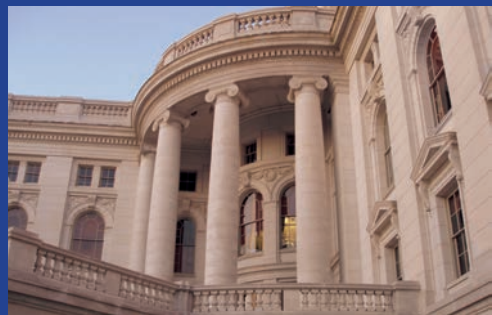
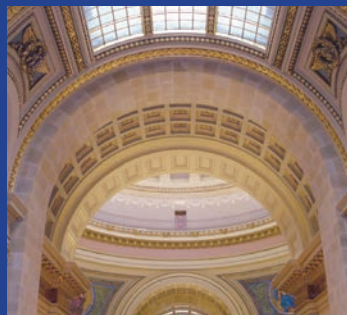


Report 14-5
February 2014

Local E-Government

Best Practices Review

STATE OF WISCONSIN



Legislative Audit Bureau ■

Local E-Government

Best Practices Review

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STATE OF WISCONSIN
Legislative Audit Bureau

22 East Mifflin Street, Suite 500
Madison, Wisconsin 53703
(608) 266-2818
Fax (608) 267-0410

www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lab

Toll-free hotline: 1-877-FRAUD-17

Joe Chrisman
State Auditor

February 27, 2014

Senator Robert Cowles and
Representative Samantha Kerkman, Co-chairpersons
Joint Legislative Audit Committee
State Capitol
Madison, Wisconsin 53702

Dear Senator Cowles and Representative Kerkman:

As authorized by s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats., we periodically produce best practices reports that seek to build on the efforts of local governments by identifying and publicizing successful approaches to certain local government issues. We have completed a best practices review of local electronic government (e-government), which includes the information and services that local governments provide online, such as contact information for elected officials and application forms that can be submitted electronically.

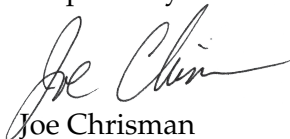
Through a survey of all local governments in Wisconsin, and our review of 110 local government websites, we identified a number of e-government best practices. Providing certain information, access to services, and links to other websites increases the usefulness of websites and potentially allows local governments to increase efficiencies. For example, some local governments reported that allowing individuals to make online payments for services reduced their costs and allowed staff to complete other tasks.

An effective local government website is well organized, easy to use, and accessible to a variety of individuals, including those with a range of abilities. In addition, local governments should sufficiently safeguard information provided by individuals. Analyzing information about how individuals use a website can allow a local government to improve the website's organization and navigational tools.

Individuals increasingly use social media, which presents opportunities for local governments to engage with individuals. Local governments reported a number of reasons for using social media, including providing the public with information about public safety issues, elections and voting, and government meetings.

We appreciate the courtesy and cooperation extended to us by the local government officials who responded to our survey and provided other information included in this report.

Respectfully submitted,



Joe Chrisman
State Auditor

JC/DS/ss

Introduction ■

Electronic government (e-government) includes the information and services that local governments provide online, such as contact information for elected officials and local government departments; permit, license, and other types of application forms that individuals can submit electronically; and social media involving commercially operated website services that enable local governments to share information with the public, who can comment on the information. E-government can allow local governments to provide information and services to the public more effectively and at a lower cost than is possible through more traditional methods.

Most individuals have used the internet to access government information and services.

Most individuals have used the internet to access government information and services. The increasing availability of high-speed internet connections and mobile devices has supported an increase in the number of activities that individuals are able to perform online with government agencies. A December 2009 Pew Research Center survey found that more than 82 percent of internet users reported having accessed a government website that year in order to find information, apply for services, or complete financial transactions.

A 2011 national survey of counties and municipalities by the International City/County Management Association indicated that more than three-fourths of respondents had reported that e-government improved customer service and communication with the public. As its online presence develops, a local government may begin using its website to enable individuals to download forms, apply for services, or pay for services without visiting government offices. Provision of services online may allow a local government to streamline its administrative processes by reducing staff time.

Under s. 13.94(8), Wis. Stats., the Legislative Audit Bureau is required to periodically conduct reviews to identify local government practices that can save costs or provide for more effective service delivery. Best practices reports seek to build on the efforts of local governments by identifying and publicizing successful approaches.

In December 2001, we released *Local E-Government Services: A Best Practices Review*, which reviewed the efforts of local governments throughout Wisconsin to use websites to facilitate individuals' access to information and services. At that time, we found that most local governments operating websites designed their websites primarily to present information rather than to provide the public with opportunities to interact with the local government, such as by completing transactions or submitting feedback online.

As required by s. 13.94(8)(d), Wis. Stats., the State Auditor has established an advisory council to assist with the selection of best practices review topics. Its four members represent counties, cities, villages, and towns and are listed in Appendix 1. The advisory council suggested that we obtain updated information on the development of e-government in Wisconsin. Therefore, we reviewed the websites of 110 local governments, which are listed in Appendix 2 and include 35 counties, 30 cities, 25 villages, and 20 towns. To determine how local governments fund and manage their e-government activities, we surveyed all 1,922 local governments in Wisconsin and received complete responses from 876, or 45.6 percent of local governments.

We present a number of best practices for the consideration of local governments. Some of these best practices may not be applicable to all local governments because, for example, available financial resources or technical expertise may constrain a local government's ability to implement a given best practice. In addition, there may be little public demand for some local governments to implement a given best practice.

In addition, our report includes links to a number of websites that provide information local governments may find useful as they consider issues related to e-government. These websites are listed in Appendix 3.

