

Date: December 8, 2023

To: City Administrator Marketa Oliver, City of Bondurant, Iowa

From: Eli Steenhoek, Sam Keenan, James Feeney, Ellie Holstad, Harper Dunne (Civic Education Group), Public Policy and Persuasion Fall 2023

Re: Citizen Property Tax Education

SUMMARY

Like many communities around the country, residents of Bondurant, Iowa struggle to understand both the mechanisms of property taxes and how their taxes are connected to essential city services. One way that this gap in knowledge manifests itself is an abundance of residents calling or emailing various city and county departments, causing strain on staff time. To improve city-to-resident communication about city services and their connection to property taxes, the city of Bondurant could benefit from using infographics, adjusting its social media platforms and website, and potentially investing in an AI Chatbot.

BACKGROUND

As a rapidly growing city, the issue of communicating with residents about important issues like property taxes is more important in Bondurant than ever. Bondurant is a city of 8,710 citizens located just northeast of Des Moines. Despite often being considered a suburb of Des Moines, the City of Bondurant predates Des Moines' expansion. In the past 13 years, Bondurant has seen its population grow by a staggering 91%.¹ Also, in 2020, Amazon opened a fulfillment center in Bondurant which brought 1,800 jobs to the city.² This rapid growth means that more people are interacting with the property tax system. On top of that, Bondurant also has a high percentage of property-tax paying homeowners at 90%,³ more than exceeding Iowa's state average of 73%.⁴

Compared with the surrounding area, Bondurant's population is also very young. Just 7.6% of residents are over age 65⁵ compared to Polk County's 14.2%.⁵ Bondurant's median age of 32.5 is significantly lower than Polk County's 36.7.² Having a younger city population calls for a communications strategy that takes technology into account.

Lastly, 61% of the City of Bondurant budget is funded through general property taxes, of which are majority commercial and residential taxes.⁶ Given that such a large portion of city expenses are funded via property taxes,

¹ "Bondurant Demographics." *Bondurant IA*, www.cityofbondurant.com/bondurant-general-info/pages/demographics#:~:text=Per%20the%202020%20Census%2C%20Bondurant's,2010%20and%202020%20Census%20years. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

² *Community Profile - City of Bondurant*, www.cityofbondurant.com/sites/g/files/vyhlf2841/f/uploads/chapter_3_-_community_profile.pdf. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

³ *U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Bondurant City, Iowa*, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/bondurancityiowa/PST045222. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

⁴ "Homeownership Rate for Iowa." *FRED*, 15 Mar. 2023, fred.stlouisfed.org/series/IAHOWN.

⁵ *U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Polk County, Iowa; United States*, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/polkcounyiowa.US/PST045222. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

⁶ "Fund/Budget Overview - City of Bondurant." *Bondurant IA*, www.cityofbondurant.com/finance-department/pages/fundbudget-overview#:~:text=In%20FY22%20the%20budget%20is,their%20portion%20of%20Worker's%20Compensation. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

it is important that Bondurant citizens are aware that the services they rely on and enjoy are provided by their taxes.

CURRENT EFFORTS

In Fiscal Year 2024, the city of Bondurant's budget allocated \$617,451 to the Parks and Recreation Department. This department is overseen by the Events & Communications Director. It is our understanding that this budget category would include expenses related to civic education and communications, however specific line items are unavailable. From a communications standpoint, the City of Bondurant informs citizens about various matters through their website, their email list called *The Bounce*, and their social media platforms.

- Bondurant's website contains visually appealing tabs to guide citizens to important information like city services, ways to connect with their community, and city news.
 - However, the website has room for improvement in ease of access. There is often outdated information and dead links. For example, though the city council minutes are updated, they can be found via two different routes on the website, one of which is only updated through 2021. This gives the appearance of not being updated regularly.
 - Furthermore, Bondurant city employees report fielding many messages about city services that are provided on the website, but that residents apparently cannot access. See Appendix 1 for examples of questions that citizens cannot answer via the website's resources.
- Bondurant has social media profiles on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and X (formerly Twitter). The social media profiles are all managed well and actively post, with Facebook generally having the most engagement.
 - However, the posts tend to be identical to one another across platforms, reducing the incentive to follow all of the platforms. Also, visuals are often consecutively reposted in a feed, giving the same information as prior posts.
 - Posts are generally 'time-based announcements,' meaning they mostly focus on what is currently happening in the city. This is an important function of social media, but another function that could enhance citizen understanding of city functions could be providing continuing education.

