

SOFTWARE SHINES IN OVERHAULING NEWARK, N.J., PUBLIC MEETINGS PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

Managing a city's operations in an ever-changing technology landscape has never been more complex, especially if municipal leaders are reliant on legacy solutions.

With a population of more than 278,000 people, Newark is the largest city in New Jersey. And with thousands of employees spread out across 12 major departments, in 2005, city officials were feeling the strain of not having capable resources and technology to handle the paperwork, manual steps and other responsibilities of their public meeting preparation process. They began exploring their options when it came to agenda management and in-meeting software that could streamline the way the city went about compiling information and items for agenda production.



PROCESSES BEFORE THE SWITCH

Prior to adopting any software, city management originally took a largely manual approach to prepare for and carry out government meetings.

In City Council meetings, for example, votes were tallied up on paper, with the hope that they weren't misplaced. Agendas were complex to put together, and because the workflow relied heavily on paper, it was often challenging to include details about individual items. These difficulties took up a significant amount of time and impeded accountability and transparency efforts.

“So there's just one hard copy, instead of 15. Across 12 departments, each with a few divisions, it adds up.”

The legacy processes also involved a considerable amount of paper use in everything from agendas to legislation. Office of the City Clerk Project Coordinator

Damaris Quinones-Gray said every piece of legislation was copied 13 times, and these files and contracts were often voluminous. Each department might also have five to 10 resolutions before the Council, which needed 15 copies each. With 12 departments - along with a few divisions in each - the costs and amount of paperwork associated with these practices added up quickly.

Adding to the chaos was a manual delivery system

in which departments would send someone with the physical paperwork to each review point - the Law Department, Business Administrator's Office and the Office of the City Clerk. Each entity would review the legislation on paper before it went to Council, and manpower was required to pick up and drop off documents. As such, tracking each file's exact location in the process was a major issue.

PUTTING GRANICUS INTO ACTION

In a push to make the legislative process easier, less reliant on paper and more streamlined with greater levels of accountability, Newark pursued the Legistar® and VoteCast software applications from Granicus. The city now leverages Legistar® for all legislation that comes before Council. The software supports nearly 300 users, including drafters, approvers and council members, and is utilized to create agendas, minutes and as a research engine to retrieve old files. The tracking capabilities have also proven to be a major boon for the city.

"The approval tracking is definitely huge," Quinones-Gray said. "A lot of times, when departments will drop off something the director will want to know where it is and the department will say 'Oh I left it in the law department.' Law department might say 'No I never got it.' The approval tracking is excellent because we

can see where each file is at all times."

Newark also aims to make audio and video recordings more available in the future. The city already utilizes this technology and has dabbled with Granicus' live meeting manager - and staff say it's just a matter of getting users acclimated and training the council. With live meeting manager, recordings can be indexed with the published agenda on the website so the viewing public can jump to the video and audio of the agenda items they are most interested in. Quinones-Gray noted that moving forward, the goals are to push meeting minutes online, make it easier for the public to access live video streaming of meetings, and have VoteCast - Granicus' touch-screen presentation and vote recording software - working by the end of 2015.

BENEFITS FROM THE SOLUTION

Within months of implementing Legistar®, Newark city employees began seeing significant benefits.

Besides removing hundreds of sheets of paper from the process and making tracking submitted legislation easier than ever, the Legistar® search capability is one of the more valuable features for the Clerk's Office. For Quinones-Gray, the more information a city employee has, the easier it is for them to handle

CITY OF NEWARK
NEW JERSEY

LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH CENTER

City Home | Legislation | Calendar | Municipal Council | Departments | People | Live Proceedings

Details | Reports

File #: 14-2045 Version: 1 Name: Ordinance appropriating \$1.2 million for Joint Meeting
 Type: Ordinance Status: Mayor's Office
 File created: 11/26/2014 In control: Finance
 On agenda: 12/17/2014 Final action: 1/21/2015

Title: BOND ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF NEWARK, IN THE COUNTY OF ESSEX, NEW JERSEY, PROVIDING FOR THE CITY OF NEWARK'S CAPITAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE JOINT MEETING OF ESSEX AND UNION COUNTIES AND APPROPRIATING \$1,200,000.00 THEREFOR, AND PROVIDING FOR THE ISSUANCE OF \$1,200,000.00 IN BONDS OR NOTES OF THE CITY OF NEWARK TO FINANCE THE SAME. Sponsors: Chaneyfield Jenkins/ Crump Deferred 6PSF-f 010715

History (3) | Text

Date	Action By	Action	Result	Action Details	Meeting Details	Video
1/21/2015	Municipal Council	Clear sorting		Not available	Meeting details	Not available
1/7/2015	Municipal Council	maintained on public hearing and deferred	Pass	Action details	Meeting details	Not available
12/17/2014	Municipal Council	Advanced and adopted on first reading	Pass	Action details	Meeting details	Not available



various tasks. With Legistar®, documents are scanned and attached to other relevant existing files - with paperwork dating back to 1955 having been entered into the system and readily available for review as needed. Now, only one paper copy of legislation and ordinances remain, as the information can be easily retrieved in the software along with other pertinent data.

“Legistar® eliminated all of that - now they just have to bring the originals of any signature or seal that goes with that files,” Quinones-Gray said. “So there’s just one hard copy, instead of 15. Across 12 departments, each with a few divisions, it adds up.”

Chief Information Officer Seth Wainer added the value of having everything in one place is especially remarkable, allowing users to find historical items quickly for research purposes.

“As someone in IT, I’m always looking for historical background on contracts, franchise agreements or whatever we have in place,” Wainer explained. “The Legistar® platform helps us dig through these things really quickly, find what we’re looking for fast and empowers the city clerk to help. It’s really quite something in our field.”

Wainer and Quinones-Gray agreed the Granicus solutions are not only easy to use, but the support the City has received to facilitate any changes has been

especially useful. When City staff wanted to livestream meetings, for example, everything easily fell into place for them to work more collaboratively with Granicus’ video streaming team. While the City originally had a Granicus representative conduct on-site training, staff soon implemented a train-the-teacher approach to train new users in sessions geared for drafters, searchers and approvers.

“We still have a long way to go with training and making sure titles and resolutions make sense, but it really is all about collaborating and making sure that everything is on the up-and-up and is moving quickly,” Wainer said. “Having the Granicus platform in place is a big part of that. As a big city, we also have to hold ourselves to a certain standard and ensure that our training and compliance with all those things we set in place is up to speed so things move rapidly. But without Granicus in place, there really is no chance of being organized in this way.”

