Discussing Digital Communications in a Hancock County Barn

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Two months ago, we celebrated the milestone of Maine's first Digital Equity Plan being approved by the federal agency deploying nearly $300 million in broadband funding to our state. Last month, we explored how municipal planning and partners like libraries and adult education can help achieve digital equity at the local level.

Now we get to boil this big topic of digital inclusion down to some practical tips and takeaways for municipalities from a recent conversation at the Woodlawn Barn in Ellsworth. On March 20, the Hancock County Planning Commission and Island Institute co-hosted a panel discussion on why digital engagement is important for municipalities, and the opportunities it can provide. The four panelists were Ray Weintraub (Sullivan, Town Manager), Matt Williams (Ellsworth, City Planner), Kate Dufour (Maine Municipal Association, Director of Advocacy & Communications), and Kathleen Bell (UMaine, Professor of Economics). Topics included the benefits and challenges of implementing digital communications, tips for getting started, and the implications for community and economic resilience.

To kick off the conversation, panelists responded to the question of why digital communications are important for municipalities. The responses included:

- Transparency.
- Cheaper and easier to communicate with more people.
- Strengthening community and economic development.
- Protecting records and archives.
- Providing additional pathways for citizen and stakeholder involvement.
- Opportunities for greater community input leading to better decision making.
- Keeping with the times.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This article is the third in a series by the Island Institute exploring the topic of digital equity in relation to Maine's municipalities.

> "Digital communications are the future of local government."
>
> *Kate Dufour, MMA*

Throughout the discussion, panelists touched on several examples of how digital communication takes place in municipal contexts, including:

- Digital signs.
- Websites.
- Social media (Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube).
- Hybrid meetings (allowing for both in-person and online participation).
- Email blasts.
- Digital alert systems.
- E-newsletters.
- Online polls.

> "It lets you touch base with a portion of the population that may not be comfortable walking into a city council meeting and standing at a microphone and talking."
>
> *Matt Williams, Ellsworth City Planner*

Ray Weintraub and Matt Williams talked about successes and challenges from their direct experience as municipal employees, each from a different perspective of scale: Sullivan's population is 1,219 and Ellsworth's is 8,399. While Ellsworth has IT staff allowing for more capacity for hybrid meetings, Sullivan has leveraged its own resources and ability to get the word out on their digital sign, website, and social media. As Kathleen Bell noted during the discussion, "We should celebrate that in Maine, big and small communities are wading into this space."

Some needs identified by both the town manager and city planner included:

- Funding for equipment and staffing.
- Education and technical assistance for municipalities and citizens.

- Evaluation and modification of municipal offices for hybrid meetings.
- Affordable high-speed internet and devices for citizens.
- Linking expanding internet access and digital equity into workforce development.
- "Right sizing" the approach to communications for each community.
- Multiple people with digital skills for sustainability of technical efforts over time.
- Time and resources to form and participate in collaborative efforts.

"One of the obstacles we hear is 'Well I only have a flip phone, how do I participate?' How do you bring the world wide web to the world that doesn't have the technology to connect from their home?"

Ray Weintraub, Sullivan Town Manager

Kate Dufour, who also serves on the Hallowell City Council, provided examples of relevant conversations happening in the Maine State Legislature around moving municipal websites to the .gov domain and expanding broadband infrastructure across the state. She also provided examples of the services and resources that the Maine Municipal Association offers to its members that are navigating the digital realm, including:

- Legal services, advocacy, communications, and education.
- Resources on dealing with public comments, and training for newly elected officials.
- Partnership with UMaine Augusta's Cyber Range to provide assessments of cyber threats.

The voices of the municipal staff and MMA's advocacy & communications director were rounded out with some valuable research-based perspective. Kathleen Bell has been studying the role of digital services in advancing municipal resilience alongside her research partners Eileen Johnson, Bowdoin College; Vanessa Levesque, University of Southern Maine; and Jessica Leahy, University of Maine, supported by their students. Bell explained her team's findings on the use of digital resources in small, rural communities in Maine and its effect on community and economic development.

The researchers have observed small communities working effectively in the digital space to provide services to citizens and build community and social capital. Some towns have found creative solutions by working together, as in a case Bell mentioned of two towns collaborating on a website. Her group has found a relationship between the number of digital services that a municipality offers and population size, and between the number of digital activities and more representative forms of government.

