

Amherst Open Government to the MAX! Project

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Inception: Go-Live March 1, 2011



Amherst takes
Open Government
To the MAX!

What Is It? *Open Government to the MAX!* is the name we came up with for a simple automated system, integrated into the Town's website that provides citizens and professionals in Amherst unique tools to participate in government, communicate with each other and officials about local issues, and automatically stay informed.

What Was The Goal? Like many communities, Amherst faced issues surrounding how to streamline board and committee meeting postings with agendas while staying true to the law, creating efficiencies and going (almost) paperless. The goal was to create a system to meet that need, and other similar needs surrounding community events, news, bid postings, job postings, public notices and more. Additionally, we wanted the system to be easily marketable to the Amherst community under a catchy-named umbrella.

What Makes This System Unique? There are many reasons why the Amherst's *Open Government to the MAX!* system is very unique, here is just one reason: The over fifty boards and committees in Amherst use the *Open Government to the MAX!* system for their official meeting postings with agendas – and then on the flip side, once the posting is approved and time stamped by Town Clerk staff, the posting with agenda instantly and automatically gets distributed through the notifications system within *Open Government to the MAX!* which includes emails, text messages, RSS feeds, iCal, Facebook postings and even instantly appears on digital signage screens viewable inside and outside of Town buildings 24/7/365. Following a meeting boards and committees post minutes and documents distributed at the meeting. *Open Government to the MAX!* Subscribers customize what categories of information they want notifications on, and what forms of notifications they prefer.

The "Amherst Takes Open Government To the MAX!" Button Appears on Every Page of the Town Website.



Homepage Banner, News & Announcements, Boards & Committees and Community Events, all fall Under the Open Government To the MAX! Umbrella system.

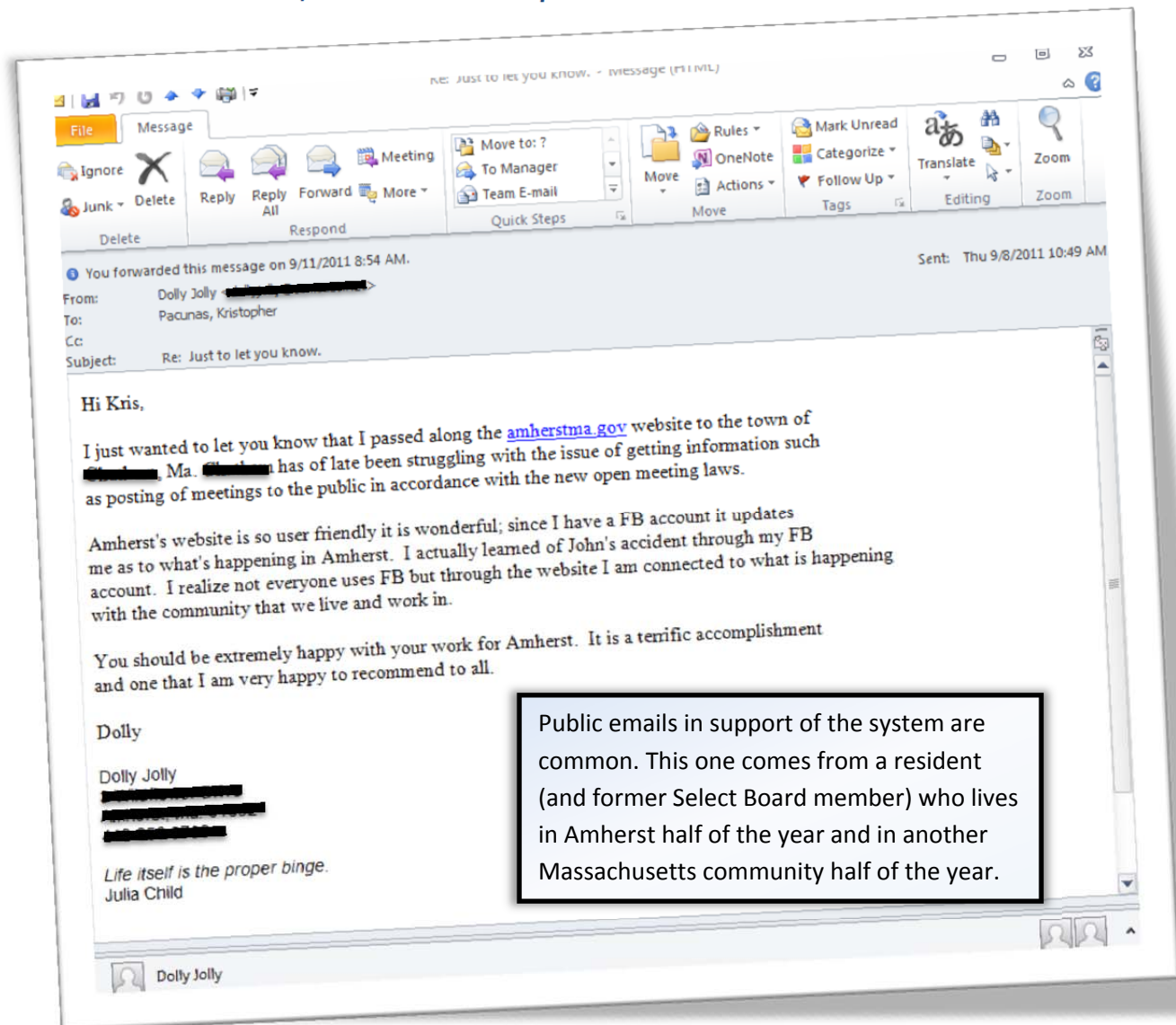
What Did It Cost? The Town of Amherst already had a website in place with a backend content management system so the *Open Government to the MAX!* system was largely an organization and marketing project. Staff time to plan, configure and train was essentially the largest investment. Other expenses included the 42" digital signage displays placed in Town buildings at a cost of \$3,000 each and some marketing expenses including a banner hung outside Town Hall stating "Amherst Takes *Open Government to the MAX!*."

