**4. Serving Customers' Information Needs/Managing Information Overload**
Serving Customers' Information Needs and Managing Information Overload – Pat Wood (pat.wood@gsa.gov)

Pat Wood discussed the government e-Gov portal, firstgov.gov, highlighting what it is, its new design and features, what government customers need and want, best practices in information management and what will be coming from firstgov. Firstgov is a one-stop government portal for federal, state, local, and tribal information. The portal provides a front-door for citizens to do business with the government and to find information about and available from government agencies. The portal is a cross-agency initiative administered by GSA. Home Page for www.firstgov.gov :

New features include 3 channels for 3 audiences (Government to Citizen, Government to Business, and Government to Government), emphasis on transactions, one-stop/3 clicks to what user needs, free subscription service. Subscription page currently has 26 newsletters from across government newsletters and pre-selects them according to what site it is on. There have been over 170,000 subscription referrals since launch of site on December 4, 2001.

The new search engine searches 181,000,000 federal and state web pages in less than quarter of a second to index 26 million sites while searching pdf, xml, databases, Powerpoint, Microsoft documents. The portal is free to the more than 200 participating agencies (contact for service: tim.bennet@gsa.gov).

Firstgov finds out what federal and state customers need through web site feedback, the online customer satisfaction survey (ASCI), focus groups, usability testing, and input from agencies/ partners/stakeholders. Key usability findings include: citizens/customers don't care about specific government organizations or hierarchy; users skim or scan but don't read everything; users look for links, headers, and bullets; do not understand government jargon; citizens have no idea what governments have on line; users want/need specific information before making an on-line transaction; users like firstgov and its purpose and indicate they will use the site again and recommend to friends.

From lessons learned, firstgov has identified the following best content practices:

a. Know audience -- needs & purpose in using site.
b. Clearly define purpose of site and sponsor (easily accessible contact information).

c. Organize content based on user needs (not organizational structure.
d. Use plain language (get help!).
e. Offer information and services in different ways.
f. Offer new features and keep content current.
g. Offer subscription news letter to announce additions to users.
h. Resolve state linking and privacy policy issues.
i. Make site 508 compliant – it's the law!
j. Conduct usability tests as features are added.
k. Continuously re-evaluate citizen/user needs.
l. Automate as many forms, transactions, services on-line as possible.
m. Apply the "no more than 3 clicks" to common needs/services.

Web development best practices include modular codes, use/develop coding standards, standard style sheets, short lists and scrolling pages, simple URLs, avoid flashy multimedia techniques.

The future for USA Citizen Service will bring integrated, multi-channeled gateway to citizen service (phone, E-mail, and standard mail), Customer Relationship Management (CRM) for seamless citizen access across government, piloting of automating E-mail routing system with 5 partners by 10/02, additional shared services for agencies (customized search engine, full service web hosting, portal toolkit, development of a content management system (beginning by 10/02).

The Role for Local Governments – Dr. Costis Toregas www.pti.org

Public Technology, Inc. (PTI), is the non-profit technology organization for all cities and counties in the United States. The National League of Cities, the National Association of Counties, and the International City/County Management Association, three primary local government associations, provide PTI with its policy direction, while a select group of city and county members conduct applied R&D and technology transfer functions. Created in 1971, PTI is the only national organization dedicated to furthering the use of technology in both cities and counties, for both elected officials and professional managers. Partnerships with private industry, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a focus on connectivity, sustainability, and wise decision support are the foundations of PTI's success. The organization's current activities in e-government include:

a. Web Managers Forum
b. International Dialog for Naming Conventions
c. Coordinated effort for DOI's one-stop geo spatial effort

E-gov connects citizens to their government to deliver effective services, promote democracy, and stimulate economic development.

Dr. Toregas discussed local e-gov from the perspective of slogans/logos, mission statements, what's hot, and the costs. Web site slogan and logo opportunities were presented in the following slide.

An example of a local mission statement for e-gov is that of Montgomery County, Maryland: “e-Montgomery is to facilitate the delivery of high quality benefits, take advantage of improvements in information and communication technology, reengineer service or delivery processes, and provide refined public and private sector organizational relationships. In short, offer all that we do by paper, telephone, or in person through the Internet and other electronic technologies.”

Denver’s Government Vision is: “Transform Denver Government by using technology to improve service, to promote economic development, and increase democratic participation.” Another mission statement -- “Provide a 24-hour city hall for the citizens, businesses, and visitors of the City of Hampton, Virginia.” And from Fairfax County, Virginia: “...utilize the benefits of emerging technologies to extend and expand the ability of government to provide information and citizen-centric services to county residents, businesses, civic groups, and other interested parties.”

Local governments are using e-gov to provide a wide-variety of services to their citizens and to collect information, to provide information, to promote the economy (business, tourism), and to involve citizens and stakeholders in government issues. Local government investment in e-gov continues to grow as citizen demands for and satisfaction with electronic services and information increase. For local e-gov, web managers need new skills to satisfy the demands: complex project management, infrastructure development, technology mastery, cross-boundary leadership (influencing people they don’t control) and psychiatry! Listening to citizens and seeking ways to assist them in managing information volume and tailoring information to user needs will be essential to successful local e-gov. Lessons learned from 9/11/01 for local government web masters include: back up all systems and information in different locations, safeguard data, and listen and integrate stakeholder concerns.

The attributes of a strong web site are: transparency, sustainability, interactivity/ transactional, and citizen-centric (focused on citizen needs/expectations). Transformation requires innovation and creation of electronic processes rather than just automation of old processes. Guiding principles to remember are to let the citizen do the work, use multiple platforms and marketing, memorize initial CRM and learn what they can do for citizen-centric e-gov, involve kids, and e-gov has no meaning without e-citizens!