
**AWARDS FOR CREATIVE INNOVATION
IN GOVERNMENT FINANCE**

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Submitted by the

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Description of Local Significance and Value (Background)

1. Opening paragraph and description of our innovation.

The City's Budget Information Center (BIC) provides citizen access to nearly every financial and budget document prepared and maintained by the City's Finance Department. This website is a separate, complimentary presence to the City of Manhattan's official website. This allows citizens to enjoy several innovative features including several calculators allowing them to build their own General Fund budget and to submit same to the Finance Department. Another unusual feature of this website allows citizens to engage Finance staff "one-on-one" via an interactive Internet whiteboard. The BIC also features a comprehensive search tool; PowerPoints and webcasts from City Commission budget work sessions; and hyperlinks to budget information of cities across Kansas.

The City of Manhattan has experienced unprecedented growth across the community during the past five years, including being selected as the preferred site for the new National Bio-Agro Facility (NBAF) that will research zoonotic diseases.

This growth, coupled with a major downtown redevelopment program and the effects of a national recession, have created difficult budget issues for the foreseeable future. To better inform citizens of these budgetary challenges, City Management elected to establish a website devoted to presenting current financial information in a simple, yet effective format.

2. The role the Finance Department, the planning process, and associated costs of our innovation.

Staff within the Finance Department (which includes information technology staff) researched other city websites across the country to see how budget and financial information was presented via the Internet. What Finance staff discovered was twofold: first, there were sparse examples of comprehensive budget information that was readily available to local residents; and second, if information was available via the Internet, it was not obvious how a user could obtain it.

As a result, Finance staff decided that it would be easier and far less costly to develop a special website "in house" to allow for full flexibility of use and to incorporate the many ideas of how budget and financial information could be displayed to Manhattan citizens.

About 100 hours of City employee time (from within the Finance Department) has been invested in the creation, testing, and updating of the Budget Information Center (BIC) with an internal "cost" of about \$3,000. The City purchased a new domain name cityofmanhattan.info for a three-year period of time (\$21.57) and is using a three-year web hosting agreement with GoDaddy.com (\$350.65). The BIC was created entirely in-house and is maintained by the IT Department through a MySQL relational database management system and server provided by GoDaddy.com. A separate search engine designed to search across the website's budgetary PDFs (portable document format) was also purchased (\$99).

In order to minimize duplication from the BIC website to the City's website, hyperlinks to certain financial information already available on the City's official website are used where appropriate. Likewise, the City's official website has a separate, identifiable link to the Budget Information Center as well. Based on the way this new website was constructed, there was not a need to use any outside consultants. (The City's current website provider CivicPlus did not play a role in the creation of this website.)

Technical Significance and Transferability

3. The financial concepts, standards, techniques, and lessons learned from our innovation.

The informational concepts offered by the BIC are not new to municipal governments, but the way the data is presented and displayed is unusual. The technical aspects and related costs suggest that a similar approach is feasible for nearly every municipal organization to consider implementing. The public feedback to date has reinforced our belief that taxpayers are looking for financial and budgetary information provided by the BIC and appreciate the opportunity to more actively participate in the annual budgeting process.

The concept and even the technical methodology can easily be adapted by any organization—even smaller municipalities that do not have a full-time IT staff. According to the Census Bureau, over two-thirds of American households have Internet access and over 80% of Americans live in cities or suburbs giving every municipality nationwide an obvious venue to engage citizens. The resulting benefits are clear and the process to engage citizens is easily accomplished.

The Budget Information Center was designed to be a simple process for both City staff to update and citizens to use. Key Finance staff has immediate access to a direct and easy to use administrative area where documents can quickly be uploaded (see the attached PDF). Documents that are “time sensitive” are always “date stamped” to alert Finance staff if a given document has not been reviewed recently and to give citizens confidence that information is not stale or out-dated.

Since the Information Technology Division is part of the Finance Department, there has not been a need for training regarding this website. While the City is fortunate to have the technical skills available on staff to create such a website with interactive features, smaller municipalities without such skills on staff can still create a budget information center with little or no outside consulting costs.

Quantum Leap of Creativity and Innovation

4. How our innovation benefits the community.

While presenting budget and financial information is not unique for many municipalities, attempting to engage citizens as active participants in the budgeting process via the Internet is, in our opinion, unusual. Perhaps the most unique feature of this website is the ability of a citizen to engage a member of the Finance staff one-on-one via AT&T Connect Online Meeting.

This feature allows for documents from the BIC to be uploaded to a whiteboard and then manipulated by either party with drawing and comment tools. Communication between the two parties (or any others who would want to join the discussion) can be done through a “chat box” or by voice either over the telephone or voice-over-Internet protocol (VOIP). Of course, the website also features the ability for citizens to submit their own version of a General Fund budget in addition to expressing their opinion as to where funding consideration for the annual City budget should be given. Throughout the BIC a citizen can easily send emails directly to Finance staff or find direct phone numbers to key Finance staff members who are knowledgeable in the budgeting process.

The Risks Associated with this Innovation

5. How our innovation presents some risk.

Understandably, presenting full disclosure of virtually every financial document related to the annual budgeting process has created a number of critical questions from community taxpayers. These questions are typically directed to Finance staff but, on occasion, have been directed to the City Manager’s office or to the City Commission. Nonetheless, we believe that the benefits of such disclosure outweigh public scrutiny of the

budgeting process. Indeed, we firmly believe that such scrutiny is an important element of true governmental transparency.

Other Distinguishing Features

6. Other noteworthy features about our innovation.

The City of Manhattan Budget Information Center also has these other features not always available on other municipal websites:

- ♦ *Every budget work session has the entire information packet available plus the accompanying PowerPoint and webcast of that particular meeting (2010 and 2011 City budgets).*
- ♦ *The website's search tool feature searches across budget information for every fiscal year available on the website (2008 through 2011). The design of this tool allows citizens to search a given budget document by line item description or account code and provides two charts of accounts—one alphabetically arranged and the other numerically sequenced. This way, a citizen can easily find the expenditure line item for, say, "Training (49-20)" for every Division or Department of the City.*
- ♦ *Special hyperlinks are provided for information that may be useful for comparative purposes. For instance, a link has been specifically identified for statewide city budget information that is provided by the Kansas Division of Municipal Services. The Finance Department has provided a brief explanation of how to use this hyperlinked website to compare current state budget data of cities across Kansas.*
- ♦ *A statistical counter has also been applied to the website to show daily and weekly "hits" from Internet users. While it is not possible to know how many of these "hits" are from Manhattan residents, the feedback relayed to the Finance Department—both email and verbal—indicates that the website is growing in use and popularity locally.*
- ♦ *(Innovation in process) Within the next 90 days, a significant new feature will be added to the BIC website called "Measuring Manhattan." This new addition will link Department/Division performance measures across existing budget information found on the Budget Information Center.*

Documentation

7. Additional information regarding our innovation.

Website examples and relevant information are attached to this application.