Name of Local Government: CITY OF KELOWNA

Project Title: Reporting Problems On The Go – A Unique Approach

www.kelowna.ca/servicerequests

Project Summary

The Service Request (SR) system was created by the City of Kelowna in 2000 as a business application used to manage requests for service and complaints from the public. Requests are received by telephone, email, at the front counter, or submitted on-line by the requester. Over 20,000 requests for service are received from the public each year and the system is accessed by over 700 staff on a weekly basis.

In January 2013 the City successfully took the in-house service request system mobile and citizens now report problems “On the Go” from their mobile devices (smartphones and tablets). The mobile project was completed in 4 months by a cross departmental team without any third party resourcing or additional costs outside of staff time. It was built using HTML 5, JavaScript and the Google Maps API. It runs on any Apple iOS, Android or BlackBerry device with a modern HTML5 compliant browser.

Project Analysis

Please answer the question in 300 words or less in 11 pt Arial font (our judges value directness and brevity). If you experience difficulty answering a particular question, consider the aspects of your program that may relate to the question and show us how they are linked. Remember to include measurable results whenever possible.

1. SERVICES
   How has the implementation of this program/project improved services in your community?

Mobile service requests have improved the public’s accessibility to municipal staff in solving problems in the community. The mobile application enables citizens to use their mobile devices to report problems as they are experiencing them. The requests are routed directly via the system to the City department responsible. For example, if someone spots a problem while out enjoying Knox Mountain Park they can use their mobile device, snap a picture, and send the information including the GPS location coordinates to the City Parks’ department. This provides citizens with a 24/7 service channel versus relying on calling, or submitting an online service request when they get back home.

The City of Kelowna has spent a considerable amount of time improving online options for citizens to submit requests and report problems but prior to the 2013 launch of mobile service
requests there was no “on the go” reporting options for the public as they came across a problem in the community. To create a mobile version of submitting service requests to the City is a natural evolution that matches the busy lives of Kelowna citizens who are always active and 

On the Go.

In the first 6 months of deploying the mobile option 5% of public service requests are already being automatically handled through the mobile web application. This has a direct impact on decreasing our intake delays and allows us to respond faster to address each request. If this trend continues by the end of year one the City will have successfully received 1000 mobile requests for service automatically to 700 staff in 35+ departments without requiring any administration to manage the intake of those service requests.

2. EFFECTIVENESS
How is the program/project more efficient and/or effective than it was before?

Prior to mobile service requests a citizen wanting to report a problem while on the go could not do so outside of calling the City switchboard. The closest electronic option available was to use the online reporting option via a desktop computer. Typically the public would submit their online service requests at the end of their work day from home when most of our civic service counters and operators are closed. Detailed photo information was not being sent to staff even though it was an available option as it was time consuming to use a camera to take a picture of the problem and then upload it to a computer for submission with your request. The mobile option is more effective and efficient in submitting requests as follows:

✓ It’s easy to submit a photo by attaching it directly in the submission.
✓ The location can be specified using the GPS settings on a mobile device (Most mobile device users refer to this as using “My Location”).
✓ Reducing inspection visits. An increase in the use of picture attachments when submitting requests is reducing the need to dispatch staff to investigate. The first response team can deal directly with the issue and have the needed tools and machinery with them as a result of reviewing the submitted photo.
✓ Staff receive mobile requests quicker throughout the day versus getting online service requests after hours. This is allowing faster response times to address problems.
  o E.g. Our tree maintenance crew and graffiti abatement crew are both equipped with tablets to review and close service requests in the field.
✓ Maintenance crews are encouraged to use mobile service requests from their mobile devices while they are out attending to daily duties rather than forwarding problems via radio to administration staff to process in the SR System.

3. ECONOMIC IMPACT
How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?

✓ The mobile web application is very cost effective as it is supported on multiple operating platforms and does not favor one particular device type: Apple, Blackberry or Android. Other municipalities are choosing to contract out to build native apps for these devices with licensing costs and app store approval processes for each company to maintain. Kelowna chose to stay in-house and leverage our staff expertise in programming using HTML 5. This provides us with direct control over the application using our website as its base for public access versus an app store. This due diligence has saved the
municipality a conservative $30,000 alone just in the funds required to launch the project.

✓ The cost of engaging with a customer face-to-face, or even over the phone, is many times the cost of receiving an online or mobile request for service. Digital self-service is a proven cost effective alternative in the delivery of municipal services, particularly the reporting of service requests. By building on a digital approach using a mobile web application it has allowed the City of Kelowna as a mid-sized community to provide service supports to citizens without the overhead costs. We believe it is a fiscally prudent alternative that has not sacrificed service delivery, and focuses on providing the highest and best value for our taxpayers’ dollars.

