

## CASE STUDY: CITY OF ROCHESTER

# Convert FOIL from a Problem to a Source of Pride

The City of Rochester receives close to 4,000 Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) requests a year, which works out to one for every hour of business of every working day. The City had struggled for many years to meet the New York State deadlines for notifications and fulfillments.

After implementing a Laserfiche solution designed by General Code, the City was able to complete 311 online requests within an average of four days in the just the first month of operation. Notifications? They were automatic and instant. The benefits of using Laserfiche were instant and substantial in terms of time and greater transparency.

## An Electronic Content Management Strategy

The City's IT Department took the lead in finding a solution to the challenge. In the words of CIO Lisa Bobo, "The confirmation and distribution of requests, gathering and validation of record submissions across departments and responding to constituents was time consuming, error prone and difficult to accomplish in the timeline required by the State. . . It was clear there would be advantages to automating any and all FOIL processes."

Bobo's team developed an RFP based on a vision. "Looking further out, we saw ECM (Electronic Content Management) as a way to support document-based process improvements City-wide," she said.

## A Transformational Laserfiche Blueprint

To win the RFP, General Code presented a solution design that laid out the goals for the project as follows:

- Establish a reliable process that can be enhanced as necessary.
- Make it easy to submit Records Access requests online.
- Help assure that users enter the data required to fulfill their request.
- Accelerate Record Access fulfillment.
- Accommodate the majority of request types by supporting key functionality.
- Provide visibility to all requests and ease of finding specific requests.
- Give requestors access to online self-serve status of their requests.
- Support proper records management requirements for retention and disposition after fulfillment.



At each phase of the processing cycle, the solution would save time, relieve bottlenecks and allow for dynamic workload assignments. Tracking, status windows and dashboard metrics were included to facilitate daily management and long-term process improvements.

## From Paper Shuffling to Point-and-Click

With the Laserfiche solution, there's no stacking and storing requests on desktops for later fulfillment. No more routing bulging folders from department to department via interoffice mail. No whiting out copies and photocopying redactions. ECM-enabled processing saves time and allows tracking at every stage of processing.

### 1. Submission

One City staffer referred to request submission as "like Amazon.com for FOIL." Indeed, the online submission form mimics the online shopping experience, with dropdowns and prompts to assure accurate, complete entry. You can create a user account that saves time on future requests and checking on the status of pending requests. Click "Submit" to complete your request and a confirmation letter arrives by email almost immediately.

### 2. Classification

Incoming requests are sorted by the system and added to Task Queue windows used by clerks in the City's Communications Bureau, which oversees FOIL requests. In the case of media requests, the system recognizes and flags these for special attention.

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The Communications clerks preflight requests within a Laserfiche Forms window. Drop-downs allow them to add Service Areas, issue a pre-formatted Notice of Extension or forward a problematic request to the Legal Department for prescreening. If the record requested turns out to be a county or town document, there's the option to deny the request and issue a customized form letter.

### 3. Fulfillment

Once the Communications clerk is satisfied by the completeness of the request, a mouse click is all it takes to distribute the request to the service areas involved. Out at the Police, Fire and Environmental Services Departments the request is added to a departmental task list. The staffer designated as "Primary" in the system receives an email notification, which is copied to additional people within the department. The solution is configured to allow a team approach to fulfillment. If the workload exceeds the Primary's capacity or if he or she is out of office, the tasks can be picked by other department staff. To help keep things on track, the FOIL solution issues periodic deadline reminders to the entire team.

All the information the clerk needs to identify the document that needs to be pulled is specified on the form associated with the requests. In most cases, the clerk will click "Upload," select the documents and they will be added to the FOIL repository folders created for that request.

### 4. Review & Delivery

A Communications clerk reviews fulfillment by clicking on a document name within one of the folders. This opens a window for viewing and possibly redacting the document. To redact a name to protect the privacy

of a victim, for example, the clerk selects the redaction tool and drags the cursor over the information to be blanked out. A check for redaction is a review task default, offering the clerk a choice of "Redaction Complete" or "Not Required," helping to assure consistent processing that lowers the City's risk of exposure to legal action.

In the event there's a question about what to release or not release, the clerk will check a box for legal review, then add a comment and click submit. The solution emails a notification to the Law Department, enters the request on the Corporation Counsel's FOIL task list and updates processing status in the solution's tracking log.

When all reviews are complete, the solution generates an individualized cover sheet to be emailed or mailed to the requestor with documents attached or not, depending on the requestor's preferences up to the email limit of 20MB. The solution updates the processing record maintained in the repository for a complete audit trail of activity. If the requestor picks up paper copies or reviews documents in person, the clerk can record the date and add it to the metadata tracking the request.

## Mission Accomplished; FOIL Mastered for Good

After testing and training, a March go-live date was timed to coincide with the "Sunshine Week" sponsored by open government advocates. At the press conference, Mayor Lovely Warren said "This project will make city records easier to access and does away with old technology that has mired down our FOIL process. But just as importantly, it is a step toward opening city government a little more to help people understand it better."

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