

Technology & Planning: A Tale of Uneven Distribution

Editor's Note: Initially, this issue of The County Planner was meant to be devoted to exploring innovative approaches to increase public participation, most notably through the use of online forums and surveys and related internet-based approaches to the providing greater access to public information. As the two related articles indicate, some counties are tapping into the internet phenomena in order to provide their citizens with greater access; however, these counties are the exception rather than the rule. The focus of the newsletter changed as we realized that the story wasn't so much the promise of the e-government, but the question of access to technology and the geographic and socioeconomic based digital divide and knowledge divide which exist between counties located in metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) and rural, non-MSA counties.

Most of us do not think twice about signing onto our computers, clicking on the browser icon, and searching the web for answers, checking our mail, or reading the latest news. We google, we surf, we email, we blog, and we ramble around the internet looking how others in our profession "do things." It seems a natural part of our professional and personal lives. Those of use who are connected too often forget that our connections and our knowledge are not necessarily universal rules.

For those of us who live in jurisdictions with a significant online presence, our county websites afford citizens with ready access to documents, agendas, and minutes without tying up staff resources; staff can more widely distribute documents and solicit feedback without spending a fortune on printing and mailing costs; and jurisdictions can tackle more projects with fewer staff because of the time freed by online access. Unfortunately, counties with an internet presence, especially in rural areas, are the exception rather than the rule.

During the summer and fall of 2006, NACP conducted a survey of 817 counties (out of 3089) to determine the extent to which counties have tapped into the internet phenomenon and developed e-government approaches to providing government information and garnering citizen involvement. In addition to confirming the results of the NACO's County Government Survey: Changes and Challenges in the New Millennium (2001), which found that " only 29% of rural counties and 39% of adjacent counties compared to 73% of metropolitan counties have a land-use planner on the

county staff," the NACP study (discussed in greater depth later in this article) found that only 37% of non-MSA counties had a web presence and only 18% had a planning department web page or provided planning information. In addition, only 14.5% posted their ordinances online, 12% posted their comprehensive plans; 12% posted forms, 10% posted their agendas and 9% posted their minutes; and 10% provided some form of educational materials. Clearly, the much touted information and internet access revolution has not extended to rural county governments. Part of the reason may well be connected to the ongoing presence of what has been termed "the digital divide."

The Digital and Knowledge Divides

In the mid-1990s, as computers and the internet began to revolutionize how we conduct business, interact with government agencies, and communicate with each other, the U.S. Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) released a series of studies (1995, 1998, 1999, 2000) on a growing phenomenon that they referred to as the "digital divide." At that time, NTIA defined the digital divide as the gulf between information "haves" (those with access to technology and digital/internet based information) and "have nots." The NTIA found that information "have nots" were "disproportional found in this country's rural areas and its central cities" (NTIA, 1995). In 2004 and 2005, Pew Charitable Trust released the results from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The results indicated that the digital divide between rural and urban counties still existed and continued to have a significant impact on how counties provide information and generate

(Technology, continued on Page 4)

In This Issue

Technology and Planning	1
James City County, Virginia: Reaching Out.....	2
Pierce County, Washington: Tapping into Technology.....	3
Advice From the Trenches: Creating a Web Presence as a Service Learning Project.....	7
County Profile: Carbon County, Montana.....	9
A Planner's Life.....	10
County Miscellany.....	11

citizen input.

NTIA's Falling Through The Net studies, 1995, 1998, 1999 and 2000.

The initial NTIA study examined geographic phone, computer, and modem penetration based on race, age, and educational attainment. The study found that:

- The most seriously "disadvantaged groups were young householders (under the age of 25) particularly in rural areas;
- Rural seniors had the lowest rate of computer ownership/use of any group;
- Among households with computers, the "youngest in rural areas fared worst in modem penetration;
- "Rural households with computers consistently trail urban areas and central cities in terms of modem penetration;"
- "Modem penetration among computer households is lowest in rural areas, specifically in the West, then the Midwest and the South," and
- There is a direct relationship between educational attainment and computer usage, especially in rural areas.

