

Beginning a Conversation with your Local Government

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Local government is invisible to many Americans. As long as services are provided efficiently, many of us feel no need to visit our city or county offices. On those infrequent occasions when we need to connect, we may not know where to start. Community engagement with local government may not always seem intuitive, but in most cases officials are happy to provide the information you're looking for.

A 2014 [Gallup poll](#) showed that 72% of respondents said they trusted their local governments (the percentage dropped when respondents were asked about State and Federal governments). Local employees and officials are unusually accountable. I can't tell you how many times a NC mayor or city councilor has told stories of impromptu "meetings" at the grocery store.

While local governments vary due to location and size, we have more ways than ever to begin a conversation. This post will not address public records law; however, it is designed to help you begin the process of getting help or information from local officials. I will address how to get started, using social media, smartphone apps, call centers and whom to contact.

How to Get Started

If you are simply looking for information, you may never need to visit a local office. Most every town, city, or county in NC has a website that provides a wealth of information. These sites usually include financial documents such as budgets and bid opportunities; job openings; recreational opportunities; news releases; and contact information for town staff and elected officials.

Just about any search engine can lead you to your local government site. In my experience, the homepage and employment searches consistently attract the most visitors. If you can't find the information you want at the homepage, an extra word or two in the search engine should take you directly to the correct place. Most modern websites also include a search function built into the homepage.

Government Social Media

You may also have some luck through the community's social media sites. Official Facebook pages are common for cities and counties; it's a good idea to verify that you're at the official site, though. Some places use the town's name in their Facebook pages for other purposes (garage sales and community news are two of the favorites), but aren't tied directly to town hall. In recent years, Facebook has become more diligent in approving the names of town pages so people know whether they're dealing with government or non-government administrators. Your best bet is to look for phrases that include "official" or "government".

These pages are excellent sources of timely information such as upcoming events and service changes. If you don't see what you need on the town's Facebook "wall", you may be able to ask the administrator directly via private message (I get a private question or two every week). Of course, social media practices vary by community.

In my community of Knightdale, the Facebook page is also open to wall posts from users, so they have the ability to ask a question publicly. These questions often deal with services such as recycling or leaf collection. Because Facebook pages are so easy to create and manage, there's a very good chance your community has one in place. In addition, many cities, towns, and counties also use other social media sites such as Twitter and Google+.

Smartphone Apps

Many local governments have partnered with developers to create smartphone apps that encourage conversation with town or county staff members. Generally, these apps allow users to

receive alerts from government officials (water advisories and gas leaks are a common use) as well as send requests. Some applications, such as See-Click-Fix <http://seeclickfix.com/> allow users to report problems such as potholes or traffic hazards. The apps are easy and quick to use.

The only drawback is that the information may not make it to the right person or persons. For example, if a driver reports a pothole to his/her local city, but the road is maintained by the state highway department, the notification isn't helpful. Contributing to the confusion is the fact that the US Postal Service uses city and town names for routes that are often outside the municipal limits.

Call Centers

Many communities offer a free telephone service for non-emergency information. These centers serve two purposes: they give residents a quick place to ask for help and they free up the 911 lines that are reserved for emergencies. These free services are often reached by dialing 311 or 511. They act as a "catch all" for questions and usually connect you to a person instead of a recording. These are often limited to metro areas rather than rural areas and [may not be available](#) through all telephones service providers.

Whom to Contact

In some cases, residents know what they want to ask, but just aren't sure whom to ask. Again, this varies according to the community, but there are some truths that tend to apply to most places. First, check the community's official website for contact information; there's a good chance the name, phone number and/or email address are listed there. If you are searching for a specific topic instead of a name, try the search function on the homepage or your favorite search engine.

If all else fails, check to see if the city or county has a communications office. These officials have to know a little about a lot of things (many are former journalists), and while they may not have the answer, they'll often know where to find it. These communicators are often referred to as communication directors, managers, or specialists. They may also be called public information officers, especially in police and fire settings. One quick note: it's easy to confuse these communicators with the telecommunications personnel who work in emergency offices. The skillsets are certainly distinct, but sound the same. Again, just send an email or call, and they should know where to direct you.

Your local government is accountable to you. Local officials are accustomed to providing information. The more focused your questions are, the more likely you are to find answers quickly and efficiently.

I'm interested in your experiences with local government. Do you have any techniques that work well in your community? Do you prefer a visit to town hall over the website? I'd love to hear your input.

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