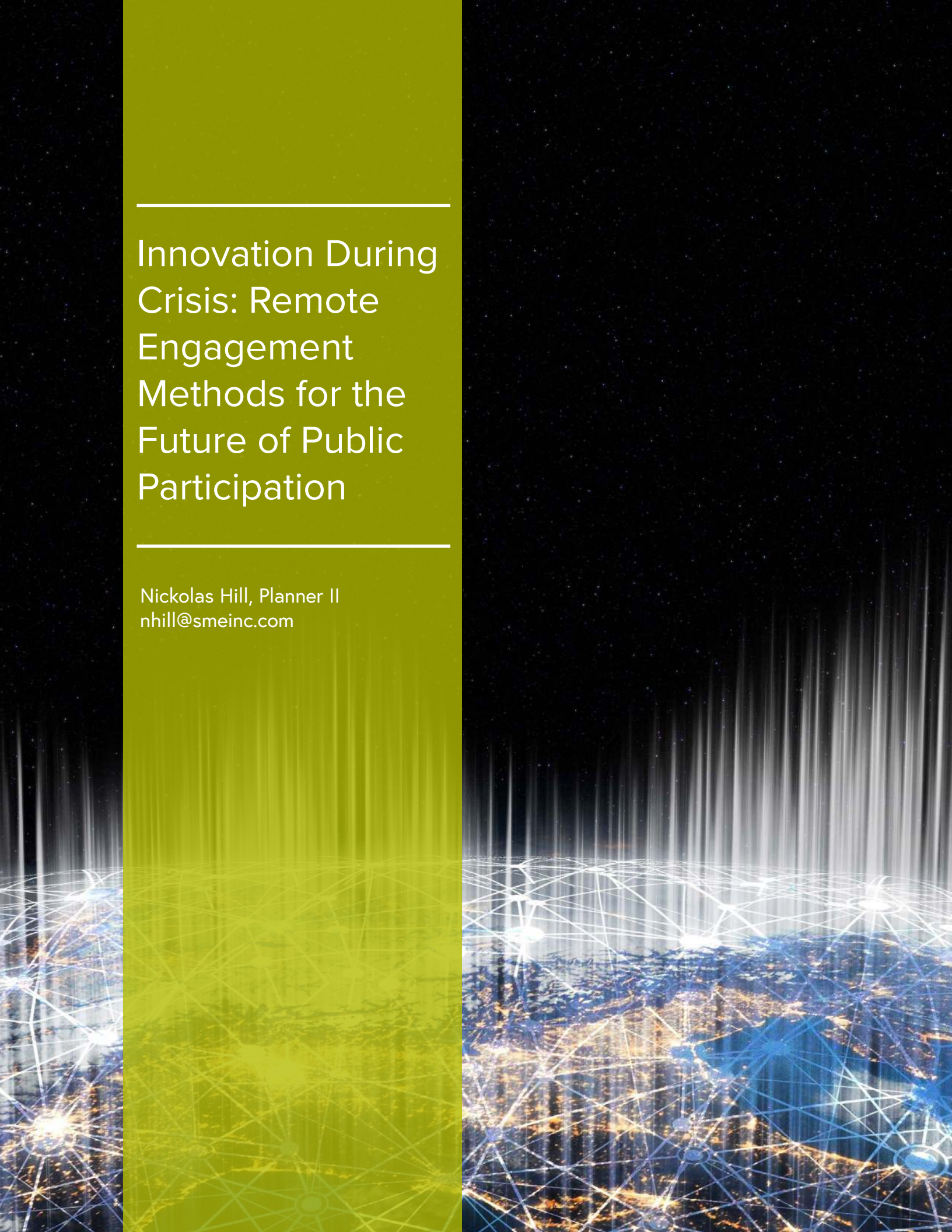

Innovation During Crisis: Remote Engagement Methods for the Future of Public Participation

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01 INTRODUCTION



When leading a planning effort, there are few responsibilities more important than maintaining effective means of communication and collaboration. This is particularly true for local governments, who strive to maintain an open dialogue and transparency with the public throughout the duration of their projects. Unfortunately, with the rapid proliferation of COVID-19, our traditional methods of public engagement, such as workshops, open houses, and work sessions may no longer be feasible for the foreseeable future. This perceived barrier to public engagement threatens to stall or even shutter projects that were previously on track for adoption and successful implementation.

