

County aims high



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Matryoshka nesting doll likenesses of County Commissioner Corey O'Brien, right, Mayor Chris Doherty, left, Governor Tom Corbett, lying down, and Uncle Sam joined together recently to view each other's official government websites.

Website is very useful, needs redesign

(Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of four columns about the websites of Scranton, Lackawanna County, Pennsylvania and the federal government. This week's column focuses on Lackawanna County.)

Much like Scranton, the county's site at lackawannacounty.org was a lot brighter and more energetic than I expected of a government operation. It seems I'll have to adjust my stereotype of the way governments communicate.

The county's site is more focused on taking care of business than the city's, though there is an effort to put its best foot forward. Each page on the site features a banner across the top with nice color photos of various county locations and activities. They give the impression of a thriving place with lots to do.

Useful but not pretty

The rest of the home page is mostly text and links. There's a smattering of colorful graphic links placed awkwardly around the sides and bottom. These take you to pages, other sites, videos or downloads of various county operations, such as the library system, Everhart Museum, a calendar of events and more.

There's also a video in the center of the home page that shows a commissioners' hearing on fiscal challenges facing the county. I had to download Microsoft's Silverlight software

in order to view the video and other photo slide shows on the site. The video was almost two hours long, so I never did get around to watching it all.

The numerous text links on the home page take you to a wide variety of information. There's a latest information feature, photo galleries, a baseball archive, information on parks and recreation, news and events, quick links to different departments and more.

While the links are certainly useful to many people, the design of the page leaves a lot to be desired. The title type at the top of the page needs to be bigger and the rest of the type needs to be more unified. There are too many different sizes and colors which give it a slapped-together look. Some objects protrude off the page, contributing to the sense of disorganization.

Taking care of business

On the left side of the page is a column with links to all the site's features. This is designed well, making a lot of the clutter on the rest of the page unnecessary. If you need to take care of county business online these links are very helpful.

The first link takes you to a list of all the county departments. Each department has its own page with contact information, the office location and a description of its functions. Some of the departments have more content, such as downloadable files or videos. The departments are grouped according to the types of services they provide.

The next link takes you to a page full of downloadable forms. The forms are grouped by departments, such as assessor's office or

clerk of judicial records. There are dozens of different forms available making this a very useful part of the site.

Video, audio and written records of the commissioners' meetings are available via the next link. The list of meetings goes back to 2007. These records are valuable for research or as a sleep aid.

Judging by the News and Events links, the site could use some updating. All of the featured events had already occurred when I looked at the site. Also, the Sports link had nothing on the page. The Job Openings link has positions ranging from van drivers to prison warden, but the majority of them have already been filled.

Vendors wishing to do work for the county can download all the requests for proposals and qualifications at the next link. There's a link with contact information for all the municipalities in the county and links to the websites of those that have them. Area Links connects you to the websites of various nonprofits that have affiliations with the county. Attractions provides links to the Web pages of county parks and tourist sites. Finally there are links to the county's history and quick facts about it that make for some interesting reading.

Lackawanna County's website is an ambitious effort that has some real value for people wishing to visit or conduct business with the county. It serves its primary function of providing residents and visitors with information, but it could use a makeover to improve the experience.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.