

AN INVENTORY OF MID-HUDSON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

How are municipalities in our region utilizing technology to inform and engage residents?

SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

This report details the findings of a five year tracking study which inventoried how local governments in our Mid-Hudson region are using technology—in particular, websites and social media—to communicate information and engage residents. Our four-county region is defined as Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan, and Ulster counties.

eGovernment is “the delivery of government information and services through the internet 24 hours a day, 7 days per week” (Reddick & Frank, 2007, p. 577), and is defined as “the use of information and technology to support and improve public policies and government operations, engage citizens and provide comprehensive and timely government services” (Scholl 2008).

Localities in our region are smaller: they range in population from as small as less than 200 to as large as over 40,000, and average only about 11,500 residents per town or city. There is very little empirical research on this topic at the local entry level of government, and this project seeks to fill that gap for our region. For all governments at all levels, size notwithstanding, this report helps show, eGovernment has become the principle means of communication and interaction with citizens in contemporary America.

Early in his first term, President Barak Obama directed federal departments and agencies to “harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public” (Obama 2009). In fact, a survey done almost a decade earlier showed that most states and a majority of large cities (population 100,000+) in the U.S. already had some form of Internet presence (Stowers 1999). More recently official websites have come to be augmented by social media - Facebook and Twitter – for governance purposes. (Snead 2013; Bridges et al 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012; Landsbergen 2010; Mahler and Regan 2011).

In an era skeptical about government, advocates believe that the goal of eGovernment is a path to “participation, openness, transparency, good governance, and trust” (Criado et al., 2013). Indeed, research affirms that by providing readily available and easy access to information on websites and social media, the Internet has transformed the way that local governments inform and engage their communities and, further, that the more information constituents can find on the web, the level of trust and confidence in government grows (Criado et al. 2013; Musso et al., 2000; Tolbert & Mossberger 2006; West 2004a,b).

In his study of Florida’s local government websites, Armstrong (2010) shows that the “accessibility of public information at the local level is a key issue in the overall perception of open government,” and “online public records serve as a proxy for the entity’s overall level of transparency” (p. 11). In their national study of 500 U.S. cities, Yavuz & Welch (2014) demonstrate that “higher website openness is positively related to increased frequency of public

participation in agency decision-making and civil society influence, increased technical capacity, lower organizational control, and higher perceived usefulness of website technology” (p. 574).



Five years ago and again this year, we tracked whether or not local governments in our region had websites, and if so, what types of information were being posted on their sites. Our checklist of forty items included a variety of information in thirteen categories: contact information; recent activities; public access; forms; departments, commissions, committees; financial; law/legal; ethics; official maps and local demographics; planning and development; environmental impacts; emergency management; and, elections. In addition, websites were evaluated on their ease of navigation.

For the first time in 2015, we also looked to see if municipalities had a social media presence. This included local governments with a Facebook page or Twitter account for their municipality as a whole, or for one of their departments.

Our 2010 data was collected from January 5, 2010 through January 19, 2010. The 2015 data was collected February 4, 2015 through March 9, 2015. All 116 jurisdictions—cities (6), towns (74), and villages (36)—in the four-county region were investigated. For each website located, a standard forty item checklist was utilized to code the presence or absence of particular items found on each website. Over the course of the study, six undergraduate students were trained and contributed to data collection. To provide inter-rater reliability, multiple students inventoried overlapping sites, and any discrepancies triggered a double check visit to sites to ensure accuracy.

Key findings:

- Ninety-seven percent of the local governments in our four-county region maintain a website. This compares to 93 percent in 2010.
- Among those with websites, only one third have a posted website policy to inform and guide website visitors.
- A plurality (44 percent or 51 local governments) of websites included at least one item in ten or more of our thirteen categories. On average, city websites contained items in eleven of the categories, town websites in nine, and villages in seven.
- The three most common categories of information found on local government websites are contact information, recent activities (such as meeting calendars, agendas, and minutes), and reports about planning and development.
- All governments gave some contact information over the web. Most have phone numbers listed (96 percent). The number of websites providing email addresses rose from 57 percent to 85 percent in the five year period.

97%
OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENTS HAVE
WEBSITES

100%
PROVIDE TELEPHONE
OR EMAIL CONTACTS

- Recent activities (96 percent) most commonly were represented by calendars (75 percent) listing events and meetings, board/council meeting minutes (76 percent), and press releases (63 percent).

Category	2010	2015	2015 Rank	Change
Contact information	95%	100%	1	+5
Recent Activities	93%	96%	2	+3
Public Access	11%	20%	11	+9
Forms	76%	87%	4	+11
Departments, Commissions, Committees	70%	73%	6	+3
Financial	56%	73%	6	+17
Law/Legal	83%	88%	3	+5
Ethics	26%	47%	8	+21
Official Maps and Local Demographics ¹		50%	7	
Planning and Development	85%	96%	2	+11
Environmental Impacts	64%	76%	5	+12
Emergency Management		32%	9	
Elections	27%	27%	10	-

- The high percentage for the planning and development category (96 percent) is driven by the increased number of municipalities posting minutes for both planning board (PB) (69 percent) and Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) meetings (54 percent), as well as the majority that publish comprehensive master plans (59 percent) on their sites.

96%
PUBLISH INFO ABOUT
RECENT ACTIVITIES

96%
PRESENT PLANNING AND
DEVELOPMENT INFO

- Law/legal (88 percent) was the third ranked category. This is substantially due to the posting of information about the Freedom of Information Act (FOIL) up from 41 to 61 percent of sites in the five year period, and the use of eCode by 74 percent of municipalities.
- The two fastest rising categories relate to financial information (73 percent) and ethics (47 percent).

Items (Category) with the greatest 5-year increases	2010	2015	Change
MS4 Reports (Environmental Impacts)	25%	65%	+40
Budgets (Financial)	28%	59%	+31
Email Addresses (Contact Information)	57%	85%	+28
Ethics Policy (Ethics)	26%	47%	+21
Official Maps (Maps and Local Demographics)	26%	47%	+21
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	+20
PB Minutes (Planning and Development)	49%	69%	+20
ZBA Minutes (Planning and Development)	36%	54%	+18

¹ Categories not inventoried in 2010 include local demographics and emergency managements.

- Growth in the financial category resulted from a much larger number of municipalities now posting their annual budgets online; this percent increased from 28 to 59 from 2010 to 2015.
- The ethics category is comprised of a single item: the publishing of a code of ethics or having it within a local government's eCode. In 2010, a resident could locate a code of ethics on 26 percent of websites; five years later it was up to nearly half (47 percent).

74%
**UTILIZE ECODE, AN
 ONLINE INTERFACE THAT
 HOSTS MUNICIPAL LAW**

**MORE AND MORE
 MUNICIPALITIES ARE
 PUBLISHING
 INFORMATION ABOUT
 WATER QUALITY,
 BUDGETING, ETHICS, AND
 HOW TO FOIL**

- Some municipalities are required by the state to complete water quality (MS4) reports. This item showed greatest growth in the five year time frame, a 40 percentage point increase from 25 percent to 65 percent of mandated jurisdictions publishing these on their websites.

Top 10 Items (Category)	2010	2015	2015 Rank
Phone numbers (Contact Information)	81%	96%	1
Email Addresses (Contact Information)	57%	85%	2
Meeting Minutes (Recent Activities)	64%	76%	3
Meeting Calendars (Recent Activities)	73%	75%	4
eCode (Law/Legal)	69%	74%	5
PB Minutes (Planning and Development)	49%	69%	6
MS4 Reports (Environmental Impacts)	25%	65%	7
Info about departments (Depts, Committees)	68%	64%	8
Press releases (Recent Activities)	60%	63%	9
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	10

**LESS THAN ONE IN FIVE
 LOCAL GOVERNMENTS
 POST BOARD MEETING
 VIDEOS ONLINE**

- Only 19 percent of local governments post meeting videos to allow residents who cannot attend in person to view them later online. Only six (5 percent) provide a way to live stream board meetings.
- On a scale of one to five with one representing ability to navigate, and five as great ease of navigation, on average, local municipalities with websites scored 2.8. Cities ranked the

highest with a mean of 3.7, followed by towns with a mean of 2.9, and villages with 2.3.

- Approximately two thirds (63 percent) of the local governments in our four-county region has some type of social media presence: a Facebook page or Twitter account for the municipality or at least one of its departments. However, only four percent of those with a social media presence have a published related policy.
- Sixty percent of local governments have a Facebook presence and about one in five (21 percent) have a Twitter account.

63%
**HAVE A SOCIAL MEDIA
 PRESENCE ON FACEBOOK
 OR TWITTER**

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INTRODUCTION

Declining citizen engagement with government is well-documented, and troubling. The utilization of technologies to encourage reconnection provides one remedial response to rebuild participatory democracy. Websites – and to a growing extent, social media – now represent one of the chief interfaces between governments and their community constituents. By the year 2000, almost every state and a majority of large cities (population 100,000+) in the U.S. had some form of Internet presence, with the great majority (90 percent) including some type of contact information (Stowers 1999). In addition to websites, Facebook and Twitter are among the most commonly utilized venues of social media utilization by governments (Snead 2013; Bridges et al 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012; Landsbergen 2010; Mahler and Regan 2011).

The use of web-based technologies “increasingly holds the potential to improve transparency, accountability, and public participation, by providing a more effective and efficient disclosure of information to the citizens and organizations and by providing channels for interaction with the government” (Yavuz & Welch 2014). Acting on this view, early in his first term, President Barak Obama proclaimed open government and transparency a top priority. In his 2009 *Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government*, the president stressed that “executive departments and agencies should harness new technologies to put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public” (Obama 2009).

eGovernment is “the delivery of government information and services through the internet 24 hours a day, 7 days per week” (Reddick & Frank, 2007, p. 577), and is defined as “the use of information and technology to support and improve public policies and government operations, engage citizens and provide comprehensive and timely government services” (Scholl, 2008). Citizen engagement via “participation, openness, transparency, good governance, and trust” is the goal of eGovernment (Criado et al. 2013). Asgarkhani (2007) argues that there are five good government purposes for utilization of eGovernment:

- “providing access to general information,
- connecting individuals to services (e.g., property information),
- raising awareness about government decision-making,
- facilitating communication and consultation with general public, and
- inviting citizens to participate in public process” (in Armstrong 2010, p. 12).

Research by social scientists and policy analysts who study eGovernment affirms that by providing readily available and easy access to information on websites and social media, the Internet has transformed the way that local governments inform and engage their communities. Furthermore, the greater the availability of information on the web, the higher the level of trust and confidence in government (Criado et al. 2013; Musso et al. 2000; Tolbert & Mossberger 2006; West 2004a,b).

Transparency is “public openness to governmental decision-making” (Armstrong 2010, p. 12), it nurtures good government by informing and involving the public, and helps decision makers adhere to ethical norms and avoid errors. Coglianese writes:

- “By making more information available, the public can ... participate more thoughtfully in the governmental process, sharing new information or raising questions about the adequacy of proposed governmental solutions.” Moreover, “transparency can help preventively, making abuses and mistakes by government officials less likely, as those

officials know that ordinary citizens, organized interest groups, the media, and other government officials (especially those specifically charged with oversight roles) can more easily monitor the workings of the federal government” Coglianese (2009, p. 535-6).

In his study of Florida’s local government websites, Armstrong (2010) shows that the “accessibility of public information at the local level is a key issue in the overall perception of open government,” and “online public records serve as a proxy for the entity’s overall level of transparency” (p. 11). In their national study of 500 U.S. cities, Yavuz & Welch (2014) demonstrate that “higher website openness is positively related to increased frequency of public participation in agency decision-making and civil society influence, increased technical capacity, lower organizational control, and higher perceived usefulness of website technology” (p. 574).

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This report details the findings of a five year tracking study which inventoried how local governments in our Mid-Hudson region are using technology – in particular, websites and social media – to communicate information and engage residents. Our four-county region is defined as Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan, and Ulster counties.

Five years ago and again this year, we tracked whether or not local governments in our region had websites, and if so, what types of information were being posted on their sites. Our checklist of forty items included a variety of information in thirteen categories: contact information; recent activities; public access; forms; departments, commissions, committees; financial; law/legal; ethics; official maps and local demographics; planning and development; environmental impacts; emergency management; and, elections. In addition, websites were evaluated on ease of navigation.

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Our 2010 data was collected from January 5, 2010 through January 19, 2010. The 2015 data was collected February 4, 2015 through March 9, 2015. All 116 jurisdictions - cities (6), towns (74), and villages (36) - in the four-county region were investigated. For each website located, a standard forty item checklist was utilized to code the presence or absence of particular items found on each website. Over the course of the study, six undergraduate students were trained and contributed to data collection. To provide inter-rater reliability, multiple students inventoried overlapping sites, and any discrepancies provoked a double check visit to sites to ensure accuracy.

This report is organized by category, reported in the aggregate for our baseline year of 2010, current year of 2015, and by type of municipality: cities, towns, villages. We provide descriptives for 2010 and 2015, including trend analysis. Each category section also includes two other subsections: *Why is this Important* and *Forecast for the Future*.



The Benjamin Center at SUNY New Paltz (formerly CRREO) was established in 2007 to further engage the university and its people with communities, governments, not-for-profits and businesses across our region. Our center conducts and publicizes research on regional topics; creates and directs select institutes focusing on specific topics of regional interest; connects and partners with local governments, not-for-profits and businesses to initiate reforms and advocate for best practices; contracts to assess the performance of public and not-for-profit agencies and programs; and works to foster intergovernmental collaboration and community engagement. Through these efforts we seek to inform decision-making in the region, identify opportunities, highlight successes, and bring attention where improvement is needed.

In 2008, with support from U.S. Senator Charles Schumer and funding from the U.S. Department of Education, CRREO launched the Regional Well-Being Project to identify agreed values and goals and to develop ways of measuring our Mid-Hudson Valley communities' social, economic and environmental character that are broadly accepted and allow the tracking of change over time. As part of the Regional Well-Being Project, the 2010 baseline wave of this study was funded and conducted.

In 2014, the second wave of this study was conducted with support from a New York State Assembly Local Initiative Grant sponsored by Assemblymember Kevin A. Cahill (Ulster-Dutchess).

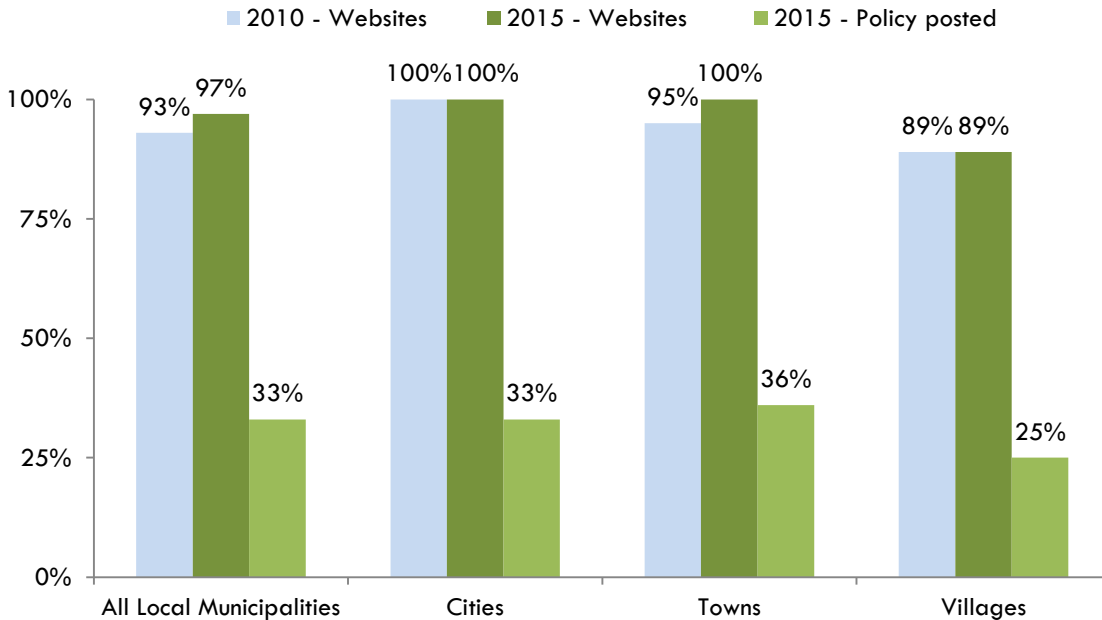
The principal author of this report is KT Tobin, with considerable assistance from student research assistant and Benjamin Center Cetrino Scholar Emily Vanderpool (Economics '16). Janis Benincasa and Gerald Benjamin were contributing editors. The following students conducted data collection for this project: Layla Alqaisi (Political Science '10), Maria Davila (Political Science '10), Sadie Godlis (Political Science '15), Andrea Mazzetti (Sociology '13), and Caitlyn O'Donnell (Political Science '13).

We purposefully have not made this a "report card" for individual municipalities, but rather, a best practices inventory and guidebook so that our constituent municipalities can read this report to learn what their peers are doing, and make informed choices about how they can better provide eGovernment.

MUNICIPAL WEBSITES

2015 Findings

Ninety-seven percent of the 116 city, town, and village governments in our four-county region maintain a website. All cities and towns in the region, and all of the municipalities in Dutchess and Ulster counties have websites. Overall, only four municipalities do not have websites: two villages in Orange County, and two villages in Sullivan County. Despite nearly all local governments providing their own websites, only one third has a posted website policy to inform and guide visitors to their sites about objectives and appropriate uses.



Websites and Website Policies: whether or not the municipality has a website, and if so, if a website policy is also posted

Five Year Trend

In 2010, 93 percent of local governments in the four-county region have websites, compared with 97 percent in 2015. The increase is solely attributed to the increase in the number of towns with websites; an increase from 95 percent five years ago, to 100 percent today.

CONTACT INFO

Category Total

2015 Findings

Contact information for at least one elected official, in either the form of telephone numbers or email addresses, can be found on all local government websites in our four-county region.



Contact Info: combined total category includes phone and email contact info for at least one elected official

Five Year Trend

In 2010, on 95 percent of municipal websites, residents could find a phone number or an email address for at least one of their local government elected leaders; today, that is true for all.

Why is this Important?

Outside of attending board and council meetings, community members need and expect a way to communicate with their local leaders.

Forecast for the Future

We expect that contact information will continue to be standard information that resident can find on their local government websites. While nearly all currently supply phone numbers, in 2020 it is predicted that a similar percent of municipalities will also grant access to email addresses.

Telephone Numbers

2015 Findings

Almost all of the municipal websites in our four-county region provide at least one phone number in order to contact elected officials. This includes 88 percent of villages, and all of the towns and cities.



Telephone Numbers: at least one phone number for at least one elected official is posted

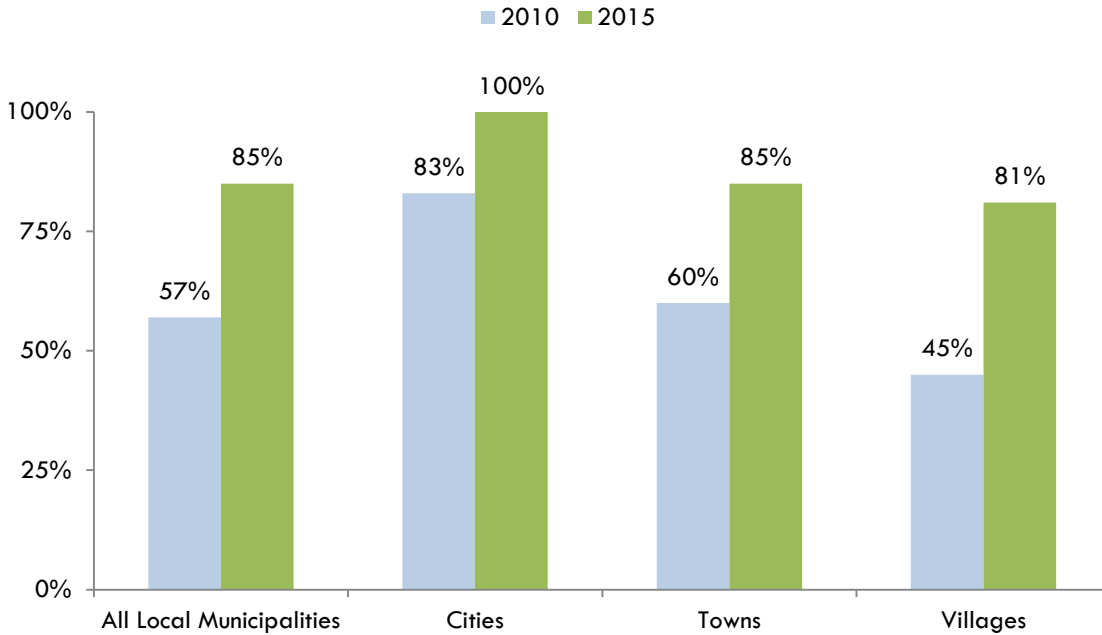
Five Year Trend

In the past five years, the percent of local governments publishing phone numbers for elected leaders increased from 81 to 96 percent.

Email Addresses

2015 Findings

Eighty-five percent of local governments in our four-county region make available at least one elected official's email on their websites. This includes all six cities, 85 percent of towns, and 81 percent of villages.



Email Addresses: at least one email address for at least one elected official is posted

Five Year Trend

There has been a considerable increase in the number of local governments that are publishing elected officials' email addresses. In fact, among the forty items we track, emails had the second greatest percentage increase, a 28 percentage point rise (second only to budgets which had a 31 percentage point increase). In 2010, 57 percent of municipalities posted elected officials' emails, and in 2015, 85 percent do. The percentage point increase in that same time frame was 25 for towns and 36 for villages.

RECENT ACTIVITIES

Category Total

2015 Findings

The second most common type of information on municipal websites document recent activities: 96 percent post news, press releases, calendars, or meeting agendas and minutes. This is true for 94 percent of villages, 97 percent of towns, and all six of the cities in our four-county region.



Recent Activities: combined total category includes press releases/news; meeting calendars; meeting minutes; meeting agendas within a given time frame

Five Year Trend

Posting this type of information on local government websites is not new. Five years ago, 93 percent of municipal websites included postings of news, press releases, calendars, or meeting agendas and minutes. This was true for 90 percent of villages, 93 percent of towns, and all of the cities in the region.

Why is this Important?

In order for citizens to keep up with what's happening in their local governments, municipal websites can provide easy access to information about regular activities. Whether residents want to read about what's happening via press releases and newsletters, to find out about upcoming events, or when meetings will occur and what happened at them, municipal websites are an easily accessible electronic go-to place for this type of information.

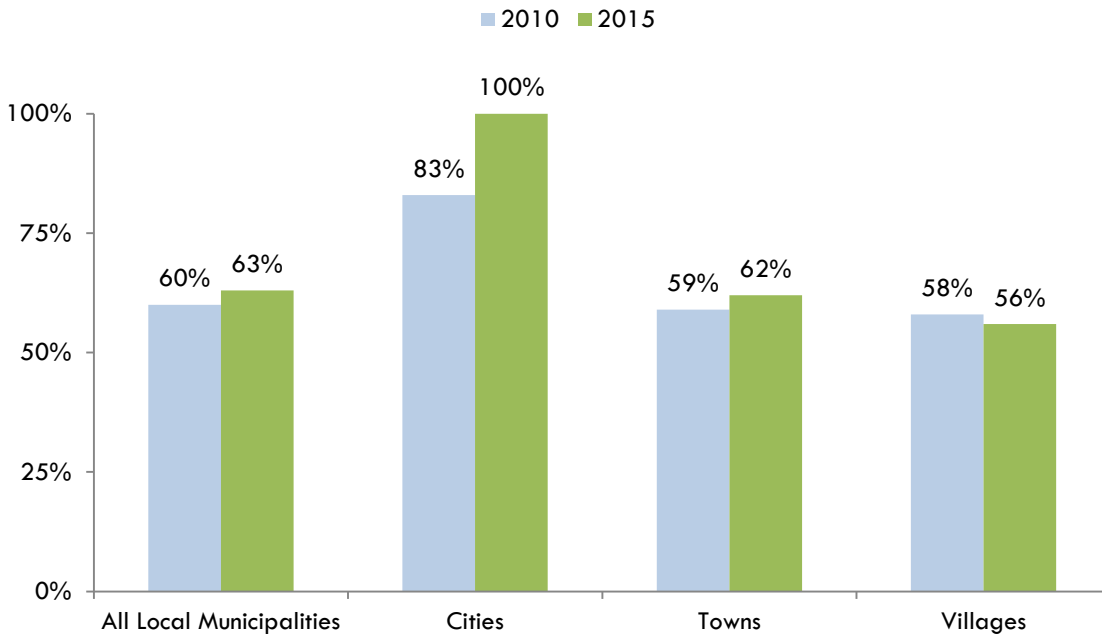
Forecast for the Future

Nearly all of the municipal websites in the region provided at least some type information in the recent activities category. Our expectation is that this will continue, and by 2020 all municipal websites should have recent activities posted.

