



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Understanding the Tools Available for CED Professionals: How Far Do NC Local Governments Go in Social Media Presence?

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This past Friday, at the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration 2016 Annual Conference in Raleigh, second year UNC MPA graduate student Sabrina Willard accepted the Robert Klein Award for her paper on the presence of social media in North Carolina jurisdictions. The results of her paper raise significant questions about the adoption and use of social media in local government, including its ability to support or detract from community and economic development (CED) work. Willard's paper, including the full dataset, is attached with permission.



Image is obviously important for economic development efforts, and strong

community engagement helps community development efforts. How does social media fit in? Lisa Baker called it "A Brave New World" in an article on social media for CED professionals in the *Journal of Housing and Community Development* in 2012. Baker argues social media is here to stay and CED professionals will need to figure out how to manage the new landscape. North Carolina seemed up to the challenge. In a 2010 report, the North Carolina Association of State Chief Information Officers described the state as moving ahead aggressively with social media adoption.

Willard quickly found out that not only was there little available research on the impact of social media for public engagement on any issue, let alone CED, but there was little documentation of even *the presence* and types of social media being used by local government in North Carolina. Her effort, therefore, first focused on detailing the existence and growth of social media use by the local government overall. She did not look specifically at websites for economic development corporations, bureaus of tourism or community development nonprofits, but started at the broader town or city level. In the past year, one by one, Willard examined the website, Facebook, and Twitter presence of all 553 municipalities in North Carolina. The results were startling.

Not surprisingly, of the 50 largest cities in the state, 96% are on social media, compared to





Perhaps even more interesting, however, is that **there has been almost no growth in North Carolina local government social media adoption in the past three years**. A 2013 Western Carolina University report found 54% of all North Carolina municipalities had a social media presence. In 2016, Willard found that that percentage had increased by only one point –an increase to 55%. It appears that the early adopters have been the only adopters.

Should every jurisdiction seeking CED advancement have a social media presence? That's an open question. Obviously some jurisdictions may be more suited to it than others. However, Willard also looked at whether or not the majority of North Carolina municipalities that are *best situated* to reach the most active group of social media users (suburban, younger and/or wealthier) are taking advantage of the opportunity to engage with those specific populations, using complementary information provided by a 2014 Pew Research Center study. Again, there were surprising findings. Only 50% of North Carolina's wealthier jurisdictions (those with a median income of over \$75,000) were engaging in social media use (Facebook and/or Twitter). In addition, use by suburban communities was higher (67%) as was use by communities with high populations of 18 and 29 year olds (54%). Given the wide-spread use of social media in the general population, this means there is significant untapped potential by local governments to reach out to community members



about CED efforts.

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What does this mean for smaller jurisdictions? As Willard found, the practitioner world is moving faster than research, and there are not yet wide-spread studies on impact. But recent research from Maine by Jones, Borgman and Ulusoy in the journal *Small Business and Enterprise Development* on the use of social media by small businesses in underserved areas suggests positive benefits, not just for the businesses themselves but for the overall image of small business in the surrounding region. A 2015 study from Scotland by Peter Matthews in the journal *Housing Studies* highlights the benefits of social media for a distressed neighborhood by prompting discussions about housing, neighborhoods and 'residence.' As social media evolves, research on the value of local investment in social media by CED officers will increase. Having a benchmark study such as this may advance conversations around social media for CED efforts now, and make such future research in North Carolina easier.

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