

Becoming Well-Connected Means Putting Citizens First

It was the often articulated vision, in 1994, of what a National Information Infrastructure (NII) could provide for this country that Orange County, Florida, found so compelling. While there have been models, on small scales, of governmental institutions' providing information through technology to their immediate constituents, neither the value nor the impact of such transactions could be appreciated fully until they had been placed within the framework of a national goal.

In January 1994, Vice President Gore told the country: "We will connect to all of our classrooms, all of our libraries, and all of our hospitals and clinics by the year 2000." This endeavor has been embraced eagerly by a generation of public managers who heard, in Gore's pronouncement, a challenge for the 1990s, a challenge reminiscent of one made by the president of their youth, who would take them to the moon before the end of the '60s. Just as the exploration of lunar space excited the world, so too has the exploration of cyberspace captured the world's imagination. It will change our lives forever.

Orange County Responds to the Challenge

By October 1994, Orange County was positioned to pick up the national challenge by focusing on its immediate environment, central Florida. The county consists of 1,000 square miles with a population of 740,000. The county seat is Orlando. Orange County is organized under a charter government with six, single-member-district commissioners

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and a strong county chairman, who is elected at large.

Within Orange County, there is no single repository of electronic management information, as this information is distributed among various management information systems organizations under the board of county commissioners and under each of the elected constitutional offices in the county. Since 1992, all of these organizations have joined in a common effort to build systems and networks to enhance the sharing of information among public organizations. Thus, the focus for efforts to "access" public information has been an internally driven one, with the ultimate goal of creating a flowing and meaningful taxpayer information product. The NII goal clearly affirms this direction, while at the same time creating a sense of urgency to get the data platforms completed so that the county can move rapidly on to the delivery aspect: connecting local government with its citizens.

In December 1994, Orange County Chairman Linda Chapin invited local citizens to begin the dialogue on how central Florida should proceed in creating its own computer-based system for information service delivery: "As a community, we need to play an active role in determining what choices will be available for our families and businesses. We need to take an active part in looking for the greatest benefits for the greatest numbers. We can neither ignore these decisions, nor can we defer them. We must act on them."

The sense of urgency was communicated clearly. Emerging technologies—some with a capacity to enable and some, by their inaccessibility, to disenfranchise—quickly were arriving on the market. A question to be addressed was: Should the community wait to see how the marketplace planned to deliver the new capabilities, or should the consumers and practitioners, as a common voice, have a say in the deployment of the

technologies, thus gaining greater synergistic value for their community?

The project undertaken by Orange County was made possible largely through the county's participation in the Public Technology, Inc. (PTI), Urban Consortium. For a long time, PTI had held the global view of increasing the access between local government and its citizens and had articulated this vision through its concept of the "well-connected community" (WCC). In 1994, the copyrighted name Well-Connected Community was made available to Orange County, Florida, to serve as its banner for this initiative. The WCC concept was developed by PTI with and for its partners, local governments. The term WCC now has become part of the local vocabulary in Orange County, used by county staff, other local governments, institutions, and citizens as the focal point for furthering their mutual objectives.

On Saturday, February 11, 1995, Orange County hosted its first WCC conference in a commission chamber overflowing with 157 participants. Invitations had been mailed to all local educational institutions, citizen boards, homeowners' associations, social and political groups, telecommunications providers, private corporations, and the media, which carried the message in print and on the radio. The county had hoped that at least 60 to 80 individuals would attend and become a core group of participants to move the project along. In fact, approximately 40 people had to be turned away in the last few days before the conference.

Fortunately, planning before the conference had allowed enough flexibility to provide the required printed materials, space, and box lunches (provided at \$6 each) to accommodate the attendees. County staff were available to greet the guests, provide registration materials, give directions, and answer questions throughout the day. Early on, these staff members were identified

as *cyberneighbors*: companions for the day, whose job was to ensure that all logistical needs were met.

First Conference and Its Results

In her opening remarks to the conference, Chairman Chapin set the tone for what WCC was to mean to the community of Orange County: "Today's conference is not just about technology. As a matter of fact, this gathering today is more about social impact than about technological capabilities. This conference is about people working cooperatively, collaboratively, and collegially to draft a vision for the best use of technology for our community. Furthermore, it is not about government *telling* anybody anything, it is about government *asking*. And today, we are asking: What uses of technology do you see in the future, and what role do you expect your government to play in that future?"

The morning session consisted of an overview of the WCC concept, followed by presentations on various tangential subjects: progress toward creating a Community Services Network bulletin board and social services referral system; legal implications in procuring and using computers; a telephone-company partnership with local schools and hospitals for distance learning; an introduction to Senior Net; business opportunities as seen by the chamber of commerce; and a demonstration of the Alachua County (Gainesville, Florida) FreeNet. The purpose of this eclectic mix was to educate, inform, and stimulate the texture of subsequent discussions.

Participants went to task force discussions in separate conference rooms, based on interests they expressed at the end of the morning session. Each task force selected its own chairman, recording secretary, and protocol monitor (to keep them on task). The task forces covered:

neighborhoods and communities, educational resources, technology trends, social services and health care, business opportunities, and local government. Each task force worked through five questions, dealing with:

- Identifying existing strengths,
- Barriers to success,
- The role of government,
- Top three potential applications, and
- How to proceed for the next six months.

