From Necessity to Excellence

BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE TOWNSHIP WEBSITE

In today's digital age, your township's website is more than just an online presence—it's a powerful tool to share information, provide convenient services, and engage with residents in time-saving ways that are unmatched by any other medium. By strategically using its website, a township can significantly strengthen its connection with the community while greatly enhancing the accessibility and transparency of local government operations.

A website offers every township **the extraordinary ability to communicate 24/7 with their residents,** as well as visitors, current (and prospective!) businesses, and others. Townships can further enhance their website with features that foster even greater engagement and accessibility within the community with "beyond the basics" options, such as:

- Submittable forms for additional information
- Streaming township board and commission meetings
- Online reservations for the township hall or facilities
- Interactive maps and GIS
- Online payment for tax payments, fees, etc.
- Allowing residents and others to subscribe to receive newsletters or township announcements via email or text

Preference for online interaction is large in many facets of life—and interacting with one's township government is no different. Consulting and auditing firm Deloitte published a 2023 Digital Citizen Survey noting that 50% of U.S. survey respondents prefer website interaction with their local government—versus just over one quarter (28%) who prefer face-to-face. Township websites have been—and continue to grow as—an integral part of that interaction and information. Consider, for example, how townships can take an active role in helping to educate voters—sharing on their website information and answering questions on voter registration, early voting, polling places, precincts, sample ballots, and more—in an accessible, local manner.

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through transparency of government process. Communication of township business and decision-making goes a long way to fostering trust in the township board. Simply making meeting minutes and other township documents readily available is a great first step (and can even help cut down on certain Freedom of Information Act requests).

This modern method of outreach also allows the township to **promote its area and foster economic growth,** sharing information on local events, area businesses, and tourism interests in or near your community. Making it easy to find information on events, opportunities, and businesses within the township helps build community for residents—and keeps their time, energy, and dollars in the township. What's more, this outreach can also help to draw new and potential people and businesses to your township, growing your tax base and fueling your economic growth goals.

Enhancing the online experience

Township websites run the gamut from just a few simple webpages sharing board meeting schedules, township services, and officials' contact information to broader offerings, with a library of township ordinances, rules, policies, and other documents available with one click, access to tax and assessing information, event calendars, and more. It varies between townships who is responsible for maintaining, monitoring, and updating the information—and how and when. For some townships, individual township officials or a designated staff person may be responsible,

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while some may even work with a resident with web experience. Still others may contract with their website developer to make necessary updates and changes.

Today's website platforms—how your website is built—can make the process incredibly user-friendly, with standard templates for the homepage and additional page designs, and document and image libraries that help make uploading and sharing information online quick and easy. Regardless of your role (if any) in maintaining the township's website, it is helpful for all township leaders to consider what information and services are available on its website—and what improvements can be made to further enhance the online experience for your users. We share some practical suggestions for officials to consider—from minimum aspects on your site to "above and beyond" steps to create a helpful, smooth user experience.

Website 'best practices'

While the term "website best practices" has different meanings depending on your perspective, the good news is that by focusing on best practices for website management, you end up offering an optimal experience for your township residents, businesses, and visitors. Whether your township has 15 people or 100,000, the same basic best practices apply.

Design and user experience

The following are suggestions and ideas to consider that can help improve the look and usability of your township's website.

Ensure accessibility: Though not *currently* required for local government websites, ensuring that all users, including those with disabilities, can easily access your online information and services has long been a best practice, with voluntary guidelines available to help guide these efforts. Soon, however, *all* townships will be required to ensure their website is accessible. A U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) final rule on "Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities" (28 Code of Federal Regulations Part 35) was released in April 2024, establishing specific requirements—including technical

standards—to ensure accessibility on all state and local government websites and mobile apps.

Keep it simple: Your website's design and layout should offer easy, logical access to your information.

- **Content:** Use plain language and make sure your site includes key content like township contact information, documents, and community services and resources.
- **Navigation:** Keep the webpage layout simple, and make sure that the menus are clear and easy to follow. Ensure navigation elements are fully visible on all screen sizes.
- **Function over form:** Prioritize delivering valuable content over using elaborate design elements. While important, aesthetics should never compromise accessibility or functionality.
- **Home page priorities:** The homepage is the "face" of your township website and should provide easy access to key information and services, such as public notices, important announcements, bill payments (if available), etc. Remember, the home page acts as a guide for your users, directing them to other pages with the township information they seek.
- **Search functionality:** A search function is helpful to allow users to find information quickly.
- **Social media:** If your township uses social media, including links to your township's accounts can help you further connect with residents—and even allow them to spread the word about township events or announcements by sharing on their own social media feeds.
- **Legal compliance and user experience balance:** Notify users about cookie usage as soon as they land on the site. Though this may require an extra click, it ensures transparency.

