

Use Technology to Streamline Your City's Legislative/Meeting Management Processes



by Donny Barstow



Staffing resources have become more limited, and doing more with less has become a requirement rather than a goal. The good news is that efficient techniques in managing the legislative/meeting process are available.

The legislative process should be recognized as a core business process just like any other, and one that is likely in need of an overhaul. Technology has made significant strides over the years, and by leveraging it, efficiency and transparency are to be gained.

Electronic Systems for Legislative Management

Most local governments currently use a paper-intensive and/or mainly manual approach to legislative management. The current process is extremely time-consuming and full of opportunities to “drop the ball.” There is no consistent way to submit draft items to the process, or to get them approved for an upcoming agenda, let alone a system for tracking the items as they move through the approval process. Public access is likely limited to making the agenda available on the Web at the last minute, and search tools are typically lacking as well.

In a world where we are faced with doing more with less each and every day, doing things the same way is becoming unaffordable. By leveraging technology to automate the legislative process, we can gain efficiency in drafting individual pieces of legislation and agenda items. We can also streamline reporting needs; increase efficiency in the process of compiling documents such as agenda hearing notices, agendas, minutes, voting records and certified copies; and do a much better job of providing constituents with the information they need, when they need it.

Open government and improved transparency are benefits of implementing an electronic legislative management system. For example, when items are drafted and tracked electronically, information can be made available at any stage of the process. If certain groups and/or the public needs to see all items that are in draft or pending status so that they know what legislation is being proposed, the information can easily be made available prior to items being included on an upcoming agenda.

In addition, the new electronic options to handling the legislative process allow for posting any level of detail to the public, such as agendas with all associated supporting attachments, minutes of meetings with actions and votes

taken, and even linkages from specific pieces of legislation to audio/video from the actual meeting.

Looking into the future, imagine an environment in which the public can sign up for RSS feeds that will notify them when the content or status of an agenda item and/or meeting has changed; in which constituents can set up search topics and be automatically notified if and when they are brought up during a city council meeting; and in which every department knows where its items are in the process at any given time, rather than wondering whose desk they may be stuck on.

For the City of Eustis, the future is here – and these are just some of the benefits it is already experiencing. The city (population: 18,354) recently implemented an electronic legislative management system and is making much more information available and searchable to the public. While vast efficiencies have been gained in using the system to submit agenda items, approve items, draft agendas, draft minutes, link to video, and fulfill many other reporting needs, the advanced public access provided is just as important.

For a preview, visit the City of Eustis' Web site at www.eustis.org and select “Legislative Info Center” under the “Government” directory. From there, visitors can search all legislative content, as well as view upcoming meetings, proposed legislation, video links, agendas, minutes and city-council member information, in addition to information on any other city boards or committees that the city may choose to automate in the future.

Local governments are facing tighter budgets and increasing demand for public information. While the two needs appear to conflict with one another, many are finding that improved technology, along with sound change management, is the right combination. In addition, the technology has become affordable enough (as technology does over time) for any size of city to calculate a significant return on investment. And while not the only one, the City of Eustis is a fantastic example of a city leveraging the available technology to increase efficiency and transparency in the legislative/meeting management process.

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