

# US cities using tech to cull ideas from citizens

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In a Feb. 17, 2011 photo, New York City Comptroller John Liu, left, takes notes while he participates in a public meeting to suggest audits for his office in New York. New York and cities around the country are trying to follow the example of private companies and use technology and the Internet to harness the wisdom of citizens and create virtual civic forums. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

(AP) -- In a city of millions, how many people go knocking on the door of City Hall?

Most citizens know that, at least in theory, they can bring their problems and ideas to elected officials. But in reality, speaking at a public hearing, calling a complaint line or writing a letter can be time-consuming and seem to make little impact, with small-scale concerns getting bogged down in dense bureaucracies.

Now, New York and other cities around the country are trying to un-bog the bureaucracy. Following the example of private companies, they're

employing technology to harness the wisdom of citizens, make use of their skills and create virtual civic forums.

New York will soon be asking the public to make suggestions online and by text message about how to make the city greener and more sustainable; people who submit ideas will be invited to join with others to make similar changes happen.

In California, the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District recently released an iPhone app that will alert citizens trained in CPR when someone nearby is having a heart attack.

San Francisco city employees joined forces online to propose and vote on thrifty ideas, leading the city to stop paying \$900 a month for the music callers heard when they were put on hold. New York City began a similar employee program last month.

Government officials tout such projects as money-savers that increase efficiency and improve transparency. Citizen advocates for the programs argue they offer something deeper - an opportunity to reignite civic responsibility and community participation.

In some ways, the new approach is simply a high-tech version of an old concept, says Ben Berkowitz, the CEO of SeeClickFix, which helps citizens post pothole-type complaints and track whether they've been addressed.

"It's participatory democracy," he says. "Open government ... is something that was laid out by Thomas Jefferson pretty early on. This is just a way to realize that vision."

In recent years, businesses have used the Internet to cull the wisdom of crowds to do everything from design shoes to publish books, a practice

known as "crowdsourcing." As the approach has caught on in the civic sphere, entrepreneurs and activists who support it have begun calling it "open government" or "Gov 2.0."

"The solutions to urban problems are not just the city government handing down ideas from on high. It's about collaborative citizenship," says Jake Barton, founder of Local Projects, which is partnering with New York City to gather citizen input on environmental improvements. The Give a Minute program has already undergone trial runs in Memphis and Chicago, where it asked residents to answer questions about how to increase public transit usage and about developing their professional skills.

New York is planning similar programs to tackle other issues.

Deputy Mayor for Operations Stephen Goldsmith said all the city's agencies have been ordered to use social media to seek public comment on proposed rules. He envisions a day when city residents who opt in will receive Facebook notifications regarding proposals and civic issues most relevant to their interests or neighborhood, and will be invited to offer input.

For now, a city Web page asking residents to make money-saving suggestions is little more than a digital suggestion box, but participants eventually will be able to see each other's ideas and vote for those they most like.

The city's workers already have that option - and the ideas that receive the most votes get evaluated by deputy mayors. As a result of that crowdsourcing effort, which formally began last month, the city has ordered all its offices to change their printer settings so that documents print double-sided by default. Other ideas suggested by city employees have included the creation of a central research and development unit to

help connect agencies with new initiatives, as well as an online auction portal allowing city agencies to bid on items being given up by other agencies.

The interest in this tech-age brand of populism has attracted both activists and entrepreneurs - and people who straddle both worlds.

One effort launched this year, Code for America, recruits technology developers and entrepreneurs before they enter lucrative careers, persuading them to give a year of service in exchange for a stipend. Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle and Washington, D.C, are hosting fellows this year. New York [City](#) officials have met with the organization about the possibility of being included in the program next year.

At the federal level, President Barack Obama has ordered agencies to "improve transparency and integrate public participation and collaboration" into their work. Last month, the federal government finished collecting input from hundreds of people around the world on how it can best use technology to consult citizens. Even NASA has enlisted the help of the crowd, asking the public to use images from Mars to count craters and help create better maps of the planet.

Internationally, Ireland has made use of crowdsourcing. Last year, thousands of private citizens competed online for two euro100,000 prizes, submitting proposals to create jobs and transform the economy. The government of Flanders began a similar program in September.

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