

OUR VIEW

Government, open and at your fingertips

OUR POSITION: *Online services, phone apps and the like bring people closer to public services.*

Think of "open government" and what readily comes to mind is meetings conducted with the doors open, paper records available for perusal, the opportunity for citizens to add their 2 cents to policy deliberations.

There's more to it, though. Open government means accessible government. Or, accessible as feasible. In the best circumstances, it's a function of the buzz-worthy phrase, "customer service." Which means convenient service to taxpayers trying to negotiate a red-taped web of the government they pay for.

One example of how-not is an all-time classic: the Department of Motor Vehicles. Ask someone about navigating government services and they'll probably groan and mention the DMV. In large part, nowadays, that perception of hell for wheels is a myth. Around here in our experience, vehicle registration and licensing is not painful. Routine stuff can be handled

online or by mail. Our concept of "open and accessible" is evolving along with technology. We now expect, rightly, for public meetings to be broadcast live online and available for replay later. We can communicate with public officials via email. We can follow county or city government news and events on Facebook or Twitter.

Increasingly, we can communicate, obtain information or conduct business with the device we carry in our pocket or purse: a smartphone.

Smartly, government is adapting to that reality: Yes, Siri, there's an app for that.

Kudos to local government agencies that are increasingly using cellphone apps to bring government closer to people and people closer to their government. Phone apps are convenient and simple: Government at you fingertips.

(For those of you stuck in the flip or wall phone age, "app" is short for an application that can be downloaded onto a mobile device, then opened by touch to bring you weather, news, music or maps/directions.)

Our favorite phone feature is the Marriage Scheduling app from the office of Charlotte County Clerk Roger Eaton. Want to get married? Download the app and fill out a marriage application, schedule a ceremony and receive text notifications. (Get me to the Clerk's Office on time? Ceremonies are held in a newly redesigned marriage room at the county Justice Center.

Presumably — or hopefully — you won't need it more than once per couple. Eaton said since the system was brought online more than 200 couples have plighted their troth there.

Eaton's office also updated and automated the jury management system. Included in the process was the first-in-Florida use of the myJuryServices app. It texts people summoned for juries and allows them to scan in when they arrive. The office also has developed a system for jurors to be paid on the day they serve, not wait for the check to come in the mail.

Over in North Port, the City Commission recently agree to join Ring Neighborhoods, a digital neighborhood watch system with an app for homeowners to view the scene from doorbell cameras. The Police Department also can obtain access to footage. Some 3,400 have signed up.

The Charlotte County Sheriff's Department has also gotten in on the phone tech-wave with a new, free mobile app. Citizens can get news alerts, contact the police and send in tips, with photos. There's a map of sex offenders, records of arrests, etc.

Yes, it's a quickly changing world. Good governments are changing with it.