In spite of the facts that it was a Saturday and that a number of attendees had come simply out of curiosity (some of these identified themselves as “web heads” or “modem huggers”), there still were 60 people present at the conclusion of the conference—approximately the number the county had hoped might attend in the first place.

Responses to the Issues

Perhaps the two most telling of the five questions were those that addressed the role of government and the future direction of the WCC effort. The task forces were asked to view government as owner, player, facilitator, etc., of the local effort. The collective response made it clear that government neither should be nor should consider itself to be the owner of information or the sole controller of access to it. The responses characterized government as a player, one of many, and as a facilitator, that is, a player with a key role in organizing and communicating about such efforts to the public.

The collective answer to the question about the future was: Stay mobilized, keep WCC alive, create a mission statement, specify objectives, expand participation to ensure inclusiveness of all parts of this community, and develop a not-for-profit organization to manage the process

and ultimate products. Before closing, the participants voted to meet again for another full-day session within six weeks.

Two memorable statements from the first session complemented Chairman Chapin’s thought that WCC is more about social impact than technology. They were expressed to the gathering by task force representatives in the course of the closing remarks. Educator Gail West said, “You may not have to be traditionally educated . . . *if you are well-connected,*” pointing toward the learning options and opportunities that may be unleashed through the use of technology. John Barbour, who stepped forward to chair the neighborhoods-and-communities task force, brought the message even closer to home: “. . . People have expressed the need for redefining ‘neighbor’ as no longer limited to turf or geography . . . The cyberspace neighbor [is] related by common interests, transcending physical space. . . . That’s what the computer and modem free us to do.”

Ongoing Efforts

A second conference in March 1995 was attended by 114 participants, who went to work on developing the task forces. Though, at the first conference, each task force addressed the same five issues, this time they each were provided with targeted questions to build substance and direction. Ongoing work resulting from the March session consists of:

- Development of a network architecture model,
- Identification of existing data resources,
- Listings of the most important informational topics,
- Prioritization of the information services that need to be provided, and
- Development of a not-for-profit organization to oversee WCC projects.

It is important to note that each of the current task forces is chaired by a citizen volunteer, who collaboratively sets the agenda, meeting times, and places. The chairmen meet regularly as a steering committee to share findings and to propel the aggregate interest of the project. Local government serves as the facilitator for the steering committee meetings, and, complementing these communication processes, a local on-line bulletin board regularly posts agendas and the minutes on behalf of each task force.

Citizen Progress

Since March, the task forces and the steering committee have logged 20 separate meetings in the development of WCC. Significant progress has been made by all groups in clearly defining their respective roles. The frequency and volume of communications that have arisen within the community on these issues is truly amazing. The energy and enthusiasm of the individuals who have come forward to work on WCC demonstrate a belief and commitment that deserve our respect and gratitude.

A residual benefit of the task forces’ focus on the issues is the indirect impact on public agencies. Institutional leaders within the county, the city of Orlando, Orlando Public Library, University of Central Florida, and the Economic Development Commission of Mid-Florida, to name a few agencies, have increased their respective commitments to pushing the development of related technologies. Web servers, home pages, data designs, and network infrastructures have gone on the fast track in the community during the past few months, in part due to the heightened awareness of the powerful promise that information sharing offers for central Florida.

In making this statement, it is critical that the concept and nomencla-

ture of "community" be underscored. WCC efforts are not the property of any one county, city, or institution. They are regional. They are geared toward the promotion of better business, good government, excellent education, and concerned citizens.

As stated earlier, becoming well connected will change people's lives forever. The relationships among government, institutions, businesses, and citizens will become almost seamless; the technology will enable the connection, the practitioners will empower it. Expectations for responsiveness, accountability, and inclusion will find new levels in the public dialogue on all issues. Clearly, information will achieve the profound status predicted for it in past years: "the fifth utility," a life-sustaining requirement for all citizens, and "the currency of the twenty-first century," a key component of the economic engine of our future.

Writing for the *Orlando Business Journal*, WCC task force volunteer Patrick Dowling reported, "The two most important elements of the finished network will be the breadth and depth of the government information available and the scope of the public's access to that information." Once the local government starts down this path, there will be no going back. The organizational commitment to building meaningful information systems must recognize the long-term obligations that will follow and thus must make the investment in time, staffing, and training. Breadth and depth need to be incorporated from the beginning as key design characteristics.

Library a Key Factor

Perhaps one of the more exciting developments to be added to Orange County's WCC effort stems from local leadership in the public library system. Traditionally, libraries have been valued as the repositories of hardbound information. The

county's network design anticipates keeping the library in this central role not only to make available its considerable store of information and services, but also to afford a local electronic gateway to government and other institutions. The role for the library was as important to Alexandria in ancient times as it is to central Florida today; to one who is seeking knowledge, the library provides an electronic passport to a vast network of additional local information and services. After all, this endeavor is not so much about technology as it is about social impact.

Central Florida is well positioned to achieve its objectives. Community partnerships are the answer. Local governments, institutions, and businesses seeking to attract new industry, create new jobs, and find a new mission for the next century have the

chance today to lay the groundwork, but they cannot do it without their constituents. In Orange County, WCC is part of our belief in "Citizens First," a commitment to caring, to communicating, and to connecting: to people and to the future.

One attendee at the March conference was a 13-year-old from a neighboring county who made the following statement to the assembly: "I've been running a bulletin board service for the past two years, and I just wanted to come today to see what this Internet stuff was all about." We hope that he learned it is about people, about community, and about our times: becoming well-connected. **END**

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