

# Creating Communities of Place

## Office of State Planning

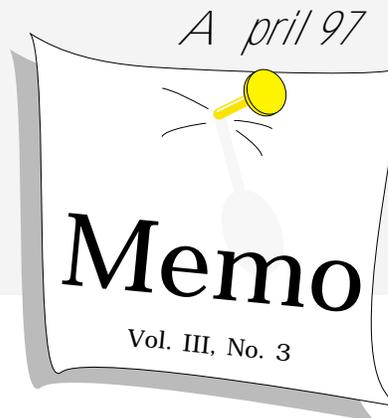
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## PLANNING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES: Using the Web to Make Planning Real

**OSPnet** The Office of State Planning (OSP) has established an Internet Web site (<http://www.state.nj.us/osp/>) to improve two-way communication with the public and other agencies. Planners and other public officials who are considering establishing their own Web sites can apply the experience gained and the lessons learned by the OSP.

### The Concept of "Community"

Community involvement in the planning process is vital to the acceptance and acceptability of plans. But, despite repeated invitations to the public, community involvement on a large scale may not materialize until after major decisions are made and the plan is adopted or implemented. At that stage, participants may challenge the concepts and assumptions established early in the process. This is because, from the community's perspective, the planning process is too long, too complex and too tedious. Going to meetings requires a long-term commitment. Work and household schedules are disrupted, and it makes for a long day. Can't the planning process be made more convenient?

Thanks to the increasing popularity of the Internet's World Wide Web, planners can now make house calls! Anyone with a telephone, computer, modem and "browser" software like Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Explorer can, almost instantly and at any time, access meeting announcements, reports and maps, at a

cost that compares favorably with those of printing, postage, storage and staffing. Using other Internet resources that are now being integrated into the World Wide Web - electronic mail, newsgroups, "chat rooms" and hyperlinks (optional jumps) to other related sites on the Web - community residents and other interested individuals can also respond immediately to public officials and to each other.

Better than 40 percent of American households own personal computers capable of connecting to the Internet, according to recent market surveys. This new, popular use of electronic communication has created an *extension* of our traditional face-to-face -- and telephone -- community, what some call a *virtual community*. By adding virtual communities to the planning process, public officials can better anticipate and initiate the mid-course corrections and adjustments needed to create plans that will more quickly, more successfully, become *real*.

### The State of the Art

The World Wide Web continues to evolve rapidly, as do the tools to access it and develop content. Forty years ago, the predecessors of the Internet served as a vehicle for scientists, engineers and the military to send text using a series of arcane commands. Today, the tools for citizens to access the Internet are included in every new desktop computer, and even television sets can be inexpensively outfitted with World Wide Web browsers.

*OSPlanning Memo is a monthly publication which highlights strategies, techniques and data of interest to the planning community in New Jersey. I welcome your comments on these memos and your suggestions for future topics.*

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Is this just a dream world? One does not have to be a Luddite to be skeptical of what this new, ever-changing and often over-hyped Internet technology can actually deliver. No one can afford a "toy" that consumes an ever-increasing amount of resources. Fortunately, there are good examples and guidelines to follow that enable planners to use the Internet effectively. This *OSPMemo* is written for the practicing planner who is considering establishing a presence on the World Wide Web.

With the right software and telecommunications connections, the leading edge of the Internet can be nearly seamlessly integrated into most major graphics-rich, intuitive computer programs that include word processing, spreadsheets, databases and graphics (e.g., Microsoft Office 97 and the Corel/Netscape office software suite). The many software programs and books with examples on CD-ROM available for Windows and Macintosh computers make it possible for most computer users to set up a Web site without seeing any programming code at all. Some computer systems are even being packaged as "turnkey" Web sites, requiring only the addition of content. Now, any planning organization can easily establish a Web site.

## The OSP's Experience

The State Planning Commission (SPC) consists of 17 members from state agencies, municipal and county governments, and the general public. The SPC is responsible for developing and periodically updating the State Development and Redevelopment Plan through the cross-acceptance process, in consultation with New Jersey's 21 counties, 567 municipalities, and other local governments and public interests.

The OSP, which staffs the SPC, faces the challenge of communicating with constituencies who are widely dispersed, even for a small state, and representative of different experiences, perspectives and interests. It has been as difficult to develop a common language of planning terms for interaction as it has been to develop a cost-effective, efficient and timely common medium for the exchange of ideas.