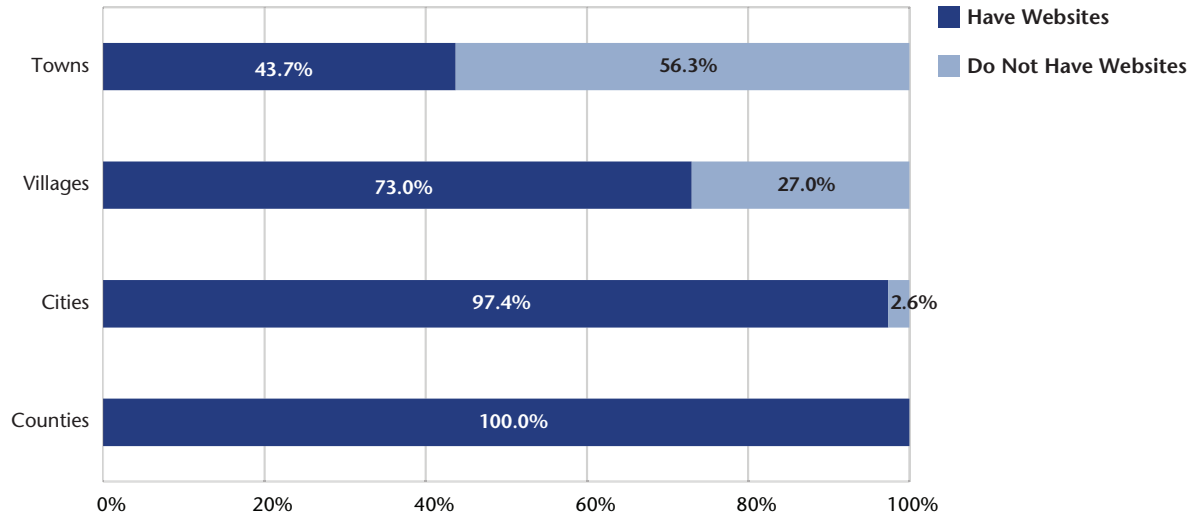
Local Government Websites

We found that 57.3 percent of all local governments had a website.

Figure 1 shows the percentages of all Wisconsin towns, villages, cities, and counties that had a website at the time of our review. Overall, we found that 57.3 percent of local governments had a website. In comparison, 11.7 percent of local governments had a website in 2001.

Figure 1

Wisconsin Local Governments with Websites¹



¹ Fall 2012 for counties, cities, and villages; spring 2013 for towns.

As shown in Table 1, towns with smaller populations were less likely to have websites than towns with larger populations.

Table 1

Towns with a Website, by Population¹
April 2013

Population	Number with a Website	Total Number	Percentage
Less Than 500	43	269	16.0%
500 to 999	150	467	32.1
1,000 to 1,999	180	323	55.7
2,000 or More	176	197	89.3
Total	549	1,256	43.7

¹ Estimated population as of 2012.

All county governments have websites. Those cities, villages, and towns that responded to our survey of all 1,922 local governments provided a variety of reasons for not having a website. Some jurisdictions with smaller populations reported limited financial resources, time, and technical expertise to develop and administer websites. In addition, 46.1 percent of survey respondents without a website reported that they believed there was limited public demand for one. Several respondents noted the limited availability of high-speed internet services in their area. We found that if a city, village, or town did not have its own website, the county's website often contained information about it, such as contact information or the dates of governmental meetings.

A total of 129 respondents to our survey reported the number of times their websites were visited in the prior year. As shown in Table 2, more than half reported that their websites were visited fewer than 500 times in the prior year. A local government's population was often correlated with the number of visits. For example, 65 of the 71 survey respondents reporting that their websites were visited fewer than 500 times were towns and villages.

Table 2

Number of Visits to Local Government Websites in the Prior Year¹

Visits	Respondents	Percentage of Total
1 to 499	71	55.0%
500 to 999	20	15.5
1,000 to 9,999	22	17.1
10,000 to 49,999	9	7.0
50,000 to 99,999	3	2.3
100,000 to 249,999	2	1.6
250,000 or More	2	1.6
Total	129	100.0%

¹ As reported by respondents to our spring 2013 survey of all local governments.

Funding Website Development and Maintenance

Survey respondents reported property taxes as a common funding source for local government websites.

Local governments use a variety of funding sources for website development and maintenance. A total of 366 of the 511 survey respondents with websites, or 71.6 percent, indicated that property taxes were a source of funding. Property taxes were indicated as the sole source of website funding by 61.4 percent of these 366 respondents. Table 3 shows other funding sources for local government websites.

Table 3

Additional Funding Sources for Local Government Websites¹

Funding Source	Respondents ²	Percentage of Respondents with a Website
Volunteer Labor	72	14.1%
Advertising Revenue	9	1.8
User Fees	8	1.6
Transaction Fees for Online Services	7	1.4
Grants	5	1.0
In-Kind Donations	4	0.8
Other	55	10.8

¹ Other than property taxes. As reported by respondents to our spring 2013 survey of all local governments. Survey respondents could indicate multiple funding sources.

² A total of 511 survey respondents had a website.

Approximately one-third of the 511 survey respondents with websites reported that they had created or redeveloped their websites within the prior five years. Among those responding to our survey, the reported average cost to develop a website ranged from \$41,357 for counties to \$1,141 for towns, as shown in Table 4. In addition, local governments incur ongoing website maintenance costs. Most survey respondents reported that their annual maintenance costs were less than \$2,500.

Table 4

**Website Development Costs Incurred by Local Governments
in the Prior Five Years¹**

	Cost per Local Government		
	Average	Lowest	Highest
County	\$41,357	\$3,500	\$130,000
City	19,299	100	100,000
Village	4,184	100	30,000
Town	1,141	10	15,000

¹ As reported by respondents to our spring 2013 survey of all local governments.

Approximately two-thirds of survey respondents with a website reported that vendors had designed or maintained their websites.

Approximately two-thirds of the 511 survey respondents with a website reported that vendors had designed or maintained their websites, typically because vendors possessed the necessary technical expertise or completed the work at a lower cost and in less time than local government staff. However, a few survey respondents reported that hiring vendors resulted in a loss of some control over the timeliness of website updates. Survey respondents reported receiving website services from more than 100 vendors, as well as from four counties.

Other survey respondents reported that they did not hire vendors for website design or maintenance. For example, the cities of Madison and Milwaukee reported that their IT departments had the staffing and expertise to design their websites. A total of 72 local governments, which were primarily villages and towns, reported that volunteers designed their websites. Other local governments reported that their websites were designed in collaboration with local chambers of commerce.

To develop and operate their websites, local governments can use commercially available software or open-source software, which is supported by a community of experienced individuals who provide updates and fix flaws. Because of this ongoing support, some individuals believe that open-source software offers more security than commercially available software. Purchasing commercially available software requires up-front costs but may require local governments to incur fewer ongoing costs. In contrast, open-source software is available at no charge, but it may require local governments to incur ongoing maintenance costs, including staff

time and training. Before using open-source software, local governments should consider the advantages and costs. Several Wisconsin local governments, including Rock and Marathon counties, have chosen to use open-source software.

