

City cuts red tape, saves hours

New procedures streamline special-events permitting process.

May 10, 2016

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Staff writer

Anyone applying for a special-events license from the city needs approval from seven departments and divisions including police, fire, zoning, building, public services, utilities and tax collection. What had been a cumbersome, paper-heavy process to obtain these approvals has now been streamlined, saving hundreds of employee hours annually.

After promoters of a special event filled out the application in the city clerk's office, the clerks previously would scan the application into the computer system and send it to representatives of all seven departments, who would then print it out, fill in their comments, re-scan it and send it back to the city clerk either online or by interoffice memo. The result was at least eight pieces of paper that had to be processed.

Sometimes more approvals were needed. If city properties such as parks were being used, for example, the Recreation Division had to sign off.

With 245 special-events licenses issued during the past year, it was a time-consuming process.

Now, city employees have created a Microsoft shared file showing the application that all the departments can access.

"We send an email notification to the departments," City Clerk Laura Swistak said. "They click on a link and fill out the form online. It's like a fillable PDF."

The departments use digital signatures, and all the approvals are now on one sheet of paper after the form is printed, instead of in a stack of papers.

City employees are not stopping there. Eventually, they want people to be able to fill out their special-events applications online and pay the necessary fees, all in the comfort of their own homes or businesses. Fees must be paid, and the City Council must approve, before the license is issued.

The change in the special-events permits procedure is a direct result of Newport officials taking part in a program called Leadership Matters RI, a joint initiative of the city, the Pell Center at Salve Regina University, and the Public Sector Consortium, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to reinventing the practice of public leadership through learning and practice.

Fire Chief Peter Connerton led an employees' cohort that included Budget and Finance Analyst Elizabeth Sceppa, Fire Marshal Wayne Clark and Assistant City Engineer Francis Marinaccio.

“Beginning in October 2014, we met four Fridays and four Saturdays,” Connerton said. “It was great training. When we got out, our minds were hurting.”

Eighteen other employees went through a training session, and a group of employees with the cohort continues to meet monthly. They have had 17 meetings so far, Connerton said.

“Leadership Matters is about creating and processing efficiencies in government, as well as succession planning,” he said. “It’s about creating a workflow for each department. We’ve basically written a standard operating procedure for this process.”

“We’re still not done with this,” Connerton said. “We’re investigating other approval processes, like the annual liquor licenses. We’ve already done the legwork on this and other procedures.”

Sceppa completed an analysis that showed about 999 hours of staff time were devoted to special-events licenses annually before the change. Now, an estimated 150 hours will be devoted to the licenses under the new procedure, she said. Based on an average cost of salaries and benefits, the time saved will amount to the equivalent of about \$44,150, according the analysis.

As part of the overall initiative, Sceppa and other city employee volunteers are building an in-house database that outlines the different talents and education backgrounds of city employees. That is information that cannot be seen in a job title and will be a resource that all departments will be able to tap into, she said.

“It will be searchable,” Connerton said.

The Leadership Matters RI program at the Pell Center begins with skills training such as facilitative leadership practices, systems thinking, negotiations and systems alignment for high performance.

City employees began working with Leadership Matters early in 2014, when the first cohort included then-City Manager Jane Howington, Finance Director Laura Sitrin, Director of Public Services William R. Riccio Jr. and Councilwoman Naomi Neville. They made changes that led to improved communications such as the upgraded city website, Sitrin said.

“After the training, they expect you to follow up on it with innovation projects,” Connerton said. “Georgie is a tough taskmaster.”

He was referring to Georgie Bishop, president of the Public Sector Consortium, who retired from a position in the federal government.

“The Leadership Matters RI program in Newport was a huge success,” Bishop said in a written statement. “The resulting savings and outcomes have inspired other people to volunteer for the next system wide re-invention team.”

“If anyone had ever told me I would be doing this as fire chief a few years ago, I would have said, ‘You’re out of your mind,’” Connerton said. “But it is a great way of looking at things. We get to work with other employees outside their job descriptions and we get to know each other well. It brings us all together.”

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