CREATING FULL COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS:
HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS CAN BEST REACH, SERVE, AND ENGAGE DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, FROM GEN Z TO BOOMERS
A quick scan of any social platform or news scroll surfaces memes around the different generations coexisting today. From, “OK, Boomer,” to “Coronavirus Quarantine: Gen X Was Made for This,” pictures and articles that capture stereotypes or take note of unique attributes of generations are ubiquitous.

While many of these are entertaining and may contain some nuggets of truth, the heightened awareness around what sets different generations apart or what makes them tick tells us something bigger is at play here. What has organically become a hot topic in society at large is something worthwhile to explore in more depth, particularly for local governments. How, for instance, can local governments respond to the challenge of serving and engaging multiple generations?

To gain greater insight about commonalities and differences across generations, Tyler Technologies, Inc. has partnered with The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK) on a national study to answer this and other questions.
LOCAL GOVERNMENT’S PROBLEM-SOLVING POWERS

Local governments are uniquely positioned to address some of society’s most pressing problems. In fact, our research study shows that 60% or more of all generations surveyed agree that “government has to be the solution for today’s problems.” Today, real solutions to homelessness, the opioid crisis, equitable access to justice, food scarcity, navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, and other issues are being developed and implemented at the community level. These local approaches can then be scaled regionally and upward. Local governments are achieving success with these solutions while also continuing to provide quality services to constituents even in the face of political uncertainty, reduced resources, a changing workforce, and, of course, the disruption of COVID-19.

Local governments, as Tyler’s Chief Strategy Officer, Jeff Puckett recently noted, “weather unprecedented circumstances with grace and grit, agility and innovation,” time and again. The question for local government is how to approach assessing today’s challenges and prioritizing different solutions.

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

Tyler has suggested the most effective way for local governments to address pressing challenges is through the lens of connected communities. According to this new research, the majority of America defines a Connected Community as one in which “communication is easy and meaningful between government and residents.” The next most popular definitions are that residents “are active participants,” and that “all functions of government are visible to one another.”

America is spot on in this thinking. We view Connected Communities as those in which silos are removed, creating shared processes that cross department and agency boundaries, connect communities to one another beyond geographical boundaries, and, perhaps most important, connect citizens to their government.

Connecting citizens to government means lots of things, most notably, informing, engaging, and enabling action. It means providing easy ways for residents to interact with agencies and consume information that is relevant to them. It means creating successful, user-centered policy and program delivery that allows constituents to become part of the government process. Connected Communities solves the challenge for all generations of going to multiple departments to conduct business with local government.
COMMUNITY MAKE-UP

But can a “one-size-fits-all” approach to these connections work? What happens when communities – and they all do – include distinct generations with very different experiences, expectations, and approaches to local government? Governments can maximize service delivery, enhance public participation, and foster partnerships necessary for tomorrow’s solutions only by reaching, serving, and engaging citizens in ways that work across generations. In order to do this, government leaders need to more fully understand how each generation views its current and ideal government interactions. Knowing the barriers each generation faces as well as each cohort’s desires with respect to engagement can inform the most successful way forward.

In the ongoing COVID-19 context, this insight is more important than ever, as there is a new urgency around communicating and serving effectively. As the pandemic’s disruption is accelerating advancements away from the old models of operation, now is the perfect time to understand and apply this critical generational context.

A NEW, NATIONAL STUDY

In order to uncover actionable insights with respect to the largest generations in communities across America, Tyler Technologies, Inc. partnered with leading generational experts at CGK to produce a first-of-its-kind national quantitative research study. The custom survey was administered in January and February of 2020 to more than 1,500 respondents ages 18-65 and was weighted to the U.S. Census for age, region, gender, and ethnicity. Twenty-eight survey questions measured the differences, similarities, expectations, and experiences of the four major generations engaging with local government.
For the research, the generations were defined as follows:

- **Gen Z:** Born between 1996 - 2012
- **Millennials:** Born between 1977 and 1995
- **Gen X:** Born between 1965 and 1976
- **Baby Boomers (Boomers):** Born between 1946 and 1964

While governments may be observing or even tracking outcomes with respect to generational engagement, this study uniquely examines the behavioral drivers that lead to those outcomes. It separates myth from truth through data, providing governments with an accurate snapshot of each generation’s experiences in order for them to adjust accordingly.

