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And some national experts, as well as local officials, worry that the economic downturn could hamper the evolution of municipal government Web sites as powerful tools for residents and the business community.

If you haven't visited your community's Internet outpost lately, you might be surprised at what's available with just a few mouse clicks. For example:

■ Livonia residents can calculate - to the penny - how much the proposed road improvement millage on the Aug. 6 primary ballot will add to their property tax bill.

■ Plymouth residents can download and print the form requesting their home be placed on the Plymouth Police Department's vacation checklist.

■ In Farmington, where the city's Web site is aimed at attracting new business as well as providing services for residents, you can take a video tour of downtown.

■ Those unlucky enough to be caught speeding in Redford Township can pay the fine online with a credit card through a link with the 17th District Court Web site. And if you're still angry about the way the township handles traffic enforcement, you can look up township board minutes going back to 1989 to see if anyone has voiced similar concerns.

Upgrades on the way

Nearly every municipal Web site offers e-mail to elected officials and department heads. Most have links to the local library and school districts. On the business side, several devote pages to current bidding opportunities and RFPs.

Today, Westland residents can fill out about two dozen forms and permit applications, as well as view zoning maps. The city can also post emergency alerts in a prominent spot at the top of its home page.

Plymouth Township's Web site will be completely redone this month, said Supervisor Steve Mann. "We'll have an updated list of current events, assessing information, emergency notification for road repairs, a list-serve for e-mail and a limited amount of interactivity," Mann said.

In Redford Township, residents and businesses should be able to pay their water bills online by spring, said Betsy McRae, the deputy township clerk who administers the Web site. The project is being handled jointly by the township and a subcontractor, Official Payments.com.

More interactivity

Canton Township and Livonia, which already offer a basic level of interactivity, are looking to expand their capabilities in the near future as well.

But the idea of adding as much interactivity - in as many different formats - as possible is echoed

ADDRESSING GOVERNMENT

COMMUNITY	OFFICIAL WEB SITE
Canton Township	www.canton-mi.org
Farmington	ci.farmington.mi.us
Farmington Hills	www.ci.farmington-hills.mi.us
Garden City	cityofgardencity.org
Livonia	ci.livonia.mi.us
Plymouth	ci.plymouth.mi.us
Plymouth Township	plymouthtpw.org
Redford Township	redfordmi.com
Westland	ci.westland.mi.us
Oakland County	www.co.oakland.mi.us
Wayne County	waynecounty.com
State of Michigan	www.state.mi.us

* Unofficial site, established and maintained by Garden City Fire Department

in a report from Gartner Research, a Stamford, Conn.-based research and consulting firm used by local and state governments throughout the U.S. The November 2000 report lists four phases of e-government.

The "Transaction" (third) phase allows users to conduct and complete entire tasks online, such as paying taxes or obtaining dog licenses.

The end goal, or "Transformation Phase," is to "redefine the delivery of government services" by providing a single point of contact for residents online, business, according to the report. Eventually, that could mean a series of custom-tailored Web sites for individual users or even voting over the Internet.

Roadblocks in Michigan

There are major obstacles to even the third level of e-government, according to local Web site administrators. A bill in the state legislature would allow electronic signatures on legal documents, but it remains in committee.

"In Michigan, the only legal signature is still the one that's handwritten on a printed piece of paper," said Tom Alexandris, Plymouth information systems manager.

Web site administrators with other municipal government experience in several communities said they still believe many residents will be reluctant to give out credit card information online or just change the way they've always interacted with their local government. A large number of residents still line up at the treasurer's window to pay property taxes in person, rather than trust the post office, they said.

Meanwhile, declining state shared revenues and other budget cuts could eventually stall municipal Web site development, some officials said, even though most

southeastern Michigan communities spend comparatively little keeping their sites up and running.

Others disagreed, saying local government's presence on the Web had become too valuable to discard during an initial wave of belt-tightening.

"I'm not sure I would call it a thrill," Westland's Veldhuis said. "You need to be able to make a long-term commitment to it though."

"We may not be able to do some of the larger projects over the next couple of years," said Livonia's Putman. "But I think there's a cost savings to look at when you begin offering things online as well."

Minimal costs

Livonia spent \$8,000 to put up its site four years ago, using a start-up company that has since become a leader in the municipal Web site field, Putman said. The cost to maintain and administer it is small enough that it isn't broken out as a separate line item in his department budget, he added.

