

Guest Commentary: Federal Glover: Converting to paperless documents saves dollars

By Federal Glover For the Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News

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It has taken awhile, but the county is slowly but surely moving into the 21st century. In 2007, the county board of supervisors got the ball rolling by passing a resolution to move a paperless system of document management.

Since then, Contra Costa County has made a conscious effort to reduce the amount of paper used. Before this initiative, hundreds of trees would be felled to supply the county with the paper to keep and store import documents and records that include births, marriages and deaths, business permits, building inspections and health histories.

Through this transition, tons of paper used for anything, from staff reports, agendas, minutes. Fliers to the countless reams used in the scores of copiers used throughout the county's offices to make duplicates and triplicates of every possible record.

My Board of Supervisors' meeting packet, which used to be eight inches thick in multiple binders could sometimes be as large as 1,500 pages, is now contained in a single iPad.

On the supervisor's meeting packet alone, the county saves about \$35,000 going electronic.

Document management systems are replacing the row upon row of file cabinets. County records have been scanned and now are stored in hard drives, flash cards the ever ubiquitous cloud, our hospitals are in the midst of switching medical histories into electronic records.

Reducing paper and files not only save money, but it also increases the efficiency of our employees:

For example, the Clerk of the Board staff members don't have to spend hours duplicating and putting together the meeting binders for the supervisors and various department officials. This gives them more time to concentrate on more important things, such as accuracy.

Additionally, going paperless is a sustainability concept that is easy to grasp and implement. It is also rewarding because employees and management learn sustainable processes and see results.

Private businesses have long ago gone all electronic. Government entities such as Contra Costa County and the state of California, have lagged in eliminating paperwork.

My office is in the midst of turning our paper files into electronic documents. With our limited staff, this is a huge project that will take some time to be completed.

Another long-term benefit is that by taking steps to incorporate sustainable business practices of going paperless, it opens up new doors and makes us see things in a fresh way to see if going electronic can be incorporated elsewhere.

Building inspectors can now take pictures of violations and file reports from the field, Sheriff's deputies can

file reports from field offices without having to travel to headquarters to use a desk computer; photographs of code infractions are instantly recorded and stored; and downloaded applications means the customer -- meaning the public -- can pay their bills online, apply for jobs, permits or ask questions.

Our health services department, has gone electronic in a big way, too. Patient records can now be accessed anywhere in our health delivery system, in clinics, hospitals or elsewhere.

The public can also take pictures or video code infractions, misbehavior or criminal activity and email it to the corresponding agency to get faster responses. The adage: "A picture is worth a thousand words" has never been truer.

The conversion is being made easier and we are progressing faster because mobile devices have become more commonplace in our society. Smart phones, social media, have become an integral part of our lives. Since many of our employees use these devices in their private lives, it was easier to obtain their buy-in and speed their familiarity to the new systems.

As everyone knows, the advances in mobile devices have improved to such a degree that a smart phone can perform the functions that many years ago, was done by computers that used to occupy a basketball-court-sized room.

Google glasses are just a symbol of what's to come. I hear that a Dick Tracy-like watch/phone/computer will soon be marketed and computer chip implants are not far-fetched.

As a result of these devices that was only science fiction a few years ago, the county is becoming more efficient and we're saving thousands and thousands of dollars in terms of floor space, materials and employee work hours.

Federal Glover is the county supervisor for District 5 in Contra Costa County.