

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2017.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: County of Henrico

Program Title: Virtual Town Halls: Government at Your Fingers

Program Category: Communications (Public Relations)

CONTACT INFORMATION

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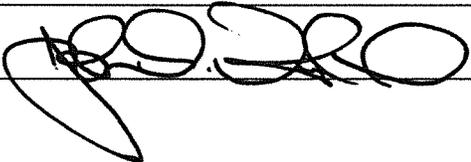
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Name: John A. Vithoulikas

Title: County Manager

Signature: 

1. Program Overview

Regardless of schedule or internet access, a citizen should be afforded the opportunity to obtain public information. To make a personal connection while informing the public, governments host public meetings or town halls. However, this method is only limited to a certain segment of the population. Furthermore, this method does not incorporate or embrace technology readily available to both the public and government.

Thus, Henrico County combined interpersonal and digital communication efforts into one public meeting. The presentations and question and answer periods were live-streamed at two magisterial district town hall meetings, and online participants submitted questions and feedback through social media or email. This allowed for in-person and virtual attendees to become informed and fully participate in the discussion. Additionally, the video stream was archived allowing citizens to access the town hall meeting anytime. Instead of the usual ten to twelve attendees at a public meeting, 177 people participated in the live feed or watched the archived public meeting.

2. Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

Providing access to and disseminating public information is a basic function of all government entities. Finding efficient and effective manners to do so can be challenging, though. One interpersonal method usually employed by local governments includes hosting town halls, specifically later in the evening during the week. Though these meetings are designed to attract employed individuals, most of the participants in one Henrico County magisterial district's town hall meetings were senior citizens who regularly

attended the meetings. Only a small segment of the district's population was receiving the information necessary to be informed citizens or stay engaged in county business.

These open forums also incorporated traditional forms of providing information – PowerPoint presentations and handouts. Very rarely was any other form of technology utilized to engage the audience. Due to the interpersonal nature, only present participants could contribute to the discussion or ask follow-up questions. Usually, the question and answer portions of the town hall meetings generated thorough discussions and clarified any topic for the audience. Subsequently, the questions and reactions of the participants provided invaluable insight to the elected official about the perspective and standpoints of the constituency. Wanting to increase attendance, diversity, and the amount of discussion participation, a Board of Supervisor official developed the concept of virtual town halls.

3. How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria

Having an engaged and informed citizenry is critical to the success of county government and the quality of life in a community. Henrico and its Board of Supervisors take educating the public seriously by meeting the public where it convenes for information. Whether it is online or in-person, it is the responsibility of government to provide the information through any means necessary. Henrico County not only disseminated information through digital and in-person communication mediums, but its efforts attracted a larger following to obtain the information.

Around 177 citizens were able to view and participate in town hall meetings that, traditionally, have been limited to those who did not have evening commitments. More importantly, the virtual town hall program helped shape perspectives – internally and externally – about how local governments could share information and educate the public. By opening additional information and communication channels, Henrico has also created more opportunities for citizens to become involved and stay engaged.

4. How Program Was Carried Out

To revamp the methods of disseminating public information and to actively engage all generations of county residents, the idea to live stream town hall meetings was developed. Live streaming and publicly archiving these meetings created numerous objectives with internal and external benefits. The desired format would give the public multiple opportunities to become informed, as opposed to just one day and time. This would also increase the attendance at the actual meetings and provide the elected official the public opinion or insight necessary to conduct county business. By utilizing technology, Henrico could reach and engage younger generations while still providing an outlet for senior citizens. This method would need to create a two-way communication system for all meeting participants during and after the actual town hall.

The idea was first stated in the summer of 2015, by a member of the Board of Supervisors. Throughout the end of 2015, until the spring of 2016, data was collected and qualitative information was taken at the magisterial district town hall meetings of the Supervisor. Approximately ten to twelve senior citizens would attend these meetings, and, typically, it

would be the same ten or twelve people at each meeting. The question and answer portions of the meetings appeared to satisfy the curiosity or needs of the citizens more than the actual presentations.

With the analysis, research was conducted to identify the most efficient and cost effective way – for the public and Henrico County – to provide an online method of live streaming the meetings. When searching for an online avenue, several implications needed to be put into consideration. First and foremost, the public needed to easily access the live feed at no charge. This meant the system did not need a login and had the capacity to allow a significant number of viewers access the feed. Additionally, the live feed needed to have a two-way communication feature. The final consideration was the ability to archive and make the video available for public consumption.

The criteria led to the decision of creating a general-use Henrico YouTube channel, which would be used for all county agencies and Supervisors. It is a free media platform recognized and used by all generations that will archive the feed, and it even has features to share the video across other media and social platforms. A citizen only needed the URL and internet connection to participate in the meeting. The only login requirement was associated with utilizing the communication feature. A viewer would have to login or create a Google account. To overcome this potential obstacle, viewers could submit questions through a generic email address or the county's social media accounts, including Twitter and Facebook.

