

Municipalities on the march

They're the new kids on the block, and they're looking for action

By: Lawrence Moule (15 Jun 2005)

The slow, stately march to transform government services could soon become a bit disorderly. In some eyes, the transformation parade revealed a few weaknesses as it passed the reviewing stand at this year's Lac Carling Congress. There is no identifiable parade marshal, after all. At every fork in the road, the parade slows or halts while negotiations take place among the leading marchers. But in the ranks behind, the most recent recruits to the parade are intent on marching briskly forward, protocol be damned.

The new marchers are municipalities. They have someplace they want to go. They might not be willing to march in line. And they are, by and large, an impatient and outspoken lot.

"Just do it!" was the exhortation from one municipal delegate during the opening plenary session, when delegates were discussing issues to be raised and organizations to be consulted before recommendations could be made to a committee to consider a study of a potential initiative.

The interjector was Per Kristensen, chief technology officer of the City of Nanaimo, B.C., and one of the founders of an emerging municipal IT association called MISA/ASIM Canada.

Kristensen spoke afterward of the frustration felt by municipal IT delegates with the pace of service delivery advancements as discussed at Lac Carling.

"At this conference, every time we start talking about a project, its scope grows. You get scope creep. People say, 'We should do this, but we also need to consider this and this and this and this.' So we end up in analysis paralysis, and never get on with it."

This is a new drumbeat for Lac Carling. It comes from a group that, until last year, had hardly been heard from at all. It was only at the 2004 conference, under the influence of co-chair Peter Bennett of Winnipeg and growing municipal involvement in pilot projects, that delegates voted to make "engaging municipalities" one of the highest-priority recommendations to the Public Sector CIO Council and the Public Sector Service Delivery Council.

This year, it was clear that delegates now generally accept the view expressed during the Political Leaders Panel by Ann MacLean, mayor of New Glasgow, N.S., and president of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities: "Governments must work together," MacLean said. "We cannot work in silos. Cities and communities must be involved. They must be essential partners, because it is at our cities and communities where the federal, provincial and territorial policies are implemented. They are the front line of government."

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CTO, City of
Nanaimo, B.C.

On the evening before the opening of this year's Lac Carling Congress, 10 municipal delegates signed a memorandum of agreement to promote a national association to serve as their common voice.

There were two signatories from each of five municipal IT organizations: MISA chapters in British Columbia, the Prairies, Ontario and Atlantic Canada, as well as the Réseau de l'Informatique Municipale du Québec, known as RIMQ. The signatories agreed to ask the executives of their organizations to formally agree to join MISA/ASIM Canada by Oct. 1.

Membership would be based on a draft By-laws and Operations Manual created through a series of teleconferences since October 2004 by the MISA/ASIM Canada interim executive chaired by Kevin Peacock.

As the culmination of months of work, the signing of the MOU at Lac Carling might have been a celebration, but the atmosphere was somber because of the sudden death of Peter Bennett two days before. Much liked and respected as a municipal IT pioneer, Bennett had been president of MISA Prairie and a founding member of the interim executive. One of the first decisions after signing the MOU was to create an award in Bennett's name, to be presented annually to a person who has made outstanding contributions to the development of municipal e-government. Bennett himself will be the first recipient.

The first formal meeting of MISA/ASIM Canada, and election of the first members of its permanent executive, is planned for next year's Lac Carling Congress. Leaders from other levels of government were enthusiastic about this new body.

Broader Perspective Needed

Despite the enthusiasm for it, MISA/ASIM Canada cannot be expected to provide all of the municipal perspective needed at Lac Carling or other inter-jurisdictional meetings. People who participate in MISA chapters and in RIMQ on behalf of their member municipalities are almost all information technology managers and professionals. They are not senior managers, nor do they manage service-delivery channels or business units.

Nor is MISA/ASIM Canada represented on PSSDC, for example; municipalities are represented on the service-delivery council solely by Philip Clark, director of client service and public information for the City of Ottawa. The 32 municipal delegates at Lac Carling recognized the need either to bring more service delivery representation into MISA/ASIM Canada or to work more closely with other municipal organizations, such as FCM.

For its part, FCM intends to participate more actively in addressing national service delivery issues, Ann MacLean told delegates.

MISA/ASIM Canada, in contrast, does not see itself as working at the 30,000-foot level. It represents municipal delegates who have their feet on the ground and want to move them.

Kristensen sees the municipal role as achieving some-thing concrete that points the way forward for the other levels of government, who can then figure out all the angles.

"We deal with the user interface, the client interface, and that's the place to start," he said. "Let's just identify a problem and find a solution that solves 80 per cent of it, and recognize that the other 20 per cent perhaps needs to be handled in some special way. But don't try to consider all the factors and analyze it to death. Get on with it!"

National Contributions Municipalities can already point to two initiatives in which the cause of e-government has been advanced by municipalities who just got on with it: The Municipal Reference Model and 3-1-1.

The concept of services mapping was pioneered in the early 1990s by municipalities in the Prairies and Ontario. Beginning in 1990, a group of municipal IT professionals from 18 MISA Ontario member municipalities, led by Roy Wiseman of the Region of Peel, developed in partnership with Chartwell Inc. a standard way to describe municipal services and programs. They called it the Municipal Reference Model.

Chartwell later extended the concept and introduced it to the Ontario government, where it became the Public Service Reference Model, and to the federal government, where it evolved into the Government of Canada Services Reference Model (GSRM).

GSRM has now become fundamental to inter-jurisdictional efforts to align and rationalize public services, through initiatives such as BizPal and the Collaborative Seniors Portal Network. But the intellectual property that underlies it - what Jeffery Smith, president of Chartwell, calls the "DNA of government" -- is still owned by MISA Ontario.

Transformation Milestone

A milestone in service delivery transformation was reached May 18, the day after Lac Carling 2005 ended, when the City of Calgary launched Canada's first 3-1-1 municipal phone service.

3-1-1, which originated among U.S. municipalities, is a single number to call for any non-emergency municipal service. More than a phone number, 3-1-1 is a customer service system to co-ordinate and electronically assign work orders, track them and report to citizens that their requests or complaints have been dealt with.

Calgary's implementation is to be followed in the months ahead by launches in Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, Gatineau and the Region of Halton, Ontario. They are members of the Joint Applicant Group, which applied successfully last year to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission for approval to reserve the number 3-1-1 for exclusive use by municipalities.

3-1-1 is entirely a municipal initiative. It will be a turning point in the transformation of all governments, Lac Carling delegates were told in a session by Joint Application Group leaders Noreen Rude, manager of customer contact initiatives for the City of Calgary, and Colleen Bell, manager of the City of Toronto's Corporate Client Services Initiative.

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