Results: To say the system has been a huge success. Boards, committees and departments enthusiastically use the system and citizens and professionals of Amherst have more than embraced the system with over a thousand voluntary notification subscriptions and a very positive and vocal following. As a welcomed byproduct usage of all portions of the Town's website have also increased as a result of the popularity of the *Open Government to the MAX!* service.

"Even with all the benefits the Open Government to the MAX! system provides the Amherst community it actually requires less staff time to manage than the paper system we used prior." -**Town Manager, John Musante**

"We use the Open Government to the MAX! system to distribute our agendas and meeting packets for every meeting and our constituents appreciate the simplicity of the automated notifications." -**Stephanie O'Keeffe, Select Board Chair**

"I'm now using the posting tool on the Town's website to post all Amherst and Regional School Committee meetings (and I must say, it's AWESOME)." - **Debbie Westmoreland, Assistant to the Superintendent**



WHAT ARE SOME WAYS THE AMHERST COMMUNITY CAN NOW PARTICIPATE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND/OR STAY UP-TO-DATE?

- Public events including board/committee meetings with agendas are entered online by the public or the board/committee then automatically get routed to appropriate Town staff for approval.
- Email (with news, announcement, event or board/committee meeting and agenda information contained within the email).
- Text/SMS message that include details about the news or event item.
- View the event calendars live within your own calendar program (Microsoft Outlook, Google, Yahoo, etc) by clicking the iCal icon next to a calendar.
- Use an RSS reader to simply view news, announcement, event or board/committee meeting information.
- Watch the On Demand videos of board/committee meetings online.
- Facebook postings (done right) that include details about the news, announcement or event item on the Town's popular Facebook page.
- View the news, announcement, event or board/committee meeting details on the digital signage displays throughout Town buildings.



WHAT INFORMATION IS PART OF OPEN GOVERNMENT TO THE MAX!?

- ALL board and committee meetings with agendas (no meetings without a posting).
- Announcements and news items (town-wide or granular by topic or department).
- Town calendars (i.e. community calendar, board/committee calendar, town meeting calendar, police calendar and many more).
- On Demand videos of board and committee meetings.
- All government job postings (additionally local businesses can create an account on the website and post jobs at a nominal fee. One benefit is notifications get processed through the *Open Government to the MAX! notification system*).
- Daily activities, events and meeting room schedule from our very active Bangs Community Center.
- Community maps with public markup and comment on the map capability.
- All bid postings and public notices.
- And much more.