■ ■ ■ ■

Website Information and Services ■

Providing certain information, access to services, and links to other websites increases the usefulness of websites and potentially allows local governments to increase efficiencies.

Local government websites typically seek to meet the needs of a variety of individuals, including those wanting to contact elected officials or access government services, businesses seeking to obtain permits or property records, and visitors searching for information about nearby hotels and recreational activities. Providing certain information, access to services, and links to other websites increases the usefulness of websites and potentially allows local governments to increase efficiencies.

Website Information

Websites with contact information for elected officials and local government departments enable individuals to ask questions and relay concerns. We found that:

- 104 of the 110 websites (94.5 percent) we reviewed provided the names of local elected officials;
- 103 websites (93.6 percent) provided the telephone numbers of local government departments;
- 93 websites (84.5 percent) provided the telephone numbers of local elected officials;
- 90 websites (81.8 percent) provided the e-mail addresses of local government departments; and
- 69 websites (62.7 percent) provided the e-mail addresses of local elected officials.

Online information about government operations and finances increases transparency and can foster increased public engagement.

Online information about government operations and finances, such as meeting minutes and audited financial reports, increases transparency and can foster increased public engagement with local governments. Table 5 shows the proportion of local governments that provided certain information on their websites.

Table 5
Information Provided on Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Meeting Minutes	97.1%	86.7%	84.0%	90.0%	90.0%
Meeting Dates	88.6	93.3	84.0	80.0	87.3
Meeting Agendas	97.1	80.0	84.0	80.0	86.4
Ordinances/Code	80.0	83.3	72.0	75.0	78.2
2013 Budget	68.6	63.3	40.0	20.0	51.8
Audit Report	62.9	53.3	20.0	10.0	40.9
Meeting Videos	11.4	40.0	4.0	0.0	15.5

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to provide:

- *contact information for local elected officials;*
- *contact information for local government departments; and*
- *other information about local government operations and finances.*

Website Services

Local governments perform a number of services, such as issuing permits and licenses, providing emergency services, and collecting trash and recyclable materials. To facilitate convenient access to these services, local government websites may:

- present information on when and how services can be accessed;

- make government forms available for download so that individuals can complete the forms at home and submit them in person or through the mail;
- allow users to complete and submit forms online; and
- allow users to pay permit fees and parking tickets and complete other financial transactions online.

Table 6 shows certain types of services for which information was available on the 110 local government websites we reviewed. Most commonly, the websites provided information related to law enforcement agencies and fire departments, such as links to those entities’ websites. Counties commonly provided a user interface for basic online geographic information system (GIS) services because they are statutorily responsible for managing property records, which are frequently accessed by title companies, surveyors, and banks.

Table 6
Services for Which Information Was Available on Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Law Enforcement Agency	100.0%	100.0%	84.0%	65.0%	90.0%
Fire Department ²	NA	96.7	84.0	65.0	84.0
Trash and Recycling Rules ²	NA	73.3	96.0	70.0	80.0
Trash and Recycling Pick-Up Schedules ²	NA	70.0	88.0	70.0	76.0
Job Vacancies	94.3	93.3	64.0	20.0	73.6
Property Assessment	88.6	70.0	56.0	50.0	69.1
Public Utilities ²	NA	86.7	68.0	25.0	64.0
Land Information	94.3	60.0	40.0	35.0	61.8
GIS Interface	97.1	43.3	12.0	15.0	48.2
Emergency Medical Services (EMS)	34.3	63.3	40.0	20.0	40.9

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013.

² Because these services are not provided by county governments, the overall percentages are based on our review of the websites of 75 cities, villages, and towns.

Most of the local government websites we reviewed had at least one application form for services.

We found that 102 of 110 local government websites we reviewed (92.7 percent) had at least one application form for services that could be downloaded, printed, completed by hand, and mailed. Common types of application forms included those for employment, voter registration, and park reservations. On average, counties

provided 13 downloadable application forms for services on their websites, while towns provided 7 downloadable application forms. Counties are responsible for providing services, such as those related to vital records, that municipalities typically do not provide.

Local governments responding to our survey reported a variety of reasons for having no downloadable application forms for services. The most common reasons included limited staff time, cost constraints, and limited public demand for services accessed through websites. In addition, some local governments reported that they offered few services overall.

Allowing individuals to apply for services by completing and submitting application forms online may be even more convenient. Our website review found that a number of local governments allowed individuals to complete and submit online at least one type of application form, such as employment forms. In addition, local governments allowed individuals to submit comments and complaints online.

Enabling individuals to track online the progress of an application or a request for a service can reduce telephone calls and e-mail messages to local government staff.

Enabling individuals to track online the progress of an application or a request for a service can reduce telephone calls and e-mail messages to local government staff. For example, the websites for the cities of Milwaukee and Wauwatosa allowed individuals to access information on the status of their requests for service and complaints, and Brown County’s website allowed job applicants to check the status of their employment applications.

We found that 70 of the 110 local government websites we reviewed (63.6 percent) allowed individuals to pay online for at least one service. Table 7 shows the proportion of the 110 websites that allowed online payments for certain services.

Table 7

Selected Local Government Websites that Allowed Online Payments for Certain Services¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Property Taxes	74.3%	43.3%	20.0%	20.0%	46.4%
Vital Records	71.4	3.3	NA	NA	23.6
Utility Bills	NA	53.3	24.0	5.0	22.7
Parking Tickets	5.7	50.0	0.0	5.0	16.4
Real Estate Documents	51.4	NA	NA	NA	16.4
Procurement Bids	2.9	6.7	0.0	0.0	2.7

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013. Some local governments do not provide certain services.

Some survey respondents reported that allowing individuals to make online payments for services, rather than in person or through the mail, reduced their costs and allowed staff to complete other tasks. For example, the City of Madison and the Village of Sussex each reported that up to 30.0 percent of all transactions with them were made online. However, other survey respondents reported that their costs were not significantly reduced, possibly because few online payments were made to those local governments.

Although the local governments that allowed online payments for services typically represented more populous areas, several local governments that represented less populous areas also allowed online payments. For example, the villages of Howards Grove and Bayside each allowed online payments for at least five different types of services. In addition, some counties collected property tax payments online on behalf of municipalities. For example, Town of Somerset property taxes could be paid through St. Croix County's website.