Our response has been to use every medium we could afford — from newsletters to videos. After the first State Plan cross-acceptance process concluded in 1992, a number of consulting planners and government agency planners suggested that we start using electronic mail to distribute spreadsheets, word processing documents and other information more quickly.

In 1995, the Internet became available to our office as part of a changeover in our computer system. In early 1996, the New Jersey state government home page made its debut, and every state agency was invited to provide content.

As we considered developing a Web site, we envisioned a number of opportunities, which evolved into these objectives:

- ◆ Use the Internet to improve the cross-acceptance process.
- ◆ Provide useful and understandable information to people of all backgrounds and interests.
- ◆ Provide another way to distribute information and publications.
- ◆ Save printing, storage, handling and mailing costs.
- ◆ Provide 24-hour public access.
- ◆ Provide better cross-referencing of documents.
- ◆ Provide feedback to staff and commissioners.
- ◆ Don't spend too much time or money.

We were quick to seize the opportunity of going on-line. Using free software downloaded from the Internet, the OSP converted many existing documents into formats used on the World Wide Web. We first posted our staff directory, meeting announcements and publications catalog. We converted our 200-page State Plan for posting online for ready reference, along with our enabling statute and administrative rules and regulations. We added current events, a survey, numerous technical reports and new proposals for changing the Plan and our administrative rules. Finally, we designed a home page to describe who we are and what is available at the site.

We tested the site in-house, and by July 1996, we were on-line with *OSPnet*. (See Exhibit 1) Our efforts were quickly recognized with more visits than we had anticipated, and with awards from the New Jersey chapter of the American Planning Association and the New Jersey Planning Officials organization.

We estimate that *our Web site has, in effect, added one and one-half people to our staff*, based on the time it would have taken to respond to user requests by conventional means. While detailed statistics on the users of our site are not readily available, we have no doubt that *we have expanded our audience not only within the state, but beyond its borders, both nationally and internationally*. We are reaching more people, we are reaching people we wouldn't have reached in other ways, and we are widening their understanding of the planning process, its purpose, its tools and its benefits.

We continue to update existing information, add new information, and refine our presentation with interactive maps and other advanced features. (See Exhibit 2) Our site can be accessed at the URL address of <http://www.state.nj.us/osp/> or through New Jersey's state government home page.



Exhibit 1: NJOSP Home Page

## Closer to Home

As of this writing, nearly 200 of New Jersey's 567 municipalities and 18 of its 21 counties are represented by Web sites. Most of these sites can be accessed through New Jersey's state government Web site (<http://www.state.nj.us/local-gov.htm>) and through other organizations (See, for example, <http://www.cityconnections.com/muni/muniview.html> and [http://www.new\\_jersey.com/commun/](http://www.new_jersey.com/commun/).) But many of these sites provide only limited information, such as agency telephone directories, and many are not "official" sites maintained or endorsed by the municipality or county.

Public libraries have taken the initiative in hosting a substantial number of local government sites. Businesses, chambers of commerce and community newspapers frequently host sites. Many sites promote tourism, shopping, economic development, or real estate. Very few sites mention their planning agencies, and thus lose opportunities to enhance their planning processes.

The World Wide Web is a distinct medium of communication. Presenting information on the Web is significantly different from newsletters, magazines, video, slide shows or CD-ROM. You can enable

*The New Jersey Planning Officials (NJPO) organization has established one of the first and best planning home pages around. It includes the latest planning news: the NJPO newsletter, "The Planner"; information on seminars and other events; the NJPO Bookstore; and legislative archives. The "Feedback" section allows you to express your views. The NJPO home page is at <http://www.vidkraft.com/njpo/> or you may access it through the public affairs page on the OSP Web site.*

users to select the information they want to receive from a site. You can present content in multiple forms, frames and color schemes. You can get viewer feedback from each page.

Rather than simply converting material that already exists in print, other low-cost, colorful and multimedia options for presenting content should be considered:

- ◆ color text
- ◆ hyperlinks to other content within the site
- ◆ hyperlinks to content at other sites
- ◆ tables
- ◆ charts
- ◆ maps
- ◆ graphics
- ◆ animation
- ◆ sounds
- ◆ videos and voice-overs
- ◆ interactive maps and databases
- ◆ three-dimensional renderings and walk-throughs
- ◆ e-mail
- ◆ fill-in forms
- ◆ on-line chats.

