



Making the Case for Virtual Governance Technology to Your Council

In 2020 the need for technology was brought into sharp focus by the coronavirus pandemic — not only the need, but the requirement. As professional administrators, city managers rely on technology to manage the ever-increasing landscape of the organization's business. While using technology to work through council materials more efficiently may be second nature for an administrator, for council members, it adds a layer of unfamiliarity to an already busy schedule.

To be successful in bringing governance technology into the organization, there must be buy-in from the council members. To help you make this case, we have outlined three core benefits of adopting virtual governance technology. Change brings with it challenges and opportunities. To overcome the challenges, we have highlighted some features and examples of opportunities to better connect with your community.

“We are saving at least what it cost for me to stand and run copies every week — close to \$10,000 a year just in personnel cost.”

Staci King
City Secretary
Stephenville, TX

Finding Efficiencies and Doing Away with Inefficiencies

- **Cost-effectiveness.** The phrase is often quoted: City councils deal with one of the things that matters most to people — their money. Taxpayers are currently wary of spending and are concerned financially in the wake of the economic slowdown due to COVID-19. The city council needs to demonstrate they are good stewards of the dollars entrusted to them. This is true all the time, but with distrust of government and concern over transparency at an all-time high, it becomes an even higher priority. Using the tools embedded in iCompass creates tremendous efficiencies in the administration of council meetings.
- **Virtual Meeting Management.** When municipalities moved to virtual administrative work, many employees that needed to submit items for the agenda were working from home. iCompass is the natural tool to circulate information and get approvals from remote locations using the workflow processes designed in the system. It is essential to help council members understand that administrators and staff can securely share information and move items along without being in the same location. This allows the work of the council to continue in any setting. In unpredictable times, this is important to note. City staff can quickly pivot to virtual meetings with the right tools already in place.
- **Time Savings.** Many commissioners are sensitive to the amount of work that administrators and administrative assistants do. Highlighting the time savings for staff will often help council members open up to the idea of electronic agendas. One task that is so time-consuming for administrative staff is compiling meeting minutes. Using the electronic voting in iCompass allows the system to collect the data. Staff members need only load the data from the digital voting in the Minutes module, give light edits to fit the local community format, and attach to the next meeting's agenda, taking a task that took days and sometimes weeks down to a couple of hours. Automated minutes are the time-saver that councils have needed for years. A quick scan of time spent on this task can be shared with council members to help them understand the efficiencies of automation.

“iCompass saved us at least eight hours of manual labor we historically devoted to just creating the board agendas. Today, directors and admins have increased communication and collaboration through the workflow and we are able to quickly search and access previous board documents with ease.”

Colby Diuguid
General Manager
Jurupa Area Recreation and Park District

Action Items

- ☐ Estimate the labor and material costs associated with council meeting preparation
- ☐ Catalog the different tools and processes used for meeting management. Also note whether all participants are using the same tools/processes.
- ☐ Document the average time spent preparing for meetings and compiling minutes.

Protecting Sensitive Information

- **Protecting Against Phishing Attacks.** The recent security breach at Twitter exposed the fact that even the most tech-savvy users are susceptible to attacks. The data breach at Twitter stemmed from what is called a phishing attack. People get an email that looks to be legitimate and they reply with data like passwords or other identification information allowing the hacker access to the system. Budget cuts are depriving city councils of the financial resources to invest in cyberdefense. Small IT departments that are currently stretched supporting staff members in virtual working formats do not have time to be everywhere. Security patches go uninstalled and virus protection is not updated. Cyberattacks on local government entities—both education and municipal—are on the rise. These organizations are considered “low hanging fruit” to hackers. Even if the hacker gets a small ransom, they can add up quickly. You don’t have to hold a tech giant like Twitter captive, or the government of New Zealand, as recently happened, to get a sizable payout. Cities often pay to restore services quickly. Simply put, email and free repositories are not secure formats for what can be sensitive data.
- **Paper is Not Safer.** Council members that use devices need to be aware that the transmission of sensitive data is open to attack. Before they counter with paper being safer, they need to understand that copiers have hard drives or chips in them filled with data of every image processed through the machine; paper is a form of electronic copy. There is no way to share information that must be conveyed from person to person without risking breach. Conveying information as attachments in email or a document repository like Google Docs may be a slight improvement but is still not secure. With iCompass, all data is stored on secure, encrypted servers. Council members access their password-protected accounts without the information having to be transferred.
- **Complying with HIPAA and PIPEDA.** The COVID era has brought even more security risks. All employees are subject to privacy laws and organizations must keep data secure. This includes everything from disciplinary or employment records to applications to the diagnosis of a virus or disease. Weigh this with the council needing to be apprised of the health risks in their organization and it makes a situation rife with opportunities for a breach. Staff and council members should never discuss sensitive information in any electronic format that is not secure. This includes texts, emails, or copies of information. Leaving employee or user records at risk could open the city up to potential legal liability. A secure governance portal keeps all data safe, securing highly confidential material and helping to maintain public trust. No city wants to make headlines by accidentally releasing sensitive data.