Private vendors typically were contracted to handle online payment transactions for local governments.

Local governments that allowed online payments typically contracted with private vendors to handle the transactions. They reported that contracting:

- saves time and effort, compared to having local government staff manage the transactions;
- reduces the liability of local governments because the vendors are responsible for maintaining confidential information that individuals submit when making online payments; and
- may reduce costs, particularly when local governments contractually require vendors to cover credit card companies' processing fees.

We reviewed the extent to which local governments charged individuals service fees to cover costs associated with online transactions, such as passing along credit card companies' processing fees, which typically were 2.4 percent to 3.5 percent of the total payment amount. We found that 70 of 110 local government websites we reviewed (63.6 percent) charged at least one service fee. These local governments often charged different types and amounts of service fees, based on whether a payment was made with a credit card, debit card, or an electronic check. Local governments charged either no fee or only a small fee for payments made by electronic checks, which typically involve no processing fees.

Local governments indicated that service fees based on a percentage of the payment amount deter online payments for large transactions, such as those involving property taxes and court fines. For example, Wood County’s website stated that, “Depending on the amount of your tax bill, the fee can be quite expensive, so please consider this when deciding which payment type to use.” Because electronic checks do not involve a percentage-based service fee, making this payment method available could increase the frequency of online payments for services. However, an electronic check may be returned by a financial institution if an individual’s bank account has insufficient funds.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *provide information on their websites about the services that they provide;*
- *allow individuals to download application forms for services or submit application forms for services online; and*
- *consider accepting online payment for those services for which it can be done cost-effectively.*

Links to Other Information and Services

Local government websites can enhance their usefulness by including links to other websites that provide information and services.

Local government websites can enhance their usefulness by linking to other websites that provide information and services. As shown in Table 8, we found that those local government websites we reviewed most commonly included links to certain state websites, such as the Government Accountability Board’s website, which allows individuals to download voter registration forms and absentee ballot applications. Local government websites also included links to other local governments’ websites. For example, Douglas County’s website included a link to the City of Superior’s website, which allows online payment of parking tickets.

Table 8

Types of Links Included on Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
State Government ²	97.1%	83.3%	72.0%	80.0%	84.5%
Other Local Governments	85.7	83.3	76.0	75.0	80.9
Libraries ³	NA	96.7	68.0	35.0	70.7
Calendar of Events	60.0	83.3	68.0	40.0	64.5
Tourism	91.4	70.0	48.0	25.0	63.6
Economic Development	71.4	86.7	56.0	15.0	61.8
History/Historical Society	62.9	76.7	56.0	35.0	60.0
Public K-12 Schools	25.7	93.3	64.0	30.0	53.6
Federal Government	80.0	43.3	28.0	20.0	47.3
University of Wisconsin System and Technical Colleges	17.1	53.3	32.0	15.0	30.0
Local Newspapers	14.3	20.0	24.0	10.0	17.3
Hospitals	17.1	30.0	4.0	0.0	14.5

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013.

² Other than the University of Wisconsin System.

³ We did not determine whether counties' websites included links to libraries.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local government websites to include links to other websites that provide useful information to individuals.



Website Usability, Accessibility, and Security ■

Effective local government websites are well organized, easy to use, and accessible to a variety of individuals, including those with impairments. In addition, local governments should sufficiently safeguard information provided by individuals. We reviewed the usability and accessibility of local government websites. We also considered ways for local governments to develop and implement effective IT security, and identified a number of best practices.

Website Usability

Grouping related information and services on a website enables individuals to focus their searches.

Grouping related information and services on a website enables individuals to focus their searches and increases the likelihood they will find the desired information quickly. Local governments organize information on their websites by several methods, including:

- by department, which may be helpful to individuals familiar with a local government's structure;
- by target audience, such as residents or visitors; and
- by service, which may be helpful to individuals uncertain which department provides a given service.

As shown in Table 9, 70.0 percent of 110 websites we reviewed were organized by department, 41.8 percent were organized by target audience, and 36.4 percent were organized by service. We found that 50.0 percent of those websites were organized in multiple ways, which can make it easier for individuals to locate desired information. For example, an application for a park permit could be located through a link for a parks and recreation department or through a link listing available services.

Table 9

Methods Used to Organize Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Department	97.1%	86.7%	48.0%	25.0%	70.0%
Target Audience	42.9	70.0	32.0	10.0	41.8
Service	48.6	43.3	28.0	15.0	36.4

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013. Websites could be organized through multiple methods.

A variety of navigational tools can help individuals to locate information. For example:

- a home page link on every web page allows individuals to return quickly to the website’s home page;
- a search engine allows individuals to locate where key words or phrases appear on a website;
- links that change color when clicked remind individuals of web pages they have viewed; and
- a site map, which is similar to a table of contents, lists the types of information on a website.

As shown in Table 10, 97.3 percent of 110 websites we reviewed included home page links, while 63.6 percent had a search engine. Approximately 80.0 percent of these websites had multiple navigational tools.

Table 10

Navigational Tools on Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Home Page Links	100.0%	96.7%	96.0%	95.0%	97.3%
Search Engine	77.1	70.0	64.0	30.0	63.6
Links That Change Color When Clicked	28.6	36.7	24.0	60.0	35.5
Site Map	31.4	30.0	32.0	35.0	31.8

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013. Websites could have multiple navigational tools.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *group related information and services on their websites, including in multiple ways when possible; and*
- *include one or more navigational tools on their websites.*

Measuring Website Use

Analyzing information about how individuals use a website can allow a local government to improve the website’s organization and navigational tools.

Analyzing information about how individuals use a website can allow a local government to improve the website’s organization and navigational tools. Almost half of local governments responding to our survey reported that they used at least one method of gathering feedback, such as by analyzing statistics on a website’s traffic. Such statistics were often provided by website vendors. However, 34 local governments reported using Google Analytics, which is a free website statistic program that provides information such as the number of times each web page is viewed and the extent to which individuals make online payments for government services. Free online training and tutorials explain how to use the program and analyze information.

To solicit feedback from individuals who used their websites, local governments reported that they used surveys in their periodic newsletters and on their websites, and that they informally asked their staff, town board members, and others for such feedback. Local governments reported that some individuals used these opportunities to request information on the times, locations,

agendas, and minutes of municipal government meetings, while others requested downloadable forms, information on elections and municipal services, salaries of public officials, a “frequently asked questions” (FAQ) section, and larger-sized fonts to make a website more readable. In some instances, individuals pointed out errors in the information on websites. Respondents to our survey reported that quickly acting on comments and feedback was appreciated by the public.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *use website traffic statistics to analyze how their websites are used and could be improved; and*
- *solicit comments and feedback about their websites and then act on the information received.*

Mobile Applications

Individuals increasingly use mobile devices to access websites.

