Where is the Public Mistrust? Review of "E-Government, "

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"E-Government"
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"E-Government," by Jennifer Evans-Cowley and Maria Manta Conroy, is a Planning Advisory Service document published by the American Planning Association (APA). The APA defines these advisories as "eight reports on important planning topics per year containing information you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere else" (APA, 2005). The "E-Government" report is based on consultation with and study of planning departments in cities throughout the United States with a population of 100,000 or greater. As the authors note, "the purpose of this analysis has been to determine the types of e-governance tools planners are using to communicate with citizens" (Evans-Cowley & Conroy, 2). The report serves as a primer for municipal planners, listing their current options for creating e-government initiatives. To complete this objective, the authors divide the report into five sections: 1) a brief introduction to e-government; 2) an examination of the types of e-governance tools most often used by planning departments; 3) a description of the steps necessary for creating on-line participation tools; 4) a section dedicated to special considerations for developing these tools, and; 5) three case studies that provide some options for approaches for planning departments to take. For purposes of their report, the authors select a definition of e-governance provided by the National Academy of Public Administration: "The transformation of governance processes resulting from the continual and exponential introduction into society of more advanced digital technologies" (Evans-Cowley & Conroy, 1).

Prior to describing the tools available for a planning department's e-government initiatives, the authors fist ask and then answer the question, "Why should planners be involved in e-governance?" The authors answers include the following: 1) e-governance allows planners to promote planning through better customer service; 2) as society becomes more electronically savvy, citizens demand more of their governments, especially at a local level; 3) planners can provide citizens with plan and permitting information, and; 4) e-governance can be used to foster citizen participation, reducing operating costs and promote local events. Conspicuously absent from this list is mention of the current public mistrust of government and the role that planning departments use of e-governance might have in addressing potential causes of that mistrust.

According to a 2000 NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey, over a quarter of American adults believe that that local government is a major or minor threat to their personal rights and freedoms and only 39% of Americans responded that they "trust local government to do what is right 'just about always' or 'most of the time'" (NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School, 2000). Combined with that general lack of trust is the perception that government is corrupt - the NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School survey summary notes that "a majority of Americans (55%) consider government corruption a very important problem."

Recent land-use conflicts in Oregon and Washington serve as examples of how that high level of public mistrust of government is directly impacting planning departments. Oregon's Measure 37, which took effect Dec. 2, requires state and local governments to compensate property owners when regulations reduce the value of their property, or forgo enforcing the regulations. Advocates say the Oregon initiative gave property owners hope after 30 years of excessive restrictions on land-use planning (Gregg, 2005). In King County, WA, a citizens group called Bainbridge Citizens United and powerful interest groups, including the Building Industry Association of Washington and the Washington State Grange, are planning to draft a citizen's initiative to overturn a recent King County Council land-use decision (AP, 2005). Given this combination of mistrust, perception of corruption, and significant public discontent with planning decisions, the ability of e-governance to enhance government transparency by increasing access to local government documentation, process and rule-making seems to be an omission from the authors list of reasons for planners to utilize e-governance.

About the Author:

Mr. Gugerty earned his B.A. in English at Miami University (OH) in 1997 and organized for the Miami University Gay, Lesbian & Bisexual Alliance, educating the university community about challenges facing GLBT students. In 1998, Mr. Gugerty worked in the Vice-President's Office for Development and Alumni Relations at the University of Chicago and from 1999-2003, Mr. Gugerty worked for the American Bar Association helping to mobilize legal communities across the country to implement public service and pro-bono projects in their local communities. Currently, Mr. Gugerty works as a communications specialist at the Association of Washington Cities, implementing a statewide marketing and communications strategy to enhance local government officials' advocacy efforts with the WA State Legislature; serves as Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors for United Communities AIDS Network (Thurston County, WA); and is pursuing an M.P.A. degree at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, WA.

Resources:

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The Associated Press. "Washington groups intrigued by Oregon's new land-use law." Seattle Post-Intelligencer 15 Jan. 2005.