

COUNTY OF LAKE CSAC CHALLENGE AWARD SUBMITTAL

COVID-19 Response: Hybrid Board Meetings Drive Exponential Growth in Local Engagement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview: Lake County's unique blend of Zoom, Facebook, email, Granicus eComment and Public Television platforms enabled thousands of residents to engage while Sheltering in Place.

Challenge: County Administrative Officer/Clerk of the Board, Carol Huchingson, challenged staff to use technology to enhance efforts to maximize citizen engagement in the face of the most significant pandemic of our time. The goal was to safely enable real-time participation via both Zoom and a remodeled, socially-distanced, physical Board Chambers environment.

Solution: Huchingson and staff developed an innovative blended physical/virtual venue for Board Meetings:

- A limited number of participants (24) are able to access the meeting via the physical Board Chambers, and participation is fed into the ZOOM environment in real-time. In other words, the Board Chambers is a participant in ZOOM. Given the physical distancing requirements in place in the Chambers, local constituents have been encouraged to reserve this physical space for those who lack the capacity to virtually connect.
- In ZOOM, people may participate by telephone or any internet-connected device.
- An Information Technology staffer is the ZOOM Host, working with the Chair to ensure all parties wishing to speak are heard, and minimizing uses of the platform for unintended purposes (a.k.a., "ZOOM crashing").
- Meetings are broadcast live on the [County of Lake Facebook page](#), Lake County PEG TV (local Mediacom Channel 8) and through our public [Granicus portal](#), where our Board's agendas, videos and minutes reside and are accessible 24/7. Video is also made available on [YouTube](#), a further accessibility enhancement which adds closed captioning. Audio recordings are also made available to our local public radio station, on request.

- Facebook commenting is enabled, creating a Virtual Town Square environment.

Innovation: The early phases of development for this “hybrid” model, were challenging initially because we were on the leading edge. (Such a model was not in use anywhere else.) Being able to link older analog technology with current digital and IP technology is being abandoned because of the antiquated analog processes and the synchronization challenges they present. Our technical solution was research-intensive, and included problem solving with the most experienced and respected industry leaders.

Results: Lake County began streaming Board meetings on Facebook in March 2020. By June 2020, we were averaging 4,200-5,700 weekly viewers. In August 2020, in six Board of Supervisors and Virtual Community Meetings, we averaged 12,000 Facebook viewers; the equivalent of 18% of Lake County’s population. Prior to the creative challenges brought by COVID-19 and Carol Huchingson’s innovative mandate, Lake County saw an average of 100 web-based viewers using solely Granicus. The modes of access have fed one another; Granicus views are up 300-500%. Pre-pandemic, in-person meetings customarily drew a dozen or so active public contributors. We have been seeing 35-70 participants via Zoom in recent weeks, many remarking they are available to engage in local government for the first time.

Replicability: County of Lake Information Technology and Videography staff have documented the programs and platforms used, and have produced a short video to enhance replicability. Any County interested in making their meetings decidedly more accessible and inclusive will want to consider at least the principles of Lake County’s approach. Given the diversity and quality of input this approach has garnered, we do not anticipate ever returning to in-person-only meetings.

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Optional Submission: <https://youtu.be/eZobFqa4HAI>