We are challenging communities across the nation to not view this virus as an insurmountable obstacle for public input, but as an opportunity to innovate stagnant public engagement methods. By embracing recent innovations in digital technologies, we can continue to foster public input while simultaneously elevating the frequency and depth of this dialogue through the strategic implementation of **remote engagement methods (REM)**.

Unlike traditional engagement practices, REMs do not necessitate the use of in-person events to encourage and facilitate public input. Instead, REMs rely heavily on the use of social media, connected devices, digital gaming, collaborative online spaces, web-based platforms and other widely-used technologies to reach new and existing audiences for engagement. This paper discusses five REMs supplemented with recommended strategies for implementation.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Take advantage of free and popular social media services to easily connect with the community.

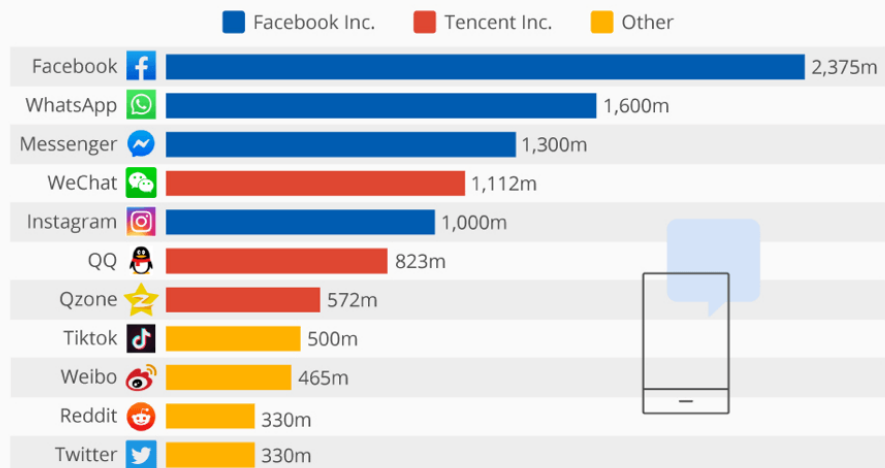
According to data collected from the Pew Research Center, approximately 72% of U.S. adults use at least one social media site (2019). The embedded user base of these popular services provides local governments with excellent opportunities to engage with large portions of their constituency, which makes this REM effective for targeting audiences of all ages. A few forward-thinking strategies for cultivating local engagement via social media are provided below:

- *Start a branded #hashtag campaign to hear your community's perspective on local issues, generate community pride, and provide important project information.* One example includes #HoustonBikePlan, which was a project-branded hashtag created for the city's bicycle master planning process. Using this hashtag, the City and their constituents were able to facilitate multi-platform, online discussions about policy recommendations, the location of much-needed improvements, and other project-related items.

- *Make the noon lunch hour a regularly-designated time for staff to answer questions, discuss issues, and develop a rapport with the community.* The team behind Minneapolis 2040, the City's most recent comprehensive plan update, used this strategy to host an informal and dedicated forum on Twitter to discuss project-related ideas for the plan (n.d.).
- *Encourage the sharing of the social media posts to spread community awareness about local projects.* As part of the [Curry Ford Neighborhood Vision Plan](#) (an effort led by S&ME on behalf of the City of Orlando), project staff created several social media posts to raise awareness about project-related events, but it wasn't until area officials, main street organizations, and local homeowners associations began sharing the City's posts that the project began generating significant local attention. In fact, many of these reposts created invaluable, large-scale conversations online that were later considered while drafting several iterations of the neighborhood's final vision plan.

Facebook Inc. Dominates the Social Media Landscape

Monthly active users of selected social networks and messaging services worldwide*



02 REMOTE ENGAGEMENT METHODS (REMs)

GET CREATIVE

Challenge your constituency to bring out their playful side with online games, quizzes, and creative design tools while engaging with complex local issues.

