



Groveland, MA – Transparency Best Practice

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Office of Municipal & School Technology

EOTSS | Executive Office of Technology Services & Security



Image: Groveland Town Hall¹

Executive Summary

The Town of Groveland adopted the Transparency best practice in January of 2016 as part of a Community Compact agreement signed with the Baker-Polito Administration. Groveland partnered with the Office of Municipal and School Technology (OMST) to talk through the challenges of transparency and develop a plan for improving the flow of information between the Town and its residents. The Town has executed upon several key elements of this plan, including a redesign of its website and implementation of Point PermitLink electronic permitting software. Further planned changes will include the deployment of a public records tracking tool along with an open checkbook or open budget tool.

COMMUNITY PROFILE

The Town of Groveland is located in northeastern Massachusetts in Essex County. Groveland is a small residential community of 6,459 people², with a median household income of \$69,167³. The Town changed gradually during

¹Richard B. Johnson (LymanSchool). "GrovelandMATownHall." *Wikimedia Commons*. Creative Commons License. Accessed October 2017. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GrovelandMATownHall.jpg>

²2010 Census. "Community Facts." *United States Census Bureau, American FactFinder*. Accessed October 2017. https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

³Ibid

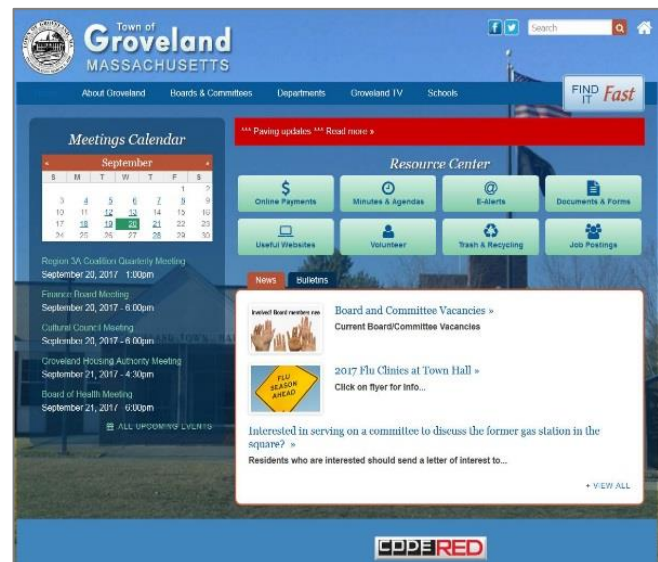
the 20th century from a shoe and textile manufacturing community to one which is almost wholly residential, serving now as a suburb of nearby cities. Today, Groveland retains all of the characteristics of a friendly rural town in the setting of a convenient suburb.

Project Background & Process

Smaller towns in Massachusetts, including Groveland, are responding to the growing number of requests by residents to proactively provide more information online, directly through the Town's website and also through specialized applications like information portals. These requests must be balanced with budget realities and must be free of any personal or otherwise inappropriate data, and updated frequently so consistent accuracy is maintained. As outlined below, Groveland has completed two important steps in this process with additional steps planned in the future.

WEBSITE REDESIGN

In the summer of 2017, Groveland's website was redesigned with a new, modern layout. Displayed below, is the old layout in the figure on the left; the new layout in the figure on the right.



A “resource center” is front and center in the new design, showcasing the most popular destinations for visitors to the Town website so the number of clicks necessary is reduced. A “find it fast” button displays even more of the most requested links, so visitors don’t have to go through numerous menus to find what they are looking for. The new design is also “mobile friendly” so it displays properly on smartphones and tablets, which more and more residents are using as their primary internet devices.

Included on the site are links to the Town's official Facebook and Twitter accounts, which reduces confusion about what accounts residents should be following for official Town information.

POINT PERMITTING

The Town worked with their permitting vendor, Point Software, in deploying "PermitLink", an online permitting solution that includes a public access portal for property information. The portal has several different views for information; including the ability to search for a property, see all active and historical permits issued to it, and filter by type or status. Inspection data and other relevant documentation can also be accessed through the portal. Having all this information online is extremely valuable and allows residents to have access to numerous pieces of information without making a formal request.