Press Releases and News

2015 Findings

Just under two thirds (63 percent) of municipalities have press releases, current news, or newsletters on their websites. This includes 56 percent of villages, 62 percent of towns, and all of the cities in our four-county region.



Press Releases and News: includes any posted press releases, current news, or newsletters posted within the past month

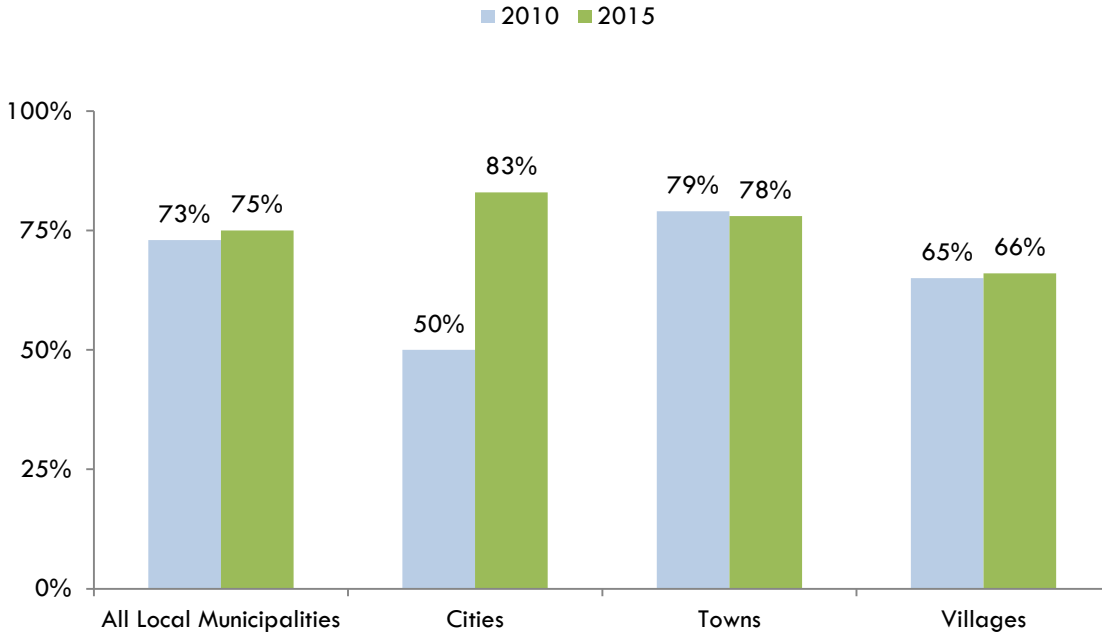
Five Year Trend

In 2010, a similar number of municipalities had news and press releases on their websites, 60 percent compared with 63 percent in 2015. Five years ago five cities in the region posted news; now all six have some sort of recent news posted on their sites.

Meeting Calendars

2015 Findings

Three quarters of municipal websites include meeting calendars. This includes 66 percent of villages, 78 percent of towns, and nearly all (five of six) of the cities in our four-county region.



Meeting Calendars: includes posted calendars populated with meeting dates and times

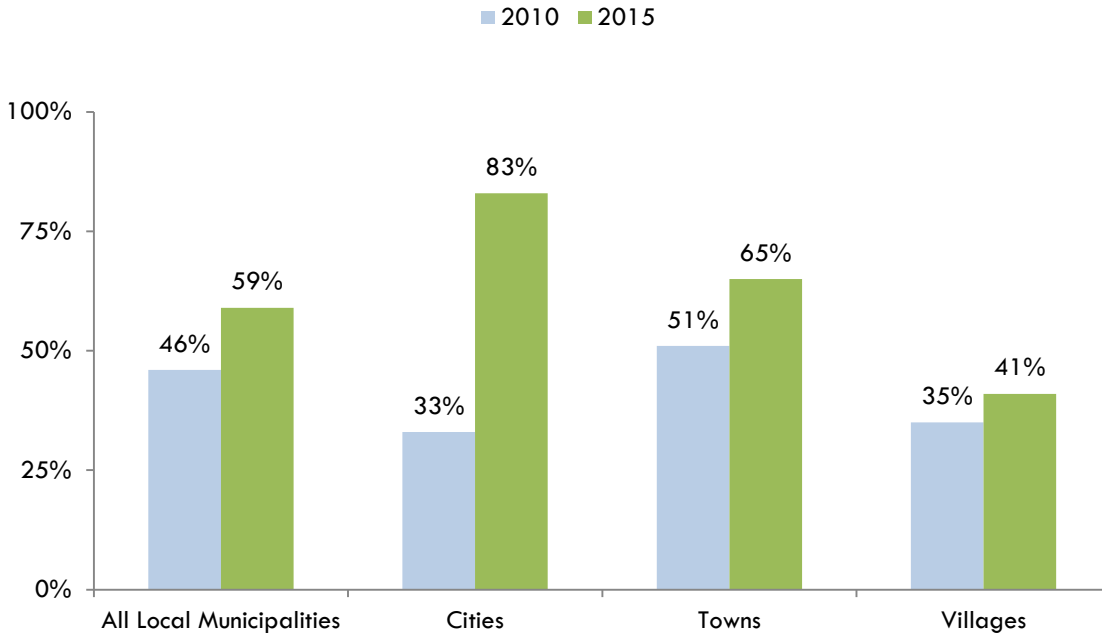
Five Year Trend

Posting meeting calendars in 2010 was just as common as it is in 2015; 73 and 75 percent, respectively. The percentage of town and village websites with calendars in 2015 posted is nearly identical with 2010. The number of cities with calendars increased from three to five in that same time frame.

Meeting Agendas

2015 Findings

A majority of municipalities (59 percent) publish meeting agendas on their websites. Five cities and about two thirds of towns (65 percent) have council meeting agendas on their websites, whereas this is only true of about four in ten (41 percent) of village boards.



Meeting Agendas: includes posted city and town council and village board meeting agendas for the past three months

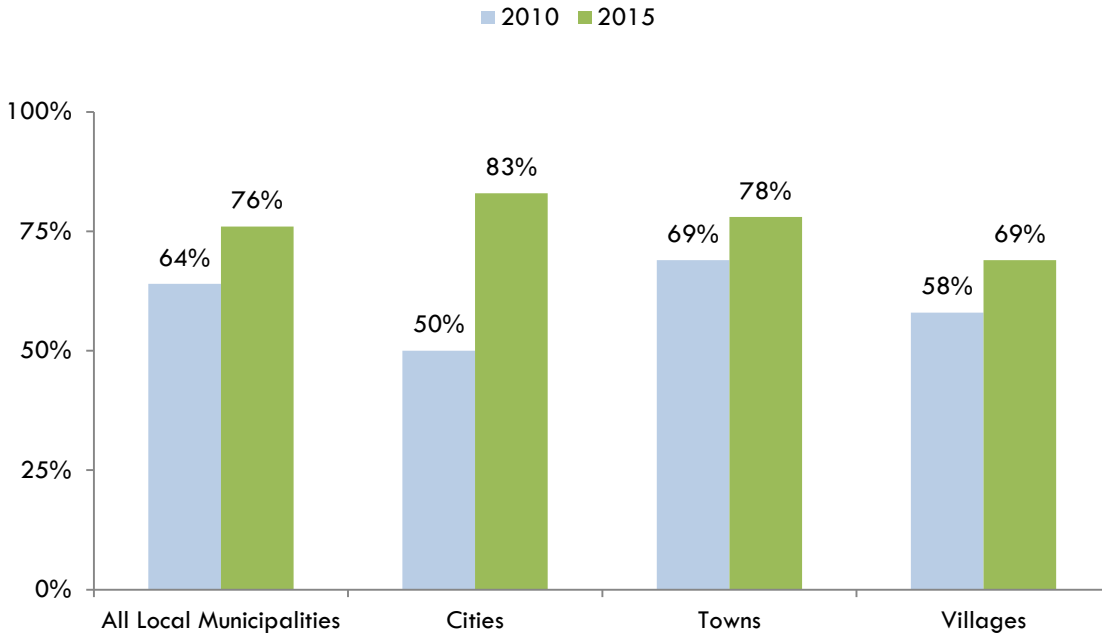
Five Year Trend

Publishing meeting agendas occurred less often in 2010 (46 percent) compared with 2015 (59 percent). From 2010 to 2015, this percentage for village and town websites increased by 6 and 14 percentage points, respectively. The number of cities with meeting agendas posted increased from two to five in that same time frame.

Meeting Minutes

2015 Findings

About three quarters (76 percent) of municipal websites post council and board meeting minutes. This includes about five cities, 69 percent of villages, and over three quarters (78 percent) of town websites.



Meeting Minutes: includes posted city and town council and village board meeting minutes for the past three months

Five Year Trend

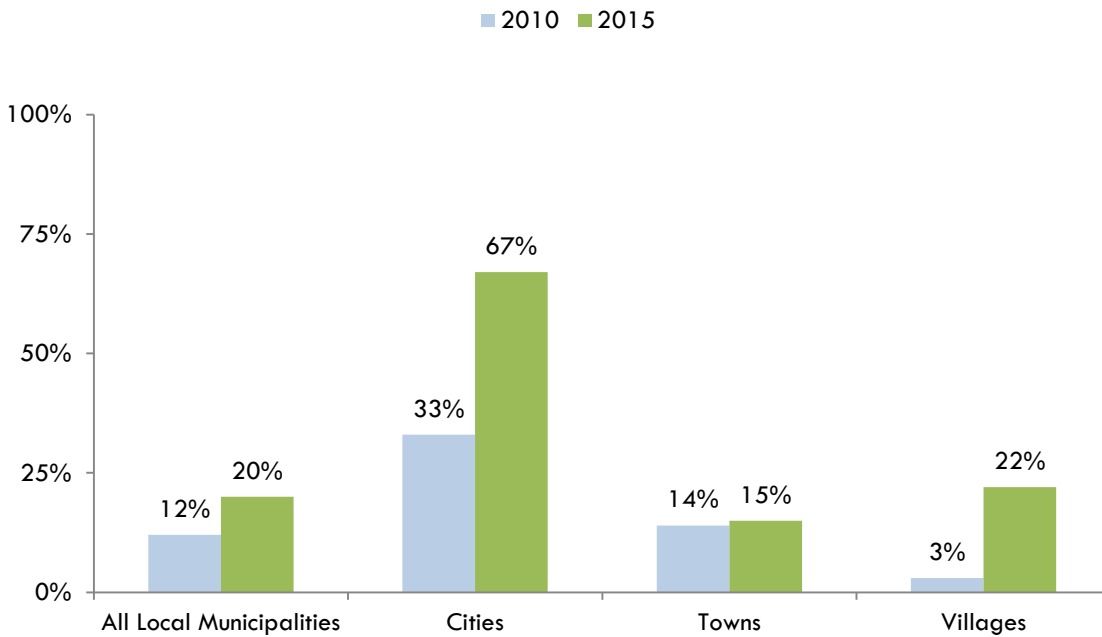
Nearly two thirds (64 percent) of local government websites posted board/council minutes in 2010; this increased to over three quarters in 2015. In this time frame, the number of cities increased from three to five, and the percentage point increase for towns and villages was 9 and 11, respectively.

PUBLIC ACCESS

Category Total

2015 Findings

In lieu of physically attending board and council meetings, many municipalities air their meetings live and then follow with a broadcast on their local public television cable station. In addition, some post these videos for viewing after the fact online or, in a small number of cases, allow residents to live stream these meetings over the Internet. In 2015, 20 percent of municipalities in the four-county region posted and/or live stream these meetings. This is the case for four cities, 15 percent of towns, and 22 percent of villages.



Public Access: combined total category includes posted videos and/or live streaming of meetings

Five Year Trend

There has been a modest increase in the past five years in the percent of municipalities posting or live streaming their board/council meetings, from 12 to 20 percent. Villages experienced a significant increase of 19 percentage points, from 3 to 22 percent.

Why is this Important?

In order for residents to keep abreast of local government activities without having to physically attend meetings or watch them on cable TV, making available live streaming or videos on the web is critical.

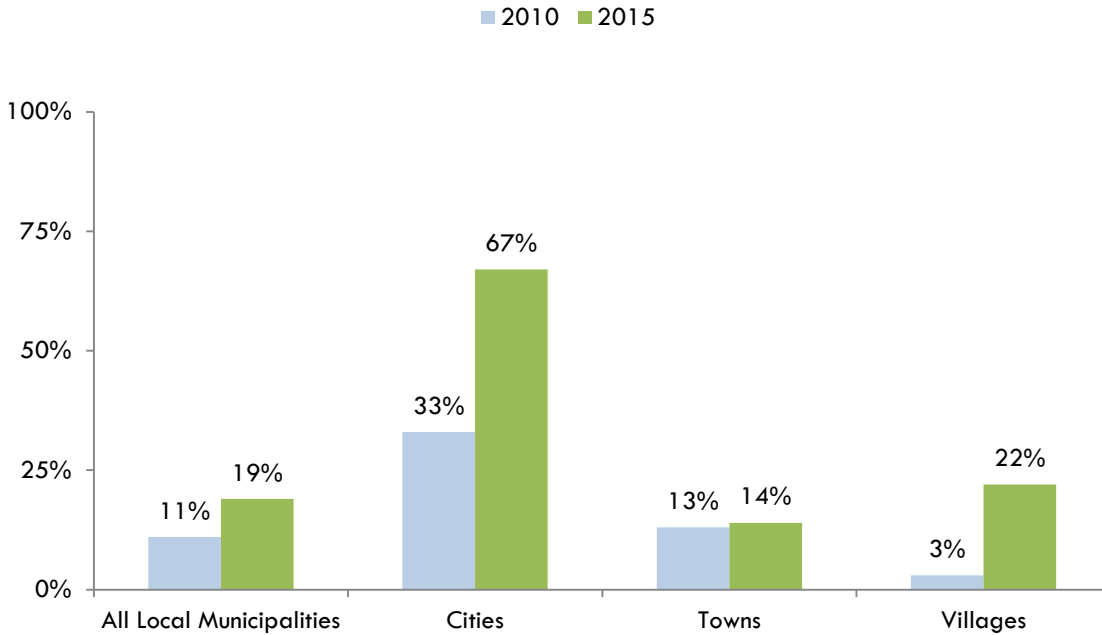
Forecast for the Future

There has been a fairly small expansion in the number of local governments in our region providing live stream or posting meetings online. The trend is in the right direction, and we expect it to continue as such.

Meeting Videos

2015 Findings

Nineteen percent of the local governments in our four-county region offer the ability to watch recorded board or council meeting videos on or through their websites. This includes four cities, 14 percent of towns, and 22 percent of villages.



Meeting Videos: posted videos of board/council meetings

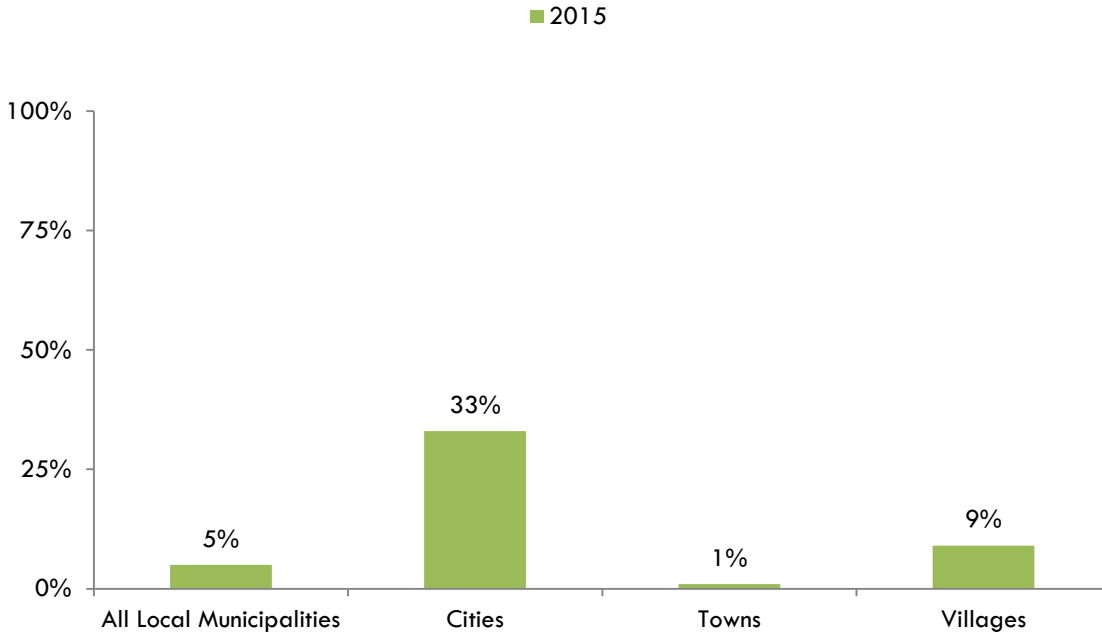
Five Year Trend

Five years ago 11 percent of municipalities made meeting videos available on their websites. In 2015, this percent has climbed modestly to 19 percent. The number of cities rose from two to four in that same time frame. The percent for towns is stable at 13 and 14 percent, respectively. The percent for villages increased from 3 to 22 percent.

Live Streaming

2015 Findings

In our four-county region, one in twenty local governments offer the ability to watch live board or council meetings via their websites: two cities, three villages, and one town.



Live Streaming: board/council meetings are live streamed

Five Year Trend

In 2010, only one municipality live streamed these meetings, compared with six, or 5 percent in 2015.

The City of Newburgh in Orange County real time live streams all City Council work sessions and meetings, as well as hosts video archives of previous meetings. The archived videos are indexed by topic, so web viewers can go right to the discussion of an issue they are concerned about.



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The City of Newburgh is proud to announce that all City Council work sessions and meetings are now streamed live and available to the public to view in real time. Please check the [City calendar of events](#) to check for the next scheduled City Council work session or meeting. Once meetings are concluded they can be viewed on demand by selecting the City Council tab on the player below. On demand video is indexed by agenda item, enabling the public to jump to a particular agenda item they are interested in.

Video recordings of City Council Meetings (not work sessions) run on cable public access Channel 23 on Sundays between 5 and 8 p.m. The previous week's meeting is broadcast the next Sunday, unless a meeting of the Orange County Legislature is shown. If so, the Newburgh City Council meeting will be aired on the following Sunday. Video recordings of City Council Meetings can also be viewed online on the [City's YouTube Channel](#).

Audio recordings of previous City Council work sessions are available online at [archive.org](#). To listen to work sessions, [click here](#).

Live City Council

Live

Check calendar for Next Meeting



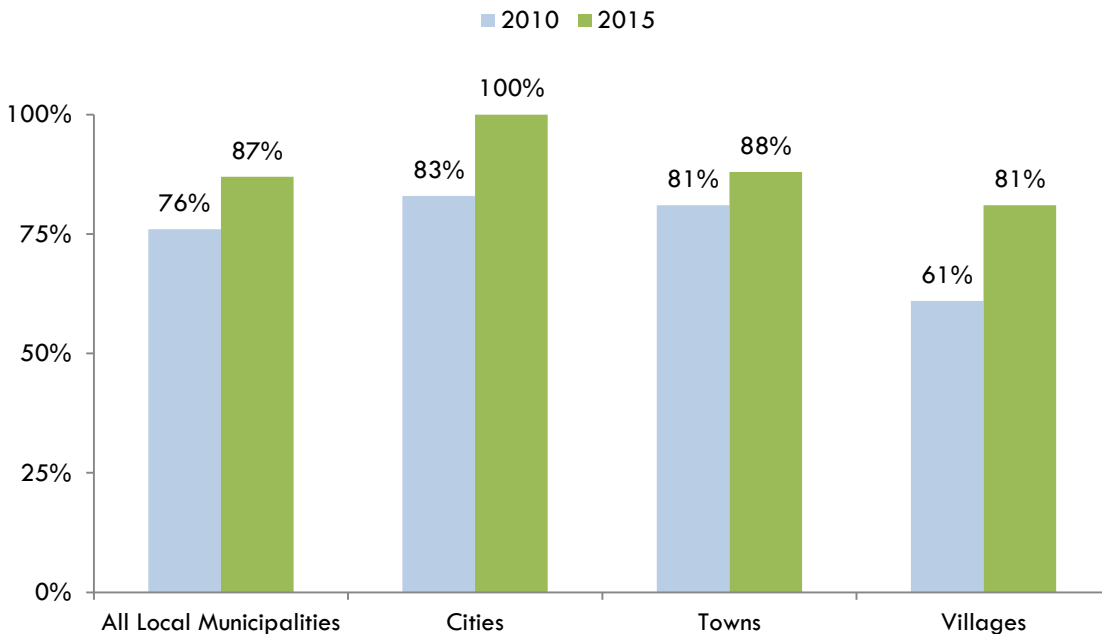
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FORMS

Category Total

2015 Findings

Technology is valuable not only for communicating from the government to citizens, but also for making use of routine government processes easier and more efficient. For example, there are many different types of forms that can be made available for download or submission via municipal websites. Eighty-seven percent of municipal websites make available at least some type of these for residents online. In our four-county region, forms can be accessed online for 81 percent of villages, 88 percent of towns, and all six cities.



Forms: combined total category includes all types posted for download including but not limited to assessor, employee, planning board, zoning board, and complaint forms, etc. as well as permit and facility requests

Five Year Trend

Compared with 2010, the percent of municipal websites with downloadable forms increased eleven percentage points from 76 to 87 percent in 2015. Villages have had the greatest increase, from 61 to 81 percent in that same time frame.

Why is this Important?

Making forms available electronically on municipal websites allows for citizens to see what is required without having to physically visit their city, town, or village hall. Even if residents need to submit the forms in person, with forms online they can see what is needed ahead of time, which can minimize the number of trips and confusion.

Forecast for the Future

Nearly all of the municipalities in the region have downloadable forms accessible through their websites. Document centers are one popular and effective way to present forms. Our expectation

is that by 2020 more than just forms will be available, but that more and more services and fines will be able to be paid for and/or fully processed online.

The City of Newburgh's (Orange County) website has an easy to manage Online File Center, organized by department.

Home > Online File Center

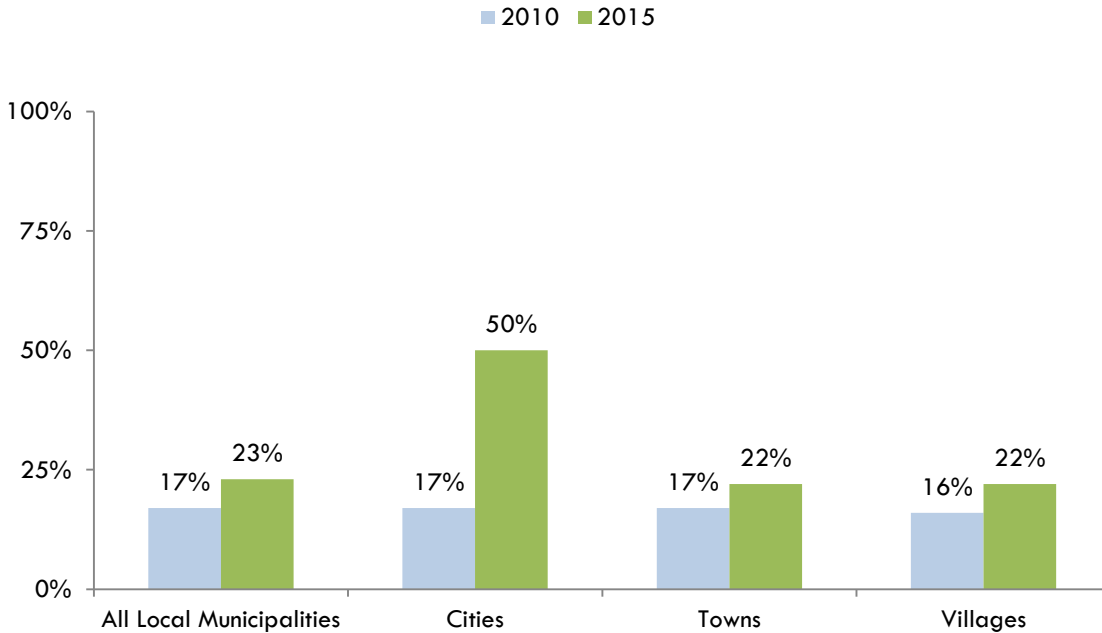
ONLINE FILE CENTER

<h3>ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW COMMISSION</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">ARC Variance Recommendation ApplicationARC Application Packet	<h3>ASSESSOR</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Change of Address Notice (pdf)Grievance Application - Complaint on Assessment (RP-524)How to File a Review of your Assessment (pdf)
<h3>BUILDING/CODE ENFORCEMENT</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Rental License Application2015 Vacant Building Registration FormRequest for Information ReportBuilding Permit ApplicationApplication for Pre-Rental Inspection	<h3>CIVIL SERVICE</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Application Fee Waiver Request and Certification FormApplication Form with SupplementVeterans FormMunicipal Civil Service Commission Local Rules and Regulations
more...	
<h3>COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Workforce Development Institute ReportBidders Worksheet - City of Newburgh Section 3 PlanHousing Rehabilitation Program Payment Form	<h3>COMPTROLLER</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Equipment Assignment FormVoucherRehabilitation Program Payment FormFederal Taxpayer ID Form W-9City Taxpayer ID Form
<h3>DISTRESSED PROPERTY TASK FORCE</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Distressed Property Task Force Meeting Flyer - February 19, 2014Distressed Property Task Force Flyer - May 21, 2014	<h3>ELECTRICAL LICENSING & PERMITS</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Owner Occupant Electrical Permit ApplicationOne-Job Electrical Permit Application - Fillable

Complaint Forms

2015 Findings

eGovernment may also facilitate citizen communication with government. About one in four (23 percent) of municipal websites make available a complaint form or a way to submit a complaint online. This includes 22 percent of villages, the same percentage of towns, and three of the six cities in our four-county region.



