

STRATEGIES



City of Sydney Council information manager Greg Naimo says lodging development applications online is the Holy Grail.

Photo: JIM RICE

Council grapples with complexity

City of Sydney Council must hone online tools that serve its many and diverse needs, says **Emma Connors.**

City of Sydney Council's push into web services has a distinctly spatial element, according to Greg Naimo who is in charge of information management.

Any Sydney City Council ratepayer keen to find out just how much precious inner-city sunlight will be blocked by his or her neighbour's planned extension now just has to go online.

The council requires digital copies of all plans and supporting documentation so they can be displayed on the internet. Those wishing to lodge documents can either bring their own electronic copy or have the council scan their originals.

That requirement saves other interested residents a trip to a council office to inspect the plans, while also giving some idea of the council's priorities.

"Many of the projects that are going ahead in the next 12 months are focused on online service delivery. We want to give people an alternative to coming in or phoning," says Naimo,

who runs the council's multifaceted information management department.

Recent investments in land, property and finance systems have delivered a platform for the web service push, Naimo says.

"Geac Pathway is our core business and management system: it keeps track [of]... anything related to land and property. We are using that product's web interface to build links to geographical information services.

"There is a spatial component to a lot of what we do. It's all about land and property and managing assets that include trees, benches, street furniture."

His team uses the geographical information services (GIS) to present information on these assets to internal business users, and to show customers how various objects interact.

"That's why our view of online services has a GIS flavour," he says. "It's much more than a series of maps, because it is tied into various other systems. When people log on to check a development application, for

example, we also want them to find information on events that are relevant to their particular location."

But for the time being at least, would-be renovators will still have to make the trek to lodge both paper and electronic documents in person at council offices.

"Lodging development applications online is the Holy Grail. But enabling people to sit with all their documentation and lodge it using their home PC is not a trivial exercise."

Of course there are degrees of difficulty. If someone wants to put up a gazebo, that could probably be electronically communicated relatively simply. But when it comes to a towering office block or a sprawling residential development, it isn't so straightforward.

In May 2003 parts of the South Sydney and Leichhardt local government areas were shifted to the City of Sydney. Then the former City of Sydney and South Sydney councils were sacked and amalgamated, and spent a short time under administrators.

At the election in March last year, the independents and Greens

unseated the Labor majority and installed high-profile independent MP Clover Moore as Lord Mayor.

The extension of the council to include various inner-city residential suburbs meant its rateable properties doubled and the variety of those properties increased.

"Now we have inherited the new areas, we have a mix of the big end of town, who might walk in with a 35-storey hotel refurbishment, to someone coming in and asking how they go about putting up a new shed in their backyard," Naimo says. "It is hard to find a computing solution that can cater for all of those situations."

The council also has to juggle the needs of the 150,000 people who live in the local government area with those of the 348,000 workers who flock in each day and the 4 million tourists who visit each year.

Naimo's department itself also faces a juggling act: besides computing staff, the division is home to document management specialists, including both the City of Sydney historian and a curator who manages a collection of objects that date back to the 1800s.

Explaining the workings of a department that's responsible for both back-office computing systems and for advice on suitable gifts for visiting dignitaries often takes some doing, particularly as the operations of the council at large are similarly diverse, Naimo says.

"We often find we have to run through the gamut of council operations, from child-care centres to meals on wheels, property management and political interaction with the state government," he says.

"Much of what we do is asset based. Right now we're in the midst of deploying an asset management system to handle the couple of billion dollars worth of assets owned by the city, which include footpaths, curbs, all that boring stuff. We have to make sure it's replaced and refurbished at the right time."

Work begins on online Sydney dictionary

Work has begun on a dictionary of Sydney that will be similar to Wikipedia, the famous online encyclopedia.

The project is a joint effort of the City of Sydney, the University of Sydney, the State Library of NSW and the State Records Authority of NSW.

Earlier this year the Australian Research Council awarded a \$916,000 grant to the ambitious project that will include entries on people, places and things found in the Sydney metropolitan area from prehistory to the present.

Hundreds of historians, academics and institutions are expected to contribute entries which will hopefully be used by tourists, Sydneysiders and educational institutions.

"This work will have many participants and is likely to go on for many years," said Greg Naimo, who is in charge of information management at City of Sydney Council.

"It will be web-based but could also spin off various hard and soft-copy publications."

The dictionary will allow people to search for specific information and browse through Sydney's history and recent events. It will include primary sources, bibliography material and multimedia resources such as images, maps, databases and movies.

The use of web technology means there is no limit to the size of the dictionary. The English version of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia that began in 2001,

boasts more than 700,000 items.

But unlike Wikipedia, contributions to the Dictionary of Sydney will be by invitation only - although members of the public will be able to submit suggestions.

A project newsletter emphasised the difference between the Dictionary of Sydney and Wikipedia: "Some people have assumed that we are embarking on a kind of Wikipedia for Sydney, where any contribution is accepted," the newsletter said. "This is a long way from our aim of producing a site that is carefully researched and trusted by its users. Every entry in the Dictionary of Sydney will go through an editing process and the authorship of each article will be acknowledged on the site."

Emma Connors