

County of Santa Barbara

CLIENT SUCCESS: ARRA

SNAPSHOT



ORGANIZATION

The County of Santa Barbara California is located on the Pacific coast in Southern California. The Santa Barbara County Government is the governing body for the County's 405,000 residents.

CHALLENGE

Manage information about ARRA funds received from the federal government and make selected information easily available to the public; build and deploy the project within a very short time frame.

STRATEGY

Create a two-fold solution: An internal management application and a public facing website.

SOLUTION

A public website provides citizens with current information about ARRA funds so citizens can see exactly how, when, and where their tax dollars are being spent. A user-friendly administrative application enables County staff to easily manage ARRA data.

RESULTS

Santa Barbara County's ARRA application informs the public about federal stimulus dollars coming into the County. Delivering crucial accountability and transparency for ARRA funds, the solution has become a model for other government agencies.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 is an unprecedented effort to jumpstart the U.S. economy, create or save millions of jobs, and put a "down payment" on addressing long-neglected infrastructure projects. The total nationwide funding equals \$787 billion, which includes \$288 billion in tax credits and \$499 billion in spending. These funds have been a boon to state and local governments, but also an administrative burden. State, county and city employees must monitor each program and account for all project expenditures. Transparency is essential, since citizens have a vested interest in how the money is appropriated. It's a tall order—which is why many government agencies are having a difficult time presenting the public with up-to-date information about ARRA activities.

At the County of Santa Barbara, project leaders were suddenly tasked with managing their share of these funds as well as with providing citizens with the ability to monitor the progress of the recovery efforts. With help from Visus LLC, the County created a web-based information system that meticulously tracks the funds received from the Federal Government, providing current information to county workers and the general public about all ARRA activities.

"Over the ten years that we have worked with Visus, they have always delivered innovative solutions—on time and within budget."

– Jennifer Slayman, IT Project Manager, Santa Barbara County

"There was a definite sense of urgency for this project," states Sally Nagy, Chief Information Officer at Santa Barbara County. "We literally needed it completed within just a few weeks. Based on previous work Visus has done for us, we were confident in their ability to complete the project."

With few standards from the Federal Government for managing ARRA data, and few precedents from other government agencies for how to build a suitable website, the County looked to Visus for guidance.

"It was clear that there was going to be a directive of transparency and accountability so citizens could see how, when, and where their tax dollars were being spent," says David Matson, Assistant Director of the Redevelopment Agency and Deputy Director of Long Range Planning in Santa Barbara County. "We didn't have any pre-existing system that was capable of meeting these requirements from a programmatic perspective, let alone a reporting, compliance, and transparency perspective. What we did have was the creative thought and a defined concept of where we needed to be. All that was needed was the technical engine to be built very quickly."

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Rapid Development

Visus worked with the Santa Barbara County Long Range Planning Team to understand their needs and processes for gathering and tracking information. Initially, the County Webmaster spent two weeks putting together some static Web pages to meet reporting needs. The deadline for Visus to complete a fully functioning web portal and administrative back-end application was a scant four weeks after that.

“This project had a very challenging time frame of just a few weeks. Visus used their expertise to create the entire solution from scratch.”

– David Matson, Assistant Director of the Redevelopment Agency and Deputy Director of Long Range Planning in Santa Barbara County

“We recognized that we needed a public-facing interface out there sooner rather than later to give decision-makers adequate tools to manage this project,” says Jennifer Slayman, Information Technology Project Manager at Santa Barbara County. “It had to be robust enough to last for several years, and hopefully have some co-benefits that could be developed into follow-up projects to meet other needs in the County.”

“Because the local requirements and our own concepts remained fluid during the early planning stages, Visus needed to be able to retool on the spur of the moment,” adds Matson.

In response, Visus created a secure, web-based system that enables County staff to track and manage funds and allows instantaneous reporting to the public of all funds received and used. Anyone can visit the site to learn how federal funds are being distributed to the Santa Barbara County community.

The secure, web-based system includes an internal management application and a public facing website. Data is stored in a Microsoft SQL Server database. The interface was created using Microsoft’s ASP.NET technology. County users are authenticated with Microsoft Windows Active Directory.

“One of the valuable tools Visus provided for us was a map

that helps our internal users see the correlation between the database and the way content will be displayed on the website,” Slayman explains. “The database has around 150 different fields on various pages. The map helps people know that by putting information on a certain field it will appear on a corresponding section of the website. That made it much easier to do data entry.”

Today, Santa Barbara County’s internal-facing ARRA application enables members of the ARRA management team to enter information on programs and projects. It also allows them to attach a variety of documents and post them on the website. “Of particular importance was the ability to track the various funds coming into the County so that the County was well-positioned to comply with State and Federal requirements,” says Sharon Friedrichsen, Assistant to the CEO. “The fact that the public can now see these reports in real time was all the better.”

The public-facing website, which is updated hourly, also receives steady traffic from citizens interested in how ARRA funds are being used. “This system broke new ground in the speed with which it was made available to the public,” Matson says. “The entire project, including the database, was created from scratch. After a fast but thorough discovery and planning process, Visus rose to the occasion and delivered the tool that could display the results we needed within a challenging time frame.”

Measuring Success

One of the ways the County determines the value of the new system is by comparing it to the early concepts Santa Barbara County had for working with ARRA data. Nagy explains. “When I first met with Long Range Planning, they had two ideas of how they would track this information,” she says. “One was with spreadsheets, and the other was with a Microsoft Access database. Neither of those options would have included the type of web interface that we needed, which means we would have been tracking information internally with those tools and then replicating that information to a web page for public viewing. By storing this information in a relational database that automatically updates the website, Visus helped us optimize our efforts.”

Matson says the site goes “much deeper” into the ARRA project than just about any other similar site thanks to the SQL Server database, which can store everything from high-level project overviews to detailed documentation

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on individual projects. County employees and the public use it to monitor everything from high-level snapshots of ARRA activity to detailed grant applications and economic analyses.

“Visus quickly understood what was required. They delivered a powerful solution that benefits all county citizens.”

– Sally Nagy, Chief Information Officer, Santa Barbara County

The database has evolved over time as the County has learned what is most important. “The map Visus created has been extremely useful in helping us wrap our heads around the next phases of development and how we can continue to refine the back end to meet the needs of ARRA as they unfold,” Slayman explains. “The requirements for data tracking, public information disclosure and reporting continue to evolve, so the database has to do the same.”

Fortunately, expanding the system has been relatively painless. “We have been able to easily add new functionality,” Slayman continues. “In the next phases of the project, we have a vision for building more reporting functionality into the system.”

With the large amounts of money coming to local jurisdictions from the federal government, accountability is key. “Visus helped us succeed by creating a solution that allows people to see exactly how much money has been received across all the programs, and where that money is going,” Nagy summarizes. “They did the job quickly and within the budget guidelines we approved. We have been contacted by several other government agencies that recognize it as a job well done and want to create something similar. It is clear that our system is a model that can be replicated by other government agencies.”

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