Promoting an E-government and Building a Sunlight Government
—Handan City Government-Citizen Interaction Practice and Research

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Handan City is situated in the south of Hebei Province, with the Taihang Mountains to the west and bordering the North China Plain to the East, covering an area of 12,000 square kilometers and with a population of 8,630 thousand and 19 administrative counties (towns and districts). In 1985, Handan was designated as one of the cities open to foreigners. In 1992, Handan was approved by the State Council to be a larger city with local legislative and it is also one of the best tourist cities and one of the famous historic and cultural cities in China.

Modern digital technology has penetrated into fields of politics, economics and social life, and information has marked the trend of development of the era. The government is the biggest owner, producer, user and distributor of information. In recent years, Handan City has focused on developing an E-government, building a sunlight government and accelerating the development of informatization and has made outstanding achievements. Handan has been designated as a national tentative city for city informatization and a national model city of development of digital cities. Recently, under the European Union Information Communities Aid to China Program, Handan is listed as one of the six model cities in China.

1. Information publicity is the premise of government-citizen interaction

Only with government transparency, can the government be a democratic, highly efficient and vigorous one; only by promoting public information, can the government be open and transparent, and citizens achieve access to and share public information. This is both the right means to protect the rights and interests that citizens should have and important measure to monitor the public power, promote lawful operation of the government. Just as former US president Johnson stated, only within the boundary of national security, only when people can achieve access to the total information, can democracy operate best. In recent years, for the purpose of realizing the development and application of information resources, by means of publishing government information on the Internet, adhering to the principle of public information with the exception of confidential information, Handan has been actively engaged in promoting government information publicity, and as a result, social information resources have been effectively shared, citizen rights have been effectively protected and public rights and interests have been effectively maintained.

In order to promote information publicity, Handan government has issued Handan City Government Information Publicity Management Regulations, providing concrete requirements for the contents, channels and deadlines of information publicity, and has standardized and programmed information publicity. At the same time, corresponding new concepts, new knowledge and new technology about informatization are introduced to citizens of all classes and all fields and a benign atmosphere has been created in which the society as a whole care, support and participate in the development of informatization. In order to have comprehensive, detailed, convenient and quick information publicity, we have built up administration network platform that covers departments of government and Party committee and counties (towns and districts) of the city and network resources management center, opened up more than 10 comprehensive shared application systems such as the tele-conference system between provinces, cities and counties, city port website sina.handan, government port website Handan city government public information network, public exchange system, civil servants email boxes, and so on; we have established basic city geographic information system, One Card program, Handan city digital library, agricultural information system, environment monitoring information system and irrigation and disaster prevention information system; and we have conducted studies on digital Handan, a soft research project funded by the loan from the World Bank.

There shall be no accomplishments without regulations. We have continuously strengthened reforms. Any information is regarded as spontaneously abandoned if the information has not been published through the network when it should have been, and the contents should not be exercised in work. Otherwise, violation of regulations shall be considered. Definite regulations are made for the 8 areas of information that should be published, namely, information about administrative legislation and decision making, administration programs, administrative licenses, administrative collection and requisition, administrative contracts, static items, and internal information open to the public and the
open internally. At the same time, we have published on the network the functions of government departments, responsibilities of the officials, work processes and policies and regulations for the reference of the community. In practice, we have published information through mass media like official announcements, press conference, government websites, archives, libraries, information bulletins, e-information screens and televisions and newspapers, etc., enabled citizens, enterprises and employers to have convenient and fast access to related information, provided conveniences to the masses and raised work efficiency.

The low rate of using the Internet by social vulnerable groups has been an unneglectable blind spot. Therefore, we have paid great attention to weak groups, taken multiple steps, helped them to obtain the most information at the lowest costs. In the first place, we have organized and established network in towns and villages. We have connected 260 towns and villages of Handan city through an internal network, opening one information releasing site for each town or village and providing all kinds of free information to the rural population. In the second place, we have actively promoted the Village-to-Village Rural Economic Information Project. We have established an information site in every village and released information to villagers by all means. We have mainly provided villagers with technological information that can help them to become rich, and information about rural culture, planting and processing, and information about pesticides, fertilizers, seeds, etc., and information about rural produces marketing and exodus of surplus rural labors, so as to promote growth of farmers’ income. Thirdly, for the purpose of making it convenient for the unemployed and low-income groups in cities to obtain all kinds of free information, we have built up neighborhood information centers in residential areas of cities and towns and achieved good results.

2. Promoting government transparency is the key to realizing the government-citizen interaction

Only when we effectively condition and monitor the operation process of administrative power, can we truly realize a government-citizen interaction. Promoting an open and transparent operation of administrative power, just as its name implies, means making public the whole process operation of administrative power. In the course of establishing the e-government system, Handan City has actively explored the operation model of One Center 8 Large Networks and constructed a working platform for building a sunlight government.

The one center indicates the service center for developing a transparent administration power. An administrative license service hall, open administration network hall, government-citizen interaction hall and development programs center, development projects bidding center, etc. have been built up in the center and all are run in open offices. The first departments that have entered the center include 25 city government departments. They manage 148 units and are in charge of issuing 281 types of administrative licenses and providing 146 administrative services. This year, they have already received 37,000 items of complaints, inquiries, suggestions and praises, directly dealt with 25,000 items and transferred 11,000 items to other departments. The new Handan city administration service center under construction can hold 70 city government departments (units) and 8 open network service systems, with a centralized office system, they will provide all services at one station through one gate, making it most convenient to the masses.

