

History of Digital Towpath 1999-2019

The first twenty years

The Digital Towpath Project (DTP) grew from a project, facilitated by SUNY Institute of Technology's Office of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) and supported by funding from Niagara Mohawk Power Company (NiMo). In 1998, CPE met with representatives from eight primarily small, rural local governments with part-time officials who were looking for a cost-effective way to extend their service to their communities through municipal websites. CPE convinced NiMo to underwrite the proposal. The project was one of 20 development efforts funded by the NiMo initiative and the only one to survive.

Beginning in early 1999, CPE brought together two officials from each of the initial eight municipalities and a team of website developers to begin the process of developing custom software to directly address the needs and skills of those officials. The group met at least once and often twice a week for nearly a year to discuss what was needed and what would be doable considering the technology skill level of most officials in small towns and villages.

The system this team developed is a shared content management system with separate databases of content for each website. The first eight sites went live in January of 2000. Within a couple of months later officials from an additional ten towns and villages in Oneida and Herkimer Counties formed a second group of users who, with the first group, refined the software and devised training materials for any new adopters that might come. The second group of sites went live in early 2001 and the project got a name – Digital Towpath, because the group of governments was located along the original towpath, the Erie Canal. The project grew by word of mouth. By the end of 2003, there were 40 Digital Towpath websites.

In 2004 NiMo was bought out by National Grid and closed their Community Development office, transferring responsibility for maintenance of the systems to a private company in Oswego and awarding them the last NiMo grant in order to stabilize the aging code and improve the system's usability by adding new modules; new functionality; a graphic administrative interface; and a shared, domain-based email system available to all member governments.

CPE assisted in the submission of a grant proposal, underwritten by the Northern Oneida County Council of Governments (NOCCOG), through the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF) of the NYS Archives. CPE hired a part-time employee to manage the administration of the Digital Towpath Project. The NOCCOG grant proposal was accepted and that employee assumed responsibility for the successful completion of the grant project through a contract with SUNY Research Foundation through SUNY IT CPE. At the end of 2004, there were 65 Digital Towpath websites.

During 2005, the CPE employee, in her role as Project Director for Digital Towpath, focused efforts on gaining statewide recognition for the project. The consortium received a Best of NY award from the Government Technology Center and a Best Practices award from the NYS Forum. The Project Director spoke at Forum committee meetings and with other agency personnel to introduce them to the project.

The Project Director also wrote two grant project proposals – one for an Office of Real Property Services RPTATIP grant and one for a NYS Archives LGRMIF grant.

The communities that make up the Digital Towpath Project organized under article 5-G of NYS Municipal Code forming the Digital Towpath Cooperative, adopted an Agreement for Services, which is the group's intermunicipal agreement, and Organizational Regulations, which lays out the governance model for the group. There were 70 Digital Towpath websites at the end of 2005.

Both grants were awarded in 2006. The RPTATIP grant was awarded through the Town of Danube as lead agency but managed by the Project Director through a contract with CPE. The LGRMIF grant was awarded directly to the new consortium. The Project Director increased her efforts to market the project to small, rural local governments, attending or speaking at conferences and joining the Office of Cyber Security and Critical Infrastructure's Local Government Cyber Security Committee. Most of the latter part of the year was spent assuring that both grant projects could be successfully completed and members would receive support in their implementation. At the end of 2006, there were 87 Digital Towpath websites.

The grant projects were successfully completed in 2007. DTP now had new functionality and online training resources. The Project Director continued her efforts to market the project through speaking engagements at conferences and for small groups of municipalities at special events. At the end of 2007, there were 99 Digital Towpath members, all with websites and many with official email.

The private company in Oswego reorganized in 2008 and became less interested in continuing a relationship with the cooperative. Billing and member management was shifted to the Project Director through a contract between the cooperative and SUNY IT CPE. Work began to move DTP services to a new data center utilizing new hardware obtained through grants and gifts from CPE. The cooperative was awarded another LGRMIF grant to study email use and management in small local governments in New York in order to assess the feasibility of expanding the DTP email system to include email archiving. At the end of 2008, there were 105 DTP members.