Location	Permit#	Permit Type	Issued	Fees	Status	Work Description
PECKER LN	Draft	Building Reside		1335.00	New	New single family dwelling - 4 bedroom
WOOD ST	Draft	Building Reside		1410.00	Processing	New single family dwelling - 4 bedroom
ESTY WY	Draft	Building Reside		60.00	Processing	12 x 14 shed
CANNON HILL RD 17-94E	Electrical		09/19/2017	110.00	Approved	rewire kitchen, new panel and feeder
WHARF DR	Draft	Plumbing		35.00	Payment Due	Replace Water Heater
CENTER ST	17-93E	Electrical	09/19/2017	60.00	Hold	disconnect feeder from 2 meter socket
SCHOOL ST	Draft	Plumbing		35.00	Hold	boiler
SCHOOL ST	Draft	Gas		35.00	Hold	boiler
CANNON HILL AV	17-92P	Plumbing	09/19/2017	88.00	Approved	new bathroom at addition
SALEM ST	Draft	Building Reside		50.00	New	To install 12x12 shed on existing concr
SALEM ST	Draft	Building Reside		135.00	New	To remove existing 25x25 ft. barn.
CENTER ST	Draft	Building Reside		230.00	Hold	One story addition on grade, Second s
KING ST	17-4CA	Certificate Of Ap	09/14/2017		Approved	Finish Basement to create in-law apart
CANNON HILL RD 17-91P	Plumbing		09/14/2017	67.00	Approved	kitchen sink
CANNON HILL RD 17-89G	Gas		09/14/2017	67.00	Approved	cook stove
MAIN ST	Draft	Electrical		110.00	Payment Due	Replace existing 911 UPS with new
Sunset Circle	17-88G	Gas	09/14/2017	67.00	Approved	Underground gas line
SCHOOL ST	17-89E	Electrical	09/14/2017	60.00	Approved	water heater and furnace
SCHOOL ST	Draft	Building Reside		425.00	Hold	Addition on the side and rear of the exi
ABBOTT ST	17-145RE	Building Reside	09/18/2017	45.00	Approved	To remove existing concrete steps and
MAIN ST	17-88E	Electrical	09/12/2017	60.00	Approved	Install exit and emergency lighting in -
SALEM ST	17-146RE	Building Reside	09/19/2017	75.00	Approved	Strip and reroof main house with asph
MAIN ST	17-9CB	Building Comm	09/12/2017	60.00	Approved	Build 3 foot by 6 foot shed to enclose r
KRAVCHUK DR	Draft	Building Reside		1660.00	Processing	28 x 38 Colonial with 24 x 24 attached

Image: Groveland's Online Permitting Solution

PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST TRACKING

The Town is also exploring implementing a tool to track public records requests. In January of 2017, an updated Public Records Law in the Commonwealth took effect. One provision of the updated law requires that records responses be provided in an electronic format unless the record itself does not exist electronically or the requestor cannot receive the record in an electronic format. The updated law also requires that responses to

records be processed within ten business days. This makes the tracking and expeditious fulfillment of requests even more important for municipalities like Groveland. Other communities in Massachusetts have successfully implemented tools to manage and fulfill public records requests. As seen below, Middleborough, Massachusetts uses one such tool called NextRequest to manage incoming requests and provide transparency into the fulfillment process, making the requested documents available to the original requestor and the general public.

Id #	Status	Request Date	Request	Departments
17-42	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	07/05/17	I am writing to request voter records. Specifically, we are requesting three files: the voter ext...	Town Clerk's Office
17-39	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	06/21/17	Please send me the Town's Harassment Policy and subsequent Sexual Harassment Policy.	Town Clerk's Office
17-38	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	06/20/17	I'm interning with a Boston-based nonprofit called the Environmental Voter Project. We're a nonpa...	Town Clerk's Office
17-25	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	03/22/17	I am requesting a copy of the Education Plan approved by the School Committee at the December 15,...	School Department
17-24	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	03/20/17	I would like to request a few voter lists: Current Registered Voter List 2016 Annual Town Elec...	Town Clerk's Office
17-19	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	02/17/17	what is 6 howland street being surveyed for	
17-18	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	02/17/17	Please e-mail a copy of the Brewster Ambulance Contract dated July 1, 2014 through June 30, 2017.	Fire Department; Town Clerk's Office
17-13	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	02/10/17	Provide last four (4) voter extracts for Annual Town Elections.	Town Clerk's Office
17-12	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	02/09/17	This e-mail request is being sent to all cities and town. I am requesting the electronic voter fi...	Town Clerk's Office
17-11	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	02/08/17	I am writing on behalf of the Novus Group, a political consulting firm, to request voter records....	Town Clerk's Office

Image: Middleborough, MA – Public Records Request Tool

OPEN CHECKBOOK AND OPEN BUDGET

With a modest budget and smaller population, Groveland must carefully balance budget realities with service delivery to its residents. It's important that this budgeting process be highly transparent to residents, so they are encouraged to participate in Town government. Proactive disclosure of information can discourage rumors and false statements as well.

