

**2008 NASCIO Recognition Awards Nomination  
Commonwealth of Virginia**

**Nomination Category:**  
Cross Boundary Collaboration

**Title of Nomination:**  
Collaborative Performance:  
Virginia's Regulation Information System and Town Hall

**Nomination Submitted By:**  
Lemuel C. Stewart, Jr.  
Chief Information Officer  
Commonwealth of Virginia  
Virginia Information Technologies Agency

**2008 Commonwealth of Virginia NASCIO Award Submission**  
**Category: Cross Boundary Collaboration**  
**Collaborative Performance:**  
**Virginia's Regulation Information System and Town Hall**

**Executive Summary**

At its root level, government is a system of laws and regulations that must be adhered to by its citizens and businesses. The Virginia Administrative Code (VAC) contains these regulations and is jointly developed and maintained by both the legislative and executive branches. A highly collaborative and innovative IT partnership between the two has created a nimble and adaptive electronic filing system that functions across organizational and geographical boundaries.

A new Regulation Information System (RIS) application and upgraded Regulatory Town Hall Web site, jointly launched in July 2007, provide publication of a real-time VAC on the Internet, a substantial reduction of redundant and paper-based processes, simplified business rules for agencies and improved transparency, accessibility and involvement for citizens.

The regulatory process in Virginia is a complex system with multiple levels of publication requirements to ensure public transparency and participation. State agencies submit regulatory actions in the Virginia Town Hall application operated by the Department of Planning and Budget for citizen comment and executive branch review and approval. Once approved, the legislative branch's Virginia Register of Regulations completes official publication.

Prior to implementation of the collaborative electronic filing system, the online VAC was often three to four months out of date due to multiple process obstacles. Legislative and executive systems operated with different databases, entry points, user requirements, legacy table and data structures, Web server software, server side scripting tools and interface requirements.

Citizens could have difficulty determining the most current version of applicable regulations. Agencies had to maintain their own databases, enter redundant submissions to both entities, follow complicated version control procedures and maintain paper files. The Office of the Registrar had to follow a predominantly paper-based and labor-intensive process.

To create a fully integrated and scalable solution, policy personnel from both branches worked closely together to create business rules and requirements. In-house technical teams then applied the business rules to create an entirely new system on the back end that eliminated data and system barriers while maintaining a high degree of security and version control.

Their collaboration provides a centralized, Web-based enterprise approach that allows agency users to submit regulatory actions for review and approval, to the public for comment and finally to the Registrar for real-time publication in a seamless atmosphere.

The systems provide significant savings in time and vast improvements in usability, accuracy and transparency for citizens. It provides a model for electronic rulemaking nationally.

## Description of the problem and solution

The regulatory process in Virginia is a complex system with multiple levels of publication requirements to ensure public transparency and participation. Virginia state agencies submit regulatory actions including promulgation, amendment and repeal through a Town Hall Web site operated by the Department of Planning and Budget for executive branch review and approval. Once adopted, regulations are submitted to the Virginia Register of Regulations in the legislative branch for official publication in the Virginia Register of Regulations and real-time updating of the Virginia Administrative Code (VAC).

The Town Hall Web site contains applications for both internal and external users. Since its 1999 launch, the award-winning Web system has provided a single point of executive review and given citizens instant access to and participation in the regulatory process. Advances in technology since first launch and growing business need for synergy with official publication of regulations and streamlined process requirements led planners in both the executive and legislative branches to strategize improvement.

The integrated solution developed collaboratively between the two independent branches included a revamp of the Town Hall site and a completely new Regulation Information System (RIS). The business owners included the Virginia Code Commission and the Division of Legislative Automated Systems from the legislative branch and the Department of Planning and Budget and agencies of the Commonwealth from the executive branch. The combined application solved four common and significant business problems – and did so through use of the proverbial carrot, not the stick.

First, existing legacy systems had significant architectural differences, including databases (DB2 and MS SQL), entry points, user/agency requirements, legacy table/data structures, Web server software (Blue Dragon and IIS), server side scripting tools (Cold Fusion vs. ASP.NET) and interface requirements.

Second, production of the Virginia Register of Regulations was predominantly a paper-based system of submission and preparation for publication using a central database that was unavailable to individual agencies.

Third, the VAC as published online was often months out of date due to reliance on updates from the vendor that compiled final changes from regulations published in the Virginia Register of Regulations. Citizens searching for regulations faced a complicated process of determining the most current version. Similarly, agencies did not have a current database to draw from while preparing amendments to regulations; many prepared and maintained separate databases for their own Web site users to provide current information to the public.

Finally, many images in the online VAC were unreadable by the general public due to restrictions in the update process. Because the VAC was updated in its entirety once a quarter through an outside source, the Office of the Registrar did not have the ability to improve tables and images for better public and agency access.

To create a fully integrated and scalable solution, policy personnel from both branches of government and field users worked closely together to create business rules and requirements. Then, during a one-year application development period, Web services personnel first provided an integrated proof of concept incorporating desired functionality.

In-house technical teams then applied the business rules to create an entirely new system on the back end that eliminated data and system barriers while maintaining a high degree of security and version control. The new system also purposely avoided significant user change by adopting a single-face agency entry approach using the familiar Town Hall interface.

New technologies were utilized in the Town Hall upgrade, including dynamic HTML, JavaScript, AJAX and new Cold Fusion commands, making screens more friendly and flexible. Another important technology was use of XML-based Webservices to closely integrate Town Hall and RIS, making exchange of information between the two systems transparent to users.

