

A look inside government: Jeffco planning video of meetings, interactive Web page

By AJ Vicens

Jefferson County residents and any other interested parties will soon have easier access to the workings of Jeffco government, as county leaders are working on two projects to increase transparency.

One effort, headed up by public information director Kathryn Heider, will allow people to watch county government meetings online, as well as have easy access to agendas and minutes. People will be able to watch the whole session or clips of video featuring a particular agenda item. Heider is hoping to have the project up and running by the end of the year.

The other project is the brainchild of County Administrator Jim Moore, who wanted to increase public access to documents and other information after seeing the way that the state of Kansas operates its government website. The county has created a website called Transparent Jeffco that will be linked to the county's main Web page at www.jeffco.us. The website — slated to be up and running by mid-October — will be previewed by the county commissioners on Sept. 30.

"The more informed people are, the more they understand," Moore said. "But this is not intended to take the place of face-to-face interaction. It's meant to enhance it."

One of Moore's favorite aspects of Transparent Jeffco will be a blog. Framed as a "Conversation with Jeffco," the blog will be a space for Moore and other county officials to discuss ideas or issues, and people will be able to respond. People will also be able to submit questions to Moore and other officials, and the answer will be discussed on the blog. The first blog posting from Moore will be about government transparency, and he'll ask county residents to weigh in on what the term means to them.

Transparent Jeffco will also feature surveys on various topics, the first about what transparency means. There will also be easy access to budget and spending reports and other data, and a public-meetings calendar with links to meeting agendas.

Moore and Heider are also devising ways to have in-person focus groups with county officials so citizens can air questions, concerns and grievances.

Heider said the county is in the process of choosing a vendor for the video-casting software. It will cost the county \$30,000 to \$50,000 in initial set-up costs, and then monthly fees of more than \$1,000. She emphasized that the idea is just a proposal, and will have to be approved by the commissioners. Even though the county is in the midst of dealing with flat revenues and increasing needs countywide, the video project is a good investment, Heider said, because it makes it easier for people to get involved.

"We want to get to citizens in as many ways as we can," Heider said. "This is just another way. It's a convenience for the citizens, and it's cool." Heider dismissed the idea that the

push for more transparency can be seen as an admission that the county has not been transparent enough.

"Technology makes it so much easier (now)," Heider said. "If you use a combination of everything you can, you reach more people."

The county has been criticized in the past for its lack of transparency. Landmark Community Newspapers, the parent company of Evergreen Newspapers, sued the county in 2007 over a violation of the Open Meetings Law by the commissioners.

Moore said the increase of information available to the public could open county government up for some criticism, "but that's OK."

"What better involvement than including more citizens in the decision-making process and getting advice from them?" Moore said. "This is just good government. We want to engage people who disagree with us. The more inclusion, the better the outcome."

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