Interview with Erik Pappa, Director of Public Communications for Clark County

On August 1, 2008, I spoke with Erik Pappa, Director of Public Communications for Clark County. I conducted a brief phone interview and Mr. Pappa provided me with information regarding the County’s current process of revamping their public website. The questions I asked Mr. Pappa were the following:

1. What changes are in the works for the website?
2. How did the County come to these conclusions (i.e. what changes were necessary)?
3. Was any citizen feedback solicited or used in this process?
4. Are any blogs or other user-generated content features being added to the website?

Regarding Question 1, Erik stated that the website was in for a substantial overhaul. He offered to e-mail me a couple of documents, which I received shortly after our telephone interview concluded. These documents were the County’s “Charter for the Web Governance Committee,” dated November 8, 2007, and Clark County Information Technology “Web Usability Assessment,” dated January 17, 2006. Erik stated that the Web Governance Committee is an internal staff committee formed specifically to inform and direct the changes that will be made to the website throughout the process.

Erik stated that the County has already put out an RFP for redesign of the website, and they are currently negotiating with vendors. They are hoping that a more definitive project plan will be in place in early 2009.

Regarding Question 2, Erik made a few pertinent statements regarding the County’s current website:

1. It is outdated and “not intuitive.”
2. It is not optimally organized and is somewhat difficult to navigate as a result, especially for the average citizen who knows little about how government is organized.
3. It is not Section 508 compliant. (Erik also provided me with a link to a government website detailing Section 508 for web accessibility requirements; http://www.section508.gov). This means that the website does not contain features such as vision enhancements, text size and font options, and audio capability to accommodate users with disabilities and certain impairments.

Regarding Question 3 on citizen feedback, Erik stated that no citizen feedback has been solicited or incorporated as of yet, but the County is planning to do so to ensure that the resultant website is as user-friendly as possible. He stated that they intend to do some test runs for this purpose as well once development has begun. He stated that the County recognizes that IT and e-government initiatives are one of the leading ways to increase efficiency, and they are looking to improve customer service delivery through e-government and also to improve overall website accessibility for citizens.
Regarding Question 4 on blogs or similar features being added to the website, Erik stated that the County had already had some preliminary discussions about this option and has decided against it for the time being for a few reasons:

1. This option would prove resource intensive in that there would have to be staff not only to monitor postings and communications, but also to research citizen inquiries and ensure that correct information was being provided, and provide feedback.

2. The County has asked itself if there is good citizen benefit in conducting these kinds of interactions between citizens and government, and if the benefits outweigh the costs, which would be substantial.

3. Erik stated that some research has shown that some smaller municipal governments have someone designated, in some cases even the County manager, to respond to citizen inquiries and blog-type communications. For a government the size of Clark County, this obviously would not be a feasible option. Erik stated that this would be a task much easier for a smaller government to accomplish but would present serious challenges for Clark County.

4. According to Erik, Clark County is already strapped in terms of resources in that there are not enough employees to get everything done as it is. He stated that Clark County is in fact one of the leanest municipal governments in the country. That said, it would be difficult to find someone to perform the above roles of monitoring communications, researching inquiries, and providing feedback to citizens.

He stated that although two-way blogging does not appear to be a viable option at this time, the County is certainly interested in providing opportunities for citizens to communicate efficiently with government through direct access features such as e-mail. He asserted that the County is interested in direct dialogue with citizens, but not in an open public forum such as blogging.

In closing, Erik stated that the County recognizes that its website is not up to date with current best practices in web design, and they will make improvements in overall organization and layout to increase user accessibility and navigation.