

Clark County Joint Lobby Cuts Through Bureaucracy to Better Meet the Needs of Citizens

Posted on July 8, 2014 by Josh Mahar

Walking into the office of the Assessor, Treasurer, and Auditor in Clark County can be a bit odd: you aren't entirely sure where one office ends and another begins. That's because through a unique partnership, these three entirely independent offices have come together to offer citizens a streamlined process for government interaction. Not only are these three offices housed in the same building, with a single, shared lobby and service counter, but their customer service staff are all cross-trained to provide assistance on issues for all three offices. This means that when citizens come in to accomplish a task, they can do it quickly and easily, all in one transaction. Known as the joint lobby project, Clark County is a practical example of how a little collaboration can provide some important efficiencies, both internally and externally.



The joint lobby in action.

The Fred Meyer of Government

The project started with a concept: what if government transactions were more like Fred Meyer? Doug Lasher, County Treasurer, noticed that citizens were often frustrated by the complexity that existed when dealing with the Auditor, Treasurer, and Assessor; they are distinct offices but ones with often intersecting responsibilities. All too often citizens would come to an office and wait in one line, only to be told at the counter that they needed to visit a different office – in its own section of the building with its own line – to complete their task. Lasher thought, why couldn't this service be more like a grocery store? There, people pick up items from all the different departments, but when it's time to check out, they make one transaction. Simple. He decided it was time for a change.

Lasher saw an opportunity to initiate his vision when Clark County was getting ready to construct a new administration building. Lasher shared his vision with the other officials and proposed that the three offices co-locate and develop a single, shared counter. The other county leaders liked the idea and agreed to go for it.

However, co-location was just the beginning; really streamlining customer service meant cross-training staff as well. Although the shared counter reduced some citizen stress, initially the counter space was still divided between the three offices. This meant that one of the offices could have a long wait time, while front counter employees in the other offices sat idle. It was a major inefficiency from an integration standpoint. With cross-training, all customer service staff members would be able to handle any requests that customers came in with, providing much faster and comprehensive service.

Management by Negotiation

As any local government leader knows, managing a single office is challenging enough, let alone trying to manage three offices together. To ensure that the joint lobby truly accomplished its goals, the county officials set up a structure of supervision to help harmonize and coordinate the three different offices. It begins with a 33-page [Follow](#)

memorandum of understanding, which lays out the basic policies and procedures that each office agrees to work by. On top of that are a plethora of meetings – opportunities for issues to be talked through and negotiated. The three department heads meet weekly to discuss challenges and to do joint scheduling. The county officials try to meet monthly to discuss plans and make sure operations are running smoothly.

Another important element for success has been buy-in from the top. As County Assessor Peter Van Nortwick noted, it is all about trying to get people to see the three offices as an integrated whole, and, when the leadership can achieve this, it flows down to the front lines. When problems do arise, the three county leaders provide strong support and let employees know that they will not let them fail. As time goes by, this concept of a “three parts of a whole” gets stronger and now, when any office is hiring new employees, they even bring staff members from the other two offices to vet the candidates.

A Pay-off for Citizens and Beyond

Even with a little more energy required for management, everyone involved agrees that the benefits have been worth it. The key factor is happier customers. Citizens no longer have to navigate the county building to multiple different offices and wait in multiple different lines to deal with certain issues. Now it all takes place in a single transaction. Further, having staff cross-trained to handle all tasks instead of just those in their department means better work flow management. During peak periods, such as property tax due dates, staff from all three offices can be deployed to stave off the rush, getting customers in and out much faster. Recent statistics show that the cross-training program has eliminated around 20 hours of overall waiting per month for customers. Lasher notes that one of the only complaints he’s heard is that people are overpaying their parking meters since they don’t expect their transactions to go so quickly.

The cross-training has had some internal benefits as well. The three department managers coordinate more and can better manage workloads by spacing due dates and project timelines. There is also more flexibility in staffing as each department can “borrow” front office workers to accommodate vacation, sick leave, or all-staff meetings. As workers learn the skills of other departments, they also start to see the “big picture” of the many forms and paperwork. This helps them understand why certain things are filled out in certain ways, reducing errors.

While adding responsibilities to a job seems daunting, the department heads say they’ve seen a noticeable increase in employee satisfaction. More skills and knowledge means employees are more empowered to help customers with their questions. Of course, with more satisfied customers, the mood in the lobby is cheerier. And having more scheduling flexibility is always appreciated.

Thinking Customers First

The Clark County joint lobby project is a worthwhile model that provides some interesting lessons for all local governments. Regardless of where technical responsibility falls, the truth is that for most citizens, government is government; one poor interaction reflects on everyone. The joint lobby project is a physical manifestation of this reality. Citizens that come to the joint lobby don’t come to see a particular office, they just come to get something done, and if they have a bad experience, the blame is shared by all. Co-managing a joint facility can certainly be

challenging, but Lasher says that by keeping the needs of the customer front and center, they've transformed these three offices into much more citizen-responsive entities, one of the ultimate aims of local government.

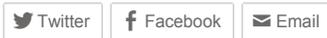
Additional Resources

- [Joint Lobby Fact Sheet](#)
- [Joint Lobby Memorandum of Understanding](#)

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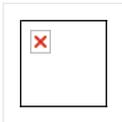
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About Josh Mahar

Josh joined MRSC in September 2013 to help manage and implement MRSC's outreach efforts. Previously, Josh spent a year at the Museum of History & Industry (MOHAI), managing digital communications and providing marketing support through the museum's monumental move to South Lake Union. Josh has also led outreach efforts for numerous community projects including the First Hill Streetcar, Unpaving Paradise P-Patch, and the Capitol Hill Light Rail Station TOD. With undergraduate degrees in History and Comparative Religion from the University of Washington, and a Master of Public Administration from the UW's Evans School of Public Affairs, Josh is a staunch Husky fan.

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