BEST PRACTICES

1. AI Chatbot

Cities across the country have discovered AI Chatbots to be time-saving, accessible solutions to convey information to residents.⁷ On such program, Citibot, has over one hundred customers in the public sector and works with clients to implement and maintain bots. In Arlington, Texas, a city that recently implemented Citibot, more service requests were fulfilled in the first year of implementation than ever before, while experiencing significantly lower call volume.⁸ AI Chatbots in use by cities also share their data with city administration to inform them what is most commonly being asked about.

⁷ Pica-Alfano, L. (2023). *Citibot's AI chatbot makes local government more accessible*. Govlaunch. <https://govlaunch.com/stories/citibots-ai-chatbot-makes-local-government-more-accessible>

⁸Citibot. (2021). *Arlington, TX case study*. Citibot. <https://citibot.ac-page.com/arlington-tx-case-study>.

The city of Mont Belvieu, Texas has also implemented Citibot into their citizen interactions. Mont Belvieu is of comparable size to Bondurant, with a population just under 9,000.⁹ In a city of this size, a virtual bot can reduce the load on a much smaller staff compared to larger cities. Implementation of these bots generally is on the front page of a website and/or a text line for citizens, making it the first thing citizens see before a number to call or email address to contact.

2. Infographics

Presenting information visually reduces the “cognitive load,” or mental energy required to understand complex information.¹⁰ Information is also more likely to be retained if learned by infographic than text alone.¹¹

Many cities, counties, states, and private companies have used infographics to explain different aspects of property taxes to their citizens. Community examples which we used for inspiration when designing our property tax education infographics can be found in Appendix 5.

3. Website & Social Media

Vineyard, Utah (population 14,000) is an excellent example of an organized and engaged city social media page. On their Instagram (@vineyardcity), the city not only has its primary feed with community events, updates, highlights, and reminders about civic functions, but it also uses Instagram’s highlight reel function. These reels are consistently at the top of the profile and can make specific information easily accessible. Vineyard’s highlights include updates and reminders about their community’s Splashpad, grocery store, library, kids clubs, home and local businesses, local governance, and general community reminders about fun things happening from week to week. Vineyard also utilizes their caption space to point residents toward election results, school and event calendars, and local business websites.

Vineyard also has a well-organized website linked within their social media bios. The website’s home page offers numerous tabs for residents to scroll through, including an organized residents tab, an ‘I want to...’ tab, a business tab, a community tab with numerous resources, and a government and services tab. Vineyard, Utah, also provides a chat feature on their website to ask questions quickly alongside a newsfeed about the city. However, Vineyard, Utah, isn’t the only community with these features. Two other examples for city websites included Iowa City, Iowa, and Fort Worth, Texas. Iowa City’s ‘Service Finder’ button allows residents to quickly receive service options for both emergencies and non-emergencies. Fort Worth’s ‘What’s Happening in Fort Worth’ feed on their main page puts community engagement opportunities front and center, allowing citizens to choose either community events, local television stations, or the city’s calendar without clicking anywhere else.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. AI Chatbot

Particularly because of its young and growing population, it is important that Bondurant maintain pace and adapt city services to cutting-edge technologies related to AI. The company Citibot specializes in

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: Mont Belvieu City, Texas*. Quickfacts. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montbelvieucitytexas>

¹⁰ *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, vol. 74, no. Supplement_3, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciac058>.

¹¹ Murray, I. R., et al. “Maximising the impact of your work using infographics.” *Bone & Joint Research*, vol. 6, no. 11, 2017, pp. 619–620, <https://doi.org/10.1302/2046-3758.611.bjr-2017-0313>

delivering AI-powered chat solutions specifically designed for government applications. Citibot's platform enables residents to obtain immediate answers, submit service requests, and receive real-time alerts. These solutions encompass both smart text messaging and web chat. The technology reduces response times and waiting periods for residents, answering 90-95% of questions without additional support.¹² It also provides live data analytics about what citizens are inquiring about the most, helping to facilitate real-time decision-making and inform future program directions.

