Call 311:

Citizen Engagement and 311
Case Study

311 and Citizen Engagement
in Savannah, Georgia

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ICMA

Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

In This Report

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Community and System Profile

Savannah, Georgia
Savannah 311 Center

Form of Government
Council-Manager

Council Members
9 council members; 6 elected by district and 3 at large, including the Mayor

Population
132,000 (2008)

City's Annual Budget
$278 million (FY2010)

311 System Budget
$309,082 (FY2009)

Major System Components
- Physical location: City of Savannah City Hall
- Square footage of office space: ~ 800 square feet
- Number of phones: 7
- Number of agent workstations: 6

Number of Staff for 311 System
- 1 call center system coordinator, 1 customer service supervisor, and 2 customer service representatives
- In 2010, 2 IT help desk staff were cross-trained and now work in the 311 office.

Location of 311 System Within City Government
311 is a program within the Management and Financial Services Bureau; the director of central services oversees the operation.

Type of System
Customer response management (CRM) system and information center accessible by a 311 phone number, e-mail, Website, and walk-up customer service center in City Hall.

Unique System Features

Type of CRM: Custom ASP.net, browser-based application designed in-house by IT staff. Data is contained in a SQL database. Work orders automatically route to appropriate departments based on codes assigned to each type of service requested.

Type of phone system: Shoretel

Type of reporting tool: "Canned" statistics reports were programmed into the application and use Crystal Reports to prepare the data, with the results displayed via Adobe PDF Reader in the browser window. Additional reports have been created outside of the application using Crystal Reports.

311: The First Step in Citizen Engagement?

The concept of providing excellent customer service is key to the implementation of 311/CRM systems, but such systems can also be instrumental in engaging citizens and increasing their involvement in their community. 311/CRM systems make it easy for citizens to become involved in their community by simply picking up the phone to report a problem they see. Once a person sees how reporting a problem can impact the neighborhood, for example, removing graffiti from a local park or cleaning up a vacant property, he or she might be inspired to become involved in a neighborhood improvement association. And from there perhaps serve on a citizen advisory committee or even one day chose to run for city council. With 311, citizens can see how they make a difference in the quality of life in their community and who knows what that knowledge might inspire.

Citizen Engagement in Savannah

A port city steeped in history, Savannah has a munici-pal government that is forward-looking in its attention to citizen engagement. "Too often a city does all the plans and then rolls them out and expects the citizens to kick up their heels and say how great it is," Savan-nah Mayor Otis Johnson said. "Here in Savannah, we've set a tradition of citizen involvement in the planning and decision-making process that I am very proud of."

Among the many channels for citizen engagement that Savannah offers are town hall and neighborhood meetings. An important initiative of Mayor Johnson, quarterly town hall meetings provide an opportunity for City Council to highlight progress toward achieving priorities in a transparent manner that builds trust and enhances engagement. Citizens are given an oppor-tunity to publicly voice their opinions on key issues at an open microphone during a designated period at these meetings. Neighborhood meetings are held on a monthly basis; 14 neighborhood meetings took place in December 2009. As the city Website indicates, "To move Savannah in the right direction, the City depends on vocal citizens to point the way." These town hall and neighborhood meetings are key oppor-tunities for citizens to do so.

Yet city officials do not simply wait for citizens to come forward with problems in town hall and neighborhood meetings or through phone calls and e-mails to city agencies. In Mayor Johnson's view, "This collaborative culture is helping to break down the 'us' and 'them' in our community and is establish-ing a collective responsibility for the whole. We have found that the most lasting change we have made in Savannah is when our citizens take the lead in creat-ing solutions." All city departments are committed to

engaging citizens in the early stages of programs and capital projects in order to maximize their value to the community and build social capital.