Full research methodology as well as the full survey results are available at GenResearch by Tyler Technologies, [tylertech.com/resources/resource-downloads/genresearch-by-tyler-technologies](http://tylertech.com/resources/resource-downloads/genresearch-by-tyler-technologies).
Among the generations, Gen Z merits special mention. The study purposefully included an oversample of 250 Gen Z members to uniquely tackle this important and impactful cohort. Gen Z is what the future looks like for governments — within and without — making it a necessary topic now.

With nearly all Gen Z independent members of society, local governments’ futures are tied to their abilities to retain the talent and economic buying power of this generation. Investing in Gen Z keeps them investing back into their communities.

Of note, Gen Z has always known smart technology; its members don’t remember a time before the cloud. “What we see is that Gen Z has always been able to look at a screen and engage with their world,” noted Jason Dorsey, president, CGK. “And that’s true in every aspect of their lives: banking, dating, education, news, you name it. All Gen Z is doing is bringing what they believe is normal to every environment.”

Not only is Gen Z bringing change to communities relative to other generations, those changes will represent the new normal. In fact, “for the first time,” explained Dorsey, “Gen Z is driving trends from the youngest to the oldest.” In order to meaningfully capture Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers, understanding Gen Z is imperative. “If you don’t adapt to Gen Z,” continued Dorsey, “you could end up losing the other generations, too.” As the following sections will show, Gen Z wants to engage more with government. They want to drive outcomes and have better relationships with government, on their own terms. If governments employ the technology Gen Z is dependent on, they can harness Gen Z’s energy, creativity, ideas, and diversity to great benefit. In short, Gen Z presents a significant opportunity for government leaders to drive deeper engagement and create stronger communities.

“Gen Z presents a significant opportunity for government leaders to drive deeper engagement and create stronger communities.”
The three sections below tackle just how local governments can bridge the gap between expectations and reality across generations for improved service and more vibrant, successful communities.

1. REACHING ALL GENERATIONS

Government at all levels is masterful at gathering and creating information. From open data that can be analyzed for innovation to posting job announcements; from notifying residents of available services to communicating public safety alerts; from explaining capital projects to educating the public on budget processes, there is tremendous variety to government data and information. That data’s value extends along with its reach.

Reaching diverse constituents from Gen Z to Boomers is perhaps the surest example of the folly of a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The research shows a clear generational breakdown in how the different groups find or receive government information.

Websites, social media, and word of mouth top the favorite information channels. Nearly two-thirds of Boomers and Gen X find or receive information about government services via website. This makes sense, as neither group grew up with social media. “For Gen X,” noted Dorsey, “social media is not something they necessarily trust, so web is a great way for them to go right to the source and see other related information all in one spot. Boomers think social media is the Wild West, and they can’t tell easily whom to trust.” More than half of Millennials and Gen Z, on the other hand, prefer to find local government information via social media.

CHANNELS OF RECEIVING INFORMATION FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)
Interestingly, the channels for receiving information directly impact the frequency with which each generation receives information. This has great impact both on service and engagement. Millennials and Gen Z receive information from local government much more frequently than Gen X, and significantly more so than Boomers. This is likely driven by their higher usage of real-time digital communication channels.

**FREQUENCY OF RECEIVING INFORMATION FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

While nearly half of all Boomers indicate they only receive information from their local government monthly, and nearly a quarter receive information only annually, nearly half of Millennials and Gen Z receive information daily or weekly. This stark difference means that younger people, due to their use of real-time channels, are engaging more with local government content and receiving more information than older generations.

One area in which all generations agreed was around satisfaction. Forty-nine percent of all people surveyed are not entirely satisfied with the information they receive from local government. This presents a large area of opportunity for governments to reverse this statistic. The good news is that only a small percentage — three to five percent for each generation — are truly dissatisfied. Most respondents were either somewhat satisfied or neutral with respect to government information. Forty-five percent of Gen Z respondents, for example, were “neutral.” The other generations were “somewhat satisfied” with government information, at 39% for Millennials and Boomers, and 41% for Gen X.

