

City of Tampere

Turning Civic Participation into Reality via the Internet

Jari Seppälä

Head of Information

City of Tampere

FINLAND

E-mail: jari.seppala@tt.tampere.fi

<http://www.tampere.fi>

Mr. Jari Seppälä, 43, Head of Information of the City of Tampere, Finland.

Journalistic education and 10 years of work as a news reporter in a local newspaper and national tv-news.

As a city communicator, specialized in media service, video production and the Internet.

Has acted as the chairman for two committees founded by the Association of Finnish Local Authorities, one creating the good practise for municipal information and the other one guidelines for municipal services presented over the Internet.

Tampere is the third biggest city in Finland and the most important centre outside the capital area. Due to its industrial background and universities, Tampere is at the leading edge of high technology and the information highway. Nationally and to some degree internationally the city is already a significant centre of information technology. Tampere's municipal policy for the 21st century emphasizes information as a key to the future.

By utilizing the existing knowledge, skills and research facilities, the Tampere region will be developed into a hub in the information society both in national and international contexts. Content industry (the production of information technology applications for industry, education, administration and recreation) is considered one of the growth areas of the future. Local residents are guaranteed equal access to the information society by improving the information networks and widening the selection of municipal services available through these networks.

1. 24 h City Office

The City of Tampere established a website for municipal services in 1994. From the start, the idea was to create electronic equivalents for as many municipal services and offices as

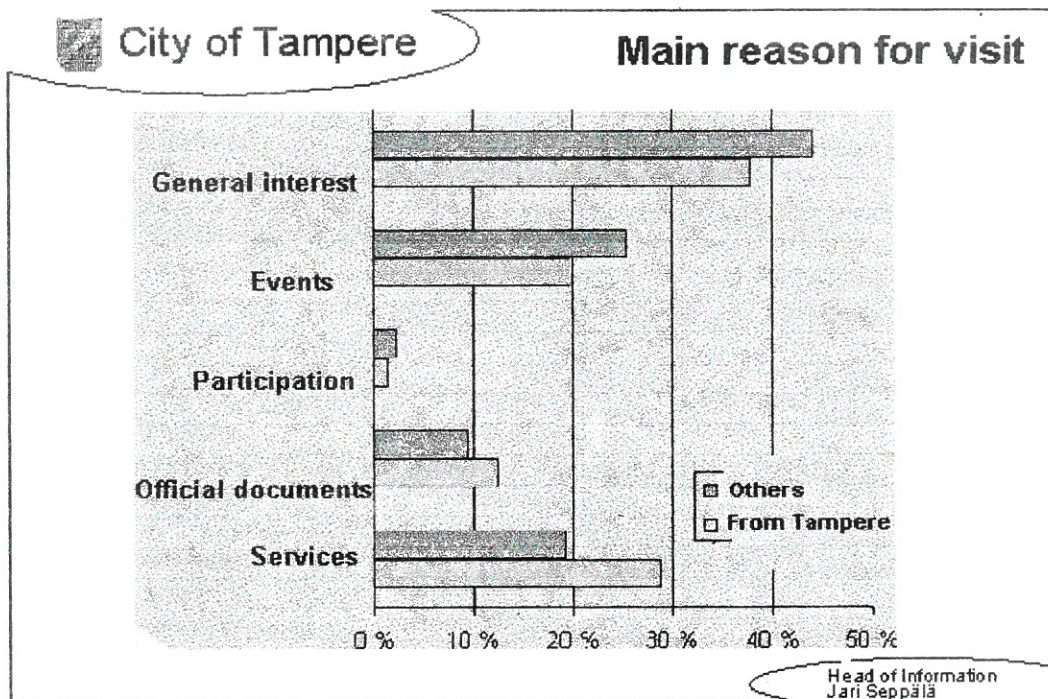
possible, for the convenience of the town's people, companies and visitors alike. Electronic alternatives were expected to make things easier both for the customers and for the municipal personnel delivering the services. City offices can now boast to be open 24 h and it is easy to pop in from home, the workplace or the other side of the world.

<http://www.tampere.fi/>

Already 30 % of the visitors of City of Tampere's web pages surf into these pages primarily in order to get municipal services, to carry out their affairs with the city or to be able to influence the city policy. Public administration in Finland is traditionally relatively transparent. That is why for example city board agendas may be published on the web before the board meetings. This is how also the citizens' participation before decision - making may come true.

