



**Partecipa.net for the associated City Plan of 5 local  
authorities in the province of Ferrara**

Partecipa.net is a web project aimed at fostering dialogue between citizens and local authorities. The Provincial Authority of Ferrara is a member of the regional project, in conjunction with other local authorities in the territory (Argenta, Migliarino, Ostellato, Portomaggiore and Voghiera). The aim of the provincial project is to experiment with new technology in the e-democracy kit, in relation to the city planning of 5 local authorities (a total of about 50,000 inhabitants).

Emilia-Romagna Regional Authority bylaws in relation to city planning (Regional Law 20/2000) specifies that before a plan can be adopted (The Structured Authority Plan - SAP), local authorities must inform and involve not only other authorities but also social, economic and environmental groups and organizations, as well as the citizens affected.

For this purpose, the Provincial Authority of Ferrara, in conjunction with the local authorities involved, has created a dedicated website for information on the Plan<sup>1</sup> with one section entitled "Let's talk it over"<sup>2</sup>.

This section can be used to access customized versions of the e-democracy kit<sup>3</sup>, giving registered users access to:

- a newsletter on *housing, production areas, infrastructure, the environment and tourism*;
- the replies of local authority experts about questions relating to the proposed Plan and its effect on each local authority<sup>4</sup>;
- opinion polls;
- forum for the discussion of the topics of *housing, production areas, infrastructure, the environment and tourism, etc.*;

The pact between the local authority and citizens is enshrined in "participation bylaws", a sort of site *netiquette*<sup>5</sup>, including some local authority commitments in relation to participation and discussion forums.

The declared aim of the website is to foster discussions about the Plan, to promote transparent local government, to make institutions and citizens accountable and to encourage collective learning; it also aims to inform the general public of issues which are conventionally discussed without dialogue with citizens.

Discussions lead to proposals rather than resolutions binding on local authorities. The proposals are subject to feasibility studies by the 5 local authorities and may be integrated into the SAP.

Partecipa.net for the associated SAP of 5 local authorities in the province of Ferrara was started up on 20 September 2006.

To date there are over 100 registered users of the portal, about 20% of whom have submitted suggestions to discussion forums.

Of the topics for discussion, "housing" was the one most discussed. This was also the only forum where it has been possible – to date – to experiment in steps, based on the Delphi model, conventionally used to support decision-making in situations where no agreement can be reached or there is insufficient knowledge to come to a decision.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.comune.argenta.fe.it/psc/psc\\_associato\\_index.aspx](http://www.comune.argenta.fe.it/psc/psc_associato_index.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.comune.argenta.fe.it/psc/strumenti/psc\\_strumenti.aspx](http://www.comune.argenta.fe.it/psc/strumenti/psc_strumenti.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> <http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it>

<sup>4</sup> <http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/partecipa.ask>

<sup>5</sup> [http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/files/Regolamento\\_Forum\\_PSC\\_associato.pdf](http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/files/Regolamento_Forum_PSC_associato.pdf)

The discussion was prepared (as for all forums) by a newsletter sent to registered users, illustrating the main choices, in relation to housing developments and services in the 5 local authorities. Completing the support documentation, a summary of the current situation was prepared together with current SAP policies<sup>6</sup>.

The first stage of the discussion was divided into two topics “Where to build” and “How to build”. The problems arising were summarized and submitted to registered users in the form of an opinion poll. In other words, the number of people consulted went beyond the number of registered users, in order to submit a broad range of observations to the local authority<sup>7</sup>.

The official response to the first step was provided by the Mayor of one of the authorities involved (and Chairman of the relevant Planning Conference), who had been informed of all critical issues raised at the forum.

The interview with the Mayor was reported in the local press<sup>8</sup>, in order to provide wider dissemination of the official position.

At the end of this first “exploratory” stage, the second stage began, comprising “analysis” i.e. proposals for the improvement of existing housing. This is a critical moment because it requires proactive participation by various actors (in addition to citizens, also organizations, politicians, authorities, professionals and technicians, ...), which is proving difficult to arrange.

To increase interest in the initiative and stimulate participation in this critical stage, training sessions were held in the use of the instrument and to provide information about the Plan, within the existing and conventional participatory framework<sup>9</sup>. These initiatives also help to reduce the *digital divide* i.e. the technological, cultural and infrastructural gap characterizing these new techniques, particularly in relation to outlying rural areas.

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<sup>6</sup> Go to: [http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/partecipa.forum/biblio.php?process\\_id=4](http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/partecipa.forum/biblio.php?process_id=4)

<sup>7</sup> For the preliminary results of opinion polls see:

[http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/phpESP/public/sondaggio.php?name=Sondaggio\\_Abitato&cod=13&results=yes](http://partecipa.provincia.fe.it/phpESP/public/sondaggio.php?name=Sondaggio_Abitato&cod=13&results=yes)

<sup>8</sup> The news was published online by the newspaper *estense.com*

[http://www.estense.com/?module=displaystory&story\\_id=14575&format=html](http://www.estense.com/?module=displaystory&story_id=14575&format=html)

<sup>9</sup> Participation Councils are consultative bodies as set up by the articles of association of some bodies' which must be consulted in relation to public policy matters.