

Hillsboro Records Going Digital

When current Hillsboro City Secretary Betty Harrell first interviewed for her job six years ago, she had two questions for then City Manager Kevin Carruth.

She wanted to know what the city had planned for its street repairs and what kind of records-management system the city had in place.

After the bond election two years ago, the city has repairs to its streets well underway. And in less than two weeks, Harrell and Deputy City Secretary Karen Warren hope to be rolling along with scanning Hillsboro's records into a digital database.

The Hillsboro City Council recently entered into an agreement with Municipal Code Corporation (MCCi) to implement a Laserfiche program.

The software, training and support service will enable the city to maintain its records digitally and securely back them up to an off-site computer server and disks.

The capability is important in the event of a fire or other natural disaster that could potentially wipe out the city's paper records.

As the city's records-management officer, the city secretary is ultimately responsible for all of the city's records, regardless of which department they are from.

These records include minutes from meetings, ordinances, resolutions and deeds.

Most of these records are currently kept in boxes or filing cabinets at the city administration building, but records are also kept at the municipal court building, Historic City Hall and individual city departments.

Three years ago the city had a records' trainer come in and show all department heads how to maintain their records, what to keep and what not to keep.

Harrell and her staff developed a manual, outlining all the information as a first step towards streamlining Hillsboro's records management.

In May of this year, the Hill County clerk's office took over management of the birth and death records.

This freed Harrell and Warren to actively pursue the digital archiving and records-storage system that they feel the city deserves.

"We could be overtaken by boxes," Warren stated, "because of a lack of storage space."

The State of Texas mandated in the early 1990s which records were to be kept permanently and how long others must be kept before being destroyed.

But with records scattered in different locations, it was difficult to locate documents when they were requested by a citizen or needed to be destroyed.

The city secretary's office received a \$30,000 allocation from the city council, budgeted to go towards purchasing a program.

Unlike most goods and services that continue to go up in price, the MCCi Laserfiche program went down to \$26,954.

The balance was used to purchase the necessary scanner and server to separately store and maintain the city's records.

"MCCi is the Cadillac of municipal-records management. Of all the companies out there offering this service, they have the best modules to fit Hillsboro's needs," Harrell stated.

In addition to saving \$3,046 on the initial purchase of the program, the city and taxpayers will soon see other savings.

By enabling their office to quickly and efficiently access important documents, Harrell and Warren will spend far less time combing through records.

In searching for a resolution the city made in the early 1980s, Harrell spent quite a while reading through old council minutes.

"It is interesting to read through past records, but too time consuming and not the best use of our time," she said.

Necessary security is also provided to the city by having its records safely backed up and centrally located.

With files located in different buildings, there has been an ongoing concern that permanent records could get away from the city secretary's office.

Once the company has installed the system and trained the staff, Wednesday and Thursday, September 17 and 18, Harrell and Warren will get to work preserving Hillsboro's records.

They plan to start with current records, scanning and entering them into electronic storage. The history of the city will be archived as well.

In the not too distant future, Harrell hopes to be in a position to purchase further upgrades to the system to put the records on the Internet.

After all the necessary security levels are implemented and the system is up and running, citizens may have the ability to access public records online.

Additionally, MCCi has a location in Waco to archive the most delicate and crumbling paper records Hillsboro has, including meeting notes and resolutions dating back to 1900.

Harrell is looking to secure grant money to fund the upgrades necessary to permanently preserve these fragile records.

Warren credits the city secretary with having the vision for Hillsboro's future by preserving its past.

"This is a way to keep the history of the city going," Harrell said. "The history of a city is like the history of a family – a big family, and it is worth preserving."