With such large numbers in the middle, local governments have great opportunity to move people out of this neutral space and into positive territory. The means to do this — across all generations — is through technology.
HOW TECH HELPS

“It’s interesting how government was really built and designed for one generation, yet now it’s trying to adapt to reach three, four, and even five generations,” said Dorsey. To bridge generational differences and to drive positive outcomes in better reaching all constituents, local government must turn to modern technology. This is particularly true when outdated technology does not hold up in moments of crisis. Using channels that connect with where the generations are is vital for effective reach, which, in turn, affects service and engagement.

Most apparent from the statistics above, to capture Gen Z, local government must catch up with real-time digital channels. Real-time communication via digital channels better serves younger generations, but it also can dramatically increase the frequency of constituents’ engagement with government information. And, modern communication tools allow government to reach constituents through traditional and modern channels based on a citizen’s preferences. Email, text, and voice complement social media channels.

In an era of public health crises, mobile apps are essential to any modern emergency communications plan. With push notifications, local governments can quickly disseminate emergency news directly to citizens, targeted by location, when immediate action is necessary. These types of notifications also play an important role in relaying emergency information to the hearing impaired, where traditional phone calls and emergency sirens can prove ineffective.

Websites, however, cannot be ignored, as they still function as the top information channel for all other groups in the study. Particularly for Gen X and Boomers, governments need to make sure that websites are mobile friendly, easy to navigate, and provide both information and useful interaction.
SOLUTIONS IN PRACTICE

Temecula, California, provides an outstanding example of how governments can weave multiple channels of communication together to accommodate every generation and reach all community stakeholders. The city’s commitment to connecting with residents begins right on the website, which houses not only key information but other ways to stay informed, including a mobile app and YouTube channel that keep the public up to date. These channels are a great start, but Temecula also realizes social media is important for capturing everyone.

“We’re starting to have a bigger presence on social media,” said Sara Seng, senior IT specialist, Temecula, California. “What we’re doing now is showcasing businesses that are opening or events happening. We have a team who manages all of our social media accounts. If there’s a gas leak or if there is a road closure, they will post it on all the different social media outlets.”

City leaders understand that generations consume information differently and do their best to cater to all constituents across all available channels. “You can visit our city website to get all the information you need about Temecula,” said Seng. “We also have a Temecula government TV channel that plays city council meetings and content created by our staff specifically for our residents.” There is even a live webcam that shows the town square in real time.

TEMECULA, CA
POPULATION: 112,230
Home to one of the oldest wineries in the state
The city’s app is available for download on Android or Windows mobile devices. In its first month, nearly 1,000 residents downloaded it. Because the app allows residents to report public works issues, voice concerns, email council members, and access news stories, interaction has significantly increased. Before the app’s existence, city staff received approximately 50-60 emails per month through the website’s contact form. They received 300 communications in the app’s first month — an increase of more than 400%. More and more residents are also subscribing to the YouTube channel. The increased connections are successfully manifesting in higher turnouts at groundbreakings and other community events.

Facilitating mass communication can also help residents conduct business more effectively with government – something that also helps with timely revenue collection. In Sevierville, Tennessee, for example, Utility Billing Clerk Andrea Madison schedules a notification call to all utility customers at risk for service termination for non-payment. Because the city operates on four different billing cycles, delinquent account notices — between 50 and 100 — occur weekly. Using an electronic notification system, the city takes notices that once sat passively on billing statements and directly reaches customers via phone and text cutoff warnings. “It’s easy and efficient for the city and gives customers advanced notice through a familiar communication method,” said Madison. For added convenience, payments can be made on the city website by following the link in their text notification or using their Interactive Voice Response (IVR) phone system. This use of technology to better reach residents has decreased utility cutoffs by half.

Parents and grandparents can be found in all major demographics. For them, school and student information is important. With mobile-capable portals, real-time student information is accessible to students, parents, guardians, and staff. Customizable dashboards with live content tiles ensure relevant information is delivered to each user. This allows all stakeholders to track homework and grades, file incident reports, record medical information or nurse visits, or update meal accounts and track purchases. Such a system also allows the school to make announcements — school-wide or just to specific classes.
In Ozark Public Schools, Missouri, leaders developed a paperless experience for parents and administrators that allowed parents to complete student information forms online in a way that eliminated redundant information entry for multiple children in a household with family-wide fields. “Our engagement rate of over 90% shows that there was a clear demand for online access for users,” said Lisa Neiman, SIS coordinator. “We often hear parents rave about being able to complete forms at work or at home in their pajamas.” The system also electronically alerts staff and parents when a form is missing, boosting compliance and accuracy.