The city works diligently to reach out to the com-munity and make needed information readily avail-able. The city's Website links citizens to an online town hall, city services, upcoming meeting calendars, news releases, and other resources. The Website's "Talk Back Savannah" feature enables residents to comment on experiences with specific city govern-ment departments, ask questions, and make sugges-tions for improving city services. The city's 311 service is another key component of Savannah's culture of citizen engagement.

Brief History of 311

The city's 311 service was introduced in May 2006 as a means to make government services more accessible and transparent to citizens. The 311 call center is open Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.; the online 311 system is available 24 hours a day.

Prior to introducing 311 in 2006, Savannah had a centralized call line that served the sanitation, water/ sewer, and facilities maintenance departments. Citi-zens used a seven-digit service request line to report public works–type problems, such as water meter leaks, street light outages, sewer backups, potholes, and other infrastructure maintenance issues.

In 2003, city officials began to discuss the merits of a call line that would serve the entire government, improve customer service, and make government processes more transparent. Unlike many other municipalities, Savannah opted to develop its 311 system on its own, rather than buy a commercial customer relationship management (CRM) system. Cost considerations were the primary motivation, but choosing this course also provided a way for city employees to have direct involvement in the development process. To help design the 311 system, a focus group of likely users within the government was put together to offer their views on priority needs. In monthly meetings, this group talked directly to the system designers about what they thought would be needed to respond

Savannah Recycling

Savannah's 311 center played an instrumental role when the city introduced its curbside recycling program in January 2009. To launch the voluntary program, the city distributed recycling carts to residents, along with instructions on the types of materials that could be recycled. Extensive publicity was done through the media and neighborhood meetings to raise awareness of the program. Even so, as the program got under way, residents still had questions and turned to 311 for information. CSRs responded to residents' calls to find out when they would receive their recycling carts, to report that their carts had not been delivered, to find out their neighborhood's schedule for pickup, and to determine which types of materials could be recycled. A protocol was developed between the 311 call center and the recycling office that required a submission of daily updates to the 311 call center from recycling, thus enabling the CSRs to dispense accurate information

In retrospect, the 311 center's staff said they likely underestimated the length of time needed to respond to the initial wave of questions about the recycling program; three months after the recycling program's introduction, 311's call volume was still higher than usual.

The recycling program highlights another way the city reaches out to citizens. As sanitation workers empty a recycling cart, they scan a radio-frequency identification tag in each cart's handle, gathering data the city can use to determine which neighborhoods have high levels of participation and which need more education about the recycling program.

The recycling program is off to a successful start, with more than 5 million pounds of material collected from households in the program's first six months of operation.

to the types of calls and requests they expected to receive. Ideas and test results were also shared through a Lotus Notes discussion database set up for the focus group.

The resulting 311 system is a fairly simple application, but staff find that it is flexible and works reasonably well. 311 went live in May 2006, with three customer service representatives and one supervisor accepting service requests on behalf of 15 city departments. The 311 call center initially was located in a City Hall annex but moved into City Hall shortly after its launch. Hours of service during the first several years were from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.; these were extended to 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. in June 2009. Presently, the call center comprises a supervisor, four customer service representatives, and a system coordinator.

The city's anti-graffiti initiative was an early user of the new 311 system. Residents were encouraged to call 311 to report the location of graffiti. The 311 center forwarded the request to the Savannah Impact Program, an initiative of the Savannah Police Department, which cleaned up graffiti and tracked graffiti abatement. In 2006, 311's first year, more than 500 calls were received to report graffiti.

Citizens also began to use 311 to report missed trash collection, pothole or pavement issues, blighted property, downed tree limbs, and issues with city property or landscaping. Calls to the 311 center typically increase around the time of a town hall meeting, as citizens inquire about the time and place for the meeting or ask for further information about issues discussed during the session.

Information gained through the 311 system has also been valuable in managing city services. Analyzing the types and frequency of service orders can help in scheduling preventive maintenance or planning major capital projects. Code violations can be tracked from an initial report through resolution.

