

The Future of YourTown.com

By Morris A. Enyeart

It has been a little more than four years since New Jersey Municipalities published its first article on municipal web sites. Since that time, the number of official municipal web sites has grown by almost 300 percent. What has changed and what lies ahead for municipal web sites?

What has changed? There have been two noteworthy trends in the development of municipal web sites since the first sites began to appear in the early 1990s. First is the fact that the number of official web sites has increased significantly while the number of unofficial web sites has actually declined. Second, both the type and quantity of information provided on official municipal web sites has dramatically increased.

The first New Jersey municipal web sites were little more than signposts on the internet. More often than not, they were limited to static information about the governing body and the most common municipal services. A large municipal web site might contain 50 pages with the capability to send e-mail to the municipality. Much of the time the only distinguishing characteristic between

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official and unofficial web sites was the existence of advertising on unofficial sites. No interactive applications, registration, or e-commerce capabilities could be found. Unofficial web sites outnumbered official web sites by more than two-to-one.

Today in New Jersey, there are more

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than two official municipal web sites (265) for each unofficial municipal web site (126). The change is as much due to the decline of advertising revenue, as it is to the fact that the unofficial sites grossly underestimated the abundance, complexity and dynamic quality that today's official municipal web sites offer. A review of New Jersey municipalities

that do not have official web sites reveals they are generally medium to small communities which do not have the resources or communication complexities of larger municipalities.

Municipal web sites are no longer just public billboards. They now cover all facets of local government. Updates occur frequently and provide residents with more timely information on day-to-day and important issues. Interactive applications are becoming more common, but still lag due to limitations of

municipal back-end systems. For example, interactive pet license applications (and many others) have faded in favor of providing online print versions of the application. The interactive versions actually increased municipal workloads since they were not integrated with the municipal systems. In addition to integration with municipal systems, the

primary barriers to municipal applications becoming interactive continues to be the lack of municipalities that accept credit cards and the existence of pre-printed, multi-part forms. The credit card issue will be addressed later in this article. Multi-part forms are most commonly found where reports must be forwarded to another governmental entity. The solution here is to be able to transmit the information electronically instead of forwarding color-coded copies to other entities.

What Lies Ahead? Three trends that are

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coalescing will transform the very nature and value of municipal web sites. First, more complex and critical information will be offered on municipal web sites. Second the type of residents being served will be broadened to include foreign language speaking residents and disabled residents. Third, and most important, will be a move to e-commerce. Interactivity will expand beyond simple e-mail links and occasional resident surveys to encompass applications.

A large official municipal web site today contains more than 150 — 200 web pages and is growing at the rate of 100 new pages a year. In addition to the standard departmental descriptions, community/government calendars and contact information; documents that were rarely seen by the general public are beginning to emerge online. Examples include municipal code books, Master Plans (Land Use, Open Space and Circulation) and annual financial audits. Meeting agendas and minutes for governing bodies, committees and commissions are also appearing with greater frequency. The response by residents to this publication of municipal government information has been very positive. Public access to government documents remains a very high profile discussion today (see The New Jersey State League of Municipalities web site at www.njslom.org for a primer on access to public records) and will continue to influence municipalities in the future publication of information on their web sites.

Future trends for municipal web sites include publishing non-binding referendums, online capability for public bidding, auctions, and sale of municipal bonds. Video, sophisticated animation, and audio presentations will also become more common in the future as people's access to the Internet gains bandwidth. Currently about 80 percent of private homes still use dial capability to access the internet. However, fewer than 20 percent have less than 56kb dial access. Four years ago, fewer than 10 percent had access speeds greater than 28.8kb.

The design of web sites has also come

a long way since the early '90s. Criteria cited in "Municipal Web Sites — What Do the Best Have to Offer" are still valid, but need to be supplemented by the following new elements:

- Navigation must now consider disabled residents. The digital divide not only affects the poor, it also places the disabled at a disadvantage. In December 2000, the federal government issued new guidelines that will require most federal agencies to redesign their web sites to make them more accessible to people with disabilities.' It will not be long before the many of the same rulings that apply to public buildings also apply to official government web sites. A good treatment of this area can be found in Michael G. Paciello's book on this subject.' Online resources include www.cast.org for "Bobby" compliance, <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10-HTML-TECHS/#noframes> standards for web developers, and the National Organization on Disability at www.nod.org. The focus of these efforts has been providing written explanations of all charts and graphics.
- Offering multilingual capabilities on municipal web sites is probably further in the future than the other trends and will most likely be handled by third parties such as Systran Internet Translation Technologies (www.systransoft.com). Most municipalities will not have the internal resources to handle this type of task.

