

City of Portage, Michigan Parks PDA Program

Maintaining a high quality of life for residents and visitors is a top priority in Portage. Fourteen parks covering 721 acres of land are the pride of Portage and contribute immensely to the high quality of life available here! Keeping all that property shipshape for residents and visitors is no small task. A broken picnic table, a torn tennis net, an overflowing trash can, a leaking faucet, or even something as simple as a malfunctioning streetlight could diminish a visit for someone. When problems occur the best policy is to handle them quickly. The City of Portage Parks Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) Program was developed to do just that—speed up the process of identifying and remedying problems in Portage Parks by using available resources and new technology to compile reports and issue work orders promptly.

A few short years ago, the process for reporting park maintenance issues involved cumbersome checklist forms that park rangers filled out by hand during their tours of duty. After their shifts, rangers would turn inspection reports in to the parks office for clerical staff to compile and pass on to the park superintendent. A hand written work order would then be generated for the maintenance teams. Up to four working days could pass from the time a problem was identified until crewmembers received a work order. The desire to complete repairs quickly resulted in the use of creativity and technology to speed up the outmoded work order plan.

With the goal set to hasten the park maintenance work order delivery system, the wireless program was included in the city's 2001-2002 Capital Improvement Program with an estimated budget of \$20,000.

A request for proposal was written and sent to 24 vendors in September of 2001. The proposal called for conversion of the paper forms to an interactive screen on a wireless device. Additional requirements called for ability to review the work orders and record the time, materials and equipment used to complete each job. The PDAs would need the ability to interface with the work order software on the city's AS/400 computer system. The program would require a mechanism for data to be uploaded from the PDAs to existing city software in a usable format and set up of management reporting on the computer system.

Maintenance checklist forms used by park rangers—the Park Ranger Patrol Report and the Security Light Checklist—were programmed for use on the PDAs. To facilitate reporting, numbered plaques were placed on all light posts in the city (784 in all) so rangers could simply indicate by number on the portable device when an inoperable light is identified.

The adaptation of the park ranger inspection program from clipboards and multi-part forms to electronic handheld devices took several months of programming. Field-testing took place during the summer of 2002 and the system went “live” in September of 2002. Additional programming and reporting functions were addressed during the winter of 2002 and the program was fully operational in March of 2003. The actual cost of the project was \$24,306.

Thorough training on PDA devices is essential, and was among the lessons learned on the Parks PDA Project. Fortunately, many employees today have computer skills and are eager to learn new technology. City staff have acquired programming knowledge on the devices and are able to perform their own updates to the checklists on the PDAs, making updates available immediately and saving money on fees charged by outside consultants for programming.

The ability of the reporting features made available through programming of the Parks PDA Project allow for generation of maintenance reports that can provide information on maintenance costs for budgeting purposes, frequency of occurrences, seasonal demands, patterns, and other data helpful for planning and streamlining maintenance tasks. Reports can also be used to indicate vehicle use, response times to work orders and to provide accountability for rangers out in the field, as reports pinpoint time and location of notations on the PDA. PDA produced reports are currently generating an average of 92 work orders per month under the new reporting system.

From the city standpoint, reporting capabilities of the PDA Program have enabled the Parks Department to meet the primary goal of the project—to quickly and efficiently issue work orders for parks maintenance items requiring an immediate response. Days were cut from the previous timeline for issuing work orders and ultimately making repairs in public areas of the city. Some repairs necessitated immediate action because safety issues were involved and in some cases being able to address minor problems quickly kept them from becoming major problems.

The Parks PDA Program is also a success because it opens the door to other applications of this type of technology in the delivery of municipal services and the goal of the city to offer efficient, cost-effective services as well.

The success of the Portage Parks PDA Program has been recognized extensively by LANSAs, Inc., a software provider that markets software that integrates with the AS/400 computer system the City of Portage operates. LANSAs issued a press release when the PDA Program was implemented and also featured an article in the Industry Showcase column of LANSAs Review magazine and has a case study of the Portage project on its website at www.lansa.com. Wireless device manufacturer, Unitech has a link to the LANSAs case study on its website at www.unitech.com.

Success of the Parks PDA Program means that the City of Portage will continue to pursue operational efficiencies through the use of technology. And continue to be a city that offers high quality of life amenities to all, while taking advantage of technology to maintain a lean city staff, thus keeping taxes to residents at the lowest manageable level possible.