

Westford develops, then markets, online permitting system

A system developed by Westford's Technology Department to enable online access to forms and permitting information may soon be licensed out to other communities in Massachusetts and beyond.

The system enables town employees, homeowners, contractors and builders, as well as the general public, to quickly gain access to a wide array of information related to any of the thousands of properties in the town, according to Technology Director Christopher McClure. By typing in a street address or a parcel number, a user can click on links to view assessors information, including a photo and building floor plans, as well as Board of Health and Building Department records.

Another link leads to the online permitting system, which lists the status of permit applications or licenses and offers the option of filling out applications online.

McClure says the system's ease of use is a key advantage.

"In a traditional model, if I wanted to find out about an address on Main Street, I'd have to go into GIS and search for it, I'd have to go into [the] Assessors [Web site], and I'd have to know about all those things," he says. "Here, we have the ability to do virtual binding of all these tools, so it's a single point of search. I can go in and search and the system is going to find everything it knows about that property."

McClure describes the system as the culminating



Westford Technology Director Christopher McClure gives a presentation about the online permitting system the town has developed.

achievement in a long effort to better manage town documents electronically and ensure that different town databases, such as Westford's GIS system, are compatible with each other.

The town initially brought in a private firm to develop online permitting, but the commercial product did not mesh well with Westford's databases, McClure says. When the town's database administrator, Tom Laflamme, said that he could handle the work of integrating permitting software into Westford's systems, the decision was made to pursue the project in-house.

Although the permitting system originally was intended for Westford's use, McClure says he quickly saw its potential to serve neighboring communities. Most towns, he says, are not in position to build their own online system, due to prohibitive start-up costs and the lack of in-house technical staff.

Fields such as accounting and police dispatching have access to prominent, off-the-shelf software that can easily be put to work, McClure

says, but the same has not been true of permitting. At a time when cities and towns are facing severe fiscal pressures, he says, sharing resources on a regional basis becomes more sense than ever.

In July, Westford entered into a three-year contract with Hawkeye Government Solutions, a Milford-based company, to sell and license the permitting product and to provide technical support. Hawkeye has been market-

ing the product to communities in New England and expects to sign the initial contract, with a municipality in Rhode Island, by the end of the summer, according to McClure. But he says Massachusetts is where he sees the most promise.

"Tom [Laflamme] designed this to be scalable and to be regional," McClure says. "The more people who use it, the more useful it becomes."

"The holy grail would be for the state to come in and say 'This is going to be the system'" used statewide.

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This monthly column highlights some of the innovative approaches and strategies Massachusetts municipalities are using to deliver services and solve problems. If you know of a Mass Innovation that could be featured in this column, contact Mitch Evich at (800) 882-1498 or innovations@mma.org.



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