

## Collaborative Group Helps Towns Take Big Steps in Small State

Imagine that your state has only 57 municipalities. For some states, that might be a stretch even for a single county! Here in Delaware, where there is only one medium-sized city (Wilmington, pop. 73,000) and a few small cities, with the rest comprising small towns and villages, it has been more difficult to realize the potential of e-government across the board.

In 2000, when I came to work for the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA), one of my tasks at this public-service unit was to help move some of this state's local governments into the twenty-first century in terms of how they were serving their residents. With my background, this meant helping towns grasp the potential of the World-Wide Web in government-to-citizen interaction.

At the time, less than a third of Delaware's municipalities even had a presence on the Web—well below the national average. I began by making presentations at annual municipal league functions and offering an occasional seminar on the benefits of electronic government. Over several years, having had little success at getting the message across on a statewide scale, I came to understand that in a small state like Delaware, relationships are paramount. This notion became the basis for convening a new professional group.

One of the true advantages of a state whose length can be traveled in two hours is the facilitation of statewide meetings. My initial call to convene the Delaware Municipal Web Developers Group (MWDG) in October 2006 drew what would become a solid nucleus of 20-25 individuals representing municipalities of varying size from small hamlets to Wilmington. The group comprises a rich mix of positions and talents—town clerks, town managers, IT professionals, graphic designers, public relations professionals, finance officers, retiree volunteers, and a GIS expert. No one has to travel more than an hour in any direction to get to its meetings, which are held in Dover.



The meeting agenda always includes a speaker and individual website progress reports from constituents. These two elements alone provide for great discussion. The three-hour format has greatly facilitated learning, as it is common for questions that have emerged to be answered knowledgeably during the meeting. Towns take turns providing lunch, which gives members additional time to network before the formal meeting begins.

Three years later, 34 of the 43 municipalities that have a website and the three county governments are currently represented in the MWDG. IPA convenes this group ([www.ipa.udel.edu/mwdg](http://www.ipa.udel.edu/mwdg)) quarterly and facilitates the securing of speakers, as directed by the group's steering committee. The state's Government Information Center, which has been responsible for national "Best of the Web" honors for its state portal, has also plays an important advisory/service role within the group.

The beauty of this group is that, through the simple networking, support, and education that happens at the meetings, it has helped accelerate the progress of *all* participant municipalities, big and small. Though it can't take complete credit, it is no accident that the number of Delaware municipalities with a local government Website has more than doubled within this decade. Moreover, local governments have begun to take this kind of service to its citizens more seriously and, in doing so, come up with a better digital interface with the public.



The Town of Bethany Beach, one of Delaware’s foremost seaside resort communities, spent nearly three years planning and developing its site, including an initial survey of residents, many of whom live in the Washington, D.C., area in the off-season. The collaborative nature of the MWDG helped foster the process. Tracy Mulligan, who served as the town’s communications committee chair during this process, put

it this way, “My attendance [at MWDG meetings] added an important dimension to our town’s Website redevelopment project. I was able to bring back valuable information to the town manager and appropriate committees in several areas, including the expertise and assistance available through the state’s Government Information Center, names and contacts of additional vendors that were useful when we developed our RFP, and an awareness of the need for specific Website policies authorized by the Town Council as well as examples of such policies.”

“In addition,” Mulligan says, “I had the benefit of seeing what other towns were doing and the Website issues they were encountering. Last, but not least, were the detailed comments about our Website project and the encouragement offered by the Institute for Public Administration. We had a better project experience and were able to develop a better product as a direct result of our involvement with the MWDG.”

New members are continually being added, as towns hear about the group. The tiny Town of Ocean View, located just west of Bethany Beach, sent a representative a year ago for the first time. After the meeting, Ocean View’s Finance Director Lee Brubaker commented, “I’ve been attending training/networking sessions for about 35 years, and yesterday’s was one of the best. Even with the broad ‘mix’ of expertise and talents, all participants were involved and took away, I believe, new things to think about and helpful ideas. It was a productive three hours.”

Even small towns in small states can do big things if people with similar agendas work together. It’s been gratifying for me professionally to witness such progress. More than that, the way the MWDG blends collaboration and public service can be a model for others.

by Mark Deshon