Complaint Forms: a form or way to submit a complaint online is available

Five Year Trend

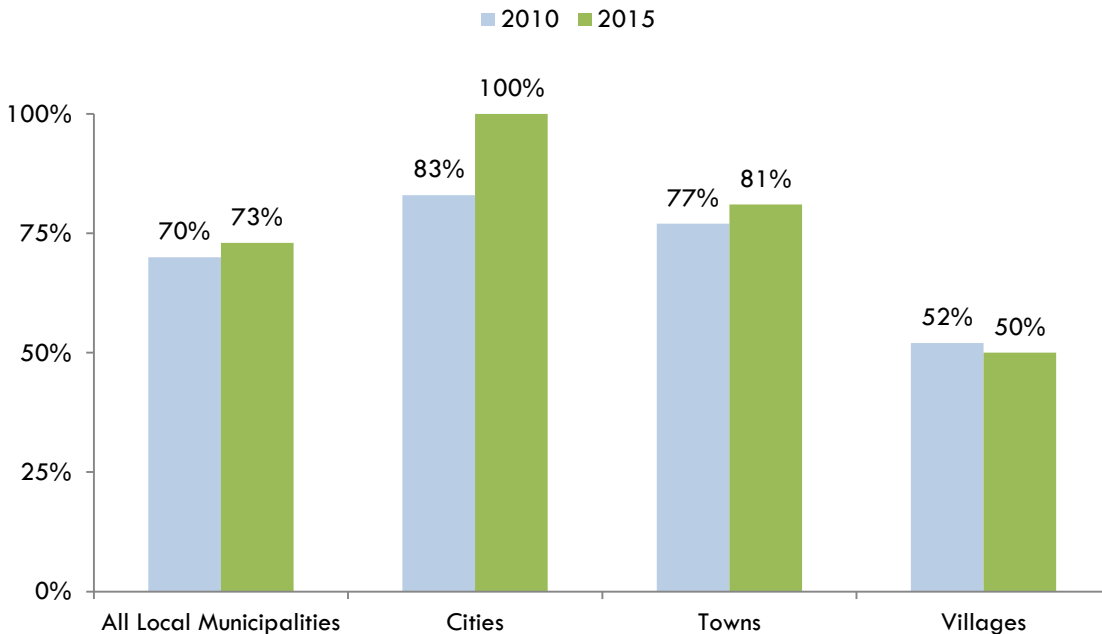
Since 2010, there has not been a substantial increase in the number of municipalities that provide a way to submit a complaint online. Cities have seen a rise; from one in 2010 to three in 2015.

DEPARTMENTS, COMMISSIONS, COMMITTEES

Category Total

2015 Findings

Seventy-three percent of municipal websites provide at least some information about departments, commissions, and committees, including vacancies and job openings. This type of information can be found on half of village websites, 81 percent of towns, and all six city websites in the region.



Info about Departments, Commissions, Committees: combined total category is comprised of information about departments, commissions, committees, including vacancies and job openings

Five Year Trend²

The number of local government websites with information about departments and committees in 2015 only increased three percentage points since 2010. In fact, in particular, information about departments, as well as committees and commissions declined.

Why is this Important?

The different types of municipal departments and committees demonstrate the varied functions of local government. This type of information provides detail about both paid and voluntary ways citizens can engage with their village, town, or city.

Forecast for the Future

Nearly three quarters of municipal websites in the region currently have information about departments and committees, nearly identical to five years ago. Our expectation is that this

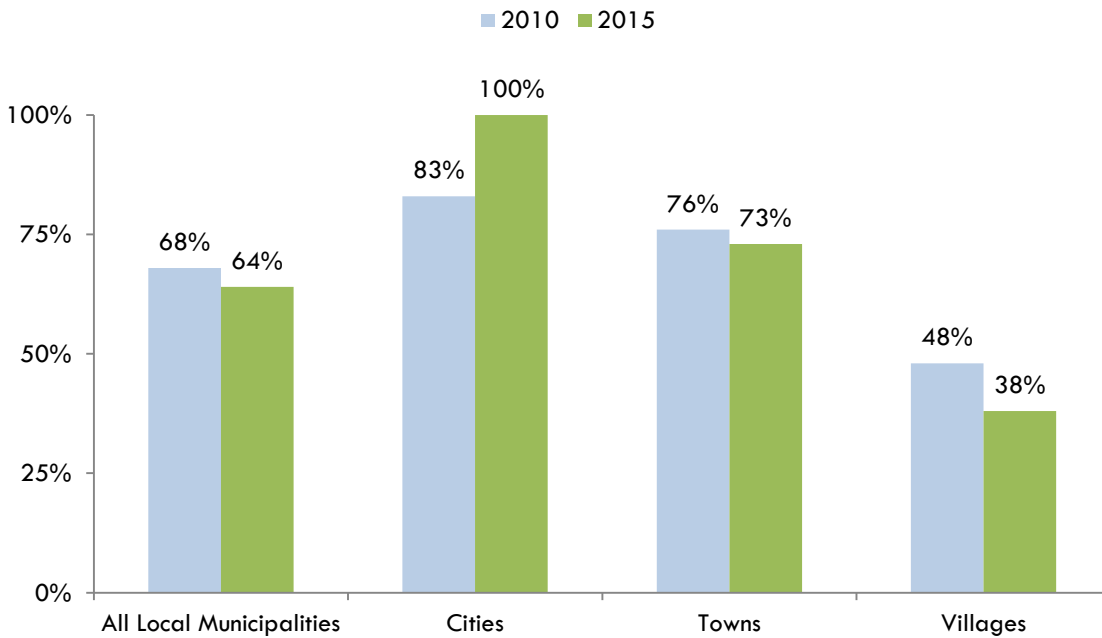
²Job openings were not inventoried in 2010. The total combined category for 2015 without job openings is 72 percent; including all cities, 81 percent of towns, and 47 percent of villages.

percentage can and should rise – to get people involved municipalities need to do a better job of letting people know about what local governments do and how citizens can engage.

Information about Departments

2015 Findings

Sixty-four percent of local government websites post information about departments (e.g., function, staff). All cities have department information posted, as do 73 percent of towns and 38 percent of villages.



Information about Departments: includes any information about departments (e.g., function, staff)

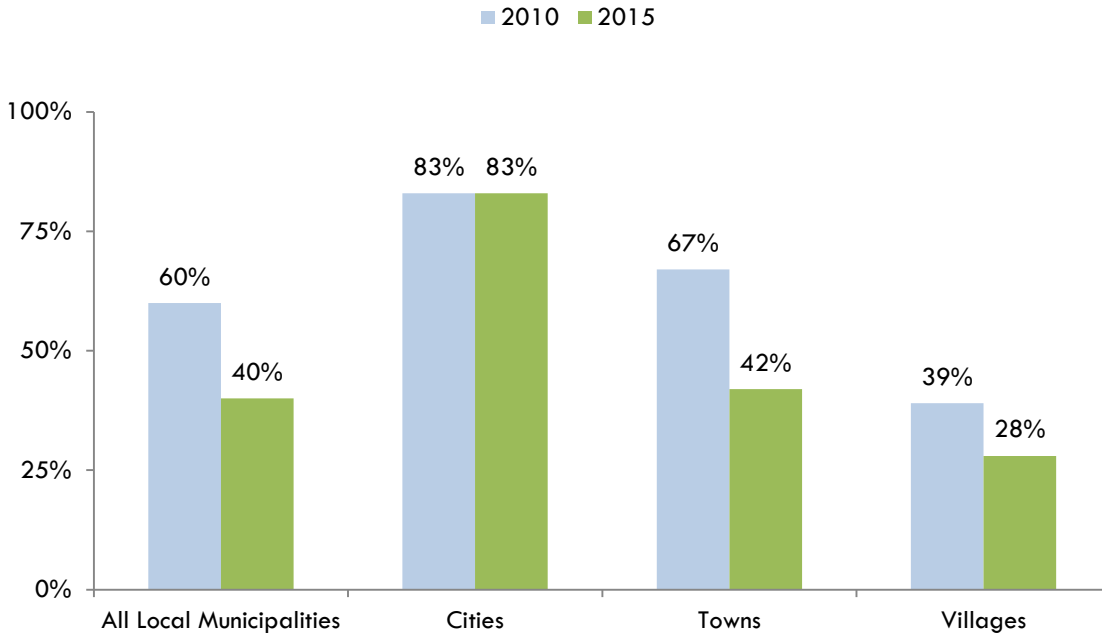
Five Year Trend

The percentage of municipal websites with departmental information dropped from 68 percent in 2010 to 64 percent in 2015. The number of cities with this type of information increased from five to six, with towns decreasing from 76 to 73 percent, and villages falling from 48 to 38 percent over the past five years.

Information about Committees and Commissions

2015 Findings

Four in ten municipal websites post information about committees and commissions (e.g., function, meeting schedules). All but one city has committee information posted, as well as 42 percent of towns and 28 percent of villages.



Information about Committees, Commissions: includes any information about committees, commissions (e.g., function, meeting schedule)

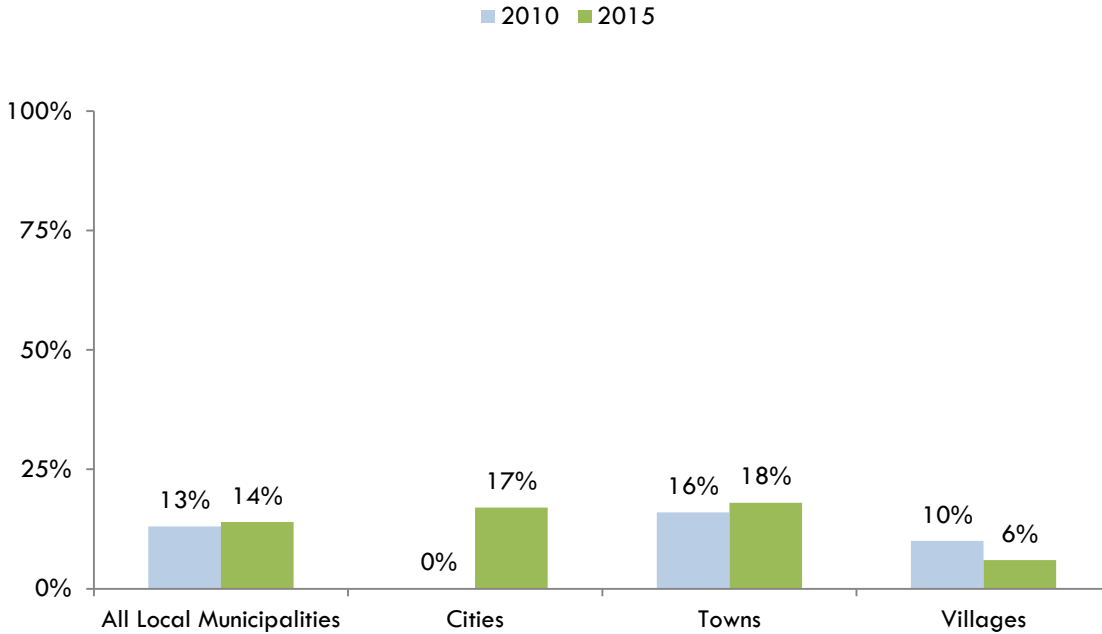
Five Year Trend

The number of local government websites with information about committees and commissions has fallen considerably from 2010 to 2015, by 20 percentage points from 60 to 40 percent. While the number of cities posting this category of information has stayed constant over the past five years, towns fell from 67 to 42 percent, and villages dropped from 39 to 28 percent.

Committee/Commission Vacancies

2015 Findings

Only 14 percent of municipal websites have postings about vacancies on commissions or committees. This includes one city, 18 percent of towns and 6 percent of villages.



Committee/Commission Vacancies: includes vacancy postings for committees and commissions

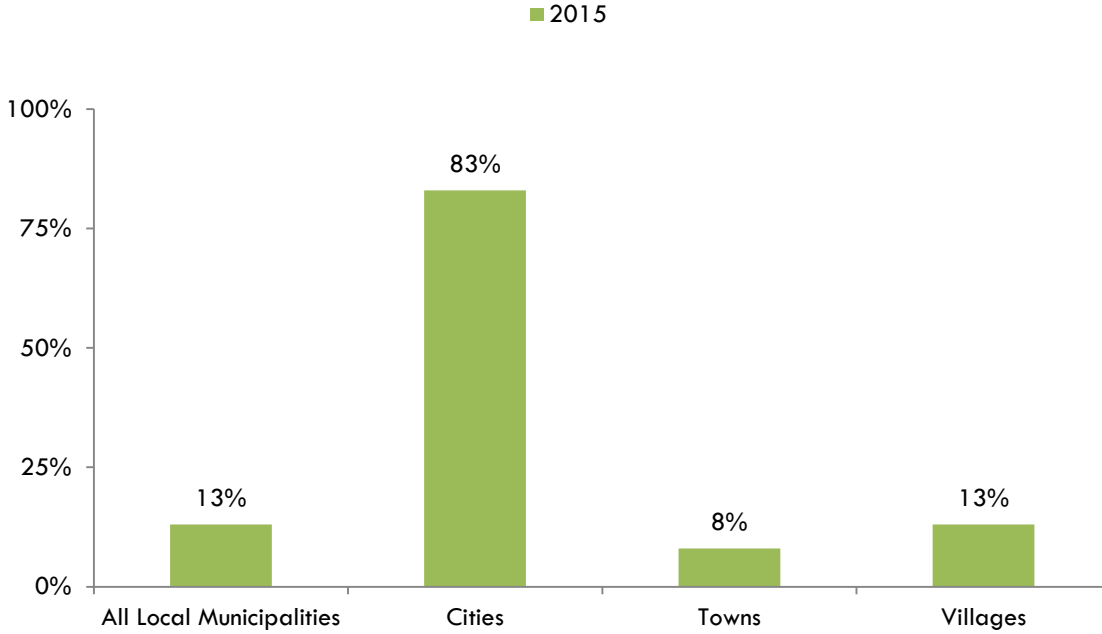
Five Year Trend

The percentage of municipalities with websites that post vacancies on committees and commissions has not significantly changed since 2010.

Job Openings

2015 Findings

Thirteen percent of local government websites include job postings. All but one city publicizes job openings, as well as 8 percent of towns and 13 percent of villages.



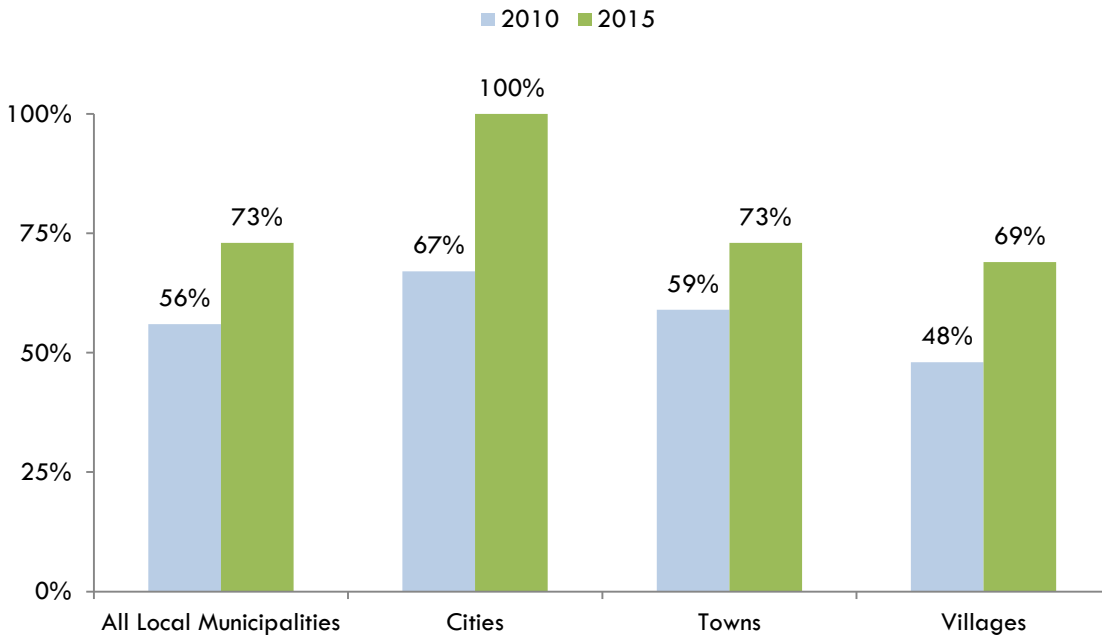
Job Openings: website contains a section for job postings or vacancies.

FINANCIAL

Category Total

2015 Findings

Nearly three quarters (73 percent) of local government websites contain financial information such as budgets, contracts, schedules of fees, and/or financial reports. These types of documents can be found on 69 percent of village websites, 73 percent of towns, and on all city websites in our four-county region.



Financial: combined total category includes budgets, contracts, fee schedules, and financial reports

Five Year Trend³

While a majority (56 percent) of municipal websites posted financial information in 2010, in 2015, this increased 17 points to 73 percent. Five years ago, four of six city municipal websites included such postings and now all do. The villages' percentage increased by 19 points from 48 to 69 percent and the towns' percentage increased 14 points from 59 to 73 percent.

Why is this Important?

A considerable factor in transparency in government involves financial performance, including how money is both collected and spent. Allowing citizens access to financial data opens up public spending and enables residents to investigate municipal funding and expenditures.

³ Financial reports were not inventoried in 2010. The total combined category for 2015 without financial reports is 73 percent; including all cities, 73 percent of towns, and 69 percent of villages.

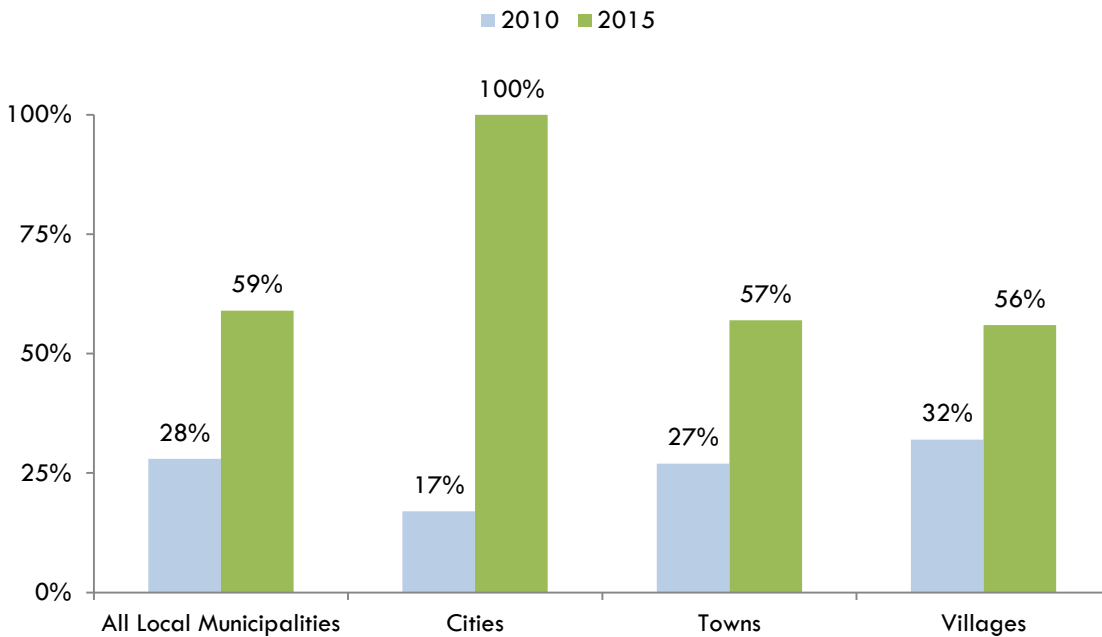
Forecast for the Future

This category has experienced the second largest category increase and we expect this trend to continue. By 2020, we expect over 90 percent of towns and villages to post financial documents on their websites.

Budgets

2015 Findings

A majority (59 percent) of local governments have their most recent fiscal year budget posted. This includes 56 percent of villages, 57 percent of towns, and all six of the cities in our four-county region.



Budgets: includes postings of budgets for the most recent fiscal year

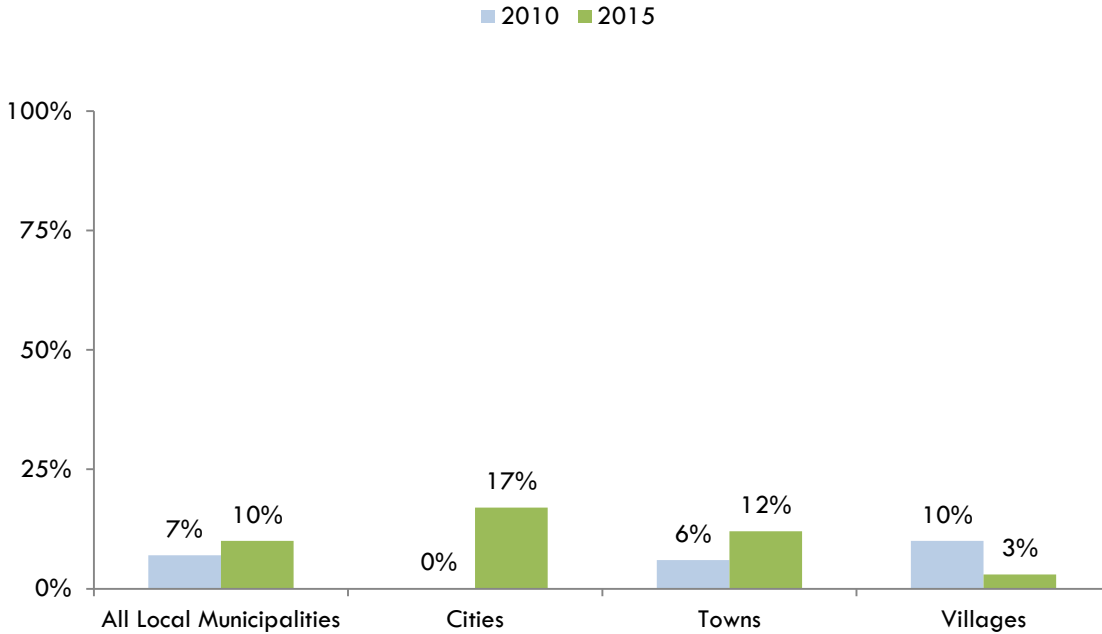
Five Year Trend

Among the forty items in our inventory, the greatest increase since 2010 has been in the posting of annual budgets. The number of municipalities that post budgets on their websites has more than doubled since 2010. The number of cities with posted budgets increased from one to all six in that same time frame. The percentage of towns more than doubled from 27 to 57 percent and village websites with budgets rose from 32 percent in 2010 to 56 percent in 2015.

Contracts

2015 Findings

Only one in ten local government websites make at least one type of contract accessible on the web. This includes one city, 12 percent of towns, and 3 percent of villages.