Responsive design—now a necessity

In recent years, it has become imperative that your township website be mobile-friendly, automatically adjusting text, tables, and images for different screen sizes, such as smartphones and tablets. A simplified menu navigation ensures a positive experience on any device.

Rethinking how you manage the content on your site

Many websites use what's called a content management system (CMS)—software that creates unified templates, formatting, and design in a simplified platform, making it much easier for a lay person to create, edit, and manage your township website's content without needing a great deal of technical know-how. MTA has long used a CMS system

for its website, for example, allowing individuals within various departments to update their own information and resources—while maintaining a cohesive appearance throughout the site.

Here's what you should expect from your CMS—from the minimum considerations to enhanced elements that can make website updating even easier and more seamless:

Content editor
- **Good:** The website editor—the individual(s) responsible for website updates—makes content, images, and documents updates and changes.
- **Best:** The website editor can see changes on the webpage as they are made, thus saving time in saving page updates, then visiting the site to view updates.

Posting township announcements
- **Good:** Have a designated area on the homepage to add and remove timely township news and public notices.
- **Better:** Set up township announcements with categories so that the news can display on multiple pages, and then move to an archived page when they rotate off the home page.
- **Best:** Take it one step further and add the ability for residents and others to subscribe to receive email and text news announcements. This allows townships to keep subscribers up to date, even if they don't visit the website. Texting is also extremely helpful during emergencies.

Additional pages for specific information, community features, or services
- **Best:** Consider separate pages for specific high-interest content for residents and other site visitors. This can also help save officials and staff time by automating processes and answering common questions.
  - ✓ FAQs
  - ✓ Employment opportunities
  - ✓ Requests for proposal
  - ✓ Officials' and staff contact information

Calendar: Listing the dates of upcoming township meetings and events helps your residents take part in the government process and feel connected.
- **Good:** List upcoming events and township board and commission meetings with dates, times, and locations.
- **Better:** Meetings and events are displayed in a monthly grid calendar, along with meeting documents, such as the meeting agenda, board packet, etc.

Cookie & User Privacy: A Guide for Municipal Websites

What are cookies?
Cookies are small files stored on your device when you visit websites. They help websites remember your preferences, login details, and other information to enhance your browsing experience.

Why it matters
Adhering to cookie consent and privacy policy rules not only help in building trust with your users but also for mitigating legal risks. In 2024, there has been an uptick in privacy lawsuits, some of which were based on outdated laws related to electronic surveillance and recording without consent.

Privacy best practices
Even if you're not currently tracking visitors to your township website, considering or adopting best practices now can prepare your website for potential future changes, such as adding videos or the need to adapt to stricter privacy laws.

- **Create a clear privacy policy:** Inform users about any data collection practices, particularly if the township uses third-party services that track behavior.

- **Implement a cookie consent notice:** Give users the option to refuse cookies when they first land on the township's site.

- **Remind users of the township's privacy notice:** Ensure this notice is visible on every page where online forms are used.

- **Make privacy policy links accessible:** A link to the township's privacy policy should be available on every page of your website—for example, included in the footer along the bottom of each page.

- **Clarify third-party site redirects:** Clearly inform users when they are being redirected to third-party sites, especially for payments, and include a disclaimer that the township is not responsible for the third-party site's security or data practices.

- **Configure Google Analytics for compliance:** Set up Google Analytics to ensure proper data retention and provide user rights to access, correct, or delete their data. Alternatively, consider using other analytics tools that are GDPR-compliant by default.

- **Best:** Take it one step further by adding the ability to set up recurring events, saving time when adding meeting dates and information to the site.

Document management: From the budget to meeting notices and minutes, proposed ordinances, the zoning ordinance and master plan, and more, townships have many documents to share with the public. A website storage process is necessary to manage these documents.

- **Good:** The website has a consistent presentation of documents, and users can open linked documents in an accessible format.
- **Better:** A resource webpage lists all of the linked documents, organized by page or subject.
- **Best:** The website has an easy upload process that allows documents to be listed in multiple folders on a resource page, and able to be displayed on multiple pages.

Website service vendors and document management providers can offer document management solutions. With the upcoming DOJ rule, every township should be aware if their website's documents will be considered ADA compliant.

Image management: Every website has at least some images, showcasing your township hall and facilities, parks, cemeteries, local scenery, and more. It doesn't matter if your website has five images or 5,000, your township's website includes a system to organize these images.

- **Good:** Images are uploaded to one media folder.
- **Better:** An image library includes folders to organize images and allows the ability to search the entire library.
- **Best:** Go one step further, and assign uploaded images to multiple folders within the image library, cutting down on the number of images uploaded.

Online forms: Simple online forms allow residents and others to submit questions to an appropriate township official or staff person, convey interest in a township program or service, or even take part in a township survey.

- **Good:** The website just includes links or email address to submit a request, concern, application, or question.
- **Better:** Online forms are created and embedded on appropriate pages throughout your website—for example, on a "Contact Us" page.
- **Best:** For forms that require follow up, a project tracking enhancement app can allow your township website editor, or the individual who received the form inquiry, to review follow up and resolution dates to inquiries.

