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The Continuing Evolution of Planning Web Technology: Harnessing the Power of Change

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The Continuing Evolution of Planning Web Technology: Harnessing the Power of Change

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Emerging technologies are fundamentally changing how we plan, develop, and manage our cities, as cities around the globe continue to urbanize and become more smart and connected. Given trends of increasing mobile use, local governments and public bodies officials (and particularly city planners) are continually being require to adopt and use new technologies to plan, communicate and engage with citizens—in essence an ec. In this context we partnered with the American Planning Association Information Technology Division to evaluate and benchmark the use of web technology in city planning departments across the United States, looking both at web use trends as of 2017 and how they have changed since 2015 (Riggs, Steins, & Chavan, 2015).

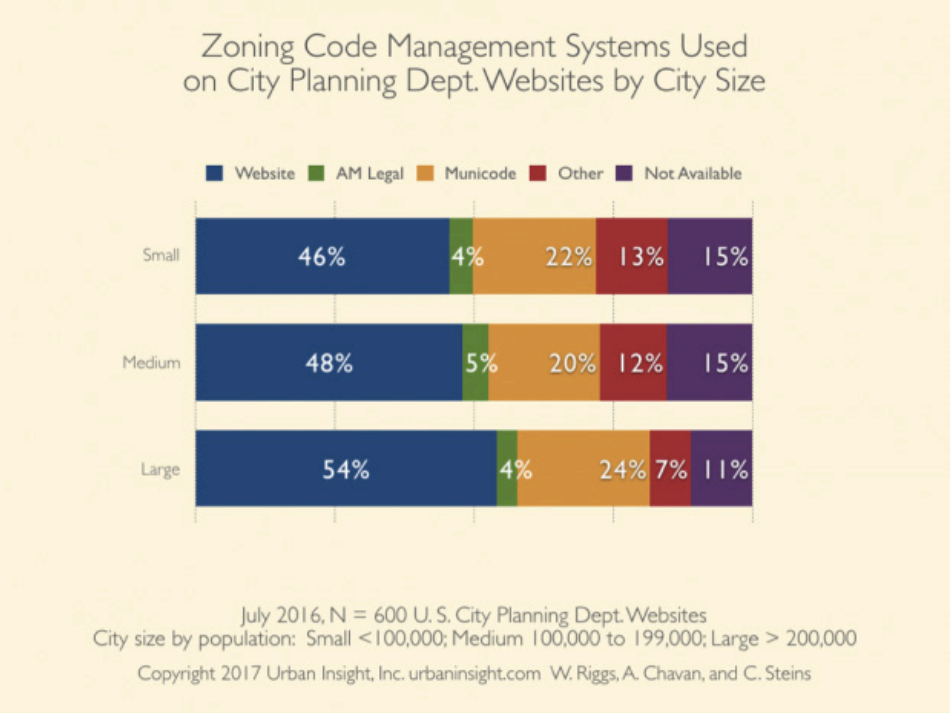
Using 11 key indicators, discussed in more depth in a peer-reviewed articles by Cabral, Chavan, Clarke, & Greacen (2012) and Riggs (2016), to evaluate over 600 cities across the United States Chris Steins (Urban Insight, Inc.), Abhijeet Chavan (Planetizen) and I found substantive changes in how planners are communicating with the public. One of the most pronounced changes was the move towards response design of websites. Responsive web design is the gold standard for building a website, given that as of 2015 more people access the Internet via mobile phones and tablets than desktop computers. It allows for information to adapt to various screen sizes and devices. 59 percent of planning departments now have a mobile responsive website. This is a dramatic rise of 44 percent; up from 15 percent in 2015.

Our team saw similar increases use of social media, online GIS tools and e-permitting capacity. With regard to use of social media, 14 percent of all cities have some form of dedicated social media for planning; this was up from 10 percent in 2015. This trend was more pronounced, however for large cities, where use has almost doubled—increasing from 17 to 32 percent. The number of cities with GIS property lookup capability rose 7 percent to 47 percent as we predicted, up from 40 percent. Finally, there was also a large increase in online permitting available. While the majority of cities (65 percent) do not support online permitting, there was a dramatic increase in the number of cities offering such services. 35 percent of the cities surveyed had online permitting capacity which was up from 21 percent.