Contracts: postings of contracts, labor agreements, bids, or RFPs are posted on the site

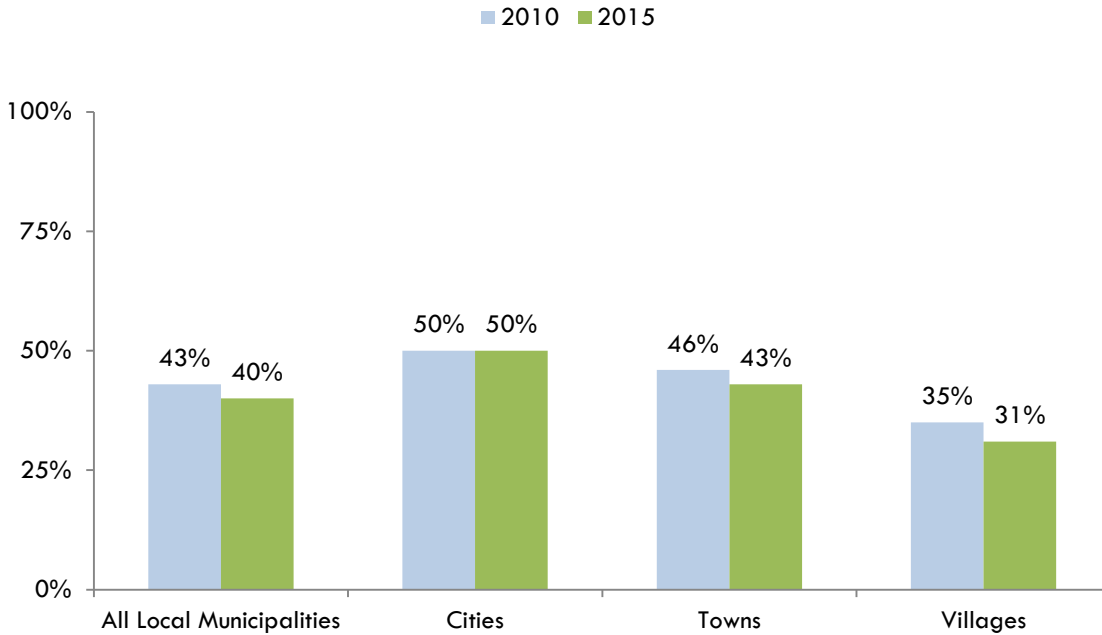
Five Year Trend

The percentage of websites where citizens can access municipal contracts has not significantly changed since 2010. However, for towns, the percentage doubled from 6 to 12 percent in that time frame and for villages, the percentage dropped from 10 to 3 percent.

Schedules of Fees

2015 Findings

Four in ten municipal websites publish schedules of fees; that is, a list of the charges or costs associated with particular services, inspections, permits, licenses, etc. This includes three cities, 43 percent of towns, and 31 percent of villages.



Schedule of Fees: includes posted schedules of fees; that is, a list of the charges or costs associated with particular services, inspections, permits, licenses, etc.

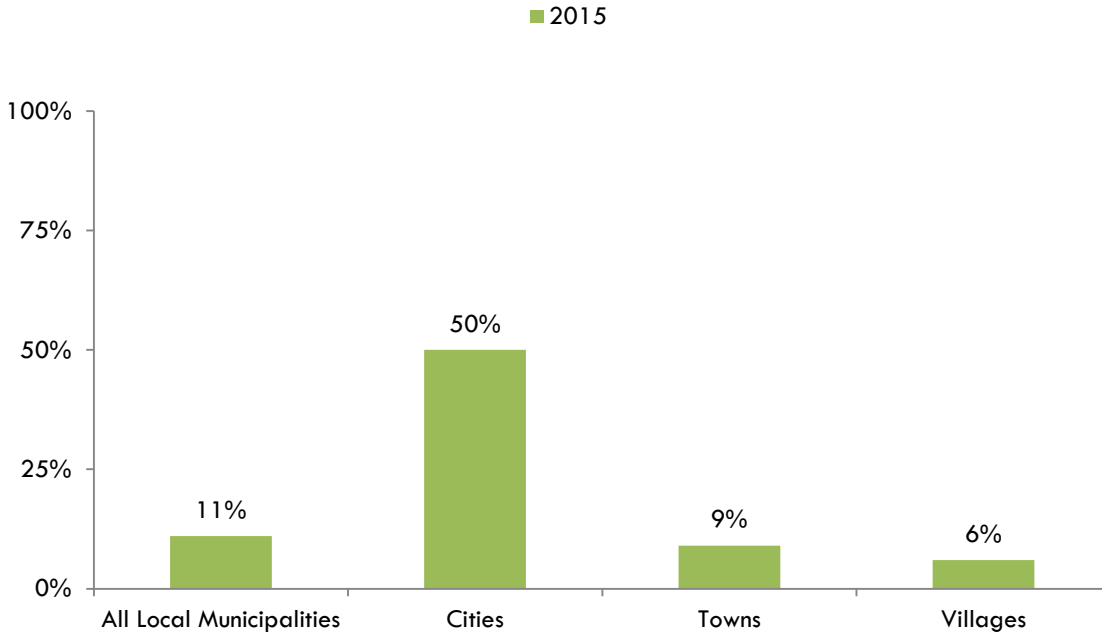
Five Year Trend

The number of local government websites that post fee schedules has remained relatively constant from 2010 to 2015, 43 and 40 percent respectively. In 2010, three cities posted fee schedules, and is the same number in 2015. Five years ago, 46 percent of towns posted info about fees and 43 percent do in 2015. Previously, 35 percent of villages published fee schedules, and 31 percent do now.

Financial Reports

2015 Findings

Eleven percent of municipal websites post financial reports. Half of all cities publish financial reports, as do 9 percent of towns and 6 percent of villages.



Financial Reports: includes any postings of financial reports for fiscal year 2014

The City of Beacon in Dutchess County has a useful finance department page, convenient for locating annual financial and audit reports, as well as yearly budgets.

City of Beacon Government >>> Finance Department

Finance Department

BeaconDelivery

The Finance department is responsible to maintain the accounting system of the City. Responsibility includes appropriately and accurately recording all inflows and outflows of monies in accordance standards set forth by City Charter, the Office of State Comptroller and Generally Accepted Accounting Principles as well as applicable General Municipal and Local Finance Law.

Finance Department Responsibilities:

- Budget preparation and maintenance
- Banking and segregation of funds
- Payroll and personnel
- Purchasing and Accounts Payable
- Collection and Accounts Receivable
- Billing for taxes, water and sewer
- Debt management



Reporting Required:

- Annual Update Document (AUD) - State report
- Constitutional tax limit
- Constitutional debt limit
- Tax cap
- Certified annual audit
- Continuing disclosure information for bonding
- IRS and NYS quarterly and annual payroll filings

Documents:

[2015 Budget \(.pdf\)](#)

[2014 Budget \(.pdf\)](#)

[2013 Budget \(.pdf\)](#)

[2012 Annual Update Document \(.pdf\)](#)

[2013 Annual Update Document \(.pdf\)](#)

[2012 Audit Report \(.pdf\)](#)

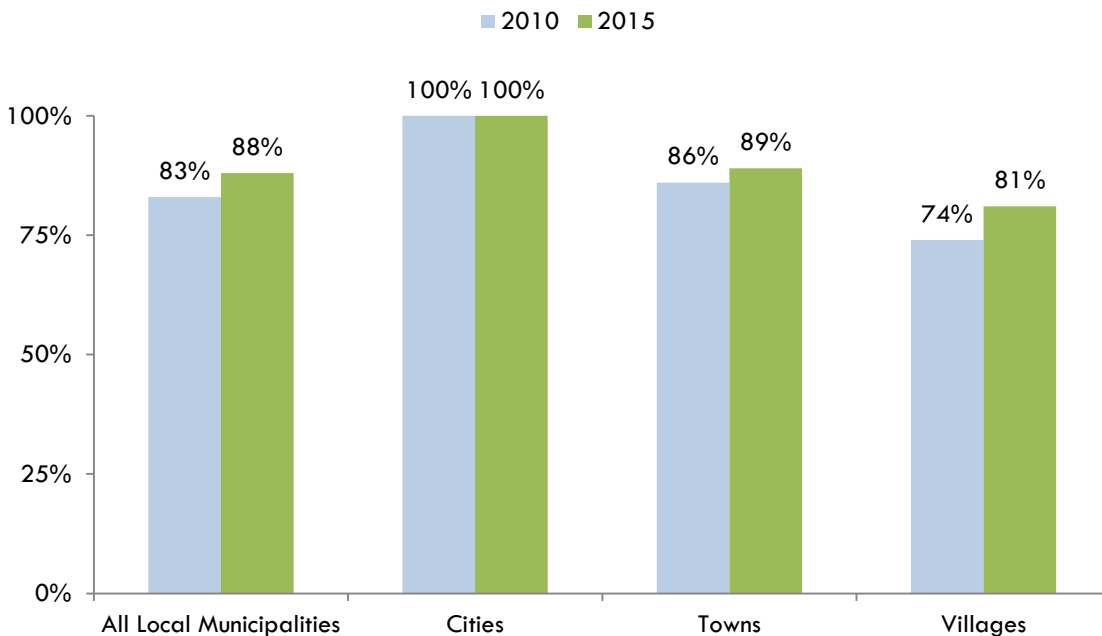
[2013 Audit Report\(.pdf\)](#)

LAW/LEGAL

Category Total

2015 Findings

Eighty-eight percent of municipal websites make available at least some law or legal data such as eCode, public hearing notices, recent law/resolutions passed, and/or guidance about Freedom of Information Law (FOIL). In our four-county region, legal data can be located online for 81 percent of villages, 89 percent of towns, and all six cities. For all of the cities, this includes their city charters.



Law/Legal Information: combined total category includes eCode, public hearing notices, recent laws/resolutions passed, and/or FOIL info

Five Year Trend

The percentage of municipal websites with legal information has remained nearly constant in the five year period; 83 and 85 percent respectively. All cities supplied this type of information in 2010, and all six still do in 2015. The percentages for 2010 and 2015 for towns is very similar; 86 and 89 percent respectively. Villages have had an increase from 74 to 81 percent in that same time frame.

Why is this Important?

Law and legal data and information are the “nuts and bolts” in terms of how municipalities set policy and put rules into action. In order for both lawmakers and citizens to understand and abide by the law, this information needs to be readily available.

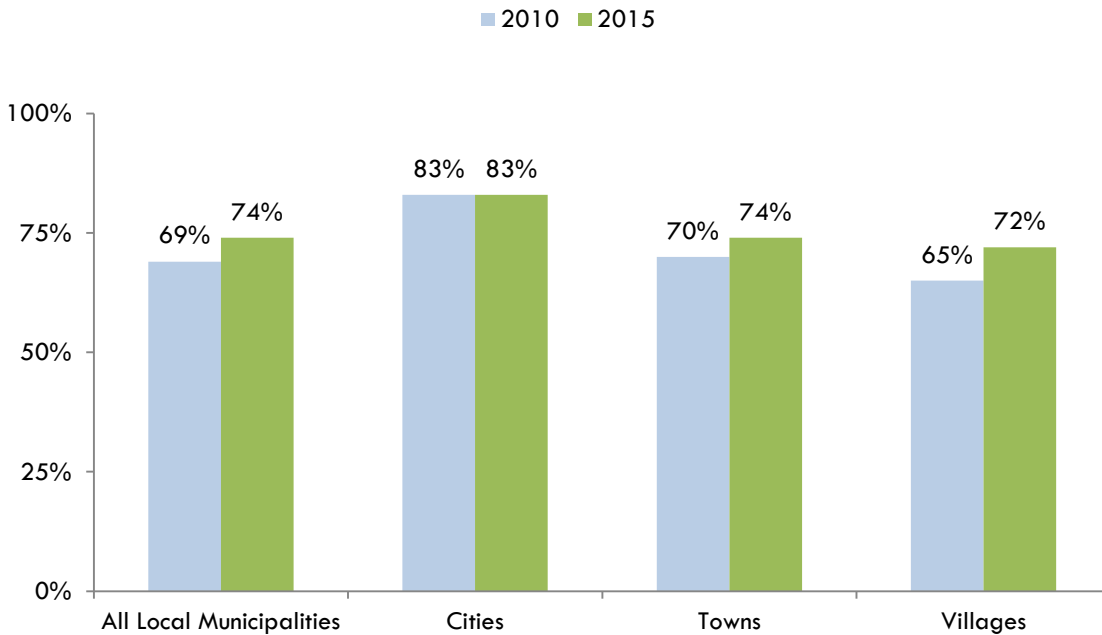
Forecast for the Future

A considerable number of the municipalities in the region have law and legal data available on their websites. Our expectation is that this will continue, and by 2020 all municipal websites will have at least one type of legal information accessible on their sites.

eCode

2015 Findings

eCode is an online interface that hosts municipal law, which can be accessible via a local government website. Just under three quarters (74 percent) of municipalities in our four-county region subscribe to and offer eCode accessibility via their websites. This includes 72 percent of villages, 74 percent of towns, and five of the cities in our four-county region.



eCode: includes any links to eCode or integrated into a tab

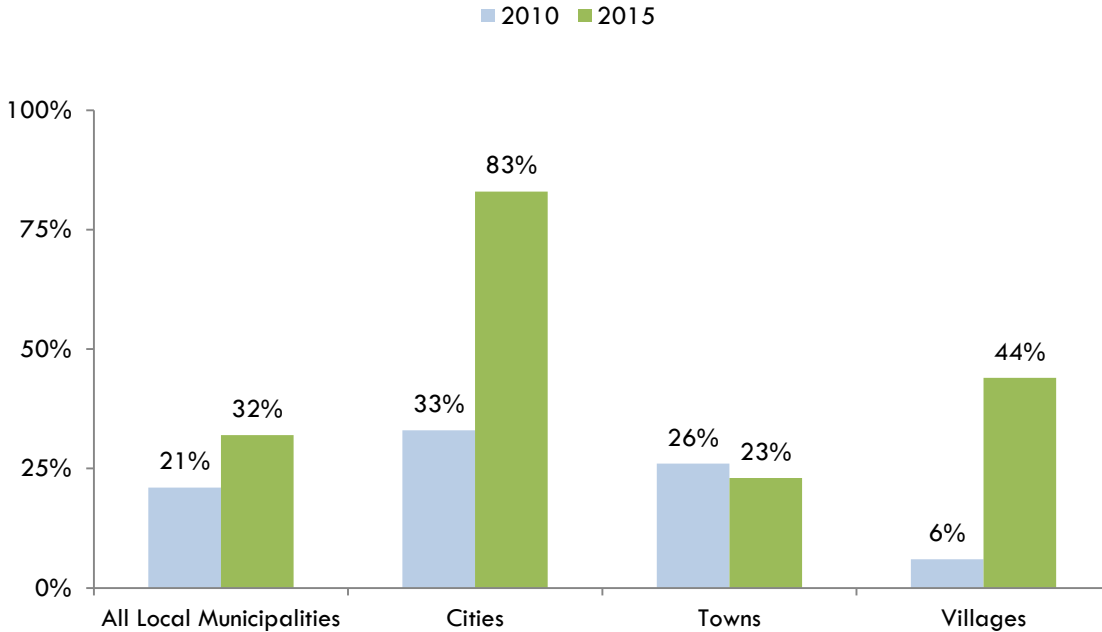
Five Year Trend

eCode was available on more than two thirds of municipal websites in 2010 and, since, there has been a slight increase to 74 percent. Five years ago, five of six cities had eCode, and that number is unchanged. Town websites with eCode increased from 70 to 74 percent, and village websites with this service increased from 65 to 72 percent.

Public Hearing Notices

2015 Findings

According to New York State open public meetings law, “many particular functions of public bodies – such as the adoption of a budget, or the issuance of a land use approval – must be preceded by a hearing.”⁴ Current law only requires notice via traditional media (e.g. newspapers), but about a third (32 percent) of local governments in our four-county region included web postings for public hearings in 2015. This was true for five cities, 23 percent of towns, and 44 percent of villages.



Public Hearing Notices: includes postings for public hearing notices for past three months

Five Year Trend

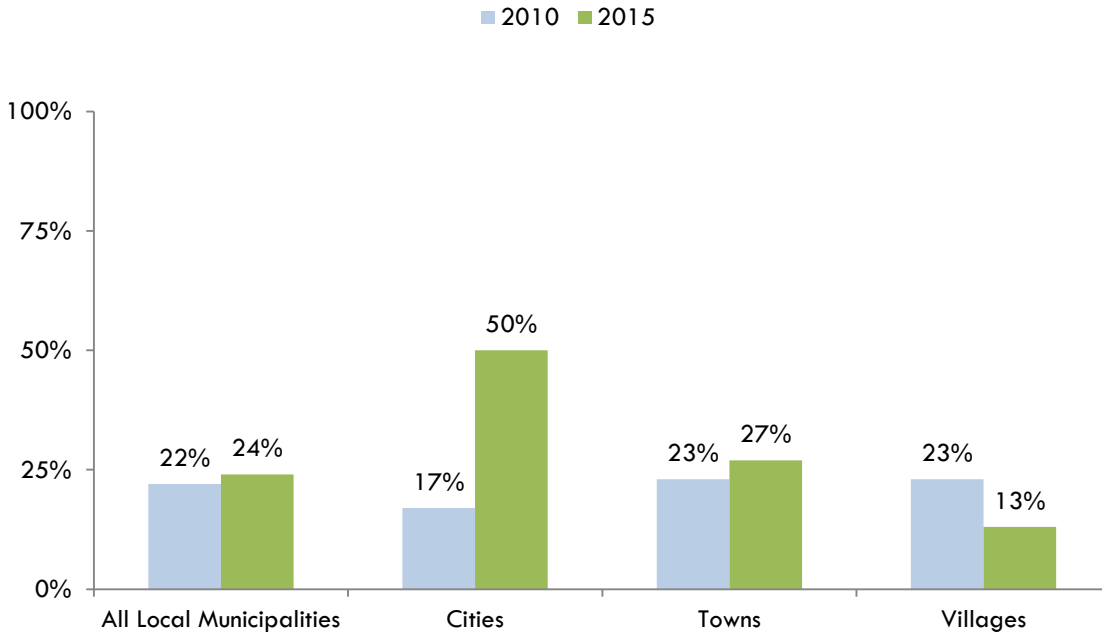
The 2015 percentage of local government websites publishing public notices is 11 percentage points higher compared with 2010, 32 and 21 percent respectively. Two cities posted this way in 2010, and five do in 2015. About one quarter of towns electronically announced public hearings in both 2010 and 2015. For villages, the percentage jumped in the same time frame from 6 to 44 percent.

⁴ Conducting Public Meetings and Public Hearings, NYS Department of State 2008
www.dos.ny.gov/lg/publications/conducting_public_meetings_and_public_hearings.pdf

Local Laws & Resolutions

2015 Findings

When new local laws or resolutions are passed, in addition to including these actions in minutes and/or adding them to eCode, municipalities may individually announce these acts on their websites. In 2015, about one in four (24 percent) of local governments did this, including three cities, 27 percent of towns, and 13 percent of villages.



Local Laws & Resolutions: includes postings of new local laws or recent resolutions passed within the past three months

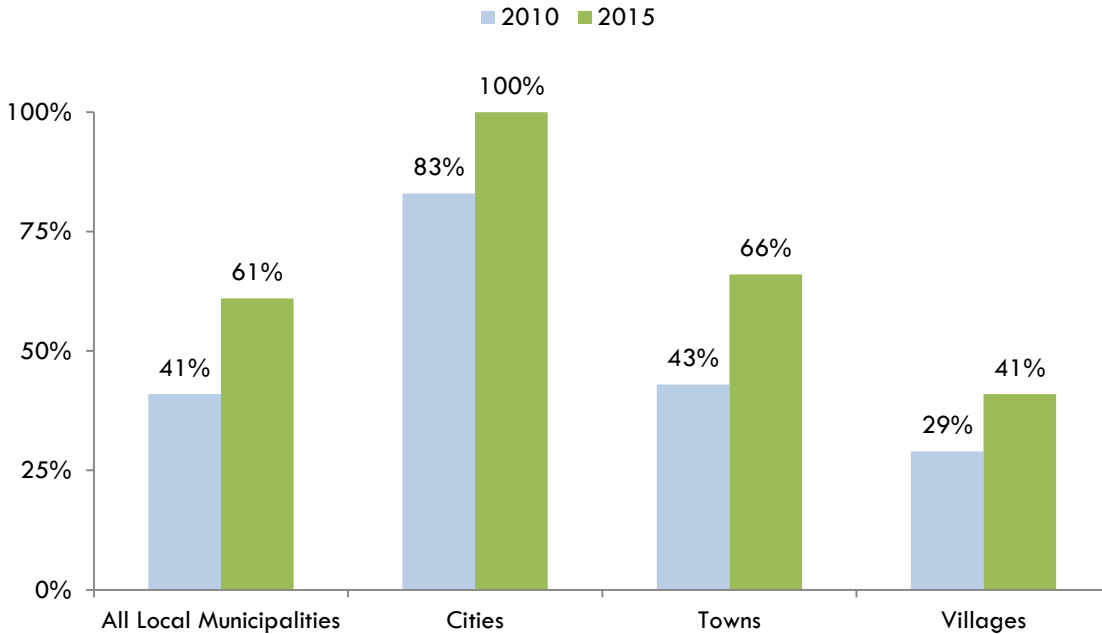
Five Year Trend

The 2010, the number of local governments posting recently passed resolutions or laws is nearly identical to that of 2015, 22 and 24 percent respectively. In 2010, only one city did this, now three do. From 2010 to 2015, the town percentage increased from 23 to 27 percent and the village percent declined from 23 to 13 percent.

Freedom of Information Law (FOIL)

2015 Findings

“The Freedom of Information Law, effective January 1, 1978, reaffirms your right to know how your government operates. It provides rights of access to records reflective of governmental decisions and policies that affect the lives of every New Yorker.”⁵ Accordingly, citizens in our state can request records via a FOIL process from their local municipality. One way of informing residents of the what and how of FOIL is to post related information on their websites. In 2015, a majority (61 percent) of local governments in our four-county region posted information about FOIL. This includes all the cities, 66 percent of towns, and 41 percent of villages.



FOIL: includes information about FOIL, including a FOIL application or instructions

Five Year Trend

There has been a 20 percentage point increase over the past five years in the percent of local governments providing FOIL information on their website. The number of cities doing this has increased from five to six, the percentage point increase for towns was 23 (from 43 to 66 percent) and for villages was 12 (from 29 to 41 percent).

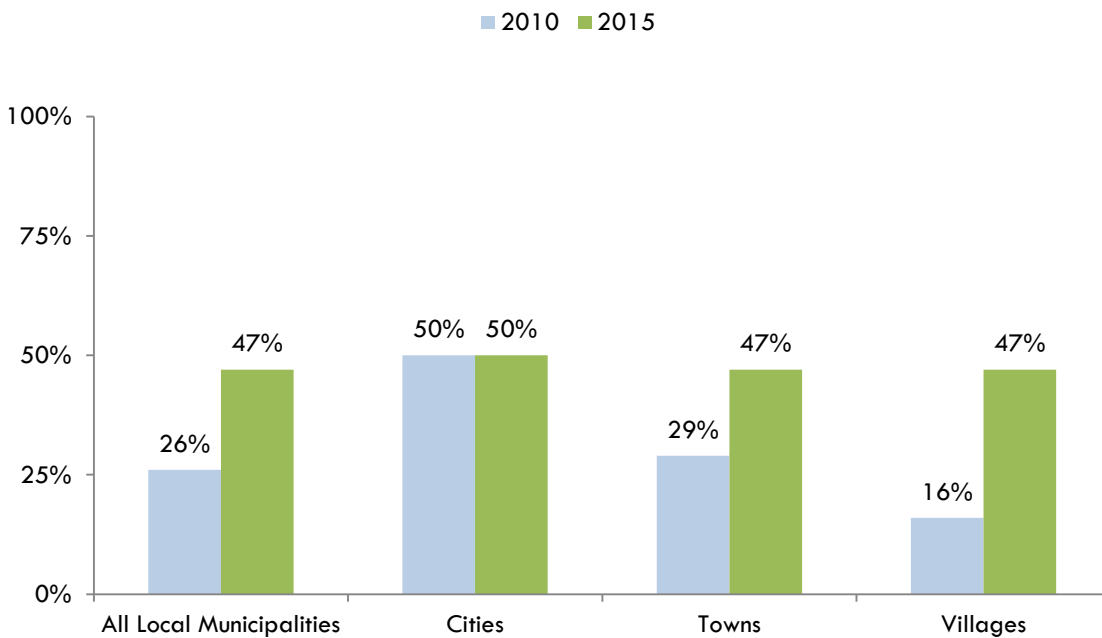
⁵ The Committee on Open Government www.dos.ny.gov/coog/Right_to_know.html#foil

ETHICS

Category Total

2015 Findings

New York State has extensive law specifying ethical standards for elected leaders, and also requires local governments to adopt their own ethics policy or code, "General Municipal Law requires the governing body of each county, city (other than the City of New York), town, village, school district and fire district to adopt a code of ethics that sets forth for the guidance of its officers and employees standards of conduct reasonably expected of them."⁶ Forty-seven percent of municipal websites have an ethics policy posted or related law in their eCode. This includes three cities, 47 percent of towns, and 47 percent of villages.