Redford paid less than \$5,000 last April to put its site up through IBS Solutions, a Dearborn-based Web site developer. The township spends \$400 monthly to maintain the site and pays \$1,100 yearly in hosting fees.

The site is updated weekly and much of the information comes from other township employees, McRae said.

Most Web site administrators and elected officials said they now consider a municipal Web site a basic and necessary service, in the same category as public safety and trash collection.

Said Plymouth Township's Mann: "One of the goals I set out when I ran for supervisor was to make communication with constituents a top priority."

"The Web site is the best way I've seen to accomplish that."

For Hills councilman, technology has its limits

BY PAUL R. PACE

STAFF WRITER

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Farmington Hills Councilman Jerry Ellis isn't ashamed to admit he still likes to do some things the old-fashioned way when it comes to technology.

While each member who serves on the Hills City Council is given a laptop computer to view his or her agenda packet at meetings, Ellis dutifully prints each page out and views them the way city leaders did for 100 years - on good old paper.

He said he's not against using technology, "I just think we shouldn't stop thinking because of it."

And whenever someone tries to schedule a meeting or a lunch with the attorney, he said he has to laugh at how it will take some people five minutes to turn on their hand-held computers, find the date and see if they are free.

He consults a more traditional



Jerry Ellis

calendar.

"I just flip a page over, and I can tell you if I can make it," he said.

"It drives me crazy when people do that," he said of people using the glowing little devices as calendars and phone books. "It takes five minutes to get an answer."

Ellis agrees he belongs to the school of thought that there's no point to trying something just because it's new, if it's not efficient. He said he prints out his council packets so he can see the pages and write notes in the columns.

"I just don't like to read documents off computer screens," he said. "I want to be able to look at it and turn the page."

He said packets can include 100 pages, and he can't look at a screen for that much material. The popular Palm Pilots on the market likely won't fit in Ellis' pocket soon.

"I have a Rolodex," he said, of storing his phone numbers.

But Ellis is not completely anti-technology. Yes, he does use the Internet and has a computer at home and at the office.

He also has a cell phone where all the important phone numbers he wants are already plugged into speed dial.

High tech takes one city down the sewer

BY TEDD SCHNEIDER

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A bigger, brighter Internet presence for their home town may be the one use residents notice on a regular basis. But it's far from the only municipal technology application literally hitting local streets this winter.

In Plymouth, for example, on-board computers allow salt truck drivers to regulate the flow and width of their discharge. The technology has helped the city cut costs and is beneficial for the environment, according to City Manager Paul Sincok.

Plymouth residents and businesses can also order "towel cam." Municipal Services workers snake a mini camera down the storm drain looking for broken pipes and blockages. Customers get an instant color photo printout showing the situation.

"We can catch things before they become a critical problem," Sincok said.

The city picks up half the \$180

cost and bills the user for the balance.

Farmington Hills and Livonia have gone from paper to paperless city council agendas and backup materials.

Farmington Hills made the switch two years ago, supplying notebook computers to council members, who download their weekly packet the Friday before a meeting.

"We used to have two people at the copy machine the entire day on Fridays," said Kathy Dorman, city clerk. "Now those employees can do other, more productive things."

While paper agendas and backup materials are still available on request, Dorman said the electronic agendas have made access more convenient for a greater number of people. The clerk's office routinely e-mails about 70 agendas each week to residents and others.

"Before, you sometimes had a petitioner or two, or someone else with an interest. But that was about it," Dorman said.

There's no fee to receive the agenda via e-mail or conventional mail.

In Livonia, council members have been receiving electronic packets for six months, said Dan Putman, the city's information systems manager.

Putman said it may take a while longer to assess the time or cost savings because the packets are typically far larger than those in Farmington Hills. A recent Livonia packet contained the equivalent of 1,100 printed pages, he said.

Of course in most local communities, the easiest way for residents to have a high-tech encounter is to run afoul of the law. Area police departments are early adopters when it comes to technology applications.

There's radar guns, in-car video cameras, Automated Fingerprint Identification Systems (AFIS), DNA evidence and, when you finally get your day in court, it could be in a video arraignment.

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mother of the bride & special occasion fashion show

Saturday, March 9
10:30 am and 2 pm
In Dresses
Livonia

Nothing makes you feel more beautiful than an elegant gown that's absolutely right for the occasion. Come see the latest designs that are sure to make your day even more memorable. We'll also show you how to complete your look with the perfect jewelry, shoes and handbag.

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