CivicLex

Proposal - Public Comment Evaluation & Recommendations

Updated March 2, 2021

Overview

CivicLex is offering to work pro bono with the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the current public comment system and generate suggestions for procedures that could make public engagement more effective and efficient.

We will work with the following confirmed external partners to accomplish this process:

- Dr. Cory Curl, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Martin School of Public Policy, University of Kentucky & associated students
- Dr. Iuliia Shybalkina, Assistant Professor at the Martin School at the University of Kentucky. She studies various points of interaction between citizens and public finance.
- Dr. Alan Bartley, Associate Professor of Economics; Chair, Division of Social Sciences, Transylvania University & associated students
- Brian Raney, CEO/Co-Founder of Awesome Inc.

What issue are we seeking to address?

LFUCG's primary system for public comment on issues before the Council centers around in-person feedback during public meetings. We see this as problematic for both residents and LFUCG for the following reasons:

- The most accessible opportunities for public engagement for most residents are the Thursday evening Council meetings.
- These meetings are not sufficient in providing input. Council meetings are the last stop before ordinances, resolutions, or other decisions receive approval, and generally,

decisions are close to final. While this is clear to the Council, it is not clear to residents, leading to a sense of disempowerment and mistrust for many residents.

- Funneling Public Comment to the last possible moment also proves difficult for Council - threatening to derail work that has been in the pipeline for months. This process is not only demoralizing for city staff but also incredibly cost-inefficient.
- A clear recent example of this issue playing out in real-time is the Floor-to-Area Ratio Zoning Ordinance Text Amendment, which received significant public pushback and accusations of "fast-tracking" and obfuscation. This ZOTA had been in process for months, but many residents weren't aware of that fact, leading to the mistrust mentioned above and disempowerment.

What do we propose to do?

CivicLex proposes a two-phase process:

Phase 1: Review of Public Comments (completed within 3 months from start date)

CivicLex will work with CIO Aldona Valicenti, Council Members, and project partners to conduct a comprehensive review of current Public Comment methodologies.

- This review would include two engagement processes: one focused on gathering input from residents and resident groups, one focusing on LFUCG employees and representatives.
- CivicLex will compile the results of this engagement process to a report with recommendations presented to the Council and the Mayor's Office.
- We have communicated with Professors at the Martin School of Public Policy at the UK and Transylvania University Economics Department. They have offered to bring one class of students into this process.

Phase 2: Matching Recommendations to Technologies (completed within 6 months from start date)

Once CivicLex compiles the list of recommendations, we will work with CIO Valicenti to examine technologies and products that match the needs expressed by residents.

- CivicLex will work with national civic tech partners (Center for Tech and Civic Life, others) to generate a database of potential technologies - including open source options - to address expressed concerns.

- This matching process will also present the opportunity to bring local web development firms into the conversation via Awesome Inc.

Timeline Summary

- **Month 1** – Hold focus groups with stakeholders to ensure survey tool effectiveness
- **Month 2** – Begin engagement process with resident groups and city staff; release survey tool; Host two digital workshops and listening sessions on Public Comment
- **Month 3** – Conclude outreach process; code and evaluate PC data; begin Field Scan of public engagement tools (PublicInput, Decidm, etc.)
- **Month 4** – Conclude field scan; begin matching process of engagement results to technologies/tools; host two local developer events to prototype solutions
- **Month 5** – Conclude matching process; finalize recommendations & report; present to council

Intended outcomes

We hope this process will generate a report, released in late August of 2021. developed in tandem with researchers from the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University, and CIO Aldona Valicenti that details the following:

- Current inefficiencies associated with LFUCG's system for public engagement on legislative issues, including frustrations with the current process expressed by LFUCG representatives and Fayette County Residents.
- A cost/benefit analysis of current technologies and systems for public engagement on legislative issues.
- A recommendation for how the City of Lexington should proceed with adopting new technologies for public comment, including the potential of external funding through Philanthropic sources.

Responses to Council Questions

CivicLex received several conversations in the February General Government and Social Services Committee meeting about this proposal. Responses to those questions are included below:

What is the data collection mechanism for the survey process?

We're seeing this playing out in two stages for the first part of the project. As soon as we have an MOU in place with the city, we'll begin by hosting a select number of focus group zoom

conversations in the first 30 days of the project. The function of these focus groups will be to gather input from key stakeholders for survey design. We are in the process of discussing who would be represented in the potential stakeholder groups and would welcome your input.

Once we have completed these interviews over zoom, we'll release a survey protocol in the second month of the process, which will be open for 30 days. We will likely use one of two digital survey mechanisms - Typeform or Qualtrics. **We plan to gather the preponderance of data for this project through a digital survey.** We have ruled out paper surveys because of capacity issues on our team, data privacy concerns, and safety protocols during the COVID crisis. We would welcome input on how to reach communities that do not have sufficient access to technology to complete the survey.

How will the survey be designed?

CivicLex and our UK and Transy partners will design the survey tool in response to feedback provided by the focus groups. The tool will be designed using a combination of CivicLex's understanding of common civic language and our research partners' expertise in survey methodology. **We are not going to seek IRB approval**, mostly because of the time involved and inflexibility it brings. **With that said, we will design this process to the highest ethical standards.**

Will submitted data be secure?

Yes. CivicLex will house all the data securely in our cloud storage. All data will be anonymized when going through analysis at Transy, UK, or the City.

Do we have target numbers for survey responses?

Yes and no. We don't want to put a specific number on what we would consider statistically significant. Our academic partners have insisted that having a target number is not necessary for a process of this scale. We also don't have figures on how many people already participate in public comment. We are confident that if we design the survey methodology with a wide audience in mind, that we will be able to reach a number that can be representative of the many constituencies in Lexington. Purely as an estimate, we hope to reach at least 350+ people, but we will not consider this outreach a failure if we over- or under-perform that number.

How will we reach all communities in Lexington?

We plan to reach out through the following three networks:

1. **CivicLex's relational network** - in 2020 alone, we had 280+ programmatic partnerships with individuals, community organizations, businesses, and more. We will tap into this network immediately for this process.
2. **Focus group followups** - While a central point of the focus groups will be for pre-research to ensure quality survey design, we also plan to utilize them as ambassadors for this project. We will rely on them to feed this survey mechanism to their constituencies and communities.
3. **Council itself** - Council itself provides a geographic framework for ensuring that we reach communities across Lexington. An aspect of our survey will be a geographic indicator so that we can respond in real time to our geographic reach. As we move through the survey timeline, we will reach out to individual Council aides about any district that is lagging behind in response.