

City of Columbus Case Study

Streamlining agenda creation processes to reduce paper, time and money



For many large municipalities, agenda creation and management is a time- and resource- consuming process unto itself, often dominating staff time because of the amount of inputs from the greater organization.

Such was the case for the City Clerk's Office at the City of Columbus, Ohio (pop. 835,957). With weekly City Council meetings and nearly 20 top-level departments, agenda preparation for public meetings was a dominant force in the Clerk's Office, bogged down by manual processes, paper usage and multiple steps.

So in 2003, City staff decided to make things easier on themselves. The solution: implement an agenda and legislative management software.

These days, the agenda creation process runs much more smoothly, and the public is more informed as a result.

"The public gets the information faster. The agenda and the legislation are now readily available," says Angie Blevins, City Clerk.



SUCCESS HIGHLIGHTS

- Eliminated the need for a costly third-party "City Bulletin" printer
- Removed staff time spent creating and assembling agenda packets
- Digitally deliver agenda packets via tablet devices
- Increased citizen engagement by delivering meeting minutes to the public faster

FAST FACTS

Agency Type: City

Population: 835,957

Solution:
Legistar and iLegislate

Active Since: 2003

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'A LOT OF TIME SPENT IN THE COPY ROOM'

The City of Columbus is not only the capital and largest city in Ohio, it's also the 15th-largest city in the United States. With a city of that size and scale, the City Clerk's office has a lot of work to do when it comes to preparing for city council meetings.

New legislation in Columbus is drafted by different departments. Prior to implementing a legislative management system, this was all done on paper. After drafting was done, staff in the Clerk's Office would begin the arduous process of compiling their agenda.

"It was one person's full-time job," says Blevins, though the responsibility was split between two people.

Staff members in the Clerk's Office would spend a great deal of time visiting different offices to collect signatures. When that was finished, each piece of legislation would have to be hand delivered to the Clerk's Office for placement in the agenda.

"We'd have to stamp them, put ordinance numbers on them, put a committee stamp on them, put an agenda stamp on them...then type them into the agenda," Blevins says.

From there, every piece of paper would need to be copied for assembly into a packet for each individual Council member, with additional copies for the City Attorney and City Auditor. What did the process cost them?

"Lots and lots of copies, a lot of time, lots of paper and toner, and a lot of time spent in the copy room," Blevins recalls. "We get maybe 70 or 80 pieces of legislation for every agenda in an average week."



This easily added up to hundreds of pages per agenda.

The City also used to contract with a third-party company to produce a "City Bulletin." This newsletter was released after every City Council meeting and was how public notices and new legislation were published. This was done because there was too much to publish in the local newspaper.

"We paid a lot of money to have that done," Blevins says.

After City Council meetings were over and legislation had been passed, another person would have to then index the various pieces of legislation from the agenda. It would have to be placed in numerical order by ordinance number, then filed topically.

"We were retyping titles in that as well, and that was a whole extra job," Blevins says.

A BETTER SOLUTION

Enter Granicus and Legistar®. In 2003, the City had had enough of being bogged down with paper and manual processes.



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“We had just started to hear about Agenda Management,” Blevins says. “Just the idea that we could get out of paper, get it electronic, and not have to retype the legislation draft” was enough of a push to look into a software solution.

The City ran the numbers and realized it would not only save the staff time, but that it would pay for itself in just a few short years.

Admittedly, moving the entire process to Legistar was “a little scary” for some people at first, according to Blevins. It took City staff and elected officials a little time to start to see the benefits of having an agenda and legislative management system in place, she says, but ultimately, everyone got on board.

“I was really worried about things getting lost and not being able to account for them,” Blevins says. “But of course it worked just fine. Everything went pretty well, because it’s really easy.”

Now things are drastically different for the City Clerk’s Office, highlighted even more by the fact that since 2012, the City Council has also been using Granicus’ iLegislate® application, which delivered electronic versions of agendas and agenda packets directly to mobile tablet devices. With Legistar and iLegislate, Council Members have access to agendas right on their tablets, further allowing the City to work in a mostly paperless agenda process.



‘SAVED A LOT OF RESOURCES’

Aparna Donthi, the City’s Agenda Coordinator, is in charge of compiling the agenda in Columbus every week.



As of 2016, the City had about 400 users interacting with Legistar on a day-to-day basis. With that many users, having visibility into each legislation’s whereabouts in the approval workflow can be a daunting task. However, with Legistar, Donthi is able to easily view where different pieces of legislation are in the pipeline and determine how soon they’ll be ready to go on the agenda. Having the ability to see where different ordinances are helps her handle the agenda process better.

With three different agendas to build throughout the week, Donthi says that having the ability to run the process through the Legistar software has made things more streamlined for her and the City Clerk’s Office in total.

“Just the decrease in paper and staff time ... has saved a lot of resources,” Donthi says.

And with an improved process internally, Blevins says the Clerk’s Office is able to more easily fulfill other critical functions, namely providing the public with the information it needs and wants.

“Being able to put the agenda on our website so the public can pull it themselves has been the greatest part,” Blevins says. “There’s been a lot of improvement in transparency.”