

Reaching Out: interactive mapping tools for community engagement

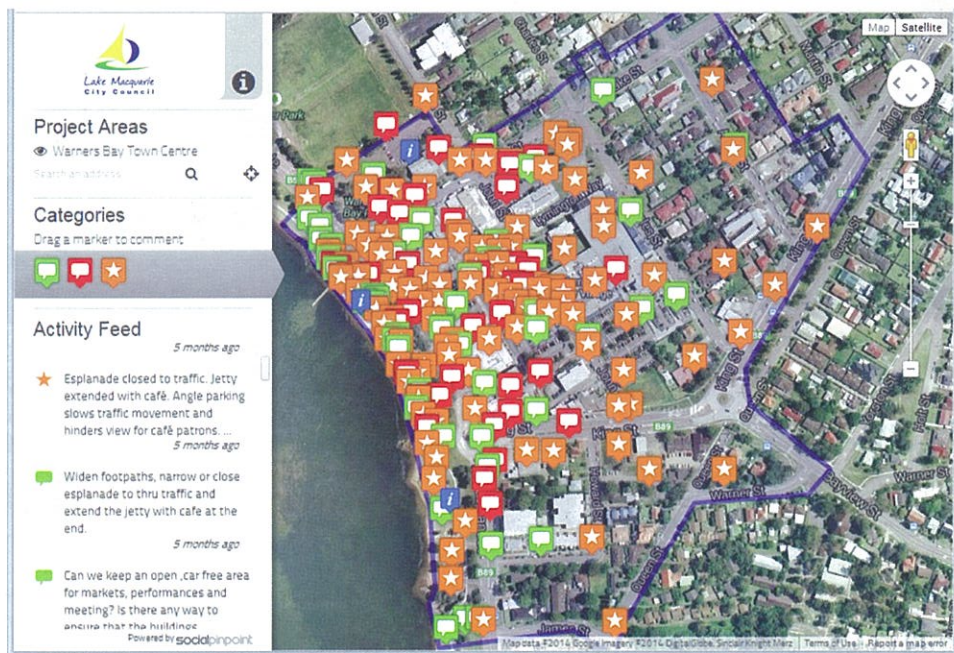
Charles Connell, Co-Founder, Social Pinpoint

Engaging with the community is an essential part of the planning process and can also be one of the most challenging tasks. While often a legislative requirement, effective consultation can also be vital to the ultimate success of a project. Increasingly, the consultation process is broadened and tailored for meaningful engagement. Combining new emerging online tools with conventional engagement techniques is proving to have successful results.

Lake Macquarie City Council Senior Land Use Planner Shane Cahill explains that in the past year they have used Social Pinpoint, a new online interactive mapping tool, as part of the community engagement process for several strategic planning projects. Council invited the community to use the interactive mapping tool to comment on issues such as building heights, pedestrian safety, lighting, parking and potential development for Council to gain more local input and to establish new planning controls within the study areas.

In addition to promoting the interactive mapping tool through the Council website and media releases "information days promoted and encouraged the use of the Social Pinpoint community mapping tool. iPad-wielding staff were on hand to talk to interested community members for projects at Warners Bay, Cardiff, and Edgeworth", explains Shane.

"Looking more like an outdoor cafe than a Council meeting room, visitors to



the Warners Bay information day were welcomed by chirpy staff, astro-turf, plants, ottomans and tablets to post comments on the interactive mapping tool – all in the name of undertaking community consultation to help Council establish new planning controls for the Warners Bay town centre." Similar days were held at Edgeworth and Cardiff.

By using a combination of engagement techniques, Lake Macquarie Council was able to engage with a larger proportion of the community that may not have otherwise provided feedback on the strategies. The use of the online tool had benefits for both Council and the community.

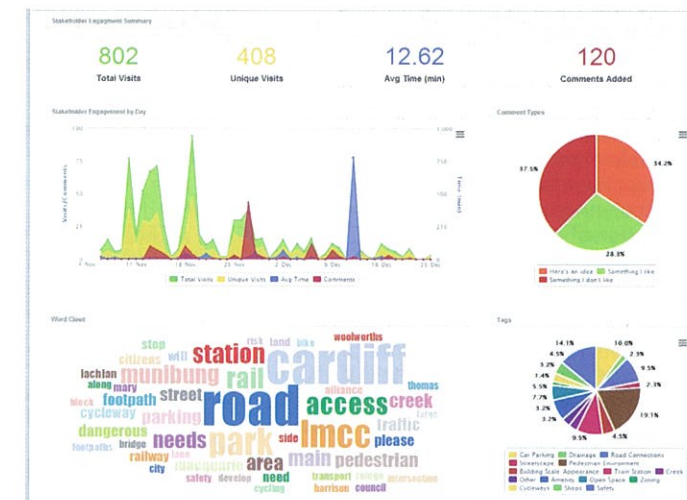
The Social Pinpoint interactive mapping tool was found to be an easy to use tool that provided the community with a quick, easy, anonymous and less formal way to comment on planning projects. "It allows the user to comment on very specific areas of interest without the need for lengthy, sometimes confusing descriptions. The spatial context makes it easy for users to comment on a specific area of interest or concern" adds Shane.

Council saw benefits of increased community participation and engagement with a broader community cross section. "We were able to use the 'Stakeholder Engagement Summary Dashboard' to provide council staff with ongoing



snapshots of information about the number of site visits, comments and common issues. We also found the data easy to manage. The online review tools categorise, group and export the project data into spreadsheets for further analysis and reporting". Having access to review and collate the data throughout the project meant that less time was spent processing information at the end of the project. It also enabled any adjustments to the engagement process if necessary.

The community increasingly expects to use social media and online systems to share information, and the community engagement process can gain depth and scope recognising this. Effective online solutions such as the interactive mapping tool that Social Pinpoint provided, work well as part of a suite of ways to enable communities to have a say. The spatial context and simple process enable input from a range of people who know a local area, to share that knowledge in a modern, easy to use, fun way.



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