

A Reprint from *Tierra Grande*

If the thought of dealing with city hall conjures up nightmares of long lines, inconvenient hours and telephone tag, take heart. Local governments across the state are improving customer service by providing services via the web. New tools such as interactive geographic information systems (GIS), online permitting and streaming video are making life easier for real estate professionals who depend on local development offices for a wide range of information.

Websites for every city in Texas with a population of 50,000 or more — a total of 47 — were examined to determine what services are being offered. The state's largest cities were the most likely to offer web-based services, but smaller cities such as Sugar Land (population 63,500) are providing high levels of e-government services as well.

Convenient Communication

Thirty-six of the cities in this study post e-mail contacts for their development departments. This allows real estate

professionals to submit questions at their convenience rather than having to call or stop by during business hours. Fifteen cities provide individual e-mail addresses for staff members, so customers may contact the person most familiar with a particular issue.

Thirty-nine of the surveyed cities provide customers with direct access to zoning ordinances. Information on the city's comprehensive zoning plan and other plans are available online for 29 cities.

Twenty-two cities provide online maps showing zoning of individual properties. Some cities provide the maps in jpg or pdf format, while others use an interactive GIS system.

With San Antonio's interactive GIS system, users can locate floodplain areas, historic districts and areas within San Antonio's extraterritorial jurisdiction. Bryan's system allows users to view subdivisions, zoning and proposed roads.

The City of Austin site allows users to download GIS data files. For example, users can download all multifamily projects

under development in the city by quarter. This helps licensees provide detailed, accurate information about properties and neighborhoods buyers are interested in.

Two cities allow customers to order and pay for permits online. San Antonio customers can apply for permits, schedule inspections and review balances owed on permits. Sugar Land allows customers to search for information on specific building permits and schedule or cancel inspections online.

Meetings Online

In 21 of the surveyed cities, customers can view agendas for planning commission meetings online in advance of the meetings. Seventeen city websites allow customers to view minutes from previous meetings.

Busy residents and business people may find it hard to attend city council, planning commission or other public meetings. But in six cities, one or more public meetings are viewable via the Internet. Corpus Christi's website includes live video of city council meetings. Sugar Land posts video of planning commission meetings on its website after the fact, so users who missed the meeting can view cases at their convenience.

The Denton and Irving websites allow users to view programs as they are broadcast on the municipal cable channel. El Paso's site provides an informational video about the city, which is helpful to newcomers.

News and Forums

Sixteen of the surveyed cities offer customers an e-mail news service. Midland and Tyler send periodic e-mail updates regarding city services and activities. Brownsville's site lets customers choose the specific type of information they receive, such as commission agendas, job postings, emergency information and environmental newsletters.

Seven city websites provide some or all content in Spanish. The City of Houston hires translators to translate individual pages, but as the site has more than 12,000 pages, not all are translated.

Five cities have online discussion boards to encourage citizens to comment on public issues. Port Arthur's discussion forum allows citizens to post questions and comments, which city staff members then respond to.

Arlington recently hosted a discussion forum on its website focusing on the city's 2025 comprehensive plan. More than 100 people registered to participate and more than 400 messages were posted, according to Luis Tamayo, senior city planner. Tamayo believes the forum was successful in encouraging input from those who do not typically attend public meetings. The city is now considering online forums for other public issues.

Case Study: Irving

Irving's website offers a variety of services in an easy to navigate, user-friendly format. The city's zoning ordinances, comprehensive plan and rezoning applications are online. Customers have e-mail access to individual city employees.

The city's interactive GIS system, which began in 1999, allows customers to view commercial building permits, zoning, subdivisions and aerial photography, in addition to other types of information. Meeting agendas and minutes



Arlington www.ci.arlington.tx.us

Austin www.ci.austin.tx.us

Bryan www.bryantx.gov

Corpus Christi www.cctexas.com

Denton www.cityofdenton.com

Houston www.cityofhouston.gov

Irving www.ci.irving.tx.us

Midland www.ci.midland.tx.us

Port Arthur www.portarthur.net

San Antonio www.sanantonio.gov/planning/

Sugar Land www.sugarlandtx.gov

Tyler www.cityoftyler.org



are available, with agendas typically posted at least 72 hours in advance.