By 2000, the number of internet users grew to 116.5 million (roughly 44.4% of the US population, age 3 and older. In addition, the study found that "pattern of increasing Internet use held true at all income and education levels, for all age groups, for both men and women, for the employed and the unemployed and across all race and ethnic groups." However, households classified as "rural" continued to lag behind households in suburban and urban areas in terms of access to the internet.

According to the 2000 update of "Falling Through the Net," approximately 38.9% of rural households had internet access. Regardless of area (rural, suburban, urban), internet access dropped dramatically based on household income. In rural areas, 76.6% of households with incomes in excess of \$75,000 or more had internet access; however, the percentage of households with internet access drops as income decreases: 41% of households with incomes of \$35,000 to 49,999, 31.9% of households with incomes of \$25,000 to \$34,999, 21.2% of households with incomes of \$20,000 to \$24,999, and less than 20% of households with incomes below \$20,000 have internet access.

The same disparity held true for race/Hispanic origin, educational attainment, and age. Asian American /Pacific Islander households (62.1%) and White households (40.9%) in rural areas were more likely to have internet access than African American households (19.9%) or Hispanic households (19.9%). Households with college graduates (67.7%) were more likely to have internet access than those headed by a household member with some college (50%), a high school diploma/ GED (31%), some high school (16.5%). or an elementary school education (6.1%). Reflecting the earlier results, rural households head by someone under the age of 25 (29.8%) or over the age of 55 (24.6%) were less likely to have access to the internet than households headed by someone 24-34 (42.5%), 34-44 (50.9%), or 45 to 54 (49.6%). The one exception to the

rural/suburban/urban pattern of disparity was with female households with children: 31.2% of female headed households in rural areas had internet access, compared to 30% nationally and 29.7% in urban areas.

The NTIA's Falling Through the Net study and the examination of the digital divide was discontinued after 2000.

The Pew Charitable Trust's Pew Internet and American Life Project

In 2003, the Pew Internet and American Life Project released *The Ever-Shifting Internet Population: A new look at Internet access and the digital divide* by Amanda Lenhart and others. In the study, Lenhart found that:

Rural and Southern. Disparities between rural inhabitants and others remain, while suburbanites have moved ahead of their urban counterparts in Internet penetration. In rural areas, less than half of Americans go online. Southerners are the least likely of any geographic group to be online with 45% still not using the Internet, closely followed by the Midwest with 44% online. The Northeast has 41% of its population off-line and the West continues to lead in Internet penetration (only 37% of Westerners do not use the Internet).

In the Pew Internet Project's January 2005 survey, the researchers found that 44% of adults in rural areas lacked internet access. Of those with internet access, 39% had high-speed connections (an increasing necessity as websites become more technologically advanced). 43% of rural households with incomes under \$30,000 have internet access. While the numbers show a marked improvement over the results from the original NTIA study ten years earlier, they still indicate a significant digital, and by extension, knowledge divide.

The Knowledge Divide

While the term "knowledge divide" was initially coined by the scientific community and applied to the knowledge gap between developed and developing nations, it also has a local, non-scientific application. Understanding how government and planning decisions are made requires access to information. When local government information is not widely distributed or is distributed only on a "adjoining property owners" basis, a knowledge gap is created between those with access and those without. That gap is the knowledge divide and is also one of the roadblocks in the participatory planning and governing process.

In 2000, John Letherman, a professor of community and regional economics in the Department of Agricultural Economics at Kansas State University wrote an article titled "Internet-Based Commerce: Implications for Rural Communities," which was published by the U.S. Economic Development Administration in their *Reviews of Economic Development Literature and Practices* (No. 5). While his article focused on the impact on long range community and rural economic development, a significant portion of his argument was based on the relationship between local

government officials and IT

“There may be some question about the capacity of rural institutions to facilitate community consensus building and foster adaptive strategies to bring about needed change. Socioeconomic and demographic indicators suggest that the people who make up rural institutions may lack the interest, understanding, and experience needed to make technology access and use a major community priority...In many rural places, local government officials fail to appreciate the importance of trends related to IT. Many local officials view investments in computer technologies simply as a “black hole” of expense. While quite a few local governments have cooperated in the development of community Web pages, most see it simply as a public relations and/or economic development tool..” (13,17)

A survey of existing county websites revealed the accuracy of Letherman’s observations.

