



2011-2012 SANTA CLARA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT

COUNTY UPDATES THE LOOK AND FEEL OF ITS WEBSITE WITHOUT ATTENTION TO CONTENT

Introduction

Santa Clara County's (the County) website¹ is the primary communication vehicle for those who rely on the County for many kinds of services. The website underwent a major overhaul in April 2012. The Grand Jury sought to understand the usefulness of the County's website.

Background

Until the 1990s, the County responded to requests for information about government services, programs, and activities primarily through the use of the telephone or contact in person. Residents and businesses called the main County phone number and spoke with an operator in a call center who would then redirect the caller to the appropriate department. According to interviews, the cost of operating a call center was expensive and not available after business hours.

Today, most people rely on the Internet to obtain the information that they need. The County established a website to deliver that information and no longer has a call center.

Methodology

The Grand Jury accessed the County website, to query many aspects of County government operations. The Grand Jury interviewed senior Information Services Department (ISD) staff about the management of the website.

The Grand Jury interviewed staff in the Office of the County Executive to determine who has management responsibility for the website, who is responsible for content and what the County's communications policy is. Website traffic analysis reports and Email reports through Webmaster links were reviewed. The Grand Jury queried other government websites such as that maintained by the City of San Jose (the City). The Grand Jury interviewed the two senior employees responsible for the City's website.²

¹ Santa Clara County Website: <http://www.sccgov.org>.

² City of San Jose website: <http://www.sanjoseca.gov/>.

DISCUSSION

ISD is the department responsible for the website structure. The other County departments are responsible for website content. Prior to the April 2012 modification, the County's website home page was a random collection of announcements, links and other information.

Structurally, website links were often not available to easily navigate the website and those links that were available often led to dead-ends. This meant users did not always find the information desired.

The Grand Jury learned through interviews that adding and maintaining content was a cumbersome process and required programmers in ISD to update the content. As a result, departments did not consistently update their content. This often meant users were not able to find current information.

Interviews with ISD personnel revealed that the department was concerned about aspects of the website. This prompted ISD to update the website's structure. In April 2012, the County website was modified and new tools enabling departments to easily create and update content were provided. The new tools eliminated the need for ISD programmers to process content updates. ISD informed the Grand Jury that over the next several years, the County plans to streamline ISD operations and improve access to information/content, knowledge, and communication delivery for businesses and residents.

While the look and feel of the home page has been improved and some of the content links fixed, problems remain. Through its own queries of the updated website, the Grand Jury found the search engine frequently returns hard to use and outdated results, contact information that is incomplete and content that is outdated. Some examples are:

- The BOS portion of the website, although well organized, is not consistent. The individual Supervisor's pages do not display the same categories of information and there is no place to find out what committees each supervisor serves on. (Compare, for instance, the following information for Supervisors Wasserman and Yeager at: <http://www.sccgov.org/sites/d1/Pages/Supervisor-Mike-Wasserman.aspx>, <http://www.sccgov.org/sites/d4/Pages/Supervisor-Ken-Yeager%27s-Home-Page.aspx>)
- A search on the BOS home page by one of the jurors using an exact home address indicated the juror lived in District 1 while official ballot information sent to the juror shows the juror in District 5.
- The Commission on the Status of Women's page has references and links to outdated information from 2009-2010. (<http://www.sccgov.org/sites/owp/Commission%20on%20the%20Status%20of%20Women/Pages/Commission-on-the-Status-of-Women.aspx>)

- A top-level search for “County Counsel” produced results none of which linked to the County Counsel page, which does exist on the site.
- There is no top-level link to the website’s webmaster or any link anywhere to anyone in the County ISD.
- To test more critical county services, the Grand Jury searched "my child was arrested" and the search returned information unrelated to the search. Going next to the Law & Justice tab, clicking on the Juvenile Detention link returns fairly generic information about departments such as juvenile detention and probation, but nothing about who to contact or what to expect. Further, one is unable to use the back button on these queries, forcing the user to go out and back in again and again each time the link does not give them the information a frantic parent might need.

Interviews with senior County officials indicated that the Office of the County Executive is aware of the content management problem. In each of its interviews, the Grand Jury tried to identify who has responsibility for content and who has responsibility for ensuring the website contains accurate information. The Grand Jury learned there was no high-level oversight to ensure content quality. Interviewees also revealed an awareness that the website was problematic, such as returning error messages on routine queries, a malfunctioning “back” button that forced users to return to the start of their inquiry, and broken links. When the website did return information, it did not deliver information well, returning several pages of information that were not useful. At the time of the Grand Jury interviews, no one was tasked with addressing content shortcomings. No content standards appear to be in force so individual departments post as much or as little information about their mission and services as they wish. The Grand Jury requested a copy of the County’s policy for what information is included on the website, who is responsible for it, and when and how it is reviewed and kept current. The Grand Jury found that no comprehensive policy exists.

The Grand Jury wanted to compare the County’s website with a similar government entity. The City’s website was chosen over many reviewed because it does a good job of delivering information. The Grand Jury interviewed the City’s website personnel. Content control is managed by the San Jose’s Director of Communications who reports to the City Manager. San Jose and the County require departments to provide their own content; however, San Jose has tasked a senior official in their Public Relations Department with ensuring department content is complete and up to date. The City’s website demonstrates good website content management and oversight that results in effective communication with its residents. Included on their website are the names, telephone numbers, fax numbers, and personal email addresses for each City department and for the mayor and each councilmember.

Conclusions

The County has invested time and money in developing and implementing its updated website and new content management tools. However, little attention has been paid to ensure the website content is current and adequately informs the public. While the new tools ease the task of updating content, there is no one responsible for ensuring department content is updated.

The look and feel of the new website is generally improved; however, the website content is not improved. The Grand Jury remains concerned that the Office of the County Executive has not designated anyone with the overall responsibility for governance of the website. Based on what is presented through the website, departments are inconsistent in their content. Interviews indicated that not all County departments have assigned persons trained and responsible to update their segments of the portal with current, accessible and useful content.

The Grand Jury found both the old and new websites lacked easy-to-access and useful information. A clear chain of responsibility for the content on the site did not seem to exist. The search engine typically returned hard to use and outdated content results. As the County's primary means to deliver information to residents and businesses, the website quality and maintenance should be a priority for County management.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1

The County lacks a policy that governs website management, structure and content.

Recommendation 1A

The County should develop and implement a comprehensive website management policy.

Recommendation 1B

The County should assign an individual within the Office of the County Executive with countywide website management responsibility.

Recommendation 1C

The County policy should require departments to identify an individual responsible for department content and updates.

Finding 2

The County website contains broken links and dead-ends, making it difficult to navigate.

Recommendation 2

The County should implement a website quality control function to ensure ease of access and functionality.

This report was **PASSED** and **ADOPTED** with a concurrence of at least 12 grand jurors on this 29th day of May, 2012.

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