

Digital Engagement: Pandemic & Beyond

→ Benefits, Use Cases, & Considerations
MMA 2022 Annual Meeting Workshop





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Brianna Sunryd, MPP
Town of Amherst, MA
Communications Manager &
Community Participation Officer
Town Manager's Office & IT

City of Worcester, MA Alum
ICMA Vice Chair Digital Strategies Committee
Massachusetts Excellence in Technology Winner





About Amherst

- **Pop. 39,924**
- **Council-Manager Government since December 2018**
- **Home to UMass Amherst, Amherst College & Hampshire College**
- **Households w/ a computer 96.6%**
- **Households w/ internet subscription 91.2%**
- **Persons in poverty: 27.5%**

Source: American Community Survey, 2019

Updated Charter and New Form of Government



Increased focus on transparency, participation & engagement

Amherst's new Charter called for focus on increased community participation

Community Participation Officers (3) appointed from existing staff

Amherst continues to build capacity & strategy in these areas, escalated by COVID

Tried & true tools of engagement



Social media channels



In person meetings & events



Newsletters & subscriptions



Websites



Surveys & more...





Enter COVID

How did we continue to serve the public and meet their needs for transparency & participation?

Urgent need to:

- Increase info & communications
- Pivot to remote virtual meetings
- Enable a remote/hybrid workforce
- Move services online
- Maintain transparency, when doors are closed to public
- Provision for engagement as well!



Some COVID silver linings

- **Rapid adoption of new technologies by both staff and the public**
- **Creative use and scaling up of existing technologies**
- **Fostered a mindset of innovation, upskilling of teams**
- **Easier to attend meetings and join boards, participation increases and diversifies**
- **More meetings recorded and online for public consumption**
- **Some really solid data and analytics on use of our digital services and virtual engagement**

Why expand online engagement?

Potential Benefits Beyond COVID



Reaching more diverse residents



Generating more informed participation



Producing concrete data for decision-making, reporting, & evaluation



Meet the digital first expectations of your community



Broader range of perspectives



Build trust, transparency & ease of interaction

Technology →

How can we use technology to increase engagement and transparency in local government?

Some recent examples from Amherst:

- Leverage virtual meeting tools such as Zoom or Teams
- Digital Signage w/text in polls
- Performance Management Software & Public Dashboards
- GIS Story Maps
- Online Participation Platform
- In-meeting polling



Public Participation Platform

Engage Amherst

Complete suite of listening, information, analysis, reporting & relationship management features online

Mix & match precisely the right online tools for community objectives, such as Council goals, building projects & more