Individuals increasingly use mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers to access websites. Therefore, it is important for local governments to consider enabling their websites to be easily viewed by individuals using mobile devices, which have smaller screens than those of laptops and desktops. For example, local governments can modify their websites so that individuals using mobile devices do not view certain photos and information that are viewable by those using laptops and desktops.

Mobile applications, which are commonly known as “apps,” enable users of mobile devices to perform certain tasks. For example:

- The City of Madison’s “My Waste” mobile application provided a refuse and recycling collection calendar specific to individual households. Individuals could set up automatic reminders for year-round collections, seasonal collections such as for Christmas trees, and special events such as collection of leaves. Individuals could also access information about the hours and locations of trash and recycling centers.
- The Village of Bayside’s “Citizen Request Tracker” mobile application, which relies on GPS technology, helped individuals to report issues

such as potholes, graffiti, and downed street lights. Individuals who submitted concerns received confirmation e-mail messages and could track the status of the reported issues, as well as comments by government officials on the issues.

Local governments employing staff with the requisite skills can develop mobile applications or purchase them from vendors. In addition, citizens can develop them. Mobile applications typically must be designed for particular operating systems, such as the iOS system used by Apple's mobile devices and the Android system used by a variety of other brands of mobile devices. Developing mobile applications for multiple operating systems allows individuals with different mobile devices to access the information.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to consider whether it is cost-effective to:

- *enable their websites to be easily viewed by individuals using mobile devices; and*
- *offer mobile applications designed for multiple operating systems commonly used by mobile devices.*

Website Accessibility

Accessibility features can help to make a website's information and services available to individuals with a range of physical and mental abilities.

Accessibility features can help to make a website's information and services available to individuals with a range of physical and mental abilities. We identified three main sources of standards for designing accessible websites:

- The World Wide Web Consortium standards (<http://www.w3.org>) provide technical and non-technical guidance for designing accessible websites. Guidance is also being developed for meeting the needs of the elderly.
- Section 508 standards (<http://www.Section508.gov>), which reference an amendment to the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, outline accessibility requirements for federal government websites. Some Wisconsin local governments, such as the City of Madison, have voluntarily adopted these standards.

- The federal Department of Health and Human Services maintains a website (<http://www.usability.gov>) that provides resources for making websites accessible.

All three sources of accessibility standards identify multiple ways to make websites more accessible, such as by:

- including textual descriptions of photographs, maps, and other images, which allows visually impaired individuals to use text-to-speech and text-to-Braille software;
- displaying an accessibility statement that describes a website’s accessibility features, identifies accessibility features the website does not support, and provides contact information for reporting difficulties in accessing the website;
- including text sizing buttons that allow individuals to increase the size of the text without enlarging the entire web page; and
- writing the text on websites according to conventions that enable electronic translation services to convert the text into a different language selected by an individual.

Table 11 shows the percentage of websites we reviewed that had certain accessibility features. Although less than one-third of the websites had a certain accessibility feature, 40.9 percent of the websites we reviewed had at least one of four accessibility features.

Table 11

Prevalence of Certain Accessibility Features for Selected Local Government Websites¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Text Equivalent for Images ²	35.5%	32.1%	20.8%	11.8%	27.0%
Accessibility Statement	14.3	23.3	8.0	0.0	12.7
Language Translation	20.0	16.7	0.0	0.0	10.9
Text Sizing Buttons	11.4	10.0	0.0	0.0	6.4

¹ Based on our review of 110 websites early in 2013.

² Excludes websites without images.

☑ Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to have accessibility features on their websites.

Information Technology Security

Local governments increasingly maintain sensitive and confidential information that must be safeguarded.

Local governments increasingly maintain and access sensitive information about their operations and confidential information about individuals, and this information must be safeguarded. Some IT security experts indicate individuals seeking to inappropriately obtain state and federal data are increasingly targeting local governments, which access some of these data and are perceived by some individuals to employ security measures that are less robust than those of state and federal agencies.

A local government can reduce its security risks by:

- implementing effective IT security policies and procedures;
- training staff on IT security policies and procedures; and
- accessing free or low-cost resources for improving IT security.

Security policies and procedures ensure that measures are in place to protect local government websites and electronically stored data against cyber security threats. State government security experts in Wisconsin and elsewhere indicate that effective security policies and procedures should:

- identify what constitutes a security violation;
- require staff to inventory all authorized hardware and software used by the local government and monitor this inventory regularly;
- limit access to electronic systems to only those individuals who need to access the systems to complete their job duties;
- establish robust password policies for accessing IT systems, including minimum standards for password complexity and a requirement that passwords be changed regularly;

- incorporate firewalls and implement software that protects IT systems against viruses, malware, and spyware;
- regularly update software with the latest security and other patches;
- regularly create electronic backups of data; and
- create an emergency response plan that staff can use to take immediate steps to address security breaches. State and federal emergency response plans can provide local governments with specific guidance for responding to security breaches.

Local governments should train their staff on and increase their awareness of effective security policies and procedures, such as using robust passwords and recognizing types of e-mail messages and websites that pose potential security threats. For example, individuals may e-mail staff an unsolicited message that invites them to click on a hypertext link in the message, which could compromise the local government's security.

A number of national organizations and initiatives can help local governments to develop effective security practices and standards. Membership in these organizations and initiatives, which is often free, provides local governments with access to security guidelines, information about the latest software patches and updates, and best practices for establishing the minimum level of protection needed to guard against cyber security threats. For example:

- The federally funded Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center (<http://msisac.cisecurity.org>) provides members with cyber alerts, cyber security incident response advice, security-related webcasts and other meetings, security training exercises, materials for the annual Cyber Security Awareness Month, and guidelines for security policies. Membership is open to all state, local, territorial, and tribal governments.
- The Nationwide Cyber Security Review (<http://msisac.cisecurity.org/resources/ncsr>), which is an initiative of the federal Department of Homeland Security, assesses the security programs of participating governments, which receive private, individualized feedback on their security programs.

