

# SeedSpeak (CitySeed)

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
SeedSpeak	Arizona State University	An application with mobile, web, and widget components that provides citizens in local communities an easy way to suggest community improvements to local leaders, volunteer groups, and each other	\$93,600

SeedSpeak, formerly CitySeed, is a project led by Retha Hill of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University (ASU). SeedSpeak is an application with mobile, web, and widget components. It allows users to plant suggestions (seeds) in local communities in order to empower other community members, leaders, and volunteer groups to discover their ideas, add to them, and help bring them to fruition. The project was created to give citizens a simple way to suggest community improvements and to increase the number of people who are informed about and engaged in their communities.

## THE INNOVATION

A number of similar applications—such as EveryBlock, City Works, City Ideas, and SeeClickFix— exist for suggesting community improvements and increasing community engagement.<sup>1,2</sup> SeedSpeak is the first of these to offer a low-cost or free open source solution specially targeting smaller cities. The project allows citizens to suggest community improvements at the exact location where they see an unmet need or have an idea for a project. SeedSpeak includes web and mobile applications as well as a white-label widget to be incorporated into local news sites or

municipality's websites can embed so community members can collaborate to improve their community or to report problems. Problems and suggestions can focus on any number of community-related issues, such as traffic, recreation, or the use of public space. In a typical case, a user might come across a potential location for a community garden. The person can use SeedSpeak's mobile application to geo-tag his or her idea, linking it to the exact location of the potential garden. Other users view this and other place-based suggestions, debate, and take action on their favorite ideas.

## IMPLEMENTATION

SeedSpeak experienced several challenges which pushed its timeline back by over a year. It hired a local, Phoenix-based interactive agency to design, develop, and build its applications. The project team focused its initial energy on user-centered design, researching the desires of the Phoenix, AZ community for features in a mobile, idea-sharing social network. SeedSpeak conducted interviews with avid social networkers, mobile experts, city officials, leaders of community organizations, and news gatherers, in an effort to understand the needs and goals of potential users and other relevant stakeholders. The research helped inform SeedSpeak's feature set, layout, and design and allowed the outside developers to hammer out a prototype website design. Early user feedback also helped SeedSpeak revise its design plans, de-emphasizing the gardening metaphor of planting and growing ideas after testers

<sup>1</sup> City Works and City Ideas are map-based applications created as a part of SocMap (formerly known as GoMap Riga), a fellow 2010 winner of the Knight News Challenge.

<sup>2</sup> EveryBlock is a winner of the 2007 Knight News Challenge. EveryBlock.com was acquired by MSNBC in 2009 and now operates in 19 US cities.

confused the goals of the project with actual gardening.

The third-party developers produced an alpha version of SeedSpeak's website in March 2011, but the site required more funding and months of additional work to address design and functionality flaws. Delays in funding due to ASU's reporting requirements also stalled the project, causing the developers to suspend their work for nearly two months. After changes in similar applications such as EveryBlock and SeeClickFix, SeedSpeak spent more time than anticipated distinguishing itself from other applications. SeedSpeak eventually created a beta version of its site, <http://beta.seedsspeak.com/>, by fall 2011 and the iTunes App Store accepted SeedSpeak's iPhone application in early August 2012. SeedSpeak contracted with a new developer to work on the Android application the next month.

When its project team initially conceived SeedSpeak, it planned to host the widget version of its application on local newspapers and news websites to allow for more interaction between users and local reporters. SeedSpeak shifted this focus shortly after receiving Knight funding when it found that media organizations were too distracted by budget constraints and other competing projects. The project pivoted instead to city and municipal government sites, promoting itself through direct outreach to local governments, local political leaders, and community groups. SeedSpeak also planned to market the tool through coverage in local news outlets and in the marketing literature, websites, and outreach collateral of supporting foundations, civic groups, public officials, ASU, and local Chambers of Commerce.

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## **REACH AND OUTCOMES**

As a result of major delays in developing the beta version of the website, applications, and widget, SeedSpeak only began promoting its tool in fall 2012. By late October 2012,

SeedSpeak was working to identify the first community that would test the platform by reaching out to numerous local governments, political leaders, and community groups. It remains relatively early in the project's lifecycle to assess the platform's ability to reach some of its more ambitious goals to increase the number of people informed about and engaged in their communities. However, several communities have expressed an initial interest in using the tool. Among these areas are Chandler, AZ; Jerome, AZ; Yavapai County, AZ; and Benton Harbor, MI.

To sustain the project into the future, SeedSpeak has applied for bridge funding through a partnership between the Knight Foundation and the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and through ASU. Despite the challenges and delays faced throughout its development, the project leader is optimistic about SeedSpeak's ability to land contracts with smaller cities. The project continues to evolve, exploring other possible uses, geographies, and partners. SeedSpeak is also exploring the idea of testing its widget in countries with markets that are less crowded with community engagement applications, such as Mexico.