E-commerce is the final frontier for municipalities. The inclusion of e-commerce functionality in municipal web sites will bring the true transformation in municipal web sites to provide more cost-effective municipal services. To say that local government e-commerce is in its infancy would be to overstate the case. A review of local government web sites illustrates the fact that e-commerce web-based applications have not yet emerged on the scene in New Jersey, or elsewhere in the U.S. for that matter. As noted earlier, there are two factors preventing the emergence of local government web-based e-commerce applications.

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The first barrier to be overcome is the acceptance of credit card payments for a broad range of municipal services. The difficulty here lies in the fact that state law precludes municipalities from charging transaction fees for payment of services to cover the cost of accepting credit cards. Charging convenience fees is permitted in some cases, but is often politically unacceptable. While banks may waive transaction fees in some cases where the volume is small, they are not likely to waive those fees where

The municipal web site audience is constantly expanding and will, in the future, accommodate foreign languages and disabled residents

large-scale payment of funds such as taxes and utility bills is concerned. State and federal governments need to pass enabling legislation to allow these fees to be recovered by municipalities. Few municipalities can afford to bear the brunt of raising taxes to pay for transactions fees as part of their overhead cost. Nor is it fair to expect municipalities to pay the entire cost of transaction/convenience fees when they are collecting taxes for school boards and county governments. [e-commerce should decrease municipal overhead costs, not increase

them. One of the first areas expected to offer web-based e-commerce applications will be the municipal court system since many of them already accept credit cards.

The second problem that must be solved is the integration of e-commerce applications with municipal systems. The solution here for most municipalities will be to use third-party vendors who will develop the web applications as "add-ons" to existing municipal web sites. Funds collected will be electronically deposited directly to municipal accounts. Data collected needs to be made available to municipalities both

online and in downloads for inclusion in municipal finance and reporting systems. It is the latter part of this equation that will present the most challenges for municipalities and vendors alike. If the data cannot be electronically integrated with a municipal system, then new manual tasks will emerge to accomplish the task, making the entire process much less cost-effective.

One concern is the cost of e-commerce services provided by the vendors. The cost must be compared rigorously to the current municipal cost of provid-

ing the service. A simple e-commerce system may cost as much as \$10,000 - \$20,000 while a complex system may cost as much \$500,000 or more. That does not mean municipal e-commerce systems will not be economically viable, just that it must be clear where savings can be expected.

While local government-to-consumer e-commerce is the holy grail of municipal web site development, we cannot ignore economies that can be gained by implementing government-to-government e-commerce solutions. The State of New Jersey is working diligently to establish government-to-government web based applications that will

ultimately reduce the paperwork and manual effort currently required of municipalities in their dealings with the state. These efforts should be actively supported and embraced by municipalities, as they are likely to be the first encounter with e-commerce activities. In summary, New Jersey municipal web sites have come a long way since their beginnings in the mid '90s. Residents of municipalities that have official web sites are being well served with frequently updated information that demystifies the operation of local government. The municipal web site audience is constantly expanding and will, in the future, accommodate foreign languages and disabled residents.

The goal of providing e-commerce on all municipal web sites is still years away due to limitations associated with accepting credit cards and integration of data with existing systems. In the meantime, local governments will gain valuable experience in e-commerce through their dealings with the state.

Endnotes 1 "Surfing the Municipal Web," Enyeart and Ackermann, New Jersey Municipalities, Oct., 1996

2 "Municipal Web Sites — What Do the Best Have to Offer," Enyeart, New Jersey Municipalities, Dec. 1999

3 "Fed Web sites must be kept usable by all," Associated Press, Home News Tribune, Friday, Dec. 22, 2000

4 Paciello, Michael G., Web Accessibility for People with Disabilities, CMP Books, 2000