

CSAC Entry: Citizen Connect

OVERVIEW: Citizen Connect is an all-in-one mobile app designed for County residents to access County services, glean critical information and track progress on issues they report.

CHALLENGE: The question we often hear as policy-makers is 'why can't government services integrate more easily into my daily life?' That question has persisted for years, but in our increasingly connected world, citizens are now demanding the same access, responsiveness, and transparency from their public agencies as they do from Amazon.com. If the expectation is 'anytime, anywhere' service, why can't a 21st century government be as connected as any contemporary private entity?

INNOVATIVE SOLUTION: Santa Cruz County has embarked upon a successful effort to tie outward-facing government functions into an integrated mobile application – Citizen Connect -- that allows constituents to interact with their government on the device of their choice. The app is a tool for residents to report abandoned vehicles, potholes, illegal dumping, dead animals, illegal marijuana grows, environmental health concerns and much more. Prior to the 4th of July, we also added a way for residents to report illegal fireworks.

Issues are automatically routed to the appropriate department, relieving customers of being forced to navigate County bureaucracy to report often simple issues. And it serves the County as an important data collection tool to better understand issues that need to be addressed.

Furthermore, Citizen Connect is a portal to important information such as restaurant inspections, voter registration information and election results, property taxes payment information, planning application status, El Nino safety information and more. While all of these data were available to residents, they were never before compiled and available at the touch of a finger.

Citizen Connect also allows the County to send push notifications, which can augment the public safety functions of our local law enforcement officers and safety personnel. During El Nino flooding, for example, the County was able to alert residents that flooding along a local river was imminent, allowing them to evacuate.

Because Citizen Connect is a *platform* not a package, new features are being added on a regular basis. We are still expecting to add features such as a department phone directory, capital project information and more.

Citizen Connect not only furthers our goal of increased efficiency and effectiveness, but will foster greater accessibility and accountability. And by developing new systems oriented toward the resolution of customer issues without requiring them to navigate County departments, we may also see better communications between departments and begin to un-silo some of the internal bureaucracies within county government.

The development process was not only technological in nature, but managerial as well. It required ISD to get buy-in from departments facing time management constraints and, in some cases, reluctant to open a more direct pipeline to the constituents they serve. Through their patient negotiations, our County is not only leading the way in our region for e-government, but we expect Citizen Connect will engender greater trust and better communication with our constituents.

ORIGINALITY: Mobile apps are an emerging field of customer service for governments at all levels. However, California counties largely adhere to their bureaucratic structures by demanding constituents download a number of different apps for different departmental services, whether it be public works or animal services of environmental health. Citizen Connect recognizes that constituents do not want to do that, providing a “one-door” approach that improves the customer experience.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS: Creating a mobile application integrating rigidly hierarchical government bureaucracies from scratch is no small feat, but our Information Services Department insisted that an off-the-shelf product would not suffice. Citizen Connect was developed entirely in-house, launching a mere four months after development began. The outside cost to taxpayers was zero, and yet Citizen Connect could save money by reducing staff time spent answering phone calls or taking over-the-counter reports. Furthermore, Citizen Connect acts as a field database for County workers. For example, public works employees may use the app to pinpoint to the location and status of reported potholes through the app’s GIS function.

RESULTS: More than 1,000 residents have downloaded Citizen Connect since launch, and the responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Without any marketing budget, in less than a year we have seen more than 500 issues reported and in some stage of resolution, along with countless other informational uses of the app.

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DOWNLOAD SITE: <https://sccappstore.co.santa-cruz.ca.us>. Also available on iTunes and Google Play.