Now more than ever, local governments that have not already done so need to develop and prioritize m-governance strategies to help them harness the power of mobile to bolster citizen engagement and streamline administrative workflows.

What is M-Governance?
Where e-governance is defined as the use of electronic communication devices, computers, and the Internet to provide public services to citizens, m-governance is more specifically the strategy of ensuring that citizen self-service functionality and information are accessible and consumable using mobile device technology such as smartphones and tablets. Aside from the convenience of allowing citizens to access resources any time from anywhere, m-governance offers critical infrastructure and financial benefits to local governments, as it eliminates the need for more costly physical communication networks, particularly in rural communities.

For local governments to evolve their internal collaboration and citizen content delivery models to enable mobile consumption, local governments must do more than build mobile responsive websites. A successful m-governance strategy must be supported by defined administrative processes, sustainable information, communication technology infrastructure that includes secure networks and databases, and an interdepartmental m-governance plan that ensures ongoing data quality procedures and software stack integrations and, of course, a mobile app development strategy.

Why Local Governments Should Build Mobile Apps to Engage Citizens
Whether your city, town, county, or village is upstate or downstate, rural, urban, or suburban, you can expect your citizens are relying on their mobile device for news, information, communication, engagement, and resources. Your average citizen spends up to five hours every day on a mobile device, and the vast majority -- 92% -- of this time is spent engaging within mobile apps. Yes, some of that time is spent with social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter, but that’s not all. For digital tools that your citizens rely on in both their personal and professional lives, apps often provide a streamlined and mobile optimized interface and engagement experience, enabling citizens to utilize critical tools and services conveniently from a smartphone or tablet.

Aside from social media, the list of critical, often daily-use mobile applications includes maps, games, news sources, weather, mobile banking, eBooks, enterprise applications such as file sharing services, team collaboration tools, project management solutions, and the list goes on. Why then, shouldn’t citizens be able to engage with their local leaders, request public services, or sign up for events or activities using a mobile app solution?

Municipal Mobile Application Opportunities
Your citizens want to engage in their local community, and they want to do it anytime, from anywhere, and from any device. Consider these citizen engagement touch-
points, all of which should be accomplishable in person, over the phone, from a desktop computer, or a custom mobile application:

- Submitting a public works request,
- Paying a water bill,
- Filling out a voter registration application,
- Remitting public parking pay,
- Researching community events,
- Signing up a child for a youth league,
- Reading meeting minutes,
- Renewing and remitting payment for pet, hunting, or fishing licenses,
- Watching a live recording of a public hearing,
- Submitting a job application,
- Paying a parking ticket,
- Reserving a park pavilion for a family reunion,
- Researching shelter pets for adoption,
- Purchasing a monthly public transit pass, and
- Receiving urgent and emergency alerts.

The list above is only a miniscule number of the civic interactions your citizens have with your municipality daily and only a portion of those that should be accomplishable from a mobile application.

Do Citizens Expect Mobile Accessible Government?
The answer to this question is a resounding yes. Today’s citizens of all ages from metropolitan cities to rural communities are reliant upon mobile device technology to seek out information, receive alerts, and establish a two-way dialogue with public sector entities. Local governments that fail to enable mobile access to resources, tools, and services, are failing to meet the needs of their citizens. When it comes to m-governance, 90% of citizens want to engage with government services through a mobile app. The common belief is that modern mobile experiences are unencumbered and simplify the user’s ability to quickly and easily obtain needed information.

Benefits of Mobile App Technology for Citizens and Their Local Governments
Consider these three ways that citizens and administrations benefit from mobile app development and deployment:

**Increased Engagement.** Mobile technology enables the kind of any time; anywhere convenience citizens want and expect from brands and entities. In an era where citizens can tweet a pizza order, they expect to be able to report a downed tree branch when they see it on a Sunday morning when strolling through a local park with nothing but a smartphone.

**Positive ROI.** Local governments across New York are staff and resource-strapped now more than ever before. Any investment in technology that can reduce paper, streamline administrative workflows and eliminate manual interventions so workers can prioritize other critical processes produces positive ROI.

For example, by reducing the number of phone calls that parks and recreation staff must respond to from citizens looking to register for upcoming seasonal classes, frees up staff members to focus on new projects, such as intergenerational program planning, or park revitalization projects. As part of your ROI optimization, consider whether it will be more cost effective for you to build your app using internal staff and hosting resources, or outsourcing development to a tech solution expert.

**Demonstrate Civic Commitment and Responsiveness.** Elected officials and their administrations are under constant scrutiny to answer the question, “how are our tax dollars being spent?” Mobile apps with citizen-service-first functionality remove barriers and close gaps between public resources and citizens. This flattened structure means that citizens can more easily access local resources, request public services, or chat with a representative anytime and anywhere, which proves that their local government is responsive to their needs and wants -- and that local leaders are optimizing their tax dollars.

