

Arcata, CA

The City of Arcata uses new ways to engage citizens



Problem

Arcata City Council was overwhelmed by the number of inbound letters, phone calls and emails from constituents regarding upcoming agenda items and needed a way to consolidate and organize this input.

Solution

Arcata implemented Granicus' eComment as a citizen portal for clerks to collect, organize and report citizen feedback prior to the meeting.

Benefit

Arcata decreased the workload of the Clerk's Office while complying with State regulations on open meeting laws and integrated comments with the public record. They brought valuable, consolidated information from citizens before Council which enabled members to make more informed decisions without slowing the meeting process.

“ We've increased involvement in the democratic process by at least two-fold and we hear from a wider range of voices that might not otherwise come before Council. ”

- Mark Wheatley,
Mayor

Fast Facts

Agency Type: Local Government

Population: 17,000

Solution:

Granicus Platform

Government Transparency Suite

Citizen Participation Suite

Meeting Efficiency Suite

Active Since: 2006

Before launching with Granicus, Arcata was overwhelmed by the task of collecting public opinion in a timely manner

With such a civilly active population, Arcata would receive an increasing number of comments from very involved constituents on subjects related to upcoming agenda items, particularly on items related to the environment. The public could submit comments to Council in a letter, via email, or in person during the meeting. Council “became overwhelmed with the number of letters, phone calls, and emails on a wide variety of issues,” says Deborah Musick, Executive Assistant to the City Manager. Getting feedback and ideas from constituents is important, but consolidating them became increasingly more difficult. When in-bound inquiries and comments were addressed to the Clerk, she could organize the material and present to the Council prior to a meeting. But the public typically contacted Council members directly who received emails on varying topics; gathering that information, organizing, and distributing it became even more of a challenge. In response, Arcata needed to find “a system that took into account Council’s desire for organized, condensed, public input on agenda items while creating an electronic avenue for citizens to participate in the public process” Musick says. It became important to find a way to decrease the time she spent gathering this information and simplify the process of delivering public comments to Council.

The solution also needed to meet State regulations around open meeting laws. Specifically, it needed to integrate with the public meeting process and be tied to the official public record. Arcata considered establishing a chat room as a means to consolidate

inbound concerns. Serving as two-way communication between the public and its government, a chat room-style forum would not allow Arcata the flexibility to filter inappropriate comments and slander. Nor was this type of communication able to integrate into the public meeting process. Searching for a solution that incorporated public comments and the public record, Arcata turned to Granicus, the sole provider of such a solution.

eComment offered a fast and easy solution for collecting citizen feedback

Granicus’ eComment gave Arcata a tool to manage the flow of information received by constituents. eComment was implemented as a complement to Arcata’s existing Granicus solution and acts, from the citizens’ perspective, as an online form that they can fill out before a Council meeting to ensure that their voices are heard.

With eComment, Arcata effectively:

- Increased citizen participation
- Allowed citizens to reach all five council members at once
- Tracked, maintained and archived electronic comments
- Provided Council with an organized report of comments prior to a meeting

Once the meeting agenda has been published online, a link to the eComment form appeared on Arcata’s view page as well as the agenda. The link allowed the public to weigh-in on an item and this is considered public testimony. Constituents could select an upcoming agenda item, indicate their position, and submit comments.

All feedback received prior to a meeting was taken from the electronic agenda and compiled into a final spreadsheet for Council, simplifying the management and reporting of public comments. “eComment has allowed us to gather feedback in a much more structured, organized, and concise way,” adds Mayor Mark Wheatley.

Arcata doubles public participation while increasing staff efficiency

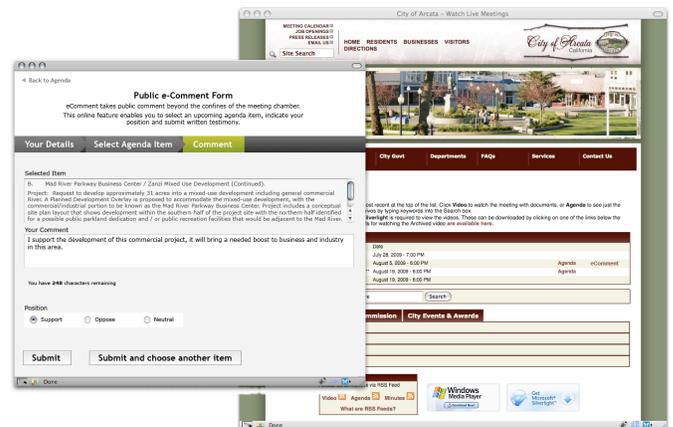
Since implementing eComment in 2008, Arcata has experienced a rise in citizen participation. “We’ve increased involvement in the democratic process by at least two fold and we hear from a wider range of voices that might not otherwise come before Council,” says Wheatley. By providing an alternative option for citizen participation, Arcata has seen greater and more informed interaction between citizens and their government.

Since the public now has a more automated and proactive approach in reaching their local government, staff has been able to direct time towards other avenues. Time spent filtering inbound comments, the amount of printing, and even the use of supplies have all decreased. As Musick notes, “We have fewer public records requests for staff reports and materials resulting in less paper consumption. We also have fewer calls prior to meetings and spend less time managing public inquiries since the implementation of this product.” Staff now relies on the electronic report for a consolidated list of feedback, organized by agenda item.

Arcata has seen eComment as a, “one-stop shop for citizens to reach all council members at once on a specific topic,” Musick says. “Council members no

longer have time to read mountains of material; these comments have been really helpful in giving them a snapshot of how local residents feel on a specific subject.” Because citizens viewed agenda items and staff reports prior to submitting an inquiry, Arcata has received much more informed and educated commentary. This method of organizing public comments has given Council insight into what matters most to citizens and better prepares them for the meeting ahead.

A true benefit for the City was the integration of eComment with the public meeting process in accordance with open meeting laws. Citizen comments have been managed through the existing legislative workflow; no additional work was required to ensure these comments are maintained in the public record.



Citizens can easily ensure their voices are heard by adding comments on upcoming agenda items for Council to evaluate

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- Deborah Musick,
Executive Assistant to the City Manager