Mobile apps, too, enable parents or caregivers to access a child’s bus stop location, route, and daily estimated pick-up time without having to contact the district. For those who have stood outside waiting for a late bus with school offices closed and no updates, this type of information is invaluable. While Boomers might find this technology novel, Millennials with children who regularly use apps like Uber and Waze expect to be able to track their students; they know the technology exists.

REACHING ALL GENERATIONS
“GMIS works with hundreds of government IT professionals across the U.S. to develop standards and best practices in delivering technology to government’s multi-generational audience. Technology can be the catalyst to shrinking the digital divide among generations. Whatever the platform (i.e. websites, social media, mobile apps), technology can be utilized to meet the varying needs of each generation to deliver better, more effective public service. Helping our members leverage technology to reach all generations is a key focus of our association.”

- Lori-Ann Fox, Vendor Relations Director, GMIS International, and Director of Technology, Town of South Kingstown, Rhode Island
2. SERVING ALL GENERATIONS

As we saw above, local government has opportunity to better reach younger generations with more frequent, real-time communication via digital channels. This is also an example of better service. How constituents are and want to be served matters in creating the strongest community fabric. Here, too, there are generational differences.

While the overall order ranking was consistent across Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials, Boomers had significantly higher usage of services associated with home ownership.

IN THE PAST YEAR
(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Gen Z</th>
<th>Millennial</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trash and Recycling</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks and Recreation</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilities</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking Trails and/or Bike Paths</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Life stage also presented differences in service expectations. In answer to the question, “What are the most important services local government provides?” Gen X overwhelmingly chose economic and community development as the most important, while Gen Z singled out continuing education.

Perhaps the most compelling finding around service delivery is that the four major generations showed more similarities than they did differences. As shown above, trash and recycling, parks and recreation, and libraries are the most identified local government services across America. When asked to rank the most important services provided by local government, all generations agreed that law enforcement, public safety, and fire services topped the list, followed by K-12 education.

The preferred service channel to get questions answered or resolve issues is email, across three generations, excluding the Boomers’ unique desire to pick up the phone and talk with someone. Even Gen Z’s, who rely mainly on social
media for information, prefer email over social channels 31% to 7% to get an issue resolved. This is good news for situations requiring remote staff work and underscores the need for technology solutions that likewise provide remote support and service.

Alignment among the generations is also present in how governments can improve service delivery, especially with respect to in-person and online interactions. For every generation, in-person interactions with government would be made better simply by knowing who or what department to contact for help. Second after this desire for clarity for Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers is shorter wait times or no lines. Note, Gen Z was the outlier here, opting for easier-to-find information instead. Shorter lines or no, Gen Z is simply not inclined to do business in person.

Most revealing, every generation, by a very large margin, wants to see online interactions improved through clear, easy-to-use technology. Outdated technology in local government is simply not meeting expectations. There is also agreement among generations on numbers two and three, as well: better connectivity between government departments and data security.

“Every generation, by a very large margin, wants to see online interactions improved through clear, easy-to-use technology.”

### WHAT WOULD MAKE ONLINE INTERACTIONS WITH GOVERNMENT BETTER?
(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clear, easy-to-use-technology</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better connectivity between different government offices (e.g., a single account to access all different utilities)</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improved data security, such as protecting your identity or private information</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrations with services I already use (e.g., ability to set up passwords with Google/Facebook accounts)</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q4 What would make online interactions with government better?

- **GEN Z**
- **MILLENNIAL**
- **GEN X**
- **BOOMER**
HOW TECH HELPS

The generational alignment in how local government can improve constituent interaction online and in person provides unique opportunity for governments to adapt and provide better service with a broad brushstroke. The data shows that improvement needs to come first in the form of clear, easy-to-use technology and better communication. As two-thirds of Americans surveyed say they would feel better about local government if there was better communication, improvements will most certainly enhance public perception. Even better than perception, digital service delivery and directly connecting citizens to services will better meet constituents’ needs overall.

