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Improving the Digital Engagement Between the City of Oakland and its Residents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Oakland's digital presence must be better focused on the user experience of residents, and should be designed with the most underrepresented populations first. The City also needs to experiment with new ways of encouraging public participation. In 2020, a city with the size and reach of Oakland should have a robust digital strategy focused on engaging the most vulnerable populations and improving equity. Residents expect an experience from their city government that is on par with, or exceeds, the sophistication and simplicity of the popular mobile apps they use on a daily basis.

This policy brief offers three recommendations for the City of Oakland to improve digital engagement and develop a digital strategy that is co-created with residents and other key stakeholders.

Thank you to our project mentor: Mai-Ling Garcia, Current Head of Digital Strategy & Engagement, City of San Francisco; Former Digital Engagement Officer, City of Oakland, CA



PROBLEM

The City of Oakland's technology policies are failing to meet residents' needs, especially those in the flatlands where, despite Oakland's [history and traditions of activism and civic involvement](#), socioeconomic and racial inequities persist. Residents want engagement with the City through digital channels such as websites, email, text messaging, and mobile applications, and they want a level of experience on par with tools provided by the private sector. Slow incorporation of modern digital practices results in a lack of trust, confidence, and participation in democratic practices.

As an example of the poor digital experience Oakland currently offers its residents, the City's website – where most of its residents find information on how to engage with local government – was updated in 2018 for the first time in 20 years. It is still a work in progress: there are inconsistencies, old pages, and broken links, and the site lacks a consistent look and feel. As a result, the new site does not reflect proven practices for online engagement. When looking for the contact information of District Councilmembers, for example, a user has to access multiple web pages; the information is not available in one place, making it extremely difficult for any Oakland resident to contact the council member who represents them. As another example, the process of finding information about an upcoming Council meeting and [suggesting an agenda item requires 17 steps](#).

For residents, Oakland's website functions as an introduction to the government and is reflective of deeper organizational issues within the city. If it takes 17 steps to carry out a simple task like suggesting an **agenda** item for a meeting, the city's digital strategy clearly is not optimized for two-way dialogue with residents. Our team was able to automate the process and [limit it to just five steps as shown in this infographic](#). Underpinning this poor experience is a lack of a citywide digital strategy that focuses on modern design practices and processes, leveraging digital interventions that are focused on the user experiences of Oakland's diverse residents.

These challenges result in a disjointed experience that does a disservice to Oakland's residents and impedes the trust the city's leaders hope to build with those they serve. What's more, this poor public experience disproportionately affects those who are unable –



through multiple constraints and/or inequities – to participate in the civic process and help shape policies that affect them the most.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Technology now allows people to connect anytime, anywhere, and with almost anyone in the world. This dramatically changes the way we work, live, and play, and it also has led to a transformation in how cities govern. Because technology has become a way of life, cities have a moral imperative to engage residents (or “users”) and meet their needs in near real-time. The pathway by which Oakland and other cities Oakland should connect with users is by deploying digital services with a supporting strategy.

Digital strategy is not just about engaging new technologies, but requires an overhaul of organizational structures, governance, work processes, culture, and mindsets. Currently, the City of Oakland’s culture is not centered on people-powered policies, by relying on special interests groups’ feedback rather than feedback directly from residents from all parts of the City. This culture does a disservice to the people who rely on good governance and cohesive technology policy to meet their needs and empower civic engagement.

To that end, we recommend that the City of Oakland implement a 21st-century digital services strategy that is focused on gathering feedback from residents and responding to their needs and input. The City should appoint a senior leader with decision-making authority to shape and implement a digital strategy that encompasses a whole-of-government approach in the long term.

