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### **e-Government Analysis: Fargo, North Dakota**

Fargo, North Dakota, a city on the bank of the Red River, was founded in 1871 and named after William G. Fargo, director of the Northern Pacific Railroad and co-founder of Wells Fargo (City of Fargo, 2014e). The Northern Pacific Railroad built a bridge across the Red River the same year, connecting Fargo to Moorhead, Minnesota (NDSU, 2013). Because of the bridge between the two cities, the Fargo ND-MN Metropolitan Statistical Area was created, which includes Fargo, Moorhead, and the surrounding communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Fargo was named the seat of Cass County, North Dakota in 1873 (NACO, 2010). By 1881, Fargo's population was 2,693, and by 1890 it was 5,664 (NDSU, 2013). In 1893, Fargo had a widespread fire on their main street, destroying over 31 blocks. Within a year, 246 buildings were rebuilt as brick structures, and most of the buildings are still standing today (City of Fargo, 2014e).

In 2012, Fargo had a population of 109,779 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a), which is more than half of the 2012 population for the Fargo ND-MN Statistical Area (216,785; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Fargo continues to grow in population and, as a result, the city offers a variety of services and community groups to its citizens (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Fargo, North Dakota Community Statistics*

City Service/Community Group	Number
Police officers <sup>a</sup>	145
Schools <sup>b</sup>	
Public	37
Private	6
Colleges (private, technical)	7

City Service/Community Group	Number
Universities	1
Education of citizens <sup>c</sup>	
Population 3 years and over enrolled in school	33,534
High school graduate or higher	64,235
Bachelor's degree or higher	1,419
Library branches <sup>d</sup>	3
Hospitals <sup>e</sup>	3
Religious congregations (Cass county) <sup>f</sup>	
Mainline protestant	70
Evangelical protestant	44
Catholic	14
Eastern orthodox	1
Other	10

*Note:* The Fargo website did not include some of the presented information; data was found in other reputable sources.

<sup>a</sup>City of Fargo, 2014a. <sup>b</sup>National Center for Education Statistics, 2014. <sup>c</sup>U.S. Census Bureau, 2012c. <sup>d</sup>City of Fargo, 2014g. <sup>e</sup>City of Fargo, 2014d. <sup>f</sup>ASARB, 2010

Fargo has a Commission form of government. The Mayor and four Commissioners are elected by the citizens every four years, and the positions have three term limits (City of Fargo, 2014b). The Commissioners act as liaisons between government departments, the Mayor, the City Commission, and the citizens, in order to provide “an effective avenue for communication between elected and appointed city officials.” The Commissioner liaison system also “helps citizens decide which Commissioner to contact when they have questions or concerns about a particular city department or function” (City of Fargo, 2014b). Unfortunately, the Fargo website does not reflect this connection between elected and appointed officials, and does not provide open lines of communication between those parties and the citizens. For example, although the City Commission webpage lists the liaison titles, the government department webpages do not have this information. Commissioner Mike Williams is the liaison to the Information Services Department, but there is no mention of his name or contact information on the department’s webpage (City of Fargo, 2014f).

The Fargo website organization also reflects a distinct separation between the city and the departments (i.e., elected and appointed officials). The website is divided into four major sections: City Info, Residential, Business, and Departments. “City Info” includes general city information, news from the Mayor, and City Commission meeting minutes; “Residential” includes topics and services relevant to homeowners; “Businesses” includes topics and services relevant to business owners; and “Departments” includes 20 separate webpages for each of the city’s departments. There is also a smaller menu bar at the top of the website, which includes separate sections such as FAQs (entitled “How Do I...”), Emergencies, Calendar, Disability Information, Links for Visitors, and a Contact Form. This structure is very confusing for the user, as one expects the information to be divided into the four main categories, but the small menu bar offers additional standalone information. Because the information is not clearly divided and organized, the website is almost impossible to browse.

However, after thoroughly searching Fargo’s dense and confusing website, it is clear that the city offers a variety of information, communication, and transaction e-government services (City of Fargo, 2014c). For purposes of this paper, Fargo’s e-government services were analyzed according to recent e-government analysis studies—Coursey & Norris, 2008 and Norris & Reddick, 2013. In particular, the division between information/communication and transaction services was taken from the Coursey & Norris 2008 study. See the results of Fargo’s e-government services analysis in Table 2.

Table 2  
*Fargo, North Dakota e-Government Services*

Service	Yes/No	Notes
Information and communication	--	
Commission agenda/minutes	Yes	--
Codes/ordinances	Yes	--
Forms that can be downloaded for manual completion	Yes	Many available across all departments

Service	Yes/No	Notes
Employment information/applications	Yes	
Online communication with individual elected and appointed officials	Yes	Via e-mail
Geographic information systems mapping/data	Yes	--
e-Newsletters sent to residents/businesses	Yes	--
e-Alerts	Yes	For emergencies only
Streaming video	Yes	Commission meetings only
Video on demand	Yes	--
Mobile apps	Yes	PD only
Customer relationship management/311	No	--
Interactive voice response	No	--
Podcasts	No	--
Moderated discussions	No	--
Instant messaging	No	--
Chat rooms	No	--
Transaction services		--
Online requests for services/reporting problems	Yes	--
Online payments of utility bills	Yes	--
Online payments of fines/fees	Yes	Parking tickets only
Online property registration (animal, bicycle, etc.)	Yes	--
Online requests for local government records	No	--
Online registration for use of recreational facilities/activities (classes, picnic areas, etc.)	No	Fargo Parks website
Online delivery of local government records	No	PD only; print and mail forms
Online payments of taxes	No	Cass County website
Online completion and submission of permit applications	No	Print and mail forms
Online completion and submission of business license applications/renewals	No	Print and mail forms
Online voter registration	N/A	There is no voter registration in North Dakota <sup>a</sup>

*Notes:* "No" was answered if the service was offered on a separate website. PD = police department.

