Chapter II

Westchester County Case Study

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Executive Summary

Prior to 1998, Westchester County (New York) outsourced vital IT functions, lacked a significant Web presence, and relied on outdated and inconsistent technology which played a peripheral role in government operations. Its economic growth was stagnating in a changing economy. This changed with the arrival of a new County Executive, Andrew J. Spano, and the county’s first Chief Information Officer, Norman Jacknis. Now, the new Department of Information Technology, with a more modern technology foundation and approach, plays a central role in both government operations and the county government’s vision of how it can serve Westchester’s residents.

Background

Westchester County, with a population nearing one million residents, is the 500 square mile region just north of New York City. Its geographical setting is a favorable one, with the
Long Island Sound on the southeast and the Hudson River on the west. Within its borders, the terrain is largely rolling hills, intersected by the Croton, Bronx, and Saw Mill rivers. To this day, the county remains one of the most heavily forested in New York State and has retained much of its rural character, while adopting the urban and suburban lifestyles dictated by its proximity to New York and a well-developed regional transportation network (Cochran & Green, 1982).

Although historically known for its wealth and highly-educated, white-collar population, Westchester has evolved in recent years into a much more diverse county, with a larger portion of immigrants and pockets of poverty, especially near its border with New York City. As a result, the county government spends a greater portion of its budget than it ever did on affordable housing initiatives, child care, public transportation, and various social services. Since September 11th, however, the county government has increasingly emphasized protecting and keeping its residents safe. As just one example, where one police officer used to man the main county office building in White Plains over an eight-hour shift, five officers now guard the building and its employees around the clock.

Under New York State law, the county is a creature of the state. It thus has to operate within some of the most restrictive civil service and government procurement rules anywhere in the country, perhaps the world. It also has been subject to numerous unfunded mandates by the state, which must be paid from county property and sales taxes. One particularly burdensome mandate is Medicaid, in which the state requires the county to fund half of the non-federal portion of the program, although the county has no legislative authority to limit the extent of what is now the nation’s most generous set of benefits.

Nevertheless, within these constraints, the 4,655 full-time, year-round Westchester County employees have long enjoyed a reputation for professionalism and efficiency. Like other large, affluent counties outside of major cities, the public has generally demanded high-quality service delivery and have not been tolerant of administrations which failed to meet those standards. Similarly, Westchester is considered to be among the country’s most financially well-managed counties, as reflected in its AAA bond rating—the only one in New York State and one of the few around the country. (It has an annual budget of about $2 billion.)

Going back to colonial times, there has been a very strong tradition of home rule at the local government (not county) level. So, in Westchester County, there are 43 full-time, independent city, town, and village governments. There are dozens of school districts, dozens of fire departments, dozens of libraries, dozens of police departments, and numerous water districts. The county even has four dozen answering points in its 911 system—perhaps the most complex 911 system in the world. In many ways, this tradition constrains the power of the county government. It has also made county government the least visible level of government. County officials sometimes joke that the government is Westchester’s “two billion dollar secret”. Despite this tradition, the county government has grown in size and responsibility over the years. In part, this reflects a nationwide trend for cities, towns, and other local public entities to transfer functions to the county level. During the 1960s, for example, 40% of all counties responding to a federal survey reported that they had assumed responsibility for police protection previously provided by a local municipality. Only 3% had shifted this duty in the other direction. Similarly, 27% had taken over responsibility for jails and corrections, 37% had assumed the library management function, 45% had become responsible for planning previously done at a more local level, and more than 20% of all counties now said they were responsible for roads, highways, sewage, refuse collection,