Small City Finds Creative Solution in LOC Web Services

by Carol Servino, City of Astoria

How to use resources efficiently to produce an effective Web site is a challenge for cities of any size. But in Astoria—a small city with big ideas—the problem became an opportunity, as City Manager Paul Benoit turned the city’s official Web site into a research project by partnering with a graduate student.

“What do people need or want from a city Web site and how can Astoria best meet that need?” Benoit wanted to know when he became Astoria’s city manager in January 2006. Dan Bartlett, outgoing city manager, created the city’s Web site as a volunteer about the same time that Benoit took over. Bartlett used software and server space available affordably through the League of Oregon Cities Web Services, http://webservices.orcities.org, and he filled the pages with content gleaned from budget documents. Bartlett soon took another job, however, and Benoit didn’t want to lose momentum. He looked for creative solutions and opportunities to revise the fledgling site by improving navigability (and better meet the needs of users) and maintain standards.

Meanwhile, the author, a graduate student, had been looking for a project—a real need in the workplace—to satisfy the requirements of the final class to earn a Master of Science degree in the Professional and Technical Communication program at NJIT, New Jersey’s Science & Research University. It needed to be complex enough to include research, a paper to explain theory and methodology, and deliverables. Being able to combine the city’s need with my skill set as a trained journalist and experience as a former administrative assistant for Astoria proved to be a mutually beneficial solution.

The project was a process divided into four phases. My research began with basic questions: Does the City of Astoria need a Web site? If so, why? I began by introducing myself to city staff to explain the project and by drawing a flow-chart to illustrate the structure of pages as they existed in June 2006. I captured layout and design of individual pages through screen captures, saved text, conducted an audience analysis, and began to interview and survey targeted user groups: department heads, administrative staff, council members, residents and business people. I looked at other government sites, spoke with Web designers and others involved in the process, including Dan Miller and Jeremy Pressel of the League’s Web Services team.

The next phase focused on potential revisions. User groups agreed...
unanimously that Astoria, a city of about 10,000 people, needs a Web site. Values and attitudes differed, however. Council members and department heads didn’t want information on the site to be static, outdated, unattractive or inaccurate, yet they knew that financial resources do not support an IT department nor a staff position for Web service administration. Administrative staff were skeptical. While they acknowledged that a Web site could help them, they felt the initial learning curve might be too steep because it would require an excessive amount of time to learn the software so that they could maintain and update content.

So, what did each of the user groups want? The city manager wanted the site to be useful to citizens and easy to navigate. Benoit said he wanted to avoid a site that appeared unbalanced in its navigation structure and design so that one department didn’t dominate others. Members of the public wanted to see the City Code, contact names, phone numbers and email addresses, agendas and minutes of council and other meetings, information for residents and tourists, job openings, forms and permit applications. Department heads wanted all of that, but they also wanted answers to frequently asked questions, press releases, links and budget information. Council members wanted all those things, and they wanted site maintenance to keep the information current and accurate. Rounding out the lists were search functions, kill dates so that outdated information automatically expires, rotating images, and the ability to view maps.

Before I could revise the Web site, I had to determine if the League’s software and its server were robust enough to deliver everything Astoria’s Web audiences wanted. I needed to learn how to use the software and to provide training to city staff members who would be tasked with updating site content. As luck would have it, the LOC Web Services unit is as user-friendly as its software and provided on-site training to a group of 13 city employees. Seeing that the software would more than handle the city of Astoria’s Web site needs, we all learned how it worked. After the training, administrative staff and I worked together to revise the site’s structure to achieve our goals.

I functioned as Web administrator.

Two weeks after the training, I assessed the revisions we made by conducting a feedback session for administrative staff. Phase Three’s usability testing and assessment revealed high marks with unanimous agreement that the revised site is user-friendly and an improvement over the earlier and more static site. All said they felt involved in the revision process and viewed it as a positive experience and that they are happy with what is on the site in general. Department heads, too, have been pleased with the continued development of the project’s final phase.

In his book “Designing Web Usability,” Jakob Nielsen states, “Page design sometimes gets the most attention... but from a usability perspective, site design is more challenging and usually also more important than page design.” Benoit, who served as external reviewer for my project, appreciates the science behind Astoria’s revisions. He insists that “useful information should be presented in a way that allows visitors access without them having to know the hierarchy of the government entity,” and says he’s seen other municipal Web sites that keep IT departments busy. Since Astoria boasts no such department, Benoit said he is pleased with the process that allowed this small city with big ideas to develop a sensible, a Web-sensible, solution to the problem of how to provide an efficient and effective Web site.

Acknowledging that a Web site is never “done,” Benoit and the city’s content editors will continue to think of effective and efficient ways to present information on the city of Astoria’s official Website, http://astoria.or.us, as if they are looking through the eyes of the average reader.

Carol Servino is a technical communication specialist and serves as Web administrator for the City of Astoria. She will earn her Master’s Degree in Professional and Technical Communication from NJIT in January 2007.

2006 Recorder of the Year

Hillsboro City Recorder Gail Wabel received the 2006 Recorder of the Year award at the annual Oregon Association of Municipal Recorders (OAMR) conference in Portland in September. “I am very honored and humbled to have received this award,” said Wabel, a 28-year city employee who was nominated by city manager Tim Erwet (right).