NACP Study of Online Presence: Comparison of Counties, 2006.

During the summer and fall of 2006, NACP surveyed the online presence of county governments in order to gauge the extent to which counties are using technology to increase access to planning information and activities and encourage greater citizen participation in their local planning process.

Initially, the purpose of the study was to gauge how local governments were employing the web as a public input mechanism. It was clear early on that governments that made full use of internet capabilities were the exception rather than the rule. The study involved cataloging the range of online information and services, including plans, ordinances, forms, agendas, minutes, and educational materials. While most of the areas are specific and self explanatory, the category of educational materials is fairly broad and includes FAQ sheets, instructions, special studies, staff reports, and background information.

The results of the study indicate that there continue to be geographic disparities in the use of computers to deliver information and provide access to services. The study involved looking at 916 counties (30% of the 3089 counties nationally). Of these counties, 537 were located in metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) and 379 were located outside of MSAs. Of the 537 MSA counties, 35% were predominantly rural (60% or more of the population designated as rural by the U.S. Census Bureau), 43% were predominantly urban (with a rural population of 39% or less), and the remaining 22% were transitional (with a rural population between 40% and 59%).

Mirroring the results from the Pew study, Western states, including Arizona, Alaska, and Wyoming, had far better internet coverage than did states located east of the 100th meridian. For example 65% of the counties in Wyoming had an internet presence and 52% had a planning presence on their websites compared Alabama, where only 45% of counties had some sort of web presence and less than 1% had a planning presence. Indeed, Florida, which

has mandatory growth management, and Virginia were the only southern states with a significant internet presence. In West Virginia, which just passed a new comprehensive planning law, 24% of the counties had an online presence and only 7 of the 55 counties (13%) provided any planning information.

Well over half the MSA counties had an internet presence (63%) while fewer than half the non-MSA counties (37%) had a county sponsored website. Of the rural counties with a website, only 17% (63 out of 379 surveyed) provided any level of planning information as compared to 39% of counties located in MSAs (210 out of 537 surveyed).

The types of information available on the website varied widely, depending, in part, on state requirements, although state required mandatory planning did not turn out to be a particularly good indicator of whether counties within the state maintained a web presence. In Florida, for example, 81% of counties maintain an internet presence and 75% have at least some planning information available on their websites. In Tennessee, which also has state mandated planning, very few of the counties have websites. Planning information, where available, is generally located on Planning District websites and is difficult to find.

The majority of counties with some sort of planning presence on their website limit their information to location, hours, and contact materials (as the figure on page 6 indicates). This is especially true in rural counties. The original intent of this study was to look at how counties, both within MSAs and in rural areas, used the internet to garner public input and provide public outreach. Sadly, less than 5% of the counties surveyed (MSA and non-MSA counties combined) used their website as a way to gather citizen comments and less than a third of MSA counties and 12% of rural counties used their websites as an educational tool to increase public awareness of planning issues and ideas.