Irving's site provides online streaming broadcasts of the city's government television station. Citizens can view planning and zoning commission meetings live. Users can also view videos on a wide range of topics including planting a tree, disaster planning and Irving parks. Some videos are available in Spanish.

Plans to enhance Irving's site include adding building inspection and other development information along with videos on community development issues in English and Spanish. Over the next year, city staff members plan to add an interactive feature that will allow visitors to get up-to-date information on demographics, economic characteristics and development information on a neighborhood, census tract or specific address in Irving. Another new feature will allow individuals to fill out some zoning and subdivision applications online. An online feedback survey is also in the works.

As this study shows, local government websites are proving to be powerful tools that enhance customer service and help cities communicate with their customers. The future will likely bring an increase in the number of Texas cities offering e-commerce applications, interactive GIS and interactive discussion forums. ♣

Dr. Cowley (cowley.11@osu.edu) is an assistant professor with the Austin E. Knowlton School of Architecture at Ohio State University.

cool ways cities are meeting customer needs

- Online zoning information. (Plano, Texas, www.planoplanning.org/gis/ims.html)
- Online property tax information and payments. (El Paso, Texas, www.elpasotexas.gov/tax_office/pay_taxes.asp)
- Building permits available online. (San Jose, Calif., www.sjpermits.org/permits/permits/)
- Report problems using interactive GIS. The City of San Diego's GIS lets users pinpoint potholes on a map. (interapp1.sannet.gov/street-div/sreq.jsp)
- Online discussion forums. (Indianapolis, Ind., www6.indygov.org/cgi-bin/ubb/Ultimate.cgi)
- Online code enforcement complaint submission. (Fremont, Calif., www.ci.fremont.ca.us/PublicSafety/ReportAHazard/default.htm)
- Virtual city tours that allow users to learn about the city and its neighborhoods. (Cleveland, Ohio, www.city.cleveland.oh.us/around_town/map/neighborhood/neighborhood.html)
- E-mail newsletters updating customers on topics of interest. (Scottsdale, Ariz., www.scottsdaleaz.gov/listserve/default.asp)
- Customizable websites. The City of Tampa, Fla., allows users to select frequently accessed information services and recent transactions to be displayed on a customized homepage. (www.tampagov.net/app1_MyTampaGov/benefits.asp)
- Live traffic and construction web cams. Colorado Springs, Colo., provides a live traffic cam from 21 locations in the city. (www.springsgov.com/Page.asp?NavID=187)



MAYS BUSINESS SCHOOL

Texas A&M University
2115 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-2115

<http://recenter.tamu.edu>
979-845-2031
800-244-2144 orders only

Director, Dr. R. Malcolm Richards; **Associate Director**, Gary Maler; **Chief Economist**, Dr. Mark G. Dotzour; **Communications Director**, David S. Jones; **Associate Editor**, Nancy McQuiston; **Assistant Editor**, Kammy Baumann; **Assistant Editor**, Ellissa Brewster; **Art Director**, Robert P. Beals II; **Graphic Designer**, JP Beato; **Circulation Manager**, Mark W. Baumann; **Typography**, Real Estate Center; **Lithography**, Sprint Press, Fort Worth.

Advisory Committee

Nick Nicholas, Dallas, chairman; Tom H. Gann, Lufkin, vice chairman; Joseph A. Adame, Corpus Christi; David E. Dalzell, Abilene; Celia Goode-Haddock, College Station; Joe Bob McCartt, Amarillo; Catherine Miller, Fort Worth; Jerry L. Schaffner, Dallas; Douglas A. Schwartz, El Paso; and Larry Jokl, Brownsville, ex-officio representing the Texas Real Estate Commission.

Tierra Grande (ISSN 1070-0234), formerly *Real Estate Center Journal*, is published quarterly by the Real Estate Center at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas 77843-2115. Subscriptions are free to Texas real estate licensees. Other subscribers, \$20 per year.

Views expressed are those of the authors and do not imply endorsement by the Real Estate Center, Mays Business School or Texas A&M University.