Recommendation One: Prioritize a Digital Engagement Strategy Focused on the Oakland Resident Experience

The City of Oakland should prioritize a digital engagement strategy focused on the experience of residents. We recommend that this strategy be completed over the “three horizons of innovation,” a [framework devised by McKinsey & Company](#) to look at short- and long-term innovation strategies, to ensure that the change is attainable, given current staff and resource constraints. The city’s focus



should shift over time from making changes to existing frameworks (Horizon 1) to adjacent markets (Horizon 2), and then to disruptive strategies/technology (Horizon 3). (To learn more about the three horizons of innovation framework, see Appendix 1.)

Horizon One: Optimize the City of Oakland’s Website to Make it Clear, Concise, and Able to Meet the Needs of Oakland Residents

The website should be written in plain language and link to the most frequently requested content on the home page so that residents do not have to search for important information. Also, the redesign should follow the principles outlined in the City of Oakland [Style Guide](#) and emphasize simplicity, equity, trust, and access. As the current Oakland website has recently been transitioned to a new site after 20 years, there is a room to continue to improve the site over time.

Horizon Two: Establish a Citywide Digital Engagement Strategy

The City should require that current and future digital engagement strategies are resident-centric and include two-way communication on diverse channels. This “meet people where they are” approach should be driven by where residents are located online and should aim to uncover their needs and pain points. This includes engaging on social media and email campaigns, and pulling together what is already being shared online.

Research by the Pew Research Center found that, while Black and Hispanic households are less likely to have a desktop computer or broadband access, “[smartphones are playing a role in helping to bridge these differences.](#)” There is no current research on desktop versus smartphone usage within Oakland. Because of this distinct gap, the City of Oakland should incorporate a mobile-first strategy that includes using text messaging for polling and other means to gather input from Oakland residents in real time.

Here are five steps that will enable the City to move toward a digital engagement strategy:

- ▶ Design functional use cases describing the audiences you are trying to reach;



- ▶ Identify goals and objectives and the digital tools you will need;
- ▶ Evaluate existing digital channels and assets;
- ▶ Create a digital engagement plan; and
- ▶ Execute on the plan and adjust as needed.

To learn more about how to initiate a digital strategy planning process, please refer to the [Backgrounder: Equitable Digital Strategy](#) and Appendix 2: Key Considerations for Digital Strategy. We've also created a [Backgrounder](#) that gives an overview of how to create an equitable local government digital strategy. Once the strategy has been devised, begin the implementation by first focusing on higher-priority items while developing a plan for executing larger projects in the future.

Horizon Three: Capture Public Sentiment with an Embedded Platform to Shape Policy

The City's strategy should deploy existing technologies, such as sentiment analysis, content aggregation, and artificial intelligence, to gather input about Oakland residents in real time and to understand what kinds of policies and actions they want on specific topic areas, such as housing and public safety. Using these technologies can increase two-way dialogue with residents and lead to better outcomes, particularly for the city's most vulnerable populations. See Appendix 3 for a list of equity-centered digital challenges.

We have created a platform for capturing public sentiment called "People Powered Policy" (P3). We have built website mockups (Appendix 4) that are informed by research completed between January through March 2020. Please refer to the [Operational Plan](#) to learn more about P3 and the roadmap and strategy for execution.

Recommendation Two: Appoint a Champion with Authority

We recommend the designation of a senior leader with clear authority, responsibility, and decision-making ability to champion the creation of a citywide Digital Strategy. For this role, we suggest appointing the City Administrator or deputy City Administrator. The appointed person should be a visionary leader, preferably one with experience as a chief technology officer or in a product manager role.



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This person should also have strong operational and policy experience, and should know and care deeply about the city of Oakland.

Culture and process are often the biggest barriers to implementing a digital strategy in government agencies or other large organizations. In order to generate the momentum and sense of urgency to adopt a digital strategy, standards must be set and enforced by a centralized group that works in tandem with a senior executive with the authority and responsibility to make changes.

Recommendation Three: Co-create a Digital Strategy

Finally, the City should convene a working group to co-create the City of Oakland's Digital Strategy, harnessing the power of technology to help create a 21st-century digital government—one that is efficient, effective, and focused on delivering services to Oakland residents.

