

Blacksburg, VA

Expanding civic engagement with survey and crowdsourcing tools



When the small town of Blacksburg, VA, needed a way to scale up their civic engagement to figure out a better strategy for downtown parking issues, they turned to the SpeakUpSM survey tool. With it, they collected over a thousand responses. These responses are now helping the city shape new solutions to create a more accessible central business district.

“We were looking for a big forum where people could share their ideas and thoughts with us. Beyond that, SpeakUp has become a self-regulating educational tool for citizens who answer each other’s questions.”

- Lisa Sedlak, Communications Manager

Additionally, with the CivicIdeas site, SpeakUpBlacksburg.org, citizens are contributing ideas for improving local business support, modifying streets and sidewalks for safer and more efficient traffic, and creating more affordable housing.

“Our transparency really improved the desire of citizens and people in surrounding areas to be engaged.”

- Lisa Sedlak, Communications Manager

Success Highlights

- Over 1000 respondents to first survey
- Expanded civic engagement beyond meeting attendees
- Collected over 30 citizen ideas in first 2 months
- Citizens are helping to inform other citizens
- Opened input to surrounding area

Fast Facts

Agency Type: Town

Population: 42,620

Solution:

Granicus Platform

Government Transparency Suite

Citizen Participation Suite

Challenges	Solutions
<p>Lack of Focus Without a good way to focus citizen feedback on particular topics, there was more time spent on varying personal complaints than building community solutions.</p>	<p>Focused Discussion The surveys and the forums keep the energies of the engaged crowd on the topics that need immediate attention.</p>
<p>Citizens Going Unheard With social media, it was clear that people were trying to be more engaged. As a university town, citizens were very vocal to begin with, and it was obvious that a better method was needed connect with citizens who wanted to be part of the solution.</p>	<p>Delivering Surveys Survey invitations sent via email and standard mail, as well as promoted through the website and social media, increased the opportunity for those who want to be heard to offer feedback. The high response count is a quantifiable improvement in feedback collection.</p>
<p>Decentralized Feedback Phones, meetings, social media, and email created too much decentralized information, with little organization making it very difficult to see the big picture or properly consider all citizen feedback.</p>	<p>Engagement Centralization Now, incoming citizen communications can be directed to the website, creating a central citizen idea depot, where citizens prioritize issues, offer solutions, or even educate each other on various community issues.</p>
<p>Limited Reach Previous citizen engagement was limited to traditional communication methods and meeting attendance. Because of time, convenience, and methods, only a small portion of the crowd was being heard.</p>	<p>Scaled Reach Today, Blacksburg citizens and citizens of the greater Blacksburg area can more easily provide feedback through a web page or by responding to surveys sent to them. The survey tool alone has broadened their civic engagement with far more people than hoped for.</p>

An Educational Tool for Citizens

The CivicIdeas site SpeakUpBlacksburg became more than a feedback and ideation management tool; it was a good place for citizens to get answers to their questions. “A lot of interactions with citizens is about having to educate, especially with explaining jurisdictions,” Lisa said. When people ask about improving areas that aren’t under the town’s jurisdiction, like Virginia Tech’s sidewalk, SpeakUpBlacksburg is a tool for responding to the concerns and directing them to the university instead. But even better, it’s become a way for citizens to educate each other. Recently a citizen mistakenly claimed that riding a bicycle on a sidewalk was illegal anywhere in town except the university campus. Before Blacksburg had to spend any resources on the issue, another citizen stepped in

to explain the misunderstanding of the law and cited the ordinance for reference. “It’s really cool to see that kind of self-regulation going on,” said Lisa.

Integrating Engagement with the Legislative Process

The survey results that Blacksburg received along with the flow of ideas that community members are offering have been impactful enough for it be considered as part of the legislative workflow. Lisa explained, “Basically, we’re going to be sending a regular report to the Town Manager, and if he wants more information, I’ll get him that, and then he’ll share it with Council.” When the Town Council takes it from there, the ideas of the community create a new and better future.