Ethics Policy/Law: there is only one item in this category - an ethics policy or related law is posted on the website or in eCode

Five Year Trend

Over the past five years, the largest category percentage point increase was in the number of local governments providing information about ethics on their websites. In 2010, 26 percent posted this type of information, compared with nearly half (47 percent) today. For towns five years ago, 29 percent published ethics information, in contrast with 47 percent today. For villages, the numbers have nearly tripled: in 2010, only 16 percent provided ethics info, compared with 47 percent in 2015.

Why is this Important?

Ethics in government is a highly salient issue in politics today. Providing an ethics policy or law online is an important way of communicating to citizens that government is holding itself to an

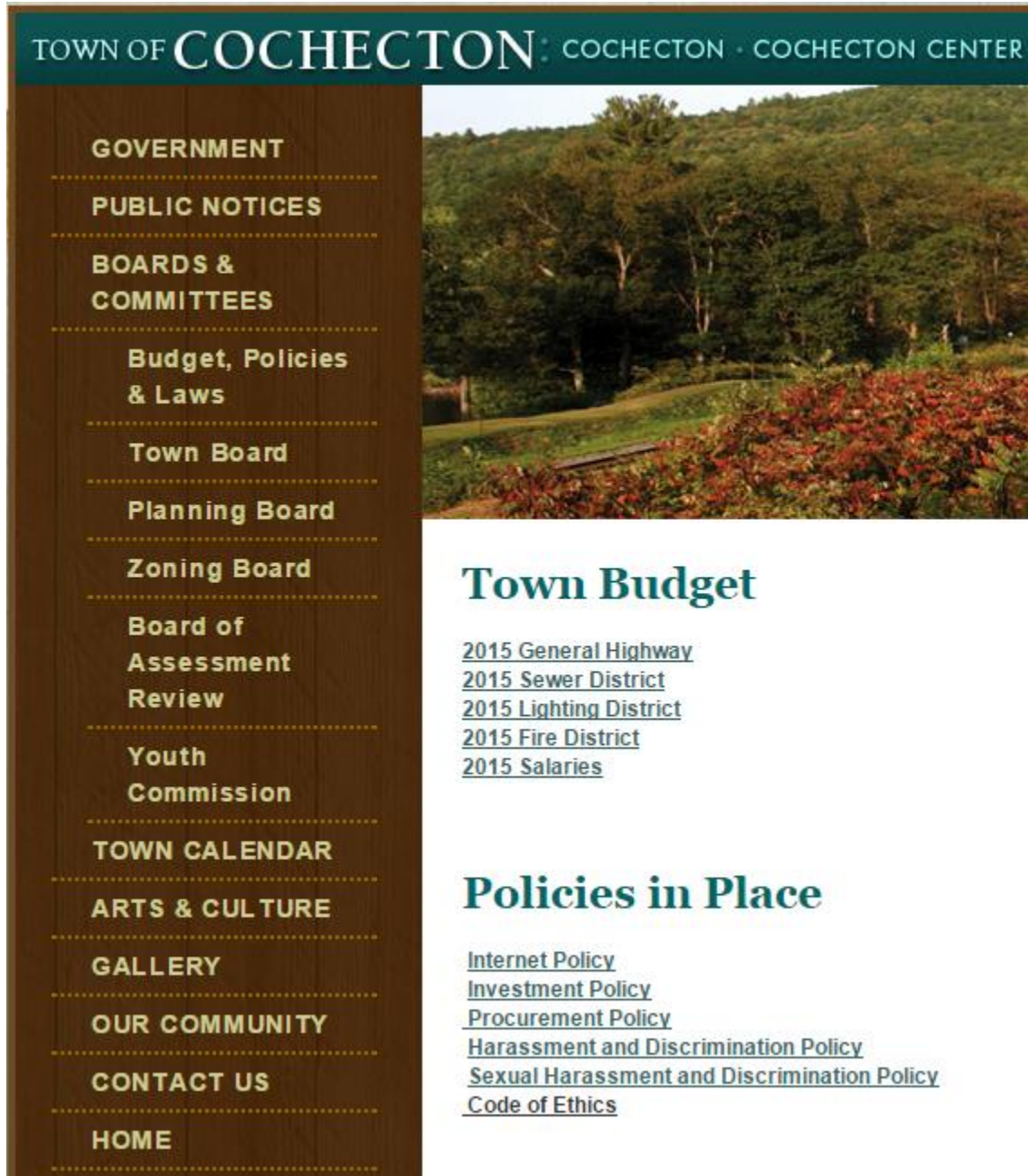
⁶ NYS Office of the State Comptroller, *Model Code of Ethics - Local Governments 2010*
<http://osc.state.ny.us/localgov/pubs/codeofethics.pdf>

appropriate standard of behavior, how it is doing this, and the manner in which misconduct is identified and addressed.

Forecast for the Future

We expect the upwards trend in the number of municipalities to steadily continue at its current trajectory. This type of information should be on nearly all local government websites by 2020.

Sullivan County's Town of Cochection has an ethics policy easily located in their "Budget, Policies & Laws" section.



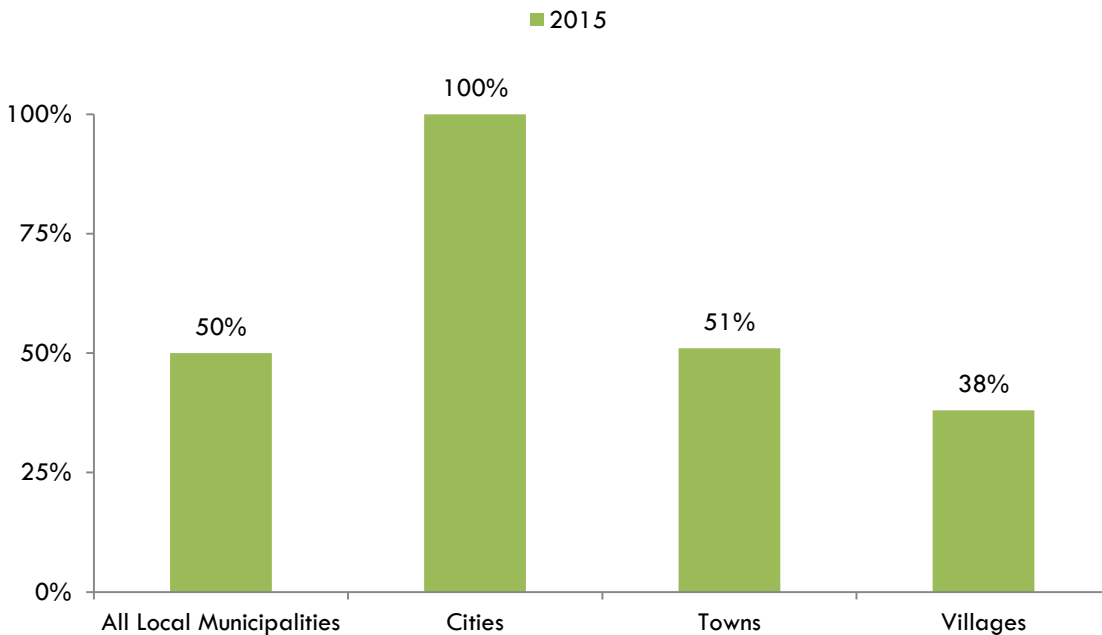
The image shows a screenshot of the Town of Cochection website. At the top, a dark teal banner contains the text "TOWN OF COCHECTION: COCHECTION · COCHECTION CENTER" in white. Below the banner is a vertical navigation menu on the left side, with a dark brown background and white text. The menu items are: GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC NOTICES, BOARDS & COMMITTEES, Budget, Policies & Laws, Town Board, Planning Board, Zoning Board, Board of Assessment Review, Youth Commission, TOWN CALENDAR, ARTS & CULTURE, GALLERY, OUR COMMUNITY, CONTACT US, and HOME. To the right of the menu is a large photograph of a forested hillside with trees in autumn colors. Below the photograph, the text "Town Budget" is displayed in a large, bold, teal font. Underneath this heading, there are five underlined links: "2015 General Highway", "2015 Sewer District", "2015 Lighting District", "2015 Fire District", and "2015 Salaries". Below these links, the text "Policies in Place" is displayed in a large, bold, teal font. Underneath this heading, there are five underlined links: "Internet Policy", "Investment Policy", "Procurement Policy", "Harassment and Discrimination Policy", "Sexual Harassment and Discrimination Policy", and "Code of Ethics".

OFFICIAL MAPS & LOCAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Category Total

2015 Findings

Half of the local governments in the four-county region post either official maps and/or information about local demographics. All six cities do, as well as 51 percent of towns, and 38 percent of villages.



Official Maps and Local Demographics: combined total category includes official maps and/or local demographics (e.g. Census data)⁷

Why is this Important?

Visualizing the landscape, both topographically and socio-demographically, is important to an understanding one's community.

Forecast for the Future

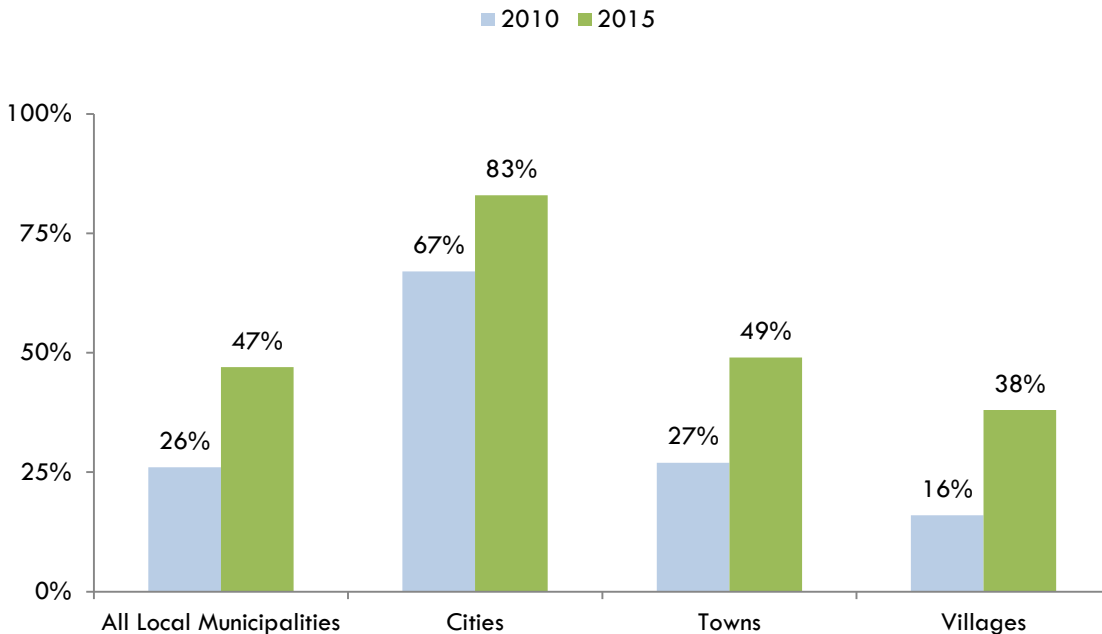
Many municipalities already provide this type of information on their local government websites and we expect the number to be higher in 2020.

⁷ Local demographics were not inventoried in 2010.

Official Maps

2015 Findings

Just under half (47 percent) of the local governments in our four-county region publish at least one official map on their website. This is true for five cities, 49 percent of towns, and 38 percent of villages.



Official Maps: includes at least one official posted map

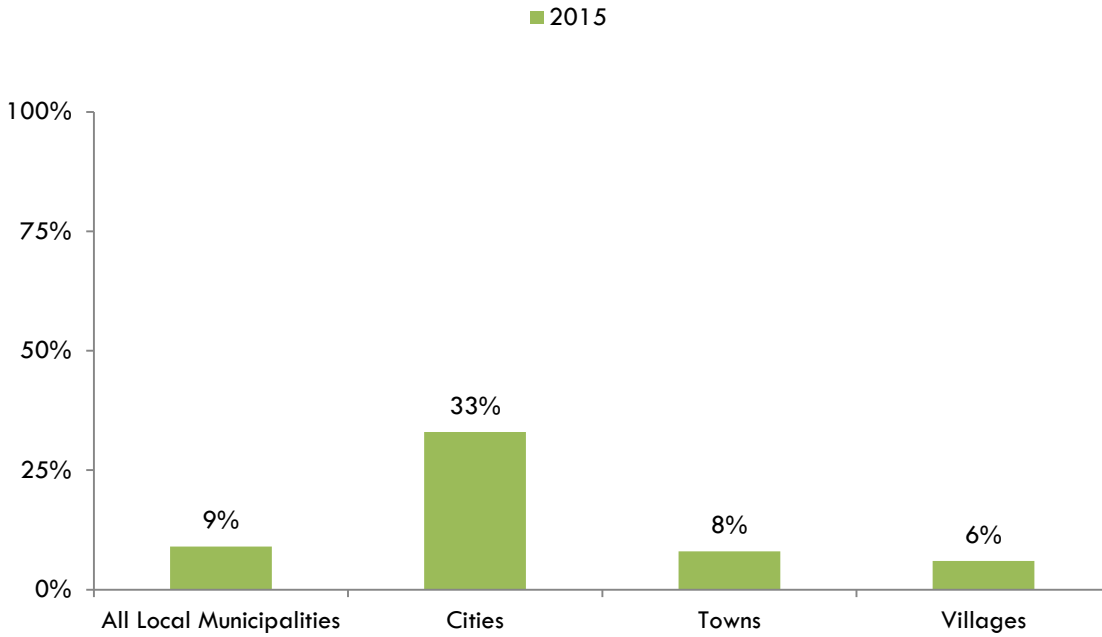
Five Year Trend

Since 2010, the percent of municipal websites has nearly doubled, from 26 percent to 47 percent. This 21 percentage point rise is ranked third for increases on the list of forty items we inventory. In the same time period, the number of cities doing so rose from four to all five. The percentages for both towns and villages grew considerably: from 27 to 49 percent for towns, and from 16 to 38 percent for villages.

Local Demographics

2015 Findings

About one in ten (9 percent) municipal websites in our four-county region include some kind of local demographic information, such as U.S. Census data. This includes 2 cities, 8 percent of towns, and 6 percent of villages.



Local Demographics: includes at least some sort of local demographic information, such as U.S. Census data

PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT

Category Total

2015 Findings

Nearly all (96 percent) of the local municipalities in the four-county region have some type of planning document, form, or data on their websites. This category includes comprehensive or master plans, zoning maps, planning board and ZBA agendas, minutes, application information, and building permit forms. All six cities, nearly all towns (99 percent) and 91 percent of villages have some type of planning, related information on their websites.



Planning and Development: includes comprehensive or master plans, zoning maps, planning board and ZBA agendas, minutes, and application info, and/or building permit forms

Five Year Trend

In 2010, at 85 percent, it was already common for local governments to provide some type of planning document on their websites. In 2015, this percentage has grown to 96 percent. Five years ago, this included all six cities and still does today. Nine of ten towns provided planning information on their websites in 2010, and 99 percent do in 2015. In 2010, 71 percent of villages did; today 91 percent do.

Why is this Important?

A large share of the job of local government involves land use and planning. Related documents and data are commonplace on websites because there is considerable activity in this arena – both in planning and in ensuring that development occurs within the law and stated community values and goals.

Forecast for the Future

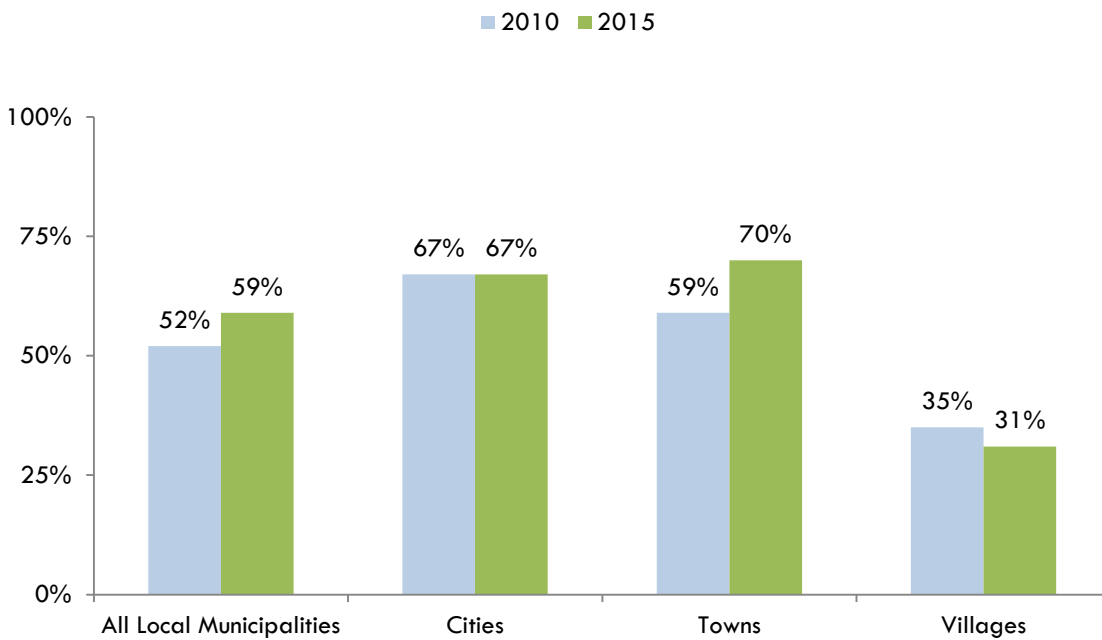
All cities and almost all towns post planning information on their websites already. We expect that by 2020, the percent for villages will increase to at or nearly 100 percent.

Comprehensive/Master Plans

2015 Findings

A comprehensive or master plan is a public policy document that outlines a community's vision for growth and development and details goals for land use, transportation, housing, recreation, etc. In our four-county region, on a majority (59 percent) of local government websites citizens can locate and download a comprehensive or master plan for their community. This is true for four cities, 70 percent of towns, and 31 percent of villages.

Among the municipalities with posted comprehensive plans, the average age of these plans was nine years; this average held for towns and villages, with the city plans being slightly newer, with a mean age of eight years.



Comprehensive/Master Plans: includes a posted comprehensive or master plan

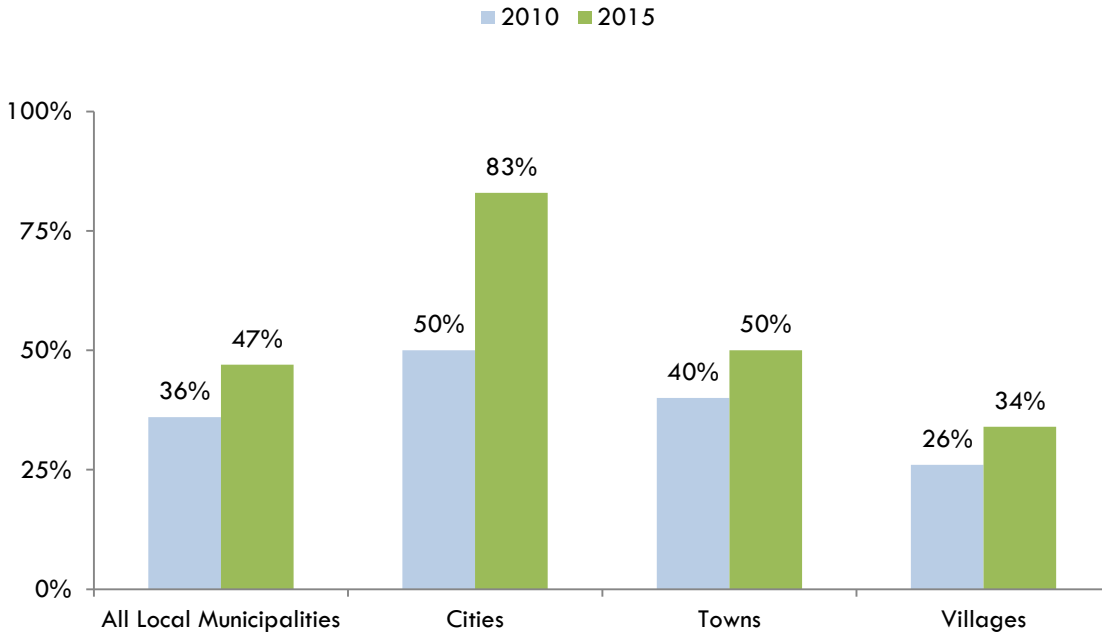
Five Year Trend

Since 2010, there has not been a significant increase in the percent of local governments publishing comprehensive plans on their websites; 52 percent compared with 59 percent in 2015. The same number of cities (four) has posted master plans. The percentage for towns posting these plans rose from 59 to 70 percent and dropped from 35 to 31 for villages.

Zoning Maps

2015 Findings

Zoning maps display legal land uses, typically by zones within a municipality, such as industrial, residential, commercial, and mixed use. Nearly half of all local governments in our four-county region publish zoning maps on their websites. This includes five cities, half of all towns, and about a third (34 percent) of villages.



Zoning Maps: a current zoning map is made available

Five Year Trend

In the past five years, the percentage of local governments that are publishing zoning maps on their websites increased from 36 to 47 percent. In 2010, three cities published these maps and now five have these maps posted. The percentage point rise for towns in the same time period was 10, from 40 to 50 percent. In 2010, 26 percent of villages made available zoning maps on the web, and now 34 percent do.

Planning Board Agendas

2015 Findings

In New York State, planning boards are comprised of appointed officials charged with the task of evaluating whether or not proposed building projects are within the parameters of the law. A majority (53 percent) of local governments in our four-county region post planning board agendas. This includes all six cities, a majority (57 percent) of towns, and about a third (34 percent) of villages.



Planning Board Agendas: includes posted planning board agendas within the past year

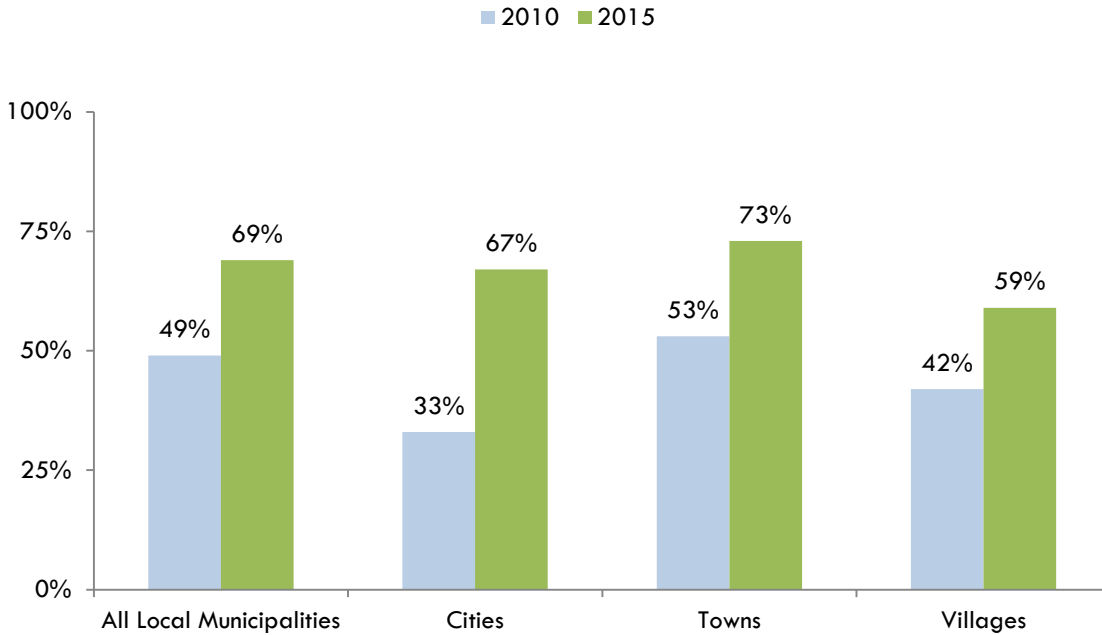
Five Year Trend

In 2010, 44 percent of localities published planning board agendas and, in 2015, 53 percent have these agendas posted. The number of cities doing so doubled- all six included in this study. Five years ago, half of towns posted planning board agendas and now 57 percent do. In the same time period, the percentage for villages rose from 29 to 34 percent.

