

Town Clerk bringing government into 21st Century

Meetings online just the latest of digital innovations

By MARK LUNGARIELLO

When Joseph Acocella (R) became Town Clerk in January 2008, he felt that Harrison was a bit behind the pack as far as entering the digital age. At 27-years-old Acocella, a former Harrison Police Department employee and member of the Harrison School District Board of Education, is a member of the "information generation" and thought it was time the town started entering the 21st century.

A year after his term began, the clerk feels that Harrison is well on its way to catching up on technology. A newly-redesigned Web site was implemented last year complete with a community calendar. The clerk himself started utilizing things like youtube.com and blogging to keep residents informed. But, the innovations have not ended there. Slowly but surely, Acocella is moving Harrison away from its old paper records-keeping processes and looking to go digital.

"We have to keep evolving," Acocella says. To the clerk, with the recession and difficult times ahead, he expects many people throughout the nation may be researching contemporary or past government action. Accessibility is key, he says. "We're in an historic time,

people are going to be taking a closer look at their government. At the same time, they need better access to government."

Last week, he implemented a records management day to get rid of clutter in all Town Hall departments. His goal was to streamline record keeping in all departments and start moving over to digital records which will be more easily accessed by employees and even the community. Currently, he is seeking funding to transfer minutes of Town Board meetings to digital, while making important clerk documents available to the public online. "Obviously, with these projects the important thing to do is take baby steps," he says. This is not a time issue, but a question of efficiency. "You have to remember you're dealing with your entire town's history," he adds.

It is not only a matter of convenience, he says, but allows for a more open government approach. "Technology can be a scary thing; it's not something you can change overnight," Acocella states. "You're not only changing practices you're changing your whole way of thinking." Someday soon, residents may be able to search old minutes of

Town Board meetings and submit important documents. One of the more significant changes recently implemented is that Town Board meetings are now available for viewing online the day following the meeting.

Acocella said he had looked into hiring a vendor to handle the broadcasts and make the meetings available for Internet viewing streaming live, but the technology was too costly in view of the recession. Instead, Acocella and Harrison's tech department decided to run the site in-house. Meetings this month are available on the "video" section of the Town of Harrison Web site. "This is a huge step to opening government up," Acocella says. The program is in its earliest stages and at the moment Harrison doesn't have the capacity to archive many meetings. This means simply that after a few months of meeting, older videos will no longer be available.

More changes will be on the horizon shortly. Acocella says he is on the phone "day in and day out" with other municipalities to inspire ideas. He has spoken to clerks in bigger cities like Toronto. According to Acocella larger cities make a good example, because if



Town Clerk Joseph Acocella

a program works for them, it can work for the much smaller Harrison. Also, despite its "small town" ambience, Harrison does have a "spread out" geography. In many ways access to government in Harrison is comparable to a larger city in that the town needs to unite diverse areas.

"We're slowly moving in the right direction," Acocella says. Someday soon, if things continue on their trajectory, Harrison may not only be up-to-date, but cutting edge in its technology.

Visit the clerk's Web site at www.harrisonclerk.com