



Case Study: Cedar Hill

Smart Integration Strategy Means Online Payment Options for Citizens of Cedar Hill

Background

Located approximately 16 miles from the heart of downtown Dallas, the City of Cedar Hill launched online bill payment and online recreation program registration for the first time to benefit its more than 43,000 residents.

Challenge

With disparate systems throughout multiple departments, the city was challenged with finding a cost-efficient way to simplify and standardize payment collections and implement a solution that allowed existing business applications to 'talk' to the city's financial software. For its cash management procedures, the city previously relied on multiple redundancies for accuracy and security. Individual departments manually counted cash and checks collected each day and dropped them in a bank bag. The bags were then hand-carried to the Utility Billing Department and recounted for deposit purposes. After deposit forms were prepared to incorporate all departments' collections, the bags and forms were transferred over to the Finance Department, where finance staff was tasked with tracking and reconciling every payment across all departments and manually re-entering deposit amounts into its finance software.

"We needed an integrated, automated approach for improved cash management procedures that would alleviate security issues and save staff members a significant amount of time counting and verifying deposits," explained Gordon. Only with standardized payment collection processes in place and the right technology solutions could the city achieve its vision of offering online services to citizens.

Solution

The city implemented Active Network, Government's Payment Manager software, a cashiering and payment management solution, in mid-2005 in its Library, Animal Shelter, Parks & Recreation, Planning & Zoning, Code Enforcement, Police and Fire departments. "We selected [Active Network, Government's] software both for its data integration capabilities with existing business applications and for its cashiering system that provided intuitive screens, a seamless interface to the city's finance software and the flexibility to meet the city's growing needs," said Gordon.

Customer at a Glance

Customer: City of Cedar Hill, TX
Solution: Payment Management
URL: www.cedarhilltxgov.org

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Experiencing success with the cashiering systems through faster transactions, increased access to customer account information, and more efficient payment collection processes, the city looked to its next steps.

In May 2006, the City of Cedar Hill reached out to Active Network once again, this time to launch an e-government project. The city was ready to expand the scope of its technology project and take its cash management procedures to a whole new level by accepting credit card payments and offering citizens the convenience of online services, beginning with utility billing payments and recreation program registrations.

Implementation

By July 2006, the city implemented two additional cashiering systems from Active in its Utility Billing and Public Works departments. "We could've very easily stuck with the cashiering system built into the utility billing software, but it didn't fulfill our long-range goals for credit card processing and integration with the rest of the city's departments like Active Network's software," said Gordon. "Our vision was clear and we made every software decision with our end goals in mind."

For the city's Utility Billing Department, a seamless transition to the new cashiering system was an absolute necessity. Serving as many as 4,000 citizens each week with a staff of only 12 and tasked with handling the city's highest customer service demands, Gordon carefully approached this implementation. "We identified our utility billing staff's needs and challenged Active to create an easy account look-up system for staff to scan a bill, enter an address, or search by the customer's name to find account information. Active's developers came right back to us with an intuitive, interactive and elegant solution."

Ease of use and fast transactions were top priorities for the Public Works Department as well. The department relies solely on Amy Pingel, Administrative Secretary, to manage front counter transactions for water, sewer and drainage activities. "We used to hand-write reports at the end of the day, which took my time away from fulfilling other departmental duties. With Active's cashiering systems in place, our transactions are much quicker and easier to process and require less of my time to manage."

By August 2006, the city began accepting credit cards across all departments for the first time and citizens responded, taking advantage of the new payment option almost immediately. With the Utility Billing Department seamlessly processing transactions and the Parks & Recreation Department starting on its second year using the cashiering system, both departments had the payment processes in place to debut Internet payment options. By September 2006, the City of Cedar Hill became the first city to use Active's software technology to offer citizens online options for utility billing payments and recreation program registrations.

Results

Saving both staff time and administrative costs, the City of Cedar Hill successfully saw its e-government vision come to life. Offering the large community of Cedar Hill access to membership, facility reservation and activity registration services year-round, Carolyn Skeels, Recreation Supervisor for the city, notes the advantages of online registration and payment services. "Previously, all of our

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activity registrations were handled over-the-counter and only during business hours. With thousands of participants seeking to register for any of our 50+ programs, the lines to sign up were often long and inconvenient. With online registration, our citizens have far better access to our services and we’re able to cut down on the traffic moving through our offices.”

The efficiencies and cost savings Active’s software has created are apparent in the Finance Department as well. According to Chuck Fox, Accounting Manager for the city, “I’m now operating efficiently with a staff of six full-time employees. Our city’s departments have been empowered with tools to access customer account information and pull accurate reports when needed, lessening the demand on finance staff to manage these duties in addition to our daily accounting responsibilities.”

Future

According to Gordon, the most satisfying part of it all is that this project is “just the tip of the iceberg.” He anticipates making more items available online to continue supporting citizens and departments through convenient, around-the-clock services.

Gordon notes that Cedar Hill made several strategic moves over the last year, from mapping out the vision, purchasing technology solutions in phases, and identifying each department’s needs to carefully selecting software applications that aligned with the overall e-government initiative and working closely with one key integrator to continue moving the project forward.

“By doing our homework and searching until we found the right integration solution for the whole city, we avoided a piece-meal approach and all of the battles that inherently come with it. Our integration solution is designed to grow with our city. We made it a point to select Active Network as our integrator due to its experience in the industry, customer service support and ability to drive our vision. Now, more than ever, our citizens are experiencing the first-hand benefits of the city’s smart integration plan through the convenience of online services.”