Quickly and easily make sense of public sentiment

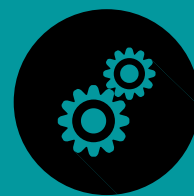
All languages



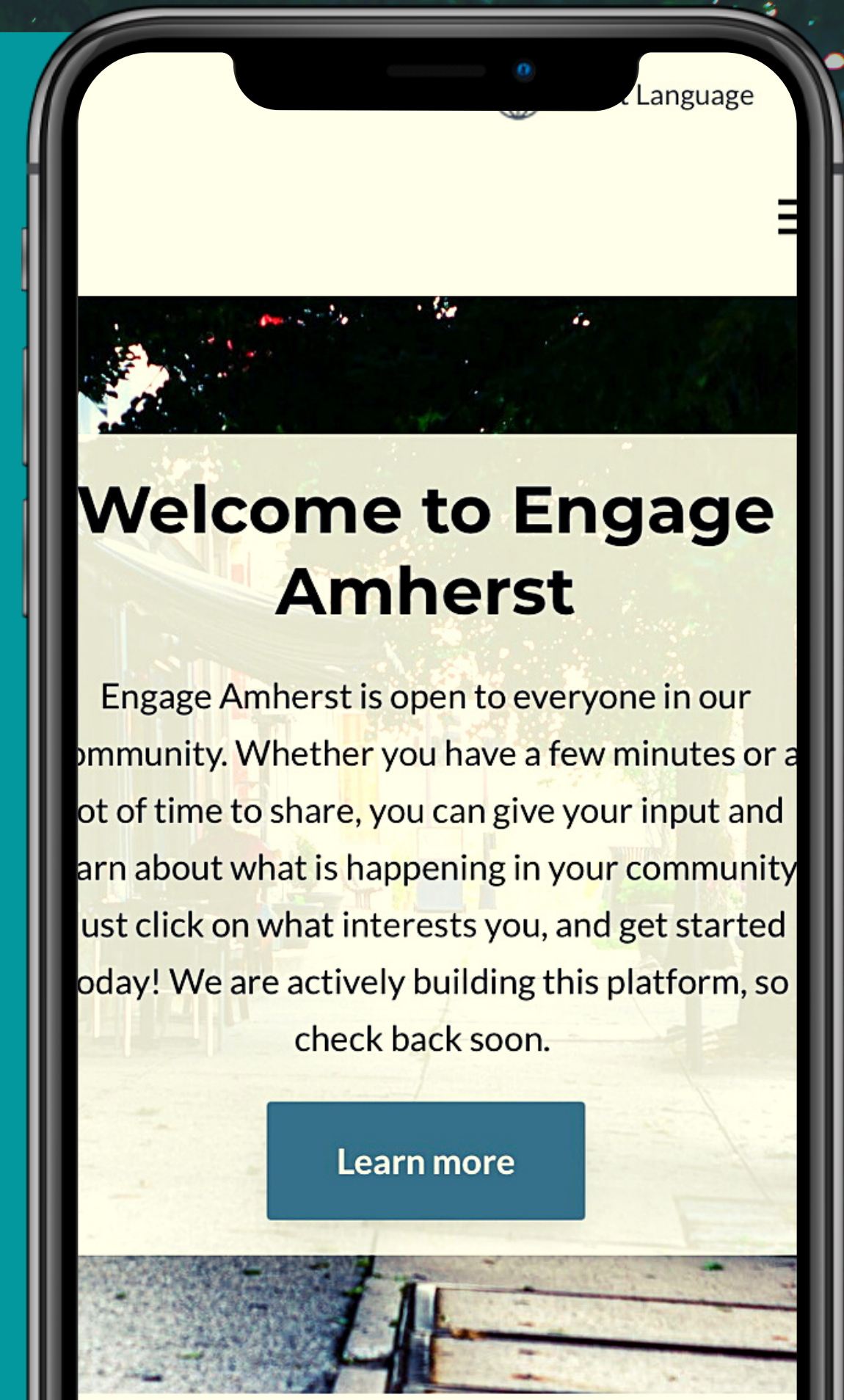
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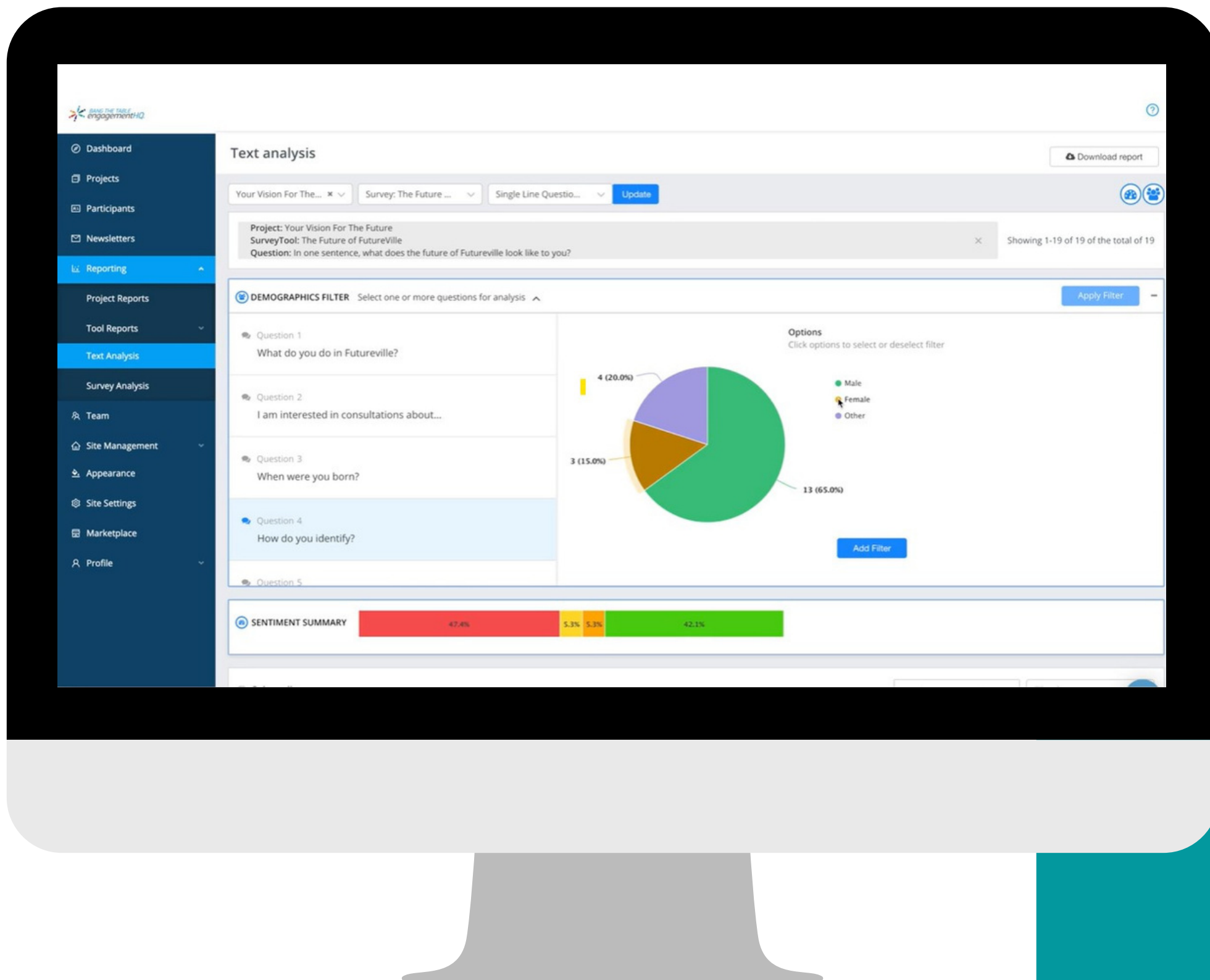