- The Center for Strategic and International Studies (<http://csis.org>), which is a bipartisan and nonprofit research organization, has published a list of critical aspects of cyber security.

☑ Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *implement effective information technology security policies and procedures;*
- *train staff on information technology security policies and procedures; and*
- *access free or low-cost resources for improving information technology security.*

Protecting Privacy

Local governments must consider privacy issues when determining which information to present on their websites.

Local governments must consider privacy issues when determining which information to present on their websites. Under Wisconsin's open records law, certain information collected by local governments must be made available to individuals who request it. Nevertheless, some individuals have raised concerns when certain information is presented online. For example, monthly information about a residence's water usage may indicate that the residence is unoccupied during certain months, thereby making the residence more vulnerable to burglaries. Although some individuals and real estate professionals find online property tax assessments to be a valuable source of information, others prefer that such information not be included on a local government's website.

E-government experts recommend that local governments establish privacy policies that specify how they will collect and use individuals' personal information and post the policies on their websites. The Federal Trade Commission has provided guidance for the content of such policies, including:

- informing individuals about the types of information that will be collected and how that information will be used;
- allowing individuals to choose whenever possible whether they provide information and how the information can be used; and

We identified at least 30 local governments that posted privacy policies on their websites.

- allowing individuals to review personal information they previously submitted.

We identified at least 30 local governments that posted privacy policies on their websites, many of which incorporated provisions that addressed such principles. For example, the City of Milwaukee’s privacy policy:

- specified the information the city collects from everyone who uses its website, such as the web pages viewed and the dates and times that web pages were viewed;
- established that the information is used only to improve the website’s usefulness;
- noted that while an individual must submit some personal information in order to request a service or make a payment, refusing to submit personal information does not prevent the individual from accessing other website features; and
- specified that personal information submitted by an individual is used only to respond to an individual’s request for a service.

Privacy policies allow local governments to provide assurances and transparency regarding how personal information will be protected when individuals use local government websites. Local governments wishing to develop a privacy policy may want to refer to the State of Wisconsin’s privacy notice (http://www.wisconsin.gov/state/core/privacy_notice.html), which addresses key privacy policy principles.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *establish privacy policies that specify how they will collect and use personal information provided by individuals; and*
- *post established privacy policies on their websites.*

Social Media ■

Social media presents opportunities for local governments to engage with individuals.

Social media involves the use of commercially operated website services that enable individuals and organizations such as local governments to share and comment on text, photos, and videos posted online. Because social media can facilitate interaction, it presents opportunities for local governments to engage with individuals. We reviewed the use of social media by local governments and provide best practices for local governments to consider.

Local Government Use of Social Media

A December 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that 73 percent of American adults who use the internet participate in social media. The most commonly used social media services include:

- Facebook, which allows organizations and individuals to create profiles containing information, photos, and videos that others can view and comment on;
- Twitter, which allows organizations and individuals to write short messages that can be read by others;
- Pinterest, which allows organizations and individuals to share and comment on pictures and videos;

- YouTube, which allows organizations and individuals to upload videos that others can view and comment on; and
- LinkedIn, which allows organizations to post employment opportunities and individuals to advertise their work qualifications or search for posted employment opportunities.

Facebook and Twitter were the social media services most commonly used by the local governments we reviewed.

We found that Facebook and Twitter were the social media services most commonly used by 110 local governments. As shown in Table 12, half of these local governments used Facebook or Twitter, while the other half did not use either of them. Counties and cities were more likely to use the services than villages and towns.

Table 12

Use of Facebook and/or Twitter by Selected Local Governments¹

	Percentage of Counties	Percentage of Cities	Percentage of Villages	Percentage of Towns	Overall
Used One or Both Services	62.9%	66.7%	36.0%	20.0%	50.0%
Did Not Use Either Service	37.1	33.3	64.0	80.0	50.0

¹ Based on our review of information for 110 local governments early in 2013.

As shown in Table 13, jurisdictions with smaller populations were less likely to use certain social media services than those with larger populations. Local governments reported several reasons for not using social media, including a lack of interest from individuals in their communities; a belief that existing local government websites provide sufficient information; a lack of affordable, high-speed internet services in their areas, which limits the ability to use social media effectively; and concerns over the costs and legal liabilities of using social media.

Table 13

Selected Local Governments that Used Facebook and/or Twitter, by Population¹

Population ²	Number	Total	Percentage of Total
50,000 or Less	35	88	39.8%
50,001 to 100,000	10	11	90.9
100,001 to 200,000	5	6	83.3
200,001 to 500,000	3	3	100.0
500,001 or More	2	2	100.0
Total	55	110	50.0

¹ Based on our review of information for 110 local governments early in 2013.

² Estimated population as of 2012.

Local governments reported a number of reasons for using social media, including providing the public with information about public safety issues, elections and voting, and government meetings; promoting the community; and encouraging economic development. For example:

- the Adams County Sheriff's Office used Facebook to provide information about certain thefts and requested that anyone with information contact Adams County Crime Stoppers;
- the City of Eau Claire used Facebook to notify individuals of a water main break and provide information on traffic detours;
- Douglas County used Twitter to provide a link to election results that the county clerk's office updated throughout the evening on Election Day; and
- the City of Beloit used Facebook to provide information on the times, locations, and agendas of plan commission meetings.

In addition, our website review identified instances in which local governments used social media to exchange information with the public. For example, the City of Madison Police Department used Twitter to inform the public it was assisting the

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) with a manhunt and to respond to individuals' information and questions submitted to it through Twitter. The Village of Bonduel used Facebook to post a description of a lost dog, information about approaching the dog, and a telephone number to call with tips about the dog's location. The post generated questions from individuals, to which the village responded.

Our website review found that 27 local governments that used Facebook and/or Twitter also used other social media services. For example:

- the Village of Bayside used Pinterest to display pictures from local events, such as a community clean-up day and a citizen's police academy;
- the City of Platteville used YouTube to post informational videos, including one in which the public works director discussed upcoming projects;
- the City of Madison Police Department used YouTube to post a video with tips on how individuals can protect their homes from burglary; and
- Sheboygan County used LinkedIn to provide job applicants with information about the county government.

Local governments interested in using Pinterest could review the Kansas City, Missouri, police department's Pinterest profile (<http://www.pinterest.com/kcpolice>), which has been cited by a national government technology association. The profile provides a range of information, including photos of missing persons, questions about unsolved crimes, parental resources for identifying and preventing drug use among children, and photos of the department's police horses and canines.

