

ST. PAUL E-DEMOCRACY

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St. Paul E-Democracy is a non-partisan citizen based organization that uses the internet to inform citizens about important local policy issues and to engage them in the public policy making process. We have created a public space online, where any citizen can start a public discussion on any issue, share information, make an announcement, or ask a question.

Previous attempts to launch open online public policy forums, either disintegrated due to abusive behavior, were taken over by interest groups, or turned into debate societies without any real impact. E-Democracy.Org uses a model for online discussion which establishes and enforces rules for participation and makes sure that elected officials, journalists, and city staff are paying attention – right from the start. This means that by using our forums, citizens and community leaders are able to get knowledgeable answers to policy questions, inspire newspaper articles, or even stimulate discussion in city hall.

We try to work closely with neighborhood based organizations and other local partners to coordinate our online discussions with what is happening in the community. We view our online forums as only one of many tools that citizens have available to them to participate in local government. We use the simplest and most accessible technology possible to keep the barriers to participation low. Currently, this means email (listserve) technology. However, we are currently developing an opensource tool which will combine the ease of use of e-mail with the best features of a web based forum.

We believe that citizens are best able to respond to government initiatives and participate in the process, when they have access to important and timely information. And when they are able to quickly and efficiently communicate with other citizens. We have found that local newspapers have cut back dramatically on local news coverage and the internet is a great opportunity for citizens to share news and information about local issues with each other.

In my city, neighborhood activists used the St. Paul Issues Forum to fight with a local company and the city, over a factory that was doing environmental damage in their neighborhood. The St. Paul Issues Forum provided a clear channel of communications between citizen groups and kept this issue in front of citizen activists in other unaffected parts of the city. Local government officials and company managers listened closely to what was being said in our public forum.

Another discussion started by a neighborhood activist in the St. Paul Issues

Forum resulted in city council debate on the funding formula for neighborhood organizations. Parent groups have used our forum to announce public meetings on the school district budget and to share information with each other online. We have even asked school district officials to reply to parent questions in our online forum. Some of this data was then printed for even wider distribution.

The policy agenda in the St. Paul Issues Forum is set by the participants. Anyone willing to obey forum rules, is eligible to participate. We are in the process of forming a steering committee of local citizens and representatives of partner organizations, that will set forum management policies and deal with disputes. In the past, this was done by a single volunteer forum manager.

One of the most important lessons that our organization has learned, is that the use of the internet for citizen participation does not eliminate or replace the need for grassroots organizing and outreach. We still need to attend community meetings and work with community partners to inform citizens about the opportunity to participate and provide training in the skills necessary to participate.

We understand that not all citizens will have the necessary internet access to participate online, which is why we work with partner organizations to increase internet access in our city and insure that alternative means of citizen participation are available. We also believe, that the St. Paul Issues Forum provides neighborhood activists and local community leaders with the information that they need to work with other citizens who are unable to connect with us online.

We believe that access to information and communications technology are critical tools for citizen participation in local government. It is the mission of our organization to increase local internet access and train citizens in the skills necessary to make effective use of the internet. We also work with local government officials to find the best ways of making government data and information available to the public and to train officials on how to use the internet to communicate with citizens.

In cities with where internet access is much more restricted than St. Paul, we encourage organizations to find a critical mass of community organizers who can make use of the internet to share stories and exchange information and act as intermediaries with those who do not have access. Information distributed via the internet can be passed along by voice or printed flyers. Likewise, a few individuals can collect stories or ideas in the poorest neighborhood and share them with government officials via email.

Like cell phones or video technology, the internet is an important tool for local citizen participation. We should find ways to make use of it, even when access is difficult.

For more information: <http://www.e-democracy.org>

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