

Best Practice: Online Public Access to Government Records

REPORT UPDATED: JUNE 13, 2011

CITY: NEW YORK CITY

POLICY AREA: GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

BEST PRACTICE

In 2003, the City Council and the Mayor passed and signed legislation (Local Law 11) which obligated all City agencies and departments to produce electronic versions of any document published or transmitted to the Mayor or Council. The law specified that the electronic documents must be made publically accessible online via the Government Publications webpage of the Department of Records and Information Services (Records) website:

<http://nyc.gov/html/records/html/govpub/home.shtml>.

ISSUE

This practice addressed the need to improve the efficiency and accessibility of information about municipal government, and reduce the environmental impact of paper use by the City of New York.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim is to provide a single location on the City's website where city agency reports can be accessed. Broad categories are provided to bring materials dealing with similar subjects together. Documents may also be located by a Google-like search engine. The Department of Records and Information Services website was selected to host this service because it includes the City Hall Library - the NYC Charter mandated depository for agency print publications since 1914, and the Municipal Archives - the repository for City documents of historic significance.

IMPLEMENTATION

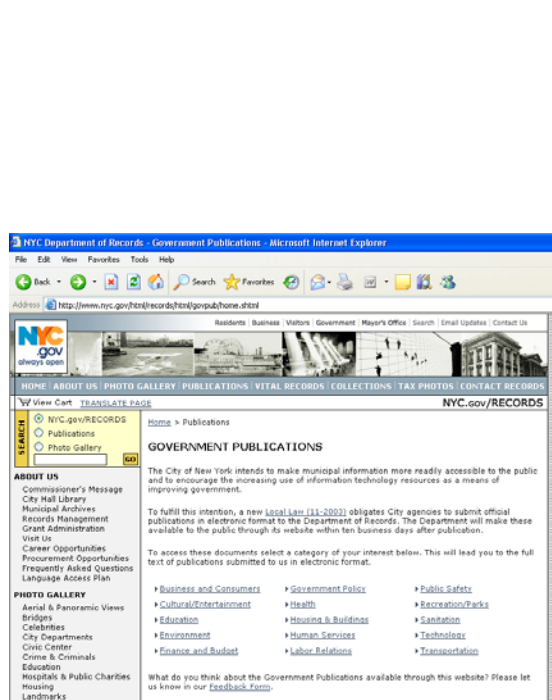
An implementation team composed of staff from DOR and the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT), and Legal Affairs met weekly for several months to develop and carry out the mandate of Local Law 11, 2003.

Agencies submit documents in PDF format to the Department of Records site via an e-form developed for the purpose. They choose a title, document type from a drop-down list (such as Annual Report, Budget Report, Legislative Document, etc.), and a brief description of contents. Once received documents are reviewed by City Hall Library Technical Services Librarian for accuracy and viewability. The librarian accepts or rejects the report and if accepted publishes it to the website.

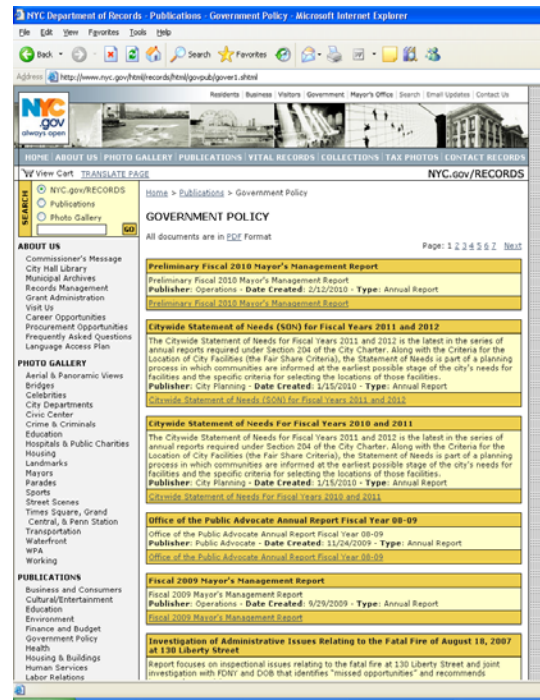
The site was launched in July 2003. In both June and September that year, orientation workshops, including a PowerPoint presentation and a question and answer session, were held for agency liaisons appointed to prepare and submit documents to the Government Publications site. Packets were handed out with printed copies of the user's manual and other information.

Users can access publications within the following categories: business and consumers, cultural/entertainment, education, environment, finance and budget, government policy, health, housing and buildings, human services, labor relations, public safety, recreation/parks, sanitation, technology, transportation. The search page can be found at the following link -- <http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/html/govpub/home.shtml>.

Best Practice: Online Public Access to Government Records



Sample screenshot of search page



Sample listings under Government Policy

COST

The cost of implementing and managing the project is part of the Department of Records normal operating budget. There is no separate funding category.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

As of May 2011, 5,200 full-text report files have been uploaded or linked to the Government Publications site, by 50 New York City agencies.

TIMELINE

It took six months from the date that Local Law 11 was announced for the website to go live in 2003. Weekly planning meetings, orientation sessions and individual contacts with agencies and planners as described above were part of the process.

LEGISLATION

Sections 1133 and 3004 of the New York City Charter pertaining to the Department of Records were changed. See the Local Law: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/pdf/law03011.pdf>. Below is a portion of the text:

“Pursuant to this legislation, and recognizing that the Department of Records and Information Services currently serves as the New York City Charter mandated repository and disseminator of City documents, City agencies will be required to

Best Practice: Online Public Access to Government Records

transmit to the Department, in an electronic format, all documents required by law to be published or transmitted to the Mayor or Council.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The greatest challenge is in coordinating updates from the various agencies given that this requires consistent and frequent communication. Additionally, when there is personnel turnover new staff need to be familiarized with the requirements of Local Law 11.

To keep the site current it is necessary for DOR to monitor agency websites for inclusion of documents that should also be available via the Government Publications site.

TRANSFERABILITY

In a large city or state government, agencies develop and perhaps nurture their individuality to the disadvantage of consistency of access, such as finding the agency's publications. Not all agencies publish reports on their site. By providing a single location where all reports can be found, a useful consistency is offered to the public. In addition, in searching for one report others on the same subject by the same or different agency may be discovered, enhancing the information experience.

CONTACTS

- Eileen M. Flannelly, Commissioner
New York City Department of Records and Information Services
31 Chambers Street, Suite 305
New York, NY 10007
212-788-8607; Fax: 212/788-8614
<http://www.nyc.gov/records>, then click on “Commissioner” under “Contact Us”.
- Christine Bruzzese, Supervising Librarian
City Hall Library
New York City Department of Records and Information Services
31 Chambers Street, Suite 112
New York, NY 10007
212-788-8595
cbruzzese@records.nyc.gov