To overcome culture and process barriers, the working group will require:

- ▶ A deep understanding of the local government's residents and a clear mission that is understood by staff members at all levels of the organization;
- ▶ Leadership to champion the cause and be responsible for its successful execution; and
- ▶ Internal changemakers to catalyze change, along with a strategy and policies that support their work.

The working group should use past examples, such as [San Francisco's Digital Strategy](#) and the [Code for America's Responsive Engagement Strategy How-To Guide](#), among others suggested in this document. The working group should:

- ▶ Offer recommendations to the Mayor and Administrator on how to structure and manage digital services for the City of Oakland;
- ▶ Create a roadmap to guide the implementation of the digital strategy;

- ▶ Create an intra-governmental governance structure to oversee the delivery of digital services;
and
- ▶ Identify and recommend policy and proven practice standards to support the creation and ongoing work of digital services and innovation.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1

The Three Horizons of Innovation

McKinsey & Company, a global management consulting firm, created the [Three Horizons Framework for Innovation](#) to begin to manage change within its client organizations in a coordinated and measured way. The framework was first developed to help businesses gain access to new markets, and it describes short-term and long-term strategies an organization can deploy to increase its market share. The three horizons are typically described as if they were along a time horizon. Initially, the organization should focus on making changes to existing frameworks (Horizon 1). It should later move to adjacent markets (Horizon 2), and then to disruptive strategies/technology (Horizon 3). This model establishes an internal framework to support the success of long-term innovation initiatives.

Below is a modified version of the Three Horizons Framework, adapted for local government. Here, the focus is less about spreading to new markets, but on achieving deeper impact and outcomes in society. This provides a roadmap for transforming services from the status quo to a better future. The roadmap requires the user to identify where they are now (Horizon 1), what they want to transform into (Horizon 3), and what steps are required to adapt to change (Horizon 2). This helps to lay out a theory of change for the future. As [Bil Sharpe at the International Futures Forum](#) put it:

The Three Horizons Framework (3H) helps by asking people first to make their assumptions explicit, and then to explore emerging change as a way to reframe what they think, what they want, and what they do. The final step looks back at history, forward at the possibilities, and creates actions that bridge from today to tomorrow.

Here are the focuses and mindsets of the three horizons as applied to digital transformation:

- ▶ **Horizon 1:** The current context and conditions. This can be thought of as the “lowest hanging fruit” of a digital strategy. The focus is maintaining stability, and the mindset is that of the manager.

- ▶ **Horizon 2:** Actions taken to resist change, adapt to change, or build upon change. The focus is on creating and managing change within the digital systems of local government. The mindset is that of the entrepreneur.
- ▶ **Horizon 3:** Transformative emerging changes, and ideas of possible futures and visions. The focus is on transformation and disruption of digital systems, and the mindset is that of the visionary.

In summary, the Three Horizons Framework helps users to focus on micro projects as well as more ambitious programs that can have a deep impact on the future. This approach leads to sustainable innovation projects that incrementally change the status quo of government through the people who are leading and growing it.

Horizon 1: Update Current Assets and Communication

What to Change: Existing Models

- ▶ **Update Website:** Consolidate webpages, update broken links, simplify the language on web pages.
- ▶ **Make contact information more accessible:** Make it clear how people can get in touch with their councilmember and other city staff.
- ▶ **Stream public meetings on social media,** to include polling and/or commenting in real time.
- ▶ **Put all future public meetings (City Council, committee meetings, town halls) online** in an easy-to-find format, preferably on the City home page, and make meetings easily searchable by keyword.
- ▶ **Write all communications from the Council in plain language,** including the agenda, and give updates on what is being covered and what has already been covered.
- ▶ **Improve the language on setting agenda items:** First, encourage residents to collect information from the councilmembers (See Output 1(a)) and then engage in the agenda setting process (see output 1(b)).

