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CONSUL CON

DAY 3 - 10:15 - AI Stage

Consul and API's: Interoperating Participation Platforms and Communication Tools

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Session recap

At a glance

Two German smart city projects funded by the federal 'Model Projects Smart Cities' programme showed how CONSUL can be connected to other tools. Sabrina Wehrend of the City of Lübeck described a vision and ecosystem of standardised, interoperable open source tools developed with other northern German cities. Tilman Hampl of the City of Würzburg then presented the new CONSUL API, which exposes nearly all of CONSUL's functions so it can run without its own interface, and Tobias of demokratie.today, Würzburg's technical partner, gave a live demonstration of participating in CONSUL through WhatsApp.

Key messages

- No single tool covers all participation needs. Cities should build an ecosystem of specialised open source tools connected through standard interfaces.
- Open source is not free: communities or providers are needed to maintain tools and their interfaces, and governments should help fund this infrastructure.
- A full API makes CONSUL 'headless': its data and decision processes stay in CONSUL, while people can participate through other channels such as messengers, apps or community platforms.
- Meeting people where they are (for example on WhatsApp, which young people already use) lowers barriers, while data and control remain on the city's open source platform.
- Simple integrations bring immediate value: open participation processes can automatically appear on the city website, open data portal and event apps.
- Lowering barriers raises questions about proposal quality and about a few actors flooding a platform. These should be monitored in real pilots.

Facts, figures and references

- Lübeck: market research on more than 100 open source participation tools in 2022; partner cities include Flensburg, Kiel, Hamburg, Bamberg and Hildesheim.
- CONSUL API: about 182 read and write endpoints, with full documentation published on Würzburg's portal.
- Integrations shown: open data platform, city website, Mobilizon event platform and app, WeChange, WhatsApp bot.
- Agencies can charge around EUR 15,000 for a standalone participation website, which the API approach aims to avoid.

Takeaways for the community

- Cities can reuse the CONSUL API now to surface participation on websites, open data portals and event apps with little effort.
- Messenger-based participation is promising for reaching young people but should be tested in real processes, with attention to data protection and proposal quality.
- Interoperability between tools requires shared standards and sustained funding for maintenance, ideally supported by state governments.