Virginia Association of Counties
ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 2, 2017.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: **James City County**

Program Title: Increasing Efficiency & Accessibility with a New Web Platform

Program Category: **Information Technology**

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: **Bryan Hill**

Title: **County Administrator**

Signature:

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Increasing Efficiency & Accessibility with a New Web Platform

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

James City County launched a new website in 2016, bringing the County's old site—which had seen many incremental iterations over 15 years—into the modern era of online communication and engagement. Our team built content for the new site entirely from the ground up; we re-wrote and constructed thousands of new pages over a six-month period and introduced dozens of new features to improve online engagement and accessibility. Our key objectives were to have a visually dynamic site that highlighted the unique history and vibrant community of James City County while improving accessibility by making the site available to all users anywhere. We are now fully mobile responsive, servicing approximately 50% of daily users visiting our site from a smartphone or tablet. Many new online components allow citizens to receive email, text or push notifications through subscriptions when new information is posted—subscribers are automatically reminded of upcoming events and important deadlines and receive instant notice of the latest County news. The County government and local businesses saved thousands of dollars in 2016 through our new bid procurement system, which allows vendors to apply for and download bid documents electronically, cutting down on significant printing and postage costs. Citizens also benefit from reduced paperwork—many forms have been converted to electronic versions that are sent to the right County

employee when submitted online. This new online form service has been a hugely popular tool, with over 5,300 submissions since launching the site in 2016. Every form that is submitted online is one less phone call that a citizen has to make to a County office or one less letter delivered—which amounts to an average of 21 per work day.

SUMMARY

Web staff knew from the beginning stages of the redesign process that we needed a content management system that would give power to departments to easily update their web pages. At the most basic level, improving the website meant fundamentally transforming the ways in which information is delivered to citizens. Allowing departments to designate a web coordinator would create a web environment where the owners of the content were more invested in their pages and would update them more frequently. Instead of posting content for all departments, web staff could take on a role of technical web support and focus on improving and developing new web services.

Analytics and data were fundamental in demonstrating the James City County website's strengths and weaknesses during every stage of the redesign process. Our old site was not mobile responsive while over 40% of users were trying to navigate it on a mobile device. It was clear that our new website must improve to adequately serve a projected 50% of mobile users in 2016 and 2017. Web staff collected detailed data for every County department, which allowed departments to see how their pages were performing. Using this data, we deleted over half of the pages on the entire site and consolidated many more to make our content more concise and our navigation more streamlined. We gave prominence to high-performing web pages, and developed strategies for improving low-performing pages that we felt had valuable, but possibly forgotten about content. One of the most

successful strategies has been to leverage social media as a tool to compliment the site, instead of as a separate means of communication. We now have a policy to try and get every Facebook post to link back to a relevant page on the County site—this drives traffic we wouldn't otherwise see, but also serves as an outreach tool for a segment of our population that has been difficult to access in the past.

When rebuilding content for the new website, web staff had a singular focus for every page to provide or support a County service—this meant cutting down on technical mission statements, lengthy department histories and other purely "educational" text that distracted from the specific services offered online. Citizens primarily visit our site to make a payment, apply for a license or permit, or request a specific service and we want to get them to those services as quickly as possible. Content is accessed through a fixed global mega-menu system, which we built and organized around services instead of departmental structure. Our goal was for citizens to access any page or service on the website in three clicks or less.

Another major initiative was the decision that we would no longer consider the website to be a repository for PDFs. We evaluated thousands of PDFs to determine how beneficial their content was to our County services, or how they could complement our new content. Some PDFs with valuable information were made into web pages, while others were made into interactive online forms. Publications, brochures, and long-form documents were migrated into a page-turning software that streams quickly to any device instead of waiting on a download queue and allows us to utilize more features (like embedded video, smarter search, and intuitive indexing). Archival documents and records were moved into a SharePoint database where they could be searched separately and sorted using more metrics than the standard document repository within the site—this was a reaction to

archival agendas or minutes "polluting" our search results with irrelevant our outdated info, while allowing us to maintain transparency and other freedom of information requirements within the site by hosting them separately from our active document directory.

Finally, we knew that all of our hard work in improving the visual impact and content accessibility of the site would be wasted if we didn't have a plan to be more engaged with our community. Moving PDF forms into an interactive online form center was one way simplifying many County processes for citizens. We were also able to leverage other interactive communication abilities by using new notification tools available within the CivicPlus CMS. Anything from the old site that was an event, class or deadline was moved into a new interactive calendar system, while press releases were posted into a smart news feed that schedules and expires items automatically, and newsletters were recreated in a new email distribution system—all of which allows citizens to manage subscriptions to receive notifications via email or text message. James City County citizens have never been as connected with their local government as they are now with our new website, while the County has become more responsive than ever to citizen needs.

