Digitizing Public Information

10 Points

New action - October 2015

In recent decades, the world has moved further into the Digital Age. Consumers expect the efficiency and availability of services that come from online technologies. The same goes for public information services. Now that information is so freely shared across the Internet, the expectations placed on government to be more transparent and accessible continue to increase. People count on searching their municipal website for information the same way they would conduct a Google search for movie times or directions to a meeting. And luckily, by proactively posting information of high interest, municipalities can cut down on Open Public Records Act requests and service calls, which can eat up a lot of staff time and resources. This action awards towns points for digitizing and posting public information.

In order for a town to receive 10 points for this action every certification period, evidence must be provided to show that the required digital public information and documents are posted to the municipal website and kept current.

Why is it important?

Public engagement is a key component to creating a partnership between the municipality and its citizens. People need information that is accessible and easily digestible in order to participate effectively. That's where this action comes into play.

Local governments need to figure out how to leverage the benefits that "going digital" has on their operations. Internally, 1) cost savings and efficiencies are created, such as a reduced need for physical storage of records and printing costs; less staff time focused on responding to information requests since the public knows where to go to get information themselves; increased productivity among staff who no longer have to manage paper records; 2) a culture of cooperation is developed, as agencies now have access to records across departmental sectors; and 3) policymakers are better informed on the decisions they make because they have a greater understanding of the operational aspects of their government in order to create

efficiencies for the future, and can more easily compare their town to others.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

The town council and administrator should be involved in setting the standards for the practice of digitizing public information, and the municipal clerk or public records custodian should lead the implementation. There may also be a need for the IT coordinator to be involved in the implementation.

Timeframe

The time frame for this action is 2 months and up, depending upon the extent of the town's public documents archive, the digital status of its records, etc.

Project Costs and Resource Needs

The expense of digitizing your town's existing records can be costly, depending upon the town's needs. In order to digitize records and post them online, associated costs include a server to store the electronic records, the process of digitizing the records, development of a platform to share the records with the public, and staff training on the new procedures.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

This section lists the requirements for earning points for this action. We have provided guidance and recommendations for implementing the action. It is not required to follow this guidance exactly as long as the final product meets the requirements.

1) Post information of high interest on the municipal website, including at minimum: (Note: This information should be posted in a location on the municipal website that is easy for the public to find. If the information already exists in the digital formats required by this action, a link to the existing location will suffice. Third party sites are acceptable.)

- links to appropriate municipal social media sites

- email and phone contact information for all governing body members, key municipal staff/departments, and all local emergency services

- public meeting dates, times, locations

- agendas and minutes of all public meetings of the governing body and appointed boards which are required to keep minutes, in a timely fashion. Governing body minutes should be accompanied by any relevant resolutions and ordinances pertaining to that public meeting. (Note: Meeting minutes can refer to the website location where adopted ordinances and resolutions are listed, either in an online municipal code book or webpage containing such a list.) Including relevant contracts and shared service agreements is highly recommended.

- a list of municipal boards and commissions, their members & term expiration dates (Note: N.J.P.L.1979, Chapter 141 requires every municipality to maintain a public directory of the municipal commissions/authorities, containing their number of positions, names of members & terms of office, vacancies, and general frequency of meetings. It does not require that this directly be put into electronic format and shared on the municipal website as this action so requires.)

- non-emergency public services to the town, such as trash/recycling pickup, snow removal, and street cleaning schedules, permit applications and forms, licenses, etc. with appropriate contact information

- recreational activities and programs

- local school information including addresses and contact information

- Open Public Records Act request form

- RFPs, RFQs and vendor bid notifications for goods and services and construction projects over the municipal bid threshold (Note: RFP/RFQ responses are recommended, but not required.)

2) **Choose at least one of the following five options to post on the website in digital format as well:**

- ordinances, resolutions, executive orders and administrative codes (Note: While ordinances and resolutions are posted with meeting agendas and minutes, they would also need to be listed somewhere easily found with all ordinances, resolutions, executive orders and administrative codes.)

- contract and shared service agreements to be listed in minutes pertaining to that public meeting (Note: It should be indicated if materials are in a format unable to be digitized, such as blue prints.)

- tax maps searchable by block & lot (Note: It is preferable to provide a digital tax map the where a user can search by block and lot, like Wayne's Interactive Mapping Portal, Woodbridge, Gloucester County and Morris County. Many counties provide this information for municipalities. The NJ Division of Taxation is another resource. Some towns and counties provide tax maps as PDF documents, which is also acceptable. The downside to PDF's is that they are fixed and static and require regular update. It may be better to link to the state or county tax board sites, which are updated annually at minimum.)

- labor agreements and professional (or "no bid") contracts awarded by the governing body (Note: A reference to the NJ Public Employment Relations Commission site for links to municipal public sector contracts is acceptable.)

