

Digital Democracy

Broadband gives citizens new ways to interact with government



MULTIMEDIA MAYOR — Walterboro Mayor Bill Young and other city council members use iPads for agendas, documents and notes at meetings.

City councilmen aren't always known for being hip. But the Walterboro Council uses some of the coolest gadgets on the market to stay up to date with the town's affairs.

During meetings, each council member uses an iPad to view the agenda, budgets and reports from city departments.

"You probably would not expect a small southern town government to be involved in technology like that, but we're trying to stay on top of things," says Mayor Bill Young.

Sitting in an office at city hall, Young swipes his finger across the iPad screen to go from a planning report to an agenda for an upcoming meeting. Before he moves to the next document, he pauses to play a Black Eyed Peas song on the tablet. "Every day I learn a new way to use these," Young says of the iPads, which were purchased by the individual council members.

More and more, local, state and federal government agencies are finding ways to use broadband-powered technology to interact with residents and improve their workflow. And that means everything from reducing paper and printing costs to saving time for residents. "Most of the things people need from our office, they can now handle remotely," says Tommy Hill, the tax assessor for Colleton County.

The California-based Center for Digital Government has noted that local governments around the country are using the Web with increasing regularity, especially in a recession when tax revenues are down. "Many [governments] have found ways to provide better information security, transparency and citizen engagement with innovative uses of social media and advanced decision support tools," says Todd Sander, the Center's executive director.

THE NEED FOR SPEED

Heather Landry, Colleton County's technology director, says the ability to update information quickly is one of the biggest benefits of moving city and county data online. Paper maps or reports were often only reprinted annually, meaning the documents wouldn't reflect changes in zoning or tax rates that could have been made months back. "Rather than using these paper maps

that we have to print every year, you can go on to the computer where we have up-to-date information,” Landry says.

Hill says the ability to store tax information digitally has helped his office considerably. Before broadband connections, Hill’s staff had to find and flip through large maps, locate parcels and hope the data on the map was current. With a high-speed connection, they can find accurate, current information with just a few keystrokes. “We’ve streamlined things so the information is updated on the day it’s done,” he explains.

But the large maps and other files can be 15 to 20 gigabytes each, which would not be manageable without broadband. “You won’t get that with dial-up,” Landry says. “You won’t get it done.”

CONNECTED COMMUNICATION

This summer, the City of Walterboro launched a new website (walterborosc.org), replacing a page that was about eight years old. City manager Jeff Lord said that having more virtual visitors on high-speed connections allows the site to do more with regular updates, videos and social media integration.

On the city’s Facebook page, which has more than 1,300 friends, staff posts updates on everything from curbside recycling to relevant news articles. “People expect a website to be constantly updating and flowing,” Lord says. “It’s an opportunity for us to get the word out on things.”

The site includes special tabs for visitors and businesses looking to open in Walterboro. Lord says the website could very well be someone’s first impression of the town. “If somebody is looking to come to Walterboro they’re going to look at our website,” he says.

But for those already in the Lowcountry, Colleton County’s site (colletoncounty.org) allows residents to pay traffic tickets, stay up to date on county events and search job listings. Residents can pay property taxes and have access to all sorts of tax data, including a tax estimator. “They don’t have to come to the office to get information,” Landry says. “If they can do it remotely, that’s usually better for them.”

And if residents are sending in digital



TAX INFORMATION — Colleton County technology director Heather Landry and tax assessor Tommy Hill compare digital information to data on a tax map.

forms rather than hard copies, that means fewer forms need to be printed. In a recent Center for Digital Government report, Sander says there are significant cost savings in moving documents online. “Counties across the country are aligning technology initiatives with executive strategic priorities to provide vital cost savings and administrative efficiencies,” he says.

Lord puts it more simply. “Everything is through the Internet now,” he says. “Everything.”

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Such means of communication can give citizens unprecedented access to their government.

In an issue brief posted on its website, the Center for Digital Government outlines the ways that digital documents are easier for the public to access than paper copies, even with something simple like a meeting agenda. Any changes to the agenda require redistribution and leave older copies obsolete. Paper copies can also be easily lost in stacks of other documents. “The desired goal of transparency in governmental processes is not necessarily fostered by paper

documents,” the brief states. “All of these complications make it much more difficult for the public and government employees to access correct, up-to-date information.”

Lord agrees and said sharing documents with the public is simpler than ever. “Because information is so much easier to move, it’s easier to make available,” he says. The city council has all of its agendas and minutes available online back to 2005. The city has also posted its budgets and audits online since 2004, allowing citizens to instantly access files that would have required a trip to city hall.

“If someone wants to look back and see what happened, it’s there,” Lord explains.

PRTC CEO Jason Dandridge says he’s glad to see local governments using the cooperative’s network to work faster and improve service to area residents.

“Local officials have a tough job trying to oversee an area as large and diverse as ours,” he says. “We’re lucky to have forward-thinking leaders who are using technology and broadband for innovative solutions. Having progressive local governments makes things better for businesses and residents in our area.” ♦