Open Public Meetings Notices And Agendas

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

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Hypothetical Scenario and Application of Research

A Tough Hypothetical Case Testing Flexibility and Simplicity of Architecture

In order to best explain the possibilities for the public meeting notices and agendas, take the case of the Washington, DC area bus system changing a bus route. The public meeting to hear from the public regarding the change of a specific bus route happens rarely. And yet over the course of a couple years there might be many bus route changes and meetings to cover them. And the jurisdiction is complex: first WMATA, the entity managing the buses, is separate, non-governmental, but is overseen by multi-states and localities with some federal participation; second, the bus routes often go through multiple jurisdictions and neighborhoods with users sometimes only using the bus with transfers (not living near the bus route possibly), and third the citizen affected may not know in advance how to be noticed or inundated with other bus route changes and other issues of little concern. Plus if the meeting includes other agenda items, the person may want to attend at the best time for their bus route. In addition, there may be a possibility of submitting written testimony. And then there may be a desire to obtain the full transcript.

First, there is the bus rider who might want to attend a hearing that affects the bus stop that he or she uses. Since there are multiple political and geographic jurisdictions, and the bus stop may be the one that is a transfer point and therefore not near either the home or business address, it would seem that the two most closely related things that the person might be associated with are the bus stop and the bus route. Second is the need to tag/identify/associate the public hearing with a very few things that would alert the people most affected. In this case, WMATA could put a sign on the bus (which they do). But in cyberspace, it is difficult to know how to reach riders.

The project has posited a system of identifying jurisdictions through a universally understood unique identifier that leads any person to the information and the identifier can be generated by any organization or person without coordinating with any other organization. For the purpose of this example there are two known things that might be considered like a jurisdiction, the bus stop and the bus route. If the two were each given a Uniform Resource Locator (URL), that might serve as the identifier that could allow for simple discovery of the hearing to make changes that affect the person who rides the bus. For example, the bus stop sign might have a URL of http://www.wmata.com/busroute/DC8746 as well as a QR bar code that the person might scan with their phone. On the bus there might be another sign that shows the bus route with a URL of http://www.wmata.com/busroute/S2 . And since there might be information at the URLs that would be helpful, and already in use by the rider, such as the route map, route schedule and the next bus arrival time, it would be easy for the rider to add the URLs to an alert/calendar system that finds public meeting notices for citizens. And the bus route schedule could have a list of all of the stops with their URLs.

Each public meeting notice would have a web page with the date, time, location, rules, links to relevant information

and data, and the URL of the web page could become the link for an RSS feed, iCal, metadata/catalog system, etc. And it could even be a link that would go on press releases, other organizations calendars, and aggregators. Then if there are any changes, the authoritative version of the notice, the one at the web page, would change, and then other systems could poll the site for a change or a person could just go back to the page.

If WMATA had a public hearing where the bus route changes were handled separately in the agenda then the web page with the public meeting notice could have separate sections of the notice web page with the specific time for each bus route. Then, the notice could have separate URLs for each agenda item for each bus route being discussed. For example, the URLs might be http://www.wmata.com/hearings/2010/10/15/hearing59#agenda1 , http://www.wmata.com/hearings/2010/10/15/hearing59#agenda2 , http://www.wmata.com/hearings/2010/10/15/hearing59#agenda3, with the corresponding bus route mentioned with its own URL (like http://www.wmata.com/busroute/S2).

Along with standardizing the time, date, and location data for which there are ISO, RDFa, and HTML Microformats as well as some popular URLs, the above architecture for jurisdictions and agenda items will allow for simple, accurate and timely discovery of relevant meetings without needing to create a rigid or hierarchical system.

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