

Western Carolina University's 201

CITIZEN-GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS AT THE LOCAL
LEVEL IN NORTH CAROLINA

How North Carolina's

DETAILED SURVEY RESULTS

I. Survey Methods

In the spring of 2013, we contacted all North Carolina county managers by email or mail and all city managers by email. We obtained the city managers' contact information from the North Carolina League of Municipalities. We received 32 usable responses from county managers (a 32% response rate) and 71 usable responses from city managers (a 21% response rate). We asked a series of both open-ended and multiple choice questions to elicit information regarding what practices each government used to interact with its citizens. In addition to what practices were used, we also asked questions concerning both the usefulness and the influence of each type of interaction. Our survey also asked about unique methods that local governments utilize to gather public concerns or gauge public opinion.

II. Methods of Interacting with the Public

We asked respondents (county and city managers or their designees) to tell us whether they used particular methods of communicating with the public from a detailed list. We excluded public comments during elected commissioners' or board member meetings, as these are required by statute (although we did ask other questions concerning the influence of public comments at meetings). Figure 1 (below) displays the percentage of respondents in our survey that report using various methods to engage with the public and solicit comments, suggestions, and feedback on policy decisions. A few trends stand out:

- x Almost all respondents (95%) indicated that they utilize planning boards. This was expected as planning boards for zoning issues are a common and encouraged practice.
- x Respondents indicated a high use of traditional methods such as surveys (70%), newsletters or other publications mailed to citizens (72%), and open houses (64%) to interact with citizens and receive potential feedback.
- x In our open-ended questions, many officials stated that they used the local media as a way to disseminate information to the public. One county official noted that their government used the "public access channel on TV, as well as weekly 'Staying Connected' newspaper ad."
- x

respondents that use these tools said the pages were checked daily, 35% said weekly, 17% said monthly or less, and 5% were unsure how often the social media pages were checked.

III. The Usefulness and Influence of Various Methods of Interacting

Our survey also asked our government respondents whether they gained useful information from the various methods of interacting with the public. In a separate question, we also asked how influential the information gained from these methods was in the final policy or planning decisions. In this set of questions, we also asked about the usefulness and influence of public comments at elected officials' meetings. Figures 2 and 3 (below) report the results on the usefulness and influence, respectively, of each activity when the respondent reported using that activity. A few trends appear:

- x One clear finding is that the more direct, intensive, and protracted interactions with citizens produce more useful and influential interactions that affect governmental policy. The two most laborious activities (particularly on the citizen's side) involved planning boards and citizen workshops. These two activities ranked the highest as to providing useful information and being influential in final policy decisions. As to usefulness, over 80% of respondents that used these methods reported receiving "very useful" or "useful" information from planning boards and/or citizen workshops. Nearly equal numbers likewise indicated that planning boards and/or citizen workshops were either as "influential" or "moderately influential."

interest in government affairs was the largest barrier to getting the public involved in the decision-

activities through tokens of appreciation. Even small rewards, such as a catered lunch, t-shirts, coffee mugs, or other gift packages, can greatly increase citizen's positive feelings toward the process.

2. Understand what formats may be most helpful for your citizenry: Not all forms of communication may be helpful in all communities. For example, on-line resources may miss a large section of the citizens, as noted by one town official's comment that a "lack of internet connections leads to a lack of citizens using internet to see [the] Town website and Facebook page." Older populations may be less familiar with apps and on-line surveys as well. Related to the suggestion above, your community may need more targeted strategies, like focus groups in senior centers or apartment complexes, to gather useful information.

3. Understand the usefulness and limitations of modern technology: While smart phone apps and flashy software programs may look impressive, they can only do what they are programmed to do. More virtual interactions, such as through social media/social networking web pages, web page comments, and mobile apps appear to provide less tangible benefits, according to most respondents that use such means. Perhaps this is to be expected with any new method of communication. Both citizens and government officials may not be aware of the usefulness of these tools. Pe63(r)8whapo the