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Startup, Nonprofit Team Up on Hybrid Public Meeting Software

A new tool for hosting public meetings is the result of an integration between the nonprofit Open.Media and the public engagement platform People Speak, itself a product of a private-public partnership.

January 12, 2021 • Andrew Westrope



The ability to participate remotely in public meetings **wasn't unheard of** before COVID-19, but nationwide lockdown orders mainstreamed the idea in a hurry. Even as local governments switched to livestreaming city council meetings, though, they faced challenges of compliance with meeting laws and accessibility to citizens. In some places,

the limits of the software, devices or broadband infrastructure **inhibited participation**. Even in places where people could hypothetically stream meetings, some had problems navigating the technology or leaving public comments.

Having launched a successful trial in the city of Lakewood, Colo., the software company **People Speak** is rolling out a new integration with the nonprofit **Open.Media** aimed squarely at these problems, building on a hybrid meeting platform they designed for the city four years ago.

People Speak as a company has been around since 2017, when co-founders Jason Sperling and Mike Ackerman built the city of Lakewood a hybrid meeting portal called Lakewood Speaks. The city's planning director, Travis Parker, said it was originally a software-as-a-service platform to get more people involved in public meetings by allowing them to review city documents and presentations ahead of time and submit comments. The city contracted with Open.Media the following year to host the actual video livestreams.

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At the behest of Lakewood city leaders, People Speak officially integrated with Open.Media last summer, with the intention of creating a single portal for documents, presentations, comments and livestreaming. The combination of the two went over well with city leaders.

“We found lots of online town hall services, like Bang the Table and others that do big public engagement projects, but nobody had really tackled public hearings. Nobody had designed something that meets open meeting laws and can handle week-in, week-out, driving up public hearings,” Parker said. “It has met our expectations incredibly. Even before COVID, we were getting about eight times as much public participation as before we were using it. We were seeing like 90 percent of our public participation online, before COVID, and now we’re doing 100 percent of our participation through the site. It’s been an incredible partnership and product that we feel pretty proud of.”

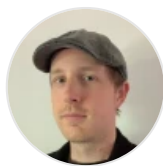
Parker said that with Open.Media’s livestream plugged into the People Speak SaaS, citizens can view all documents and presentations in advance, type comments or leave a voicemail, and the program automatically transcribes their message to text to be included with typed comments during the meeting. The product actually changed the way the city plans and hosts public meetings.

“The goal of this, and the result of this, was an online platform where the council hearings are now days long in Lakewood. During that time, you can see the presentations, ask questions, leave your comment, any time day or night for several days,” Parker said. “We pre-record presentations, we put materials out there, we put decision-making criteria, we allow asking questions, and then during the hearing we livestream from Zoom.”

A **blog post** last month on People Speak’s website announced the integrated platform is available to the broader public. Speaking for the city of Lakewood, Parker said hybrid-style remote meetings are the future for them and possibly every city in a matter of years.

“I think in five years, every city will be allowing online options for participation in public hearings. I’ve said before, setting the barrier as physical participation at a certain time is something of the past,” he said. “We’re long overdue to allow people to participate in

government the way that they order pizza or watch videos.”



Andrew Westrope

Andrew Westrope is managing editor of the Center for Digital Education. Before that, he was a staff writer for Government Technology, and previously was a reporter and editor at community newspapers. He has a bachelor’s degree in physiology from Michigan State University and lives in Northern California.

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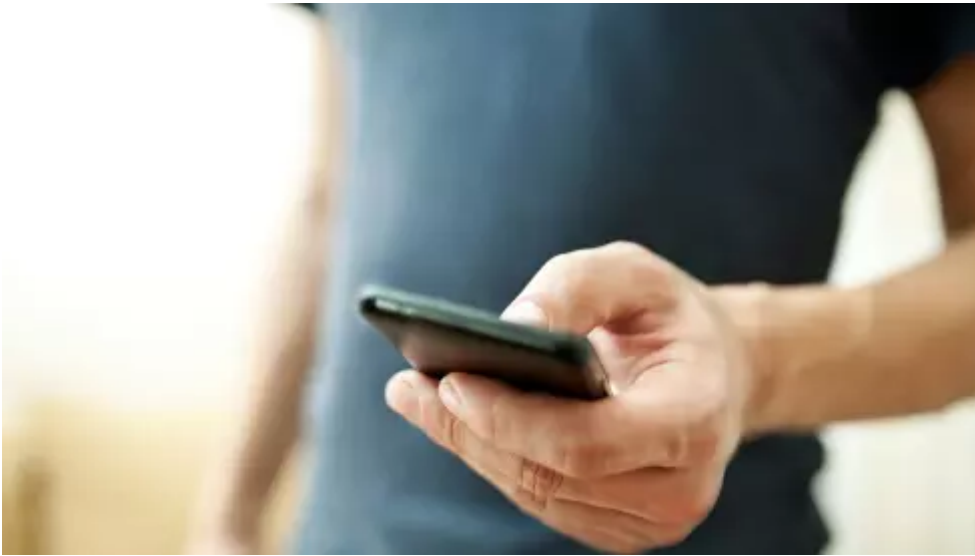
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