NAPA COUNTY GRAND JURY
2015-2016

May 24, 2016

FINAL REPORT

NAPA COUNTY'S WEBSITE NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

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SUMMARY

The County's website has become a significant interface with the public and is important to providing service to county citizens and enhancing the productivity of county departments and divisions. The Grand Jury decided to investigate how well it is being used and how it could be improved. The Jury found the county website to be adequate in some respects and a useful resource. However, the Jury's investigation quickly revealed that the features and functionality of the website vary widely from department to department. The Jury also discovered that, in some cases, information provided on the website was out-of-date or inaccurate. Documents that are supposed to be available, either on the website or in the Napa County Public Library, were not where they were supposed to be. Links to documents do not always go to the current versions, and some documents do not exist at all. The Jury found that the responsibility for the website's content management lies with department and division managers, and the duties for monitoring and updating the content are part time assignments for administrators with a wide range of interest and ability. Although the county provides training and support to these people, the results are not uniform. Some department's web pages are quite good, but others are not. The Jury recommends that the county establish standards for content, format, and features, and that it form a user group of departmental systems people to share ideas and best practices. Besides the lack of standards, the Jury found that searches for documents and other information are hampered by the website's weak search function. The Jury recommends that the county invest in a more robust search engine. The Jury found further that the county website is not capable of performing basic transactions, such as making appointments, submitting applications, and scheduling inspections, as other counties' websites currently are. To improve service to county residents and raise departments' productivity, the jury recommends that the county establish a centralized web development team with sufficient resources to make the county's website fully functional for its users.

BACKGROUND

Senior county managers said that the widespread use of smart phones and ready access to the internet have made the county website the primary interface between county departments or divisions and citizens. Although county managers report that some people still call or visit in person for information or services, the county website is by far the preferred source for most people. Because it is so important to providing service to the public and productivity to the county, the Grand Jury elected to investigate how well the county website is being utilized and how it could be improved.

While investigating other county operations, the Grand Jury found the website to be adequate in some respects and useful. However, the Jury also found an alarming amount of inaccurate and incomplete information. Some documents were hard to find; some information was not where it was supposed to be; and statements on some web pages were no longer true. Because the Jury recognized the potential of the website to improve service and productivity and to be a great source of information for county residents, the Grand Jury initiated an investigation into how the

county's website can be made more effective.

METHODOLOGY

The Jury made extensive use of the website during its investigations into other aspects of county government and gained a good understanding of its strong points and shortcomings. The Jury's investigation started with a review of the content administrators' user guide and the training and support the county makes available to content administrators. The Jury then conducted interviews with senior department managers to discuss the website content for which they are responsible and their assessment of the website in general. The Jury interviewed managers from the following departments:

     Assessor
     Auditor-Controller
     Health and Human Services
     Information Technology Services
     Napa County Library
     Planning, Building, and Environmental Services
     Public Works
     Recorder-County Clerk

Documents Reviewed
     Napa County Content Contributor User Guide.

DISCUSSION

As the Grand Jury investigated various county matters, it made heavy use of the county website. While the Jury found the website useful, it identified several aspects that needed improvement.

Lack of Standard Formats and Features

Jury members using the county website discovered that searches were hampered by inconsistency in the techniques used to store and locate data. Some departments have links under "Documents"and others do not. Also, there is no standard way that reports and other documents are referenced. Some document names start with the year being reported, some start with acronyms like "COB," "CMT," "Fiscal," or "FY," and others start with the name of the document. The methods used to name documents vary widely from department to department, and even within a single department–the Auditor/Controller for example–depending on who posted documents to the web page. These issues and the website's relatively weak search function make some documents very difficult to locate, unless the reader knows what naming convention was used to post those documents. Formats for titles, column headings, and labels on graphs also vary widely from department to department. The Jury also found that some departments, like Public Works, provide useful aids on their sites, like organizational charts. This informs residents and others what the departments do and who is responsible for what. Unfortunately, this tool is used by very few other departments.

Inaccurate and Out of Date Information

The Jury used the county website as a primary source to gather information about county functions. During this information gathering process it quickly became evident that the content on many department web pages was out of date. Links to documents went to old versions, and the new ones couldn't be found. Some reports that were supposed to be available on-line or in the county library weren't where they were supposed to be. For instance, in the case of the County Executive Office, the Recommended Budget was only available for six of the past ten years and the Comprehensive Annual Financial Reports and the Five Year Financial Plans were not available at all. The county executive office's web page said that Performance Measurement Books are available, but the link goes to a 2011-2012 report, with no indication that a report had been changed from a fiscal year to a calendar year or that the report for 2013 had been published. The Jury was unable to find that 2013 report until provided the web page URL by the county executive's office. Other departments had similar issues. It became clear to the Jury that many departments are lax in maintaining their web pages, and that they are thereby compromising the effectiveness of the website. Some institutions use interns to perform this type of clean up work.

Weak Search Function

The Jury found that the county's website search function is inadequate. Even after listing desired documents several different ways, the search function was unable to link to them. For instance, when the Jury was looking for the Performance Measurement Reports mentioned above, Jury members entered the report title several different ways. But the search function did not provide the location of the 2013 Performance Measurement Report and the Jury assumed it did not exist. However, the report did, in fact, exist and was available on-line, but the search function didn't identify it.