Two potential avenues for proactive disclosure of financial information include open checkbook and open budget. Both solutions have been implemented by numerous communities of various sizes and populations in Massachusetts with the common goal of making municipal financial information more accessible to residents in a machine-readable and graphical format. Groveland is interested in becoming one of these communities.

Open Checkbook – enables users to explore municipal finance on a transactional, line-by-line basis. Transactions can be filtered by several categories including fiscal year, department, and vendor. Most open checkbook tools allow users to see the transactional information represented in a visual chart or graph, allowing for easy comparison of categories or fiscal years.

Other communities in Massachusetts have successfully implemented open checkbook solutions, including East Longmeadow using an open checkbook product called OpenCheck. This is a cloud-hosted product that can be embedded into a municipality’s website for seamless accessibility. Data from the tool is batch exported from a municipality’s finance tool automatically on a weekly basis and can be exported from the tool itself into several open formats, allowing for public users to analyze municipal data using their own tools if desired.

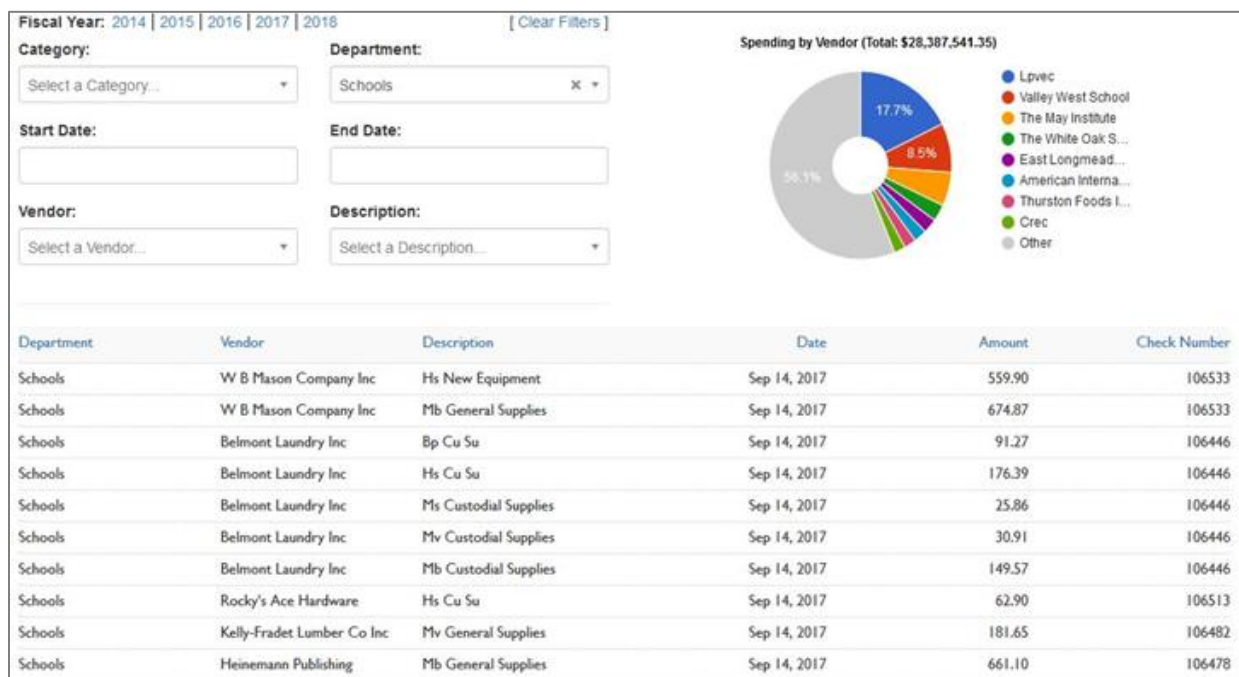


Image: East Longmeadow, MA – Open Checkbook

Open Budget – enables users to explore municipal budgets in an interactive format, complementing a budget document consisting of traditional static tables, charts, and graphs. This makes the budget document more accessible overall to users without a background in finance and allows for better analysis by internal and public users, so they can understand budget realities and priorities at a glance, understand the context of decisions made by their municipal leaders, and compare their community’s budget with the budgets of other communities more easily.

Other communities in Massachusetts have also successfully implemented open budget solutions, including Essex using an open budget product called VisGov Visual Budget. This tool allows users to enter in their individual tax bills to see where their dollars are going in the budget document itself, answering such questions as, “How much of my tax bill goes to the schools?”. This tool also allows users to see a breakdown of town revenues, answering such questions as, “How reliant is my Town on property taxes versus state aid?”.

