Chief focus of website

KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

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

Governor dominates commonwealth site

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

Gov. Tom Corbett has already made a big impact on the state in his short time in office. Drastic cuts in education and social programs coupled with a free ride for the burgeoning natural gas industry have captured the attention of many residents.

He has made an equally big impact on the state's website at **pa.gov.** The home page, a portal to all of the state's online offerings, looks more like a campaign commercial for the governor.

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InSites

A slideshow of photos of Gov. Corbett making speeches, shaking hands with constituents and smiling at children dominates the top of the page. Headlines accompanying the pictures boast of the governor's self-proclaimed successes.

At the bottom of the page is a series of videos featuring Gov. Corbett kayaking, speaking at graduations, signing bills into law, visiting businesses and playing with puppies. Descriptions alongside the videos tell tales of the governor restoring common sense to government, saving seniors' benefits and making the state more business-friendly.

More than just a pretty face

There's also a link to the governor's state website on the home page. Here you can read his resume, watch more videos of him or even download a high-resolution photo of him. If you're not convinced that Gov. Corbett is the best thing to ever happen to Pennsylvania after five minutes on the site, you'll definitely know what he looks like.

Fortunately Pennsylvania's site is much more than just a celebration of its chief executive. The state government is a huge operation with many departments serving a wide variety of the taxpayers' needs. Most, if not all, of those departments' Web pages can be accessed from the main portal site.

There are too many departments and services linked to pa.gov to feature all of them in this column. I'll just try to cover the organization and operation of the site to give you an idea of what it has to offer.

Right at the top of the page are two drop-down menus and a search field. The first drop-down features a list of links to all the state agencies represented on the site. The departments of education, revenue, transportation, public welfare and even the lottery are just a few of the many agencies listed here. Though a lot of the agencies maintain their Web pages within the pa.gov site, many of the links take you off the site to the agencies' own websites.

The second drop-down menu features online services offered by many of the state agencies listed under the first menu. Here you can get a hunting license, order a vanity license plate for your vehicle, pay your state taxes and much more.

Plenty of information

The links to agencies and services are pretty comprehensive. And the Web pages and sites they lead to all contain a wealth of information. It appears that our state workers have invested a lot of time and energy creating a vast and useful store of online resources.

Also at the top of the homepage are links to sections on living, working, playing and learning in Pennsylvania. A media link takes you to news releases on the state and other media-related information. A government link leads to information on the commonwealth's political structure, links to county websites and various other government services for residents, such as voter registration, contact information for your state representatives, campaign finance records and more.

There also are links to the first lady's, lieutenant governor's and cabinet's websites on the home page. A series of illustrated links in the right-hand rail and tabs across the bottom highlight areas of the site that I assume are visited frequently. There's a lot of overlapping of content among the links, allowing various departments to be accessed from several different areas.

Mixing it up

The design of the site is a mixed bag. The navigation is placed logically, intuitive to use and functions well for the most part (I only encountered one bad link). The Pennsylvania color scheme of dark blue and gold is used effectively throughout the portal site. The typography displays an appropriate hierarchy and mostly is unified, with some exceptions.

The home page could be more dynamic. Pennsylvania is a beautiful state, so it would be nice to see some images from around the commonwealth, rather than mug after mug of the governor. There's a large welcoming paragraph in the middle of the page that could be made smaller to make room for more interesting art.

While the design of the pages in the portal site is consistent, this unity starts to fall apart when you link to the various departments. This is understandable when dealing with the web presence of an entire state government. I'm sure different departments have built their sites at different times under different administrations. Redesigning them all to match would be a massive operation and probably not the best use of tax dollars.

Pa.gov functions well as a portal site. Once you get past the overwhelming presence of Gov. Corbett there's a lot of substance to the site.

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