

# Achieve Transparency & Open Government:

## Top Technology Trends



### Executive Summary

Hundreds of state and local agencies have proven that government can achieve transparency as well as facilitate participation and collaboration by implementing online technologies successfully. This paper will define the first step toward increasing government transparency, accountability, and public trust: making public meetings accessible online. It will also describe best practices for using Internet technology to create a transparent and complete public record.

# White Paper

## Introduction to Public Meeting Transparency

Public agencies are mandating initiatives to provide greater visibility for their citizens now more than ever. From the White House to local municipalities, governments are taking strong measures to increase citizen awareness and participation in the democratic process. Posting results of government spending, budget allocations, and results after the fact does not allow citizens to fully understand the issues and conclusions made. By observing and participating in public meetings directly, citizens are empowered with unfiltered information. Making public meetings more available and accessible is the first step in creating a more open government.

Hundreds of government agencies have implemented online technologies that allow them to provide access to all public meeting broadcasts, agenda, minutes, and supporting documentation from one centralized, integrated, and searchable media portal.

## Common Obstacles to Achieving Open Government

Transparency in government is essential to the success of any democracy. At each level, citizens should be able to stay informed on policies, issues, and the status of legislation. Our nation is founded on principles granting citizens this power, as Thomas Jefferson said, “Information is the currency of our democracy.”

Each state has its own mandate for the availability of public information, often called Freedom of

Information acts or Sunshine laws. FOIA laws grant citizens the right to obtain public records and guarantee full government disclosure. Similarly, state and local governments instituted open meeting laws requiring public meetings be conducted in public and that agencies provide full disclosure of the location and time of each meeting. For example, the California Brown Act, grants constituents access to meetings and allows them to participate at the local level.

Despite the good intention of these laws, accessing public records requires a time commitment from both citizens and the government agency. Submitting a public information request could require waiting anywhere from five days to four weeks to receive the requested information. This is a time-consuming process for staff too, who is tasked with facilitating and completing the purchasing process, locating the requested information, duplicating tapes or DVDs of meetings, making copies of documents and then preparing it for shipment. To reduce this workload, governments are providing a convenient means to well-organized, easy to locate, and searchable public records, helping citizens and staff quickly find information in real-time and on-demand.

“Information is the currency  
of our democracy”

- Thomas Jefferson

## The Key to Government Transparency: Make Public Meetings Accessible Online

It is important today for government agencies to achieve transparency and a level of accountability that will revitalize the trust between citizens and their government. Public meetings allow citizens to understand the “why” behind government decisions and actions. The reasoning and intentions of government leaders is just as important as the final resolution. With greater access to government proceedings citizens can better hold their representatives accountable for decisions they make and implement.

In order to conduct business more openly two things must happen. One, the government’s critical decisions must be deliberated on and made during public meetings or hearings. Two, these public meetings must be accessible to anyone and everyone, live and available on-demand.

These concepts should sound very familiar to anyone who has participated in local politics. Until recently, attending and participating in meetings was challenging for citizens who had to travel to city hall at a particular day and time that may not have been possible for them. However, low levels of attendance should not be mistaken for a lack of interest: as the convenience of accessing meetings improves, participation increases dramatically. The Tennessee State Legislature recently held a public meeting that fewer than one hundred citizens attended in person, but over 1,400 people watched and listened live through the Legislature’s website. Thousands more watched and listened to segments

of the meeting on-demand as early as the next morning.

The Internet is a preferred communication medium for Americans today and agencies that take advantage of this medium see positive returns. Take the Town of Blacksburg, VA who is currently streaming public meetings through its website, as well as providing audio and video podcast downloads of each meeting. Since adding these features to meetings, Blacksburg is frequently featured in the local government section of the iTunes Store and in 2009 ranked 74th in the top 100 local government podcasts. The Town took the first step toward increasing government transparency by making public meetings more accessible and has seen tremendous public interest and participation as a result.

Government transparency is no longer limited to publishing the results of government proceedings. Posting transactions and results after the fact prohibits the public from actively following legislation. Technology makes it possible to observe government as it works to balance priorities, determine tradeoffs, and make decisions. Agencies are now producing an integrated public record, allowing citizens to easily access audio and video recordings of meetings cross-linked with the minutes and all supporting documentation. Government openness begins by making public meetings conveniently available online.

## Top 10 Best Practices to Achieving Open Public Meetings

While Robert's Rules of Order, parliamentary procedure, and other best practices for organizing and holding public meetings are nearly as old as our constitution, the standards for government transparency online continue to evolve. The following best practices have been established over the past decade at hundreds of government agencies. These organizations have achieved unprecedented transparency by making meetings:

**1. Available Live Online** - All government proceedings, meetings, and hearings are available through a live webcast. The ability to see and hear these meetings in real-time is essential.