In the summer of 2016, the YouTube channel was created, and the necessary equipment was identified. Various types of camcorders, room layouts, and audio systems were tested prior to choosing the necessary tools. Because Henrico's Public Relations & Media Services department had a variety of audio and visual equipment, the only items the county needed to purchase were a camcorder and accessories, including tripod and wireless audio system with lavalier microphones. The basic encoder and YouTube software were free. Once the items were procured, initial testing was done in August of 2016, and the promotion of the first virtual town hall in early September 2016, was distributed to all media outlets and on the county's social media accounts.

For the in-person participants, the only difference was audio and visual equipment. Presenters were coached beforehand about repeating questions asked by in-person attendees and keeping within the video range. Before the main presentations began, the support staff and Supervisor briefly explained the new setup and how online viewers could submit questions and feedback through the multiple communication channels. When questions were submitted by online viewers, the question was read aloud and immediately addressed.

The same process was completed for the second virtual town hall in late September 2016. Video and audio efforts were enhanced by implementing feedback from the first virtual town hall's viewership. After each town hall meeting concluded, the video feed was immediately archived and edited to eliminate dead air time and to correct audio or visual errors. The edits were saved within an hour, which made the video publicly available on

YouTube the same night as the actual meeting. Finally, the archived videos on YouTube were reviewed weekly to monitor the two-way communication feature to ensure no questions went unanswered.

5. Financing and Staffing

One of the main objectives of the virtual town halls was to provide a cost-free, easy method of allowing citizens to participate in the meetings. Thus, very few purchases were made to achieve the goal. Existing resources, such as the laptop/workstation and converter box, were obtained from the Public Relations & Media Services department. Furthermore, the basic encoder software and creating and maintaining a YouTube channel were free.

The only cost incurred was the purchase of the camcorder and accessories, such as proper cords, tripod, and batteries. The total cost was \$2,181.09. There are no ongoing maintenance or capital costs. Two staff members researched and procured the equipment, and one staff member hosted and implemented the actual town hall.

6. Program Results

During the data collecting phase, the average attendance at one of the magisterial district town halls meetings was approximately ten to twelve citizens. These citizens were typically categorized as senior citizens and would regularly attend these meetings. Subsequently, the question and answer portions were short and underutilized since most of the attendees were heavily involved and informed. Finally, the media coverage of the

town halls was sparse or non-existent because the meetings were conventional and lacked innovation.

The results from the first virtual town hall proved the program to be a fruitful endeavor for the public and government. Due to the new, technology-driven nature of the first virtual town hall on September 8, 2016, the local prominent news outlet – *Richmond Times-Dispatch* – published a brief article on the meeting. The unconventional approach to town halls also drew a larger in-person crowd of fifteen. During the live feed, the number of times the video was loaded totaled 27, and an online participant was able to ask a question that led to an in-depth discussion. As of February 2017, the town hall meeting has been viewed 105 times.

On September 28, 2016, Henrico held a second virtual town in the same magisterial district. This meeting drew an in-person crowd and online viewership of sixteen, respectively. With a total attendance of 32, this was one of the largest audience sizes the Supervisor has ever experienced. The second town hall archived video has been viewed a total of 72 times, as of February 2016. The two-way communication feature not only allowed online participants to ask questions but also provided live feedback of the audio and video feed to enhance the experience.

Principally, the established virtual town hall setup can be used at any public meeting or town hall hosted by Henrico County. The equipment is portable, the process has been outlined, and the YouTube channel was designed to accommodate any number of topics

and public service announcements. The way Henrico shares public information had evolved.

7. Brief Summary

Transparency and keeping the public informed is a primary responsibility of government. In Henrico County, seeking public input and having an educated citizenry is a priority. The elected body – the Board of Supervisors – use various avenues of communications to fulfill this duty. The most utilized method amongst the Board are town halls, or public meetings, with presenters on topical projects, services, or programs.

To enhance this effort, one Board of Supervisor wished to live broadcast the actual town hall meeting. This would not only give more residents a chance to virtually attend the meeting, but it could also be archived for those who were unable to hear the presentations at the actual meeting. To deliver a live and archived feed, the County established a YouTube Channel. Henrico also created additional communication methods – email and other social media accounts – to address any questions or comments virtual participants may have during the meeting.

Virtual Town Halls: Government at your Fingertips Supplemental Information

September 7, 2016 Virtual Town Hall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J0CtEWaDerw>

September 28, 2017 Virtual Town Hall

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_IKN7AQYKk&t=17s