Conclusion

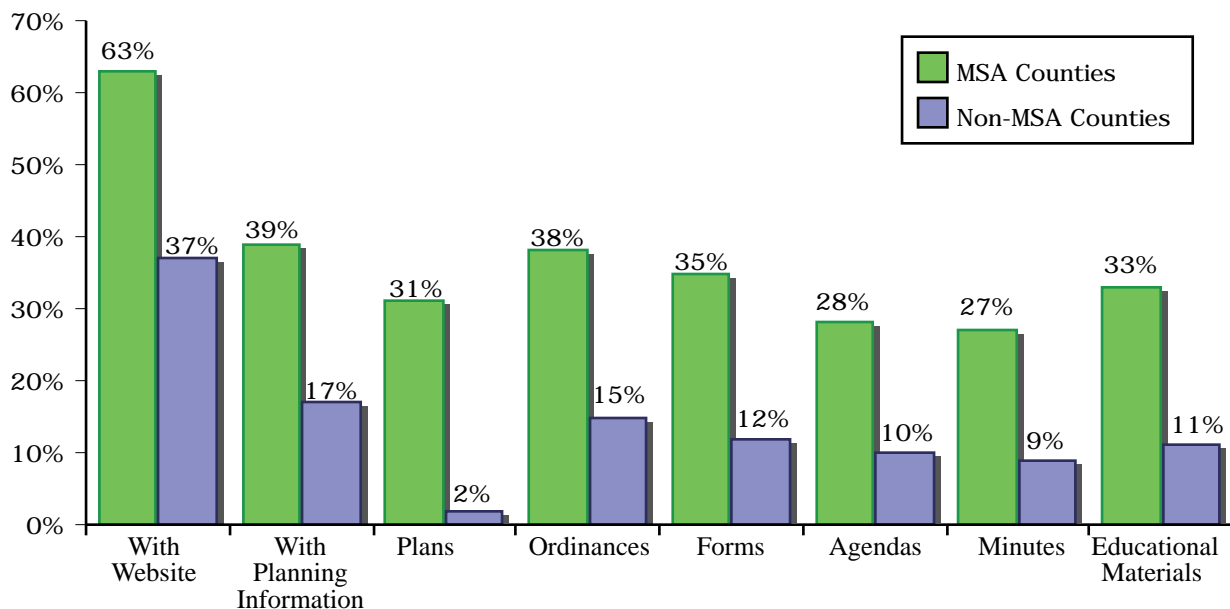
In a speech at the National Association of Counties Annual Legislative Conference in 2001, Maria Cantwell, former Microsoft executive and US Senator from Washington, stated that "while many Americans are embracing new technologies, disproportionately large numbers of those in lower income levels, rural households, and Hispanics and African-Americans lag behind, noting that "households with incomes of \$75,000 and higher, and in urban areas, are more than twenty times as likely to have access to the Internet than rural households at the lowest income levels." Cantwell concluded that: "And, as more and more everyday activities migrate to the Internet, the gap between those on either side of the digital divide will only become more pronounced and have more significant consequences to our economy and society as a whole." Her words echoed the findings of the NTIA studies and researchers like Letherman and were subsequently echoed by the ongoing research by Pew.

While the internet offers local governments a way to reach out to citizens at a significantly lower cost, it is not

MSA and Non-MSA County Planning Presence Online, 2006

	Counties in MSAs	% MSAs	Non-MSA Counties	% Non-MSAs	All Counties	% All Counties
Counties included in Study	537	59%	379	41%	916	100%
Counties w/ Website	339	63%	139	37%	478	52%
Counties w/ Online Planning Information	210	39%	63	17%	273	30%
Online Features:						
Plans	168	31%	6	2%	174	19%
Ordinances	204	38%	55	15%	259	28%
Forms	188	35%	45	12%	233	25%
Agendas	151	28%	39	10%	190	21%
Minutes	143	27%	34	9%	177	19%
Educational Materials	176	33%	40	11%	216	24%

Percentage of Counties Providing Specific Planning Documents Online, 2006



necessarily a panacea, but it is a start. As John Letherman noted in his study:

There are at least three general areas where local governments have the potential to improve service delivery by use of the Internet: accessing local government information, enhancing citizen organization and involvement, and conducting local government business. Local government can improve access to information by making public records available online and keeping information about meetings or public issues current. Similarly, local officials can often respond to public inquiries and complaints faster and more effectively via e-mail than by telephone or in person. They can also use Internet

technology to enhance citizen involvement through Internet-Based public polling, referenda, and voting. It is possible to create forums for public issues on local government Web sites. (16)

Perhaps the challenge for the National Association of County Planners and other planning and government organizations is to find ways to facilitate greater citizen access to county information by encouraging states and the federal government to help facilitate the construction of the necessary IT infrastructure while providing counties with the necessary support to develop significant online presences and provide development assistance in creating online opportunities for public outreach and participatory planning.