The way to move the needle here is, again, through technology. Technology that connects the core functions of local government to each other and with the public can, for example, facilitate advanced business management and bolster community development. Solutions that reach the public, automate business functions, and enable self-service expedite actions necessary for growth, such as licensing, tax remittance, and fee collections, while helping to enforce ordinances. Modern community development software provides online or mobile permitting, inspections, and enforcement functionalities. These help both staff and users move through the system with accurate insight from any place at any time. In a boost to citizens, functionalities that allow monetary or records retrieval transactions can allow individuals to conduct nearly all business with local government online on their own time. This frees up staff time not only for higher strategic efforts but also to better serve those who still seek in-person attention.
The other aspect is leveraging modern integrating technologies across legacy and new solutions. This includes authentication options that allow for a guest experience, use social media, and use an individual's preferences. Having a quick and reliable e-commerce solution to support bill payments, form submissions, and other traditionally in-office transactions ensures that residents can “do business” with government from anywhere. Especially with new technology solutions, the ability for a government to add solutions into their existing digital presence is key. From tailoring the “look and feel,” to providing direct API access to a back-office solution, it’s this connected experience that resonates across all generations.

**SOLUTIONS IN PRACTICE**

Little Rock, Arkansas, allows residents to enter and track requests for city services through an accessible online portal. Its Citizen Connect Portal contains 311 requests, crime data, planning permits, and housing and neighborhood program information in one place with simple navigation. This site seamlessly combines “reach” and “service” by providing information in an easily searchable format so residents can quickly understand what’s happening around their home or business at any given time. Residents can also sign up to receive tailored emails from the site, alerting them, for example, when there is a public safety incident in a chosen neighborhood.

A unique effort in 2019 to boost use of the 311 mobile app for service requests increased the number of streetlight repair tickets by 68% in one neighborhood, which had an immediate positive impact. “Residents felt like their neighborhood was dark and because of that they didn’t feel safe going from point A to point B after dark,” said Melissa Bridges, performance and innovation coordinator at the City of Little Rock. Because residents had lost confidence in city employees to fix the problems, they weren’t reporting issues. City officials couldn’t fix the issues because they weren’t being reported. Citizen self-service via the mobile app fixed this circular challenge, improving both service and public trust.

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**LITTLE ROCK, AR**

**POPULATION:** 198,135

The Arkansas state capital and the birthplace of Federal Express
In a different region and in the aftermath of the devastating Hurricane Florence, New Hanover County, North Carolina, debuted a new customer self-service portal to help the community rebuild faster. The Customer Online Access Services Tool (COAST) connected the regulatory and business requirements of relevant departments in a single platform. That integration provided a new level of transparency for residents and created internal efficiencies so that staff could process plan reviews, permits, and inspections faster.

In its first six weeks of existence, more than 1,600 users created self-service accounts. Today, more than 75% of permit applications come in online through COAST. Staff is reviewing applications faster, and customers can receive permits without ever having to come into an office in person.

Elsewhere, leaders are thoughtfully innovating through technology to improve service. “I am a huge proponent of looking at technology to see where it can help you,” said Mayor Sandy Stimpson of Mobile, Alabama. “The cities are the incubators for new ideas in government.” Operating from this vision, Mobile offers a new level of customer self-service with its Build Mobile site. This permitting and inspections site allows customers to upload plans online and see real-time progress of the review process. The city’s 311 system also integrates with the work order system so a resident can take a picture of a pothole, send it to 311, and have the request flow to the responsible department without any paper involved.

When the City of Cedar Park, Texas, faced growth of 400% in a decade, the accompanying expansion of utility billing accounts overwhelmed the staff. Because customer payment options were only mail or in-person, the increase also led to long lines and long wait times for the public. By utilizing an online utility billing payment solution, the city maintained service levels without increasing staff and offered new customer convenience. “It shortened our lines in the office so that we can serve the customers who have questions faster,” said Nanette McCartan, utility billing manager for Cedar Park. “With shorter lines, not only do we get to the customer faster, but we can also give them better service by not rushing their visit.” Many other customers switched to online payment and enjoyed the convenience of conducting a fast transaction at any time. Manual payment decreased by 44% after the introduction of the online option.
“Members of the community expect the same level of technological advancements in the courthouse as they receive in a retail environment,” said Judge Randall Slagle, justice of the peace for Precinct 2, Travis County, Texas. This fundamental belief led the court to turn to technology to enhance its operations and service. “We have shifted our focus toward increasing access to justice by moving more court services out of the courtroom and into the living room,” explained Slagle.