Planning Board Minutes

2015 Findings

In about two thirds (69 percent) of the municipalities in our four-county region citizens can locate the minutes of planning board meetings on their local government's website. This is true in four cities, 73 percent of towns, and 59 percent of villages.



Planning Board Minutes: includes posted planning board minutes within the past year

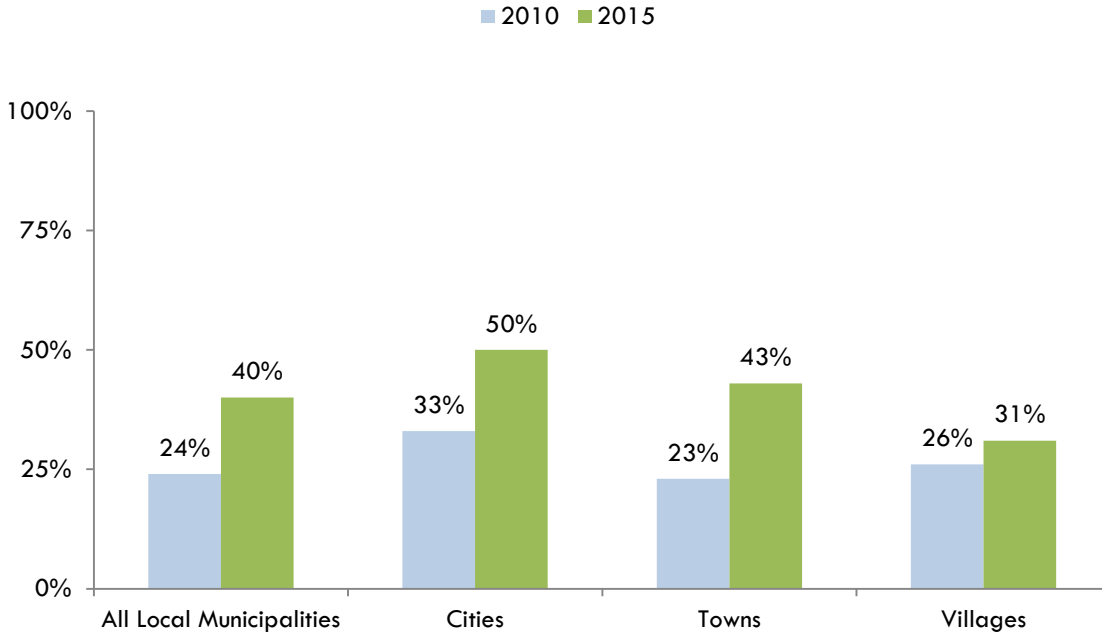
Five Year Trend

There has been a 20 percentage point jump from 49 to 69 percent for municipalities publishing planning board minutes on their websites. In 2010, two cities did so; now four do. In the same time period, there has been a 20 percentage point increase for towns that are posting these types of minutes: from 53 to 73 percent. And for villages, a 17 percentage point increase from 42 to 59 percent.

Planning Board Applications

2015 Findings

Four in ten of the local governments in our four-county region post planning board applications on their websites. This includes three cities, 43 percent of towns, and 31 percent of villages.



Planning Board Applications: project applications, including those for subdivisions and other proposals

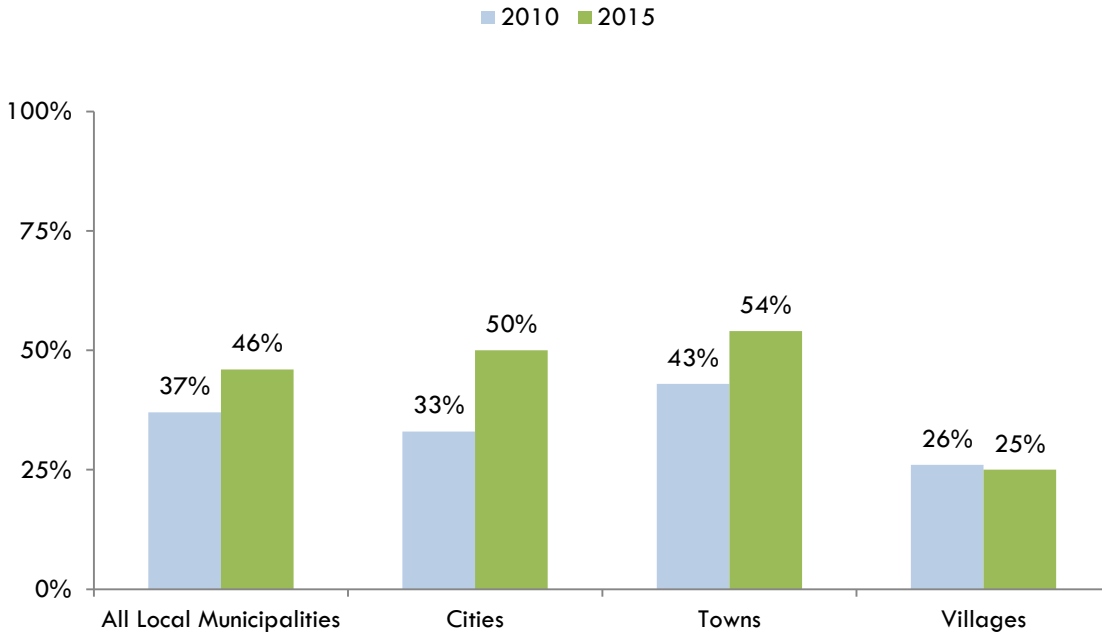
Five Year Trend

In 2010, project and development applications could be accessed on 24 percent of municipal websites in our four-county region. In 2015, this percentage has risen to 40 percent. Five years ago, two towns posted planning board application materials and now three do. In that same time period, the percentage for towns increased from 23 to 43 percent and for villages it rose from 26 to 31 percent.

ZBA Agendas

2015 Findings

In New York State, ZBAs (Zoning Boards of Appeal) are made up of appointed members who assess and determine whether or not proposed zoning variances should be granted. In our four-county region, 46 percent of municipal websites publish ZBA agendas. This includes all three cities, a majority (54 percent) of towns, and one quarter of villages.



ZBA Agendas: includes posted ZBA agendas within the past year

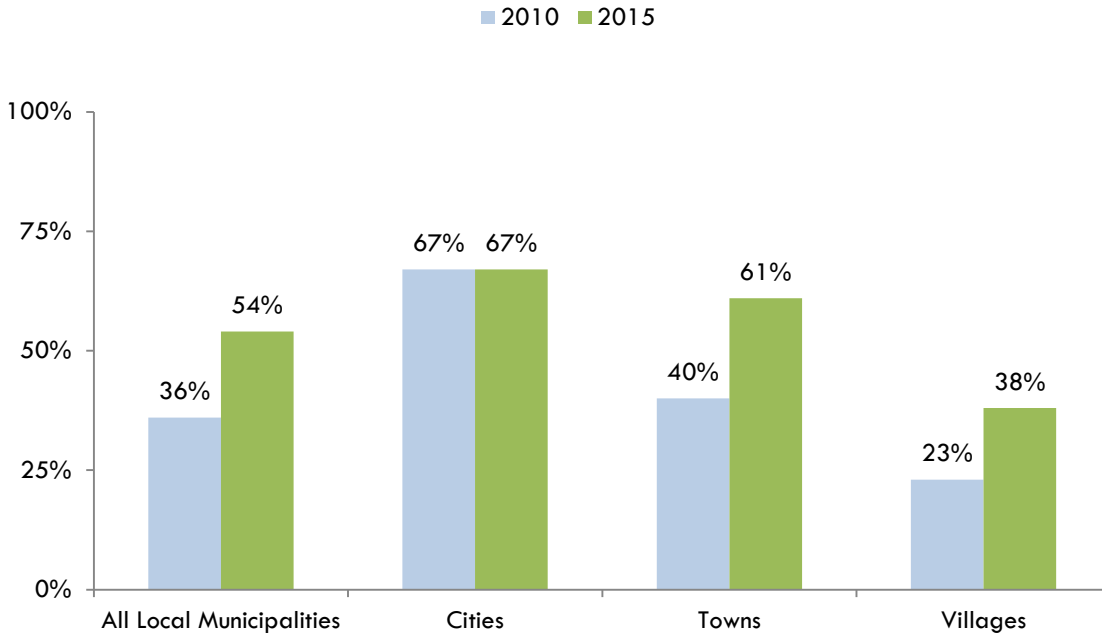
Five Year Trend

Five years ago, 37 percent of local governments in the four-county region made available ZBA agendas on their websites in comparison with 46 percent in 2015. In 2010, two cities posted them, now three do. In the past, 43 percent of towns did and now, five years later, 54 percent post ZBA agendas. In the same time frame, the percentage for villages is stable at 26 and 25 percent, respectively.

ZBA Minutes

2015 Findings

In a majority (54 percent) of the municipalities in our four-county region citizens can find ZBA minutes on their local government's website. This is the case for four cities, 61 percent of towns, and 38 percent of villages.



ZBA Minutes: includes posted ZBA minutes within the past year

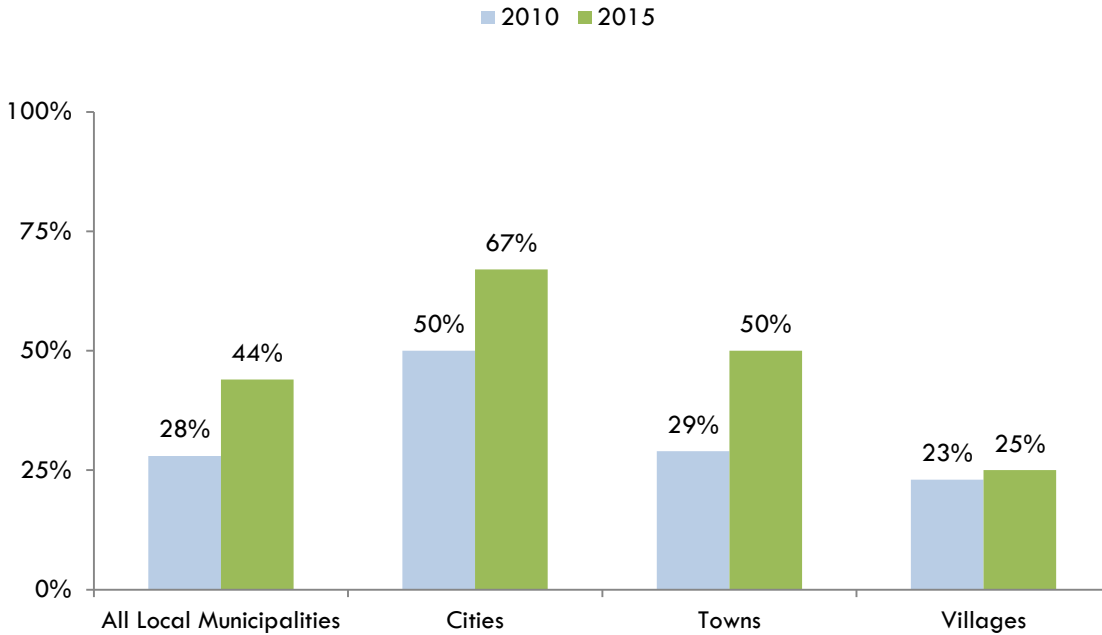
Five Year Trend

There has been an 18 percentage point increase from 36 to 54 percent for local governments posting ZBA minutes on their websites. The same number of cities that did so in 2010, four, do so in 2015. In the past five years, there has been a 21 percentage point rise in the percentage for towns publishing ZBA minutes on their websites: from 40 to 61 percent. For villages, there was a 15 percentage point jump from 23 to 38 percent.

ZBA Applications

2015 Findings

On 44 percent of local government websites in our four-county region, community members can obtain ZBA application materials. This includes four cities, half of the towns, and on quarter of the villages.



ZBA Applications: includes ZBA applications

Five Year Trend

In 2010, project and development applications could be accessed on 24 percent of municipal websites in our four-county region. In 2015, this percentage has risen to 40 percent. Five years ago, two towns posted planning board application materials and now three do. In that same time period, the percentage for towns increased from 23 to 43 percent and for villages it rose from 26 to 31 percent.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Category Total

2015 Findings

Related to planning and development, a considerable amount of information about environmental impacts and reporting can be found on local government websites in our region. About three out of four (76 percent) of municipalities make available some form of information on their websites. In our four-county region, environmentally-related information/data can be retrieved online for 72 percent of villages, 76 percent of towns, and all six cities.



Environmental Impacts: combined total category includes SEQR-related information, EISs, EAS & or EAFs, open space plans, and water quality statements such as MS4 reports

Five Year Trend

Five years ago, 64 percent of municipal websites in our four-county region included some type of environmentally-related reporting and, in 2015, 76 percent do. In the past, only four cities provided this type of information; now all do. The percentage for towns increased from 67 to 76 in this same time period and, for villages, it increased from 55 to 72 percent.

Why is this Important?

A sizeable portion of municipal planning work entails ensuring that development occurs within regulated environmental parameters. An ideal place for residents to locate this information is on their local government websites.

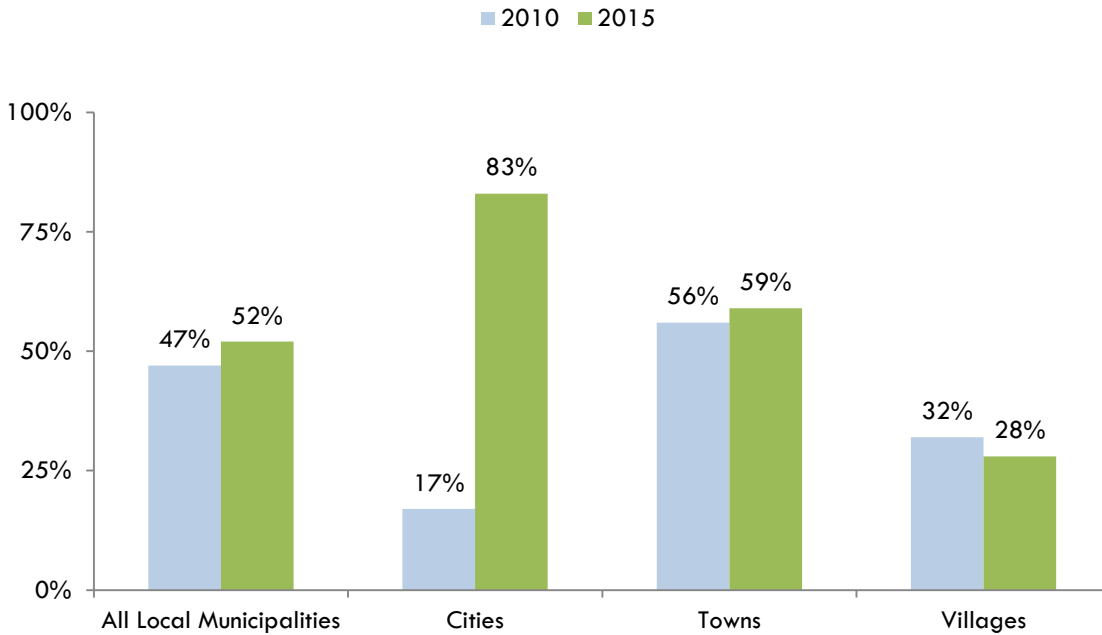
Forecast for the Future

All of the cities in our region make environmental info accessible online. Our expectation is that this will extend to the villages and towns and nearly all municipal websites by 2020.

SEQR Information

2015 Findings

In our state, the NY State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQR) “requires all state and local government agencies to consider environmental impacts equally with social and economic factors during discretionary decision-making.”⁸ Just over half (52 percent) of local government websites include some sort of information about SEQR. Five cities provide SEQR information online, as well as 59 percent of towns and 28 percent of villages.



SEQR Information: includes any postings of information about SEQR

Five Year Trend

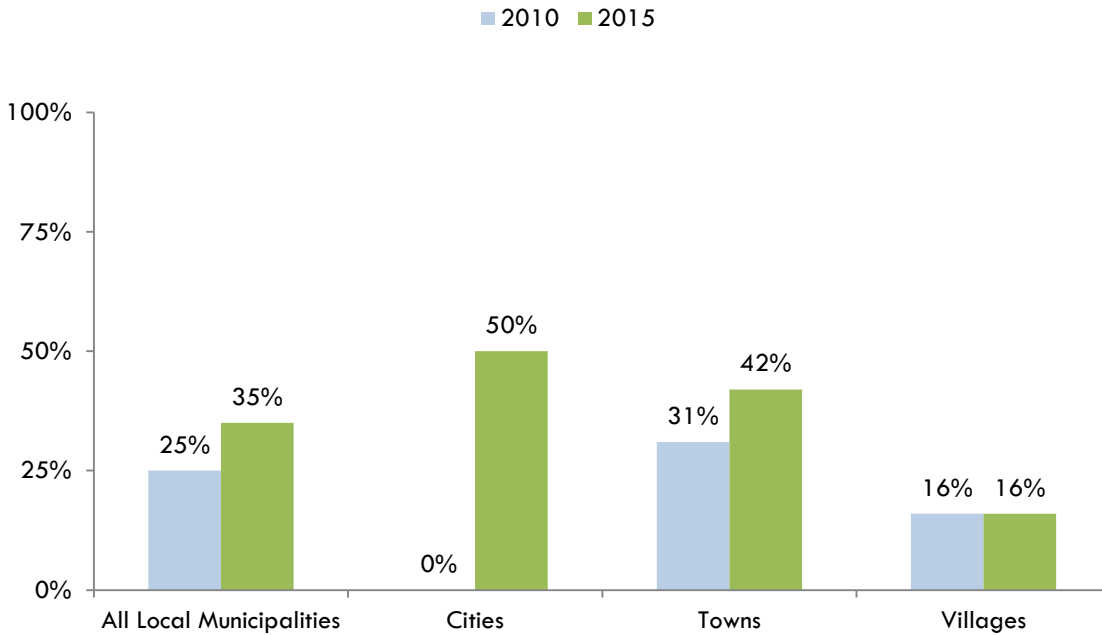
Between 2010 and 2015, the number of local government websites in our four-county region supplying SEQR information increased modestly from 47 to 52 percent. In the same time period, the number of cities doing so jumped from one to five, the percent of towns rose from 56 to 59 percent, and the percent of villages dropped slightly from 32 to 28 percent.

⁸ SEQR: Environmental Impact Assessment in New York State www.dec.ny.gov/permits/357.html

EAS/EAF Forms

2015 Findings

The first step in the SEQR process is the submission of an EAS/EAF (Environmental Assessment Form) which assists planning boards to determine whether or not a full environmental assessment is necessary. Just over one third (35 percent) of municipal websites include downloadable EAS/EAF forms. Three cities have these forms online as well as 42 percent of towns and 16 percent of villages.



EAS/EAF forms: EAS/EAF forms are available for download

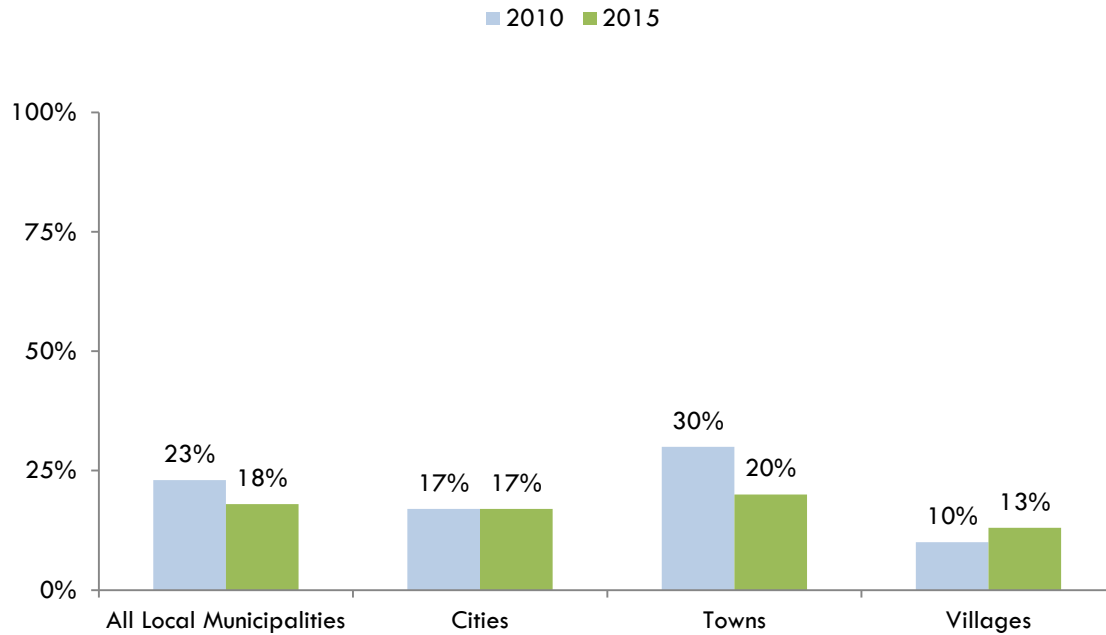
Five Year Trend

There has been a ten percentage point increase in the percent of local government websites where residents can locate and download EAS/EAF forms since 2010, up from 25 to 35 percent. Five years ago, none of our cities had this information available online, and now half do. In 2010, 31 percent of towns did and, in 2015, 42 percent do. The percent of villages providing these forms online is stable at 16 percent.

EIS Statements

2015 Findings

According to the “EIS on the Web” legal requirement, “a 2005 amendment to SEQR requires every Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) - Draft EIS (DEIS) and Final EIS (FEIS) - to be posted on a publicly accessible Internet website. A DEIS should be posted as soon as it is accepted and remain posted until the FEIS is accepted.”⁹ In 2015, on 23 percent of municipal websites posted EISs, including for one city, 20 percent of towns, and 13 percent of villages.



EIS Statements: Environmental Impact Statements are posted on the municipality's site

Five Year Trend

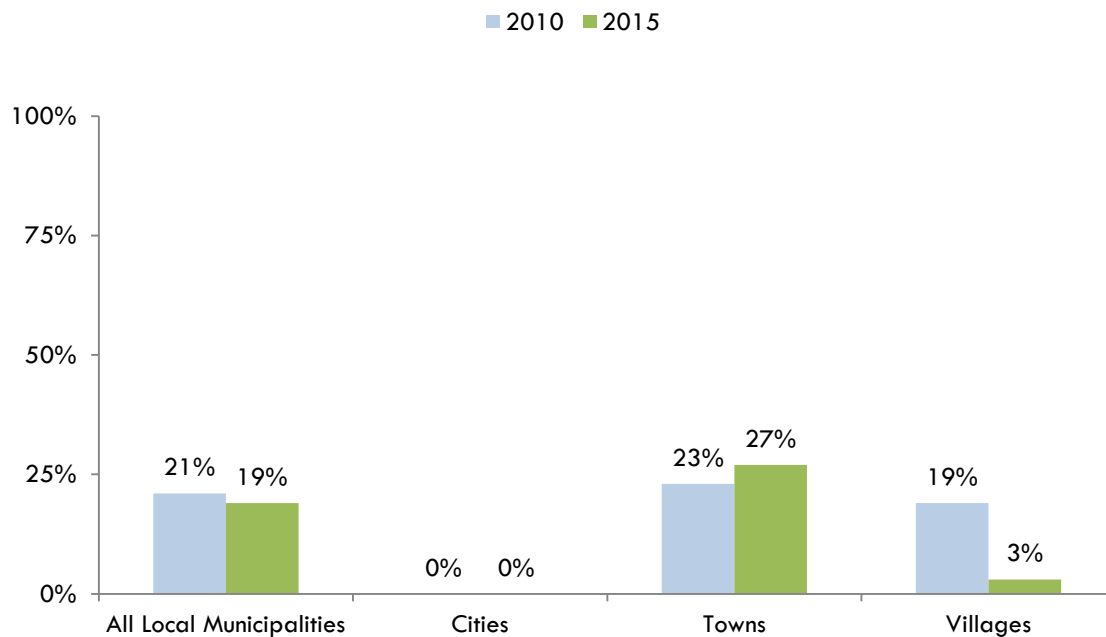
SEQR Environmental Impact Statements only result when there is a project before the planning board where a full environmental assessment has been deemed necessary. Our data does not allow us to determine if the relatively stable percentages found here reflect stability in the general number of projects and/or the number of projects with a determination that requires full environmental review.