New Tool



Website





More on platform...

Tools include

- **Custom URL and Website**
Secure, hosted, accessible
www.engageamherst.org
- **Forums, ideas, mapping, stories, guestbook, Q & A, polls and surveys**
- **Analytics & Reporting Tools**
Data analysis of sentiments, easily read and shared with stakeholders, Councilors, & more importantly the public!



Engage Amherst: Hickory Ridge Project

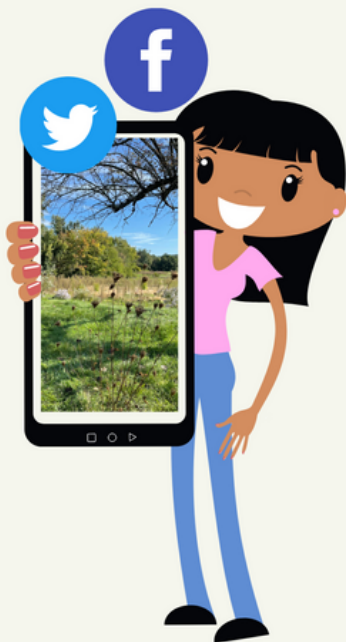
Blending in-person with online engagement



*Discover
Hickory Ridge*

Share your photos using
#DiscoverHickory
& tag us
@TownofAmherst!

