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INDEXING AND DIGITIZING IMAGES HELPS COUNTY PROVIDE BETTER DATA

BUSINESS PROFILE

The Travis County Clerk's Office manages a large permanent library of documents, including real property records, marriage licenses, and assumed names (DBAs) for new businesses. The Clerk's statutory obligation is to provide public access to these records while ensuring they are preserved for future generations.

OPERATIONAL OVERVIEW

The County Clerk's library includes millions of documents dating from the 1800's to the present. The documents most commonly requested by the public are real property records. From individual property owners and researchers, to title companies needing to validate property ownership and clear title for transactions, constituents depend on easy and timely access to these records.

BUSINESS NEED

In the mid-1900's, Travis County began to film the paper documents and their indexes and store them on microfilm. To view a record, customers were required to visit the County Clerk's office in central Austin. There, customers looked through paper indexes to find the volume and page associated with a particular document, located the roll of film for that volume, loaded the film onto a microfilm reader, and looked through the film to find the correct document.

At that time, microfilm alleviated many of the problems associated with housing large tomes of paper records and gave the Clerk the ability to economically protect original records and improve public access. The process was infinitely improved when computer technology allowed the Clerk to use an electronic database for the indexes, giving customers a faster and more powerful method to conduct searches. However, computerization of the indexes was mostly limited to newly filed documents, since limited resources made the large-scale project of entering identifying information from the paper records prohibitive.

Toward the end of the 1990's, the Clerk made the decision to begin the process of not only creating an electronic index for all records, but also connecting that index to digital images of newly filed records. In 2004, the Clerk began the enormous, long-term project of converting both the historical indexes and individual records to digital format.

SOLUTION

To begin this project, Neubus developed a clear process for classifying each type of document. Neubus spent approximately four months working with the County Clerk's Office to develop a comprehensive set of indexing standards. The resulting document, *Indexing Standards for Real Property Records for Travis County [Clerk's Office]*, defined data input specifications, index fields, document coding rules, and methods for identifying the grantor and grantee on each property record. It also defined standards for capturing and formatting names and legal property descriptions.

Neubus built a dedicated and trained staff to support the project, using the standards document as the basis for training. The company also customized its software tools to capture the County's business rules, help indexers perform sophisticated quality control, and enable employees in the County Clerk's Office to review image and data via a web-based system.

The Clerk's Office began the project with more than 8,000 rolls of microfilm. After converting these records to digital image files, Neubus created detailed index data to associate with each image file. The images were categorized and checked to make sure that no information was missing, and Neubus delivered the electronic files to the County Clerk's Office via an image and data feed.

After receiving the records, the Clerk's Office compared Neubus data with indexes in their existing system, enabling them to add to and improve the quality of their data and easily search for the electronic image associated with any record.

Once the project is complete, the public will be able to access these recorded documents on the County Clerk's website, making it easier for users to find the files they need.

BENEFITS

BETTER DATA

The County Clerk was particularly concerned that the utmost accuracy and quality be used in the management of this project. Bill Vaught, Division Manager of the Recording Division, emphasized, "All segments of our community rely heavily on these documents. For example, homebuyers and sellers, lenders, insurers and title companies file and access these records every time the property changes hands. Courts use these records in numerous situations, from civil and probate cases to divorces. We need to be certain record searches are thorough and correct and the images [are] readable."

"The work that Neubus provided was methodical, precise, and consistent, with a high degree of quality," said Bob Trautman, Computer Resource Division Manager. "We feel very confident that they provided a base standard for us. Our data set had compiled from different information systems in place over the years, so from 1987 back, we're reloading almost everything from the Neubus data set to have consistent, standardized images and index data."

IMPROVED DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

When the project is completed, the library of electronic indexes and images will replace the microfilm library as the primary medium for ensuring that documents are preserved in the event of a disaster.

The electronic library also gives the Clerk the ability to plan for a more flexible, rapid and efficient resumption of business if their main system were to fail or their main facility to become unusable. Information from the Neubus electronic indexing project has already helped identify a gap that existed in the microfilm disaster recovery data set. "During the analysis, we were able to determine that some rolls [of microfilm] were missing from our disaster recovery library," said Jane Smith, Manager for the Clerk's Records Management Division. "This allowed us to go back to original library and add the records to our disaster recovery set."

While staff members hope never to face disaster recovery challenges, the solution has prepared them to do so with minimal costs and service interruption.

"We now have replicated data at another site, so if one system goes down, the other can continue to serve the agency," says Trautman. "It has enhanced our disaster recovery abilities and created a really impressive database for future records."

IMMEDIATE ACCESS

When this project is complete, the Clerk's Office will be able to provide immediate, online access to real property records for anyone with Internet access.

Providing customers with Internet access to the records offers many advantages, including reducing the County's cost of maintaining large public research areas, eliminating the need for businesses to send employees to the County to locate records, helping the environment by reducing car trips to the Clerk's office, and the convenience of offering the ability to search the records 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "This is a win-win

solution for everyone," said Smith. "Now, we can allow anyone to search online from anywhere and at any time."

Summary

Electronic imaging and indexing services from Neubus are helping the Travis County Clerk's Office move quickly toward having an accurate and easily searchable database of indexes and digitized documents to give customers convenient access to records, provide improved techniques for document preservation, and offer faster, more flexible methods for disaster recovery and business resumption planning.

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