

Governments engage public in conversations on social media

Updated: 3/17/2010 8:46 AM
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A local city joined in the South by Southwest Interactive conversation this weekend.

In a panel called, "How Nerds Can Foster Democracy in Local Government," Round Rock explored why some municipalities are scared of social media.

"What we were doing is trying to help folks who don't work in the government, who want to see their local government use social media tools, learn how you go about that," City of Round Rock spokesperson Will Hapton said.



The city started a blog more than three years ago. Thousands of people now follow each post. "If we had 3,600 people show up at a public meeting, we wouldn't know what to do," Hampton said.

Many cities are part of a wave that's just now joining social networks.

"Our citizens are engaged in these platforms, and it just gives them another way to engage with what we're doing," Scott Martinez, Hutto Economic Development Corporation, said. "People have an expectation that we're going to be communicating that way."

However, some governments hesitate to plunge into the online community over fear of losing control of the conversation.

"You don't have total control over your message," Martinez said.



The conversation is increasingly mixing traditional face-to-face interaction with the growing face of social media.

"People are saying bad things regardless, so why not engage them in a conversation?" Hampton said.

According to him, it can also make the government more accessible to people and easier for them to participate.

"It makes it easier for more people to participate," Hampton said. "They can comment on it at 11 p.m. when they are in their PGs and the kids are in bed."

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