Horizon 2: Look Back on Past Experiences and Improve Overall Experience; Update Website to Use Modern-Day Practices

What to Change: Medium-term projects

- ▶ **Create an online archive of all past public meetings** (City Council, committee meetings, town halls) in an easy-to-find way, preferably on the City home page and easily searchable by keyword.
- ▶ **Create an interim site, such as [NYC Councilmatic](#),** that leads to a more robust future engagement strategy.

- ▶ *Add new online participation models* to collect data and information.
- ▶ *Begin experimental projects and pilot programs* informed by residents' needs, based upon research.
- ▶ *Update open government practices* based on proven practices from other parts of government and jurisdictions.

Horizon 3: Virtual-First Participation: Create a Two-Way Dialogue Between the City and Constituents

What to Change: New capabilities

- ▶ *Create a City Council-specific website*, similar to the New York City Council Website.
- ▶ *Engage in a use study* and consider deploying emerging technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, machine learning, supercomputing).
- ▶ *Consider other effective options to incorporate virtual participation:*
 - ▶ *Roundtables*: Have groups participate virtually on various topics. Requires multiple people to manage, facilitate, and support. For an example, see the [Fourth National Action Plan for Open Data](#).
 - ▶ *Forums/Town Halls*: Have Councilmembers/leaders answer questions from the audience. In-person/virtual teams facilitate questions.
 - ▶ *Design Workshops*: Have participants try to solve a specific government problem or challenge; use human-centered design or design thinking to solve said problem/challenge.

APPENDIX 2

Digital Strategy Key Government Considerations

When starting to set a digital strategy, here are some key considerations:

- ▶ Where you want to **Focus**:
 - ▶ Where should the working group/team focus their energy?
 - ▶ What kinds of digital strategies is the team going to prioritize?
 - ▶ Which past strategies are the most relevant to the City of Oakland?
 - ▶ What kind of research do you need to inform the work that is necessary?
 - ▶ What has been done before in other localities that might serve as a model?
- ▶ Who and what should be **Managed**:
 - ▶ Who is the executive champion with the authority and responsibility to execute on the work?
 - ▶ Who will be leading this work?
 - ▶ Who needs to be taught?
 - ▶ Who are the key internal and external partners?
- ▶ What **Tools** you should use:
 - ▶ Which hardware (e.g. laptops, phones, other infrastructure) do City members need to do their jobs?
 - ▶ Which software (e.g. productivity software like Google Suite, Microsoft Suite, etc.) do City members need to do their jobs?
 - ▶ How will the team do the work of creating a strategy? What does co-creation look like?
- ▶ What your **Goals** are:
 - ▶ What is your theory of change? That is, how are you going to make the change necessary to achieve the overall vision?
 - ▶ What needs to get completed first to make the most impact and build upon future success?
 - ▶ How are you measuring impact? How will you report the results?

21st-Century Change Requires New Thinking

Like it or not, technological advancements are reshaping governments around the world, causing changes for which many cities are not prepared. Modern governments require innovative, strategy-driven approaches to meet this challenge, including partnering with private firms from diverse sectors.

A stellar digital strategy combines and incentivizes citywide resources to achieve the overall vision and mission of the effort. Citywide resources can come in the form of:

- ▶ External small, medium, and large businesses and startup companies
- ▶ Community organizations
- ▶ Individuals with a digital- and innovation-focused mindset
- ▶ Existing government resources and public servants
- ▶ Innovating faster than the technology

Early in the process, the City can map community assets and strategically partner with various sectors to achieve its goals. Some strategies that have worked in the past include bringing in innovators to spark change internally through [fellowships](#) or [short-term hires](#); using startup companies as [startups-in-residence](#); training up existing [public servants in 21st-century skills](#); and [creating an innovation team](#) internally to build and scale new City innovations.