“We have two council members that live in the sparsely settled northern part of the county. I had to send the agendas and reports to them by courier — and resend if changes were made. It might take two days for them to receive the package. Now they get it instantly.”

Tracey McKenzie
Deputy County Clerk
County of Lennox & Addington, ON

Action Items

- ☐ Make a list of any personal emails or devices being used to conduct council business.
- ☐ Determine if/how paper documents are still being used and if files are stored in any cloud storage platforms.
- ☐ Document how sensitive data is protected in current processes.

Improving Access and Community Engagement

- **Keeping the Public Informed.** Community access and engagement is more important than ever. Young citizens are tech-savvy and digitally driven. Keeping community members informed and involved is of the utmost importance to both the organization and the council members. Their expectation is open access to knowledge. The public has a right to see how their money is being spent. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in the U.S. and the Freedom of information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) in Canada guarantees taxpayers and community members access to data and information as long as it does not infringe on a staff member's privacy or violate attorney/client privilege. A member of the public can make a public record request at any time. Because of the potential expense to the city in researching and copying documents, legislators have allowed organizations to charge reasonable fees for these searches. The fees often do not make up for the staff time spent. Conversely, there is no fee reasonable enough to make up for the trust that is lost, and the frustration mounted by community members when they are forced to file requests and pay for the information.
- **Fostering Trust Among the Community.** Public trust is the foundation of a well-functioning city organization. In times of uncertainty, this is paramount. The community wants to look to the local government with confidence. Having a central location to be the definitive source of up to date, accurate information regarding the city's decisions helps citizens feel their needs are being taken care of. Using the graded security fields ensures that council members do not have to look in multiple places to get the information they need. These security fields make clear what is public information and what should be kept confidential in an obvious visual format. The automatic email feature notifies council members automatically when an important update is featured, saving staff time and extra steps.

“The system allows the public to submit records requests online. It provides them with a tracking number so they can see the status of the request. We have also been able to track all our contracts and agreements, which has saved us a lot of time.”

Stephen Powell
Deputy City Manager
City of Shawnee, Kansas

Action Items

- ☐ Determine the average number of FOIA/FOIPPA requests received per year and fees collected vs costs incurred.
- ☐ Calculate the average time spent researching and responding to FOIA/FOIPPA requests.
- ☐ Evaluate how information is currently shared with the public and the council, and how access permissions are controlled including the number of different modes used (i.e. text, email, doc) to access and find information.



Save money. Save time. Make a difference.

Local government leaders require the right digital tools for transparent communication and document sharing now more than ever. For the work of municipalities to continue, solidifying these processes in a virtual format is critical.

iCompass provides local government organizations a platform to exercise transparency, navigate remote collaboration, and reach the community effectively. Designed to support nimble public meeting preparation and communication all within a virtual sphere, iCompass supports resilience during times of uncertainty and unexpected change. [Schedule a demo today.](#)



Community is the next generation of iCompass.

Community by Diligent is the next generation of the industry leading solutions, iCompass & BoardDocs, trusted tools used by over 4,000 public governing bodies. The intuitive, easy-to-use paperless meeting software supports public leaders and board members to streamline the way they build agendas, distribute materials to the board, and communicate with constituents and before, during, and after public meetings — whether they are in person or virtual.

In a time of enhanced risk and disruption, make sure your board has the right information to ask the right questions. [Schedule an iCompass demo today.](#)

Contact: sales@icompass.tech | Visit: www.icompass.tech

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