Despite the convenience of 311, city officials found that old habits were hard to break. People were accustomed to using the numbers of individual city departments, and many continued to call them instead of 311. Savannah officials did a lot of outreach to promote 311, through community groups, neighborhood associations, and TV and radio advertising, and they continue to look for ways to raise 311's profile and educate citizens about its utility. Recent examples include billboard ads recommending citizens use 311 to report water leaks and tags for city vehicles marked "Call 311 City Services & Information."

One possible way to increase 311's appeal is to make it a 24-hour operation. The 311 center is considering

311: The First Step to Greater Citizen Engagement?

Call 311 to report a problem or make a service request

Attend a neighborhood meeting to learn more about issues in community

Join a work group or committee

Take a leadership role in the community

ways to partner with the customer service desk at police headquarters, which is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With appropriate cross-training, it might be possible for these police customer service representatives to take 311 calls when the 311 center closes for the day at 8:00 p.m. 311 staff are also looking to other cities for ideas. For instance, they are impressed with a strategy that the City of Dallas uses to raise 311's visibility: 311 staff take the service "on the road" by parking a van on city streets, taking citizen questions and requests face-to-face, and then processing them on a laptop.

Role of the Citizen Office

Savannah is one of relatively few cities to have a Citizen Office. In 1998, some of the proceeds of a special purpose sales tax were made available to the city for dealing with extensive drainage problems. As this type of work typically causes major disruption in affected neighborhoods, city officials worked with residents on ways to minimize disruption and make the process as comfortable as possible. By the time the structural flooding was eliminated, city officials saw the potential value of using this approach to develop solutions in other areas, such as environmental issues or traffic patterns. By proactively seeking the input of citizens, government avoided relying on a "go it alone" approach in devising solutions. The results were owned by the people who were most affected by the problem, resulting in more sustainable solutions for community issues.

Nearly six years ago, city administrators created an internal department specializing in public facilitation, mediation, and engagement as a resource for other departments. The Citizen Office provides these services to the public on behalf of the client city department.

For instance, the Traffic Engineering Department recently sought the assistance of the Citizen Office to work with a citizen committee on a process for effectively and efficiently resolving complaints of chronic speeding within neighborhoods. Over the course of a year, the Citizen Office facilitated public meetings, provided education, and dispatched area experts to neighborhood groups to develop the new process for traffic calming. The Traffic Engineering Department is a critical player in the resulting process. However, overall process management is the ongoing task of the Citizen Office, allowing Traffic Engineering experts to focus their limited time and resources on more technical elements of the process.

The Outlook for 311

With constant interaction with citizens, 311 has become the front line of government, city officials say. The more information 311 staff can provide, the higher the level of satisfaction among citizens. Customer service representatives (CSRs) want to be able to deliver accurate information, especially in response to the most frequent question: "How long will it take?"

311 has done a terrific job within its current mandate, staff feel, but they recognize there are opportunities for it to do more. For instance, 311 staff want to raise the comfort level of employees in various departments with 311's applications so that they will make better, more accurate use of its features. City workers using 311 in the field sometimes rely on the "override" feature and manually input information, rather than using the menus and checkboxes provided. This has a negative effect on the quality of the data fed into 311's monthly reports.

311 staff also have turned to other city agencies for ideas on how to improve their service. Recently, they have been looking at how the local police department uses CompStat, a crime reduction tool that maps crime, identifies problems, and deploys the resources needed to address them. Staff are exploring whether

FY2009-2010 Budget

City of Savannah—311 Call Center Implementation and Operation Budget, FY2009–2010

Labor	$285,225
Initial Development Cost	$120,000
Annual Maintenance	$61,477
Work Stations	
Dedicated Server	Shared Server
Marketing	$10,000
Total	$476,702

they can be similarly proactive and review their 311 data in monthly meetings with representatives from the Citizen Office.

