

Franklin County Submittal

2012 VACo Achievement Award – Communications Category

TRANSPARENCY FOR A CITIZEN'S DOLLAR

In an economy where every penny is pinched and every purchase is scrutinized, citizens naturally wonder “Where do my tax dollars go”? The County of Franklin listened to their citizens to understand the frustration that its citizens felt for the fear of their taxes increasing. The County was determined to provide County residents an opportunity to be part of the budget planning process. Franklin County faced an approximate \$11 million shortfall at the beginning of this year’s budget process, as a result of ever diminishing state funding as well as a \$6.1 million drop in local property tax revenue due to the decline of property values from the 2012 County reassessment. Transparency of all the factors driving the budget decisions was going to be critical.

In the fall of 2011, staff began gathering data from surrounding localities to create comparisons for demographics, tax rates, practices and services. Staff believed that when given the opportunity to review this pertinent data, citizens would realize that County budgets are difficult and much more than balance sheets. Budgets are fiscal representatives of the challenges the locality faces and the priorities and values that it holds. The consensus was that the most efficient way to provide our citizens timely and correct information would be through an interactive website portal providing multiple budget items in one central location.

The Franklin County Information Technology Department spent many hours researching websites and gathering ideas on how to generate the content and appearance of the envisioned budget website and stumbled upon JOOMLA, a free and open source content management

system (CMS) for publishing content on the web. JOOMLA is an open source solution that supports the County's initiative to save money while still providing state of the art technology to our employees and to our citizens. Learning to administer the JOOMLA platform was a unique challenge since open source platforms rely on community forums for troubleshooting and configuration; there is no formal tech support to rely on. Therefore, when there is an issue or a need to be addressed, it often necessitates a fair bit of research.

In order to support the infrastructure to host the site, staff set up and configured a virtual Windows server which hosts the software and site. Once the server was operational, JOOMLA CMS software was installed and an associated template site was created as well as a database from which the project originated. This same server also hosts other websites that the County currently utilizes, again, stretching every citizen's dollar.

The interactive budget portal was launched on December 20, 2012 (<http://budget.franklincountyva.org/>). From that moment, citizens of Franklin County had immediate access to the same budget documents as received by the Board of Supervisors. Residents and businesses had ready access to the County's bond ratings, financial awards and policies. In addition, the proposed budget was broken down into line items, as well as the current budget and previous budgets. Citizens were also provided a breakdown of the deficit amounts that the County had to tackle. Having all this information at their fingertips, citizens were also granted access to the same exact worksheets in which the Board of Supervisors would work with to arrive at a final budget decision. Working documents were loaded to the public site as they were being handed out at Board meetings. Budget balancing worksheets were used to allow the citizens to formulate their own scenario of how to balance the budget. These worksheets permitted the citizen to supplement or remove line items within the proposed budget to see the

final outcome of their proposed budget adjustments, just like the decisions in which the Board would struggle. If further background information was desired, the budget portal was also linked to the Commonwealth of Virginia's State Budget site, the school system budget as well as data from the Weldon-Cooper Center for Public Service.

The data staff began collecting in the fall of 2011 was also linked to the site. This information included how Franklin County measured up to surrounding localities in areas of population, debt per capita, economic growth, tax rates as well as County funded services. "How do we compare?" scenarios were developed for homeowners, business owners and financial overseers using benchmark data for each bordering community showing that Franklin County was at or near the bottom in every comparison of taxes and tax burden on our citizens. However, the most significant opportunity given to the citizens was the budget input and feedback option. This feature allowed citizens to address the Board of Supervisors with their comments, concerns and scenarios directly, to help the County formulate its final budget decision. Social media was also integrated into the process through the use of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook as other avenues for citizen input.

In an effort to provide our citizens with clear, concise and timely information with which to make an educated contribution to the budget process, the County feels that the budget website was a valuable and effective tool. On April 24, 2012 the final fiscal year budget for 2012-2013 was approved and every participating citizen can feel accomplished in knowing that their voice was heard during the formulating process and can confidently say, "That is where my tax dollars went".