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Blogging the 5th District

L.B.: Like a growing number of politicians, Gerrie Schipske uses the Internet to keep constituents informed.

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LONG BEACH - City Councilwoman Gerrie Schipske would be considered tech savvy by most standards.

She uses a cell phone and a BlackBerry. She has access to three computers - a desktop at home, a laptop at City Hall and another laptop for her job at the Teachers Association of Long Beach. And this Christmas, she plans to buy an iPod to share with her family.

The freshman councilwoman is also pioneering the use of blogging to communicate with her 5th District constituents. On her blog, which she links from her city Web site, visitors can read her take on why she voted a certain way on a matter and what she thinks about pressing city issues.

A self-taught blogger, Schipske updates the blog (<http://district5journal.blogspot.com>) several times a week in the evenings on her home computer.

"I'm able to be more reflective in it," Schipske said of her blog. "It's not a press release or an official statement."

Schipske is the only one of her nine colleagues, and possibly the first in the city's history, to use this technology, which is credited with transforming the way politicians raise money, shape their public image and talk to voters.

In a society saturated by information and less attentive to traditional political talk, blogging may provide an opportunity for politicians to stand out from the crowd and compete more effectively for attention.

Experts say blogging has become a popular tool among politicians because it's cheap, easy to start and reaches a wide audience.

"The obvious suspects for using this strategy will be elected officials with constituents that are young, affluent, and highly wired," said Michael Alvarez, a professor of political science at Caltech.

Because of the novelty of blogs, it's uncertain how many politicians use them. But Alvarez said his research found the use of blogs more common among national and state candidates.

"It is unusual at the lower levels of office holders," Alvarez said.

But because local races don't receive as much media coverage, the free publicity offered by blogging could be an advantage for local politicians. In addition, politicians appear more approachable in blogs, which are designed for informal, first-person narratives and usually invite visitors to respond to entries.

However, experts say blogs do not replace traditional forms of communication that have been proven to work over decades of research and practice.

Scholars and politicians agree that personal contact with voters through door-to-door interaction, meetings, and community events is still preferred over any online tool. With blogs, it's difficult to track who visits them and how many people are using them, experts say.

"Blogging is part of the tool kit, but it doesn't replace other methods," Alvarez said. "Sometime in the future, blogs may supplant traditional methods, but that's off into the future."

Not for everyone

Some Long Beach council members say even if they wanted to create a blog, it may not be a good fit for their district.

"Many of the households don't have computers, so we as an office handle constituent e-mails, calls and meeting requests," said Councilwoman Bonnie Lowenthal of the 1st District, which includes downtown and parts of the Westside.

Councilman Val Lerch of the 9th District, which comprises North Long Beach, said he's never heard of a blog but is intrigued by the concept. He does wonder how useful it is to talk to constituents via a blog.

Instead, Lerch holds regular town hall meetings and attends several community meetings a month. He even gives his home and cell phone numbers to anyone who asks.

"There's nothing better than personal contact, that personal relationship. With a computer, you get the written stuff, but I'm a person guy. I like to be with people," Lerch said.

Larry Martinez, a political science professor at Cal State Long Beach, said blogs are hurting the democratic process because their primary goal is to raise money while politicians appear accessible to the public through them.

"There's a revolution going on in American politics which is not altogether good. It (a blog) commercializes the political process," he said.

"Real politics is being able to sit with real human beings in real space and talk about real issues. The online environment is very much second best."

No fundraising

Councilwoman Schipske's blog, the "District 5 Journal," includes her biography and links to Google and Wikipedia. Users can also sign up to receive electronic updates and search her archives.

Schipske, whose district includes East Long Beach, chose not to receive user feedback because she doesn't want to monitor comments, which could be hateful and inappropriate at times, she said. She used a blog during her campaign, but not to raise money.

Schipske doesn't know who or how many visit her blog, but she's betting it's reaching a more tech savvy segment of her district. But she still meets constituents in person and attends many community meetings.

A blog, she said, "is one additional way to communicate to constituents. And it's absolutely free. We should take advantage of that."

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