In January 2009, all domains except those in the Dot-US Locality-based, federally managed system were moved into a single registrar account managed by DTP administrative staff and all services were moved into a commercial data center. The email use study was completed and resulted in a plan for implementation that required the establishment of a storage system for the output of an email archiving system as a first stage. A grant proposal was submitted for the development of six new websites within the DTP system. Work began on a specialized module to address the need for stormwater management reporting for municipalities designated as MS-4 by the NYS Department of Environment Conservation. Funding was through a grant from Herkimer-Oneida Counties Comprehensive Planning Program. A part-time Director for Development was added to CPE staff to assist with DTP administration and a contract with the developer and system maintenance engineer was entered into by the cooperative. DTP Project Director spoke at the NYS Town Clerks Association conference and at the Tug Hill Commission's Local Government conference. At the end of 2009 there were 133 Digital Towpath members.

During 2010 the Project Director spoke about DTP at a series of regional workshops for those interested in the new stormwater management module, the Oneida County Town Clerks Association, the NY Assoc.

of Local Government Records Officials (NYALGRO) conference, the NY Conference of Mayors (NYCOM) fall conference, and at the fall NYS Local Government IT Directors Assoc. (NYSLGITDA) conference. The grant project was successfully completed and the six new members took over maintenance of their sites and email systems. New themes (templates) were added to the website system to increase choices for layout, colors and fonts. DTP Project Director produced a research paper on municipal website design and maintenance which was published and distributed to all DTP members and other interested parties. At the end of 2010 there were 144 members of Digital Towpath.

During 2011 DTP added encryption to the email system in response to threats to government email systems across the country. At the annual meeting updated Organizational Regulations were adopted in order to clearly outline the governance model for the group. The cooperative also received a grant award from LGRMIF for development of the electronic records management system (ERMS) and work on that project began. The Project Director spoke at the Catskills Local Government conference, a Codes Officers conference and the Town Clerks Assoc. conference. At the end of 2011 there were 151 DTP members.

During 2012 work on the ERMS was finished and members were encouraged to adopt the service. A new module for posting meeting information as required by a new state mandate was developed and added to the website system admin. The developer who had been working with Digital Towpath since it was transferred from Niagara Mohawk finished the work on the ERMS and the new module, and then left Digital Towpath. The Agreement for Services that outlines the responsibilities of the organization to its members and the members' obligations to the organization was updated to include the new service. DTP admin staff attended or presented at the APA local government conference, the Central NY Codes conference, the Rural Water Technical Conference, a Tech Symposium in Albany, and two IT directors conferences. The grant proposal to add email archiving to the ERMS was awarded at the end of the year and planning began to implement the proposal. At the end of 2012, there were 156 DTP members.

During early 2013, development was transitioned to a company in Troy. As our primary developer transitioned out of working with the cooperative, the development team in Troy he was working with took over development of the email archiving system which was put in place and available to members subscribing to both DTP email and the ERMS. DTP admin staff attended or spoke at two IT directors conferences, the Tug Hill Local Government conference, the Catskills Local Government Day, the North Country Tech Symposium, and the NYS Town Clerks conference. The Project Director was appointed to the LGRAC, beginning a four-year term on the state level commission. Digital Towpath received an award from the Center for Digital Government for Best Collaboration among Organizations for development of our new shared records management capability. At the end of 2013, there were 167 DTP members.

In 2014 we contracted with Thomas Bullinger, B-LUC Consulting, who we met through the developers in Troy, for server and systems management. He had assisted them in the development of the email archiving system. Thomas is a certified security expert as well as an expert on Zimbra so he went about increasing our overall security as well as managing our email and other servers. He made changes in the architecture of our systems to increase both security and functionality. Admin staff led sessions about Digital Towpath at the Association of Towns, NYS Town Clerks Association, Oneida County Town Clerks

