July 20, 2015

County Administrator Michael Brillhart
3195 Main Street
PO Box 427
Barnstable, MA 2639

Dear County Administrator Brillhart,

The County Executives of America (CEA), would like to congratulate you for your county being recognized as one of the 54 of most innovative and pioneering counties in the nation by The Center for Digital Government, sister organization to Government Technology. A copy of the article has been enclosed for you.

The County Executives of America is a non-partisan organization that includes a membership of over 700 chief elected executives of a county or consolidated city/county government. This esteemed group represents more than 50% of the nation’s population and includes the largest metropolitan governments in the country. Our members are the top decision-makers in their counties and have full responsibility for the growth of the local economy and the well-being of their citizenry.

Best regards,
Michael Griffin
Executive Director
The Most Innovative, Digital Counties

In this year’s survey, the Center for Digital Government recognizes 54 counties as adaptive IT leaders, collaborators and arbiters of the public trust.

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By Colin Wood, Steve Towns, Noelle Knell, Elaine Pittman, and Jessica Mulholland

The power of counties can be traced back to the earliest local governments formed in colonial America, where new entities took shape to pick up the excess work that cities couldn’t handle, and then later matured into arms of the state. Today, county governments have become an indispensable ingredient in keeping the nation governed, and that is why those who are best at using technology to fill the role are being recognized in the 2015 Digital Counties Survey.

The Center for Digital Government, sister organization to Government Technology, has found 54 of the most innovative and pioneering counties in the nation, with Fairfax County, Va.; Chesterfield County, Va.; Catawba County, N.C.; and Allegan County, Mich., taking top honors in their respective population categories as adaptive IT leaders, collaborators and arbiters of the public trust. Judges found counties that understood the transformational value of technology and that had made the investments needed to improve services and efficiency across all facets of their organizations.

“Counties are continually becoming more sophisticated in their approach to technology-based service delivery,” said Todd Sander, executive director of the Center for Digital Government. “We see this not only through the investment choices they are making in systems and tools, but also in their adding professional staff with specific expertise in security, data management and innovation. It is a constant challenge for government to keep up with the pace of technological change and of public expectation. This year’s survey clearly demonstrates that counties are up to that challenge, and they are actively embracing new technology that will help them make better decisions and operate more efficiently.”

This year’s survey, the 13th annual, revealed leading counties, as well as trends that span the nation. Respondents reported which technologies and innovations they believed would see more of next year, and the top 10 were:

1. Cybersecurity
2. Hire and retain competent IT personnel
3. Mobility/mobile applications
4. Open government/ transparency/open data
5. Disaster recovery/continuity of operations
6. Budget and cost control
7. Virtualization: server, desktop/client, storage, applications
8. Shared services
9. Portal/ e-government
10. Cloud computing

New concepts are beginning to take hold in county government too. More than half of respondents said they were considering Internet of Everything (IoE) technologies in their strategic plans. Twelve percent reported having a chief privacy officer on staff, 7 percent reported having a chief innovation officer, 5 percent a chief digital officer, 3 percent a chief performance officer, and 8 percent reported having a chief data officer. Business intelligence and data analytics systems are in use by more than one-quarter of respondents, with another 29 percent reporting plans to begin using those technologies in the next two years.

While innovative, counties are also slow in moving to the cloud, the survey showed. More than half of respondents reported that between 0 and 10 percent of their systems had been moved to the cloud, and another 25 percent reported that between 10 and 20 percent had been moved to the cloud. Many counties are stuck managing legacy systems that won’t ever be migrated to the cloud. A third of respondents reported that more than half their systems won’t make the leap to the cloud.

Cloud or no, this year’s winners found ways to make the most of their limited resources. Judges were impressed by projects around the areas of open data and transparency, cybersecurity, procurement, content resource management, emergency preparedness and business continuity, programs that support
environmental tenants, and performance monitoring.

The first place winner in the 500,000 or more population category was Fairfax County, Va., where notable programs included the county's big data and open data initiatives, an NCRnet interoperability portal, a comprehensive IT strategic plan, and transparent budgeting process.

Fairfax County CIO Wanda Gibson said managing the county's data is a huge job because it has 55 business agencies each with different types and formats of data.

"What we're trying to do is get our arms around a technical strategy that aggregates data and performs analytics on that particular data, and then integrates that data for an enterprise warehouse. Then, out of that data, that's where the open data comes in. The public can come in on different service areas of the county government and be able to get quick information and searches on a specific program or a specific topic."

Launching programs like big data or open data is made possible by an IT strategic plan. Judges identified Fairfax's plan as one of the best, and it's available for all to see on the county's website.

“Our plan takes into consideration the business model of our customer agencies as well as the underlying foundational technology required to support everyone,” Gibson said. “It's a mature plan, and it's a mature process that incorporates governance and input from the citizenry, as well as the agencies in terms of their business requirements.”