Each feature adds its own design opportunities and constraints. (*Designing Business: Multiple Media, Multiple Disciplines*, a book by Clement Mok, presents a useful discussion of this issue and other aspects of Web design.) In combination, these features provide almost infinite possibilities for enhancing local planning efforts.

For example, planning agencies may post on-line:

- ◆ master plans
- ◆ zoning maps
- ◆ development codes and ordinances (text and graphics)
- ◆ feedback forms for public comment before public hearings
- ◆ questionnaires
- ◆ planning board agendas
- ◆ permit application forms.

New Jersey's local government Web sites currently encompass few of these planning tools, but they continue to evolve. For example, Atlantic County provides a detailed overview of its activities at <http://commlink.atlantic.county.lib.nj.us/oppedhme.htm>. The Hunterdon County Planning Board site at <http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/depts/planning.htm> contains a significant amount of information. The City of Burlington Redevelopment Agency describes its activities at <http://bc.emanon.net>.

The City of Plainfield Web site (<http://www.plainfield.com>) features extensive links to its agencies, schools and other important resources. Many of these linked sites, like the mayor's page and the economic development office page, provide a wealth of current information.

Colts Neck Township maintains one of the most comprehensive municipal Web sites (<http://www.colts-neck.nj.us>) in New Jersey. The Colts Neck site also has the most complete planning resources, listing planning and land-use agencies,

boards and meetings, the table of contents of ordinances, and complete texts — minus the graphics — of the municipal master plan and the natural resources inventory.

*The OSP would like to help make your site known to the planning world. Please call Bob Kull at (609) 292-3096 or send e-mail questions, comments, announcements and URLs to [kull\\_r@tre.state.nj.us](mailto:kull_r@tre.state.nj.us).*

## Planning in Real Time

Updated, relevant content encourages people to keep track of progress in planning issues through a Web site. The Office of State Planning will provide technical support to municipalities and counties that seek to enhance the use of their Web sites in planning processes. A companion document, *OSPlanning Memo — Extra, "Designing Your Own Planning Web Site,"* provides further guidance to local planners who are setting up Web sites. It is available on-line or by request.

The essence of "community" is communication. Communication is vital for building both real communities and virtual communities. To the extent that the Internet's virtual communities expand our opportunities to share and respond to information, insights and experiences, our investment in *virtual* communities will help us create a new physical environment, "*Communities of Place*," for the *real* communities in which we live, work and play.

## Reference

Mok, Clement. *Designing Business: Multiple Media, Multiple Disciplines*. Indianapolis: Adobe Press/Macmillan Computer Publishing U.S.A., 1996.

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*The use of product names in this article as examples or as products used by the author does not constitute an endorsement of any product.*

*Bob Kull is the Assistant Director for Research for the New Jersey Office of State Planning, and the Webmaster of the OSP Web site (<http://www.state.nj.us/osp/kull.htm>).*

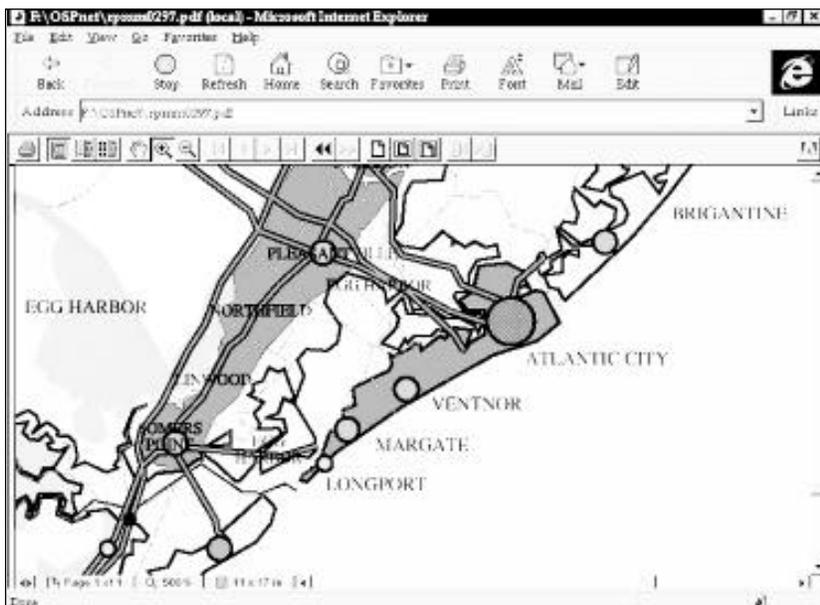


Exhibit 2: Interactive Map



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