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Citizen Access to State, Regional and Local Information and Services

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STATE DOCUMENTS

Project Goal: In three to five years the citizens of South Carolina will be able to access state, regional, and local government agency information and services via electronic means such as e-mail, kiosks, bank automatic teller machines, and other media and emerging technologies. This project will provide a convenient and systematic means of identifying and locating services provided by government. An added benefit is the reduction in frustration and time wasted in attempting to locate the information and services desired by the citizen.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Information and services in government are provided in three very distinct levels in South Carolina. These areas are local, regional, and state. Historically, there have been few, if any, attempts to share information about access to information and services. As a result, citizens often find it difficult to obtain information concerning how to access services they may need. For example, far too many people moving into our state know the frustration of standing in a long line to purchase a motor vehicle tag only to find they need to have proof of insurance and a receipt to prove they have paid the county tax on the vehicle. Even if they turn to the telephone book blue pages seeking information, they would have to be very lucky or a detective to find the number to call. They would have to know to look under Public Safety and then know the Division of Motor Vehicles issues tags.

The Information Resources Council, through the University of South Carolina, conducted research into cost of our citizens doing business with government. That report entitled The Cost of Doing Business with South Carolina Government was presented to the Council in December 1998. The study found the average family pays, "of their combined income in direct and indirect costs of government, that amount accounts for 59% of their total income. The report also states that "based on the study findings it is clear that there is a need to simplify access to government. Some of the options include a system that would allow multi-access to basic information. For example, a driver's license could be swiped to provide the vendor with information such as name,

address, date of birth, and social security number. The employer identification number could be used to provide similar information for business. Although the money saved by such measures would not be huge, it would make things more convenient for citizens and free up considerable time for them.”

“There is also a need for inter agency coordination in order to facilitate the exchange of information. For instance, if a form is required by more than one agency, the burden of exchange should rest with the agencies, not the individual. Internet services could also be expanded to allow citizens to complete certain tasks online. Payment of property taxes, vehicle registration, and business registration forms are just a few instances in which online submissions would serve to save considerable time.”

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Our citizens need and deserve a user-friendly, easily accessible means of obtaining information concerning services at the various levels of government. While this will have an impact statewide, this system can have a tremendous positive impact in the rural areas of our state where information about and understanding of services available tend to be lower.

This project is consistent with the citizen focus of the South Carolina Information Resource Council as stated in its September 1998 report to the Governor. The report states, "Government exists to serve its citizens. Government services and information should be easily and equitably accessible and delivered in a simple, effective, courteous and respectful manner."

Cause Analysis

The challenge of providing our citizens with convenient and systematic means of identifying and locating services provided by government can be illustrated by the following: The September 1998 South Carolina Information Resources Council *Report to the Governor* states, "Government in South Carolina is composed of many functions and capabilities. The design of the state's present technical infrastructure has evolved from agency and/or programmatic 'stovepipes.' The 'stovepipes' largely reflect the capabilities and applications systems design approaches of the 1970s and early 1980s. Although they served the state well in the past, these systems are difficult to modify and extremely expensive to expand as business demands change and additional features and functions are required. Simply improving the quality of existing governmental 'stovepipes' with technology cannot provide the level of long-term, sustainable advantage that can be derived from the 'synergy' of governments' various capabilities effectively supported by technology. Effectively planned, designed, and implemented information resources can enable government to evaluate and restructure operations and service delivery mechanisms based upon core competencies."

Until government restructuring came into existence, state agencies had little or no reason to cooperate with each other unless they decided it was in their self-

interest. Each agency was answerable only to the state legislature and usually only on how they spent their state dollars. There was not a push for a coordinated system of services across agency lines to meet the needs of our citizens. This problem has been also caused by the way some state agencies are funded by the federal government. In many cases, the regulations that accompanied these federal funds dictated how they were to be spent. This is often referred to as "stovepipe funding."

South Carolina has failed to develop a plan for the consistent use of information technology. Each state agency, county and municipal entity has developed and purchased information technology based upon the needs of that organization. Consideration has not been given to the need for information sharing. This hodge podge approach to the purchase of information technology has made it all but impossible for agencies to share information.

If agencies did decide to share information, often the technology did not exist to allow them to do so. Transfer of information was accomplished by the use of reams of paper. Where technology did exist it was often very primitive and not cost effective. The types of software needed to accomplish the goal of effective, cost efficient information sharing has only recently been developed and marketed.

Into this mix of state agencies, county and municipal governments, comes the era of limited government. In several successive elections, the people have said the role of government should be reduced. This has forced government to seek ways to operate more efficiently. Now agencies are constantly looking for more efficient ways of providing services and information.

