

Government Communication in Lake Placid and North Elba, New York:

A study into effectiveness, transparency, and information technologies in government

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Executive Summary

The Town of North Elba, New York, and The Village of Lake Placid, New York, located in the Adirondack Mountains, came together in 2014 to develop a joint Comprehensive Plan to guide the future of development in the area. This plan focused on various goals, objectives, and implementation strategies for the municipalities including the economy and tourism, community facilities, mobility, housing, the environment, and land use and design. Of importance for this report, is the section on Government Structure and Function. The vision for this section was to increase government efficiency at all levels to reduce costs, and to become a leader in smart growth and sustainable living by increasing the role of alternative, renewable, and self-sufficient energy sources. The first goal: to improve the operation of all village and town government departments to optimize efficiency. The last objective to reach this goal is to enhance efficiency, transparency, and access to municipal information and records. The identified implementation measures to achieve this objective are to increase transparency in government by providing information technology (IT) capabilities at town hall for various activities, and to redesign the meeting rooms with presentation technology. Over the years following the publication of the Comprehensive Plan, the Lake Placid and North Elba Community Development Commission (Development Commission) have been working to implement these changes throughout the community.

Information technology (IT) capabilities and the availability of systems for governments has increased over the years, and there is a growing demand from constituents for increased transparency and opportunities for public engagement. The Development Commission has recognized these as areas of improvement for the Town of North Elba and Village of Lake Placid and sought to develop a report focusing on public awareness of government operations and improving access and streaming capabilities of public hearings. As the report developed, a

service information gap in the municipal websites was discovered therefore, an additional theme of government communication and capabilities was added as an objective of this report.

First, a literature review spanning topics related to participatory government, citizen engagement, municipal social media pages and websites, and public meetings and video accessibility was conducted. Important ideas emerged from the literature about the core components of good governance and efficient public service delivery being rooted in transparency, accountability, and participation. Additionally, engagement between citizens and public officials was found to be increasingly effective due to the rise of technology and opportunities to create online dialogues and communities. Increased engagement and two-way communication channels has been used to foster increased public trust and have a positive impact on citizen satisfaction.

The author used a mixed-methods research design to conduct primary data. Individual interviews were conducted with seven government officials in various departments from both the Town of North Elba and Village of Lake Placid to gain an initial understanding of the relationships between government officials and residents, as well as their communication methodologies and styles. Themes of poor community outreach, a disconnect in media between the Town and Village, and opportunities for coordination emerged from the interviews. An online survey was published for members of the community with questions concerning government communication, transparency, and effectiveness. Forty-four (44) survey responses were collected and analyzed for response trends. The majority of respondents reported being active in the community in terms of participation in recreation programs, arts and culture events, and general Town or Village events, but reported low attendance at public meetings. Low use of municipal websites as a source of information about the Town and Village was also reported. Most notably, was the strong feelings of dissatisfaction with the current communications of the Town and Village. Key themes revealed in the survey are related to feelings of fairness in government representation, concerns of transparency and a lack of engagement, and opportunities for consistency and synergies between the Town and Village. Many respondents also favored the opportunity to watch a live stream of public meetings, as long as they have the ability to engage virtually.

Detailed recommendations were designed for the Lake Placid and North Elba Development Commission as a foundation moving forward. A user-focused website re-design based in a positive and modern user experience, as well as a complementary and consistent style guide for both the websites and social media pages would be beneficial for the community. The use of municipal email notification systems and virtual public meetings was also discussed. The report concludes with recommendations to bolster public engagement through informal communication, transparency, and the deliberate use of citizen feedback.