Citibot's cost involves an initial development fee of \$4,000, accompanied by an annual charge of \$5,500. Hard costs are unavoidable, but in discussions with our group, the Citibot CEO expressed the possibility of shaving off some costs.

Citibot is the most affordable known company that specializes in city knowledge. However, a general chatbot system could be just as effective, but may require increased effort on the City's part. When exploring those other options, it is important to pay attention to the pricing structure. For instance, alternative Intercom seems more affordable initially, but costs a dollar per validated AI response. More chatbot resources are provided in Appendix 2.

2. Infographics Messaging Package

In appendix 3, we have provided an infographic messaging package created based on infographic design best practices. Such a messaging package will not only add to civic education for residents, but also reduce the number of calls that the City must field.

These infographics would be posted to Bondurant's various social media platforms and sent out via *The Bounce* at times relevant to the topic. For example, property tax education posts would occur around January 1 every odd year (assessment day), March 31 (taxes due), and Sept 30 (taxes due). Also, the City of Bondurant could print and send infographics to citizens as a mailer coinciding with their reception of assessment notices or tax bills. The City would have to take on that responsibility, since inserting a mailer for Bondurant citizens only into Polk County mail is not feasible, according to the County's office. A more detailed messaging schedule for distribution of the infographics can be found in Appendix 4.

Furthermore, continuing education series posts about property taxes can be "pinned" to various social media platforms' home pages. Having these infographics accessible 24/7, every day of the year in locations other than the website will increase their accessibility, particularly for people who rely on social media for their information. On Instagram, the "permanent story" feature can be utilized to this end. On Facebook, the "album" feature, and on Twitter, the "pin tweet" feature.

The lowest cost of designing infographics is \$119.99 annually for a Canva Pro subscription. The City Communications & Events Coordinator, or perhaps an intern, would create/re-create the visuals. Alternatively, a freelance graphic designer could be hired to create new infographics annually for between \$15-\$150/hour. The cost of posting infographics to the various media platforms and sending them via *The*

¹² Riley, Bratton. "Re: Chatbox for Bondurant, IA." Received by Eli Steenhoek, 10 Nov. 2023. Shroyer, Jonathan.

Bounce emails is something the City already pays for. Printing and mailing infographic mailers for about 2,000 addresses¹³ costs between \$600 and \$2,500 per distribution.¹⁴

3. Website Improvements

The importance of social media and website use for encouraging community involvement and supporting local efforts cannot be emphasized enough in today's digital age. The current state of Bondurant's city website is good. However, there are a few simple improvements that could go a long way.

One such improvement would be bringing to the forefront information that Bondurant residents often ask about via phone or email (See Appendix 1). Currently, for a resident to find information on the website, residents must choose between 5 labeled categories that all include a drop-down menu. Next, the drop-down menu provided in each of these categories offers subcategories that will take viewers onto another page where their answer hopefully resides. This involves multiple re-directions from page to page, and each step a resident must take increases their likelihood that they believe "just calling" would be easier. This could be circumvented by maintaining the current categories but adding a "commonly asked" dropdown on that homepage for those frequently asked questions city officials field daily.

Another improvement we recommend is simply moving the events calendar to the website home page. The City puts on so many fantastic events paid for by those resident and commercial property taxes. Making sure that anyone who views the website can't avoid seeing what events the City has to offer will only increase awareness, engagement, and appreciation for city programming.

CONCLUSION

Implementing any one of these recommendations (AI Chatbot, Infographics Messaging Package, or Website & Media) will help improve general communication between residents and the City. Most specifically, our evidence-based interventions will increase citizens' understanding of property taxes, hopefully ultimately fostering a greater awareness of and appreciation for city services. Lastly, perfecting lines of communication now is important to help the City keep pace with its rapidly growing population as we enter 2024.

