TOWN OF WESTMINSTER

TECHNOLOGY REVIEW | A COMMUNITY COMPACT CABINET INITIATIVE

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DLS
DIVISION OF LOCAL SERVICES
MA DEPARTMENT OF REVENUE

INTRODUCTION

Through the Community Compact Cabinet initiative (www.mass.gov/CCC), the Division of Local Services (DLS) reviewed Westminster's information technology administration and associated practices. The goal of the program is to encourage the implementation of municipal best practices that promote good governance by fostering efficiency, accountability, and transparency in local government.

Information technology is a core business function that enables the town to carry out its other municipal services effectively. This requires ongoing attention and investment encompassing cyber security, business continuity, data standards, citizen engagement, and transparency. As a best practice, local administrators must be certain that policies are well-documented and that procedures and controls are aligned with industry standards to properly manage critical municipal systems.

To develop this assessment, a team from DLS met with local officials, including the town Administrator Karen M. Murphy and her de facto Technical Services person David Monty. From these discussions, DLS developed recommendations focused on improving communication, technology asset management, and staffing. Our recommendations are intended to enable the town to provide services, respond to events, and maintain IT services in compliance both with industry best practices and with current regulations on network security and the safeguarding of personal information.

Overall, we found Westminster to be an organized and well run community with a few shortcomings regarding the Information Technology practices. By making a few modest investments in additional equipment and personnel, the town is in good position to provide state-of-the-art services and to stay current with what cities and towns across the Commonwealth are doing in the IT arena. We believe if our recommendations are implemented, the town of Westminster will benefit and continue to be a successful participant of known best practices.

OVERVIEW

As in many smaller towns across the Commonwealth, Westminster does not have dedicated IT staff. Instead, the town relies on the expertise of two town employees with full time responsibilities in other departments. It was very apparent upon meeting with these officials that IT is something they look at closely and have set short and long term goals to deal with issues whether they're day to day or unexpected. Given the limited resources when it comes to IT operations, the overall health and functionality of their infrastructure is solid. With two part-time employees to respond to issues, who have full-time responsibilities in other departments, it is remarkable the level of service and quality of work demonstrated under existing time and resource constraints.

The IT department's ability to be flexible and change priorities at a moment's notice is an asset; they have the ability to transition work seamlessly from one tech to the other to resolve issues as quickly and efficiently as possible. Considering that both have high pressure jobs within the community, one being a first responder with IT duties in public safety and the other having IT duties in the school district, both deserve a lot of credit for making this work. As a result of this arrangement, when support is needed calls are triaged through the administrative assistant of the town administrator, or if it is a major outage, a tech could be contacted directly. The techs report to the town administrator, who trusts their recommendations when it comes to procurement, upgrades, installs and all related IT issues. One of the most impressive things we found was the techs' wealth of knowledge in all areas of IT. They are both very focused on maintaining the town's current IT investment as well as moving the town's technology infrastructure forward.

Infrastructure Improvements

Part of moving IT forward is procuring the necessary equipment and allocating the funds for such purchases. Westminster allocates about $30,000 per year for PC replacements and other IT-related equipment purchases, with another $100,000 allocated in the Operations budget for professional services, software maintenance, website, Internet and other software services. When there is a documented need for an asset, the town recognizes the importance of this crucial business function and is ordinarily receptive to meeting the need. In addition to the budgeted funds for IT, they have a current lifecycle of five years for their equipment; this seems appropriate for the size and scope of their operation. At the time of our interviews with the town, they had received a proposal for the upgrade of servers and storage arrays. This was a proactive move to help move the town into a more modern, secure computing environment.

Westminster has a few IT policies in place pertaining to acceptable use of town IT resources. This is a great starting point for an effective library of policies outlining the expectations for all users. With that said, more policies should be put in place to strengthen and direct what can and cannot be done on the network. For example, there is no policy addressing concerns surrounding "Bring Your Own Device" (smartphones, tablets, removable media and other personal devices) even though many town users have such devices. The town did express a desire to add more policies to address these issues in the near future. They understand the importance of security and having a closed network, and they do have firewalls in place and have deployed security (virus\malware) software to mitigate breaches. They are looking at updating the existing firewall to better secure their infrastructure as part of the server upgrade. Furthermore, they utilize a 12 terabyte Datto backup solution to archive critical data. Backup strategy is currently under review in an effort to better serve the town; migrating to a cloud solution is being considered.

There are several functions this town does extraordinarily well in regards to IT, especially considering its very limited staffing. Given the time, resources and funds available, Westminster's IT staff have managed to deploy a viable infrastructure that seamlessly supports various areas of the town at a high level. They have displayed a willingness to move the town in the direction of a more complex and secure infrastructure that will be a sustainable asset for the town for years to come. Whether strategically planning for server upgrades or mapping out the best course to enhance their communication systems, Westminster has the ability to identify and target potential issues that, if not dealt with, could cause irreparable harm to the town and the community at large. We believe that our recommendations would help Westminster continue to create an IT infrastructure that will rival that of towns larger in size, and could become a model for towns of similar size and means. These goals can be achieved with a minimal investment in additional equipment and staffing; the implementation of policies regarding technology usage would cost nothing but time. Examination of IT services such as cloud-based backup and recovery, or "software as a service" (SAAS) might in fact save the town money in the long term.

The following section provides a bit more detail on DLS's recommendations as a result of its IT assessment of Westminster.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Permanent full time IT Director/Administrator: The final recommendation is to hire a full time Information Technology Director or Administrator. This person, reporting to the Town Administrator, would be responsible for IT strategy, policies and procedures, leaving the part-time

staff available for ensuring day-to-day operations. This individual should have some decision making ability regarding the town's IT infrastructure when executive management can't be reached in times of emergency. The town currently gets by with two part-time staff, but the need for this review (and its outcome) highlights the limitations of that staffing model. Westminster's critical data and its total IT infrastructure should be considered one of its most important capital assets; the protection, maintenance and expansion of that asset, in our opinion, deserves the attention of a full time IT professional in addition to the services capably provided by its two part-time front line specialists.

Public Safety Communications: One of Westminster's highest priorities is to expand its public safety communication system coverage to eliminate as many gaps as possible. There must be reliable radio coverage and available equipment for those who work in the field to be safe and to perform their jobs effectively. In addition, adequate staffing is required to handle peak call volume and more reliable call center software and equipment is needed by the staff assisting the community in times of emergency. The town's Public Safety building and Town Hall phone systems should be integrated to better support the flow of communications between town personnel. In our view it is imperative that Westminster appropriate the required resources to correct these public safety issues; at the time of our interviews, there were a few mitigation proposals already under review. We encourage all concerned parties to focus time and attention on this important initiative.

PC recycling and disposal: We recommend that Westminster establish policies for disposing of retired and non-functioning computer systems according to industry-standard best practices. The town's current approach – destroying equipment itself by various, sometimes novel means – gets the job done, but involves a certain amount of risk. Allocating funds annually and following a standard protocol would mitigate security concerns associated with the possible unintentional loss of data. Using a computerized asset management system to inventory, account for and properly note the disposal of the town's IT assets is recommended. Many office and computer equipment vendors offer services for the specialized data wiping and disposal of any device containing data. Town IT staff already understands the importance of life cycle management and the protection of town data; taking it a step further by purchasing and deploying an asset management system and by instituting more secure equipment retirement practices would further reduce risk and make managing town IT resources more efficient.