scan me
escanéame



Learn more | Informarse
www.engageamherst.org/hickory

- Paired a series of in person discovery sessions with a project page online at Engage Amherst
- Collected written ideas but pushed all to visit our online space as well with great success
- QR codes on printed material & heavily promoted event online with links to project page

Engage Amherst: Hickory Ridge

1,089 Contributions (includes ideas, likes, & comments)

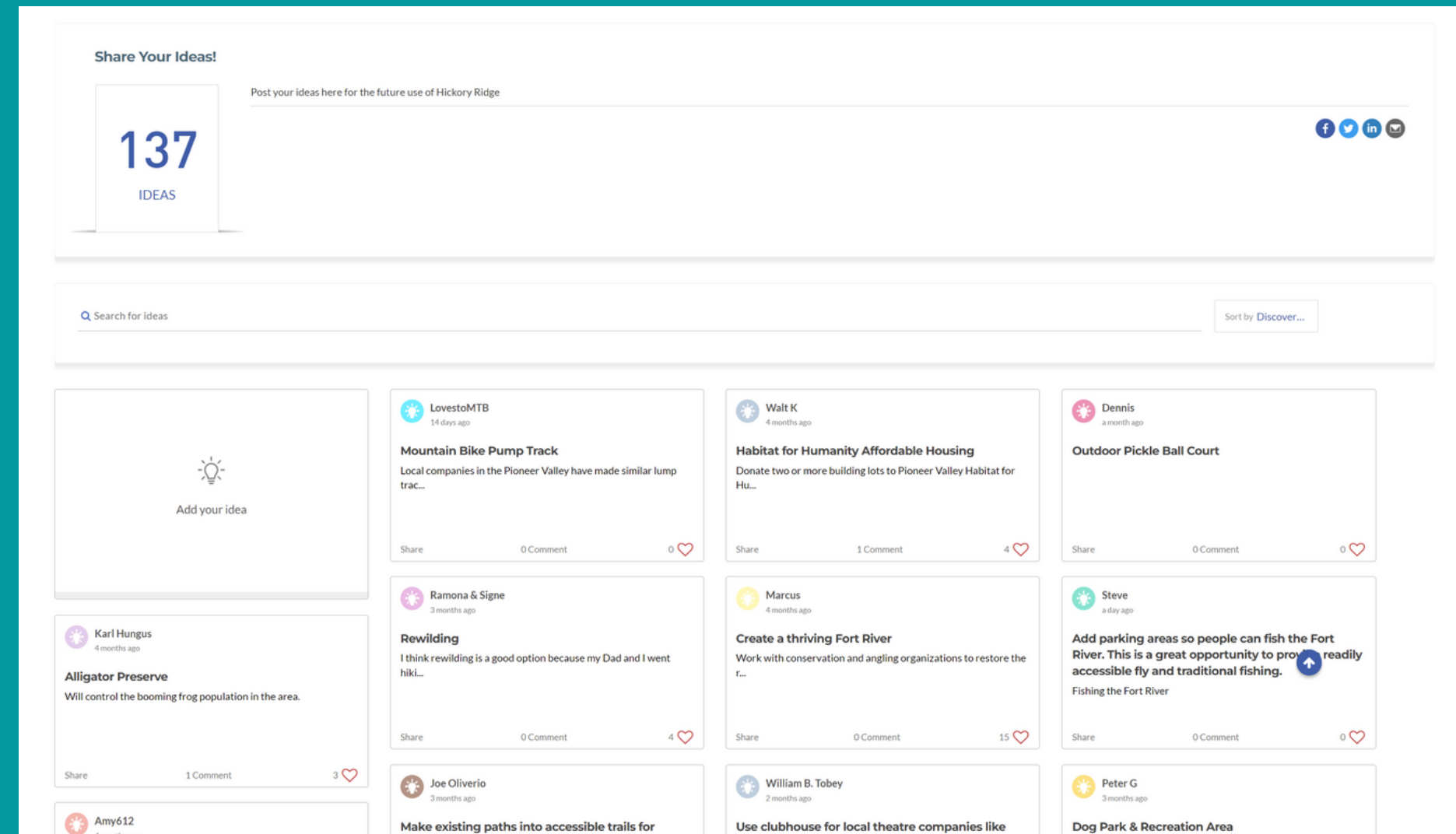
282 Contributors

137 Unique Ideas | 38 Comments | 915 Likes of Ideas

4.5 k Total Visits

200+ In person attendees

Robust reporting





Online public consultations

Recent:

- ARPA Funding
- Annual Budget
- Town Manager Evaluation
- Hickory Ridge: Future Land Use
- North Common Revitalization Project
- Intersection Improvement Project & more

Coming up:

- Elementary School Building Project
- Jones Library Renovation & Expansion
- Age & Dementia Friendly Community Process
- CDBG Community Priorities & more

In meeting polling

Touchpoints with attendees outside of public comment

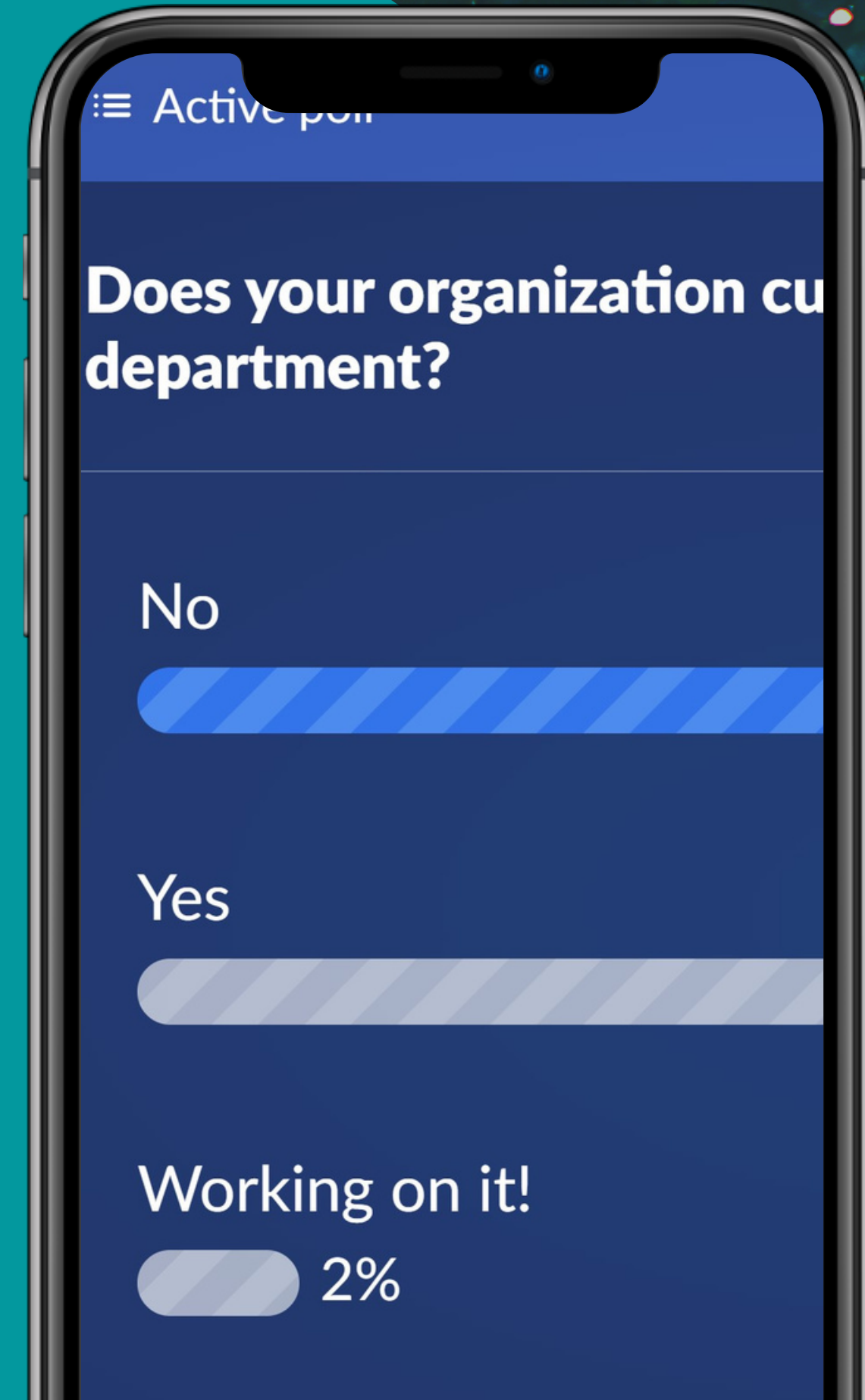
Use existing technology:

