

**Supporting Statement A for Paperwork Reduction Act Submission;  
OMB Control No. 3090-0288, Open Government Citizen Engagement  
Ratings, Rankings, and Flagging**

**A. Justification**

**1. Necessity of Information Collection**

On December 8, 2009 the Director of OMB issued the Open Government Directive. This Directive aims to create an unprecedented and sustained level of openness and accountability in every federal agency, by incorporating the values of transparency, participation, and collaboration into the ongoing work of the agencies.

Among other requirements, the Directive requires agencies:

- to extensively engage the public in the formulation of the agency's open government plan;
- to seek public input in prioritizing high-value data sets;
- to promote opportunities for the public to participate throughout the decision-making process;
- to increase opportunities for public participation in and feedback on the agency's core mission activities;
- to use new feedback mechanisms, including innovative tools and practices that create new and easier methods for public engagement;
- to use technology platforms to improve collaboration within and outside agencies; and
- to use innovative methods, such as prizes and competitions, to increase participation and collaboration.

This statement seeks approval for all Federal agencies of specific functions common to many social media tools that enable the public to rate, rank, vote, flag, or otherwise weigh in on the value of the ideas, suggestions, solutions, questions, comments, and data sets submitted by the public in the course of implementing the full intent of the Open Government Directive. This "Open Government Citizen Engagement" is a response to the Open Government Directive, which was issued on December 8, 2009 by the Director of OMB. This Directive asked that executive departments and agencies take specific actions to implement the principles of transparency, participation and collaboration, as set forth in the President's January 21, 2009 Memorandum on

## Transparency and Open Government.

There are many innovative online tools available for agencies to solicit general questions, ideas, suggestions, and comments from the public. Many of these tools also allow the public to categorize the content through social tagging or choosing categories when they provide their general input. In general, such online solicitations of general public input are exempt from Paperwork Reduction Act requirements and review. Under 5 C.F.R. § 1320.3(h)(4), “[’]information’ does not generally include . . . Facts or opinions submitted in response to general solicitations of comments from the public, published in the *Federal Register* or other publications, regardless of the form or format thereof, provided that no person is required to supply specific information pertaining to the commenter, other than that necessary for self-identification, as a condition of the agency's full consideration of the comment.” Because an agency’s postings on web sites that generally solicit voluntary public comment are publications in an electronic format, they satisfy the “other publications” language of this regulation and therefore do not constitute “information collections” pursuant to 5 C.F.R. § 1320.3(h)(4). This is also true for online usability surveys that are routinely used to permit members of the public to provide feedback on their user experience in engaging with agency web sites. In online consultations that are deliberative in form, e.g., blogs, ideation tools, challenge grants, wikis, social networks, discussion boards, usability feedback surveys and the like, the public experience closely resembles those of an online public meeting. If the same solicitation of views were to occur at a face-to-face public meeting, the factors or opinions solicited at any such hearing would also not count as “information,” whose solicitation is covered by the PRA. 5 C.F.R. § 1320.3(h)(8). Public meetings presumably do not count as “information collections” because participation is voluntary, the public nature of such meetings keeps the agency accountable for its responsible use of public hearings, and the dynamic of the interaction at a public hearing or meeting precludes the use of a pre-cleared script. The same rationales apply with equal force to online consultations.”

However, some of the online tools utilize functionality that may or may not implicate the Paperwork Burden Reduction Act, including the ability to rate, rank, vote, flag, or

otherwise weigh in on others' ideas, suggestions, solutions, questions, comments, data sets, or other input. These mechanisms can take many forms: on some tools voters can give a thumbs up or thumbs down; on others they may weigh in by giving a comment 1-5 stars or even a numerical rating.

GSA seeks clearance for all federal agencies implementing the Open Government Directive who want to use such rating, ranking, and flagging mechanisms to weigh the public's support for ideas, suggestions, solutions, questions, comments, and data sets, and alert the agency when the public thinks something is off topic or inappropriate.

One example of functionality that will fall squarely under this clearance request is the common tool GSA initially offered major department and independent agencies to assist with collecting public input to be used for the creation of Open Government Plans. GSA created an Open Government Citizen Engagement tool, an online collaboration tool, powered by IdeaScale, for agencies to use in extensively engaging the public. This was available for agencies to use beginning February 6, 2010, in order to link the tool from the agencies' required agency.gov/open web pages to engage the public in creation of the agencies Open Government Plan, which was due March 7, 2010. Because of these deadlines in the Open Government Directive, GSA originally asked for emergency clearance for six months for the use of this tool by any agency, as well as for all agencies to use similar tools in this exercise and other exercises to meet the goals of the Open Government Directive.

This information collection request is for a three-year extension with an annual budget of 1,666 hours and 1,200,000 estimated responses in the form of rankings by the public to numerous federal agencies to fulfill the public engagement and feedback aspects of the President's Open Government initiative. The end users are provided opportunities to weigh information, ideas, suggestions, comments, and data sets as part of the President's open government and transparency agenda.

