



CITY OF FORT SASKATCHEWAN CITY HALL

City of Fort Saskatchewan Boosts Transparency with Improved Streaming by Switching to eSCRIBE

Customer
City of Fort Saskatchewan

Location
Fort Saskatchewan, AB

Industry
Municipality

About the Client

Home to more than 25,500 people, Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta is a vibrant economic and cultural hub located 15 minutes northeast of Edmonton on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. The City of Fort Saskatchewan proudly manages state-of-the-art recreation, cultural and historic amenities including 75 km of outdoor trails, a performing arts theatre and fitness centre within the Dow Centennial Centre, and the 1875-1885 NWMP Fort Representation in historic downtown.

As the City's Legislative Officer, Sheryl Exley is responsible for approximately 24 council meetings each year. Having been involved with council meeting recording for over two decades, she has seen many changes from the days when minutes were all written by hand and then typed.

Exley has extensive job responsibilities beyond just meetings, including providing administrative support to each councillor, budget management, and serving as the Census Coordinator to track the city's growing population. Every minute that can be saved through better electronic meeting management is valuable time she can spend on her other duties.



The Challenge

The City of Fort Saskatchewan first adopted electronic meeting management in 2012. The software delivered the efficiencies the City expected over their previous manual, paper-based methods, but limitations of the system became more evident over the years.

"Our first system served its purpose at the beginning, but as time transpired, new programs were becoming available that didn't require as much recurring start-up effort or as much systems maintenance," said Exley. "The old system required me to work off three separate programs to use all of its functionality, so it was a lot of work to get it up and running before each council meeting, and it was hard to troubleshoot if we had difficulties."

The Significance of Streaming

Most problematic though, were the system's limitations for video streaming. Live streams and on-demand clips were not compatible with tablets and mobile devices, and even viewing on desktop PCs required a now-obsolete browser plug-in.

"Video streaming is a huge component of making sure we're transparent to our residents about how we conduct business and how council formulates its decisions," explained Exley. "Residents were frustrated, as they could not view our live streams or archived videos on portable devices. And as operating systems and browsers progressed and no longer supported the Silverlight plug-in, it became harder and harder for people to watch our videos."

Time for a Change

Unable to solve these challenges with their existing product, Exley realized that the City would need to change systems. "The software updates were not available for all modules," she said. "We could update certain components of the program, but would lose other components such as voting and

video streaming because updates were not available. This would be a step back for the City. When we looked at eSCRIBE, we were pleased to discover that they already had what we needed.”

The Solution

While the ability to easily stream meetings to mobile devices was among the City's top criteria, other capabilities of the eSCRIBE platform reinforced that it would be the ideal choice.

“The ability to access the eSCRIBE software from anywhere through a web-based interface is phenomenal, and a significant benefit over our hardware-bound previous system,” Exley praised. “It is user-friendly and provides tremendous flexibility during live council meetings, such as being able to easily edit motions.”

The City also valued eSCRIBE's approach to data storage. “With our previous system, all of our information was housed at our City Hall, which was a risk if anything was to happen to that one storage location,” Exley explained. “With eSCRIBE, all information is managed and stored in various sites within Canada, which helps safeguard our videos and archived meetings.”

A Complete, Integrated Platform

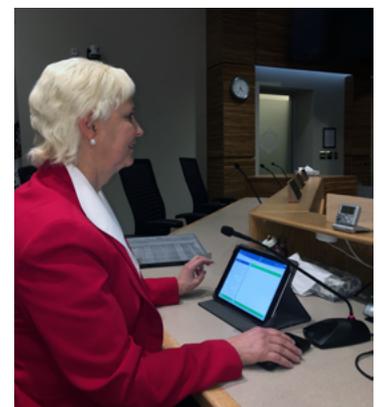
The City of Fort Saskatchewan chose the eSCRIBE Transparency Bundle, which includes modules for meeting management, report management, a participant portal, Internet publishing, and most notably for their goals, the limit-free Webcasting Plus fully-managed streaming solution.

The City also deployed eSCRIBE's Vote Manager module, enabling seamlessly-integrated electronic voting, and augmented it with an advanced graphical public display. Featuring a horseshoe-pattern seating arrangement chart showing how each councillor voted, the graphical representation is shown on public displays for in-person meeting attendees and included in the live and recorded video streams to further bolster transparency.

Last but certainly not least, the City licensed the eSCRIBE Meetings iPad app, providing councillors secure access to meetings through their tablets. While members previously used space-consuming laptops in council chambers, they now need only their iPad to view agendas, make notes, and vote electronically through the app.

Smooth Transition

Exley found the process of deploying eSCRIBE fast and easy. Implementation started in August 2017, with the first live eSCRIBE-powered meetings taking place in October.



Mayor Katchur starts her iPad prior to a meeting

"I couldn't believe how quickly things happened with eSCRIBE," she said. "From the eSCRIBE team working with our IT group to integrate with Active Directory Federated Services for authentication, to the initial templates they created for me and my own learning experience, I give eSCRIBE 100% on the process."

The Results

Switching to eSCRIBE delivered benefits for residents, councillors and Exley herself. For public constituents, the improvements in video streaming were met quickly with positive feedback.

"Residents have commented on social media how nice it is to be able to view our videos from anywhere on a tablet or smartphone," Exley shared. "For those who can't come to council meetings, being able to watch them from home is remarkable. People also like being able to scroll through the agenda on the website and click an item to go directly to that part of the video."

Councillor Convenience

The eSCRIBE iPad has similarly earned praise from councillors, while eliminating the costly and cumbersome paper agenda packages they were previously supplied with at meetings. "It's so user-friendly," said Exley. "Council is very pleased with how they can view and access agendas and vote on the iPad, and I like how remarkably easy it is to compile, index and make the PDF available through the app."

Councillors have also found the app's secure remote access capabilities to be very beneficial. "When a member of council can't attend a meeting, they can phone in and vote on items through the app," Exley explained. "It allows them to participate in council meetings in real time even when they can't be in chambers. That makes their job easier, which is always one of our goals."

Operational Ease

For Exley, using eSCRIBE has simplified operation, saving her time while eliminating concerns. "Starting a meeting is just so easy, including getting the video streaming going and the actual conducting of the meeting," she praised. "With eSCRIBE, I am confident when I start a meeting that things will go smoothly."

Even more important, eSCRIBE allows Exley to meet the City's goals for keeping the public informed. "eSCRIBE gives us the opportunity to be more open and transparent," she said. "It definitely makes it easier for me to make sure I am relaying the decisions of council and the processes behind them in the best way I can."

A Platform for Growth

While the City of Fort Saskatchewan has immediate plans to integrate their eSCRIBE deployment with the city's LaserFiche records management system, it's the long-term future of the platform that excites Exley the most.

"eSCRIBE strives to make their product even better. We want to be able to use the system for a long time. Seeing eSCRIBE growing with us and looking at new ways to improve is phenomenal. The software delivers on its promises, and it's clear that eSCRIBE values us as a customer," she concluded.



*Sheryl Exley,
Legislative Officer*