

FROM THE MEHRUTHERM BLOG · WEBSITES

# Making Your Town Website Actually Accessible (and Why It's Now Expected)

Accessibility is no longer optional for local government websites. Most of what matters is straightforward, and it makes your site better for everyone.

Himanshu Mehru · Founder, Mehrutherm

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A town website is not a brochure for visitors. It is how residents pay a bill, read a notice, find a form, or learn when the next meeting is. Which means it has to work for every resident, including the ones who are blind, who cannot use a mouse, who are hard of hearing, or who are simply reading it on a phone in bright sun.

That idea has a name, accessibility, and for local government it has quietly moved from "nice to do" to "expected of you." The standards that used to be best practice are increasingly the baseline that residents, advocates, and oversight all assume is in place.

Here is the part most town offices are relieved to hear: the bulk of accessibility is not exotic or expensive. It is a set of sensible habits that, as a bonus, make your site clearer and easier for absolutely everyone.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For a town website, accessibility means **every resident can actually use it**, not just most.
- It has shifted from optional to **expected**, and falling short can draw complaints.
- Most of what matters is **straightforward**: readable text, real structure, captions, usable forms.
- Accessible sites are **better for everyone**, including people on phones and slow connections.

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## Why This Matters More for Government

A business can, in theory, pick its customers. A town cannot pick its residents.

Everyone in the community has an equal right to the information and services their local government provides, and the website is now a primary way those are delivered. If a resident who uses a screen reader cannot find the agenda, or someone who cannot use a mouse cannot complete a form, that is not a minor inconvenience. It is a resident being shut out of something that is theirs by right.

That is also why this draws scrutiny in a way a small shop's site usually does not. Accessibility complaints against public bodies are real, and "we didn't know" is not much of a defense. The reassuring flip side is that getting the fundamentals right resolves the large majority of issues before they ever become a problem.

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## **The Things That Matter Most**

You do not have to absorb a thick rulebook. A handful of fundamentals carries most of the weight.

### **Text people can actually read**

Words need enough contrast against their background to be read by someone with weak eyesight or a glare on their screen. Pale gray text on white looks elegant and excludes people. Type should also be large enough to read comfortably and be able to grow when someone zooms in, without the page falling apart.

### **Pictures that describe themselves**

Every meaningful image needs a short written description attached behind the scenes, so someone using a screen reader, which reads a page aloud, knows what the picture shows. This is quick to add and one of the most common things sites miss.

### **Real structure, not just big text**

A screen reader moves through a page by its headings and landmarks, the way a sighted person skims. If headings are just text made large rather than marked as actual headings, that map disappears and the page becomes a wall of sound. Proper structure makes a page navigable for the people who rely on it, and tidier for everyone else.

### **Everything usable without a mouse**

Some people navigate entirely by keyboard. Every link, button, and form field needs to be reachable and operable that way, with a clear outline showing where you are on the page. If you can tab through your whole site and use it without ever touching the mouse, you are most of the way there.

## Captions and readable documents

Any video should have captions, for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and for anyone watching with the sound off. And the PDFs towns love to post, agendas, minutes, notices, need to be readable by assistive technology, not just scanned images of paper. A scanned page is, to a screen reader, a blank wall.

### Where to start, by effort and payoff

|                                 |             |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Fix text contrast and size      | Low effort  |
| Add descriptions to images      | Low effort  |
| Use real headings and structure | Some effort |
| Make everything keyboard usable | Some effort |
| Fix documents and add captions  | Ongoing     |

A rough guide, not a precise measure. The quick wins clear a surprising share of issues. Documents and media are the ongoing part, because new ones get posted all the time.

## The Quiet Bonus: It Helps Everyone

Here is the part that makes accessibility an easy decision rather than a chore.

Almost everything on that list helps people who would never call themselves disabled. High-contrast text is easier to read on a phone outdoors. Captions help anyone in a quiet office or a noisy room. Clear structure and keyboard access make a site faster to use for everybody. And search engines reward the very same things, so an accessible site is also easier for residents to find in the first place. (We get into that in [getting found on Google](#).)

Accessibility is not a tax you pay for a few residents. It is just what a well-built site looks like.

### WHY THE PLATFORM MATTERS

A lot of town sites are accessible in theory and broken in practice, because the platform makes it hard to do the right thing, or staff are left to maintain it with no guidance. If keeping your site accessible feels like a constant uphill battle, the tool may be working against you. We get into that in [why CivicPlus is the wrong fit for most small towns](#).

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## Building It In, Not Bolting It On

The hardest way to make a site accessible is to build it without thinking about it, then try to retrofit it later. The easiest way is to build it in from the start, so the structure, contrast, and behavior are right before anyone adds a single page.

That is how we approach the town sites we build: accessibility is part of the foundation, not a checklist tacked on at the end. And because the ongoing parts, documents and media, never really stop, it helps to have a simple routine and someone keeping an eye on it. (If you are weighing how to take on a new town site at all, [getting a new town website without a formal bid](#) is a practical starting point.)

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Wondering whether your town's website is leaving residents out? Get in touch and we will take a plain look at where it stands and what it would take to make it work for everyone.

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