INTRODUCING...

Your Government At Work

By Kalzi

Websites; How Does Your Town And Village Rate?

It is generally recognized that a website is an effective, cost-efficient way for a town to provide information to its residents and introduce itself to outsiders.

I took a look at the existing websites for the seven valley towns in Greene County (excludes the mountaintop towns) to see if they were easy-to-use and provided useful information. In addition, the websites for the three villages located in these towns were examined. And, to get a sense of the quality of websites to the immediate north and south of the County, the websites for the towns (and villages) of Coeymans and Saugerties were also looked at. In total fourteen websites were examined.

Each website was then graded from A to F. A grade of "A" was given to those that were considered excellent. A website earning an A not only provided basic information, but was well organized, easy-to-use and provided a wealth of other information. A grade of "B" was given to those that did a good job of providing information beyond the basics but lacked certain important elements. A grade of "C" was given to those that provided basic information, but little else, or those that may have provided significant information but had serious flaws in doing so. A grade of "D" was given to those that had a website but the website failed to provide even basic information. A grade of "F" was given to those that did not have a website. The results were decidedly mixed. Here are the results, by descending grade level.

1. Town of Catskill (A). Best website in Greene County. It was well-organized, easy to use and provided a wealth of useable information including the minutes of the Town Board, Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) all the way back to 2001. This is a website that the Town, and its residents, can be proud of.

2. Town of New Baltimore (B+). The second best website. It was a solid, well-organized website with a wealth of information. It was notably unique in that it was the only website that provided the 2009 Town Budget, in detail, together with the Supervisor's message. The only reason it did not achieve a higher grade was that it provided only the last three Town Board minutes and no minutes at all for either the Planning Board or the ZBA.

3. Town of Greenville (B). A good website. It was fairly easy to use, provided much information but was a step behind New Baltimore. Some deficiencies include not listing the members of the Planning Board and ZBA and having only three months worth of minutes for the Town Board and no minutes at all for either the Planning Board or ZBA.

4. Town of Coxsackie (C+). This was the "schizo" of the websites. There appears to be a serious attempt to have a serious website, and indeed there is a lot of useable information, but it fails in several important areas, so the overall grade is a blending of these pluses and minuses. On the plus side, it has much information relating to the Comprehensive Plan and the Town's Code. It, however, has big minuses. For example, there are no minutes for either the Planning Board or ZBA, and in the case of the ZBA, not even information on when it meets. It further appears that there is a design flaw in the construction of the website in that the website is not fully accessible to all the major web browsers (Mozilla, Firefox, for example, does not show the critical menu bar on the home page). An example of the frustration one experiences when using the website occurred when I visited the prominently displayed "Events Calendar," expecting to see dates of meetings of the various town boards. The calendar showed absolutely nothing for 2009 except for a "Pancake Breakfast" on January 25. In general, the website promises much more than it delivers and has some large holes for anyone looking for information relating to the Town.

5. Village of Coxsackie (C). The approach taken here is to provide just basic information. And, that is done fairly well. You can figure out who to contact if you have an issue, but the website provides little else. For example, it provides no on-line forms, no minutes of meeting of any of its Boards and no Comprehensive Plan information.

6. Village of Catskill (C). This website is similar to the Village of Coxsackie, in that it provides basic information and not much else. Here, when you go to "Events Calendar" there is absolutely nothing - not even a pancake breakfast.

7. Town of Cairo (C). The website appears to be fairly new and one that is still being worked on. It provides basic contact information in an easy-to-use-fashion. In addition, it provides the Town's Comprehensive Plan. In short, it is a good start, but much still needs to be done to achieve its promise.

8. Town of Durham (C). Like both the Villages of Catskill and Coxsackie, the website takes the minimalist approach, providing basic information on who does what and who to contact and not much else. It does this well.

9. Town of Athens (F). No website.

10. Village of Athens (F). No website.

In addition to the Greene County websites, I looked to the immediate north and south of the County to the towns of Coeymans and Saugerties to see how their websites compared to the Greene County websites. Generally the results were better than the Greene County websites. The Town of Saugerties was rated A+ and, as such, would have placed first were it located in Greene County. The Village of Saugerties rated an A-. The Town of Coeymans was rated B+-. And the Village of Ravena was rated a C-. Of special note is the Town of Saugerties website. It had most everything one could hope for, both in form and substance. Towns and villages looking to improve their website should take a close look at it.

COMMENTS ARE WELCOME AND SHOULD BE SENT TO KALZI@YMAIL.COM.