

City of Buffalo launches revamped Web site

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When a city accountability team began scrutinizing the City of Buffalo's Web site a year ago, officials were aghast.

The site that serves as the city's cyberspace welcome mat to the world was riddled with spelling errors, grammatical blunders and stale information.

That was the good news.

Navigating the Web site to glean even the most basic facts was sometimes akin to searching for that proverbial needle in a haystack. When it came to more complex fact-finding missions like researching the City Charter for an obscure provision, even some computer geeks found it easier to dust off old hard-copy versions.

Mayor Byron W. Brown tasked the Management Information Systems Department with revamping Buffalo's site. And it wasn't just a matter of applying sixth-grade grammatical rules to text or sprucing up the appearance of pages. Brown and his CitiStat team regularly — and quite publicly — prodded City Hall's computer gurus to make the Web site more user-friendly and introduce some new features.

While numerous enhancements already have been made, the city will officially unveil what officials tout as a vastly improved Web site today.

Raj Mehta, Buffalo's acting commissioner of management information systems, said one important new feature will let people pay their property taxes via the Internet. Individuals have long been able to pay parking fines, garbage user fees and other city charges by visiting the site at www.city-buffalo.com. But until this week, property taxes had to be paid the old-fashioned way. Another new feature will allow people to pay city charges by tapping into their bank accounts. In the past, Web users needed a credit card to pay via the Internet.

All payments made on the Internet will still be subject to "convenience" fees. Most carry a \$2 charge, but city fees that are over \$100 and are paid by credit card will be assessed a 2 percent surcharge.

"The fees just cover our costs of doing business," said City Corporation Counsel Alisa A. Lukasiewicz. "We're not making a profit."

Other changes aim to make it easier for Web visitors to find what they're looking for.

“Our goal is to get people to the information they’re seeking within three clicks [of the mouse],” said Mehta. On the old Web site, it wasn’t uncommon for people to have to click on four or even five icons before they would reach their intended destination.

Buffalo’s Web site attracts about 7,000 unique visitors in a typical day, Mehta reported.

“It just seems too low to me,” said Finance Commissioner Janet Penksa. She is hoping the dramatically improved Web site will cause a spike in usage.

The city worked with Algonquin Studios, a Buffalo-based computer consulting firm, in overhauling the Web site. Mehta estimated that the city spent about \$30,000 on consulting, noting that the bulk of the project was done in-house.

The long-awaited launch of Buffalo’s improved Web site took “too long,” said First Deputy Mayor Steven M. Casey.

But Mehta and his computer crew seemed confident their superiors will conclude that the project was worth the wait.