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Making government available online

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Using the Internet from your home or workplace to purchase a plane ticket, buy a book or even make a bank deposit is becoming commonplace. However, within the public sector, conducting business with local government online is still a relatively new phenomenon.

Here in San Diego, the city released in February an e-government survey that found a high level of computer use relative to state and national averages, and that citizens are interested in more e-government services.

According to the survey, 71 percent of San Diego households have access to a computer at home and 88 percent have access either at home or another location. In comparison, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that 51 percent of U.S. households and 57 percent of California households have access to a personal or laptop computer. Clearly, the move toward government online instead of in line is increasing here. But how will San Diego be affected as the public sector undergoes a transformation similar to what we have seen in the private sector?

Because e-government is still in its infancy, the full impact on society is yet to be determined. In fact, a study recently conducted by the Council for Excellence in Government found that only half of all adults surveyed were even familiar with the concept of “e-government.”

Many people think e-government refers to a city Web page that offers information about city hall, e-mail addresses or perhaps forms that can be downloaded and mailed or faxed back to a specific department. As important as these functions are, the true measure of e-government is in the transactional capability—actually allowing the public to make payments, reservations, submit forms, register their comments on programs and issues, access their city files to update routine information, and vote on the Internet. In addition, e-Government is a powerful tool for government employees, allowing them to share information across various departments, streamline their day-to-day processes and measure their progress through detailed reports.

As e-government becomes more widespread, we will all experience an increase in the speed within which local government delivers its services. The benefits will include a decrease in administrative layers and duplicative efforts, saving us all significant time and making better use of our tax dollars. But with this increased efficiency comes the question of quality.

Reducing lines at city hall through e-government will allow government employees to pay closer attention to the people who require personal service. However, it does not address the digital divide – the fact that so many do not have access to the Internet—or that government must still continue to improve on its one-on-one connection with the public.

In order for e-government to best meet the needs of all community members, a series of partnerships among residents, local government officials, organizations, schools, businesses and technology providers must be formed. Working together, we can best address critical issues like access to the Internet and educating users about safe and responsible use of this powerful tool.

It will seem strange to some, long overdue to others, to imagine reserving the local softball field or registering for classes at the community center through your city’s Web site.

Certainly, many businesses are excited at the prospect of obtaining permits, licenses and registrations without having to devote their own employees’ time to standing in line at various city department. And even for the most Internet savvy among us, it may take some time to grow used to the idea of having a username and password to access your account on a city Web site.

Yet in some communities, these capabilities are already a reality. See the city of San Diego’s Web site at <http://www.sandiego.gov> for an example of how our own local government is using its Web site to connect with its citizens and businesses.

Whether you already have made an online connection, with your local government or not, all of us will eventually become familiar with e-government and how it will change our lives. E-government will offer a new way for local governments to do business that places an emphasis on a customer-friendly approach and adopts the elements of private sector business practices to improve delivery of services.

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