### **What will the Open Government Citizen Engagement Ratings, Rankings, and Flagging do?**

The Open Government Citizen Engagement Ratings, Votings,

Rankings and Flagging allows agencies to engage with the public, and allow the public to weigh in on their support for agency and public ideas, comments, suggestions, solutions, questions, data sets, and the like. This will help agencies and the government meet the Administration's Open Government goals.

The goal is to allow the public to rate and rank open-ended, general questions, comments, suggestions, solutions, and the like. Tools that allow rating, voting, ranking and flagging (for example, many blogs, ideation, challenge grant platforms, and other social media tools), can be used across government to:

- Make it easier for agencies to engage with the public during the development of their open government plans and meeting the Open Government Directive requirements to implement their plans.
- Make it easier for citizens to engage with government by weighing in and helping moderate discussions.
- Use government resources efficiently and effectively.

Using such tools, the Public can:

- Vote for or rank ideas, questions, or data sets they think are most important.
- Flag ideas or comments as off-topic or inappropriate, to maintain a constructive dialog.
- Share ideas with friends via email or social media channels.

## **2. Needs and Uses**

The ratings, rankings and flags collected from the public will help all federal agencies engage with the public to meet the goals of the Open Government Directive and will institute a culture of open government throughout their agencies. The information collected will not be characterized as "representative" of either the initial visitors to the site or the general public, as many visitors may elect not to provide ratings. The feedback will serve to inform agencies about public sentiment and concerns about innovative ideas. Some may include:

**Voting/Ranking/Rating/Flagging:** A rating capability would allow the public to weigh their support or disagreement with ideas and comments expressed by the public or the agency, and highlight when ideas and comments are off topic or

inappropriate. In the IdeaScale product being used by GSA, for example, an icon next to each idea allows a visitor to "Vote Up" or "Vote Down" that idea. The ratings provided by users count the net number of votes in support of each idea. The public and the agency can sort ideas either by most popular (greatest number of net votes) or by most recent. The public can also flag an idea or comment as off topic or inappropriate, which will notify the moderator that someone has flagged the content. The rankings and flags are not used to determine whether a "poorly rated" or "flagged" idea should be taken off the site; however, it might be used to determine whether additional documentation or quality assurance is required.

### **3. Use of Improved Technology to Minimize Burden**

To enhance the opportunity provided for both the public and the government to participate, agencies are exploring the latest technologies that allow public engagement, including the ability for the community to help moderate - through such methods as categorizing public input, ranking and rating, and flagging inappropriate or off-topic content. This functionality is often seen on various technologies, including blogs, ideation and challenge software, social tagging and bookmarking sites, and social networks.

GSA's initial Open Government Citizen Engagement tools offering, for instance, powered by IdeaScale, will further enhance the process by maintaining a similar look across all federal agencies where it is used, providing a familiar and easily navigable experience. The homepage layout was created with usability Best Practices in mind and was tested with users. The design will guide the visitor towards viewing, sharing, discussing or voting on an idea. Whenever possible, icons and links have brief explanations below them to inform visitor navigation. In the GSA example, voting on ideas will require a brief registration either using an existing log-in through another provider or logging into the tool. The second option requires an email verification that the person logging in is the person with that email address, which adds a level of importance and respectability to the dialog. Furthermore, the site has links to a Help page (for technical and accessibility questions) and to provide an existing, alternate way to contact agencies.

### **4. Efforts to Identify Duplication**

GSA created the tool and offered it government-wide to reduce the administrative burden of duplicative ICR submissions of agencies compliance to OIRA's interpretation of the PRA's application to the Open Government Directive and to provide common user experience across government. GSA's Open Government Citizen Engagement tool, powered by IdeaScale, uses innovative social media technologies and strategies to accomplish its goals.

Because this tool and others like it represent a new and innovative area of exploration for the majority of federal agencies, GSA is configuring in the broadest scope possible, keeping in mind all federal agencies that must meet the Open Government Directive requirements. The various tools of other agencies and their concerns were taken into account when this tool was created and as this clearance was written.

Visitors to the site who wish to vote on ideas will be asked to log-in only once during their visit. They can opt to check a "Remember Me" box if they do not want to have to log in each time they return to engage with the government. Each user is allowed one vote per idea. The voting capability is not redundant and is relevant to the specific offerings of the tool.

**5. Minimizing Burden on Small Businesses**

There was no burden to small businesses or anyone else from this effort.

Small businesses are not specific targets of the overall Open Government Citizen Engagement except by agencies where small businesses are the main audience with which an agency wishes to engage. The government welcomes input from small business and others who want to weigh in and engage with government.