Local governments reported that managing social media accounts often involved the IT director, administrator, communications staff, and others. The City of Platteville's communications specialist managed the city's social media, including monitoring the city's Facebook and Twitter accounts, making several posts to these accounts daily, and responding to comments and questions posted by individuals. Jefferson County employed a paid intern to manage its Facebook profile.

Many local governments reported that managing social media required minimal staff time.

Many local governments reported that managing social media required minimal staff time. For example, the amount of weekly time spent managing social media was estimated by the City of New Berlin to be one to five hours, by the City of Lake Geneva to be one to two hours, and by the Village of Twin Lakes to be 30 minutes. Local governments used different methods to manage social media content. Some allowed individual departments to create and operate individual social media profiles, while others allowed departments to do so only after having completed certain training requirements.

☑ Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to consider using social media to communicate information to the public.

Social Media Profiles

To identify how local governments distinguished their social media profiles, we reviewed the Facebook and Twitter accounts of 55 local governments. We found that local governments typically used their account names, profile images, and links to their websites, all of which help individuals to ascertain that the profiles are genuine. For example:

- The City of Wauwatosa’s Twitter account name was “Wauwatosa, Wisconsin,” and the username was “@WauwatosaWI.” To help individuals locate and authenticate the city’s account, the profile picture was an image with the city’s name and official emblem, which also appears on the city’s website and other social media profiles, and the profile indicated it was the official page of the City of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.
- Jefferson County’s Facebook page was “Jefferson County WI Government,” and its profile picture displayed a county government emblem. The county’s Facebook page indicated it was the official information page for Jefferson County, Wisconsin. The profile’s name and description distinguished it from other Facebook pages for tourist organizations and Jefferson counties in other states.

Linking to a social media profile from a local government’s website also helps individuals to verify the profile’s authenticity. For example, the City of Wauwatosa’s website contained links to all of the city’s social media accounts, and Jefferson County’s website contained links to its Facebook page.

☑ Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments to:

- *identify and authenticate their social media accounts, such as by including “government” and “Wisconsin” in their account names or descriptions; and*
- *link their social media accounts to their websites.*

Policies and Procedures

Successfully managing social media requires local governments to develop policies and procedures.

Successfully managing social media requires local governments to develop policies and procedures that, for example:

- determine who is responsible for establishing and maintaining a social media account;
- determine who is responsible for managing information on an account, including ensuring the information’s accuracy and monitoring content posted to the account;
- consider security issues, such as creating and managing passwords; and
- consider legal issues, such as privacy, freedom of speech and information, and public records management.

To ensure that their social media policies address legal and personnel issues sufficiently, some local governments assembled committees that included staff representing various departments. For example, Brown County formed a committee to research social media policies and recommend whether and how it should begin to use social media.

Developing policies for acceptable conduct helps to reduce risks, such as members of the public posting offensive information to a social media account. For example, the Milwaukee Police Department’s Facebook profile stated that “Comments and posts on this website will be managed pursuant to the City of Milwaukee social media and web linking policies. Chronic violators of these policies will be blocked from posting.” The profile linked to the city’s web and e-mail policies (<http://city.milwaukee.gov/webpolicies>) stated that the city may remove comments that, for example, violate

laws or encourage illegal activity; compromise public safety; are profane, obscene, violent, pornographic, or discriminatory; or that unlawfully defame, attack, or threaten an individual, group, or organization.

Best Practice

It is a best practice for local governments using or planning to use social media to develop policies and procedures that specify staff responsibilities for maintaining the social media accounts.

■ ■ ■ ■

Appendix 1

Best Practices Local Government Advisory Council

Richard Nawrocki, Supervisor—Town of Merton

Steve O'Malley, Administrator—La Crosse County

Adam Payne, Administrator—Sheboygan County

Mark Rohloff, City Manager—City of Oshkosh

Appendix 2

Selected Local Government Websites Reviewed

Local Government	Population ¹	Website Address
Counties (35)		
Adams	20,800	http://www.co.adams.wi.gov
Bayfield	15,100	http://www.bayfieldcounty.org
Brown	250,300	http://www.co.brown.wi.us
Chippewa	62,800	http://www.co.chippewa.wi.us
Clark	34,800	http://www.co.clark.wi.us
Crawford	16,700	http://www.crawfordcountywi.org
Dane	491,600	http://www.countyofdane.com
Door	27,900	http://www.co.door.wi.gov
Douglas	44,200	http://www.douglascountywi.org
Florence	4,400	http://www.florencewisconsin.com
Fond du Lac	102,000	http://www.fdlco.wi.gov
Grant	51,500	http://www.co.grant.wi.gov
Green	36,900	http://www.co.green.wi.gov
Green Lake	19,200	http://www.co.green-lake.wi.us
Jackson	20,600	http://www.co.jackson.wi.us
Jefferson	83,900	http://www.jeffersoncountywi.gov
La Crosse	115,600	http://www.co.la-crosse.wi.us
Lafayette	16,900	http://www.co.lafayette.wi.gov
Langlade	19,900	http://www.co.langlade.wi.us
Marathon	134,600	http://www.co.marathon.wi.us
Marinette	41,200	http://www.marinettecounty.com
Milwaukee	948,400	http://county.milwaukee.gov
Oconto	37,900	http://www.co.oconto.wi.us
Oneida	36,100	http://www.co.oneida.wi.gov
Outagamie	178,200	http://www.outagamie.org
Ozaukee	86,700	http://www.co.ozaukee.wi.us
Pepin	7,500	http://www.co.pepin.wi.us
Polk	44,300	http://www.co.polk.wi.us
Racine	195,400	http://www.racineco.com
Sawyer	16,700	http://www.sawyercountygov.org
Sheboygan	115,600	http://www.sheboygancounty.com
Taylor	20,700	http://www.co.taylor.wi.us
Vilas	21,500	http://co.vilas.wi.us
Waupaca	52,400	http://www.co.waupaca.wi.us
Wood	74,600	http://www.co.wood.wi.us

