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coUrbanize launches array of free tools to help during COVID-19 crisis

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Boston, MA coUrbanize, the online community engagement platform purpose-built for real estate teams and city planners, has launched several new product features and resources to enhance communications and public outreach through the COVID-19 pandemic. As many developers and planners find themselves in a holding pattern of uncertainty, communicating clearly and often has become a common challenge for community and real estate leaders alike.

“The public process for planning and real estate development has been upended,” said Karin Brandt, CEO and founder of coUrbanize. “We’re helping our customers navigate this new reality – in which public and in-person meetings and engagement cannot happen – by giving them tools to communicate more effectively, virtually.”

coUrbanize is urging customers and partners to operate under the assumption that the pandemic will have longer-term impacts on project timelines and public processes. With that in mind, it is critical for project leaders to ensure community engagement remains as inclusive as possible without relying on in-person meetings for the foreseeable future. To address that evolving challenge, coUrbanize has developed a set of new product features and resources to help the industry to navigate digital community engagement. All are available at no cost.

New Product Features Designed for Easier Digital Engagement

- COVID-19 update templates and response tab: For most, the natural reaction in times of uncertainty is to wait until all the facts are gathered before communicating. But today, new information is emerging hour-by-hour each day, requiring frequent updates about how COVID-19 is impacting a given project. These new update templates include a general COVID-19 response template and another designed specifically for construction projects. Customers can also add a COVID-19 response tab to their project pages to document ongoing updates and process changes and impacts caused by the pandemic.
- Update templates for virtual meetings: Making the move to remote work and remote communications is difficult. So, coUrbanize has added two new templates to make the promotion of virtual community meetings and related details easier. New templates have been added to announce when a virtual meeting is scheduled and to notify community members when virtual meetings start.

- Chat request and virtual office hours: Community members can now request virtual one-on-one or small-group meetings with a project team with a single click. They can also fill out a quick form or get direct access to the right project team member's availability via Calend.ly or a similar smart scheduling tool.
- Enhanced video features: The lack of in-person engagement opportunities has made visual concepts more challenging to explain and understand. Customers can now embed videos in comment topics and updates, enabling community members to interact with a greater understanding of proposed plans and project impacts.
- Public comment via voicemail: Some community members don't have access or a comfort level in using online technology. A new feature allows customers to collect public comments via voicemail. Those comments are then automatically transcribed into text and added to the project page.

Educational Resources for Project Teams and Community Leaders

- Virtual office hours: coUrbanize is inviting any community leader, partner or real estate development team to schedule a time to attend virtual office hours with the engagement experts on the coUrbanize team to collaborate on how to solve any engagement and communications challenges that may arise. Request a session [here](#).
- Online forum: The company has also launched an online forum for the industry to share ideas, resources, and guidance to help each other better navigate the post-coronavirus world of city planning and real estate development.
- A new toolkit, Community Engagement in the Age of COVID-19: This resource provides templates and outlines some best practices for communications during this sensitive time, including guidance for hosting successful virtual meetings.

This toolkit outlines strategies to move to a digital-first community engagement strategy.

"We just kicked off a public process, using coUrbanize, for a new development and infrastructure project as a part of our ongoing work in Kendall Square," explained Tom Evans,

Executive Director of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority. "Community outreach can still happen even if traditional public meetings are cancelled. coUrbanize will allow us to engage with the neighborhood and continue moving the project forward even during this unprecedented time."

The coUrbanize team is continuing to collaborate with its customers and partners to find new ways to reimagine the public process in light of the pandemic. The company credits an open dialogue with customers as the source for several of these new features and encourages ongoing engagement to help uncover new ways they can meet customers' evolving needs.