Chapter IV

Becoming an Enterprise: Developing an E-Governance Structure in Nevada County, California

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Executive Summary

This chapter provides a case study of how a rural California county transitioned its technological governance from one centered on the perceived needs of individual departments to one integrating technological needs across the entire enterprise. The chapter details the use of “communities of interest”, a way of grouping departments with related missions for broad-based analysis of technology needs and solutions. The chapter describes the process the county used to implement this new strategy. The author hopes that use of this method can help other local governments to avoid obsolescence, unmet needs, or overlapping systems in purchase and implementation of technology systems.
Environment and History

Nevada County, California is comprised of 958 rugged square miles. The county begins at the California/Nevada state line just west of Reno, climbs over the summit of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and then slowly traverses down to the west ending in the lower Sierra foothills above the Sacramento Valley. The county boasts thousands of acres contained in Tahoe National Forest and other public lands. The population of 97,000 is largely contained in the three small incorporated areas, Grass Valley and Nevada City in the west and Truckee in the east.

Nevada County’s modern history really begins with the California Gold Rush. Thousands of miners flocked here in the mid-to-late 1800’s. But unlike many other areas of California, some of those miners stayed after the “easy gold” ran out and constructed hard-rock mines running deep underground. One of those mines, the Empire Mine in Grass Valley, retains the record as the most prolific gold mine over its lifetime in the state. Another, the Idaho-Maryland, is currently undergoing preliminary engineering for a hoped-for reopening within the next 10 years.

The engineering innovations developed in Nevada County at that time (including the Pelton Water Wheel, the design of which is still used today) continue into the 21st century. A tiny company called the Grass Valley Group formed in 1958 and grew to become the manufacturer of some of the finest video broadcast production and distribution equipment in the world. Dozens of high-technology companies spun off from GVG in the 1980’s, when the company was purchased and moved away (it has since returned).

This legacy of technology has been taken to heart by the government of the County of Nevada. Despite its small population, the county is a recognized leader in technological innovation, with an impressive track record of awards. This reputation would not have been achieved, and its continuation would not be possible, without the user-centric governance structure described in this chapter. The courage it took to attempt and follow through on such radical changes harkens back to those brave Forty-Niners who came here from everywhere to seek their fortune.

The Need

In 1999, the county was facing a technological crisis. Major systems, like general accounting, the telephone system, the computer network, and others were incompatible and obsolete. Original vendors were out of business or no longer supporting the systems, parts were unavailable, trained service providers were non-existent. The highest priority was to head off serious Y2K issues; the lack of vendor support would make that task considerably more difficult.

At that time, Nevada County had used the capital outlay method so common across all levels of government (and, often, in industry as well). Individual departments looked at their needs, contacted vendors, responded to advertising, and made purchasing requests for “System A” or “Server X”. The fact that an assessor’s office database might be completely incompat-
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