The methods of digital communication that a municipality may choose to utilize will depend on its resources, capacity, and citizens. This approach can be "right-sized" to work with the capabilities and desires of each community. Partnership opportunities include:

- Libraries, school systems.
- Other municipalities.
- Nonprofits.

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- Economic development groups and chambers of commerce.
- Community hubs.
- Regional entities such as Hancock County Planning Commission can help connect member municipalities with other towns and organizations.

Finally, the panelists discussed how digital tools have been used in response to crises such as the extreme weather events that we've been seeing in Maine. Kate Dufour shared that "it's important particularly with these weather events that you get the message out as quickly as possible, and that the message is consistent so that everybody has the same information and they're put on an equal playing field when it comes to making decisions for themselves." Sullivan makes full use of both its website and Facebook page to communicate in crises, and the city of Ellsworth is looking into the text alert possibilities.

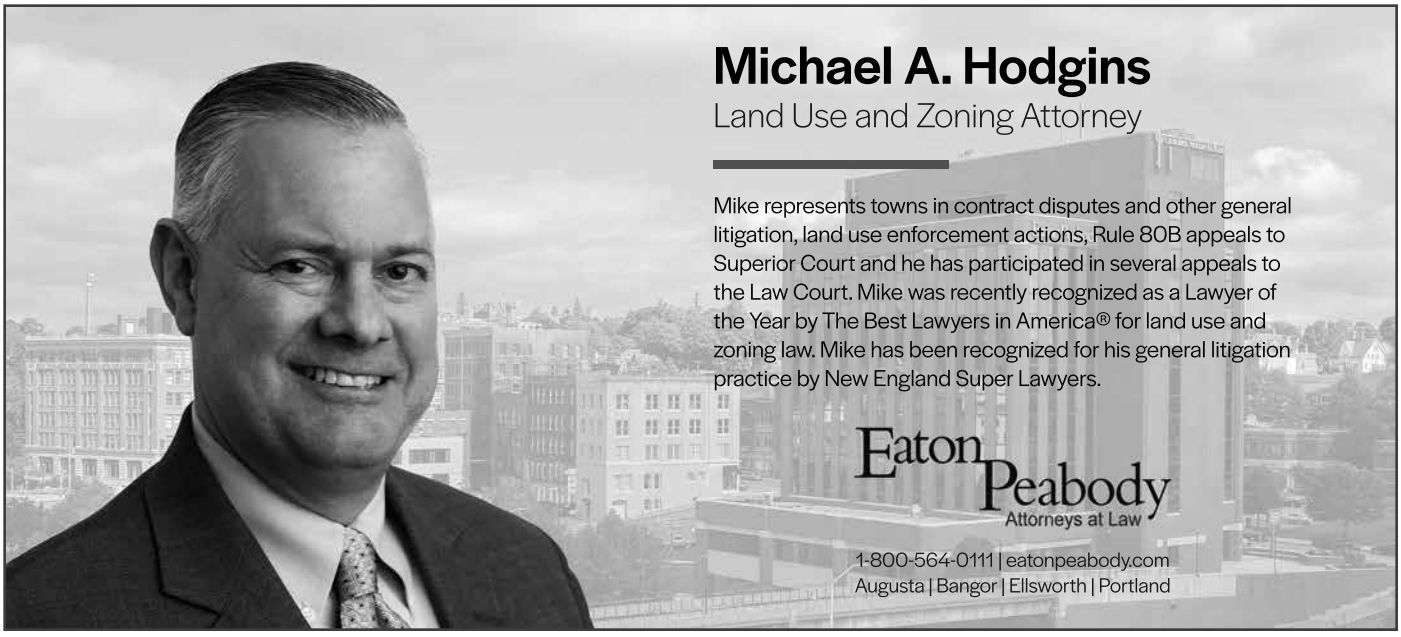
If your municipality is interested in using digital communications, panelists recommended your first steps be to talk to other municipalities and connect with tech savvy individuals in your community.

These key takeaways wrapped up the rich discussion:

- Don't be afraid to try new things.
- Communicate the value of technologies to get buy-in.
- Learn from other communities.
- Work with partners.
- Look to young people as a resource.
- Communicate to the public when you are trying new things.
- Admit when you don't know something.

"Trying new things, particularly digital communications, will enable you to reach people that are generally not being engaged and that's an incredibly important part of community decision making."

Kate Dufour, MMA

For those interested in viewing the full panel discussion, a recording of the event is available on the Hancock County Planning Commission Youtube channel.

From left to right: Kathleen Bell, Ray Weintraub, Matt Williams, Addison Gruber