State College Borough, Penn State University develop online tool to inform residents on important community issues

How can online citizen feedback translate into Borough decision-making? How can citizens process large amounts of information and create informational briefings for others? Borough residents are testing one way.
Borough’s Tech Engagement Tools

Borough has utilized many of the “traditional” social media and technology tools for engaging with the public and sharing important information:

- Social Media Accounts
- ‘Notify Me’ list serves
- Citizen Request Tracker
- C-NET recording of all community meetings, broadcast on air and on-demand
Borough’s Tech Engagement Tools

Over the past several years, Borough has piloted and launched additional tools for community engagement and information exchange:

- Engage State College (Peak Democracy)
- Future State College App
- Civic Crowdfunding
- Geodeliberation Project: Community Issue Review
Community Issue Review

Partnership between State College Planning Department & Penn State College of Information, Science & Technology.

Geodeliberation Project supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

Review current tools and thoughts on community engagement and develop tools for online deliberation to take place.
Based on Oregon’s Citizen’s Initiative Review, adopted into law in 2011.

Provide non-biased, non-partisan information to Oregon voters with mail-in ballot.

Process similar to jury duty; however, panelists do not determine guilt or innocence, but rather, most important facts about a community issue.

“Oregon voters should have the opportunity for this type of balanced analysis of every ballot measure. Voters won’t always agree with recommendations of these panels— that’s not the point. The purpose is to help voters make the most informed decisions possible.”
Launched State College’s Community Issue Review in 2014 through a facilitated, online system:

- Issue disclosed on first day of review; teach how to use system
- Panelists work on own over 10 days to review documents, extract claims and ask questions
- Meet on last day to prioritize claims, draft the statement, and poll their opinion of the issue
Community Issue Review

Issue #1: Neighborhood Surveillance Cameras

• Panel tasked with creating statement regarding the installation of security cameras in a residential neighborhood
• 7 days, 10 panelists, most self-selected
• Statement shared with the Borough-neighborhood committee developing the proposal for the camera system, and the neighborhood for the proposed cameras
Community Issue Review

Issue #2: Proposed Downtown Zoning Amendment

• Panel tasked with creating statement examining the purpose of a proposed zoning ordinance
• 10 days, 18 panelists, diverse participation through mailings
• Statement shared with Borough Council, residents at large to provide information for upcoming public hearing
• Additional online input solicited through Engage State College
# Pros & Cons of CIR Process

## Among the many benefits:

- New faces (voices)
- Better informed discussion
- Equal opportunity for all sides of an issue to be represented
- Summary not written by someone close to the issue
- References to documents, videos, websites, etc to fact check

## Challenges to be aware of:

- Giving credibility to new participants
- Online provides flexibility, but still a big time commitment
- Comfort with software, access to internet/computers for panelists
- Distribution of the Citizen’s Statement to have influence