Local Government	Population ¹	Website Address
Cities* (30)		
Adams (Adams)	1,900	http://www.cityofadams-wi.gov
Alma (Buffalo)	800	http://www.almawisconsin.com
Antigo (Langlade)	8,100	http://www.antigo-city.org
Appleton (Outagamie)	72,800	http://www.appleton.org
Beloit (Rock)	36,900	http://www.ci.beloit.wi.us
Black River Falls (Jackson)	3,600	http://www.blackriverfalls.com
Chilton (Calumet)	3,900	http://www.chilton.govoffice.com
Eau Claire (Eau Claire)	66,200	http://www.eauclairewi.gov
Fitchburg (Dane)	25,200	http://www.city.fitchburg.wi.us
Fox Lake (Dodge)	1,500	http://www.cityoffoxlake.org
Hayward (Sawyer)	2,300	http://www.cityofhaywardwi.gov
Hudson (St. Croix)	13,000	http://www.ci.hudson.wi.us
La Crosse (La Crosse)	51,600	http://www.cityoflacrosse.org
Madison (Dane)	234,600	http://www.cityofmadison.com
Marinette (Marinette)	10,900	http://www.marinette.wi.us
Mauston (Juneau)	4,500	http://www.mauston.com
Milwaukee (Milwaukee)	595,400	http://city.milwaukee.gov/home
New Berlin (Waukesha)	39,800	http://www.newberlin.org
Oconto Falls (Oconto)	2,900	http://www.ci.ocontofalls.wi.us
Oshkosh (Winnebago)	66,300	http://www.ci.oshkosh.wi.us
Platteville (Grant)	11,300	http://www.platteville.org
Portage (Columbia)	10,300	http://www.portagewi.gov
Rhineland (Oneida)	7,800	http://www.ci.rhineland.wi.gov
Rice Lake (Barron)	8,400	http://www.ci.rice-lake.wi.us
Shullsburg (Lafayette)	1,200	http://www.shullsburgwisconsin.org
Sturgeon Bay (Door)	9,100	http://www.sturgeonbaywi.org
Superior (Douglas)	27,100	http://www.ci.superior.wi.us
Waukesha (Waukesha)	71,000	http://www.ci.waukesha.wi.us
Wausau (Marathon)	39,200	http://www.ci.wausau.wi.us
Wauwatosa (Milwaukee)	46,300	http://www.wauwatosa.net

*County indicated in parentheses.

Local Government	Population ¹	Website Address
Villages* (25)		
Allouez (Brown)	14,000	http://www.villageofallouez.com
Ashwaubenon (Brown)	17,000	http://www.ashwaubenon.com
Bayside (Milwaukee)	4,400	http://www.village.bayside.wi.us
Bonduel (Shawano)	1,500	http://www.villageofbonduel.com
Caledonia (Racine)	24,700	http://www.caledoniawi.com
DeForest (Dane)	9,000	http://www.vi.deforest.wi.us
Dickeyville (Grant)	1,100	http://www.dickeyville.com
Ephraim (Door)	300	http://www.ephraim-wisconsin.com
Howards Grove (Sheboygan)	3,200	http://www.howardsgrove.org
Kimberly (Outagamie)	6,600	http://www.vokimberly.org
Luck (Polk)	1,100	http://www.luckwisconsin.com
Luxemburg (Kewaunee)	2,600	http://www.luxemburgusa.com
New Glarus (Green)	2,200	http://www.newglarusvillage.com
North Bay (Racine)	200	http://northbay-wi.us
Pepin (Pepin)	800	http://pepinwisconsin.com
Plover (Portage)	12,400	http://www.ploverwi.gov
Port Edwards (Wood)	1,800	http://www.portedwardswi.com
Prairie du Sac (Sauk)	4,000	http://www.prairiedusac.net
River Hills (Milwaukee)	1,600	http://www.riverhillswi.com
Spring Green (Sauk)	1,600	http://www.vi.springgreen.wi.gov
Suring (Oconto)	500	http://www.ci.suring.wi.us
West Salem (La Crosse)	4,800	http://www.westsalemwi.com
Whitefish Bay (Milwaukee)	14,100	http://www.wfbvillage.org
Whiting (Portage)	1,700	http://www.whitingwi.gov
Wild Rose (Waushara)	700	http://www.villageofwildrose.com

*County indicated in parentheses.

Local Government	Population ¹	Website Address
Towns* (20)		
Big Bend (Rusk)	400	http://www.townofbigbend.com
Chase (Oconto)	3,000	http://www.townofchase.org
Empire (Fond du Lac)	2,800	http://www.empire-town.org
Florence (Florence)	2,000	http://www.townofflorencewisconsin.com
Gibraltar (Door)	1,000	http://www.townofgibraltar.com
Grand Chute (Outagamie)	21,300	http://www.grandchute.net
Harmony (Rock)	2,600	http://townofharmony.com
Hayward (Sawyer)	3,600	http://www.townofhayward.com
La Grange (Monroe)	2,000	http://www.lagrangetalkofthetown.com
Lincoln (Vilas)	2,400	http://www.townoflincolnvilas.com
Madison (Dane)	6,300	http://www.town.madison.wi.us
Merton (Waukesha)	8,400	http://www.townofmerton.com
Millston (Jackson)	200	http://millston.org
Minocqua (Oneida)	4,500	http://www.townofminocqua.org
Morrison (Brown)	1,600	http://www.townofmorrison.org
Rome (Adams)	2,700	http://www.romewi.com
Shelby (La Crosse)	4,700	http://www.townofshelby.com
Somers (Kenosha)	9,500	http://www.somers.org
Wheatland (Kenosha)	3,400	http://www.townwheatland.com
Wilson (Sheboygan)	3,400	http://townwilson.com

*County indicated in parentheses.

¹ 2012 population estimates by the Wisconsin Department of Administration's Demographic Services Center, October 2012.

Appendix 3

Index to Websites Cited

Website Address	
Website Accessibility (page 19)	
World Wide Web Consortium Standards	http://www.w3.org
Section 508 Standards (federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973)	http://www.Section508.gov
Department of Health and Human Services (federal government)	http://www.usability.gov
IT Security and Privacy (page 25)	
Multi-State Information Sharing and Analysis Center	http://msisac.cisecurity.org
Nationwide Cyber Security Review (federal Department of Homeland Security)	http://msisac.cisecurity.org/resources/ncsr
Center for Strategic and International Studies	http://csis.org
State of Wisconsin's Privacy Notice	http://www.wisconsin.gov/state/core/privacy_notice.html
Social Media (page 29)	
Kansas City, Missouri, Police Department's Pinterest Profile	http://www.pinterest.com/kcpolice
City of Milwaukee's Web and E-mail Policies	http://city.milwaukee.gov/webpolicies