4. ACCOUNTABILITY
   How has this program/project improved upon accountability to the community’s citizens?

Accountability was a key deliverable in the development of a mobile service requests application being offered to the public. All citizens who enter a mobile service request have the ability to track the progress of their own request using a mobile device. The tracking feature provides contact information about the staff team responsible if follow-up is required by the requestor. The tracking feature displays a mandatory closing comment that must be entered by the staff member who is assigned the service request before they can close off a completed request. This serves to ensure that the requestor is acknowledged and that we share the actions taken with them.

In addition the assigned staff member can also choose to enhance what the requestor sees in the tracking feature by adding optional progress updates. Rather than playing phone tag or email tag staff can make requestors aware of the tracking feature in the mobile system and commit to updating service requests with any progress made. The requestor is then given the freedom to go and check the status of their issue when it’s convenient for them to do so.

5. AWARENESS
   How has this program/project created more awareness in the community about local government actions?

The community coverage of mobile service request was well received with media outlets featuring the launch of the new problem reporting tool for Kelowna citizens. Six months after the launch the City continues to promote the use of mobile service requests in our daily interaction with citizens whether it is over the counter with posters, business cards and tent cards, via our website, or through social media. The mobility of the tool combined with the built in ability for staff to be proactive in handling service requests has enhanced our image as a responsive local government. Our approach is that we are striving to increase citizen engagement while working one request at a time to make our community the best it can be. A top five list of today’s problem types is displayed every time you access the application. This serves to give the public a quick awareness of the top issues of the day that our staff is working on and helps with general awareness of issues such as graffiti and potholes which are often in the top 5.

A notice alert is being added to the system that will advise requestors of heavy request volume on any one issue. This will serve to let public know we are addressing the problem and there is no need to submit another related service request. We foresee frequent use of this issues alert
for such nonemergency issues as heavy snow removal in a specific neighbourhood. It will serve to alert everyone who accesses the service request system that we are in their area and moving quickly to address the situation.

6. TEAMWORK
Tell us about the teamwork involved in making this project possible.

Mobile service requests are a major milestone in customer service for the City of Kelowna and are the result of a cross departmental team effort. Representatives from the following departments were brought together to complete this project in a rapid 4 month period:

- Information Services built a great application.
- Community and Media Relations provided valuable input on messaging and branding the application, as well as several enhancements to the Kelowna.ca home page in order to promote service requests going mobile.
- Strategic Initiatives facilitated the system setup and configuration and worked with key users in each department to configure the system to meet departmental needs and the needs of their customers.

The Project Team took additional measures to pilot launch the mobile application using our 700+ staff as the test group. A contest entry was created for staff to win gift certificates to our corporate store if they submitted a test service request with a photo on their own mobile device telling us what they thought of the new application. The staff focus group testing was a huge success as we even had staff on holidays that took time to test the application and submit a photo attachment of their family having fun. Now that’s staff engagement! This provided great feedback as follows:

- It facilitated many improvements prior to the public launch of mobile service requests that made the application more user friendly.
- Staff had experience with the application as a result of the staff testing. They were knowledgeable and prepared before the public launch. They became natural ambassadors in promoting the use of mobile service requests to the public.
- The Project Team was able to pinpoint what devices the application was working well on and which ones had challenges loading up a picture of the problem or using the mapping (GPS) feature. These problems were solved prior to the public launch as a result.

7. INNOVATION
What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

The Project Team developed a mobile web application so it is cost efficient and sustainable in the long term due to the difficulty in predicting future device popularity. The mobile web application is very cost effective as it does not favor one particular mobile platform or device. Smartphones and other mobile devices (tablets) will continue to evolve. It was important that the Project Team not lock the municipality into any solutions that may have a limited shelf life.

- At kelowna.ca/mobileSR users are always on the latest code base, so we don’t have to rely on the user themselves updating the app online.
There are no app store approval processes to go through, such as for Apple App Store, or Google Play store. You simply access the web based mobile application from the City's website www.Kelowna.ca

While native applications and contracting out are often suitable or desirable, The City of Kelowna chose internal development using a mobile web approach. This has served to set the foundation for future development of other applications in-house as we gain knowledge and expertise and invest in training our staff. The second in-house mobile application has already been created using the same programming techniques that were used to develop the mobile service request application. The Kelowna International Airport became the most recent web based mobile application launched two months ago. It provides mobile arrival, departure and parking information to those visiting the airport.

We like to say “It just happens auto-magically” - Our Information Services department continues to take a service request system that was developed internally over a decade ago and consistently make improvements to it and have it excel in delivering great customer service today. To provide the ability for the public to submit mobile service requests, IS was able to use a mobile web approach and achieve simple integration with an existing 13 year old system. To the user who does not see the programming behind the scenes it looks and feels like a polished application you would download from Google Play or the Apple App Store.

8. SUSTAINABILITY
What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative? (e.g. staff time, resources, financial)

The Project Team developed a mobile web application so it is cost efficient and sustainable in the long term as it is difficult to predict future device popularity. Smartphones and other mobile devices (tablets) will continue to evolve. It was important for the City of Kelowna not to lock into any solutions that may have a limited shelf life.

