

County

- INNOVATIONS
- ACHIEVEMENTS
- DELIVERY OF SERVICES



Mobile App, Automated Work Order Management System Empower Citizens While Increasing Efficiency, Transparency

Bexar County

INNOVATION AWARD

YourGOV Website

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Facing a rapidly growing unincorporated area, Bexar County wanted to give its taxpayers more ownership and pride over their infrastructure and engage its citizens in the upkeep of that infrastructure. The county's public works and infrastructure services departments also wanted to more easily manage the county's growing number of assets — all its roads, drainage structure, bridges, signs, sidewalks, equipment and personnel.

So the county's information technology department joined forces with a municipal technology provider, Cartegraph, to create an application that could do all that, and more.

The result was YourGOV, a suite of applications that helps both residents and the county.

One aspect of the application is a public website that allows residents to submit infrastructure repair requests from their home directly to the county; it's coupled with a smart phone application that allows them to submit repair requests on the spot, complete with a photo and geographic location of the needed repair.

"A citizen can be walking down the street and if they see a trip hazard or broken sidewalk or graffiti, they take their phone, log on to the app, and it pinpoints the location of where they are at and they can also put the picture of the problem and it'll go straight into our system," said Tony Vasquez, the county's streets and drainage manager, adding that the electronic line of communication has greatly improved the county's response time. "We monitor our system continuously so at no point does a submission go more than half a day without a response."

The new application means that county employees don't have to spend as much time out in the field

“ Say you're out walking the dog and you're outside and you see a pothole or you see a crack in the sidewalk. You're able to through your iphone take a picture and send that directly to Bexar County and we will then use that information to generate a work order to go out and fix that pothole or fix that crack in the sidewalk.”

— RENEE GREEN, Bexar County Engineer

searching for the subject of a repair request.

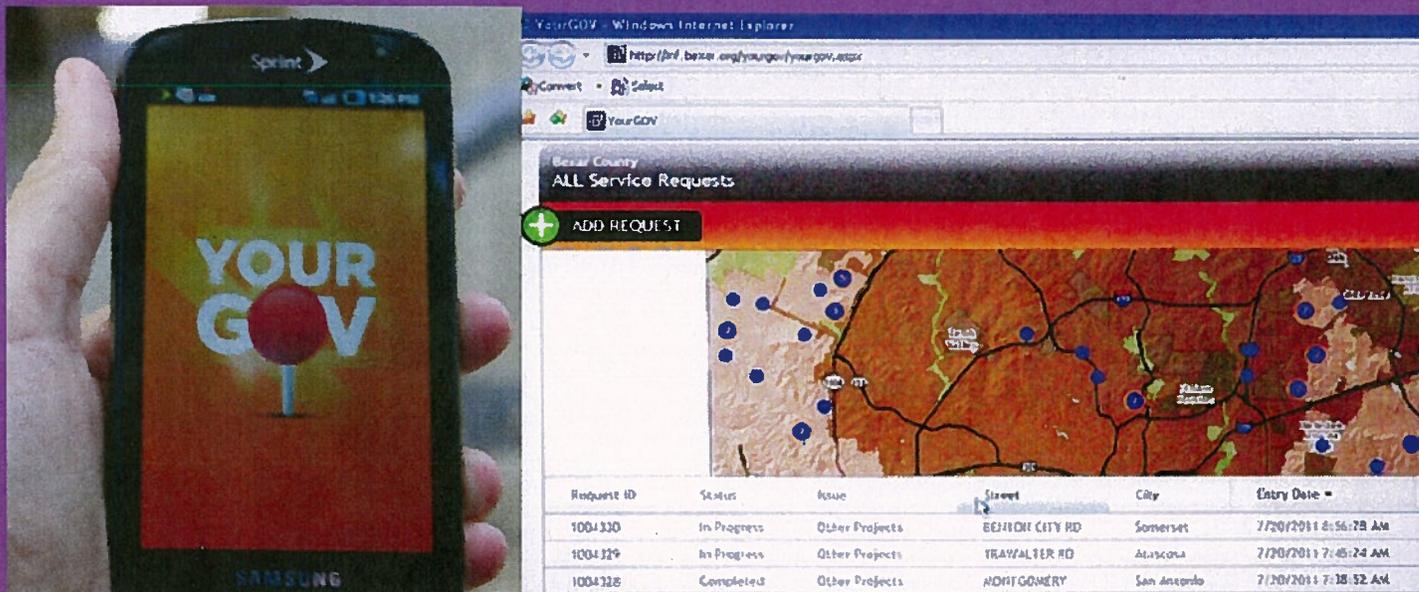
"Your inspections go from your personnel, which we have 185 people, to the residents," Vasquez said. "Everybody that has an I-phone or a smart phone now is actually an inspector."