The 8 large networks indicates the 8 large public networks we have established that cover administrative licenses, government procurement, development projects bidding, operative land remising, special funds management, property transaction, recruitment of civilian servants and city layout programs, based on the integration of the existing conventional media like bulletin board, hand touching screen, city newspaper column, business guide, etc. and supported by the city public information network, system engineering theory and computer network technologies. We finished the designing of the 8 large networks in April, 2005; conducted collective demonstration of them by the end of April and put them into trial operation in May, 2005. The 8 networks take the heated spots of people’s concerns as the focus of publicity, make public the whole operation process of decision making, implementation, results, etc., make happen a human-computer synchronization and government-citizen interaction of the government and citizens (corporations and other social groups). The public can carry out inquiries, applications and approvals, and other businesses through the network. For example, the administrative network has input 367 administrative licensing programs of the city into the computer system, synchronized human and computer and realized reviewing and approving through the network. Since the trial operation, the networks have already been clicked 600,000 times. According to the principle of operate legally, effectively and transparently, we have made work flow charts for the 2515 administrative powers, and made definite regulations for the government departments, office processes, time schedules, methods and measures of all services. Those concerned can completely finish their businesses through the network.

Through promoting government transparency, we have nailed down the boundary of government and department powers, promoted lawful administration, simplified administrative flow, enhanced office efficiency, transformed work styles, reestablished government image, built a sunlight government and effectively kept corruptions within limits. In the first half of 2005, we have straightened out and cancelled 266 administration authorities of 70 government and city departments, straightened out and confirmed 2515 administrative authorities and redefined 30 administrative positions and their powers according to law. We have altogether carried out 101 projects transactions within the main districts of
Handan city. 779 enterprises entered for bidding, 260 of which were from other cities, and enterprises from other places won 23 bids, which far exceeded the rate in the corresponding period last year.

3. A network communication platform guarantees the realization of the government-citizen interaction

To open up the two-way communication channel between the government and citizens, we have started various channels such as open mayor telephone, mayor email box, Handan city forum, citizen’s hotline for convenient services of city construction, free-phone complaints line, etc. They have functioned well. But they have also had weaknesses such as cold hotlines, blocked channels, low efficiency, failing monitoring systems, repeated construction and waste of recourses, which have in some degree affected the quality and results of the government-citizen interaction. In order to resolve these problems and give full play to the role of government-citizen interaction, we have followed the principle of separating reception services and administrative supervising functions, centralizing receptions, specializing supervising functions and separating ranks of responsibilities, put the reception center in the leading position of the line, focused on supervising bodies supported by branches and related functional departments, and opened up the network interaction platform for Handan government and citizens.

According to the public complaints that there are too many hotline numbers for them to remember and that they do not know who they should turn to when they have problems, we have integrated the hotlines 12345, 12333, 12358, Handan City Forum, mayor email into one reception center, which especially deals with the inquiries and complaints. In this center, according to the designed process, complaints information are delivered to supervising departments or directly to management departments, which has provided the public with conveniences, reduced unnecessary delays, improved efficiency and optimized service standards.

In order to further management transparency, we have taken advantage of network technologies, recorded and saved all the public complaints, transfers, supervision, management and feedback of the complaints in the government-citizen interaction network information system, and timely released them through the network. In the process of management, we have implemented computerized voice and message reminders, reminding people of the unprocessed issues by the computer and reducing man-made factors. The website contains a knowledge inquiry system, and has columns for hot and difficult issues that citizens have submitted in certain period of time. Citizens can obtain inquiry results directly through the network, which has improved the management efficiency of hot and difficult issues.

Since the establishment of the platform, an average of 2000 and more calls have been handled. Up till now, the network platform has received and handled 38,000 valid inquiries, complaints and suggestions through phone calls, faxes, emails, Handan city forum, etc, 26,000 of which have been dealt with directly and 12,000 items have been transferred to government departments concerned. The platform has functioned well in providing citizens with conveniences, improved standard of services, resolving a large number of hot and difficult issues involving water, electricity, natural gas, housing, food, and transport that are closely related to the daily life of the general public, realizing a two-way government-citizen interaction and improving a two-way communication between the government and the public, and played an active role in the development of a harmonious Handan. First, the platform has played the role of decompressor. The reception center, through here-and-now explanations and afterward feedback, provides citizens with explanations, helps them understand policies and has promoted social stability. Secondly, the center has played the role of heart-to-heart bridge. When citizens have difficulties, they feel it convenient to contact government departments, the mayor, and even the secretary of the Party Committee, which has certainly helped to narrow the gap between the government and the public. Thirdly, the center has played the role of think tank. Through the platform of interaction, citizens can timely express their opinions about promoting social harmony; government can timely know public opinions, understand situations of the people, and improve the democratic and scientific level of decision making. Fourthly, the platform has played the role of barometer. Through the platform, the government can timely know what the public need and want, and strengthen the pertinence of government decisions.

Next, we shall continue to focus our attention to promoting an E-government and building a sunlight government, carefully sum up and spread the experience obtained through government-citizen interaction, further perfect the leadership system, provide guidance to government departments, enterprises and citizens in spreading and using information technology, mobilize the whole society to be engaged in informatization development, enrich the meaning of digital Handan that is of the people and for the people and increase its feasibility and practicability. We shall give more support for the development of major programs for basic informatization development of popular commonweals, and expand investment in the development of communication systems in the underdeveloped regions and vast rural areas. We shall gradually raise the standard of public information services, lower the costs and ease the difficulties for citizens to use information resources, develop practical techniques that are easy to learn and understand, make information consumption a common and popular consumption, enable more people to obtain knowledge and valid information at lower costs, support equal access to information resources, enjoy the information civilization and push forward a concerted economic and social development in Handan.