City unveils new, user-friendly website

By Jeanne Davant

Manitou Springs has a new online face — a modern, efficient website that was developed by a group of volunteers as a gift to the city.

The new site makes it much easier for users to find information quickly, allows them to take many actions that previously required a trip to City Hall and sports a clean, spiffy new look.

It also allows city employees to easily make updates and add information. Before, it could take a couple of weeks to make even a simple change, as updates had to go through El Paso County.

The site was launched at Tuesday's City Council meeting. It can be viewed now at www.manitougov. com and will go live next week under its official title, manitouspringsgov.com.

"Our Web site upgrade started out as a couple of citizens having issues with our current site," said Councilman Matt Carpenter, who worked with a team of volunteers to produce the new site.

"In July 2009, Clint Lewis did not get an ARRA meeting notice e-mail that his wife did, and he wondered why," Carpenter said. "But instead of just complaining, like most do, he offered a solution. He proposed that we set up a system where residents could sign up for e-mails and pick what information they wanted to get. And most importantly, he offered to help set it up."

"Once we got past the e-mail list part of this, I started thinking about how poor the city Web site was," Lewis said. "We came up with a list of things we thought were really important. One of the ideas was to convert to electronic (Council) packets."

Lewis, who is a regular at Council meetings, was frustrated that citizens didn't have access to materials that Council members and other groups use as a basis for discussion and decision making.

"We would come to Council and not know what was going on," Lewis said. "We thought, all this material needs to live somewhere so you don't have to come down to City Hall and pay 25 cents a page" to reproduce it.

Lewis and Carpenter also thought the site should be reorganized into categories that would make it easy for users to access information.

"We wanted it to be more logical, useful and pretty—to bring it up to contemporary times," Lewis said.

The new site's home page displays a rotating series of photos, gives a brief, introductory description of Manitou Springs and puts most-wanted information at users' fingertips. There are quick links to the city budget, Council agendas, the Municipal Code, and reports, plans and maps, as well as news and announcement summaries and information on upcoming events.

There's a new privacy policy and even a WeatherBug widget that gives the current temperature and links to forecasts and Webcams.

The site contains five major tabs, labeled Residents, Business, Visitors, Government and I Want To....

Rather than re-creating the content of sites such as that of the Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau, the Residents tab directs users to information about trash and recycling service, pet licensing requirements, the Arts Council, the library and School District 14.

The Business tab links users to useful information about starting a business in Manitou, business license and tax reporting forms, and helpful outside agencies such as the Chamber and the Colorado Department of Revenue.

The Visitors tab gives a brief overview of Manitou and links with the Chamber Web site.

Under the Government tab, citizens can find information about everything from the Climate Protection Plan to the role of the City Clerk. All city departments, boards and commissions are reached through this tab, along with useful links. For example, the Planning Department's page answers basic, frequently asked questions; supplies information and forms relating to property improvements; and links to fact sheets and guidelines. The City Council page offers information about meetings and provides a ward map.

The I Want To... tab points users quickly and easily to the exact information they're seeking. Menu items guide people who want to apply for boards and commissions, business licenses or liquor licenses; connect with the city; learn about everything from parking permits to the mineral content of the springs; locate a building; pay a bill; rent a city facility; report graffiti or dogs at large; or view an events calendar or Council agenda. Throughout the site, "we tried to put in information people need the most," Carpenter said. What-you-see-is-what-you-get editing will make it possible for city personnel to expand and update information quickly and to immediately post changes.

Lewis laid the groundwork for the site, worked with InFront Webworks, the firm that created the site's layout and framework, and helped drive the development process, Carpenter said.

Other key team members included John Trimble, who reviewed content and smoothed grammar; Jay Rohrer, who set up the residents' section and helped keep the team focused; City Clerk Donna Kast, who interviewed city staff to determine what questions citizens most frequently ask and provided content; and Planning Assistant Kari Kilroy, who provided more answers for the team and produced most of the content.

The new site didn't cost the city a penny, Carpenter said. Team members raised and donated money and time to produce it. Maintenance costs for the city will be low - around $300 a year.

An ecstatic City Council unanimously approved the new site Tuesday night.

"All that work required to get all that information up there is what really impresses me," Mayor Marc Snyder said. "I think it will become the go-to site."

[Return to Article Index]