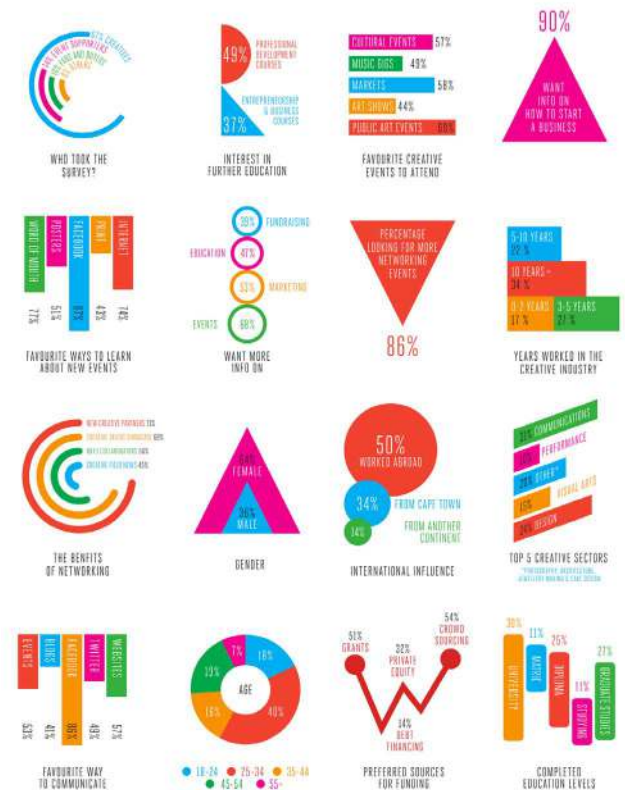
It can be difficult to keep our communities invested when developing intricate and long-term public projects. However, one REM that can be implemented to nurture sustained community engagement is to transform public involvement into a game for all-ages. A few innovative remote engagement strategies for cultivating public input via online games, quizzes, and creative design tools are listed as follows:

- *Let the community design their ideal streets in StreetMix.* Although fairly limited on design options, agencies across the country, including the Florida (n.d.), Minnesota (2014), and Seattle Departments of Transportation (Allieger, 2013), have promoted the use of [StreetMix](#) to build and visualize complete streets that are designed to encourage and support multiple types of mobility within their communities.
- *Test your citizen’s knowledge on local services, events, and processes with an online quiz.* Hosting an online, interactive quiz can be excellent tool for governments seeking to communicate important information with constituents. Portland’s Metropolitan Planning Organization’s online quiz, ‘Holiday trash? Or Recycling? Test yourself,’ for instance, encourages area residents to test and evaluate their current level of recycling knowledge while also learning about the MPO’s extensive recycling and reuse programming (Cathcart, 2019).

- *Challenge your citizens to identify community values, select potential policies that will advance those values, and establish an implementation budget with MetroQuest.* Winner of the American Planning Association’s 2016 National Planning Excellence Award, NashvilleNext utilized the highly-customizable online gaming service MetroQuest as the cornerstone of their public engagement process to collect and implement community preferences into their comprehensive plan update (n.d.).

“Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn’t really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while.”

– Steve Jobs



(Ebizaradio, 2013).

LEARN THROUGH SURVEYS

Work to replenish your understanding of the community by engaging them directly with online and text surveys.