BellSouth currently estimates that 92% of the households in South Carolina are equipped with telephones. Individuals without telephones in their own homes can access them through other family members, neighbors or the local pay phone. Because there is almost universal access to telephones, this project foresees the telephone as the primary means for citizens to access the information and services they desire. In an article penned by Mr. Peter Fabris in the April 1, 1998 edition of *CIO Magazine* he writes, "the humble touch-tone telephone 'isn't snazzy, but it sure is useful because everybody knows how to use one,' says Brant Huddleston, IBM's global solution manager for motor vehicle systems in Bethesda, Md. In Arizona, IBM developed an IVR system for the Department of Motor Vehicles that offers the same services as its Web site. In the first month of operation, IVR was by far the more popular interface among Arizona motorists, outperforming the Web site by a ratio of 8 to 1. While one reason may be the departments efforts to advertise the IVR, another likely reason is that people are generally more willing to turn to the telephone than to the Internet to perform transactions. The message: Though the Web is the

darling of technology pundits, the telephone comes much closer to hitting the bull's eye when the goal is reaching 100 percent of the population.”

While many citizens prefer to receive their information orally, others prefer to have their information in writing. For this reason, a web-based application will be created to support the telephone operation. This allows citizens with computers in their homes to access this information directly. Also, all county libraries and their branches have computers connected to the Internet. Even citizens without computers in their homes or who lack computer skills will have access to this information at the county library level.

Kiosks are another means of providing citizens with access to information and services. However, the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism is removing kiosks from their Welcome Centers because they have found most of their visitors would rather interact with a person. Again quoting the article by Mr. Farbis, “so far, kiosks have not caught on in test applications. In Illinois, for instance, IBM pulled the plug in November 1997 on a network of 10 motor vehicle department kiosks—designed and funded by Big Blue—after an 11-month trial because not enough citizens used the devices to justify the cost of maintaining them.” While kiosks have not been well received in these applications, as other technologies become readily available they will be used to provide citizens access to information and services.

The South Carolina Services Information System (SCSIS) currently provides information about and services for persons with disabilities on a statewide basis. SCSIS offers a model for the implementation of this project. SCSIS could serve as a central source to provide citizens with information concerning services on a state, regional and local level. They currently have a statewide 800 number and are developing a web application. The information to be provided would include what agency or organization provides the services desired the qualifications to receive those services and the name and telephone number of the appropriate contact. Eventually, the system will provide any information a citizen will need from an agency. To ensure that this information is current and correct the database will be maintained by the individual agencies and organizations. This will also reduce the number of additional employees required to maintain this system.

Implementation Plan

This project will be accomplished through the Information Resources Council. The Information Resources Council has been tasked by the Governor to develop a statewide strategic information resources plan. The Council is divided into committees to facilitate effective information resources planning that emphasizes improving services to citizens through effective use of technology. The 1.3.3 working group of the Citizen Access Committee will recommend strategies that create and support an environment in which government services and public information are readily available to the public. The report will include recommendations on the use of call centers, Internet, e-mail, kiosks, bank automatic teller machines and other media and emerging technologies.

January 1999, the 1.3.3 working group will make their recommendations to the full committee concerning the methodologies for responding to public queries about government information and services via electronic means.

January 1999, the recommendations will be forwarded to the full Information Resources Council.

June 1999, the Information Resources Council will develop strategies for funding multi-agency information sharing and public access.

January 2000, the Governor will recommend to the legislature that funding be included in the budget for implementation of the Information Resources Council plans.

2001 the plan will be implemented.

Representatives of both the public and private sectors are guiding this process. These include representatives from manufacturing, merchandising, information management, communications, local, regional, and state level governments, the Budget and Control Board and the Office of the Governor. The broad make-up of the Information Resources Council will provide a base of support for overcoming obstacles encountered in the implementation process.

The citizens are demanding an efficient means of receiving information and services from all levels of government. A potential stumbling block to the implementation of the proposed information system is identifying financial resources currently available to the various levels of government and identifying additional sources of funding. The Information Resources Council will be prepared to demonstrate the cost effectiveness of its proposed strategies.

Evaluation

This plan is due to be implemented in the 2001. As part of the implementation, a comprehensive set of process and outcome measures will be used for evaluation of the plan. These would include, for example, using the utilization of the call center and web-based application contact data from the year 2000 for SCSIS as a baseline. This baseline data will allow the implementers to determine if there is an increase in the use of the call center and web-based application.

The following measurements will be used to determine if implementation is accomplishing the goals of the project:

1. Is the call center open?
2. Are citizens utilizing the call center to access information?
3. Has waiting time for agency services and information been reduced?
4. Has participating agencies' cost been reduced by utilization of a central call center?

These measures will enable us to determine the extent to which the citizens of South Carolina are able to access state, regional, or local government agency information and services in an efficient, cost effective means.