Association and NY Conference of Mayors conferences during the year and attended two NYS IT Directors conferences. We began to experience service interruptions due to our data center so began looking for alternative locations as well as setting up an offsite backup system and devising a disaster recovery plan to deal with possible further problems. We added a listserv server and information website outside the shared system, to increase communication within the group and provide for communication during a system outage. An email use policy for the admin staff and other account holders in the digitaltowpath.org domain and an update to the Agreement for Services in relationship to email use were both adopted at the annual meeting. A budget shortfall was expected for the year. In response to that and to the changes in administration and mission of SUNY IT, the group decided to end the contract with CPE for admin services and contract directly with the project and development directors as independent contractors. A grant proposal was submitted to the NYS Archives for a two-year project to increase the functionality of the ERMS. At the end of 2014, there were 163 DTP members.

During 2015, work on the grant proposal and the background information collected in support of it brought Digital Towpath to the attention of the Library of Congress. This recognition resulted in the Library's decision to collect periodic web archiving representations of all Digital Towpath websites and compile them into a collection that will be a permanent part of the Library of Congress at their facilities in Washington DC. Because some of the information that New York State requires municipal governments to provide on their official websites is considered personal or private information by federal standards, the collection is not available through the Library of Congress website. The collection will be used primarily by researchers and educators of the future in order to compile as complete a record of the history of New York State as possible.

The grant was awarded and work began on it late in the year in coordination with the Center for Technology in Government of UAlbany. The most significant change in Digital Towpath in 2015 was entering into an intermunicipal agreement with OCM BOCES to locate Digital Towpath services on our own hardware in their data center in Syracuse at the CNYRIC. Near the end of the year we also entered into a development contract for production of a code enforcement tracking system. At the end of 2015, there were 155 members.

During 2016, work on the SARA grant continued. New hardware purchased through the grant was installed at the CNYRIC and our engineer restructured all services to balance workloads and provide additional security, redundancies and on-site and off-site backups. The codes program development got underway. At the end of 2016, there were 146 members.

During 2017, the grant project was completed, resulting in a toolkit of policies and procedures that any local government can use to develop and implement the use of an electronic records management system. These items were posted to digitaltowpath.org for public access. Work continued on the codes program. A reverse proxy system was put in place to insulate the website system from outside intrusion. A direct administration option for email was developed so that members could subscribe to the email service without the need for a website admin console. A service called Briefcase was added to the email system so that users could store and collaborate on documents using a granular access permissions schema. The Agreement for Services document, our end user license and intermunicipal agreement, was

updated to address the changes in services over the past two years. At the end of 2017, there were 144 members.

During 2018 development of the code enforcement actions tracking system neared completion and final testing began. An option for a separate email server for larger municipalities was developed and two member government were moved to their own email servers, giving them more control over their email and providing all email users with less more efficient email service. The connections to websites in the Digital Towpath system were changed from http, which is not encrypted, to https, which is, so that all public and administrative connections were now more secure. Two new virtual servers were added the DTP cloud to assist in back office functions and access to logs so that the entire administrative team can share responsibility for these functions. Administrative team members lead a session at the NYSAT training school and conference and attended the NYSITDA Spring conference. They also conducted four training session online and one on-site training session in the Catskills area of the state. At the end of 2018 there were 140 members.

It was decided that restricting the number of participating governments was important to the efficient management and maintenance of the cooperative's systems. Although membership had fallen since its highest number in 2014, the smaller membership was sufficient to support the cooperative financially and allowed the administrative team to manage the system and support for end users while adding services when grant funding was available, and so, limited growth in number of participants was an advantage for existing members. The services available to all member governments through their basic annual fee were expanded through action at the 2018 annual meeting, adding the electronic records management system to the base services for all participating governments except counties.

Articles written by us

AOT 2013-03-20

AOT 2017-11-15

Articles written about us

Govtech 2016-12-12

Oneonta Daily Star 2013-05-15

CDW-G 2007

Govtech 2016-12-13

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle 2017-03-12

Wellsville Daily News 2017-08-01

Testimony

NYS Assembly 2012-08

Awards

Best of NY 2005

Best of NY 2013

NYS Forum 2005

State/Federal level

Cyber Security/ MS-ISAC 2006-2018

LGRAC 2013-2017