

Guide

# Best Practices for Proactive Governance

Some of the best practices you'll want to adopt for effective proactive governance

Proactive governance starts with the decision to embrace resident feedback and interpret its results. Ultimately, it ends with implementing strategic plans at City Hall and communicating them to residents. But how do you know you're on the right track? Here are some of the best practices you'll want to adopt for effective proactive governance.

## Introduction

Proactive governance is a conversation between City Hall and its residents that allows city policies to take into account the opinions and changing needs of the city by responding to resident discourse and specific incidents as they arise. It can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from a city-led campaign seeking community feedback to a strategic municipal policy that provides greater transparency for residents, such as exposing city work to the public eye via dashboards.

Proactive governance improves the quality of municipal services by purposefully detecting, responding to, and addressing problems. As a result, governing proactively also increases public trust. This increased trust, combined with better services, can have a significant impact on the quality of life of residents.

Now that cities are incorporating more digital processes into the way they govern and the services they provide, it is both easier and more important than ever for cities to govern proactively. **Now is the time to reevaluate how your city can better implement proactive governance policies.** Here are some of the recommended best practices we've picked up thanks to our work with dozens of cities across the country.

# 1. Embrace Resident Engagement & Harness the Power of the People

For resident engagement to be effective and successful, it needs to be supported by City Hall. According to the national bestseller, [New Power](#), authors Jeremy Heimans and Henry Timms make the point that, “*Participation needs to be much more than a website that allows you to point out occasional potholes in the street; it needs to be a constant and compelling experience that keeps people working together on the things that matter.*” In their view, “*The goal of new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.*” And channeling the power of your residents has never been easier with more digital tools at your fingertips and an ever-more-digitally-savvy population.

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In their book [Millennial Momentum](#), Morley Winograd and Michael Hais point out that Millennials are creating new momentum for civic involvement. Generally perceived as a positive, group-oriented generation, Millennials seem to be more invested than other recent generations have been in changing the course of history. They tend to have a natural interest in being involved, and in doing their part to improve the quality of life in their cities. This means they are more likely than earlier generations to be engaged more fully as city residents. This is a huge opportunity for cities -- but cities need to be ready for this type of participation. Zencity’s tips:



Be prepared to accept and embrace a new wave of embracing resident engagement, and to be equipped to tap into and channel the power that residents have to give back to their cities.



Remember, it's not enough to stop with engagement; you have to truly listen to what residents are saying and respond accordingly. If not, residents will take note and your community engagement efforts, or lack thereof, can backfire.

## 2. Interpret & Respond to Resident Feedback

Let's say City Hall receives a lot of feedback about a particular initiative meaning resident engagement on a particular issue is high: greater attendance at community meetings, an increase in the volume of calls to public servants, visible attention on social media, and so forth. What does City Hall do with the feedback it receives?

There are so many channels through which residents express their opinions; the number of channels and quantity of responses can be overwhelming. And even if City Hall stays on top of all of these responses, what next? What do they do with the information they receive? And how timely is the city in responding to it? The answers to these questions are essential elements of proactive governance.

On [Go Public](#), Government Technology's Noelle Knell talks about whether cities are equipped to manage the problem of "citizen engagement overload," explaining that, "*We seem to be living through a particularly divisive era in American politics. People are voicing their opinions on issues of the day in unprecedented numbers.... But the question is: is government equipped to effectively deal with all of this input, and what does 'effectively dealing with it' actually mean?*" And of course, this is particularly true when we think of social media. Her points go right to the core of the problem. So, what does this mean for you as a city?



At the local government level, effectively dealing with engaged residents means that you need a plan in place for integrating the results of citizen engagement campaigns into your daily workflow and strategic plans.



Invest the time and resources necessary to interpret resident engagement results, enabling you to respond to them in a timely manner.



Make responding to resident feedback an integral part of your organizational workflow.

### 3. Leave Room for a Contingency Plan

We all know how important it is to plan ahead and follow a well-constructed strategic plan, and knowing to integrate sought-after feedback into that plan is essential. But proactive governance also means leaving room to venture off the pages of your work plan and responding to the real needs and changes that arise, as they arise.

It's a different way of thinking that goes beyond having a good system in place for crisis management. Whereas crisis management involves responding to an emergency situation that you absolutely must deal with, governing proactively means preempting crises and managing pain points that you didn't anticipate.

A [program run by the IBM Center this year](#) on the role of citizens in government defined several different models of engagement. The common denominator? They are all purpose-driven. For example, resident engagement might be focused on agenda setting, policy development, service delivery, or program evaluation. But at the end of the day, the goal of engagement is to drive change, and this only works when City Hall is open to adjusting its predetermined plans.



Be flexible. In fact, make flexibility an organizational value.



Keep your underlying goals and KPIs in mind - and then always double check that your work upholds these goals. Sometimes this focus can give you the space you need to work outside of pre-defined work plan.



Be prepared not just for successful engagement from your active efforts, but to respond to residents' voices as they arise.

## 4. Don't Forget to Communicate Your Achievements

And finally, let's say you successfully responded to resident feedback. You not only listened to what people were saying, you took it seriously; you worked hard and made a significant change – be it a change in city policy, or the initiation, cancellation or adjustment of a project. If you don't tell anyone exactly how you responded, you're not reaping the full benefit of your own hard work.

When residents don't know that an issue has been addressed, they generally assume the problem is still there. And when you don't share with them that you're listening, or show them how you responded to their voices, they may assume more than just the "problem" is the problem. The solution, therefore, is only half as effective. A crucial part of proactive governance is ensuring people know that you responded to their feedback. To maximize the impact of your policies and initiatives, don't forget to communicate. So get the word out – and make sure it's all known to the public:

-  Share the very fact that you are responsive to residents' needs.
-  Publicize how you met the changing interests and desires of city residents to show that their feedback contributed to the decision-making process.
-  Create a positive feedback loop for engagement, increasing transparency in governance and conveying your sense of full accountability to the public.
-  By doing so, you can both boost public trust and help residents feel more satisfied.

## In a Nutshell: What It Means to Be Proactive in Local Governance

Proactive governance means responding to the real needs of your residents as they arise, even if it means veering off your strategic work plan. Governing proactively, and being transparent about this, further empowers and encourages residents to communicate with their local government. In turn, proactive governance improves their own satisfaction as residents see they have an impact on the quality of life in their city. This process starts with a decision to embrace what your residents are expressing, can involve resident engagement and interpreting the results of engagement campaigns, and it sometimes ends with changing plans at City Hall and communicating the changes you've made to city residents.

Proactive governance is vital because it helps build trust in government while simultaneously improving government services across the board. But it does mean a lot of work; it requires both investing the time and financial resources necessary to encourage residents to be involved and enabling the City to have space in its workflow for change - even strategic change.

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Zencity can help you govern  
More proactively

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