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Maerker Brandenburg: Citizen-centred administration in the digital age in practice

An interview with Fanni Schmidt

The Maerker Brandenburg information platform allows the citizens of the State of Brandenburg to notify its municipality administration of where infrastructure issues have arisen in public areas. This enables the municipalities to resolve issues – such as overflowing bins or defective street lights – quickly and purposefully. In this interview, Fanni Schmidt from the 'WerkStadt für Beteiligung' citizen participation initiative in Potsdam reports on how the Maerker works, what type of notifications are dealt with, and how it affects communication between citizens and the administration.

photo: F. Daenzer

What is Maerker Brandenburg, how does it work, and what is it meant to achieve?

Maerker Brandenburg is a common information platform of the State of Brandenburg which is now used by around 100 municipalities. All municipalities in Brandenburg are able to use it free of charge.

Citizens can use the Maerker online portal or the Maerker app to notify their administration of where infrastructure issues have arisen in public areas, ranging from uncollected waste through defective street lights to fallen trees or road and pavement damage. These notifications enable the state capital Potsdam to resolve the issues quickly and purposefully. Citizens are often quicker to notice issues in their immediate living and working environment, and their notifications through the Maerker portal facilitate a prompt response, so that the problem can be dealt with in a timely manner.

The current status of the measures is made transparent with a traffic light system. The competent specialist department will then make a statement on the completion level of the steps required to resolve the notified issue. This is public, and accessible to everybody on the portal and the app. In addition, users can be informed on the status of the measures via email if they have chosen to provide their email address.

The traffic light colours have the following meaning:

- Red (submitted): The notification was submitted on Maerker by a user, but has not yet been read and checked by the Maerker editors.

- Red (accepted): The Maerker editors have checked the notification with regards to the privacy policy and terms of use, and published it.

- Amber (in progress): The notification has been forwarded to the information office, and the matter is being investigated. A re-submission period, typically 14 days, is set for a response by the competent department.

- Green/Amber (processing concluded): Processing has been concluded. However, the concern could not be resolved as requested by the notifying person. This may be due to e.g. other responsibilities outside

the control of the administration of the City of Potsdam, or a lack of resources for the realisation of the measure.

- Green (completed): The concern has been processed and dealt with as requested by the notifying person.

Why is the Brandenburg administration's electronic communication platform called 'Maerker'? Is that name part of its recipe for success?

The name was inspired by well-known quote by the author Theodor Fontane: "The Märker's sense of duty, their desire to learn, their sense of order, their thriftiness – this is what's best about them. And these are the characteristics that enabled them to do well." (Theodor Fontane)

The name 'Maerker' refers to the renowned sense of duty of the 'Märker' – the residents of Brandenburg, formerly known as 'Mark Brandenburg', i.e. the Margraviate of Brandenburg – and the opportunity to notify the administration of something one has noticed – 'bemerkt' – by means of modern technology.

The name has become a brand that is easy to remember, and is well-known across the Brandenburg municipalities. Since the name relates to the entire State of Brandenburg, it has become something people can identify with.

However, the platform's success is primarily due to the participating municipalities in Brandenburg who encourage effective communication with the residents of the State of Brandenburg through their diligent use of the platform.

What sort of concerns can be notified to the administration through the Maerker. Which ones can't? And how does the administration respond to the citizens' concerns? Also: What service does the City of Potsdam pledge with the Maerker?

Infrastructure issues in public areas can be communicated to the administration with the Maerker. Nine distinct categories are offered for this purpose. The notifying person has to select a category. Depending on the scope of the notification, a final response can usually be published online within 14 days. In 2016, the average processing time was 10 days. In rare cases, processing and response may take longer than 14 days. These are mostly responses to notifications covering several subjects. Such concerns cannot be resolved by the administration alone. They also need to be forwarded to third parties, such as private property owners.

Concerns not relating to infrastructural issues – e.g. criticism of urban development or traffic management – cannot be processed via the Maerker platform. Notifications that contain personal insults, defamatory statements, complaints about neighbours or discrimination are not published by the Maerker editors, and deleted. The Maerker terms of use clearly specify that such notifications cannot be processed.

In addition to the terms of use of the Maerker platform, each participating municipality issues a service pledge to the platform users. It describes the processing standards that all Maerker users can rely on. The pledge covers the following points:

- For notifications submitted by 2 pm, compliance with data protection regulations will be checked, the text and photographs will be published, and processing will commence by 6 pm on the following business day.

- A response will be published online within 14 days, stating the outcome of the examination of the notification. If no final response is possible within that period, an interim statement on the current status of the relevant measures is published.

- Notifications submitted by the citizens are not filtered, provided that the topics are permissible in accordance with the terms of use and the data protection regulations.
- If the state capital Potsdam is not the competent body for a notified concern, it will be forwarded to the competent authority with a processing request.

When was the Maerker introduced? How has it affected communication between citizens and the administration? How has communication with citizens changed since?

The Maerker platform was launched in the first few municipalities of the State of Brandenburg in September 2009. It has been used in Potsdam since early 2010.

Analyses of the years 2010, 2015 and 2016 show that citizens increasingly utilise the opportunity to contact the administration online. Communication between citizens and the administration has become more transparent and citizen-centred through the Maerker platform. Since the response to the notifications is public, citizens can see how effective their active involvement in municipal action is. Moreover, the service pledge creates a commitment that is important to the citizens.

What has been your experience so far: How is the Maerker received by the people? How often is it used? By whom? Is it, for instance, also used by the elderly?

The statistical analyses of the past two years speak for themselves: The range of subjects handled via the Maerker is continuously increasing, as is the number of notifications. A total of 1,065 notifications was received in 2015. In 2016, this had already increased to 1,370. This indicates that the platform and its functionalities are well-received and accepted by the citizens.

However, a differentiated statement on user data is not possible, because no personal data is analysed. The proportion of individuals contacting the City via the Maerker that belong to an older or younger age group cannot be verified.

With a view to other cities, districts and municipalities in Germany and Europe, including Ukraine: What are your recommendations for the introduction of such a communication instrument? What would you say requires special attention?

It is crucial for the successful implementation of an instrument like this that the administrative staff is well-informed about it before its introduction, and that it stands behind it. A clearly regulated procedure for the processing mode should be described prior to the launch, and a contact should be available to deal with any uncertainties. This allows the administrative staff to use the instrument with confidence, and process citizen notifications.

Furthermore, the service pledge must be taken seriously and implemented diligently. Otherwise, confidence in the communication medium between citizens and the administration would soon be shattered, and people would stop using it.

Fanni Schmidt

Fanni Schmidt works in the internal administration of the 'WerkStadt für Beteiligung' citizen participation initiative of the state capital Potsdam. Her core responsibility is the development of barrier-free idea and complaints management in the City. She is the competent Maerker editor for the City of Potsdam.

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