Success in Fairfax County has been the culmination of several factors, Gibson said, with the county's leaders filling one of the key roles.

“We have had incredibly visionary leadership in Fairfax County,” Gibson said. “We also have an agile way of going through the acquisition process, which puts a lot of authority in the hands of the CIO, and we also have a flexible way of being able to change priorities as either business conditions or the IT market changes.”

Chesterfield County, Va., took first place in the 250,000 to 500,000 population category. Judges highlighted the county's transparency and open government efforts, online newsroom, robust library website, strategic planning, IT assessment of Virginia Commonwealth University, and use of Salesforce for economic development.

Barry Condrey, CIO of the county, said the key to Chesterfield County's success derives from a mature approach to IT governance and leadership.

“The county has a long history of commitment to quality and long history of commitment to planning,” said Condrey. “Our board of supervisors continues to recognize the value of innovation, technology for innovation, using technology in innovative ways, and they continue to fund and recognize those efforts. Unlike a lot of localities that struggle with convincing county leaders that technology and innovative approaches can bring improvements to citizen services, Chesterfield County's leaders have recognized that for a long time.”

While Chesterfield County maintains a strong legacy of innovation, many counties struggle with their IT governance. Condrey suggested a greater focus on the basics.

“One thing we see a lot of opportunity with is consistency with the way [governments] approach technology investments and technology for innovation,” he said. “Having repeatable processes, having governance models set up that you can rely on to guide the investments so that you don't have to make individual decisions on [which projects to choose]. You need an overall governance model that at least gives you a starting point.”

With a solid framework in place, a culture of innovation can begin to grow, Condrey said.

“We're always looking for innovation, we're always looking for ways of investing in technology and investing in areas where we can improve citizen services,” he said. “It's the way we do business.”

Catawba County, N.C., took first place in the 150,000 to 250,000 population category for its social engagement initiative, centralized GIS website, performance metrics, open data efforts, shared services initiative, and commitment to the environment. Catawba County ranked first in North Carolina for total public recycling per capita.

Social engagement and social media are crucial elements of the county's operations, said CIO Rick Pilato, because those online interactions enable them to direct citizens toward the services and information that they demand.
Catawba County was recognized by judges for its Life, Well Run campaign, which showcases work the government has been doing. The program’s Web portal is an instance of leading by doing, Pilato said. By encouraging issues that align with the county’s own goals, they can encourage citizens to work with them in parallel. Issues like public service and the use of green building materials are highlighted by the program, said Pilato.

Social engagement can be challenging, Pilato said, but they key is not to give up.

"You can create a Facebook page and only get 100 people on there," he added, "but if you’re putting information on there that folks are really interested in, that number’s going to organically grow and sometimes you’ve got to give it time."

Engaging with the public also means presenting information in many different forms, Pilato said, and one thing many governments may not realize is that the format of the data is often as important as the data itself. The data that government publishes, he said, should be easily understandable and easily manipulated by the citizenry.

 Allegan County, Mich., took first place in the less than 150,000 population category for its involvement in a three-county procurement consortium, 27 online services including an online GIS data library, a centralized social media portal, and a dashboard that includes budget reports and key performance indicators.

The procurement system, which was developed by Kent County, Mich., and which is also used by Ottawa County benefits the participants in several ways, said Robert Sarro, county administrator of Allegan County.

"The more we work together, the more purchasing opportunities there are and the better vendor base we get from having the three counties together," Sarro explained.

The online system uses a reverse auction process that also saves the county time and lowers bids, he said. Procurement can sometimes take up to 90 days, but because their system only deals with non-custom orders, everything is simplified and vendors can try to outbid each other and finish the process quickly.

"For example, if we were hiring an architect for a project, we would want to interview that architect, we would want to do background checks, and this is really a commitment up front. When you post that bid package, you’re essentially committing to award it to the lowest bidder," Sarro said. "It has taken processes which, in the past, could take easily 90 days to do, and we can do it now in three days, sometimes the same day."

Allegan County didn’t develop the procurement system, but identifying those kinds of opportunities is the difference between success and mediocrity. Always looking for opportunities is what has enabled the county IT office to flourish as it has, Sarro said, adding that in Allegan, staff members call it their Continuous Improvement program. It’s why they entered an unofficial partnership with Haworth, a global furniture company with headquarters in the county.

"It’s about sharing information and training with each other. They have shared resources with us in the way of trainers and implementers to come help us build our continuous improvement culture. It’s about just continuing to improve and, as such, it’s really building transparency in the organization so we can really see everything that’s going on," he said. "It’s kind of a unique thing for county government to do, to join up with a corporate partner to see where can we fit the things that are working for them in their corporate world and where we can learn from some of those things, but not necessarily duplicate it, but take that things that fit in a government environment."

Look here for detailed write-ups on each winner.

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