The input process is intuitive; the system queries for data as needed. A “Contact us” link always is available should a user encounter difficulty. A powerful, updated search engine organizes results by category, including agencies, regulation titles, regulatory actions, meetings, boards, guidance documents, legislative mandates, petitions for rulemaking and general notices.

Town Hall receives a snapshot from RIS of proposed text of a regulation for executive review. Town Hall sends regulatory packages to RIS electronically, including an automatically generated transmittal sheet, agency background statement and petitions for rulemaking, General Notices, and Notices of Periodic Review, for official publication in *The Virginia Register of Regulations*. Hyperlinks guide users between Town Hall, agency Web sites, the Virginia Administrative Code and the *Code of Virginia*.

Public comment forums open automatically when all non-exempt regulatory stages and notices of periodic review and petitions for rulemaking are published in the *Register*. Users can see which public comment forums have received comments and how many there are. Meeting information is integrated; previous meetings can be used as a template to avoid duplicative data entry. Agencies easily see when regulations were last reviewed or amended on Town Hall by viewing Board Information for a list of board regulations, last activity and last periodic review.

Training personnel conducted extensive hands-on usage instruction; more than 250 users were trained in the first seven months of operation. An online Town Hall user manual was updated.

Though the RIS system is role-based for security, a functional demonstration is available online at <http://leg5.state.va.us/risdemo/> for better understanding of the process. The Town Hall Web site contains significant public view at <http://www.townhall.virginia.gov>. Town Hall complies with the [Commonwealth’s Accessibility and Web Site Standards](#).

## Significance of the project to the improvement of the operation of government

Agencies now download current VAC sections from the VAC database for new projects and create final regulatory actions from the published version of the proposed actions.

- Agencies now can link to official regulations rather than maintaining their own databases.
- Effective Town Hall integration eliminates redundant data entry.
- Staff may access projects from multiple locations and have numerous new output options.
- Multiple users may collaboratively access sections at one time through version tracking and control.
- Multiple cumbersome paper-based processes have been eliminated.
- The systems provide significant time savings and improvements in accuracy.
- The project is scalable, flexible and adaptable.
- General Assembly and agency updates easily are accommodated.
- A mobile workforce is enabled through secure Web access.
- Customer service is vastly improved.

Efficient records management is achieved automatically. Comments and changes are saved with the project through its lifecycle. A permanent file is generated for each regulation, aiding the Registrar with her statutorily required duty of maintaining a central repository of currently effective regulations, and allowing the Registrar to produce needed documentation for archiving with the Library of Virginia.

On two recent occasions, an emergency regulation has been promulgated in less than one business day, moving from the agency, to the Attorney General, back to the agency, to DPB, to the Cabinet, to the Governor's office, and to the Registrar's office all on the same business day. This would not have been possible prior to implementation of RIS and Town Hall. (Note: Emergency regulations are not subject to an economic impact analysis but do have to follow all other procedural steps.)

The project meets all five goals in [Virginia's Strategic Plan for Information Technology](#).

## Benefits of the project

Town Hall 2.0 and RIS have created a significant positive business impact by providing integrated business functions for government users. By standardizing and simplifying input from every state agency, the regulatory process has been moved online from a paper-forms-based information flow.

- Efficient communications and document flow between regulatory staff and agencies is digitally enabled.
- Service delivery has been streamlined.
- Data accuracy and timeliness are improved.
- Information availability and usability is increased.
- Regulatory development and publication have been transformed.

The Town Hall/RIS project provides significant value to citizens by providing instant access to and participation in the regulatory process. Interested persons now can:

- Easily submit comments and influence public policy through enhanced online forums
- Quickly search existing regulations and possible changes/additions/repeals with upgraded search tools
- Conveniently access minutes from regulatory board meetings across the Commonwealth
- Seamlessly view all scheduled public meetings through the systems' automatic population of the Commonwealth calendar online
- Automatically receive e-mail notifications on topics of interest and update preferences at any time

Usability and accessibility have been vastly improved – especially for disabled and remote users.

More than 5,000 persons now have registered to receive e-mail notifications from the Town Hall Web sites, and that number continues to grow.

This transformation in business process was achieved through close collaboration between state employees rather than outsourcing to a vendor. Need for the previous vendor for producing the online Virginia Administrative Code has been eliminated. The system was built to the exact business requirements of the Commonwealth, rather than modified to work within a commercial application.

Significantly, the project enabled close and rare collaboration between two branches of government, the executive and legislative, to benefit users and citizens.

The following comment from a user summarizes the public value well:

*“The Department of Environmental Quality is staff to three environmental boards and between the four regulatory authorities has over 100 regulations. The Town Hall resulted in savings for the agency in both staff time and money, by making the executive review process and public notification process paperless. The RIS process has saved staff time as well. Many features of the RIS ensure regulation writers are working from the correct text and errors are discovered long before they become a problem. Doing things in a different way is always intimidating, but the developers made the transition as easy as possible by consulting with each other and the users. Also, having to do things more than once is a waste of time. The developers of the two systems made a concerted effort to make sure agencies would not have to do that by making sure the two systems would talk to each other. The RIS and the Virginia Regulatory Town Hall have been significant improvements to the regulatory process in Virginia.”*

*-- Cindy M. Berndt, Director, Regulatory Affairs, Department of Environmental Quality*

Governmental regulation can be a complex and confusing process, particularly for citizens. Virginia's Town Hall 2.0 and RIS systems have streamlined and simplified this process for both government and citizens, inviting two-way communication during policy development and creating a model for rule-making nationally.