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Online Park Enrollment

by Mark Tomb

The Internet is changing the way citizens in the City of Lawrence are enrolling for parks and recreation programs. In August 2003, the City launched an online enrollment program as part of its e-Gov initiative to provide customer-friendly and operating efficiencies to online city services.

Online enrollment will allow citizens to enroll from the convenience of their home computer. A trip to one of the department's recreation centers during normal hours of operation will no longer be necessary.

"I believe online enrollment will make it convenient for people to register for parks and recreation programs on their time schedule," Ernie Shaw, Recreation and Operations Superintendent, Lawrence Parks and Recreation Department (LPRD) said. "No matter if it's early in the morning or late at night, they will be able to enroll in the programs they want."

Program Basics

The program provides a useful option for city residents while at the same time freeing up departmental resources to deal with more complex customer service situations.

Online parks and recreation enrollment integrates the catalog of course offerings with the ability to enroll in a course and provide payment through a secure credit card transaction.

Tim Laurent, Recreation Facilities Supervisor, LPRD, has overseen the development of the online registration process and sees it as a great way for people to enroll.

"The system we are using is very user friendly," Laurent said. "It allows you to search courses by the type of activity, the age of participants, and by the time of day you want to take classes."

"So, if you have a four year old that wants to do an arts and crafts activity between 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., you'll be able to pull all the classes that fit that criteria and then select the course or

courses you want to enroll in," Laurent said.

For those unsure of how to enroll online, the City has created a detailed help page that can be found right on the enrollment website.

"We wanted to make the enrollment process as easy as possible. We know that if people have a bad experience with a website and become frustrated, then the project would not be successful" said Roger Steinbrock, Marketing Supervisor, LPRD.

The City wanted this program to be an extension of the high level of customer service currently provided to Lawrence residents.

The program is currently being used for the winter and spring enrollment periods. The final numbers for the fall, as well as current enrollment figures, show roughly one-third of all registrations are being conducted online.

The early success of the program has been a result of an extensive educational campaign conducted by LPRD. The City began its efforts at the annual Fourth of July parade. The theme of the project launch "celebrate your freedom, enroll when you want" was especially well received.

The program was operational a month later when the fall catalog was distributed in the *Lawrence Journal-World* newspaper on Sunday, August 3, 2003.

Eighty-three people enrolled that Sunday from the convenience of their homes, and the first week found 264 people registered online out of a total of 747 overall registrations (accounting for over 35% of registrations).

The City had registrations for all types of courses, from youth programs to classes designed primarily for seniors.

The City should also be able to reduce the time support staff spends in dealing

with routine enrollments. In fact, the City estimates that over 22 hours were saved during the first week when you assume an average of 3-5 minutes are spent with each citizen who comes to enroll in person.

LPRD initiated the program primarily for citizen convenience. "We recognize that this may not be for all cities. The program should be cost-effective and a city needs to have enough enrollments to warrant the cost of software," said Steinbrock.

The City used software from Vermont Systems, a company that specializes in products for managing recreation and park operations. The City already utilized their RecTrac software to manage much of their program enrollments and then utilized an additional product (WebTrac) to offer online registration.

In addition to online enrollment, the WebTrac software allows facility rentals and reservations (including golf tee times). The City of Lawrence currently does not utilize the facility reservations feature because the City desires more personal interaction with those seeking facility reservations.

For the online enrollment project to continue to enjoy success, the City recognizes that a consistent marketing and public education effort will need to be conducted to inform citizens about the advantages of this project in the years to come.

In addition, LPRD hopes to respond to the growing needs of a web-savvy public by conducting an online survey to see if any changes to the program will be needed.

For more information regarding the Lawrence Parks and Recreation Department's Online Enrollment project visit their website at www.lprd.org

Mark Tomb is the Intergovernmental Relations Associate for the League of Kansas Municipalities. He can be reached at mtomb@lkm.org or (785) 354-9565.