

# Laptops helping governments go paperless, conserve money and resources

October 20 2009, By Jim Adams

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Minneapolis metro-area cities are saving both dollars and trees by reducing their paper-shuffling. From utility billings to city council agenda packets, more city staffs are using the Internet and flash drives to share information and save expenses on printing documents.

Some Minnesota cities, such as Ramsey, Osseo, Minnetrista, Buffalo and Big Lake, have equipped their city council members with laptops that they use during meetings so they don't need printed agenda packets.

Dozens more now create electronic agenda packets for residents, though some of their council members continue to use paper copies.

"It was wasteful making all this paperwork when we have the means to do it electronically," said Ramsey Mayor Bob Ramsey. "It is a learning curve for the council. Some members are not real computer-savvy. But it's a simple process, and they catch on."

Among other conservation efforts underway:

- Minneapolis saved \$2,000 this year by posting its 654-page budget book online. It still printed 144 copies, but that's 80 fewer than last year. And it plans to print only 44 copies next year, said spokesman Matt Lindstrom.
- In Minneapolis and Eden Prairie, residents can pay utility and other city bills online with a credit card or through their banks, paper-free.

- St. Paul over the summer began implementing a paperless purchasing system for equipment and supplies that will integrate 25 different department billing systems. "We are electronically streamlining operations in the city," said spokesman Bob Hume. "It's a winner for taxpayers and the environment."

In Ramsey, the paper-saving effort began after a new mayor and two new council members took office in January. The city has gone electronic for its City Council, board and commission meetings, though a few officials still prefer printouts.

"The council can sit down, open up a laptop, and there is Case 1, Case 2, Case 3," said Dean Busch, Ramsey's information technology manager.

Busch estimated that after paying \$3,700 for laptops plus some related costs, the city will realize a net savings of about \$5,550 in the first year and more after that. The savings include \$1,400 from printing only two paper agenda packets instead of 23 for the biweekly meetings. Copying fewer packets also saves staff time.

Big Lake spent about \$4,200 for seven laptops so its council and commission members, except the park board, could go electronic, said City Clerk Gina Wolbeck. "I used to do 22 copies of the council packet, some up to 500 pages each. Now I do two. It's made a huge difference. I think the laptops have paid for themselves already."

The city made the move after printing costs for council meetings ran about \$4,000 over budget last year.

City officials acknowledge that the dollar savings are modest in the early stages of such a changeover, but they see big potential savings in paper, postage and time. Minneapolis spends about \$500,000 a year in postage alone to mail more than 100,000 bills a month for water, sewer, trash

hauling and recycling, Lindstrom said.

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## ONE CITY'S SAVINGS

Ramsey, Minn., cited these costs and savings in going to online city council agenda packets:

### COSTS:

- \$3,700 for six laptops and 20 flash drives to download agenda data. (One of the seven council members uses his own [laptop](#).) The laptops may need to be replaced in three to five years.
- \$534 annually for anti-virus protection

### SAVINGS:

- \$8,350-a-year reduction in copier maintenance contract
  - \$1,400 a year in reduced paper costs
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