



Community news is clicking on the Internet

Neighborhood groups increasingly use Web

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Web sites, blogs and social networking sites are changing the way news is spread in north Baltimore neighborhoods.

Communities such as Roland Park have well-established and maintained Web sites that keep neighbors informed of the latest neighborhood news.

Greater Homewood Community Corporation, a community-based organization that serves 40 neighborhoods, is using the social networking site www.facebook.com to communicate with communities.

Northern District police use Listservs, e-mails and neighborhood Web sites to spread the word about everything from Citizens On Patrol walks to recent criminal activity.

Doug Munro, Webmaster for the Web site www.rolandpark.org, said the site is used to get time-sensitive information out to the community.

He said the site is a cost-efficient way of providing "nuts and bolts" information, from the neighborhood pool hours of operation to the latest news about Keswick Multi-Care Center's controversial plans to build a 323-bed retirement community. The site feeds into "what people do like doing on Web sites (which is) clicking on stuff, and bringing up new windows and pictures," he said.

Greater Homewood late last year launched "Greater Homewood 2.0," a strategy that uses the Internet, including a blog site, greaterhomewood.blogspot.com, to stay in touch with member community associations, spokeswoman Frankie Gamber said. The blog site is used to post short articles, photos and videos to update residents on Greater Homewood activities and initiatives, she said.

"We thought that we could really extend our capabilities for communicating with people in a much more frequent and a much more timely manner if we started introducing more electronic platforms into our repertoire," Gamber said.

Greater Homewood also started a Facebook page to help its communities feel more "interconnected," Gamber said.

"It's a really great tool for building community, because even if you can't necessarily physically go to a neighborhood association meeting, you can still participate in the life of the community by keeping up with the Web site," she said.

E-mails, Listservs and Web sites also help police to release and get information.

"We can put out an alert if something is going on in a neighborhood," said Doug Gibson, a police community liaison officer. "If we're seeking information in a neighborhood, we use it that way."

But the new media has drawbacks.

One issue with Web sites is that they have to be updated and kept fresh, Munro said. Some community Web sites start off with a lot of momentum and a lot of new information being posted, but soon lose steam and become static -- "a brochure in cyberspace," Munro said.

But in Oakenshawe, that's by design, said Becky Bridger, co-president of the Oakenshawe Improvement Association.

Though the association doesn't have the time or resources to update most of the content on its Web site, www.oakenshawe.org, on a regular basis, the page that lists local contractors is updated often, Bridger said. Residents also get "blast" e-mails and communicate through a Yahoo group, she said. And even a

static site has brought the community into the Internet age, negating the need for its old newsletter.

"We don't flier the neighborhood anymore," Bridger said.

Gibson warned of another downside: sites that lack an online gatekeeper can be rumor mills, causing panic. For example, "it seems like every year or so some crazy rumor about body parts being found in a Dumpster in Hampden pops up," he said

Despite the drawbacks, communities are expanding their forays onto the Internet.

Gamber hopes to post video of Greater Homewood's "Barclay Boys" summer program for pre-teens on www.youtube.com. And Munro is working on a project to highlight the history of Roland Park by posting old photos from the Baltimore County library archive next to recently taken photos of the same buildings.

Editor Larry Perl contributed to this story.

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