**2. Accessible Upon Request** - In order to improve convenience for citizens who cannot view live meetings, all proceedings are archived within twelve hours of the conclusion of any meeting. In order to achieve a twelve-hour or shorter turnaround time, it is important to use technology that will encode your meetings live and publish to the Web through an automated workflow. This automation not only decreases the turnaround time, it also lowers the manual costs related to managing the digital records.

**3. Integrated with the Public Record** - Because public meetings and government proceedings can be very lengthy, the usefulness of the content depends largely on the granularity and quality of the associated documentation. A best practice has been established for public meetings called an "integrated public record," which is comprised

of agendas, minutes, audio/video recordings, and any related digital documents—all archived, cross-linked, and searchable by keyword.

**4. ADA Compliant** - Accessibility for all citizens is critical when considering government transparency. All web applications should meet ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) standards. Closed captioning is an important part of ADA compliance and should be utilized to allow transcript searches for all content mentioned in the meeting.

**5. Searchable** - All records are searchable, including all meta data in the public record as well as meeting transcripts and closed captioning. This lets citizens find exactly what they are looking for without wading through hundreds of documents and hours of video.

**6. Downloadable and Syndicated** - The ability for citizens to download and store meeting audio, video, and records, and subscribe to these items through RSS (really simple syndication) are easy to confer and critical to providing transparency services to the public.

“Educate and inform the whole mass of people... They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”

- Thomas Jefferson

**7. Shareable** - Citizens are able to quickly and easily share elements of the integrated public record with members of the community through blogs and social media networks.

**8. Protected and Authenticated** - It is important that government agencies publish and store their meeting records on their own websites in order to ensure a protected and authentic record. Sites like YouTube can be used as a powerful secondary distribution option, but lack control and security and therefore should not be the primary location where content is published. In addition, it is important that government agencies ensure that citizen participation data such as polls or comments are protected and not manipulated by special interests.

**9. Follow Open Data Standards** - It is important for government to set open data standards and requirements for widely used, non-proprietary formats because technology innovation moves more quickly than government legislation or mandates can be updated. For example, the webcasting standards for the State of New York's Executive Order 3 list "Windows Media Player and Real Player" with no mention of Flash or other popular webcasting technologies. It is important to set standards for non-proprietary formats.

**10. Free to the Public** - Unprecedented transparency is created by increasing convenience for citizens. Any time public records are only available through paid services, convenience and access are dramatically decreased. Citizens should not be required to pay for requested public

information when the cost of hardware and staff time dedicated to this process can be eliminated.

## Transparency Solutions Increase Accuracy, Reduce Workload, and Inform Citizens

Government agencies have always considered making public records accessible as an extra burden or job to be done, but in reality, software as a service (SaaS) solutions are available that make this process easy and provide additional benefits. Transparency solutions can now be incorporated directly into public meeting processes, making staff more efficient and the public record more accurate. In many cases, webcasting technology is built directly into minutes annotation tools used by meeting secretaries and clerks to automatically start, stop, and create chapter index points during meetings. These tools also allow secretaries to attach related documents to the meeting archive. This same technology permits the automation of the legislative and public hearing processes, resulting in enhanced communication, efficiency, and record-keeping during meetings.

## Encourage Productive Citizen Involvement in Government

Encouraging higher levels of citizen participation strengthens trust between citizens and their government. The first step in promoting involvement is engagement in the meeting process through audio or video streaming of live meetings and posting archives. Once comfortable, the next step is to have citizens productively participate in the meeting process. Government agencies give the

public a stronger voice in the democratic process by linking citizen comment forms to the upcoming meeting agenda. An electronic form allows for timely and actionable feedback and gives elected officials time to deliberate and respond during the public meeting.

## How Local, State, and Federal Government Agencies Can Achieve Transparency Today

We have the greatest opportunity in history to change the way government interacts with its citizens and makes decisions. The best-in-class government agencies that have successfully achieved their transparency goals and met FOIA and Open Meeting regulations now:

- Publish a schedule of public meetings and hearings as well as information on the decisions to be made and provide access to these meetings.
- Post meetings online, live and on-demand, complete with all features of the integrated public record.
- Provide opportunities through which citizens may productively participate and collaborate during the decision-making process.
- Enable the best possible decisions be made by ensuring open standards and technology formats.

## About Granicus

Granicus, Inc. is the award-winning cloud platform provider for government transparency, efficiency, and citizen participation. Our solutions are designed specifically to help government agencies establish meaningful connections with citizens while reducing operational costs. Granicus has been recognized the past four years for being one of the fastest growing company private companies in the U.S., San Francisco, and the Silicon Valley by Deloitte LLP, the San Francisco Business Times, and Inc. Magazine.

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