

RENO, NEVADA

Reno, Nevada, Improves Efficiency while Complying with Stringent Open Meeting Law Requirements

The City of Reno, known as “The Biggest Little City in the World,” is located just east of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in Northwestern Nevada. The City and the surrounding area of Truckee Meadows provide residents and visitors with a wide range of indoor and outdoor recreational activities, including biking, camping, hunting, fishing and mountain climbing, all within a 50-mile radius of the metropolitan business center.

ADAMANT ABOUT TRANSPARENCY

The Reno City Council is elected to make policy decisions for Reno City government. The City Council meets regularly to set priorities, approve the budget and address issues facing the community. These meetings are guided by incredibly stringent open meeting law requirements, which easily surpass requirements of neighboring jurisdictions and other states. Staff must post the agenda, along with all supporting materials, on their website at least three days prior to a meeting. Additionally, if any documents are presented during a Council meeting to help make a decision, it must be uploaded within 24 hours after the meeting.

Jaime Schroeder has been with the City of Reno since 1995. As a Senior Management Analyst, agenda management became a huge part of her job for the Office of the City Manager in early 2012. She is responsible for coordination of all staff reports, supporting materials and the agendas for the Reno City Council and the Reno Redevelopment Agency Board. Back then, the agency was using a government shareware product. “We realized we had quickly outgrown that system,” recalls Jaime. The City’s communications and technology department conducted a thorough search of alternatives and narrowed the list down to three contenders.

“We interviewed each vendor and participated in webinar-based demonstrations, and we quickly eliminated the low-end solution,” says Jaime. “When we looked at pricing, we thought one had too many ‘bells and whistles,’ features that we knew we wouldn’t use. We looked at Accela Legislative Management and realized it was the full package. It was something we felt we could implement and get comfortable with quickly.”



Population
233,294

Challenge
Outgrew legacy system and needed to remain compliant with open meeting law requirements

Solution
Accela Legislative Management

Results
Simplified meeting management and follow-up

Integrated video management with time-stamp features

Enhanced city image through transparency and online citizen engagement

Saved time and money

Increased transparency with streamlined meeting management

AN ONGOING PARTNERSHIP

One of the things Jaime appreciates about Accela is that “they believe in their product so much, you don’t have to sign on for a year. With Accela, we didn’t feel they were trying to get the most money they could from the agency. We felt they truly were a company that wanted to work with us and were understanding of all the different requirements we had.”

Accela Product Consultant Mike Lyons recalls some of the unique challenges that the City of Reno faced. “It was very important for them to maintain the current look and feel of their documentation, so we worked with them to ensure it remained the same. Reno is a big proponent of open government and the transparency that entails – which means they are very serious about their open meeting law requirements.”

Approximately 100 agency users who create staff reports and give presentations to the Council would use the system. Accela staff provided a series of webinars, templates and training sessions, first for power users and then for everyone else. According to Jaime, “The Accela trainer was very good with folks hesitant to use technology. Within six months, the people who didn’t want to change were fully on board, love

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Jaime Schroeder, MBA

Senior Management Analyst, Office of the City Manager

the search feature and think it’s great that we can duplicate reports and have all this data in the new system.”

The focus on customer service didn’t end once the City went live in August 2012. “Technical support was fantastic during the implementation phase, and the crew is still fantastic two years later.”

HOW ACCELA EMPOWERS RENO

City Council meetings are on average four to six hours long, and Council members run two meetings in the same room on the same day – one for City Council and one for the Redevelopment Agency Board, with many of the same people participating in both meetings. The Council meeting starts first, and after a quick recess the Redevelopment meeting kicks off followed by the second part of the Council meeting. Nevada’s open meeting law requires jurisdictions to post two separate agendas. This presented a unique challenge to keep the two meetings separate, yet record and stream them to the Internet at the same time. The team at Accela came up with a unique solution to manage both meetings by using two video encoders side by side.

In the past, citizens had to fast forward and rewind through an entire meeting online in order to find what they were looking for. “The great thing about this product and why we chose it is that the video of each meeting is integrated with the meeting documents and it also has time-stamp features, making it easy for staff and citizens to quickly find what they are interested in. I love that transparency. It just makes it so much easier.”

Once staff was comfortable with the new solution and members of the Council were up and running, Jaime also uncovered an opportunity to help the Planning Commission improve its meeting management processes. Each planner created staff reports in Microsoft Word, and provided hard copies of maps, photos and supporting materials. A secretary would then type up an agenda based on each staff report, print out all of the documents and take them to a local office supply store to have them scanned into PDF format – losing the optical character recognition (OCR) that makes a file searchable or recordable

and significantly increasing the file size. A five-page Planning Commission staff report that has been printed and scanned with color photos could go from a small file to a very large one. Accela Legislative Management keeps the file sizes small, which is critical for transparency – especially for citizens who don’t have high-speed Internet or who access the City’s website on a mobile device using cellular data instead of a Wi-Fi connection. After demonstrating the benefits of Accela Legislative Management, including how quick and easy it is to find something with a simple search, Jaime worked with the Community Development department to implement the solution for the City’s Planning Commission.

THE BOTTOM LINE

What staff members appreciate the most is the ability to quickly search for things themselves instead of having to initially rely on someone from the Clerk’s Office to look through a database that isn’t available to all staff members. Once a document is posted online, staff and citizens alike can access it through a meeting portal 24/7. When citizens call requesting a Council or staff report, employees can simply direct them to the portal, where they can click on the meeting date, see the agenda and then click on the item that interests them. When the media requests information, the Communications department can send links to staff reports online, saving time, paper and money and helping to ensure accurate media coverage.



With Accela, Reno extends city meetings beyond City Hall by publishing agendas, minutes and video content online.



Proofreading staff reports is much easier now that they are in a consistent and professional format. If Jaime needs to make an update, she can duplicate a report that has already been approved, which saves time during the approval process. "Making sure all questions are answered in a consistent format is much easier. Even making a small change a year later is simple – staff can just duplicate an older staff report and make the change. Everyone has already signed off on the report and there are no errors to correct, so only the change has to be approved. There are still bureaucratic layers getting departmental reviews, but because they know it was in the system previously and has all the components required, approvals take a lot less time."

In the future, the City of Reno is looking forward to using the electronic voting feature available within Accela Digital Boardroom that shows meeting participants' votes on a screen during the meeting in real time. The clerks are looking forward to being able to see who made a motion and who made the second without having to go back through the entire video.

Learn more

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About Accela

Accela provides civic engagement solutions for government. Accela's Civic Platform, which includes open APIs and mobile apps, enables and improves core processes for city, county, state and federal governments. Accela's solutions uniquely address the diverse needs of their constituents by making publicly available information more accessible. The Accela Civic Platform includes solutions for land management, asset management, licensing and case management, legislative management and more. With more than 1,000 customers worldwide, Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with offices in San Francisco, New York, Melbourne and Dubai. For more information, visit www.accela.com.