



City of Ithaca FOIL Workflow Process

In the spirit of New York State's Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), the City of Ithaca is working hard to support open, accountable government by proactively posting information on the Web for public access. Due to privacy issues – such as a crime victim's identity on a police report – some classes of documents will always require review, research and redaction by the City Attorney. To facilitate this process, the City created a workflow solution that automates several aspects of FOIL request fulfillment while providing tracking and accountability. This frees up resources and makes it easier for the City to remain compliant with the law.

Opening Doors to Open Government

Ithaca City Clerk Julie Holcomb is passionate about public access to information. As she declares, "My goal is 24/7 access for our constituents." That's a good thing for the citizens of Ithaca, NY, because one of the hats she wears is that of "Records Access Officer." In this role she ensures the availability of public records while protecting the privacy of certain types of content in concert with the City Attorney's Office.

Alan Karasin, Holcomb's Senior Network Administrator, matches her passion with his own sense of mission on the technology side. "Compared to other communities that may outsource FOIL requests at a cost of \$50 to \$60 and charge for reports, we want to provide no- or low-cost access for the people legally entitled to see the reports," he says. In 2014, Holcomb and Karasin advanced their goals by designing, piloting and launching a semi-automated FOIL workflow process in just a couple of months.

Technology in Service of Accessibility

For many municipalities, FOIL serves as the default way to request copies of government documents, such as meeting minutes and budgets.

Holcomb and Karasin had already leveraged their Laserfiche system to mitigate many possible FOIL requests. "You could say we are taking a hybrid approach," says Holcomb. "We created a Laserfiche Weblink portal to provide immediate online access to government documents that don't require review by the City Attorney. I call it the 'Quick-FOIL' option."

Today, the City Clerk's Office manages an electronic public record repository with folders that house agendas, land use plans, the city budget, and more. Here, from the convenience of your PC or mobile device, you can review minutes and

policies from over 20 City entities that range from the Bicycle Safety Advisory Council to the Youth Bureau Advisory Board. Documents are added on a going-forward basis, with some back-file conversions when and where public interest warrants and resources allow. "We posted City Common Council meeting minutes back to 1929," says Holcomb. "If you want to research some public issue, say water fluoridation, you can follow the debates through history."

Streamlining FOIL, Inside and Out

"After we attended the 2014 Laserfiche Empower Conference we got fired up about what to do next," says Holcomb. "Yes," agrees Karasin, "We took what we learned about Laserfiche Workflow and went looking for opportunities where it would have the biggest impact." They quickly settled on FOIL as their target. "It's a time-intensive process that touches every City department," notes Holcomb, "and it involves 500 to 600 requests per year."

"Our FOIL process was somewhat informal," says Holcomb. Requests arrived over the counter or through email. She identified the document and department involved. Then she forwarded the request to the department head and the City Attorney. The process was somewhat problematic from there and involved a certain amount of risk. "There are severe legal penalties if we miss a deadline, such as notifying the requestor that we have received his or her request, and it was hard to know the status of a request in process," says Holcomb. "Interoffice mail to a remote department could add time. And there wasn't really any accountability."

In June of 2014, Holcomb and Karasin approached the City Attorney's Office. "We got stakeholder buy-in immediately," remembers Karasin. "They said, 'This can help us with FOIL? Sign us up.'"

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DIY Process Re-engineering: Bootstrapping Improvements

Ithaca's Laserfiche system is part of a shared services system with Tompkins County, which maintains their Laserfiche Server setup. The City, County and area municipalities regularly collaborate on Laserfiche initiatives. "One of us will develop and pilot an idea," explains Karasin, "Then we'll share it around. That way we all get more from our Laserfiche investment."

The team mapped out process steps for the incumbent FOIL process and gathered requirements so they could understand the content and flow of the information involved. Laserfiche Workflow tools enabled them to design possible workflows. "We reviewed and tested our work repeatedly," says Karasin. "We were able to add efficiency to the process as we went along."

In July, Holcomb started using the Laserfiche Workflow internally, entering information from written requests and emails into the online request ticket to initiate the process. This was a worthwhile intermediate step. "Using the process allowed us to tweak things and make some adjustments to the workflow before we went live," says Holcomb. From there it was an easy transition to public availability in September.

Achieving Accessibility with Accountability

Given its convenience, Holcomb expects Ithaca's FOIL Workflow to continue to gain in popularity. "Now it's much more easy for drivers or insurance agents to request copies of accident reports. Neighbors can review the specifics of a noise permit associated with a special event organized by college students. Landowners can get planning documents for adjacent developments."

It's easier for the City Clerks Office, too. "Our FOIL workflow gives us visibility into the process," reports Holcomb. "If I need to, I can check on the progress of a request in seconds and kick off a reminder to a department head, for instance. The system generates age-out reminders for the Attorney's Office to help them stay current. Simply speaking, requests can't be overlooked or misplaced."

Holcomb sees multiple operational benefits. "My office runs more efficiently, with fewer FOIL-related interruptions to disrupt our daily work. And some FOIL work steps are now automated. For instance, the system generates requester notification correspondence automatically. I understand that the City Attorney's Office used to dedicate a full-time position to FOIL processing. Those 40 hours have been reduced to 18 hours, or a half-time position."

Clearly Holcomb and Karasin achieved their goals. "We're saving time, money and resources," concludes Holcomb, "And we've made information much more accessible to the public."

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