

# Open Public Meetings Notices And Agendas

A Joint Preliminary Research Project of the eCitizen Foundation and e-Democracy.Org

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## Proposal

The authoritative copy of the proposal to build out a plan for online public meeting notices and agendas by e-democracy.org is available at: <http://generalapp.newschallenge.org/SNC/ViewItem.aspx?pguid=6671c4e8-ddb2-4170-9b12-e864115cc5a3&itemguid=odd146af-667a-4ed9-a7bc-502fbd93030> Below is the submission, as it existed on December 27, 2010:

Public Meetings Liberated - Personalized, Geo-Aware Online Alerts for All

**Project Title:** Public Meetings Liberated - Personalized, Geo-Aware Online Alerts for All

**Requested amount from Knight News Challenge:** 500,000

**Expected amount of time required to complete project:** 3

**Total cost of project including all sources of funding:** 1,000,000

### Describe your project:

Enter Address: Enter Interest Keywords: You will now receive e-alerts on upcoming agenda items at government public meetings near you that matter you. To publicly comment (text, voice or video) or rate the comments of others on upcoming public meetings, search meetings here. Are you an elected official? Set your profile to conveniently receive digests of public comments or "virtual testimony" with popularity ratings on agenda items before you vote. To eventually cover all 30,000 government bodies in the U.S., you need at least \$66 a government. Video description:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIAOMd\\_ZZtQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIAOMd_ZZtQ)

### How will your project improve the delivery of news and information to geographic communities?:

Improving timely access to decision-making information from government when the you can still act on it is highly democratizing. Today most people find out about key decisions via the media after it is too late or with cut backs in newsrooms, never. "PublicMeetings.Info" will create a distributed data aggregation and syndication system based on open standards and open source technology to provide the public universal access to public meeting notices, agendas, and more via media and other civic partners across the nation. Creating a shared based of public data on meetings will allow local media sites to cost-effectively host the public meeting event calendar of the 21st Century that can build in greater engagement and accountability.

### What unmet need does your proposal answer?:

Public meetings are functionally inaccessible to the average citizen. Agendas are scattered across many websites and few offer any form of geographic or personalized notification. Timely access to meeting information is extremely democratizing because it allows someone to act on that information before a decision is taken. Structured online input encourages convenient any time, anywhere local participation. Today only upcoming meeting covered by the local media are well known - typically on controversial matters leading to the least constructive form of local engagement - the adversarial meeting with outraged protest and unresponsive officials. The diatribe as entertainment local online news comment model also requires alternatives.

### How is your idea new?:

By law, open meetings are the only places for a quorum of a public body to meet. Governments are using this as an excuse NOT to host public online interactivity. By moving meetings agendas into the interactive Web 2.0

environment, more people will be informed and empowered to act. There is no online utility that allows the public to follow public meetings from multiple jurisdictions that govern them. By leveraging lessons from scraping Federal websites and developing adaptive scrapers for the 30,000 local government bodies in the United States, initial data will be collected rapidly with mixed quality but still useful. For the long-term an open standard for geo-coding agendas will be established to allow direct aggregation from government.

**What will you have changed by the end of the project?:**

Local democracy, everywhere. The current technology-driven hype around publishing open data sets from government for reuse is engaging a few interested large local governments. Most Americans are not served by those governments and most of us are being left behind when it comes to serving the information needs communities in a democracy. However, this project will raise the profile of access to decision-making process government information and data within "that movement" to extend its focus beyond crime, transit, and other service related data. The timing to launch this project is ideal. Ultimately, more accessible and relevant public meeting processes will help officials make better decisions and allocate scarce public resources more effectively. Despite their flaws, public meetings are the cornerstone of local decision-making and need to be pulled into the Web 2.0 era to be pulled from obscurity. As millions of Americans come to learn about upcoming agenda items on a timely basis that interest them, they will both have the opportunity to influence decisions (and compete the lobbyists and interests who normally are connected and in the know all ready). More Americans will comment publicly (online and off) on decisions to be taken as well as be held to account by their peers who may have other ideas. This increased openness will lead to greater trust in local institutions (not just government) and the ability of their community to solve problems and meet public challenges.

**Why are you the right person or team to complete this project?:**

E-Democracy.org has 17+ years experience with the use of technology to provide democratic information and civic engagement. We recently attracted modest Ford Foundation funding to start an initiative called Participation 3.0 - <http://e-democracy.org/p3> - in 2010. Included in this project is an exploration into ideas related to local government transparency and accountability through online information dissemination and public engagement.

PublicMeetings.Info is our pilot project for convening and open specification work which will lead to detailed proposals and requests for funding to fully implement. While it unrealistic to cover all 30,000 government bodies in the U.S. quickly, with the right partnership building and engagement of inter-governmental association as well as media associations, most Americans would be able to easily alerted about most of the meetings (and agenda items of interest) being held by governments that their taxes support. E-Democracy.org is led by Steven Clift - <http://stevenclift.com> - who has extensive experience bridging between the civic engagement and media world as well as his role as the founder and coordinator of the State of Minnesota's first government portal.

**What terms best describe your project?:**

democracy, information, meeting, public meetings, transparency, data, open, open government,

**Have you applied to the Knight News Challenge previously?:** Yes

**How did you learn about this contest?** Other

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