Collateral Duty Content Administrators

Through its interviews, the Jury found that the responsibility for managing website content resides with the department and division heads. The personnel who actually monitor and maintain the content have a wide range of qualifications for and interest in this part of their jobs, typically a small fraction of their total responsibilities. Therefore, it is not surprising that maintenance and development of the website does not always get the emphasis it requires. The webmaster offers open houses and voluntary training sessions for these people to hone their website skills, but these programs have mixed results, depending on the receptivity and ability of the content administrators. A comment was made by one interviewee that the people who need the training the most are the least likely to attend the training sessions. Some find it interesting and challenging, while others are intimidated by the technical aspects of content management. The responsibility for developing new website features, like on-line processing of building permit applications, falls largely on line managers, who don't have the resources at their disposal to do website development. For instance, the Health and Human Services technology team is focused on maintaining the department's four primary systems and installing a data mart to combine the data from all four systems in a single location. HHS doesn't have the additional resources at present to also develop it's portion of the county website as an efficient client

interface for its four primary systems, as it would like to do. Information Technology Services maintains the website framework and does offer some technical support for security and compatibility of software, but does not have the resources to support robust website development. Line managers said that they are virtually on their own for adding website features and functions. In addition, the county has not used all its available tools to evaluate and optimize website usage. It was not until the Jury asked for the number of website "hits" on specific documents that the activity tracking feature was turned on.

Waiting In Line Rather Than On-line

The Jury interviewed several senior managers who had worked for other counties before transferring to Napa County. Those managers voiced their opinions that the Napa County website is well behind those other counties in supporting online transactions. They are well aware of the improvement in both service and productivity that can be achieved with website enhancements. One of them commented that they "would much rather have their customers wait on-line than in line." However, they all stated that such improvements are not likely to happen soon, because of limited resources and conflicting priorities. Planning, Building, and Environmental Services is interested in on-line permit applications to its portion of the website, but its IT resources are allocated to more immediate needs.

FINDINGS

F1: Lack of Standards – The Jury found that although all departments use a standard web page design, there is a wide range of formats and features from department to department. Document naming conventions are not consistent, frequently making documents difficult or impossible to find. Some departments include helpful information, like organizational charts, but others do not. Website users would benefit from more uniform formats and features.

F2: Content Out of Date or Wrong – The Jury found that content on the site is not current. Some links to documents do not go to current versions of those documents. Some reports that are referenced don't exist. Some reports cannot be found through website searches and can only be accessed if readers already know the location. Documents that are supposed to be available elsewhere, i.e., at the county library, are not there. Regular reviews of website content are not being done.

F3: Search Function is Weak – The search function on the county website is inadequate.

F4: Website Content Not a Priority – Managing website content is a line manager responsibility, and it is clear that it is not a priority for some departments. In most cases, monitoring and updating website content make up a small fraction of the jobs of the administrators who are assigned those duties, and those people have widely varying ability and interest in the task. The technical challenges of maintaining the site are intimidating for some. The website is not getting sufficient attention to make it an important communication and customer service tool.

F5: Site Not Living Up to Full Potential – Although the website is a useful resource and has become a primary source of county information, it has not lived up to its potential to be an effective tool for providing service and efficiency. In addition to having inaccurate and hard to find data, the site does not support even basic transaction capability, such as scheduling appointments and submitting applications, functions that are available on the websites of other counties. The current organizational structure relies on part time content administrators and puts the responsibility for website maintenance and development on the shoulders of line managers, who in many cases do not have the necessary resources to do that. Information Technology Services does have some systems development capability, but also has limited resources and does not have the responsibility for driving process enhancements in county departments and divisions. As a result, the website falls well short of the functionality it could and should have.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: In response to finding F1, establish County wide standards for formats, document naming conventions, and best practice content features.

R2: In response to finding F2, clean up the website and keep it current. Verify that information is accurate, up-to-date, and easy to find.

R3: In response to finding F3, the county should upgrade the website search function.

R4: Based on findings F4 and F5, the Jury recommends that the county form an expert user group to share best practices and new web functionality among divisions.

R5: In response to findings F4 and F5, recognize the website's importance as a communication, productivity, and service tool, by providing sufficient up front resources to department/division managers and to Information Technology Services to be able to implement all systems enhancements that can be cost justified through improvements in productivity and customer service.

R6: In response to Finding F5, the Board of Supervisors should challenge department and division managers to identify opportunities to improve productivity and/or customer service through the use of technology and provide the necessary up front resources to implement those opportunities that can be justified based on cost/benefit analyses.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:
From the following governing bodies:

Board of Supervisors: **F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, R1, R2, R3, R4, R5**, **R6**

From the following Individuals:

    County Executive Officer: **F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, R1, R2, R3, R4, R5**, **R6**

INVITED RESPONSES

From the following individuals:

    Library Director: **F1, F2, R1, R2, R4**
    Chief Information Officer: **F3, F5, R3, R5**, **R6**

    Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.