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Cambridge's City Council puts policy issues online, giving pols and constituents a window into government

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The problem: Accessing information anywhere, any time of day

Cambridge City Councilor Marjorie Decker is not a nine-to-five official. Many times you'll find her at her desk during the early hours of the morning working on the various issues that make up life in Cambridge's diverse, multicultural community. But while Decker doesn't hold traditional office hours, she found that the city did. "When I got elected four years ago, I was shocked to see that I couldn't go online at four in the morning and look at policy orders," Decker related.

Policy orders are the things that city councilors live and breathe for. They're the heartbeats in the life of the community. Policy orders are legislation filed by councilors, and most likely become public policy, laws, or an action the city takes. For instance, a policy order may be initiated for something as simple as a constituent complaining about a pothole on a street. Decker would write a policy order to have the pothole filled, setting the wheels of democracy in motion. Most orders are more complex, though, involving many of the city's departments at once. For example, at one point she was working on a proposed citywide smoking ban. What Decker wanted to do was track these policy orders over the Web as they wound through the government in all their forms, such as meetings and emails between the city manager's office and any of the city's departments.

The answer: A proven partnership delivering robust Web sites

Decker wrote—what else?—a policy order stating the need for a database that could be accessed anywhere, anytime. The order eventually landed on the desk of Cambridge's MIS Director Mary Hart, who then called the technological tag team of Studio 180 and Blue Note Technology. Studio 180 and Blue Note Technology are two businesses that have joined forces to supply forward-thinking clients like the City of Cambridge with robust, navigable, database-driven Web sites. It was these two companies Cambridge hired to revamp its entire Web site and turn it into the award-winning site it is today (www.cambridgema.gov). While still operating as two distinct firms, Studio 180 and Blue Note Technology have developed a cooperative and noncompetitive partnership whereby each organization delivers its particular expertise to a project. Studio 180's skill lies in graphic and Web design, and information architecture, and it acts as the client liaison and also designs the site's branding, user interface, and navigation. Blue Note Technology concentrates on the site's back end, with Blue Note's content management application anchoring all of the functionality related to delivering content to the user.

The process: Learn the business, then reflect the business in code

Before Blue Note or Studio 180 puts a finger to a keyboard they first learn the business processes of the organization for which they are working. Web sites are—or at least the good ones are—true reflections of an organization. To duplicate the organization in code, the designers first need a complete understanding of how the organization works.

“Initially, Cambridge came to us to put the policy orders online,” explained Christine Weatherwax, one of Studio 180’s two principals and Cambridge’s liaison on this project. “But we quickly discovered that the workflow had to be put online as well. So much was interrelated.” The City of Cambridge is made up of 48 individual departments, and many of them can be involved in a project at once.

Weatherwax and Mike Foster from Blue Note began meeting with Hart and Cambridge’s City Clerk Margaret Drury who had the arduous task of getting all of the information in the database. Drury is the keeper of all the paperwork that’s related to policy orders—the memos, agendas, and related communications that result from council meetings. “It’s not as if they weren’t using computers before, but there still was a lot of information that had to be loaded into the system in the form of Word documents and PDFs,” explained Foster.

“City government gets complicated as the various departments work together, and the application reflects and tracks the work they do on the Web site” he continued. “When something happens, when a councilor or a department takes action, the action is tracked and updated on the city council Web site until it is resolved, and then it’s archived.”

In the end, Blue Note and Studio 180 built a new application for Cambridge on its Web site based on Blue Note’s content management application and supporting a database developed on Microsoft SQL Server. Because of the complexity of the government process, the new application is a step beyond simple content management to being a custom application, with approximately 36 joins connecting a dozen entities.

As complex as the site is, it doesn’t complicate the city worker’s lives. “It’s important that a site doesn’t make more work for people. Part of our job is to help our clients streamline their workflow, and we worked very closely with Cambridge to ensure that that happened. It’s something we do for all of our clients,” explained Weatherwax.

“We also did quite a bit of customizing their interfaces because Cambridge required that they be rendered in a very particular way,” she said.

An added benefit: Power to the people

When the founders of this country established our government, leery of the monarchy, they devised a series of checks and balances so one branch of the government never could abuse its authority. Then there arose the fourth estate, or what today we loosely define as the media, the self-imposed guardian of democracy. This system, stated in these simple terms, worked fairly well for 200 years. But now, let’s fast forward to the 21st century, the advent of the Internet, a truly democratic technology, and the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

While this project initially began as a way for Cambridge’s city councilors to access policy issues, it also had broader implications. “Some politicians are wary about giving the public too much access to the work they do,” said Decker. “Their wariness stems from a fear that people don’t understand the legislative process and how it works. But there is no reason the public can’t see the legislation we’re filing.”

The city, they say, never sleeps, and apparently, neither do some city councilors. If Decker wants to work at four in the morning, she can. And now the citizens of Cambridge have a window into the workings of their government. If a pothole doesn’t get filled, they can find out why. If an after school program is built, they can find out who truly was behind the success. “It holds elected officials’ toes to the fire,” said Decker.