- crime statistics, updated on a monthly basis (Note: It is recommended that this information be posted in a useable, "machine readable" format. Denver and Chicago are a great examples, as their crime statistics are shared with the public in open data portals that have usable raw data that includes the case number, location and description of incident, course of action, and GIS coordinates so that the information can be viewable as a map, among many other visualizations and downloaded in various file types (see Denver and Chicago for examples). If such a sophisticated open data portal is not feasible for your town, a report which includes at minimum, the location, date, time, and description of incident, as well as the course of action taken for every crime reported. Charts which show categorical statistics are helpful in painting a picture, but cannot be the only source of information shared.)

We also encourage municipalities to consider the following best practices:

- As many documents as possible should be converted to "machine readable" formats. "Machine-readable" formats are computer languages that are automatically read by a computer or web browser and can have their data extracted by computer programs easily (i.e. CSV, RDF, XML, JSON). Scans and images such as JPG and PDF are easily read by humans, but not computers. The U.S. Open Government Directive requires all federal data to be shared in an open format, defined as "one that is platform independent, machine readable, and made available to the public without restrictions that would impede the re-use of that information." For more information, see Data.gov's "Primer on Machine Readability for Online Documents and Data".

- Visualizations can help people understand complex data in a more digestible manner, such as budget information. We recommend the use of visual aids (info graphics, maps) and foreign language options, where applicable. The U.S. Census Bureau is a great example of government data visualization in use. It should be noted that many translation services can be inaccurate. If you choose to use such software, it is recommended that you include such a disclaimer.

- Once a town begins posting public information in digital format on the website, it will become regular practice moving forward. Towns can implement a standard that all newly created public documents will be created in formats that are made immediately available for upload for quick and easy sharing with the public.

- Guidelines for Digitizing Records: No set standards exist across the board, however because of the federal mandate to digitize all historical records, we are seeing federal departments sharing information and tools, and collaborating on best practices, which can be applied to the local level. The Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative has an array of guidelines pertaining to digitizing various formats of information. The State Archives of North Carolina has a catalog of guidelines for digitizing records, from signatures to email and social media to imagery.

What to submit to get credits/points

This is an annual action. In order for a town to receive 10 points for this action every certification period, evidence must be provided to show that the required digital public information and documents are posted to the municipal website and kept current. Towns must complete the downloadable submission checklist.

1. Please use the text box provided on the submission page for this action to share of any details on what has been accomplished and the impact it has or will have on the municipality beyond what was contained in the submission checklist.

2. Upload a completed submission checklist.

If you have gone beyond these recommended examples, please share in detail.

IMPORTANT NOTES: There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Spotlight: What NJ Towns are doing

While we have not yet found a town that is doing everything included within this action, Princeton and West Windsor are doing much of what is required. This information is found with downloadable links when appropriate, all of it easy to find. The left hand columns hold the majority of this information with one simple click, otherwise it is found through easily identified tabs across the top of the page. The Monmouth University Polling Institute completed an analysis of municipal websites in 2013, with criteria such as ease of use, content, and citizen interaction. Towns can compare their own ranking against other towns.

Resources

Google Fusion – free, easy to use that creates maps from the simple uploading of a spreadsheet. Examples: NJ Spotlight; NYC Comptroller; WNYC map list

GovQA – fee based service that provides a customizable OPRA request portal that is searchable by the public, a payment service, and ways to manage and track request processes

Government Web Professionals of New Jersey (GoWProNJ) – a group focused on using the web to effectively communicate with constituents, while keeping up with the latest technology, and meeting citizen demand for more e-government - Robert Charkowsky, President -rcharkowsky@ucnj.org

Info graphics – a powerful way to tell a story through visualizations. The US Department of

Energy uses info graphics in an effective way to tell a story in an easy-to-understand way. There are sites you can use to create info graphics for free: Tableau Public, PicktoChart)

Municipal Clerks' Association of New Jersey ** – assist in setting up uniform methods of procedures in New Jersey towns. Joel Popkin - 732-609-6441 | ExecutiveDirector@NJClerks.org

National Archives' online record catalog View their complete strategy for digitizing their archives, and includes their objectives, current status analysis, approach to digitizing, and more.

National Association of Government Web Professionals - an organization of local and state government web professionals working together to share knowledge, best practices, and innovative ideas to improve our capacity to provide value across the web to our communities - Katya Wowk, Northeast Region Director - katyaw@nagw.net

New Jersey Foundation for Open Government – a nonprofit focused on protecting and expanding public access to government records and meetings, and a good source of information on implementation standards of the Open Public Records Act. info@njfog.org

NJ-GMIS Chapter - an association of government IT leaders - Executive Director Mitchell Darer, mdarer@mresc.k12.nj.us

Open Public Records Act (P.L. 2001, CHAPTER 404, N.J.S. 47:1A-1 et seq.)

The Sunlight Foundation – a go to resource for best practices on open government."Can Electronic Records Save Money, Increase Efficiency, and Benefit Everyone?" a blog post on the cost benefit analysis of digitizing public records.