More details can be found in our full report, accessible on Planetizen at: https://www.planetizen.com/node/90628/. Yet these results warrant thoughtful action. Given increasing change, planners and policy makers should expect to see continued evolution of how we do business. City planning is one of the most intimate forms of government in how it engages with citizens about the components that frame where they live. And in an era were data and mobile access is continuing to proliferate, we anticipate that this evolution will not only continue but accellerate. Web-based tools for planning are becoming more refined and defined. In the last few years planners have seen tools such as RideScout evolve in to Moovel, Mindmixer transition to mySidewalk and conduits such as Loopnet and OpportunitySpace give way to tools such as Oppsites.

In this light, civil servants of all types (not just planners) my team suggests the following actionable responses.

- If you are building a new website, be certain that it uses responsive design ad consider using a content management system to facilitate mobile delivery of information.
- If you are considering updating the city's zoning code or general plan, budget and plan-for the use of an appropriate online / digital publishing platform.
- Explore online permitting and online geographic information systems as they

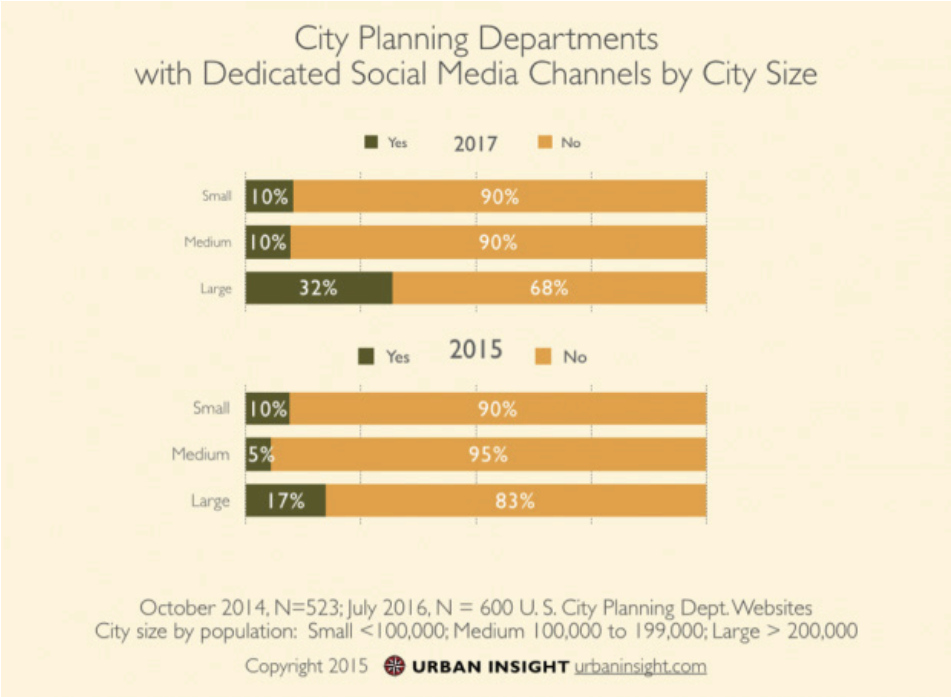


Zoning Code Management Systems Used on City Planning Department Websites by City Size

become increasingly available through evolving technological tools.

- Consider identifying a tech-savvy team member to champion new approaches and technology.

The field of civic technology, "civic tech," has grown significantly in the last five years, and consistent with Moore's Law this growth will continue. Planners and policy makers ultimately need to be continuing to education themselves about the latest innovations and tools and exploring what they mean to practice. While they may not hold all the answers or ever supplant the power of the face-to-face public meeting, by staying nimble to these changes and understanding new tools, our professional can best harness their power.



City Planning Departments with Dedicated Social Media Channels by City Size

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The Technology Division is charting the use of new technologies for the American Planning Association. Planners everywhere need to understand the use and planning implications of new systems: computer simulation, GIS, telecommunications, and computer-based information resources.

Planning & Technology Today is the Division's newsletter, bringing you current information that is useful for making decisions on how to use the new technologies. If you are presently a member of APA, it costs only $25 to join the Division; students $10; non-members $40.

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