

3-1-1 System Helps Fill Service-Delivery Holes At Windsor

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Electronic Service Delivery

Kenora Portal Provides Textbook Case For e-Services in Small Municipalities

By Ben Pawlowski
City of Kenora

This article is based on a presentation to the MISA Ontario Annual Conference in Ottawa on June 5, 2006.

CAN SMALL MUNICIPALITIES achieve big things in electronic service delivery? The City of Kenora has proved that, with support from partners and the community, indeed they can.

Our city of 15,000 in northwestern Ontario has implemented a portal that we believe rivals anything that big cities have to offer – and has even introduced new advancements in ESD technology.

The portal, www.kenora.ca, aggregates Kenora's community information, delivers online services to residents, and promotes economic development by providing e-commerce capabilities for local businesses and organizations.

"Our City's ability to communicate with our citizens has improved dramatically, as we are now able to keep our citizens informed with personalized information, alerts and bulletins," says Karen Brown, manager of finance and administration.

A visitor to the portal can see that its attractive design is particularly effective at promoting tourism, an important industry for our city. Kenora is a gateway to the Lake of the Woods and the recreational country to the north. In summer, the population climbs to 60,000.

Background

The portal is managed by the City, but its development was a community effort. The initial vision came from the Lake of the Woods Business Incentive Corporation (www.lowbic.on.ca), which serves a 50-kilometre-square area with Kenora in the centre.

It was that corporation's vision to apply to the Ontario Ministry of Economic Development and Trade (MEDT) for funds to bring a community portal

to the City of Kenora. We received \$817,000 through the Connect Ontario program, the last community to receive funds before the program unfortunately was cancelled.

Ultimately the portal owes its existence to five partners: the City, LOWBIC, MEDT, FEDNOR, the federal government's assistance program for northern communities, and our primary vendor, Imex Systems Inc. Total value of the project in dollars and in-kind contributions was \$1.8 million.

Community Guidance

Development began in August 2004. We established a steering committee with members representing different sectors such as health care, tourism and the broad business community. They worked long and conscientiously, touring other Web sites to see what features to select for Kenora.

The committee's recommendations were the basis for the design and implementation of the portal by the management committee, with LOWBIC's chief administrative officer as project coordinator.

Kenora's Recipe For Success

- Clear definition of goals and requirements at the start of the project
- Clearly designed phased deliverable approach
- Willingness to adapt business processes
- Teamwork and close collaboration between IT and other departments
- Customer-satisfaction-focused vendor
- Demonstrated commitment by all partners
- Professional project management
- Strong leadership.

Electronic Service Delivery

With the involvement of all stakeholders, we established these objectives for www.kenora.ca:

- Deliver as many City services online as possible.
- Provide flexibility in payment options.
- Enable convenient sign-in without multiple user names and passwords.
- Integrate business processes.
- Fully integrate the architecture with a common look and feel across all services.
- Make the portal easy to use and manage.
- Centralize the services administration.

It is fair to say that we have met all of these objectives and that feedback from citizens since the portal's launch December 1, 2005, has been overwhelmingly positive.

Content of the portal is organized under four gateways to services and information: City

Government, Tourism, Business and Economic Development, and Living in Kenora. All told, the portal contains more services and information than can be listed here, but some features are noteworthy:

- We have established sub-portals for community organizations such as Lake of the Woods Museum and Northwest Business Centre. They have their own distinct URLs but can also be accessed via the portal. The organizations have their own look and feel on their sites, while being able to take advantage of the City's technology for hosting.
- We have an online store, www.shopkenora.ca, which gives our local businesses an affordable way to become Web-enabled. We also have a site-builder tool, which enables business groups and community organizations to easily create their own Web sites within the portal structure.
- Within the City section there is a button labelled "Report It!" This gives our residents the opportunity to request services or report problems at any time. It's not quite 3-1-1 – we don't have a call centre, and the citizens' messages are returned only during business hours – but the system is an effective way for citizens to interact with the City. "Messages from citizens are sectioned out by departments," Brown notes. "For example, a pothole problem would go to Operations. "The manager's assistant administers that program and makes sure that the appropriate supervisor gets the necessary information to address the problem. The assistant sends an e-mail to thank the citizen, advising what the next steps are. Once the issue is resolved, the citizen receives another follow-up message."

Single Sign-In

The portal is built on iCity, a solution developed by Imex Systems using Microsoft .Net technology. It makes extensive use of Web services to integrate a set of application modules.

Features include single sign-on with identity management, a powerful payment engine capable of handling various forms of online payments, and a content-management system to effectively produce, manage and publish the portal content.

We believe we are the first city in Canada to offer residents the ability to sign in just once to the portal and then conduct any number of transactions

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within it. After the initial sign-in and authentication, the user can efficiently move from service to service and does not have to be authenticated again when returning to the portal.

Kenora was also one of the first cities in Canada to enable online payments by debit card. The payment engine provides maximum flexibility and convenience for Kenora's citizens and businesses to make payments through Interac Online using debit cards, or to use credit cards and pay directly through their bank accounts.

This innovation was accomplished through our agreement with Moneris. We had to go through a lengthy security process to make it happen, but our businesses and consumers are grateful.

The content-management system from Ektron Inc. helped the City to delegate portal content responsibility to individual content owners and subject matter

experts, and removed delays and bottlenecks in keeping site content up to date.

Various departments and people are in charge of specific content sections. The City Government section is handled by staff within City departments, while LOWBIC is responsible for the business sections. There are 10 editors, including myself, who see to quality control.

The local community is benefiting immensely from a wide variety of collaboration tools, and local community organizations are able to use the portal services to recruit volunteers and collect donations.

Our portal project has proved that small communities can successfully implement online services, maximize the benefits of IT, and realize citizen satisfaction.

Ben Pawlowski, City of Kenora portal administrator, can be reached at bpawlowski@kenora.ca. ■

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