Group note for Marketa, Nicole, and the rest of the Bondurant Team: We did our best to carefully lay out very specific, inexpensive, and simple adjustments that we felt would take Bondurant's already robust and thoughtful civic education efforts to the next level. Throughout the process, we all thoroughly enjoyed working on this project and getting to know your lovely city through it. We truly appreciate you all allowing our involvement, and we hope that you found our recommendations helpful!

¹³ Per US Census cited in Footnote 3, 90% of Bondurant = homeowners -> 2,379 households in the city -> .9*2379=2141 houses paying property taxes annually

¹⁴*Business Postage Price Calculator Mail Services*,
postcalc.usps.com/Business/MailServices?country=0&ccode=US&mdt=12%2F27%2F2023&m=1. Accessed 8 Dec. 2023.

APPENDIX

1 - City of Bondurant Officials Report of Common Citizen Questions

- How do I set up utilities?
- How can I pay my bill/permit?
- Why is my bill so high?
- Why are my property taxes so high even though I signed up for tax abatement?
- Do I need a building permit?
- Do you sell compost/large item stickers?
- How do I file a nuisance complaint?
- My garbage pickup was missed.
- How do I get an irrigation meter?

2 - AI Chatbot Further Resources

ChatBot Pricing | Start for Free

Chatbot is a recognized company, with clients like General Motors, offering several plans. The “team” plan would be the perfect fit for Bondurant. Costing just \$1,704/year, the service is cost-effective. Given Bondurant’s still relatively small population, the allowance for 5 active chatbots and 5,000 valid chats/month would be adequate. This plan also includes unlimited training history which allows the chatbot to learn and improve over an extended time.

Intercom - Fin Chatbot

A general chatbot system could be just as effective as Citibot but may require increased effort on the city's part. Intercom offers such chatbots, but there are several other companies which might provide similar services.

3 - Designing Infographics Best Practices

- Use 3-5 colors, including at least one light, one dark, and one emphasis color. (1)
- Use 60-30-10 rule of color use - use a dominant (often neutral) color of 60% of the space, a secondary for 30%, and an accent for 10%. (1)
- Use simplest graphic possible including only necessary details. (1)
- Use text-light, image-dense graphics. (2)
- Use Sans Serif fonts. (2)
- Use humor and metaphors. (3)

- (1) Spicer, Jennifer O, and Caroline G Coleman. “Creating effective infographics and visual abstracts to disseminate research and facilitate medical education on social media.” *Clinical Infectious Diseases*, vol. 74, no. Supplement_3, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cid/ciac058>.
- (2) Murray, I. R., et al. “Maximising the impact of your work using infographics.” *Bone & Joint Research*, vol. 6, no. 11, 2017, pp. 619–620, <https://doi.org/10.1302/2046-3758.611.bjr-2017-0313>.
- (3) Gottlieb, Michael, et al. “Educator’s Blueprint: A How-to Guide for Creating a High-Quality Infographic.” *AEM Education and Training*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 25 Aug. 2022, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9411917/.

4 - Additions To Messaging Schedule

YEARLY:

- January - *Property Tax Cycle, How Property Taxes are Calculated*
- February - *How to Pay Utilities/Bills/Permits*
- March - *Property Tax Cycle, How Property Taxes are Calculated*
- April - *Waste Pickup*
- May - *Capital Events, Property Tax Distribution Dollar Bill*
- June -
- July -
- August - *How to Pay Utilities/Bills/Permits*
- September - *Property Tax Cycle, How Property Taxes are Calculated*
- October - *Capital Events, Property Tax Distribution Dollar Bill, Register to Vote*
- November - *Election Day*
- December - *Waste Pickup, Christmas in Bondurant*

MONTHLY:

- *City Council Upcoming Meeting* (post on month start and day before/of)
- *City Official of the Month*

**Italicized* = provided in Infographics Messaging Package via Canva

5 - Examples of Property Tax Infographics from Communities

Cities	Counties	States	Organizations/Companies
City of Steinbach	Columbia County, Oregon	Washington State	Economic Opportunity Institute
Oyster Bay, New York	Cook County, Illinois		Texas Real Estate
	El Paso County, Texas		Hause It
			Outlier Media
			Lincoln Institute of Land Policy (great visuals in Property Tax 101: The Mechanics Video)