<sup>a</sup>North Dakota Secretary of State, 2014.

The data above shows that Fargo has made a huge effort to provide information on their website, but when it comes to direct Government to Citizen (G2C) communication, the city is lacking (e.g., no chat rooms, instant messaging, or 311 lines). However, according to Norris & Reddick, 2013, Fargo is not alone in their lack of G2C communication. The Norris & Reddick

study found that out of 4,452 municipal government websites surveyed in 2011, only 17.2% had customer relationship management, 7.3% had moderated discussions, and 7.1% had instant messaging on their websites. Rather than G2C communication features, most of the websites had information-based communication like e-newsletters, meeting minutes, and video on demand—similar to Fargo.

When it comes to transaction e-government services, Fargo has some major growing to do. The city does allow citizens to pay utility bills and parking tickets online, but their website offers less than half of common e-government transaction services. For example, in 2011 49.7% of local government websites had online requests for government records and 36.7% had online deliveries of those records to citizens (Norris & Reddick, 2013, p. 169). Fargo doesn't have either of these features on their website; the Police Department is the only government department that even acknowledges requests for records, but requests are made and fulfilled by mail. Additionally, a few transaction services were offered on external websites, but that information was very difficult to locate on Fargo's dense website.

It is also important to assess Fargo's presence on social media, as everything the city shares on social media accounts falls under their e-government services. Fargo's website was analyzed again (see Table 3) according to Mossberger and colleague's analysis of interactive and social media tools on websites of the largest cities in the United States (Mossberger, et al., 2013).

Table 3  
*Fargo, North Dakota Website Interactive and Social Media Tools*

Tool	Yes/No	Notes
Online newsletter subscriptions or e-mail updates	Yes --	
Downloadable information materials	Yes --	
Comment or message box	Yes	"Contact Us" form
RSS feed	Yes --	
Twitter	Yes	Separate PD Twitter
Facebook link	Yes	Separate PD Facebook
YouTube link	Yes	PD only

Tool	Yes/No	Notes
Blog for city in general	No	--
Blog for elected official	No	--
Flickr link	No	--
Online citizen survey	No	--
Searchable databases	No	--
Discussion boards	No	--
Virtual town hall meetings	No	--
Open data portals	No	PD has dispatch log data

*Note:* PD = police department.

Fargo utilizes less than half of common social media and interactive tools on their website, which further reflects the city's lack of G2C communication. Though Fargo has some social media presence, the tools are severely under-utilized. For example, Fargo's Facebook and Twitter pages are used to convey information about local events and to answer simple questions. There are no instances of dialogues about city issues between government representatives and citizens, but not for lack of trying. Citizens frequently post and tweet comments and suggestions for improvements to Fargo, but government representatives make no effort to engage them in conversation. Mossberger believes that social media should be integrated into all local e-government services as a means to "provide convenient venues for dialogue between citizens, and with government," (Mossberger, et al., 2013, p. 351) but Fargo is not using the tools to create those dialogues. Their social media presence is just another avenue through which to provide information available on their website.

Fargo, North Dakota meets citizen expectations when it comes to distributing information electronically (Shuler, Jaeger, & Bertot, 2010). The city's website is overrun with information; users can find everything from police crime reports, city commission minutes, trash pickup schedules, GIS maps, and detailed answers to common resident and business questions. The city has not figured out how to organize that information, but it is possible this is due to the fact that

“Fargo [is] continuing to grow and its activities [are] becoming more complex” (City of Fargo, 2014b), and the issue will hopefully be fixed as the city expands. On the other hand, Fargo does not provide adequate G2C communication, given the tools and platforms they are utilizing. The City Commissioners are supposed to be liaisons between government services and citizens, but they do not offer open lines of communication on the website or social media platforms.

Additionally, Fargo presents all information and data in formatted documents; there are no open data portals or databases for users to search. Bertot would argue that the City of Fargo “ought to strive to produce open data rather than focus on the formal documents or specific formats” (Bertot, Jaeger, Shuler, Simmons, & Grimes, 2009, p. 434) in order to encourage citizen participation in city services, thereby expanding their G2C communication.

Looking forward, Fargo needs to increase lines of communication in order to build mutually beneficial relationships and “trust” between the government and its citizens (Morgeson, VanAmburg, & Mithas, 2011, p. 2). As the city increases their communication with citizens, they can establish better organization and integration of e-government services. As seen in Tables 2 and 3, the Fargo Police Department is already providing G2C communication through a mobile application, government record requests, specialized social media accounts, and dispatch log data. As a first step, the Fargo City Commissioners need to meet with the Police Department to discuss if this strategy is beneficial for both the department and the citizens. Whatever the outcome of this first step, the end goal for Fargo is to standardize their G2C communication policy and offer global e-government services across all departments. The city may not be able to offer all the services outlined in Tables 2 and 3, but they should not *only* be offered in one or two departments.

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