In practice, making the justice system more accessible to all residents meant implementing an online dispute resolution (ODR) service for small claims cases. Through ODR, the same litigants who would have had to take time off work to drive sometimes hours across the county for a traditional hearing were instead able to access the platform from the convenience of their own home and at their own pace. Because of that, a large percentage of the cases were accessed well after court hours.

Where it used to take an average of six months to resolve a case in the traditional court process, ODR cases are routinely resolved in two weeks. The shortest time to resolution was just two hours. What’s more, 60% of the cases that utilized ODR were resolved directly by the involved parties without intervention from a mediator or the court.
3. ENGAGING ALL GENERATIONS

Government’s ability to partner with community members to innovate, create, and carry out solutions hangs on the practice of engagement. “What strikes me,” said Dorsey, “is that there’s an opportunity with every single generation for local government to better engage them on their terms and to drive more of these key interactions that we all want.” Every generation in the study felt there was an opportunity for deeper engagement with local government. Not only do people want to engage more with local government, but they also want to engage in similar ways across generations.

Using parks and recreational facilities, voting in local elections, and becoming more informed are the top ways every generation wants to engage with local government.

**TOP 5 WAYS YOU WANT TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT**
(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)

Engagement, as it turns out, is also a two-way street. Eighty-five percent of respondents think government can do a better job engaging citizens, but respondents also think that citizens need to become more involved themselves. (Note, the very last way every generation wants to engage with local government is to run for election to local office, with only 6% of the entire sample indicating a desire to do so.)
Overall engagement with local government follows key generational trends: the older the cohort, the more likely to engage, though engagement here is centered around very specific activities. Boomers are more likely to pay taxes and vote in local elections than the other generations, doubling Gen Z on voting. In the past year, 56% of Boomers reported voting in a local election, compared with only 26% of Gen Z. Given that Gen Z members are all over age 18, voting opportunity between the two groups is equal. The study showed that more than 20% of Gen Z don’t vote in elections of any kind. Less than half of Millennials say they voted in a local election, the second lowest behind Gen Z. This is a worrisome trend, in that Millennials understand how to engage in other ways.

Particularly in an election year, local governments should be working to reverse these statistics. Why don’t these generations feel confident physically showing up to vote? “Adapting how we teach people to vote and making it much more mobile friendly to find and navigate voting locations,” noted Dorsey, could help in increasing participation and letting these cohorts know that their votes do count.

Voting itself is an interesting measure. It’s easy to look at voting and tax payments and say that Boomers are the most engaged generation. The numbers show a different, more complex, story. Remember that the younger generations actually engage more with local government content because of their use of real-time, digital channels. While Boomers are the most likely to frequently vote, they are the least likely to engage with the community in almost every other category.

### TOP 5 WAYS YOU WANT TO ENGAGE WITH YOUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT
(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Gen Z</th>
<th>Millennial</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Boomer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donating to a local charity</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in/lived government-sponsored community events such as parades, festivals, etc.</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering for a local non-political organization</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in petitions or voter canvassing</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making public comment at a public meeting</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q8 In what ways would you like to engage with your local government?

"In the past year, 56% of Boomers reported voting in a local election, compared with only 26% of Gen Z. 20% of Gen Z didn’t vote in elections of any kind."
Other generations are more likely to engage in every single other non-voting behavior compared to Boomers. In other words, Boomers define engagement as going to vote; the other generations define engagement as everything but voting.

**ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS**

In large part, local government is built for Boomers. This is understandable, as it’s made for and shaped by the largest voting bloc. The consequence here is that barriers to engagement are much higher for Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z.

**TOP 5 BARRIERS TO ENGAGE WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

(Sorted From High to Low by Total Sample)

- Overall, it just feels like a frustrating process: 30% Gen Z, 28% Millennial, 25% Gen X, 24% Boomer
- Fees/expenses: 25% Gen Z, 25% Millennial, 25% Gen X, 24% Boomer
- Lack of communication/transparency: 23% Gen Z, 22% Millennial, 25% Gen X, 22% Boomer
- Long waits: 24% Gen Z, 24% Millennial, 23% Gen X, 9% Boomer
- Difficulty finding information: 23% Gen Z, 23% Millennial, 22% Gen X, 15% Boomer

Q9 What is preventing you from engaging more with your local government?

