

# E-Mail Subscription Service Informs County Residents

By visiting the Web site of Somerset County, NJ, residents can sign on to receive free e-mail updates about county issues, programs, and states of emergency

By Kristin M. Atwater, Managing Editor

Located in the northwest quadrant of New Jersey, Somerset County flaunts picturesque parks, sparkling waterways, and historic venues. A technologically savvy environment also surrounds the region, filled with computer cables and wireless services to connect the county's 300,000-plus residents.

Because many Somerset County residents have access to computers and the Internet, the county's Board of Chosen Freeholders looked into Web-based ways to enhance communication with constituents. New Jersey is the only state where elected county officials are called "freeholders," a term initially used in colonial times to designate property owners who were entitled to vote and hold public office. Today, five freeholders govern and manage Somerset County.

During the course of 2002, the freeholders decided to

investigate e-mail services that would allow the county to communicate proactively and cost effectively with a large and diverse resident base. Officials wanted a service that would let residents manage e-mail subscriptions across all county government agencies. In addition, the chosen service would not require undue expenses, such as hiring additional county workers or purchasing special equipment to obtain or maintain the service.

A computer consultant for the county pointed officials to GovDelivery, an e-mail notification service offered by GovDocs, Inc. Without requiring additional software, hardware, or extensive programming, the service seamlessly integrates with a public agency's Web site. Users log on to the agency's Web site to create or modify a personalized profile. Within the profile, site visitors specify documents and news categories



of which they would like to receive free e-mail updates. Then, whenever content in requested areas is updated on the agency's Web site, an e-mail is automatically sent to the registered user. The e-mail includes a link to the specific Web page containing the updated information.

To evaluate GovDelivery, county officials invited the company to demonstrate the service at a freeholders' meeting. In addition, the county's Public Information Director, Linda Van Zandt, queried other GovDocs users to assess the e-mail service.

"We interviewed a number of other GovDocs users across the country," says Denise Coyle, Freeholder Director. "In addition to asking about their experiences with GovDelivery, we asked if they had researched other firms. None had found any company that provided the same type of software."

Because the service could not readily be provided by other firms, the procurement was classified as an Extraordinary Unspecifiable Service (EUS). Under New Jersey's Local Public Contracts Law, an EUS is exempt from bidding requirements, and a contract can be awarded to a sole provider.

According to Mary Lou Stanton, Purchasing Agent for Somerset County, "pursuant to Local Public Contracts Law, Extraordinary Unspecifiable Services mean services which are specialized and qualitative in nature, requiring expertise, extensive training, and proven reputation in the field of endeavor." Although county purchasers were not directly involved in procuring the e-mail service, Stanton had to certify that GovDelivery was indeed an EUS.

The county then awarded GovDocs a one-year, renewable contract to implement and oversee GovDelivery. Price tag for the service was a \$21,000 set-up fee, followed by \$2,100 a month for all ongoing technical support, training, and troubleshooting by GovDocs. Funds to implement the service are allotted from the County Administrator's Office budget.

#### Web Registration to E-Mail Notification

Since Somerset County launched GovDelivery in December 2002, results have been impressive.

"GovDelivery was a hit for Somerset County from day one," Director Coyle says. "At the end of our first year, we had 3,504 subscribers, a record among GovDocs' clients. Our subscriber list has continued to grow to 4,225 as of June 1, 2004."

When residents visit the main Somerset County Web site, they can sign up to receive specific e-mail updates. To date, choices include 15 general categories, such as education and recreation, employment, events, health and safety, law enforcement, meetings, and senior programs. In April 2004, the county added wireless text messaging for emergency and weather alerts, road closings, construction projects, and foreclosure sales.

In addition, the county's e-mail service offers 54 separate categories that provide a gateway to specific



*The 2004 Somerset County Board of Chosen Freeholders includes (seated, left to right) Director Denise Coyle, Ken Scherer, Robert Zaborowski, (standing, left to right) Peter S. Palmer, and Deputy Director Rick Fontana.*

documents. Overall, the top item accessed is "What's New in Somerset County," and the county reports more than 6,000 "hits" in this category. Close behind are Recycling Schedules and Library Press Releases.

"In our use of GovDelivery, we characterize every "click-through" as a "hit,"" Director Coyle explains. "What this means is that a resident receives an e-mail from the county telling him or her that a topic of specific interest has been updated, and the resident uses a link within the e-mail to visit the new information on our Web site. Our click-through rate is over 20 percent, which means that one in five of the 25,000-plus e-mails we send each month generates a visit directly back to our Web site."

Besides meeting county goals of increasing traffic to its Web site, the direct e-mail links please site visitors by expediting access to desired, updated information.

The county uses its in-house staff to make changes and additions to the GovDelivery program. Ten county employees currently update and revise posted documents from their own departments. To ensure the privacy of subscribers, all information gathered from the e-mail list is kept strictly confidential by the county.

A big benefit of GovDelivery is its ability to extend beyond county lines. "Anyone, anywhere with access to the Internet and e-mail may sign up to receive free e-mail updates on any of our posted documents, including bidding notices," Director Coyle says. "We have [also] promoted the GovDelivery service internally as a way for employees to keep informed of what other departments are doing." □



#### PRO PATHWAYS

—GovDocs, Inc., a software company based in St. Paul, MN, offers GovDelivery e-mail subscription services, as well as electronic formats of labor-law posters and human-resources documents. For more information, call 866-276-5583 or visit: [www.govdocs.com](http://www.govdocs.com).

—Somerset County, NJ, includes registration information for GovDelivery e-mail notification service on its Web site. Visit: [www.co.somerset.nj.us](http://www.co.somerset.nj.us).