Residents can also use the YourGOV website to track the status of their repair request as it goes from submitted to completed, increasing the transparency with which the county does its work.

In its first seven or eight months, the county received about 400 service requests via the smart phone application. Approximately 500 residents have signed up to use the web portal application.

"It's taking an old county practice, which is fixing potholes, fixing streets, and bringing it into the 21st Century, so that everybody that has a smart phone can now utilize it," said County Engineer Renee Green. "It empowers the citizens. It makes them feel that they are involved in their government that their tax dollars go to pay for."

A second aspect of the suite is an internal work and asset management application that allows the county to track everything from response time to equipment and personnel. The suite includes a "dashboard... a top-level view of everything that is happening out in



Bexar County Streets and Drainage Manager Tony Vasquez, Engineer Renee Green and Senior Information Technology Project Manager Jeff Booth all had a hand in developing YourGov, a smart phone and web-based application designed to engage residents in the upkeep and inspection of county infrastructure.

the field, to be broken down by costs, by activity and by department,” said Jeff Booth, the county’s senior information technology project manager. The system keeps a record of everything in its database, so that information about productivity, expenditures and assets can be easily found and tracked over time.

“Every time we do a task, we can attach what equipment was used, what personnel was used, when it was done, and there is a permanent electronic record, so essentially what we are going to is a very paperless type of system for managing a public works department,” Green said.

The internal and external tools are completely integrated with one another, said Booth, and decrease the amount of paperwork and time county employees need for managing assets.

“Without the system, there would be a lot of paper. There would be a lot of paper-pushing, there would be a lot of field review, there would be a lot of travel, a lot of phone calls,” Booth said.

The system increases efficiency in other ways as well. For instance, before the YourGOV suite was created, employees in the county’s public works department would meet each morning to view their assignments, which would be written on a wipe board. The assignments were numerous, and just doling them out took about a half an hour each morning. The new system automatically assigns and manages tasks, saving each employee 30 minutes of waiting and adding those minutes to the amount of time each spends out in the field every day. When added all up, the additional productivity created from that one bonus is the equivalent of 10 additional full-time employees — or \$500,000 — per year.

“In the last five or six years, the county road system has grown by about 20 percent, which is really a phenomenal growth for the unincorporated area. At the same time, the economy has downturned so it would be very hard for us to go in there and ask for the people that we would need to manage that system if we were still doing it the old way,” Green said. “This updated technology has allowed us to absorb that increase without having to ask for additional warm bodies to go out and do the work.”

Another benefit is that several other YourGOV citizen request-type applications already exist for residents to use, but they are not tied directly to a government entity. That means that a citizen could be attempting to submit a repair request via a smart phone or web application, but that the repair request gets lost in cyberspace, creating frustrated citizens. By giving its citizens an application to use, Bexar County is ensuring that its citizens are heard.

“We’ve gotten very positive feedback from the residents,” Green said. “It’s just the best demonstration that I have of efficiency in county government.”

Any county can implement a YourGOV-type application in their own communities, Green added, though just how expensive such a system would be depends on each county’s wants and needs. Green recommended other counties start off slowly, with just one application, then build on the system over time. That’s what Bexar County did.

“It was a gradual process,” she said. “It was not anything we invested all in one year. We started in the ‘90s actually when we first bought the modules for about \$90,000. . . . Over the last several years as we’ve added additional modules and additional applications. Our total investment in the system is close to about \$600,000, but that’s over a five-to-six-year period.”

Given that the system saves \$500,000 a year in productivity alone, that means that for Bexar County, it’s already more than paid for itself.

“You can start very small,” Green said. “I think the real hesitation for any agency to move forward with something like this is they may believe that it takes the amount of robust data that we’ve collected over the last six years to kick something like this off, and it doesn’t.”

The only challenge to implementing the system, Green said, was coordinating repair requests with the City of San Antonio, since the city does not have a YourGOV-type system in place. The county now forwards all city-related repair requests via email. That way, the county does not have to deny any repair requests that are submitted within the city limits. ★