The City of Kelowna can leverage this development effort for future mobile web applications ("apps") (Airport, Parks, Heritage Tour, etc). The second mobile web application has already been produced for Kelowna (YLW) Airport: ylw.kelowna.ca/mobile. A third application, a Parks inspection extranet for contractor inspectors, is complete and in use as programming time is being reduced with each web application produced. Sustainable measures for mobile service requests include:

- User always on latest code base as they access it through the City website; we don't have to rely on user updating the app themselves as they do with a native downloaded app.
- No app store approval process to go through, such as for Apple App Store, or Google Play store.
9. BEST PRACTICES
What sets this program/project apart as a winning idea? Why should it be considered a best practice, in comparison to other similar programs?

Key features of the mobile web application that make it a best practice include:

- It was built completely in-house using HTML 5 and runs on any device on any platform with an HTML 5 compliant browser including Apple, Android and Blackberry devices.
  - Other municipalities may prefer to contract out to build native apps for these devices but face licensing costs and app store approval processes to maintain.

- The use of a mobile device’s camera to include a photo of the problem.

- The use of a mobile device’s GPS to provide location coordinates.

- The new mobile application integrates seamlessly with the existing SR system that has been in place for 13 years. The City of Kelowna consistently continues to interface a customized service request system that was developed internally over a decade ago and improve on it to make it modern and publicly accessible. In order to provide the ability for the public to submit mobile service requests, we were able to use a mobile web approach and achieve simple integration with an existing 13 year old system. This shows the adaptability and solid framework that has been built directly into the system.

- The Service Request System is the backbone to interacting with the public as we work to manage municipal problems everyday in Kelowna. Our track record as civic servants who provide excellent customer service relies in large part on our system being the best it can be in managing service requests.

10. TRANSFERABILITY
How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?

The approach taken is transferrable and desirable for municipalities with limited resources or without the programming expertise who wish to create a fiscally responsible mobile application for citizens and visitors to report problems without creating native applications specific to platforms such as Android, Blackberry, Window Phone or Apple iOS.

The City of Kelowna is a strong supporter of municipalities sharing best practices and learning from each other so all our communities can continue to grow and provide the best value for service delivery using taxpayer dollars. Examples of where we have taken the opportunity to share our experiences include:

- We are sharing at a workshop during the upcoming Municipal Information Systems Association of B.C. (MISA BC) conference this September in Whistler.

- We have shared our experiences in detail with communities who call us asking how we have developed mobile service requests. This includes most recently connecting representatives from the City of Calgary and the town of Langford with those directly responsible for the building of the application in our Information Services department.
11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING
What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?

It was very challenging for our project team not to get caught up in the hype of delivering the latest and greatest application on the newest Smartphone or tablet. Several for profit companies are out aggressively marketing to municipalities to manage service requests including the popular SeeClickFix and Fix My Street applications that can be downloaded on your mobile device from app stores. Municipal Information Network was showcasing in their daily e-newsletter emerging Canadian cities going mobile with an application that is linked to Apple or Google stores to download. City of Kelowna Councillors were using the latest IPhone or Blackberry and talking about an app for the City.

We would encourage project teams to focus on a solution that integrates well with existing systems and that works for the municipality in the long run instead of being tied in to the latest gadgets. Take into serious consideration solutions that are one code base as this is cost efficient and sustainable in the long term given it is difficult to predict future device popularity. In following this approach some benefits we have experienced are as follows:

✓ We know users are always on the latest code base, we don’t have to rely on user updating their “apps”.
✓ We do not have app store approval processes to go through, such as for Apple App Store, or Google Play store.
✓ We do not face monetization or ads commercializing the system – we control the packaging and marketing of the tool to our needs. We are not secondary in focus to an app store that needs to focus on selling banner advertising.
✓ The core of the program is identical to our existing online version so we are able to leverage that.

12. TELL US MORE
Please share any other information you think may help us better understand your submission.

The mobile service request application has truly opened a door to increased civic engagement for all staff at the City of Kelowna. So often we think of engaging with citizens on a group level via City Council chambers, an open house or on the City’s website. In introducing mobile service requests staff now have the ability to communicate with the public one on one on issues that matter to them while they are out leading their busy lives. We will continue to enhance the features of the system to empower staff to embrace our City’s strong service delivery culture and strive to deliver exceptional customer service to the public. These improvements have made such a high level of service possible for each staff member to communicate and engage with citizens daily – one on one – with each request that is completed.

The applications that can be produce internally using HTML 5 without facing ongoing maintenance costs and licensing fees are endless, responsive and practical. Consider the practicality of a mobile application accessed on your Smartphone as you walk through
Kelowna’s municipal cemetery. We could easily connect out of town visitors with burial plots of loved ones during a Sunday afternoon when our cemetery office is closed.

The City of Kelowna will continue to improve in building in-house web based applications and enhancing the delivery of our services to citizens while ensuring we are providing the best value for taxpayers’ dollars.