2. Electronic Signature

The Internet is not yet an official medium in the context of initiating suggestions, filing complaints, applying for permits or voting in an election. We expect, however, that in near future "electronic signatures", or procedures for ascertaining the identity of electronic communication partners will be introduced, thus enabling us to extend the virtual services into officially signed documents and conclusive referendums. In fact, first electronic identification cards were introduced to the public in December 1999. The Finnish Population Register Centre serves as the certificate authority for the electronic exchange of official information. The municipalities from



their side will provide electronic services for the identification cards.

<http://www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi/hst.htm>

3. Access and Skills

On the other hand, the full utilization of the electronic services is held back by limited access to the Internet and lack of computer skills both among the residents and city employees. The situation, however, is changing very rapidly. Almost 50% of the adult population in Finland have at least once tried the Internet, and one third use it on a regular basis. 10 % of adult Finns have visited their own municipality's website during the past three months and more than 50 % consider it important that the public services are transferred to the net.

The City of Tampere counts more than 200,000 visits a month to its web pages. The amount is constantly growing. Still, we cannot rely completely on the electronic version in any service: the same service has to be available in conventional form as well. All the electronic services are more or less experimental and additional to the conventional services. Services are developed the same time as the access network and computer skills are improved.

Already today, access to the Internet is provided by the municipality in libraries, schools and a web cafe. The City also provides some Internet courses for the residents.

4. E-mail

Already has the Internet proved itself an informal and easy-to-use tool for communication between the municipality and its residents or outsiders. It seems to be much easier to e-mail the Mayor than to write him a letter, or come and knock at his door. With respect to answering their mail, the city officials have a lot to learn – so far most people seem to treat their e-mail messages as they treat their letters: they are opened and read but not necessarily answered. E-mail has definitely increased the number of residents' contacts, even taking into account the ensuing drop in the number of letters and phone calls.

One of the first truly efficient users of the Tampere website and e-mail opportunities was a small group of steamboat enthusiasts lobbying for the refurbishment of an old steamboat in Tampere and instigating a world-wide appeal campaign. On their own website, the group placed an appeal form ready to be mailed to the Mayor of Tampere. At least to begin with, this e-mail campaign certainly received more attention than a traditional appeal campaign

would have. The appeal was nevertheless processed just like any other citizens' appeal. And despite its modern methods, the campaign has not so far borne any fruit.

<http://www.sci.fi/~pohjola/viite1.htm>

5. Discussion Forum

From early on, the Tampere website has included a discussion forum for the exchange of opinions on current affairs and projects in Tampere. When the Central Square of the city was remodelled, residents were encouraged to submit their viewpoints via the Internet during the time that the plan was available for viewing. The 108 entries to the discussion forum were considered in the further processing of the plan. Other subjects covered at the forum include the master plan of the city region, the zoological and botanical emblems of the city, traffic plans, the city economy and changes of the municipal ordinance.