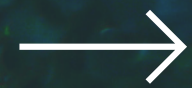
- Zoom/Teams native polling

Explore free services:

- Menti, Sli.do & more
- Ask limited polling questions with a free account
- Good place to start!

Paid services for more integrated polling





Digital Info Signs

Use for Engagement & Transparency

In addition to sharing out updates and other local information...

Use signs to ask questions and poll community members w/ text-in response options

Share surveys and project initiatives outside of existing audience or to the passerby

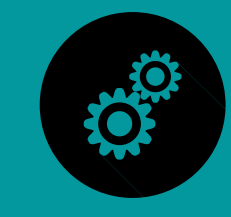
Access the digitally unbanked in our community with important info



CARES Funded



New Tool



Web & Physical



Budget

Communicate online about the annual budget in new ways

- **GIS Story Map:**

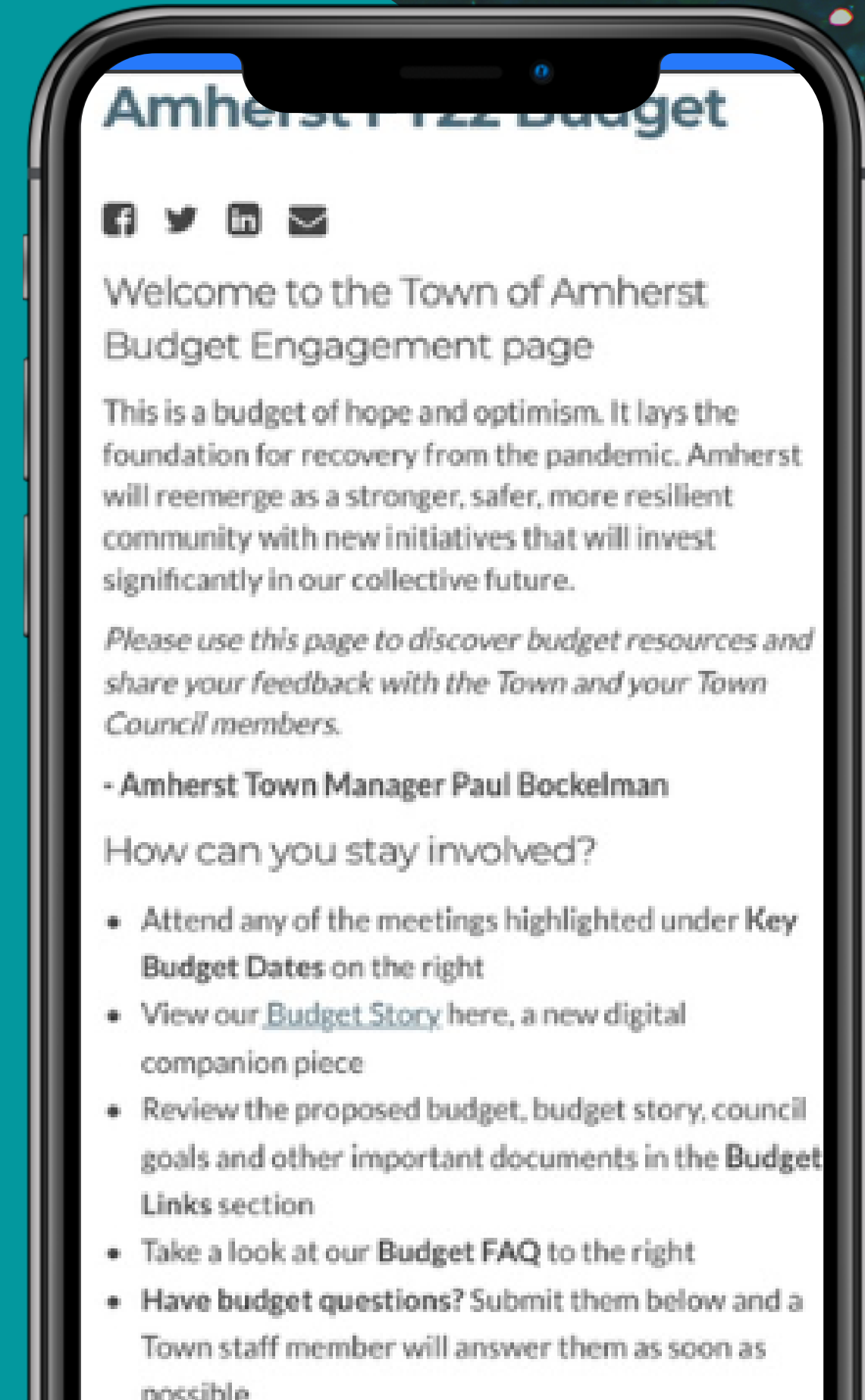
- Tell your budget story visually and make it interactive!