**6. Consequences of Less Frequent Collection**

The initial use of the GSA-provided tool was from February 6 through March 19, 2010, to allow the public to share ideas as agencies create their Open Government plans. Even though the initial phase has ended, many of these sites continue to run, and many others with similar goals and features have been launched. This collection was instrumental in gathering

ideas and comments from the public to aid in the creation of agency Open Government plans. By providing innovative online tools to agencies, and by using these tools to solicit general questions, ideas, suggestions, and comments from the public, agencies are improving their ability to engage the public and foster a culture of open government. In addition, this and other tools will continue to be used to engage the public in the spirit and changing culture of open government to increase both public participation and collaboration. Agency Open Government plans and practices will determine the frequency of the information collection.

**7. Consistency with OMB Guidelines**

The GSA and other agencies collected information in a manner that complied with OMB guidelines. GSA requested a waiver to the Guidelines in 5 CFR 1320.5(d)(2) of the Emergency ICR FR Notice due to the short timeline to implement the Open Government Directive.

**8. Consultation Outside the Agency**

The GSA understands from the OMB that public participation and collaboration is desired. This aligns with the Administration's Open Government agenda. The GSA has also conferred with the OMB to determine that the social media functions of voting/ranking options are also desired, within scope of the Open Government goals, and provide value to the public. A notice published in the *Federal Register* at 75 FR 16484, on April 1, 2010. One comment was received, although it was of a general nature and was not related to our information collection.

**9. Explanation of Decision to Provide any Payment or Gift to Respondents**

No payments or gifts will be made to respondents under this ICR.

**10. Describe any assurance of confidentiality provided to respondents and the basis for the assurance in statute, regulation, or agency policy**

Visitors to the Open Government Citizen Engagement websites are strongly assured of confidentiality. GSA and other agencies have and will prominently post their

Privacy Policy and Terms of Participation. The Terms of Participation will explain how the rating, ranking, and flagging works.

In the case of the GSA provided tool powered by IdeaScale, a user must sign on with an existing external account or email registration to submit vote an idea up or down. Full email addresses are not made public and visitors only see the screen names for each submitter that are created by the submitters themselves. It is not possible for a user to inadvertently include personally identifiable information when they vote an idea up or down.

**11. Justification for Sensitive Questions**

Rating, ranking, and flagging mechanisms do not ask questions or collect data of a sensitive nature.

**12. Estimated Burden of Information Collection**

This ICR is for a three-year standard clearance of the GSA rating, ranking and flagging mechanisms, and those used by other agencies implementing the Open Government Directive. IC's are included in this package for the following feedback mechanisms:

**Voting/Rating/Ranking/Flagging for Public Support or Disagreement:** We anticipate every agency of the federal government will use this type and similar ideation tools to help them engage with the public. At least twenty-two government agencies used this tool this year so far. It is expected agencies will continue to use the GSA-provided and other similar tools to engage the public on more specific topics related to the missions of each agency.

It is estimated that across the federal government 1,200,000 votes / ratings/flags may be submitted as agencies engage the public in the spirit of open government. Each of the ratings is estimated to take 5 seconds to complete. Therefore, it is estimated that 100,000 minutes (1,666 hours) per year may be expended to submit votes / ratings as agencies engage the public in open government activities.

**13. Estimate of Cost Burden**

The easy-to-use ratings/rankings/flagging requested is of

the type and scope normally provided online and without additional research time required. Therefore, respondents are not expected to incur any costs or burden for responding to this purely optional opportunity to participate in the rating/ranking/flagging process.

**14. Cost to Federal Government**

Electronic rating/ranking/flagging mechanisms are innovative tools in the social media market that will be used for open government. There is no additional cost when these tools include rating/ranking mechanisms. In many cases, the tools, or the plug ins for rating/ranking are free (*e.g.*, Wordpress blog plug-ins for rating, ranking, flagging). The GSA, for example, is incurring no additional cost for using a tool that includes the mechanism for the public to vote ideas up or down. The rating/ranking and flagging features of such tools allow the public to help moderate conversations and keep them civil and relevant.

**15. Reason for Change in Burden**

N/A

**16. Plans for Tabulation, Statistical Analysis and Publication (Project Schedule)**

GSA and agencies collect rating numbers to track the utility of ideas and comments and to improve the value of the engagement. The results are not to be characterized as representative of the user population, as many users may elect not to provide ratings.

**17. Request to Not Display Expiration Date**

GSA and other agencies will display the OMB Control Number on the Open Government websites and tools that use the rating/ranking/flagging mechanisms. GSA requests, on behalf of all agencies, permission to waive display of the expiration date to mitigate the risk of the public's misunderstanding of its meaning. A misunderstood expiration date may be detrimental to the President's vision of an open and transparent government. Acknowledging that most citizens may not be acquainted with the PRA and the

reason for an expiration date, potential participants might be discouraged from participating if the experience is perceived to have an impending "expiration" date.

**18. Exceptions to the Certification**

No exception to the certification statement is being requested.