

**Six Top Trends in
Information Management
for State and Local
Government**



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The business of government, managing public records, shouldn't take away from the goal of government: serving the public. That's why state and local agencies around the country are developing creative solutions to spend less time and money on information management. Among the most popular goals for agencies and departments are to adapt quickly to change, produce reports on demand, reduce costs, improve service, integrate with legacy systems, and preserve vital information for the coming decades. Always, ease of use is key: "Small departments in local and state agencies may need to develop solutions without full-time support from IT," notes Mike Harris, member of the FileMaker Solutions Alliance and president of Cerné Systems, Inc. in California.

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Adapt quickly to change

State and local governments face increasing pressure to react quickly to the changing needs of citizens, elected officials, and other levels of government. One reason is that over the last decade private businesses have dramatically raised expectations for customer service. Another is that in the wake of 9/11, requests concerning building security, for example, have become more urgent.

"Change cycles of a year or more for modest paperwork reengineering are no longer acceptable," says Harris, who notes that in certain development environments, even adding a second address line can take six to eight hours of a professional developer's time. "FileMaker is so easy to use that if the developer sets it up properly, the employee in charge of a form or letter can change it without help—say, to reflect a fee change," says Harris.

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Produce reports on demand

Reports—many, often, and for multiple requestors—are a defining characteristic of government. The flexibility to generate reports on demand, and to easily modify report content, increases efficiency and reduces the time to deliver services or receive funding.

Among the agencies enjoying the ease of querying and reporting with FileMaker Pro are customers of Joe Mastrianni, a member of the FileMaker Solutions Alliance and president of HAPPY Software, Inc. Located in Saratoga Springs, NY, HAPPY provides FileMaker solutions for local governments that receive federal government funds to administer housing programs for low income, elderly, and disabled citizens. These agencies need a solution for case management, property management, and financial management. They also must comply with myriad reporting requirements, including providing family characteristics and demographics to the U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Department. "The ability to produce reports on demand is essential because governments are constantly asked to produce data about the people they serve," says Mastrianni. HUD auditors, for example, often cannot provide their requests ahead of time and yet require information when they're on site. "The ad hoc query capability in FileMaker lets small and medium agencies manage and retrieve information without purchasing specialized reporting programs or hiring people with special expertise on reporting," says Mastrianni.

"With FileMaker Pro, I can just click a button to send reports to case workers that show what is required to remain in compliance with HUD regulations. What's amazing is that with almost no computer experience I was able to quickly set up a database that served our needs for eight years."

-Robin Keller, Section 8 Coordinator, Pike Metropolitan Housing Authority, Piketon, OH

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Reduce costs

The current budget pinch challenges state and local governments to find ways to cut costs and preserve vital services. A key cost-reduction target: high computer support and development costs. With its easy-to-use development environment, FileMaker produces superior results for a fraction of the cost of alternatives. Case in point: several years ago a state agency approached Cerné Systems after discovering that its two-year, \$5 million project to create a scheduling program for top managers was unusable. In just one weekend Cerné Systems created a working prototype with FileMaker. For another client, a law enforcement agency, Cerné created a functional FileMaker crime reporting application for police officers' laptops in just two weeks. It supplanted another application that had in been in development for two years and yet remained unfinished.

By cutting development costs, state and local agencies free money for other projects and services. And by reducing development time, they and their citizens gain the efficiencies of the new application more quickly.

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Improve service

Innovative applications for managing information help local and state agencies improve service and at the same time reduce costs. For example, the Santa Clara County Department of Planning and Development in California wanted to make it easier to retrieve older building documents that existed only on paper, such as blueprints, plans, and maps. With the paper-based system, a citizen filled out a request form, and later a county employee hiked down to the basement, retrieved the document from a box, and made a copy. A day or so later the citizen needed to return to the county offices to retrieve the document.

To improve service, the county first scanned the documents into Adobe PDF files. Then it stored these files in a FileMaker Pro database developed by Cerné Systems. Now when a citizen requests a document pertaining to any land parcel, a clerk can retrieve it instantly for printing or e-mail. The results: much better service as well as greater productivity.

Santa Clara County boosted service again when it engaged Harris to create a FileMaker solution that responds automatically to e-mail requests for specific types of information. Citizens can request documents by e-mail and in less than five minutes receive an automated e-mail response with the requested document attached as an Adobe PDF file. So far the system accepts requests for inspection information, a copy of the permit, an inspection request by item, plan check status, and permit status. Requests for plan check status trigger a notice to the appropriate county employee.

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Work with legacy systems

Rarely do new government agencies have the luxury of starting computer systems from scratch like new businesses in the private sector. Rather, government must build on legacy systems—some several decades old.

FileMaker Pro simplifies integration with other computer systems because it's fluent in so many popular computer languages and protocols, from the new XML/XSL standard to older fixed-length text formats. Compatibility with older standards enables agencies to capture valuable information from legacy systems

before retiring them. And integration with industry-standard applications such as Microsoft Office products simplifies development for solutions that originated on desktops.

“FileMaker Pro seems to be able to talk to anything else: no more ‘islands of automation.’”

**-Dennis DeMattei,
Department Manager,
County of Santa Clara, CA**

In fact, FileMaker Pro is often the fastest possible way to convert a legacy system to a contemporary one. For example, Harris recently worked with Santa Clara County to convert its building permit system from an Omnis database to FileMaker. The county took the opportunity to integrate the building database with a touchtone phone system and “query-by-email” capabilities. Now county residents can use their touchtone phones to enter a property ID number and request a building inspection visit for the following day. The request is automatically routed to a FileMaker file. When building inspectors arrive at work the next day, they download their inspection schedules from the FileMaker database into their PDAs. Then, at the end of the day, they transfer the inspection results from their PDAs back to the main FileMaker database, a function Cerné Systems added using AppleScript.

“By automating aspects of its building permit system, the County markedly improved its already excellent quality and accuracy of service,” says Harris “When departments can convert all their databases to FileMaker, they eliminate the hassle and confusion of redundant information, and other workgroups can benefit from the information collected.”

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Link past, present, and future Systems

A final concern of local and state government agencies is future-proofing. Many agencies still maintain documents created decades ago, and expect to retain them for decades more. FileMaker makes it easy to convert files from one version to another, offering local and state agencies an enduring platform. “The ease of changing FileMaker Pro files extends the useful life of those files,” says Harris. “And the life of the files is further enhanced because government agencies can use FileMaker with several platforms and operating systems.”

In government as in every other industry, the only certain thing is change. With FileMaker Pro, state and local agencies equip themselves to respond to changing agency needs, changing regulations, and changing technologies—all the while providing improved services to their citizens at lower cost.