Staff are evaluating whether and when they should change from their current 311 system—developed in-house—to a commercial system. While the current system meets basic needs, it operates within constraints, including staff time. As members of the original design team move on to other positions, there is a loss of institutional memory about how the program is set up and how it can be modified. The introduction of new infrastructure and equipment, such as a telephone system, requires time-consuming, corresponding updates to the 311 program. IT staff time for system maintenance and upgrades is a limited commodity, particularly in times of financial constraint and when multiple departments have projects requiring their time and expertise.

The main reason for considering a commercial service, however, seems to be the advantages it can offer, especially in terms of increased flexibility and greater access to data. A commercial system would make it easier to capture information and develop an expanded knowledge base. At present, CSRs rely primarily on FAQs to respond to citizen inquiries; with a commercial system, they would have a robust, searchable database to work from, reducing the time customers wait for a response. The current system captures service requests but does not track the calls requesting information; many of the calls received by the 311 center are for information about city hours, where to go for free assistance with tax return preparation, and other basic informational requests.

A commercial system would also generate more detailed reports, making it easier to evaluate response time and for departments to anticipate citizen needs. Staff currently have access to reports that show call volume, the types of service requests received, and even requests by aldermanic district. But the "executive dashboard" feature that commercial systems offer is an example of a format that might make it easier for department managers to access data and evaluate performance.

Cost considerations are a primary factor in evaluating the pros and cons of moving from the in-house system to a commercial product. A budget has not yet been developed for this type of transition, and funds have not yet been allocated.

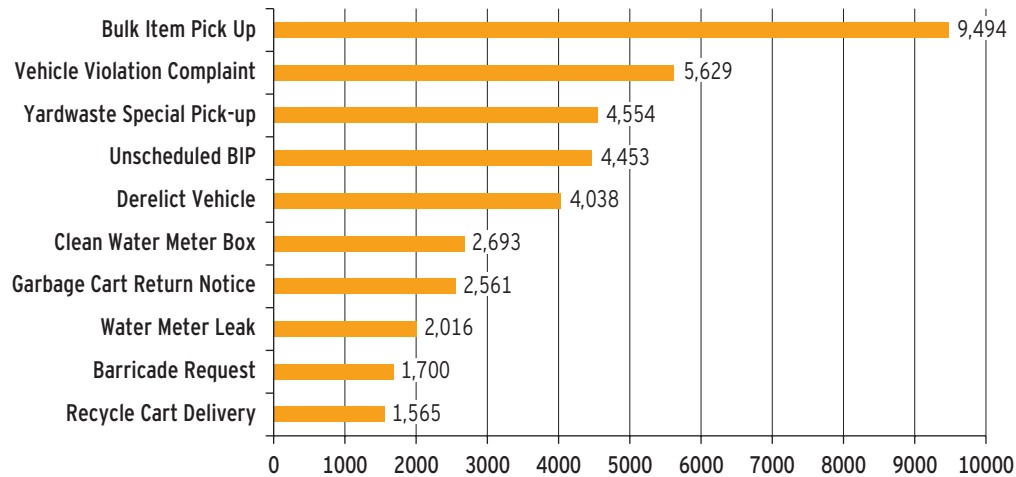## Bringing Citizen Engagement to the Next Level

Savannah staff are committed to supporting City Council's public engagement priority. Departments strive to continually improve and enhance engagement strategies and often partner with the Citizen Office to do so. The processes give citizens access to professionals with expertise on a particular issue or concern and then facilitate work toward viable solutions and consensus.

Traffic issues, which are always a priority for citizens, illustrate the value of engaging communities and the potential for 311 to play a role. From past experience, city officials know that putting a speed bump in one place often simply displaces the traffic to another area. Plus, whoever has the speed bump in front of his or her property is not happy. In September 2009, Savannah hosted a presentation by national experts on traffic calming at a public forum. Based on citizen interest in that program, the experts have been engaged to work on the specific needs of two Savannah neighborhoods, Paradise Park/Oakhurst and West Savannah/Hudson Hill. The goals of this effort are to help residents understand the big picture of traffic flows and neighborhood needs and to walk them through the process of reaching a workable solution.

