get updates, feedback, etc. So it’s simple after the fact. And once you’re signed in and a member of the site, if I post a new issue that involves your area, you will be notified immediately that a new question or issue has been posted.”

According to the company website, PlaceSpeak has been designed to transform the way people in neighborhoods interact with location based topics — things like zoning issues, school referendums, community development, etc. — by amplifying conversations relative to proximity.

“PlaceSpeak connects people’s online identities with their residential addresses so that they can voice their opinions electronically in a wide variety of forums and provide our proponents with confidence that they are receiving feedback from the right places,” the site states. “We are advancing the public consultation process by creating an online platform that enables inclusive, informed participation, policy development and decision making.”

And that, Yoder said, is exactly what has been missing when it comes to local community dialogue in the digital age.

“Some of the things I see with it in the future is the possibility of making local government more interactive and user friendly,” Yoder said. “So for instance, when the County Commissioners have public hearings on a rezoning request, that’s at 9 a.m. Mondays, which is not real convenient for a lot of people. But with this, I could put that topic up on the site, and I could limit the discussion directly to only those people who have a direct connection to the zoning request. So that way, I know I’m not getting comments from Timbuktu, or somebody from Hawaii, etc.”

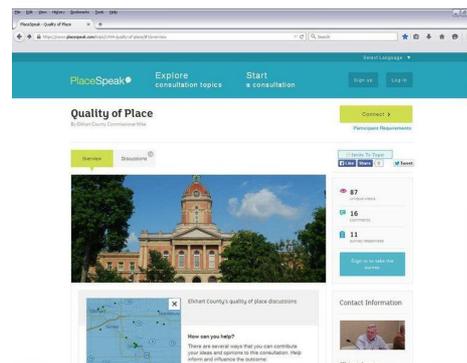
Along those lines, Yoder noted that anonymity has been one of the biggest detractors when it comes to local community interaction on sites such as Facebook, where users don’t necessarily have to confirm who they are or where they’re from when commenting on sensitive local issues.

With PlaceSpeak, while users will still have the ability to comment on issues anonymously, many of the issues that often go along with anonymous commentary — i.e. people commenting on issues they have no direct connection to, etc. — are weeded out through the tool’s more stringent registration and verification process.

“The vast majority of people will participate as who they say they are,” Yoder said. “But if it’s sensitive topic like, say, a controversial rezoning or something, you will be able to post a comment anonymously, but you’ll still have to be a true, legitimate member of that community in order to submit a comment.”

In addition, Yoder said the site’s more stringent verification system will also help to cut down on what have come to be known as “trolls” in online discourse, or people who sow discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people by posting inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community with the deliberate intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.

“The verification gets rid of the trolls that you get on a lot of the less regulated sites,” Yoder said. “I didn’t know this before, but there are actually professional businesses that provide what are called ‘trolling’ services, where they can actually create all of these artificial online personalities and profiles, and they go on these sites and just trash an idea, or a proposed project, etc., and there’s no verification.



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Goshen News photoTHIS SCREEN GRAB image from PlaceSpeak shows the Elkhart County page.

You can do it anonymously. But with PlaceSpeak, it's all verified, it's authenticated, and creates a much more civil and productive experience."

Due to the exploratory nature of the program, Yoder said he is currently covering the cost of the site himself, though he noted that his long-term goal is to eventually see the tool expanded into other areas of county government, and possibly even to other areas of the greater Elkhart County community such as non-profits, school corporations, etc.

"I personally will probably keep my own site, but I also see where the county may take on their own site as well, particularly when it comes to planning and development purposes for sure," Yoder said.

And that, according to PlaceSpeak founder and CEO Colleen Hardwick, is exactly what she had in mind when designing the program in the first place.

"We've believed for some time that information and communications technology has the potential of strengthening our democracy by strengthening the relationship between citizens and their representatives," Hardwick said during a phone interview Friday. "Having this be used in the ways Mike is suggesting is exactly how we'd like to see it be used. So we couldn't be more delighted."

To learn more about the county's PlaceSpeak site or to sign up and join the conversation, visit www.placespeak.com/elkhartcounty. A web-based video tutorial explaining some of the capabilities of the PlaceSpeak program can also be found by visiting the company's YouTube channel.