Video streaming: More and more, especially since COVID-19, townships offer live-streaming of their public meetings and some even maintain a video archive of past meetings. This can help to increase community engagement by allowing residents and other interested stakeholders who may not attend meetings in person to learn more about township decisions, efforts, and actions. While not all townships record or live-stream their meetings, those that choose to do so may consider the following:

- **Good:** Record your meetings, upload them to a streaming service like YouTube or Vimeo, and embed link or videos on website.
- **Best:** Work with your township website service provider or a third-party vendor to implement a complete streaming solution.

Reservation process: If your township rents township-owned facilities to the public, such as the township hall or a park pavilion, an online system can save your staff time managing requests.

- **Good:** The website includes information about facilities for rent, and contact information to reach the appropriate official or staff person by email or phone.
- **Better:** Add a calendar to your rental/ reservation page(s) that shows availability status.
- **Best:** Automate aspects of your reservation process with a customized solution based on your township's needs.

Maps and Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- **Good:** Provide contact information for township staff who can help the public in obtaining zoning maps, property maps, etc.
- **Better:** Post maps in PDF format on the website, such as zoning, future land use, and voting precincts.
- **Best:** Offer links to third-party online interactive maps and GIS tools for property information, zoning, and services.

Bill payment system access: Due to the time-saving nature of online payment for both township staff and residents, many townships offer, or are considering, online payment options on their website. Because having a user's personal bank or credit card information touch your website adds new security and PCI compliance requirements, very few website service vendors offer payment on their platforms, and instead partner with a third-party vendor to securely process payments for taxes, utilities, and other fees. If your township uses a third-party payment platform, best practices suggest that you remind the user in writing, close to the "Pay Online" link, that:

- The user will be opening a new website when they click on the "Pay Online" link.
- That this third-party website will have different security and privacy policies.

Broken link audit: Links to documents, pages on external websites, and even to pages on the township's site can become broken as files are moved and updates are made. Many website platforms include an option to scan for broken links—or if your website does not include many pages or links, this can also be completed manually.

- **Good:** Review your website pages on a regular basis and fix any links that are broken.
- **Best:** Save staff time by using a broken link checker to report the location of any broken links.

A vital link

Your website creates a vital link between your township and your constituencies. Beyond its appearance and functionality, it is also essential to ensure your website is properly functioning, configured, secure, and well-maintained. Ask your website service provider questions, such as:

- Who is providing maintenance and how often?
- How often is your website server backed up? Where are the backups located?
- How is your website and server protected from security breaches?
- What is your website service's plan for security, new features, and productivity enhancements?

Whether you're taking the first steps to publish a website, or planning improvements on your current site, ensure that your digital presence meets the highest standards of accessibility, transparency, and user engagement. By doing so, you'll not only comply with best practices, but also foster a stronger, more connected community.

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Prepare now for upcoming local government website accessibility requirements

New accessibility standards, set by the U.S. Department of Justice under the Code of Federal Regulation's 28 CRF Part 35, will affect *all* municipal websites. These requirements come into effect in April 2026 for municipalities with populations over 50,000, and in April 2027 for all others. The rule requires key federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility features to be implemented to ensure all who use your township's website, including those with disabilities, can access the township information and services without issue.

Your website may already be compliant, or only need minor modifications. Many web design firms monitor their clients' websites for accessibility issues. They can also show you how to scan your website to assess accessibility compliance—or areas for improvement. Software advances over the next two to three years could also help to simplify compliance.

The key is to be proactive—and know that you don't have to do this alone. If your township works with a website service firm, check in with them now to ensure they are aware of the DOJ rule, have a plan for compliance, and what actions they—or those in the township who update the township's site—may need to take.

Key rule requirements:

- **Ensure a minimum color contrast** between the text and backgrounds to enhance readability
- **Screen reader compatibility** with content presented in correct reading order for screen readers
- **Logical page structure,** making navigation intuitive
- **Interactive elements,** such as forms and links, follow a logical order
- **Meaningful link text** using descriptive wording (avoid things like, "click here")
- **Content resizing,** allowing users to resize screens without losing content or functionality
- **Alternative text for images,** with tags for image descriptions
- **Document accessibility,** ensuring all documents are readable by screen readers and follow standards, such as correct reading order, searchable text, and alternative text for images, tables, and charts
- **Audio/visual content** includes captions for videos and transcripts for audio content, and audio descriptions for important visual details. Allow users to pause or stop videos that autoplay for more than three seconds.
- **Online forms** include descriptive labels for form fields
- **Accessibility policy** published on the website, including a way for users to report issues or concerns

Documents created before these regulations take effect are exempt from the new requirements, provided they are archived separately from compliant documents. Townships must still make archived documents on the website accessible upon request.