Identifying community preferences and perspectives throughout the planning process is critical in forming the foundations of effective and locally-supported projects. Yet, traditional engagement methods that seek to obtain this input often result in poor attendance and conversations dominated by a vocal minority with narrow agendas (Read, 2014). One way to combat this occurrence is to implement a REM that allows for more accessible and inclusive input opportunities for citizens of all ages, such as surveys that can be completed digitally from the palm of their hands. The following are recommended strategies for cultivating public input via the internet and text-based surveying services:

- *Develop targeted online surveys to hear community perspectives on specific subjects and projects.* Using the online survey platform [Feedier](#), the S&ME team was able to develop a dynamic online survey for the Fort Pierce Redevelopment Agency, which sought to obtain and understand local perspectives on the current challenges and opportunities facing their community (2019). Despite the city’s relatively small population (estimated at 46,071 in 2018), the survey generated nearly 200 unique responses with over 1,000 data points collected (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

- *Allow your constituency to crowdsource and support their own responses to survey questions with [All Our Ideas](#).* In contrast to traditional online surveys that force respondents to select from a list of pre-determined responses, All Our Ideas allows participants to provide and collectively prioritize other participants’ original responses in a “transparent, democratic, and bottom-up way” (n.d.). Although the organization’s client list is extensive, it was notably used by New York City’s Department of Parks & Recreation to obtain subject-specific community input for their redesign of the Rockaways Parks (All Our Ideas, 2013).
- *Empower citizens to provide local perspectives without the use of the internet with [Interactive Text](#).* Project staff for the Philly Bike Share initiative implemented this innovative engagement strategy to regularly survey community members invested in a potential local bike share program via text message. When combined with an effective marketing campaign, online map, and a project website, the City was able to collect over 10,000 comments from nearly 6,000 individuals in less than 30 days (Mayor’s Office of Transportation & Utilities, 2014).



02 REMOTE ENGAGEMENT METHODS (REMs)

CONNECT VIRTUALLY

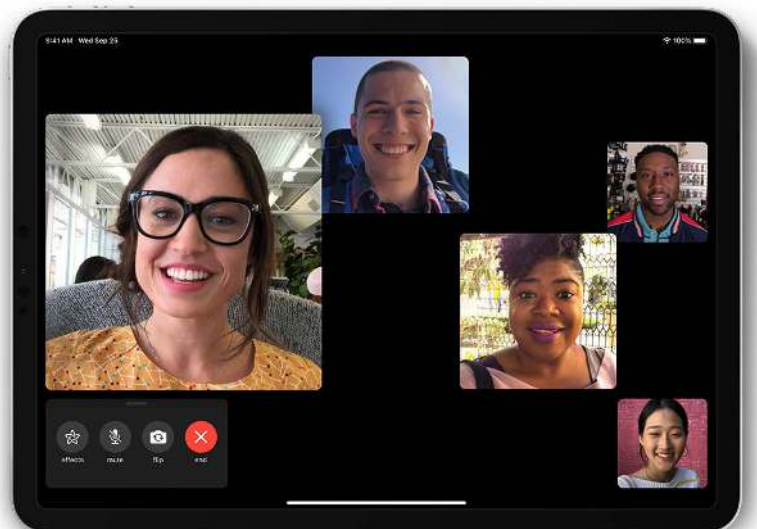
Provide opportunities for inclusive, large-scale community dialogue with virtual public meetings.

To supplement community open houses, workshops, and charrettes, which can sometimes be poorly attended and are incompatible with current social distancing efforts, innovative communities across the nation are continuing to advance traditional public engagement methods by hosting virtual meetings via the use of either retrofitted technology or web-based platforms. Not only does this REM provide opportunities for more frequent and cost-effective engagements with the public, but they can also provide for more inclusive and productive dialogues between citizens and their government. Provided below are a few progressive strategies for cultivating local engagement via virtual public meetings:

- *Reach those uncomfortable with modern technology by hosting a Telephone Town Hall (TTH).* Despite the increasing pervasiveness and popularity of the internet, many segments of the population remain unwilling and/or unable to effectively utilize internet-based services. Recognizing the technological limitations of their constituency, the City of Ft. Lauderdale have instituted TTH meetings that take place throughout the year, where constituents can regularly engage with their representatives in a dedicated, free, and convenient telephone-based forum (n.d.).