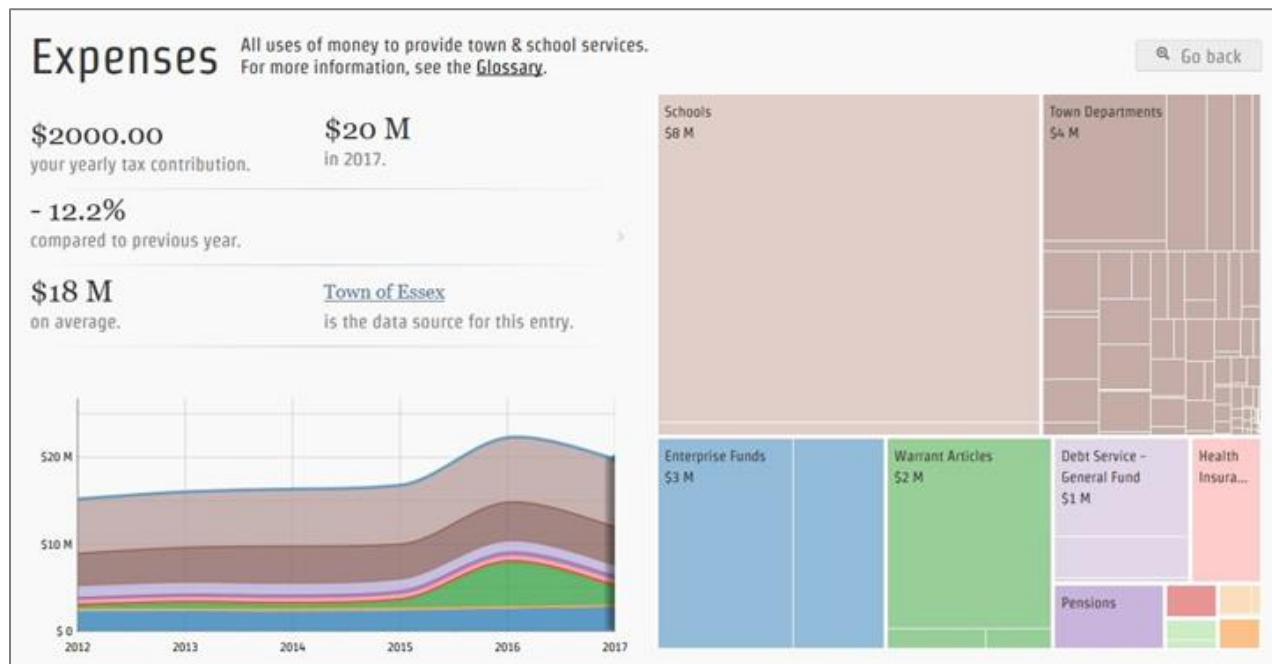


Image: Essex, MA – Visual Budget

OMST Recommendations and Conclusion

OMST applauds the work that Groveland has completed so far in the area of transparency. The redesign of the Town’s website makes it easier for constituents to navigate and find what they are looking for. This new version is also much easier to navigate on a mobile device, which is the way more residents are accessing information today. The implementation of Point PermitLink is also a big step forward for Groveland, as it allows residents to have quick access to a variety of information about properties around Town without having to go to Town Hall and request the information in person.

OMST recommends that the Town continue with their plan to explore implementing a public records request tracking tool along with an open checkbook and/or budget tool. These are both very valuable for improving the flow of information between a municipality and the public.

A public records request tracking tool will allow residents to submit easily-trackable records requests and allow for fulfillment through a portal that enables other members of the public to access the already-requested information. This reduces the labor surrounding multiple requests for the same piece of information.

An open checkbook or open budget tool will allow residents to explore municipal finance in a more meaningful way compared to traditional budget documents with static spreadsheets, tables, graphs, and charts. Providing municipal transactions in a “checkbook” format can help a Town dispel rumors and false statements through transparency. Providing the municipal budget in an open format can help a Town show a breakdown of spending per an individual taxpayer’s bill or compare the local budget with the budget of neighbors with a similar population, increasing understanding of the difficult decisions made by municipal leaders and encouraging participation by residents in the budgeting process.

Groveland is well-positioned for success in the area of transparency. The work completed so far on their website and the implementation of Point PermitLink are great first steps forward in this area. Next steps in public records request tracking and open checkbook and/or open budget will further improve the flow of information because the Town and its residents, which will hopefully lead to better-informed and engaged participants in Town government.