What to Consider When Building a Citizen Mobile App
If your administration is ready to invest in a custom mobile app experience with citizen service functionality and administration benefits, consider these four critical factors for success:

1. **Scalability**
   With so many opportunities to engage citizens, streamline service delivery, and delight people with convenient civic access, it can be tempting to feel the pressure to create a mobile app that needs to be everything to everyone. The result could be a mobile app that is overwhelming whose long-list of features is never used in its entirety by the average citizen. Contrarily, it could be tempting to build 13 apps, each with a different function, creating a confusing, fragmented, and inefficient citizen experience, with siloed databases to manage, separate login credentials, unique branding, and inconsistent user experiences.

2. **Research**
   What then, is the sweet spot? How can local governments leverage mobile app technology to offer the types of services best suited for mobile engagement and do it in a way that will enhance, not confound, citizen interactions, and bolster, not burden, administrative operations? Before briefing your internal tech team, or hiring a mobile app partner, understand the needs of your citizens and where mobile solutions can be a benefit.
Consider conducting citizen focus groups and ask questions that help you understand the unique mobile behaviors and needs of your citizens. Also ask probing questions to understand everyday moments where citizens are looking for local news, information, and resources to strategize how to prioritize functionality and usability decisions.

3. Leadership
Create a dedicated leadership team to manage your mobile app implementation project. Depending on the scale and scope of your project, you may want stakeholders from multiple departments to be involved—such as parks and recreation, communications, and IT, in addition to elected representatives. Alternatively, if you are a small administration, your mobile app development may be successfully managed by one or two subject matter experts. The critical step is ensuring that you have a single, primary point of contact to lead the project. He or she will be responsible for keeping internal staff or third-party partners on time, on budget, and focused on your objectives.

As part of your leadership strategy, publicize to all stakeholders who is the ultimate decision maker (or team of decision makers) when it comes to adding features or choosing vendors. Identifying and consistently leveraging a decided chain of command will streamline the app development, management, and iteration process.

4. Development
Ensure the platform you build or adopt is scalable and will allow you to add service functionality in future iterations. As awareness and use of the app catch on, you may want to add additional features, or other departments may ask to have some of their most critical engagement processes integrated. Just like your municipal website, your mobile app should be in a constant state of evolution. Such a continuous improvement strategy will help keep citizens engaged with the product and checking in frequently to see what is new and available.

If You Build It, Will They Come?
Finally, once you have a quality engagement product that can enhance your citizens’ relationship with your administration, know that you cannot rely on the perceived power of app stores to make citizens aware of its existence. You must market your app/apps at every citizen engagement touchpoint to create app awareness and increase downloads and usage. Consider such marketing channels as:

- Utility bill stuffers,
- Your municipal website homepage,
- Postcards handed out at local events,
- A press release to local media,
- E-mails to citizen subscribers,
- Promotions by local representatives at events,
- Signage at municipal facilities, and
- Social media promotions, re-tweets and re-posts.

Don’t Forget About Enterprise Mobility Opportunities
It is no surprise that the most popular app used on a mobile device is Facebook, but it should also be no surprise that Americans use their smartphones and tablets for more than personal correspondence and social networking. Another significant benefit of mobile technology for the public sector is the ability for staff to work better and faster, from anywhere, on any device.

Consider these enterprise mobility statistics:

- According to TopRank Marketing, 64% of decision-makers read their e-mail on a mobile device.
- According to Fliplet, 60% of workers use apps for work-related activity.
- 53% of those who work on a mobile device say it helps them do their job better.
- 25% of workers use department-specific apps for such business activities as: event support, marketing campaigns, financial reporting, training, creating proposals, product management, project management, and ubiquitous computing.

Advancements in mobile device technology and enterprise applications have led to the trend of ubiquitous computing we see today. Today’s average American worker, whether in the private or public sector, is perpetually tethered to a mobile device. Supporting this trend is the growing number of software solutions developing apps that allow workers to seamlessly utilize a system, work on a project, or collaborate with a team, from anywhere, on any device. Today, a public information officer for a community can start creating a press release on a desktop computer in the afternoon, finish the same document on a tablet while waiting for a meeting to begin in a building across town, and edit the same material later that night while riding the commuter train home.

As you build your mobile technology strategy roadmap, make time to identify opportunities for your staff to collaborate better, produce deliverables faster, and accommodate deadlines using mobile application technology.

Final Thoughts
Our society has accepted mobile device technology as a way of life, and it’s not expected that mobile experiences are on pace to take a back seat to other forms of digital engagement anytime soon. By understanding your citizens’ needs, prioritizing device agnostic, 24/7 engagement, and strategically building mobile service and functionality solutions, you will earn your citizens’ trust and appreciation as a modern and responsive community that is intent on being accessible, available, and service-oriented.