<http://www.tampere.fi/mielipid/index.htm>

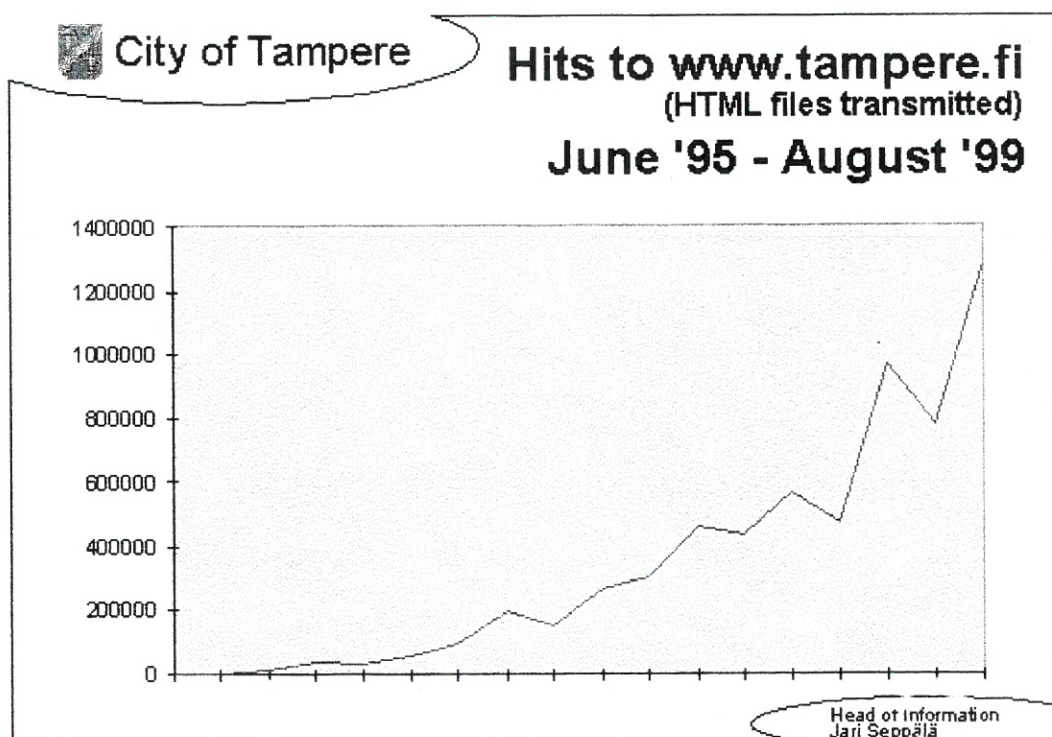
A new service at the discussion forum is "Questions and Answers". It is a site where citizens are able to ask anything about the

municipality and an official replies as soon as possible. As a result, a databank of Frequently Asked Questions will be established. During the first months of operation, this service has raised several accurate questions, which may not have been asked and answered otherwise. The answers have been rather easy to find, you just have to have one information officer searching for the answers. Once again, it is not a question of good will or technical possibilities, but of human resources and money.

<http://www.tampere.fi/mielipid/kioski/index.htm>

6. Questionnaires

Last Spring, a significant channel for civic participation in financial planning was opened in Tampere as residents were asked to contribute their opinions as the basis of the budget for the year 2000, before any plans or decisions were made at the political level. The questionnaire included sections dealing with taxation, service fees, reallocation of funds and services about to be discontinued. In just over two weeks, the questionnaire was returned by 678 people: 558 answered via the Internet and 120 had



used the hard copy available at the libraries and offices. The comments were quite to the point. 96% of the respondents were of working age and living in Tampere. So we can establish that this medium, that until now has been more or less the domain of adolescent computer herds, found the correct target group in this difficult and complicated subject. The results of the survey were presented to the decision-makers in a budget planning seminar, after the participants had completed the same questionnaire themselves. Luckily the results were very similar: it will be fairly easy to incorporate the residents' opinions into the municipal decision-making process.

<http://www.tampere.fi/talousfoorumi/index.htm>

7. Town Planning Game

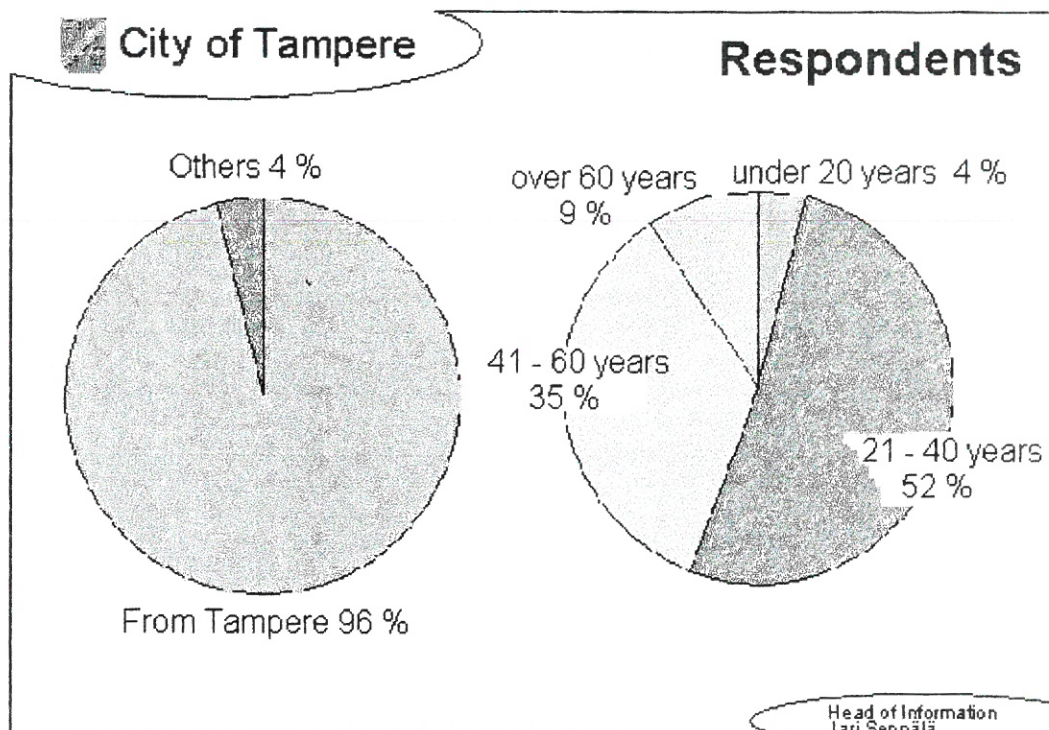
Another new example of civic participation in matters relevant to your place of residence is the town planning game available since June 1999. The game is about plan presentation, dialogue and lobbying, combined into the visual and functional opportunities provided by new media. The game enables everyone to roughly try out different construction alternatives in