Overall, the local government process simply feels too frustrating. Fees and expenses, lack of communication or transparency, long waits, and difficulty finding information are also real barriers to engagement. While Boomers may not feel these frustrations as strongly (again, as local government feels ready-made for them), the other generations want to engage with government in the same way that they engage with everyone else — through easy, intuitive technology.
“If you want to effectively engage each generation, you have to recognize them and choose to adapt. From my view as a researcher, technology seems to be that through line.”

- Jason Dorsey, president, CGK

HOW TECH HELPS

“If you want to effectively engage each generation, you have to recognize them and choose to adapt,” noted Dorsey. “From my view as a researcher, technology seems to be that through line.” The through line of technology is what will drive more engagement in ways that are comfortable, easy, and effective for each generation.

Two key points from previous sections are important here:

1. **Clear, easy-to-use technology is the number one way to improve interactions with local government across all generations; and**

2. **Adapting to Gen Z will pull all other generations along, too, as Gen Z is driving trends from youngest to oldest.**

Let’s consider two facets to engagement: transparency and participation.

Better engaging Gen Z and, in turn, the rest, means removing the barriers listed above. And, let’s not forget that the next generation is just a few years away from becoming full-fledged community members in their own right. Solving for Gen Z now will only give local governments a leg up on the new challenges and opportunities future generations will bring.

Improving communication, transparency, and access to information is a natural byproduct of integrated, modern technology. With generations ready and willing to be engaged, the adaptation for local governments is really a move towards simplicity and enhancing online interactions.

A secure, cloud-based infrastructure with self-service access facilitates transparency by providing up-to-date data that can illustrate trends, improve financial oversight, reduce costs, and engage the public and officials region-wide.

Offering public-facing engagement tools in an app allows citizens to participate in government in a customizable mobile experience. Using an app, governments can expand two-way communication with residents, allowing them to make
payments, report issues, and respond to surveys. Governments, likewise, can create targeted push notifications and develop virtual city tours and business listings.

Open data performance solutions open the door to meaningful engagement through data analytics. Using open data portals, residents can access government information to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of local programs using the most up-to-date data. This also goes a long way toward fostering public buy-in from taxpayers for program successes.

**SOLUTIONS IN PRACTICE**

The City of Henderson, Nevada’s mobile app allows residents to pay a utility bill, report an issue, register for recreation classes, find parks, and even apply for a job. Offering virtual engagement routes such as these existed to connect residents to their government prior to COVID-19. Many community members already saw value in connecting to the latest city news, reporting neighborhood code compliance issues, or learning about community events. Citizen portals facilitated public meeting notification, agendas, and minutes. Apps that provided government directories for council contacts facilitated exchange of opinions and enhanced digital discourse. Essentially, these apps put city hall right in the hands of residents.

A one-stop shop for engaging with local government became a necessity overnight as the pandemic created new urgency around sharing reliable information with the public and gathering information in turn. From providing community-level COVID-19 case statistics to sharing business statuses and public health rules, getting information out as swiftly as it changed became the new norm. Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada, drove widespread adoption of its civic engagement app through a story-sharing contest. Santa Ana, California, likewise wove its civic app’s use cases into social media stories, successfully promoting resident engagement. Kerrville, Texas, added a COVID-19 response hub button in its civic app to give residents localized information through an easy access point. Addison, Illinois, supported local restaurants by adding a directory in its civic engagement app showing up-to-date curbside pick-up and takeout options. Some jurisdictions may even imagine how apps can be used as city halls reopen for outside check-in and queuing.

