



IT SOLUTIONS

LIGHTING

ENERGY MANAGEMENT

POWER QUALITY

ON-SITE GENERATION

TRAINING

## City of Washington, North Carolina

COMMERCIAL   EDUCATION   **GOVERNMENT**   HEALTHCARE   INDUSTRIAL

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES/CUSTOMER CHALLENGE

To make it possible for City of Washington utilities customers to pay their bills and access information about their utility accounts over the internet through the city's website along with improving the look of the city's webpage .

The City of Washington, population 9,674, provides electric service to approximately 12,500 accounts and water and sewer service to approximately 5,500 accounts. All billing, collections and customer services are handled in-house.

Washington continues to look for ways to enhance and streamline its customers' interactions with the city. In 2000, as the opportunity to take care of business online was starting to be offered by banks, stores, and other utility businesses,

Washington was interested in providing a way for customers to pay utility and other city bills, access utility account information and apply for utility service over the internet through the city's website. Such a system needed to allow the customer to use the service without paying an extra transaction fee, which often is the case with third-party online payment processors, and needed to process transactions with minimal extra demand on city staff.

Also in 2000, Washington was interested in redesigning and reorganizing its website, which was launched in 1998 and was created and maintained by city staff, to update and expand the city's web presence.

## OUR SOLUTIONS/OUR RESULTS



ElectriCities introduced Washington to Energy Solutions Partner VC3, an information technology firm already helping small cities in Georgia and South Carolina offer services and transactions to their customers over the internet. VC3's GovHost applications interact with subscribing cities' in-house databases and applications to process payments, service applications, and other service transactions. Financial transactions are processed via credit or debit cards through secure processes based in a data center monitored by VC3 staff 24 hours a day, seven days a week. These services are accessed through a link on the subscribing city's website.



VC3 performed an information technology assessment to identify the resources that either were in place or were needed for the GovHost system to work with Washington's data management and processing systems. Washington could work with VC3 and/or other vendors to make any required upgrades in the information technology infrastructure.



VC3 worked with Washington IT staff to develop programs to allow GovHost applications to interface with Washington's LOGICS data management system and to customize customer interfaces that would be available through Washington's website. In December 2001, Washington activated the online utility bill payment, account inquiry and service application processes following staff training by VC3.

Washington also partnered with VC3 to redesign its website. A municipal government website often is one of the first impressions that prospective residents, businesses and visitors get of a community. Washington's first website, developed without the help of professional designers, lacked the visual appeal to present a positive impression of the community and the city. Also, though the website was laden with content, its cumbersome navigational structure made it difficult for both local and non-local users to find information. Washington wanted a new look and feel for the website that would convey a positive impression of the community, highlighting its historic appeal and waterfront location. Washington also wanted to use a more intuitive navigation system that would make it easier for the user to explore the site based on his or her particular interest – as a resident, a business owner, a utility customer or a visitor.

The number of website visitors and customers paying their bills online has continued to climb every month, particularly after a Fall 2002 print and television campaign promoting use of the website for online bill payment, service applications and utility account inquiries. By the end of 2002, Washington had collected almost \$170,000 through 1,146 online transactions. Usage in the first half of 2003 was up considerably with over \$190,000 in collections through 1,187 transactions. Also, during the first half of 2003, there were over 8,500 unique visitors to the website. The redesigned website was one of three in the country named as a finalist for Best Website in the 2002 Beacon Award Competition.

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