Possible Selection Criteria

As you start evaluating possible digital strategy options, creating a decision matrix can help clarify which overarching strategies to adopt. To evaluate the different approaches, below are some suggested criteria:

- ▶ Amount of Time/Resources Required: How much time and/or City of Oakland resources would be needed to implement this strategy;
- ▶ Community Desirability: The degree to which the community would benefit from the creation of this program;
- ▶ Control of Outcome: The amount of control that the City of Oakland has over the outcome of the project;
- ▶ Ability to Execute: The degree to which the City of Oakland has the ability and authority to implement; and
- ▶ Ability to Manage Change: The degree to which leadership can manage change (e.g. less resistance to change) from within the City of Oakland

The city should deploy a matrix of options and criteria with best estimates, based upon the current landscape. The Digital Services Working Group should identify and rate their own alternatives as they identify them in the planning process.

APPENDIX 3**City of Oakland Digital Equity Challenges**

In 2019, the Oakland Digital Engagement team, in collaboration with the Office of Race and Equity, identified the following hurdles to creating an equitable digital experience.¹ This document has been enhanced with solutions and expected outcomes informed by research completed by our Aspen Tech Policy Fellows team.

Challenge	Solutions	Expected Outcome
City staff have low morale and few incentives to improve digital processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Engage city employees to find out why and how we can remove barriers. ▶ Create and implement strategies to overcome barriers and/or create incentives ▶ Measure effectiveness ▶ Continuously improve 	Staff are motivated to develop digital processes that are focused on residents' user experience and follow standards set forth within the U.S. Digital Playbook .
The City does not engage with the community using mobile-friendly methods predominantly used by people of color (POC).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Make a mobile-friendly website. ▶ Create an easy-to-load website ▶ Use texting as an engagement tool 	Increased access to City services via mobile devices to Black and Brown Oaklanders.
City information and services are hard to understand and navigate online.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Reduce the reading level required for online systems ▶ Conduct in-person testing to inform site and service navigation 	An easier to understand site for everyone, including residents with limited English skill and/or low literacy.
Our digital respondents skew toward District 4 (more affluent) and are underrepresented in Districts 6 and 7 (less affluent).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Build email and contact lists that obtain subscriber information in underserved areas 	Increase the number of users in Districts 6 and 7 by 40 percent.

¹ Used with permission from the City of Oakland.

Challenge	Solutions	Expected Outcome
<p>The City’s digital services are not optimally accessible, according to the American Disabilities Act (ADA).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Correct web services to be 503 compliant. That is, it’s accessible by most people with disabilities. ▶ Identify key website content in coordination with ADA services; set priorities and a timeline to get the most vital sections in compliance 	<p>All people, regardless of ability, are able to access and use the site. Those who are disabled are able to use appropriate aids when interacting with the website.</p>
<p>The City currently does not engage with the community using text messaging—a primary means of access for mobile users.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Collect cell phone numbers ▶ Pilot a texting engagement program ▶ Measure effectiveness ▶ Continuously improve 	<p>All community members can engage with the city in a mobile-friendly and text-friendly way.</p>
<p>The City does not currently offer WiFi in public spaces that are predominantly used by POC.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Procure and test WiFi hotspots in public spaces ▶ Pilot access in three public spaces, such as a library or recreation center ▶ Coordinate with IT on public WiFi Project 	<p>WiFi is provided by default in all public spaces owned by the City of Oakland.</p>
<p>City services online are primarily written in English.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Identify key website information that needs to be translated and set a priority for web content to be translated, along with a timeline 	<p>All services are easily translated to various languages.</p>

APPENDIX 4

People Powered Policy Mockups

Community Topic View



Topic/Theme

Important policy topic or theme in the city or community. Includes follow, like and share buttons

Understand

Materials, links, and current events to educate residents on topic areas

Engage

Post a thought, question, submit a story or take a poll on topic area.