- **Dedicated Public Participation Page:**

- Engage Amherst Budget page
- Built in feedback tool
- Q&A button --> Finance Director
- Links to all materials & more

- **AMA sprints**

- Social media, Redditt
- Virtual workshops





UMass Amherst x Town Collab

Team of researchers from School of Public Policy, Dept. of Communications, and College of Information & Computer Sciences



Grant-funded digital engagement project, town deployed several community-centered digital tools designed at UMass to increase public participation, especially in diverse or marginalized groups



UMass Amherst x Town Collab

Community Click: web app used live, allows community members to silently & anonymously participate in public discussions in real-time. Captures more reticent voices & their sentiments.

Purpose built for the public social network: allows community engagement during and after public meetings.

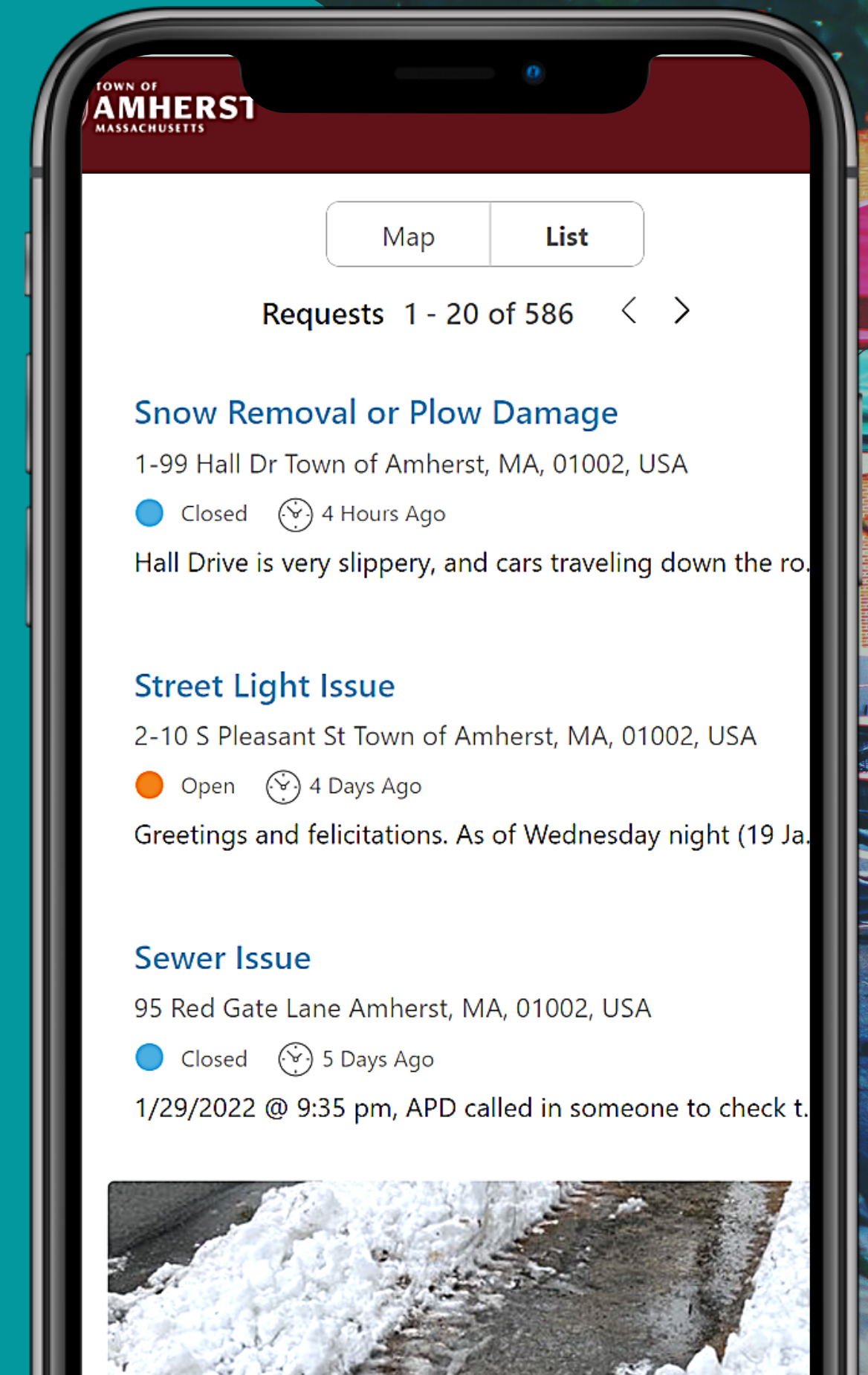
Both tested last month with continued study and collaboration in 2022.

Learn more: www.umass.edu/spp/news/grant-funds-civic-engagement-project

Other ways to connect...

Expand use of existing or free tools for increased engagement opportunities, for example:

- **SeeClickFix** issue reporting tool:
 - Set up districts or neighborhoods in this tool to create two way communications with some of your most active community members
- **Mass notification tools** traditionally used for emergencies but consider adding new categories for community to sign up and stay involved with major projects
- **Nextdoor, other third party social sites**





Increased availability and type of tech used for engagement...

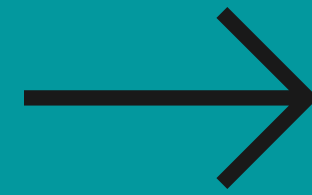


But who is left behind?

How do we address the digital divide when pushing for digital first services and engagement?



Rapid increase in new digital communications, services & engagement...



But how do we sustain this level of growth with existing staffing levels in local government?

How quickly can local government increase their capacity to maintain traditional methods while also embracing new at the same time?

Things to consider for effectively expanding online engagement



Define early what your promise is to the public



Understand staff time & expertise required for effective & proper use



Be strategic about bringing together online and face-to-face, leverage the strengths of each



Plan for scaling up & sustainability over time



If broadening your public participation is a priority, be ready to invest!



Questions?

Contact Info: Brianna Sunryd



Phone Number

413-259-3031



Email Address

sunrydb@amherstma.gov



Twitter

@Formerly_Fish