THE PROBLEM FACED BY THE COUNTY

Many factors compelled James City County to move forward with a website redesign. Our old website's platform was over 15 years old—thousands of outdated pages had accumulated, resulting in poor site performance, obsolete content, and inaccurate search engine results. Our old platform created a bottleneck of web updates that were all filtered through one person, often taking weeks to approve and publish content. During the rise of social media, we saw a trend where departments would post their content directly to Facebook or Twitter, knowing they could get their message to the

public more efficiently, but bypass updating their pages on the website altogether due to the burdens of the old system. This compounded the problem of inaccurate information on the site and created an atmosphere where the website and social media messaging were never on the same page.

Additionally, the site was not mobile responsive, which became more and more concerning as our analytics showed mobile traffic nearly doubling every year since 2010. Functionally, our old site's overabundance of navigable options and lack of intuitive design had a paralyzing effect for many visitors. Navigation was overly complex, and unless a user knew the inner workings of the County's organizational charts, it would take them several clicks to find what they were looking for. The design of the old site was stale and outdated at a time when the County leadership was trying to create initiatives to attract visitors and new businesses, finally prompting the web staff to develop a better solution.

INNOVATION

A core benefit in partnering with CivicPlus was to help us innovate the visual development of the site, and push the limit of what a government site should look like. We approached the homepage with the philosophy that visual simplicity is more effective than an overabundance of options. The home page was also our best opportunity to immediately present a "wow-factor" to visitors or prospective businesses by showcasing what James City County has to offer through a focus on local imagery. A rotation of background images updates randomly on refresh (and is replaced seasonally), so visitors are always greeted with something new when they visit the site. A major goal since launching the new website is to continue to develop photo and video content to convey a stronger essence of community in our secondary and tertiary pages.
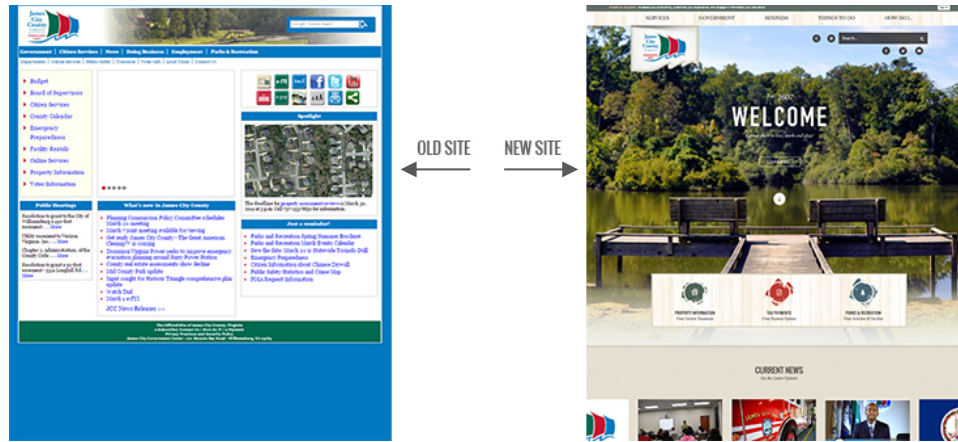
Since launching last year, we have continued to push the technological limits of our CMS by integrating 360° media, making us one of the first County websites to enter the virtual reality space. James City County has a thriving Parks & Recreation community with a number of public spaces for our citizens to enjoy; many of these spaces with rentable shelters and rooms now have interactive 360° photos that put the user directly into the space. Our citizens can assess the size and versatility of these spaces in virtual reality, and make an immediate decision if that space fits their needs. Over the next year, we plan on expanding this beyond Parks & Recreation and show more of our public spaces in the realms of public safety, economic development, special events, libraries, and much more.

COLLABORATION

The architecture of our new website has increased intergovernmental collaboration within the County and with other local government entities like our Office of Economic Development and Tourism Office. Shortly after launching the new County website, web staff began work on expanding our web presence by developing a new Tourism subsite (explorejccva.com) and redesigning and migrating our old Economic Development website (yesjamescitycountyva.com) into the new James City County web family. We designed these subsites to feel familiar to the parent County site, but

each with their own distinctive look and feel as they have more specific target audiences. The Tourism subsite launched in May 2016 and the Economic Development redesign went live in December 2016.

Web content coordinators from all County departments now have more control over their content than ever before, with the capabilities to update and maintain their pages with greater ease and efficiency. Web staff meets with department representatives quarterly, where we share the latest enhancements and tips for keeping the site compliant and up-to-date. Additionally, we meet one-on-one with each department yearly to discuss new projects and layout a content strategy roadmap for the year ahead. This helps web staff maintain a high degree of consistency throughout the thousands of webpages we maintain and advocate for cross-departmental collaboration for shared web services.

