Open Public Meetings Notices And Agendas

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

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Vision and Overview

Goals

The vision for this project is to start a process that will one day result in every public meeting notice being easily accessible online, supporting full sort, filter and search by geographic, jurisdictional, topical and other relevant meeting facets. In this way, it is envisioned that 1. citizens will have the ability to become aware of and to participate in the public meetings that matter to them, 2. public officials will be able to share information and more formal inputs and outputs between and among public meetings as well as the capacity to meaningfully engage with stakeholders on each issue addressed at the meeting, and 3. for researchers, the press, academia and others to have a complete record of the public's business in a coherent and manageable form.

Background

Today, the state of online public meeting notices and agendas in the United States is very much a mixed bag. One of the best meeting sites of a government is the compilation available is on the Rhode Island's Secretary of State's web site. On it, all of the meetings are listed, one web page for each meeting. Often the agenda is linked to from the page along with other helpful information such as the meetings minutes.

Generally there are many ways methods of publishing meeting notices on the web:

- Rhode Island calendar: http://sos.ri.gov/publicinfo/openmeetings/
- New York City Council : http://legistar.council.nyc.gov/Calendar.aspx
- Hagerstown, MD: http://www.hagerstownmd.org/shared/calendarOfEvents.asp
- University of Caifornia at Berkeley : http://events.berkeley.edu/
- Clayton County, GA : http://claytoncountyga.gov/calendar.aspx
- Cook County, MN: http://www.co.cook.mn.us/index.php/component/jcalpro/1
- Baltomore Metropolitan Council : http://www.baltometro.org/whats-new-mainmenu-74/calendar-mainmenu-73
- State of Maine (notably, using Microformats in a way consisten with the recommendations in this report): http://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=Portal_Public_Calendar&id=175575&v=article_microformat2008
- many others use
    - email: listserv announcements,
    - event web services: Eventbrite, EventPlans, MeetUp,
    - online calendar services: Google Calendar/ical based systems
    - social networks-- Facebook events

Currently there is no general standard for public meeting notices and agendas, even for the time and location. And there does not seem to be any coordination with printed material or with newspaper advertising (common way for local jurisdictions did to alert the public). There is definitely no typical use of metadata or tags to allow for indexing or searching for events across online calendars and event web sites.

For syndication and listing services, there is some use of ICal and RSS to allow for the public to follow a specific organization. Still these methods are uncoordinated and are based on knowing the main site.

For agendas and minutes there does seem to be a common method of publishing using Adobe PDF formatted documents. This does not allow for much more than reading online or printing.

Next Steps:

The eCitizen Foundation has created a check list and set of recommendations to begin the process of reaching the goals for truly online public meetings notices and agendas and seeks feedback on those materials. E-democracy.org has submitted a <u>proposal</u> for a significant national research and development effort to build the capacity for much of the United States to take it's public meeting notices and agendas online.

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