their own neighbourhood.

<http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/viinikka/frames.htm>

In the game, the population of a certain region is expected to grow by 1800 people by the year 2020. This increase should be taken into account by building new housing estates in alternative places. In each place, you can choose between several alternatives: no construction, construction of one-family houses or apartment blocks. If you want to keep the park next to your back yard, you may have to allocate construction space elsewhere. The end result of the game may be over or under the initial 1800 people; then, too, the player will have to deal with the effects: the service level of a part of the town may go down, or traffic problems may multiply.

In three months, more than 2,000 players have tried this game out. Some 330 have submitted their planning suggestions; most of them are residents of Tampere and the areas in the game. The game can be played in local libraries, and it is possible to send in one's viewpoint on paper as well. Both the players and the zoning officials have liked this sort of participation channel: it is easy to see the practical effects of each decision, the residents learn to see the big picture of town planning, and the planners



receive direct feedback from the residents of a particular area before any final decisions are made. As it could be expected, people cherish the parks, but it is obvious that the players are also getting an idea of how complex a matter town planning is. Many comments include the feedback that zoning is surprisingly difficult!

8. "Heavy Users"

As said before, this kind of interactive service and means for participation are so far experimental and cannot be taken as seriously as official referendums or suggestions from the elected city councillors. However, the Internet may be considered as one medium of expressing one's opinions, and a very practical one compared to, for example, letters to the editor in a local newspaper.

There are some groups, however, who have already adopted the Internet for their only media to correspond with the city officials. For example, the City of Tampere submits stipends for scientists, and all of the application forms are already printed from the net. Still they have to be signed and returned on paper. 20 % of the library loans are already checked and renewed in the "virtual library" along with the phone service or physical visits. Even the children's swimming schools get their applicants to a large extent over the net.

9. Problems

Some services, such as nursing and street maintenance, cannot be delivered virtually, but general information, notices, applications and other forms, reservations and dialogue are easily translatable into electronic form. Even paid goods and services are now available at the City of Tampere's electronic shop. You can also pay your electricity over the net.

Problematic situations arise, for instance, if people with computers can jump the queue at signing-up for the most popular evening classes at the Civic Institutes of the city. Additionally, integrating electronic mail and commerce into existing booking systems will require some work.

Although local authorities have, in recent years, quickly adopted new technology, they are characterized by a certain slowness of change when compared to the private sector and its straightforward objective for profit. To begin with, electronic services means an increased workload for personnel, although routine tasks will be facilitated later. It is understandable that new developments will meet with motivation problems, especially when pitching the insecurity of new technology against the nice and tangible hard copies with the official seal.

10. Surfing Forward

The City of Tampere will continue developing the range of Internet services and engaging in a two-way communication and interaction process with the residents. We do not want to jeopardize the power of our elected council, or the principles of representational democracy, but this fast, direct and illustrating channel of influence is a very interesting medium for taking care of common affairs. A small survey carried out in Spring indicated that all parties to municipal administration – the residents, civil servants and elected officials included – consider network dialogue and teledemocracy important. According to a national Internet survey, two thirds of Finnish Internet-users actually believe that teledemocracy counts.