MODEL FOR OTHER LOCALITIES

We hope that other localities see our new website as a model for building or streamlining their own websites in a concise and intuitive manner. We have seen a lot of County websites that struggle with organization by presenting overwhelming content on the home page and in menus, which is completely natural considering how complex and large County governments can be. We believe we've achieved a viable alternative to this old way of presenting content by understanding that we can't simply make content available—we must also make it engaging and accessible. We are also trying to push the boundaries of what is expected from government websites by offering 360° and VR media in our Parks & Recreation pages. This technology is becoming cheaper and more feasible for small teams to implement, and has proven to widen the horizons of public engagement tremendously.

The degree of contribution for realizing financial and operation efficiencies falls in the three areas: Reduced support on an annual basis, reallocation of a staff position to fund startup, and an increased efficiency for staff providing content and maintaining the website. The cost of maintaining an in-house web server (hardware, software and bandwidth) amounted to about $10,500 per year. The hosted solution cost amounted to $8,900 annually, resulting in an annual cost reduction of $2,600. Due to the efficiencies of the hosted content management system, we were able to reallocate staff funding from a Web Developer position to fund the startup of the website—salary and benefits amounted to $89,700 for this position, while startup costs were $75,000.

The implementation of the website utilizing the CMS also allowed us to distribute the responsibilities for content maintenance across many departments freeing the remaining web staff members to maintain design integrity, approving content for posting and monitoring performance. Putting the new web tools in the hands of our department web coordinators across all County departments allowed the content to be more precise and for County staff to have more awareness of their web presence and audience.

The new website has resulted in reduced costs for a number of a departments. One example is our Purchasing Department's use of our new bid tools that makes it easy for them to post and schedule bid items, and for business to register and download these items. The County government and local businesses saved thousands of dollars in 2016 through this new system, cutting down on significant printing and postage costs incurred in previous years.

In total, it took six months to design, migrate content, and train County staff before going live with our new website. Launching the Tourism and Economic Development subsites took an additional year in order to develop messaging and new branding. Web staff consists of two employees that share responsibilities as system administrators and content publishers. This project was done without additional budget allocation, on time and with an annual cost reduction.

RESULTS

After the launch of the new site, we have monitored analytics closely, ensuring we hit projected monthly targets based on previous years' trends. We also track popular search queries, downloads, and demographic information, among many other categories. Our analytics show us that there are 71% fewer department web pages receiving 0.00% of total traffic compared to our old site, meaning that citizens are now seeing more services and visiting more pages instead of returning just to pay their taxes once every year. The reduction of individual department pages and stored PDFs has created a leaner web environment that promotes efficiency and productivity. We have found our citizen engagement efforts to be a success. After a year with our new site:

- Over 1,500 citizens have created user accounts

- Over 7,600 subscriptions to notification lists

- Over 5,300 submissions through our new online form system—amounting to an average of 21 per work day since launch. That's 21 fewer calls or letters that County received *per day* thanks to our new web platform.

MOBILE % PER MONTH

DESKTOP VISITORS

MOBILE VISITORS

NEW WEBSITE LAUNCHES
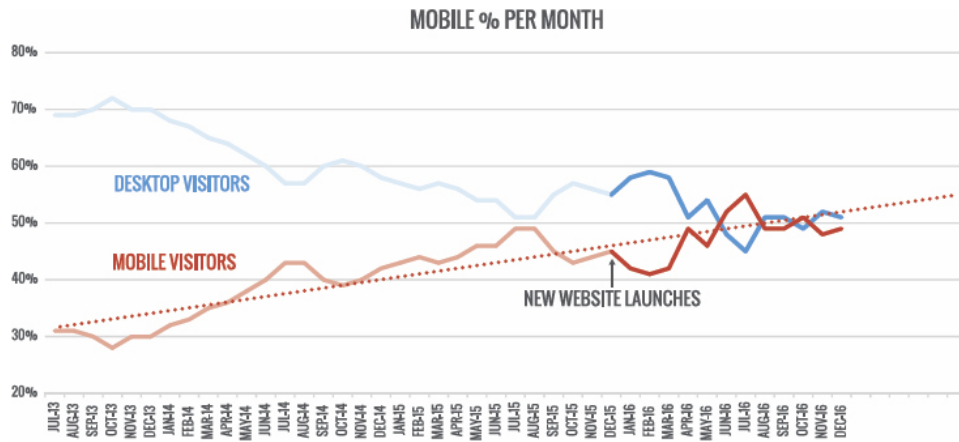
Six months after going live, the County website averaged over 50% monthly mobile usage for the first time. Additionally, our social media channel referrals to the website have doubled in the last year. As we bring new features and applications online, we continue to focus on our commitment to citizen engagement, accessibility and mobile responsiveness.