Explore

Community feed with user-generated stories, thoughts, and questions

Question or Thought Topic View

The screenshot shows a web interface for submitting a question or thought. At the top left is the 'PPP' logo. To the right are links for 'TOPICS', 'PARTNER', and 'ABOUT'. Below this is a horizontal navigation bar with categories: 'Housing', 'Education', 'Transit', 'Criminal Justice', 'Public Health', 'Parks', and 'Permits'. The 'Housing' category is selected and highlighted. Below the navigation bar, the page title is 'Housing / Community View'. A paragraph of text defines housing policy: 'Housing policy refers to the actions of the government, including legislation and program delivery, which have a direct or indirect impact on housing supply and availability, housing standards, and urban planning.' Below the text are three icons: a 'FOLLOW' button, a heart icon, and a share icon. A dark blue bar contains the text 'Submit A Thought or Question'. Below this bar are three input fields: 'Name:', 'Part of Oakland:', and 'District:', each with a dropdown arrow. To the right of these fields is a large text area labeled 'Your Message:'. At the bottom center is a green 'SUBMIT' button.

Story Topic View

PPP TOPICS PARTNER ABOUT

Housing Education Transit Criminal Justice Public Health Parks Permits

Housing / Community View

Housing policy refers to the actions of the government, including legislation and program delivery, which have a direct or indirect impact on housing supply and availability, housing standards, and urban planning.

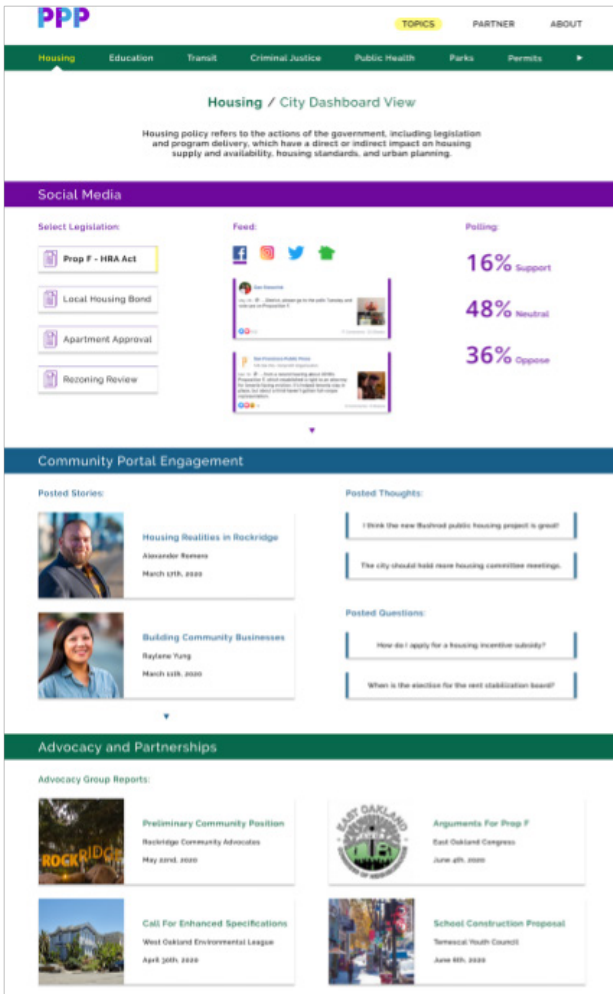
FOLLOW

Submit A Story

Name:	<input type="text"/>	Title:	<input type="text"/>
Part of Oakland:	<input type="text"/>	Your Story:	<input type="text"/>
District:	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Email:	<input type="text"/>		
Story Topic:	<input type="text"/>	Photo / Video URL:	<input type="text"/>
This is my work:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		<input type="text"/>
Send me policy writing tips:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Notes:	<input type="text"/>

SUBMIT

City Dashboard Topic View



Topic/Theme

Important policy topic or theme in the city or community.

Social Media

Recent legislation, social media feed, and polling sentiment analysis so city and Council know real time resident thoughts

Community Portal

View stories, thoughts, and questions, residents posted on this topic area

Explore

Explore the reports, relevant data and research on this topic area by community organizations and advocacy organizations



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