⁹ “EIS on the Web” Requirement www.dec.ny.gov/permits/6197.html

Open Space Plans

2015 Findings

According to the NYSDEC, “Open space is land that is not intensively developed for residential, commercial, industrial or institutional use... An open space plan is the flip side of a development plan. After identifying important open spaces, it will be much more apparent where development should occur. It can also recommend land use regulations that will help protect the community from uneconomic and inefficient sprawl.”¹⁰ About one in five (29 percent) of municipal websites in the four-county region have published open space plans on their websites, including 27 percent of towns and 3 percent of villages.



Open Space Plan: a local open space plan is available on the site

Five Year Trend

Compared with 2010, the percent of municipalities with open space plans on their websites is similar: 21 percent did so five years ago and 19 percent do so in 2015. No cities posted them in 2010 and none do now. Twenty-three percent of towns had open space plans on their websites in 2010 and 27 percent did in 2015. Nineteen percent of villages did in 2010, dropping to only 3 in 2015.

¹⁰ NYSDEC Local Open Space Planning Guide, p. 3 www.dos.ny.gov/lg/publications/Local_Open_Space_Planning_Guide.pdf

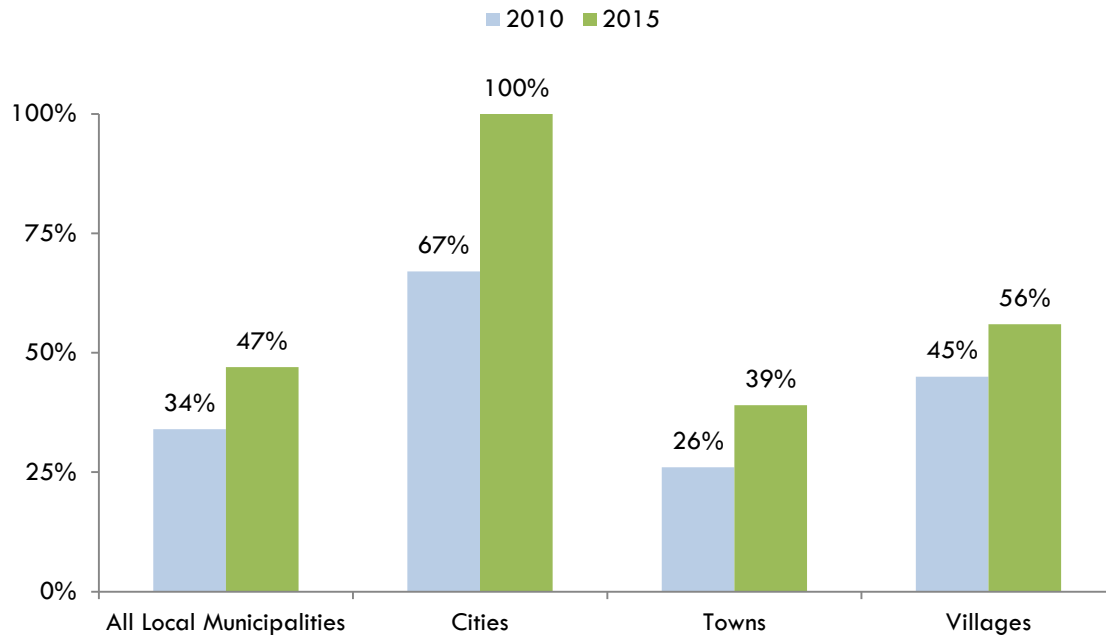
In Dutchess County, the Town of Clinton's Open Space plan is easily found in their main menu and has a page of its own with plan itself as well as maps for quick visual representations.

The screenshot shows the website for the Town of Clinton, Dutchess County, New York. The header features the town's name in a large, dark blue serif font, with the county and state in a smaller, italicized font below it. A dark navigation bar contains links for About, Government, Departments, Services, Directory, News, and Community. Below this, a lighter bar includes links for Town Calendar, Comprehensive Plan, Open Space, and Proposed Transmission Line. The main content area is titled "Open Space" and lists several links: Clinton Open Space Protection Plan, Maps (with a dropdown arrow), Clinton Aerial Map, Cultural Resources 11x17 with Bike Trail, Map 2 Ecological Resources, and Map 4 Important Farmland Areas. To the right, a large image displays the cover of the "THE TOWN OF CLINTON OPEN SPACE PROTECTION PLAN". The cover features four landscape photographs: a field with a barn, a stream with a bridge, a forest path, and a wide valley. Text on the cover includes "Prepared for: The Town of Clinton Town Board", "Prepared by: The Town of Clinton Open Space Committee", and "With assistance from: GREENPLAN INC."

Water Quality Reports

2015 Findings

Nearly half (47 percent) of all local governments publish some type of water quality report on their municipal websites. This includes all six cities, 39 percent of towns, and a majority (56 percent) of villages.



Water Quality Reports: a water quality report from the past year is posted

Five Year Trend

Since 2010 the percent of municipalities post some type of water quality report increased from 34 to 47 percent. In 2015, all cities did so, in comparison with three in 2010. In the past five years the percentage increased from 26 to 39 for towns, and 45 to 56 for villages.

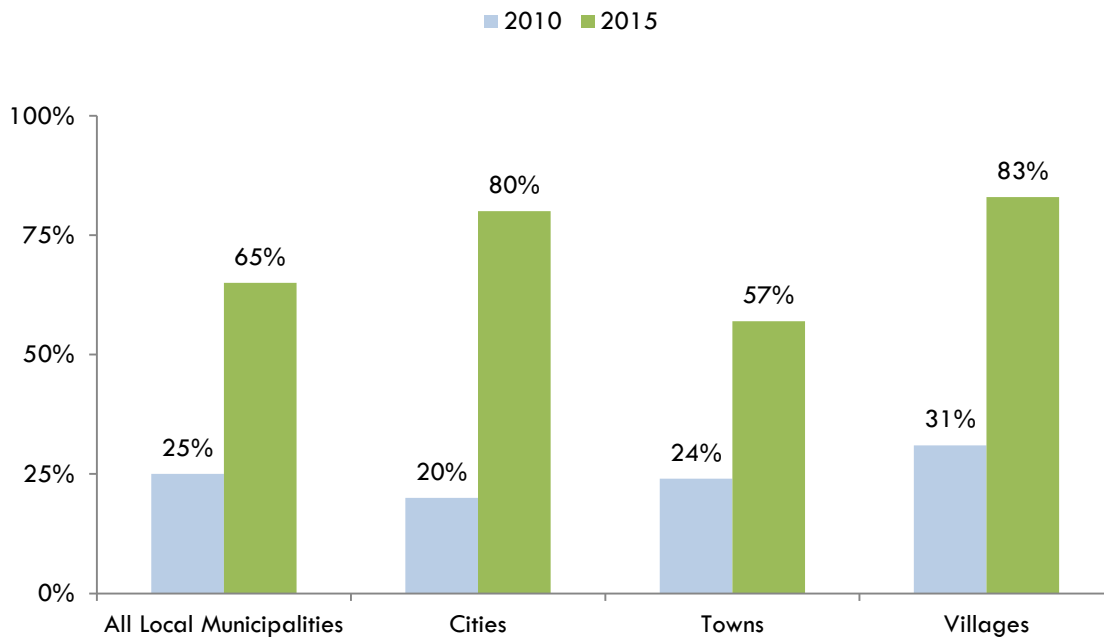
MS4 Reports

2015 Findings

According to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), “Small municipal stormwater sewer systems (MS4s) that are located within the boundaries of a Census Bureau defined “urbanized area” are regulated under EPA’s Phase II Stormwater Rule. This requires MS4s to develop a stormwater management program that will reduce the amount of pollutants carried by stormwater during storm events to waterbodies to the “maximum extent practicable.”¹¹ The DEC provides a standard “MS4 Municipal Compliance Certification and Annual Report” form.

In 2010, 45 percent of the municipalities in our four-county region were designated MS4s (with updates based on 2010 Census defined “urban areas”) and nearly half are now. This includes 46 percent of villages, 47 percent of towns, and five cities.

While posting MS4 annual reports online is not required by law, for 65 percent of MS4 regulated municipalities in our four-county region these completed forms can be accessed on local government websites. This is the case for five cities, 57 percent of towns, and 83 percent of villages.




MS4 Reports: for MS4 designated municipalities, a municipal stormwater report as specified by the NYSDEC is available; only MS4 designated municipalities are included here.

Five Year Trend

The single greatest item rise in our inventory by far was MS4 reports, with a 40 percentage point increase since 2010, from 25 to 65 percent. The number of cities rose from one to five. The percentage for towns increased from 24 to 57 percent, and for villages it climbed from 31 to 83 percent.

¹¹ Stormwater MS4 Permit and Forms www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/43150.html

In 2014, the Hudson River Watershed Alliance contracted with the Benjamin Center to map MS4 outfall data for the four counties in our study area. This map can be accessed at www.hudsonwatershed.org/ms4map/



Mid Hudson Valley MS4 Outfalls

This map of MS4 Outfalls is made using Google Fusion Tables.
 Select the parameters of your search below, and the site will parse the dataset for outfalls that match you criteria.
 The checkboxes below toggle overlays on and off. Please give them a little bit of time to load.

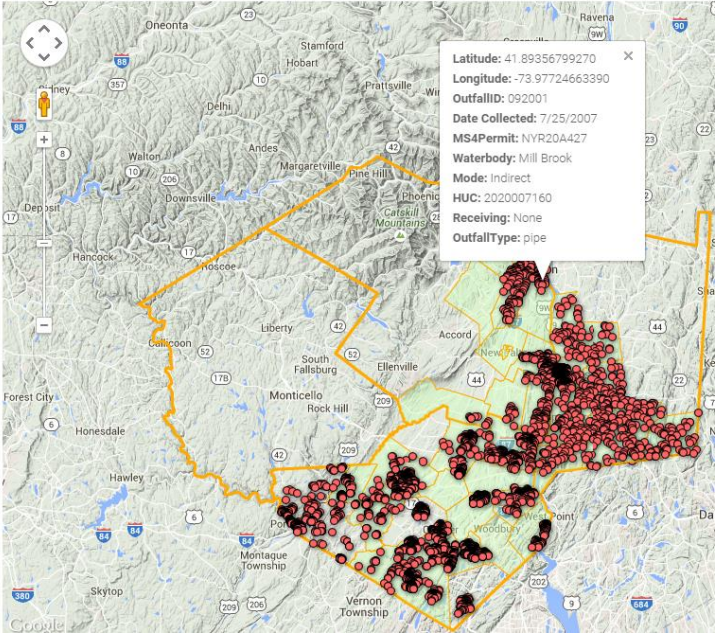
Search for Address

Search By Outfall ID

Search By MS4 Permit

Search By Outfall Type

Search
Reset



Latitude: 41.89356799270
 Longitude: -73.97724663390
 OutfallID: 092001
 Date Collected: 7/25/2007
 MS4Permit: NYR20A427
 Waterbody: Mill Brook
 Mode: Indirect
 HUC: 2020007160
 Receiving: None
 OutfallType: pipe

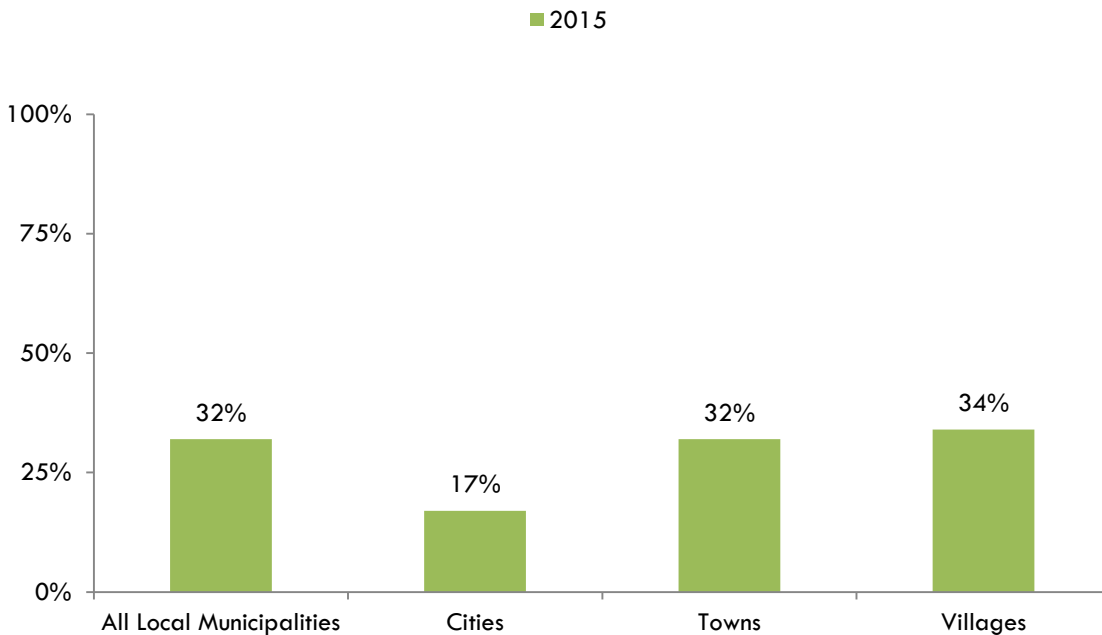
15,657 results found

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Category Total

2015 Findings

On about one third (32 percent) of the local government websites in our four-county region, residents can find emergency management information, covering preparation for and recovery from disasters. This is the case for one city, 32 percent of towns, and 34 percent of villages.¹²



Emergency Preparedness: residents can locate emergency information, such as emergency notification systems

Why is this Important?

In the past five years, our four-county region has experienced some significant weather events. Local governments have enacted emergency planning, and systems of communication to inform residents about issues and actions, from power outages to road closures to where to pick up dry ice. There are times that, even when telephone lines are out, this information can be still be disseminated via the Internet on battery powered devices.

Forecast for the Future

By 2020, this kind of information should be on all local government websites.

¹² Emergency management was not inventoried in 2010.

The Town of Shandaken in Ulster County has a very useful Disaster Preparation and Recovery menu item that includes news on the latest disasters, flood plans, and disaster related news archives.



Disaster Prep & Recovery



[Disaster Prep & Recovery News](#)



[Flood Mitigation Plan](#)



[News Archives](#)

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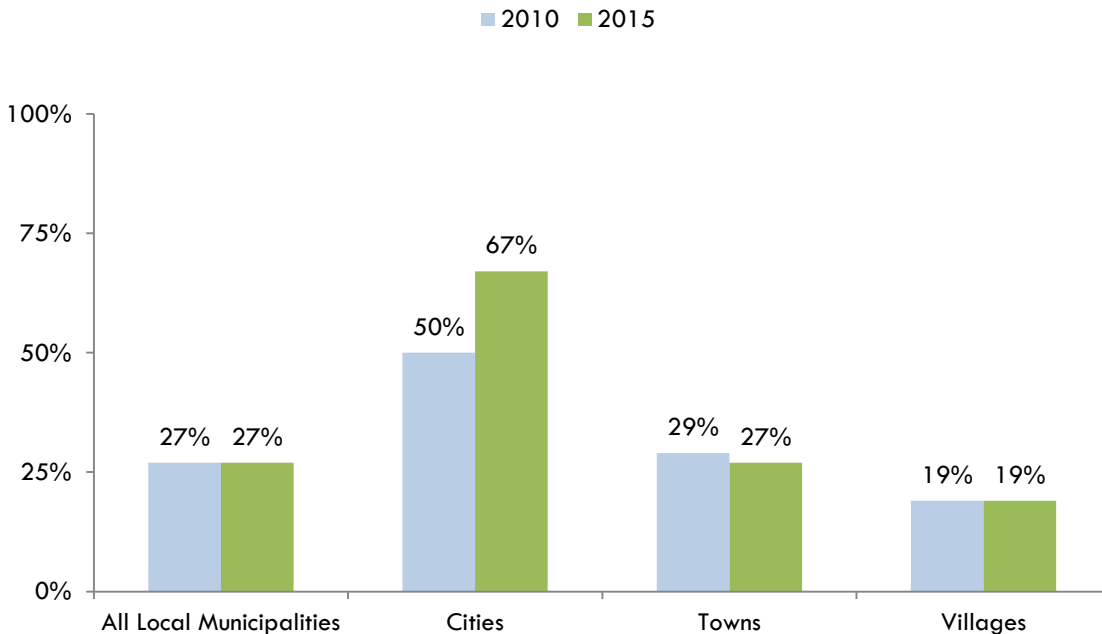


ELECTIONS

Category Total

2015 Findings

Residents can find election information such as polling places, absentee voting, and election results on about one quarter (27 percent) of local government websites in the four-county region. Three cities, 27 percent of towns and 19 percent of villages have some type of election-related information on their websites.



Election Information: total combined category includes information about voting, running for office, etc., and/or district maps and/or election results.

Five Year Trend

The 2015 percent of local governments with election information is identical to that of 2010, 27 percent. The number of towns and villages with this type of information is stable.

Why is this Important?

In democracies, people need to know how to register to vote, where to vote, how to run for office, and about previous election results. Local municipal elections, with the exception of those in some villages, are run by county board of elections. In all four counties, Boards of Elections have robust websites that provide guidance on voting, running for office, and previous election results. For community members, finding this on their local site (even if redundant), is recommended. Alternatively, a link to the county site might be provided.

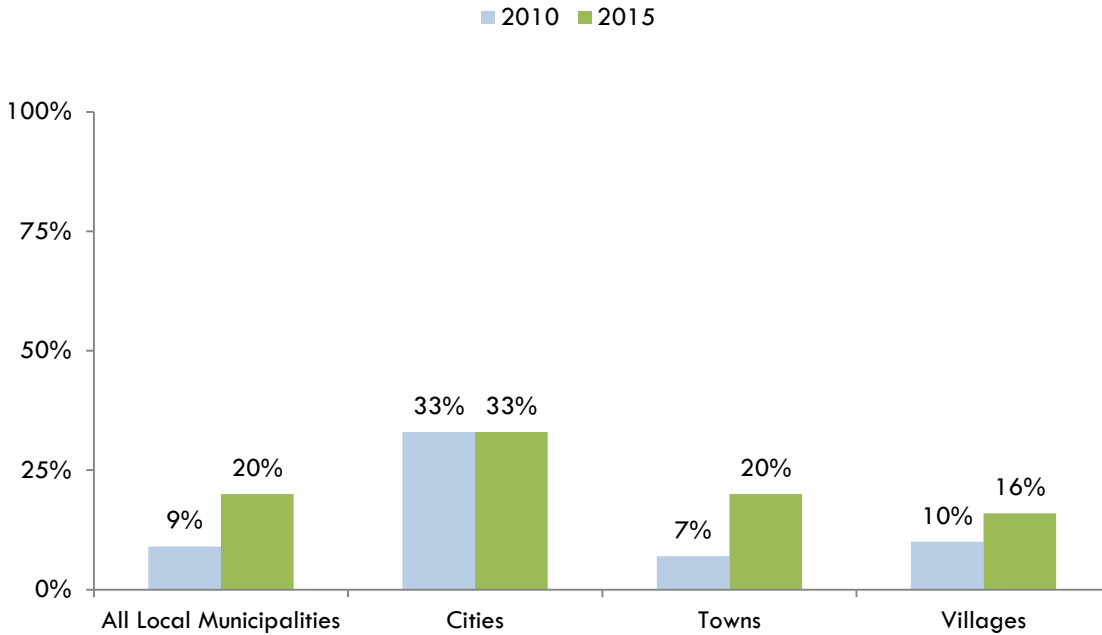
Forecast for the Future

A good number of local governments in our four-county region currently present election information on their websites. We expect that by 2020, the percent for all will steadily increase.

Election Info

2015 Findings

On 20 percent municipal websites in the four-county region, citizens can locate information about local elections, but not maps or results. This is true for two cities, 20 percent of towns, and 16 percent of villages.



Election Information: includes election information, but no maps or results

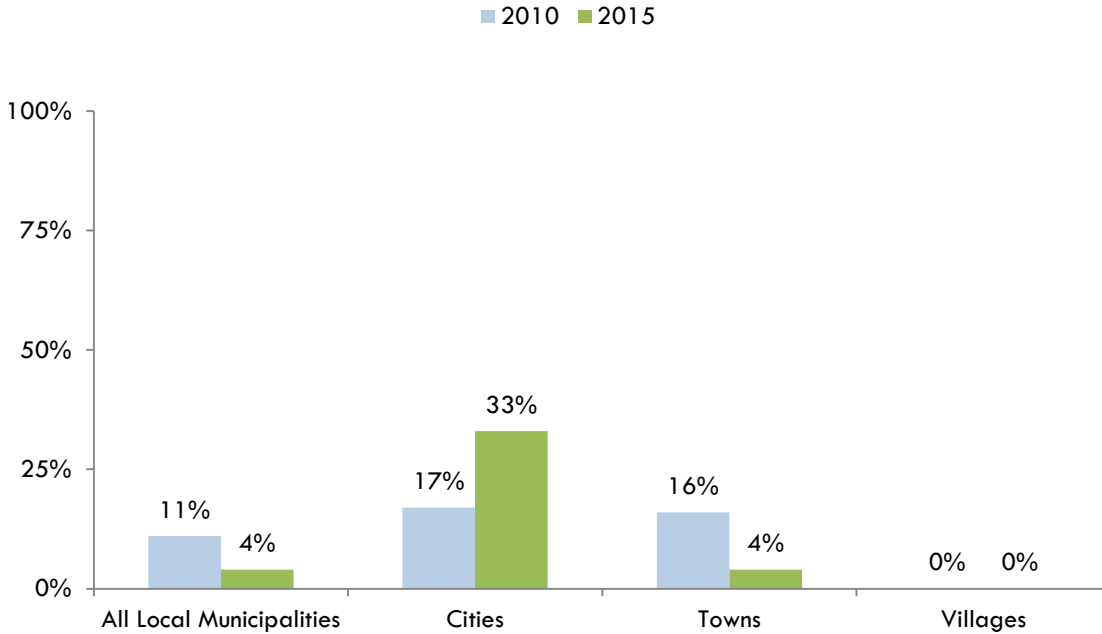
Five Year Trend

Since 2010, there has been an 11 percentage point increase in the number of municipalities that only post information, with no maps or results.

Election Maps

2015 Findings

Only four percent of municipal websites in the four-county region include election district maps: two cities, 4 percent of towns, and none of the villages.

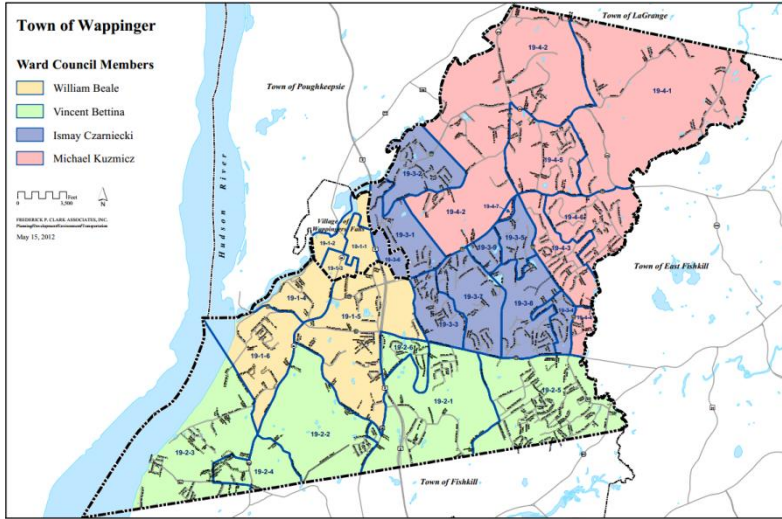


Election Maps: includes election district maps

Five Year Trend

Since 2010, the percent of local government websites where residents can find election maps decreased from 11 to 4 percent.

