

Technology brings better government to Bexar County, Texas

Landata Technologies e-Recording procedure also offers protection against fraud



Bexar County, Texas , offers electronic imaging access of public records via the Internet. Bexar County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff (pictured) displays the public access workstations in his county courthouse office in San Antonio. Rickhoff has implemented a number of money-saving technology advances in the county.

HOUSTON (Sept. 21, 2006) - In Bexar County, home to San Antonio, one of the largest metropolitan populations in the state of Texas, a maverick local bureaucrat roams the courthouse halls, saving taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars a year.

County Clerk Gerry Rickhoff has held the elected post since 1994. He had virtually no experience as an elected official, but brought a common-sense business approach and his love for technology to a position in dire need of automation. "I firmly believe that technology enables good government and it is my responsibility to manage information at the lowest cost," said Rickhoff.

Over the last 12 years, Rickhoff has engaged in a consistent process of improvement to his office. These enhancements have translated to improved services and a structured distribution of information, benefiting all Bexar County constituents.

When he took office, for example, Rickhoff recognized that his existing system was not flexible enough to manage increased filing requirements and it could not manage changes in work flow. In 2001, he installed a new recordation system from San Antonio-based Landata Technologies Inc. that offered flexibility supporting new concepts and functionality.

"I am always looking to improve my office," said Rickhoff. "I needed a vendor that would step up and try new concepts and help me continue to improve the flow of information. Technology is improving every day and we should embrace these new technologies to make our government more responsive and cost-effective."

Recognizing the value of the Internet and its role in government, Rickhoff upgraded to a newer recordation system in 2004. The Landata e-STAR system supports electronic recording and tight integration with Internet-based systems and is based on state-of-the-art hardware and software technology. Why? Rickhoff wanted his constituents to be able to access all land records via the Internet - for free. Today, Bexar County residents access more than 250,000 documents per month.

"You can research Bexar County land records from the convenience of your office or home," said Rickhoff. "This is a great savings for our constituents."

"In addition, we find that a large percentage of users come from out-of-state, so giving them online access to records means we do not have personnel tied up on those inquiries," he added. "Overall, Bexar County has reduced support costs to manage land document research by 50 percent."

Handling land documents more efficiently is crucial in a county that has seen its single-family home sales rise 14 percent from the same time last year. And the new \$850 million Toyota Tundra assembly plant coming on line in San Antonio is already bringing additional home sales and construction activity to the area. The plant will eventually employ 2,000 direct workers and create an additional 5,300 jobs through its ripple effect on the surrounding economy.

Bexar County proves e-recording works to reduce government costs and potential fraud

Bexar County continues to maintain a position of leadership among county offices across the country. In October 2003, Rickhoff used the Landata e-STAR system to file the first electronically recorded document in the state of Texas. After production testing, Bexar County went live and today processes about 70 percent of all title company submissions or about 40 percent of all filed documents electronically.

According to Rickhoff, "We have significantly reduced the cost of government by implementing the Landata Electronic Recording System. Savings are derived from decreased costs for return mail postage, document scanning, cashiering functions, document imprinting, no more delivery receipts and managing incoming checks. The use of ACH transfers provides guaranteed same-day funding for filing fees, as well.

"In addition, e-recording allows title companies to receive their documents back the same day and they can generate insurance policies more efficiently, reduce costs and improve their customers' closing experience," he added.

Given Bexar County's success, it is easy to see why other counties nationwide are considering whether to offer e-recording. Rickhoff stated, "We have not had a fraudulent e-recorded document and the issues for potential fraud are more prevalent in paper submissions. Bexar County e-files with reputable title companies, and e-recording utilizes the state of the art in Internet security and encryption."

Taking a chapter out of how to run a cost-effective business, Rickhoff consistently finds ways to manage a better government. The net result is saving thousands of dollars per year to manage the paper-intensive Bexar County Clerk's office.

Over the next three years, Rickhoff estimates Bexar County will save more than \$500,000 in administration expenses - and improve the distribution of information as well.

Rickhoff constantly challenges his in-house IT staff to work with outside vendors to utilize technology that will enhance the flow of information. Recently, in support of the Open Records Act, he pioneered a high-speed image/database distribution system to provide all land records in digital format and provide daily updates through an automated system. The Landata system will handle more than one terabyte of data - approximately 20 million pages of information.

More challenges are ahead and as technology advances, so will Bexar County. Compared to other locations across the country, Bexar County has demonstrated significant savings associated with the implementation of new technology. With government leadership from a new breed of forward-thinking elected officials like Gerry Rickhoff, maybe taxpayers are finally getting what they pay for.

About Landata Technologies Inc.

Landata Technologies Inc. is a wholly owned subsidiary of Stewart Information Services Corp. (NYSE-STC), a technology-driven, strategically competitive, real estate information and transaction management company. Stewart provides title insurance and related information services required for settlement by the real estate and mortgage industries through more than 9,000 policy-issuing offices and agencies in the United States and international markets. Stewart also provides post-closing lender services, mortgage default management solutions, automated county clerk land records, property ownership mapping, geographic information systems, property information reports, flood certificates, document preparation, background checks and expertise in tax-deferred exchanges. More information can be found at www.stewart.com.

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