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## MindMixer: Civic Engagement 24/7, in Your Pyjamas

Image



Civic tech software is giving more citizens a voice in local decisions

Imagine that the citizens of your community can participate meaningfully in important local issues from the comfort of their own homes, at any time of day that's convenient, without taking a lot of time.

Imagine that when they do they have access to good information. Their ideas are acknowledged, and maybe even improved by public discussion. And they know there is a real chance their input will be put to use.

Does that sound a bit utopian? It's not. It's a list of some of the advantages of

MindMixer, one example of a new landscape of tools called “civic tech” — online software for public engagement that is changing how local government works.

“People who are using it can use it any time, 24/7,” says Kari O’Rourke, community engagement consultant for the City of Kelowna. “That’s why online engagement works so well for us: because people can do it in their pyjamas.”

The referenced media source is missing and needs to be re-embedded.

*MindMixer is an example of a new generation of online tools that let citizens share ideas, comment on projects, answer visioning questions and discover shared priorities.*

“To me it’s about getting all the voices at the table,” adds Ron Mattiussi, Kelowna’s city manager. “We’re becoming much more collaborative — much more. And that is why a lot of the web-based methods are superior.”

MindMixer is a four-year-old company based in Kansas, whose software is now in use in a number of Canadian cities of all sizes: Kelowna, Calgary, Burlington, Guelph and Toronto. One new customer, Riverview, New Brunswick, has a population of 19,000.

The software’s tagline is “idea collaboration for better communities.” Its development was accelerated by Code for America — which has been called “a kind of Peace Corps for geeks” — and its implications for local planning are large.

In the United States, less than 9 per cent of adults attend a town hall or public meeting in a given year, though many more say they are interested in local decisions.

MindMixer’s founders knew how badly those meetings are attended, because they used to be consultants, organizing them.

“Town halls are great. They’re probably the oldest method to capture feedback from

a community. They're just antiquated," Nathan Preheim, chief operating officer and co-founder has said.

"I think the best thing is that we're broadening engagement and giving voice to people who didn't have voice before."

The reality is, apart from their low attendance traditional public meetings are not representative of the community. They are typically attended by an older generation with a certain level of health, time and education. They feel comfortable in an environment many see as bureaucratic, political or — let's lot mince words — boring.

"If we're broadening engagement and we're hearing from moms, and working parents, and senior citizens, and young high school kids, you're going to get much more reflective feedback," Nathan says.

Ron describes traditional town halls as a necessary and valid part of the decision-making process, but one that tends to bring out the same small group of people. The nature of the process can breed "the loudest mouth in the room," with other people sitting back and not participating because they're intimidated by the environment or the tone.

Kelowna has now used MindMixer for three projects, including a somewhat controversial decision about how a park would be developed in an established neighbourhood.

It's a simple, and comparatively inexpensive tool to use. A community poses a series of questions around a project they're working on. They may be as simple as a quick poll or survey, larger visioning questions, a photo share, or budget-based questions. People comment and reply online.

MindMixer has many links to the social media sites people are already using. Participants get feedback at every stage about how their ideas are being used.

"It's shifted how we create a lot of projects. We're putting the information in people's hands and inviting citizens to participate." Ron says.

"As a planner I'll tell you most of the time we have the old kind of meetings. I'll go to

a hall, put up some boards, and the same ten people show up. Through web-based applications — people are going in at 11 o'clock at night. They don't have to go at 7 o'clock to the church basement."

*This article is part of an ongoing exploration of the changing role of municipal government in Canada.*

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