

PROJECT BRIEF

Improving Public Engagement and Public Records Management at the Oregon DEQ

October 2016

TAKE-AWAYS

In February 2016, researchers from the US Forest Service had detected toxics in moss samples adjacent to several businesses in Portland. This began a series of events that highlighted both the significance of public records requests and the difficulty DEQ has in responding to complex requests.

The interest in issues related to air toxics put a strain on the capacity of the agency to respond in a timely fashion to the news media as well as citizens groups.

In August 2016, DEQ retained the Center for Public Service (CPS) to provide an outside evaluation of its efforts to improve the handling of future public records requests and to recommend improvements to the way they engage the public.

CPS evaluated DEQ's public records response processes and recommended a series of improvements. These included the creation of two new positions, with one in charge of public engagement and public records response, and the other reporting to this manager, but focused on responding to public records requests.

CHALLENGES

The Oregon DEQ is responsible for protecting air and water quality, for cleaning spills and releases of hazardous materials, for managing the proper disposal of hazardous and solid waste, and for enforcing environmental laws. Oregon's Public Records Law provides broad direction to agencies regarding public access to records. Responding to complex public records requests has proven to be problematic for many state agencies. Most public agencies have not had the resources to invest in electronic records management systems, which leaves the public frustrated that requests for records are processed slowly and sometimes ineffectively.

CPS was also asked to review DEQ's public engagement efforts and organization. The ability of DEQ to succeed at their mission requires engaging the public and the regulated

community to understand the role each plays in meeting the goals of protecting public health and the environment. DEQ has a history of being reactive rather than proactive in this arena.

STRATEGY

CPS conducted over forty interviews with DEQ staff, the staff of other agencies, members of the public and the media. Research was conducted to determine current best practices in the field of public records management and response. CPS became very familiar with the current practices, policies and procedures. The team was then able to assess the strengths and weaknesses and to compare them to best practices being used by others. The lack of attention, focus, and capacity has led to the criticism of the agency by the public and the media.

RESULTS

CPS's review led to support for creating a new Public Records Disclosure and Engagement Manager as well as a second position, dubbed a Public Records Request Coordinator. The team also found that DEQ's current public records request process largely comported with legal obligations, but needs changes and process improvements which are described in the report.

The CPS report also recommends DEQ undertake an organizational development effort to change the culture of the agency. It also recommends raising the profile of communications and engagement, and to become much more proactive. In addition, the DEQ was advised to seek approval to make significant investments in technology to improve efficiency and to provide a more timely response to requests for records.

FULL REPORT

Read the full report at:

pdx.edu/cps/profile/deq-taskforce