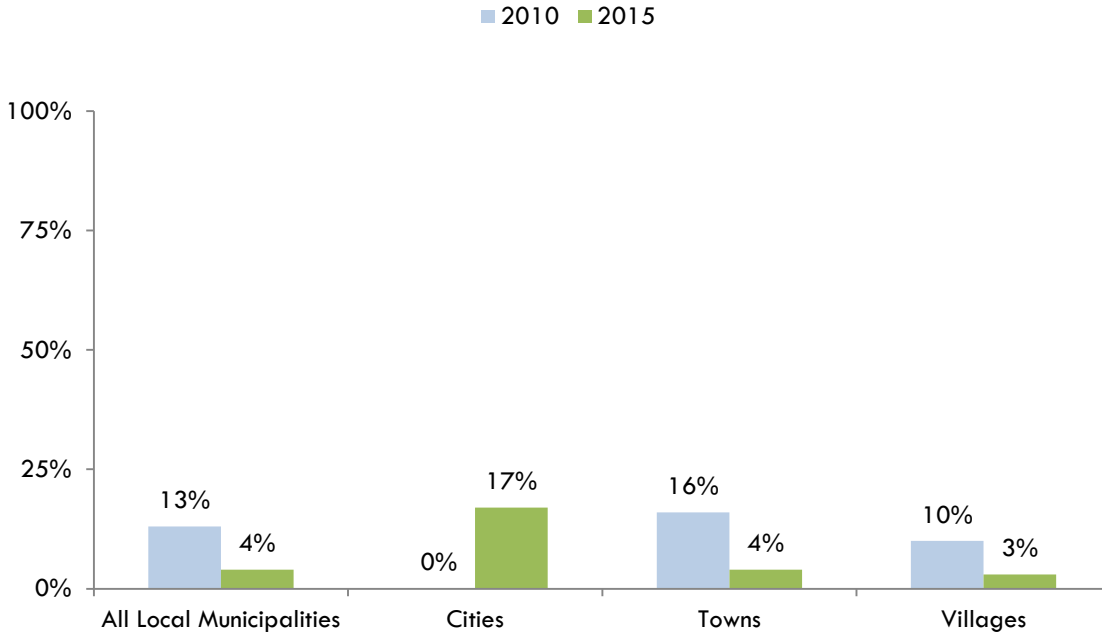
The Town of Wappinger in Dutchess County has a link in their main menu directing web visitors to a town map with election districts.



Election Results

2015 Findings

Four percent of municipal websites in the four-county region include election results: one city, 4 percent of towns, and 3 percent of the villages.



Election Results: includes previous election results

Five Year Trend

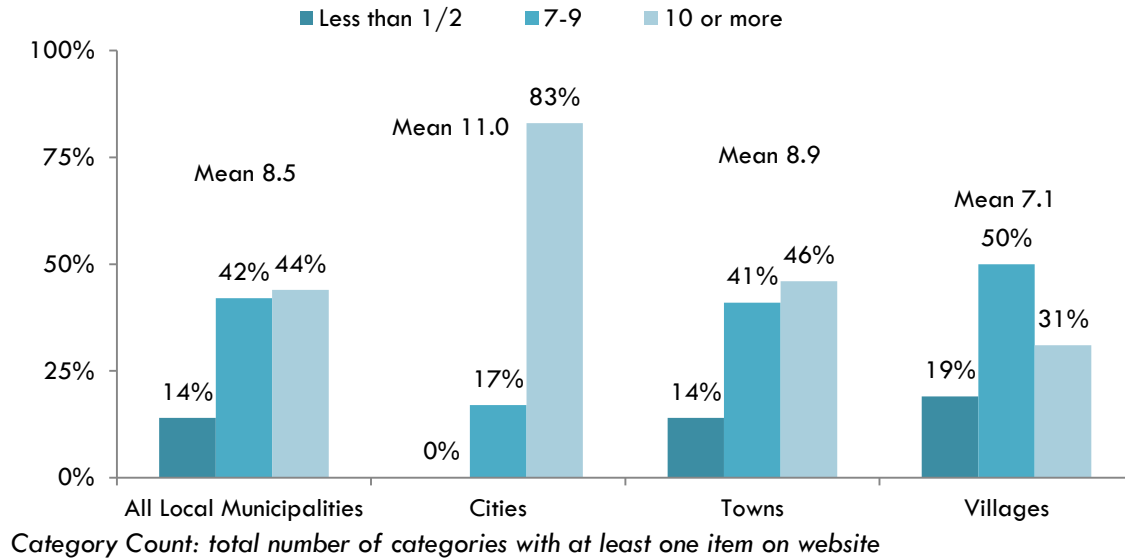
Over the past five years, the percent of municipal websites where residents can locate local election results decreased from 13 to 4 percent.

WEBSITE INVENTORY SUMMARY

2015 Findings

This study inventoried forty items in thirteen categories. Forty-four percent of local government websites included at least one item in ten or more categories, on 42 percent we found items in 7-9 categories, and 14 percent had less than half of the categories.

On average, city websites contained 11 of the categories, towns had about nine (8.9) and villages seven (7.1).



SUMMARY TABLE

Ranked Item (Category)	2010	2015	Rank
Phone numbers (Contact Information)	81%	96%	1
Email Addresses (Contact Information)	57%	85%	2
Meeting Minutes (Recent Activities)	64%	76%	3
Meeting Calendars (Recent Activities)	73%	75%	4
eCode (Law/Legal)	69%	74%	5
PB Minutes (Planning and Development)	49%	69%	6
MS4 Reports (Environmental Impacts) (% for MS4s only)	25%	65%	7
Info about departments (Depts, Committees)	68%	64%	8
Press releases (Recent Activities)	60%	63%	9
FOIL (Law/Legal)	41%	61%	10
Master Plan (Planning and Development)	52%	59%	11
Meeting Agendas (Recent Activities)	47%	59%	12
Budget (Financial)	28%	59%	13
ZBA Minutes (Planning & Development)	36%	54%	14
PB Agendas (Planning & Development)	44%	53%	15
SEQR Information (Environmental Impacts)	47%	52%	16
Zoning Maps (Planning & Development)	36%	47%	17
Water Quality Reports (Planning & Development)	34%	47%	18
ZBA Agendas (Planning & Development)	37%	46%	19
ZBA Applications (Planning & Development)	28%	44%	20
Info. about Committees and Commissions (Dept, Committees)	60%	40%	21
Schedule of Fees (Financial)	43%	40%	22
PB Applications (Planning & Development)	24%	40%	23
EAS/EAF Form (Environmental Impacts)	25%	35%	24
Public Hearing Notices (Law/Legal)	21%	32%	25
Official Maps (Official Maps & Local Demo.)	26%	27%	26
Local Laws & Resolutions (Law/Legal)	22%	24%	27
Complaint Forms (Forms)	17%	23%	28
Election Info (Elections)	9%	20%	29
Meeting Videos (Public Access)	11%	19%	30
Open Space Plans (Environmental Impacts)	21%	19%	31
EIS Statements (Environmental Impacts)	23%	18%	32
Committee/Commission Vacancies (Dept, Committees)	13%	14%	33
Job Openings (Dept, Committees)	N/A	13%	34
Financial Reports (Financial)	N/A	11%	35
Contracts (Financial)	7%	10%	36
Local Demographics (Official Maps & Local Demo.)	N/A	9%	37
Live Streaming (Public Access)	N/A	5%	38
Election Maps (Elections)	11%	4%	39
Election Results (Elections)	13%	4%	40

EASE OF NAVIGATION

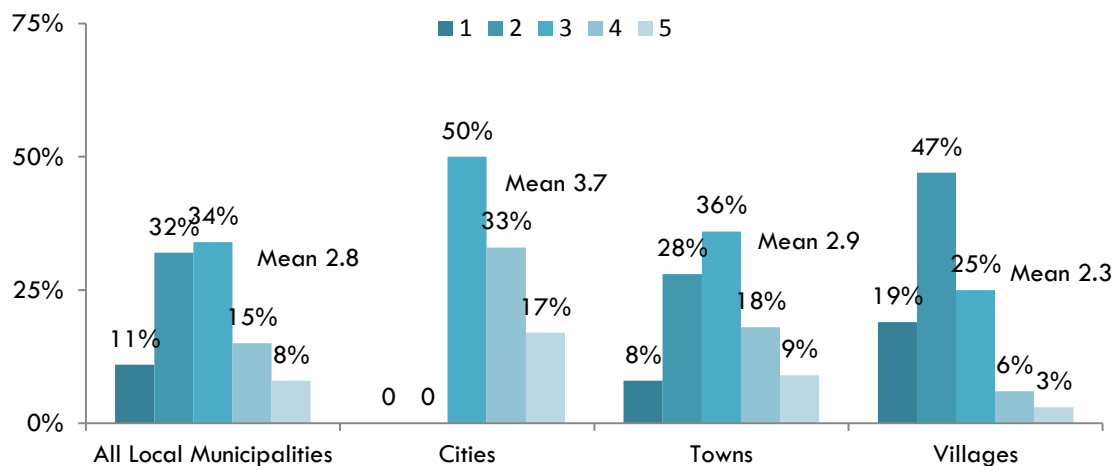
Evaluating websites cannot be limited to simply counting how much information is provided. In fact, one study of city websites concluded that too much information, when inadequately organized, can be “cluttered, daunting and overwhelming” for website visitors (West, 2004a, p. 10). Armstrong (2010) argues that “not only is the type of information placed important for determining transparency, but also where and how it is placed on the site” (p. 15).

2015 Findings

Local government websites in the four-county region were scored for ease of navigation. With 1 as low, and 5 as high, the following guidelines were utilized to assign these scores:

Score Criteria

- 1 No search bar, illogical layout, unconnected menu pathways, lack of menu bar, dead links
- 2 No search bar, has menu bar but lacking submenu and useful phrases, layout is disorganized, too much information is listed on the home page instead of within submenus
- 3 Search bar exists but may not search the site itself exclusively (rather the entirety of the internet), drop down list, forms and documents are found within department pages, more organized but lacks logical flow, if there is a document center it is unorganized and has no subsections
- 4 Logical menu formation, drop down list or submenus are available, may be missing instructions or key words, uncluttered, takes only a few minutes to find desired items, minutes and agendas are found on menu, meeting calendar is found on homepage, forms and documents are listed independently from department pages
- 5 In addition to all of 4, telling key words, drop down list, visually appealing, organized, takes only a few minutes to find desired items, related social sites and pages are linked on the website, documents centers have search bars



On average, local municipalities with websites scored a 2.8 for ease of navigation. Cities ranked the highest with a mean of 3.7, followed by towns with a mean of 2.9, and villages with 2.3.

Why is this Important?

Without a doubt it is important to have a website that contains a variety of relevant information for residents of local municipalities. However, if information is hard to find, and sites are difficult to navigate, the purpose is underserved.

Forecast for the Future

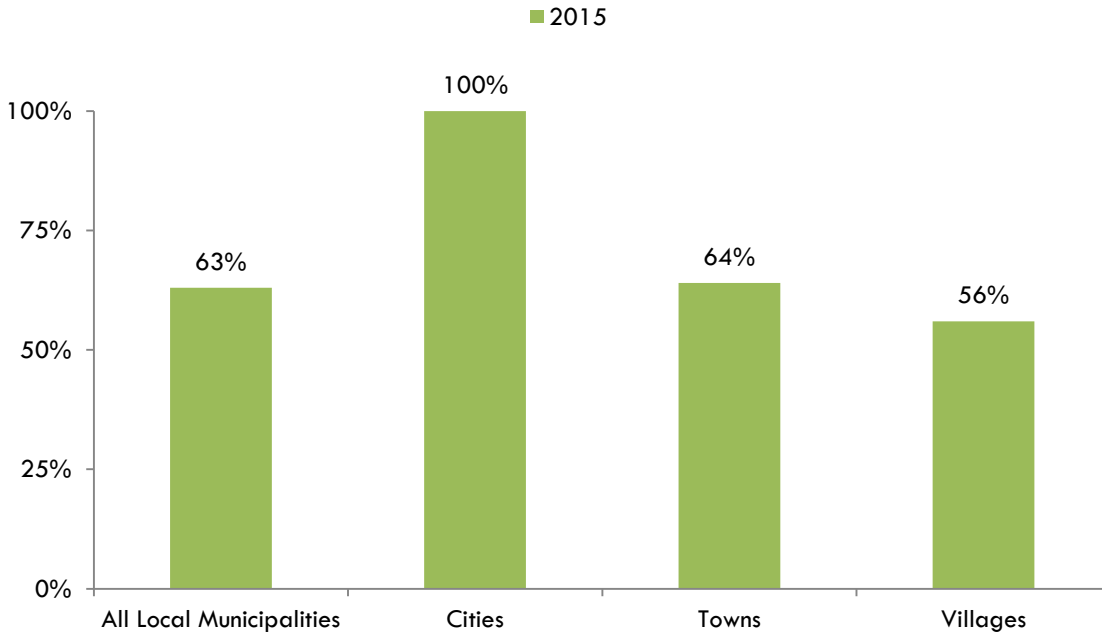
Only nine local governments in our four-county region scored a 5 for their websites' ease of navigation. It is important that this number rise by 2020.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Category Total

2015 Findings¹³

Approximately two thirds (63 percent) of the local governments in our four-county region have some type of social media presence in the form of Facebook pages or Twitter accounts for the entire municipality or any of its departments. This includes all six cities, 64 percent of towns, and 56 percent of villages.



Social Media Presence: total combined category includes any Facebook page or Twitter account for the municipality or any of its departments

Why is this Important?

Clearly, in addition to websites, social media is increasingly an appropriate way for municipalities to inform and engage with constituents.

Forecast for the Future

A significant percentage of municipalities in our four-county region currently have some form of social media presence. However, only four percent have a posted social media policy. We forecast that by 2020, the number of municipalities utilizing social media will rise substantially (on Facebook or Twitter or some other form that emerges). We encourage municipalities to publish social media policies in tandem.

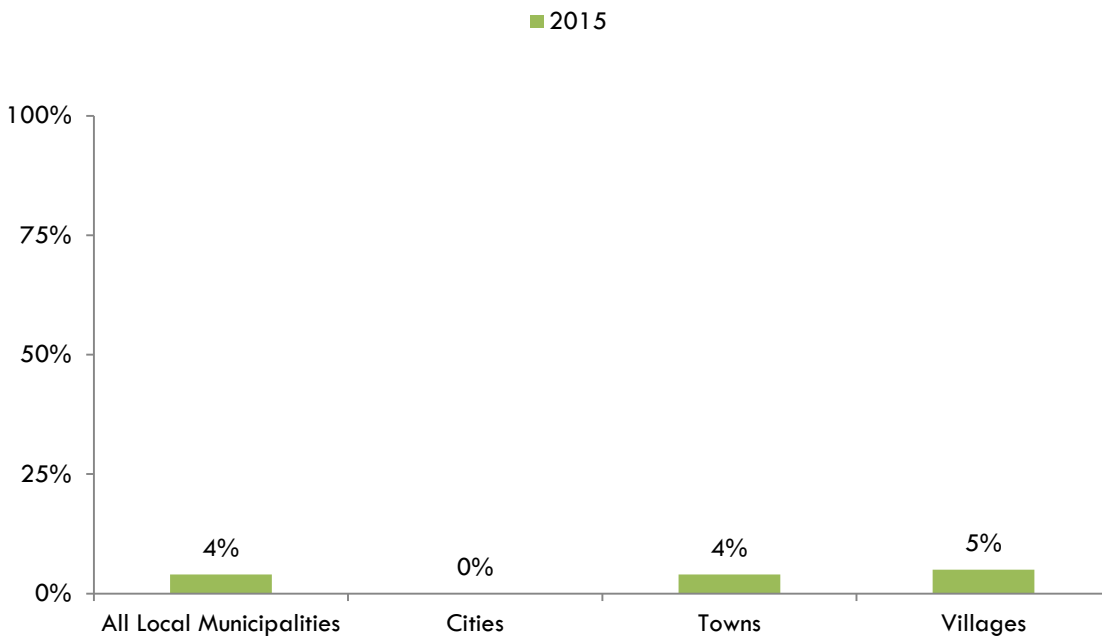
¹³ Social media was not inventoried in 2010.

Social Media Policy

2015 Findings

Policies covering digital media or social networking sites detail appropriate uses and express objectives for utilization of this type of communication. For example, in Dutchess County's Town of Dover their policy states, "goals for these communication tools are to: reach prospective residents with town messages and information; provide additional venues for citizen input; increase transparency of the town's decision-making process; and, to facilitate a sense of place and community."¹⁴

Only 4 percent of the local governments in our four-county region who do have some type of social media presence in the form of Facebook pages or Twitter accounts for the municipality or any of its departments also have a posted social media policy. This is true for none of the cities, two towns, and one village.



Social Media Policy: posted social media policy on the municipality's website or Facebook page

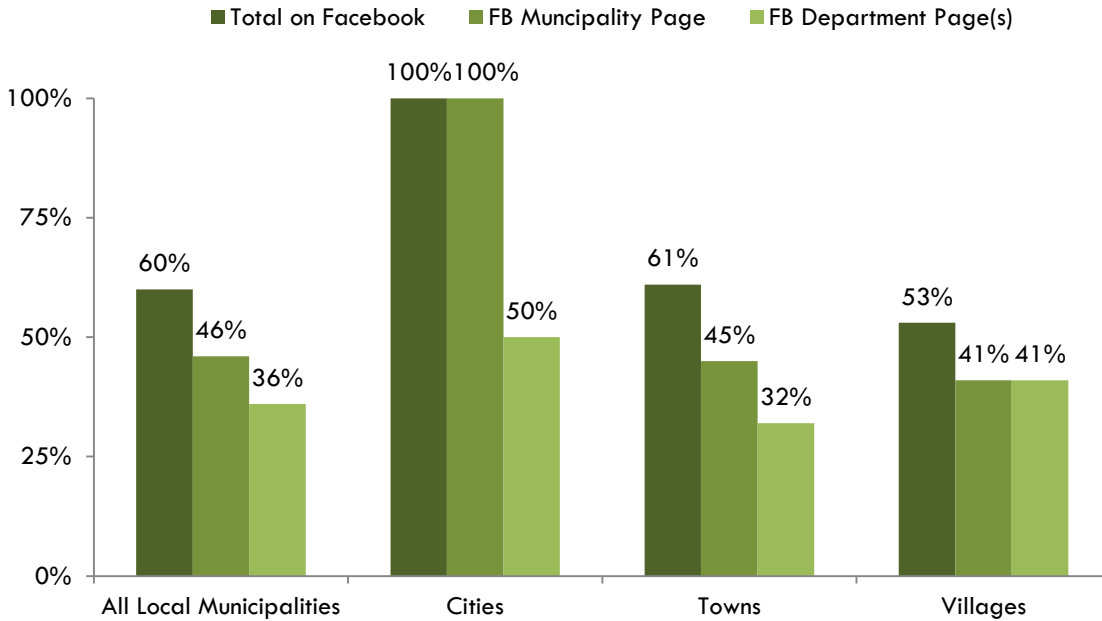
¹⁴ www.townofdovery.us

Facebook

2015 Findings

Local governments can have a Facebook presence either in the form of a page for the municipality in its entirety and/or for one of its component departments. For example, the Town of Woodbury in Orange County has a main Facebook page as well as individual pages for both their highway and police departments.

Sixty percent of local governments in our four-county region have a Facebook presence, which includes all of the cities, 61 percent of towns, and 53 percent of villages



Facebook: total combined category includes any municipality with a Facebook main page or for any of its departments

The Town of Warwick has a well-organized and regularly updated Facebook page and their homepage contains a Facebook social plugin making it easy for viewers to locate the official Facebook page.

Find us on Facebook

Town Of Warwick
1,822 Likes

Town Of Warwick
15 February at 10:09

The Town will have several crews on for the next twenty four to thirty six hours to battle snow drifts. You are however advised to exercise caution as a road may have snow drifts in place at any given time. Please remember to call the Warwick Police at 986-5000 with any emergency.

Share 19 5 11

Town Of Warwick
15 February at 10:05
Facebook social plugin

Town Of Warwick
Government Organization

Like

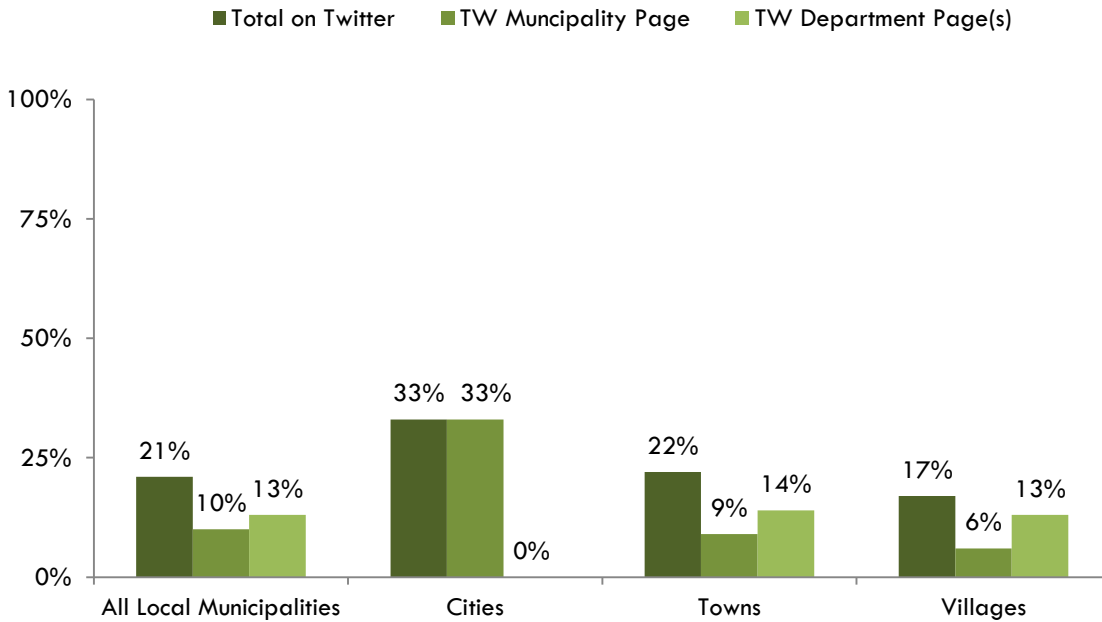
Timeline About Photos Reviews More

Twitter

2015 Findings

Municipalities may have a Twitter presence either as a Twitter account for the whole municipality and/or for one of its constituent departments. Orange County's Town of New Windsor has Twitter handle, as does their recreation department.

About one in five (21 percent) of municipalities in our four-county region have a Twitter presence, which includes two of the cities, 22 percent of towns, and 13 percent of villages



Twitter: total combined category includes any municipality with a Twitter handle or for any of its departments

The New Paltz Police Department uses their Twitter account to update residents about road closings and police activity.



The header features the New Paltz Police Department badge on the left, which includes the text "NEW PALTZ POLICE" and "DEPARTMENT". To the right of the badge, the statistics are displayed: "TWEETS 271", "FOLLOWING 13", and "FOLLOWERS 1,352". A "Follow" button with a plus icon is located on the far right.

New Paltz Police
@NewPaltzPD
New Paltz, New York · newpaltzpolice.org

 **New Paltz Police** @NewPaltzPD · Jun 7
Main St. is now open. nixle.us/8P3BP
Details

 **New Paltz Police** @NewPaltzPD · Jun 7
LGBTQ Pride Parade steps off today at 1pm from the NP Middle School , down Main St. ending at Hasbrouck Park. nixle.us/8P397
Details

 **New Paltz Police** @NewPaltzPD · May 30
Memorial Day Parade steps off at 6pm today from the NP Middle School proceeding down Main St. to the NP Fire Dept. nixle.us/8NTQE
Details

 **New Paltz Police** @NewPaltzPD · May 23
Increased traffic congestion on Main St. due to Craft Fair at UC Fairgrounds. Expect longer than normal delays. nixle.us/8NNRB
Details

 **New Paltz Police** @NewPaltzPD · May 9
Springtown Road will be closed between Coffey Rd and Dug Rd due to a working structure fire nixle.us/8NDGE
Details

METHODOLOGY

Five years ago and again this year, we tracked whether or not local governments in our region had websites, and if so, what types of information were being posted on their sites. Our checklist of forty items included a variety of information in thirteen categories: contact information; recent activities; public access; forms; departments, commissions, committees; financial; law/legal; ethics; official maps and local demographics; planning and development; environmental impacts; emergency management; and, elections. In addition, websites were evaluated on ease of navigation.

For the first time in 2015, we also looked to see if municipalities had a social media presence. This included local governments with a Facebook page or Twitter account for their municipality as a whole, or for one of their departments.

In order to inventory the availability of certain information and public records municipal websites in our region, all 116 jurisdictions - cities (6), towns (74), and villages (36) - in the four-county region were investigated. Our 2010 data was collected from January 5, 2010 through January 19, 2010. The 2015 data was collected February 4, 2015 through March 9, 2015. For each website located, a standard forty item checklist was utilized to code the presence or absence of particular items found on each website.

Over the course of the study, six undergraduate students were trained and contributed to data collection, working both individually and in teams. The data reported here is limited to what was available on each site at the time each was inventoried during the data collection time periods detailed above. To provide inter-rater reliability, multiple students inventoried overlapping sites, and any discrepancies provoked a double check visit to sites to ensure accuracy.

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