Map-centric portals that allow governments to view and analyze local development trends in their area can also effectively engage the public by offering geospatial views for both trend analysis and alert notification. In addition, this type of technology can enable valuable two-way engagement opportunities for government and community members.
Buffalo, New York, for example, hosts a robust COVID-19 site for public engagement and actionable insight. The centralized hub gives the public access to 12 categories of COVID-19 resources. It also connects the city with data from Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other verified sources. The city’s two-pronged approach in its response to COVID-19 engages both internal and external constituencies. The easy-to-navigate and mobile-responsive public hub surfaces coronavirus response resources. It also provides a way to connect and access the data needed to create and share internal reports and dashboards to commissioners and executive-level staff for use in decision-making. Communicating externally with transparency quells misinformation and fear. Internally, it’s a crucial component to conducting analyses, informing stakeholders, and making effective decisions.

“One of the issues the city has faced, health care providers have faced, and emergency first responders have faced, is misinformation that has been presented as fact,” said Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown. “It’s critically important that people get good information, accurate information, so they can make the proper health care decisions for themselves that have an impact not only on their health, but their family members and their friends.”

Real-time collaboration around accessible data has been put to use in risk analysis for volunteer deployment such as mapping vulnerable populations with higher rates of preexisting conditions, concentrations of food-insecure seniors or seniors living alone, where to find free mask or meal distribution centers, tracking 311 calls, and even targeting messaging to improve response rates for the 2020 U.S. Census.
The notion of connected communities, mentioned at the beginning of this piece, is also important here. Connected communities enhance public engagement by making more types of data publicly available, giving people new insight into their immediate and surrounding neighborhoods. Increased engagement through data also increases public trust.

Los Angeles, California, has 700 special funds in addition to its general fund. LA Comptroller Ron Galperin opened up all of those to public inspection, including 40 columns of related data, and the name and contact information for the person responsible for the fund. “It empowers the community,” Galperin said. “It’s one thing if you go to your council member and say, ‘I’d like to see an improvement in the park,’ and it’s another thing if you can say, ‘I’d like to see an improvement in the park, and by the way, I examined Fund No. X, and there is an uncommitted balance of such-and-such and the rules say it can be used for these particular purposes; how about it?’” That’s a true game-changer in terms of constituent advocacy.
Meaningfully presenting this information to the public in an impactful way includes serving the information up in different ways such as through social media, visualizations, videos, and mapping. This extends its reach and enhances transparency but also drives change through engagement. The data is used in community “hackathons,” by universities, and by high school students. “We’re able to drive changes in actual ways in which the city operates, and the kind of conversations that happen within the city and the community,” Galperin said. Examination of mapped data around airport noise, for example, provided that the age of the aircraft, not the number of passengers, contributed most to noise.

CONCLUSION

“This really is a pivotal moment for local governments to adapt to reach every generation,” Dorsey said. The vast majority of respondents believe local government is capable of addressing problems from community safety to education to community health and well-being. Nearly half of all respondents feel that local government is capable of addressing job creation, creating fair access to justice, improving inclusion, improving the environment, addressing homelessness, and combating addiction. This is a resounding vote of confidence.
In addition, there is much greater affinity toward local government than national government. Forty-eight percent of Americans across generations are satisfied with local government. The question remains: How do we move that number higher? How do we get to 85% satisfaction?

Better reaching, serving, and engaging all stakeholders in communities across the country is a matter of employing and leveraging modern technology. Technology bridges divides across generations and breaks down barriers to engagement. It’s also the top thing all respondents agree is necessary.

As we see in the examples above, old paradigms are already shifting as governments embrace modern technology to transform operations. These transformations continue to result in greater connectivity, greater efficiencies, and greater insight. The onslaught of COVID-19, however, brought with it a new context that expedited these advancements. Stay-home orders and social distancing immediately changed the way governments continued operations and engaged with all constituents. As an unfortunate result, outdated tech stacks and their limitations became more obvious, highlighting critical capability gaps.

In this emerging context, local governments that invest in software that provides integrated administrative and business management systems as well as two-way citizen engagement tools will see an unprecedented return on investment compared to agencies that do not prioritize such investments.

Reaching generations, effectively serving all constituents, and enhancing engagement will drive key outcomes for local governments across America. As governments adapt in the ways noted above, momentum and trust will build. All generations have unique attributes, ideas, energy, and diversity. And all desire to be more included. Local governments that harness these incredible, readily available assets will see success and sustainability now and into the future.

Take a deeper dive into the findings around each generation in Tyler Technologies’ GenResearch Podcast series tylertech.com/resources/podcast.

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SOFTWARE THAT THINKS LIKE YOU DO.

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