The result of the yearlong process is a "Neighborhood Traffic Calming Guidebook," a new resource for citizens concerned about speeding in their neighborhoods. The guidebook features a multitude of traffic-calming tools as well as a process for implementing measures.

A partnership with 311 provided a mechanism for initiating new citizen requests for traffic calming. A new service request code was created by the 311 technician in the city's IT Department to accommodate this type of citizen request. Marketing the new

Top 10 Service Requests in 2009

Service Request	Count
Bulk Item Pick Up	9,494
Vehicle Violation Complaint	5,629
Yardwaste Special Pick-up	4,554
Unscheduled BIP	4,453
Derelict Vehicle	4,038
Clean Water Meter Box	2,693
Garbage Cart Return Notice	2,561
Water Meter Leak	2,016
Barricade Request	1,700
Recycle Cart Delivery	1,565

program is seamless, as Savannah citizens are accustomed to calling 311 to report problems. Additionally, the 311 system allows all calls reporting issues relating to bad driver behavior to be input as standard information in a centralized database. Previously, each department receiving citizen complaints of this nature had independent systems for capturing and responding to the request. Now, as each department is aware of the new method and has access to the 311 system, all requests are funneled through a central point. Standard, accurate data gathered in a centralized database allow the city to maximize limited resources with complete information.

A larger-scale initiative, Project DeRenne, has been under way since August 2008. The City of Savannah launched the project to involve citizens in determining the future development of DeRenne Avenue, one of the city's major transportation corridors. After issuing a request for professional services, it engaged Kimberly-Horn and Associates, an engineering firm that specializes in developing context-sensitive solutions. At the first public forum, citizens were encouraged to give their opinions on what the guiding principles for DeRenne Avenue should be; among the six that were identified were preserving the integrity of existing neighborhoods, improving current and future traffic operations, and promoting a healthy and sustainable business environment.

As the process has evolved, other opportunities for citizen involvement have been offered. In November, several days of citizen focus group discussions were held on various aspects of the development project, neighborhood needs, public infrastructure, and eco-

nomic investment. Citizen input from these discussions helped shape the design charrettes that were presented to the public in December.

311 is a valuable tool in processes like these. It can bring the questions on the minds of citizens to the attention of the Public Information Office, the Citizen Office, and other relevant departments. Working as a team with 311 staff, city officials can be more proactive in anticipating citizen concerns and effectively responding to them.

Study Methodology

The authors conducted interviews with representatives of Savannah city government over the course of August 2009 to February 2010. A conversational interviewing technique was used to more fully explore the participants' experiences and perceptions of the Savannah 311 program and citizen engagement initiatives. Interviewees reviewed the final report before publication.

ICMA wishes to thank all the study participants for taking the time to discuss the Savannah 311 system and citizen engagement efforts. Their contributions to the study were invaluable.

ICMA National Study of 311 and Customer Service Technology

In 2006, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) received funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to conduct the first national study of centralized customer service systems for local governments, such as 311 call centers, constituent relationship management (CRM) systems, and online service request forms, among others. Working with The Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies in phase two of the study, ICMA is conducting research and developing new resources and tools for communities considering implementation of 311/CRM systems.

Local governments exist to serve the needs and wants of their citizens, but determining what those needs and wants are requires engaging the community. Centralized customer service systems, such as 311 call centers or constituent relationship management (CRM) systems support **community engagement efforts** by giving citizens multiple, easy means for contacting their local government and providing officials with qualitative and quantitative measures of what services citizens are requesting. This report is the second case study in series looks at three communities and how they are linking their 311/CRM systems to their citizen engagement efforts.

For more information about the study, contact...

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