- *Host interactive public meetings using [Google Hangouts Meet](#), [WebinarJam](#), or [Zoom](#).* It is increasingly understood that modern, web-based videoconferencing tools can be an extremely effective alternative to traditional public meeting forums, where far too often conversations are dominated by a vocal minority vying for influence (Read, 2014). This strategy can not only provide the same opportunities for public input as in-person meetings but can also enhance the inclusivity, collaboration, and depth of these dialogues through the use of their embedded smart-technology capabilities. These can include, but are certainly not limited to, real-time polling and surveys, collaborative white board spaces, virtual queues, and the integration of pre-recorded video, audio, and presentations. One community already taking advantage of this technology is the City of Portland, which continues to host virtual public meetings for several of their committees via Zoom despite the local proliferation of the COVID-19 virus (n.d.).

(Apple, n.d.).



BUILD A WEBSITE

Develop a thoughtful and engaging website for local projects.

The smooth and steady exchange of information to and from stakeholders is paramount in ensuring the success of any planning project. In the digital age, this can be conducted using a myriad of REMs, but is often successful through the use of regularly-updated and interactive project websites. However, not all websites are created equal. Local governments must be innovative and think critically about the content, functionalities, and design of their websites in order to maximize their effectiveness in engaging with each segment of the community. Listed below are a few recommended website-based engagement strategies for your projects:

- *Create an accessible, yet visually-striking project website with pre-designed templates using [Weebly](#).* In 2019, the City of Kissimmee contracted S&ME to develop an engaging project website for their community-driven update of their downtown redevelopment plan. Recognizing the strong Spanish-speaking culture within their community, S&ME and the City developed a project website that is accessible in both English and Spanish and continues to provide regular updates, important links, meeting recaps, and contact forms (2020a).



- *Allow the public to collaborate and exchange ideas using the conversation-sparking [MindMixer](#).* In attempts to allow for a richer dialogue than what most online forums typically produce, the Envision Sacramento team used MindMixer as an online community engagement platform that could produce thoughtful conversations about the contents and priorities of their comprehensive plan update. Questions that were posed included ‘How can we make our community a more permanent home for our residents? Where should we get started?’ and ‘What is your vision for Sacramento in 10-20 years?’ (n.d.). With over 2,000 participants actively engaging with the site over the project’s lifespan, MindMixer proved itself to be an invaluable asset for facilitating focused, community-wide discussions.
- *Target input and feedback on geographically-specific areas of your community with [CoUrbanize](#).* When the City of St. Augustine approached S&ME to improve mobility along the historic King Street, both parties agreed that the project would necessitate the use of CoUrbanize to facilitate public input on highly-specific portions of the corridor, such as intersections, crosswalks, parking lots, and vacant properties. Over the course of the website’s lifespan, the community has provided over 200 geographically-specific comments and recommendations for local improvements along King Street, which has served as an invaluable resource throughout the duration of the project (2020b).

03 CONCLUSION

The challenges of today do not represent a short-term end to public engagement, but a catalyst for long overdue innovation. The temporary inability to converse in-person has forced us to confront the reality that we have too frequently relied on the tired engagement methods of the past to obtain public input for the projects of today. We must continue to encourage and facilitate these critically-important conversations with our community through the strategic implementation of REMs.

By taking advantage of 21st century innovations in digital technology such as social media, connected devices, digital gaming, collaborative online spaces, and web-based platforms, REMs can temporarily replace (and eventually operate in tandem with) traditional in-person forums. Five REMs (and their recommended strategies for implementation) varying in both complexity and commitment have been provided in this paper. Organized by their relative ease of implementation, these REMs included:

- **Taking advantage of free and popular social media services to easily connect with your community,**
- **Challenging your constituency to bring out their playful side with online games, quizzes, and creative design tools while engaging with complex local issues,**
- **Working to replenish your understanding of the locale by engaging them directly with online and text surveys,**
- **Providing opportunities for inclusive, large-scale community dialogue with virtual public meetings, and**
- **Developing a thoughtful and engaging website for local projects.**

Although there are a wealth of options for REMs, understanding which combination of methods and implementation strategies are right for your community is a topic grand enough for its own paper and likely depends on the targeted audiences, as well as the organization's available resources, time, and budget. However, if you would like a consultation as to what REMs would be most effective for your project, please contact our organization using the information provided below:



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