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Raleigh Web site irks some users

Raleigh's revamp isn't quite finished

By SARAH LINDENFELD HALL, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- Brenda Coleman visited the city's Web page so often that she made it the home page on her computer.

Active in northeast Raleigh neighborhood issues, Coleman sometimes logged on to the site several times a day to look up zoning cases, keep in contact with police districts and help answer neighbors' questions.

So she was startled to see that a new version of the site, which went up last month with little fanfare, wiped out or moved some of her favorite sections. Zoning cases are now found under the "business" section. She can't find the telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of police officers. And she struggled to find an agenda for Tuesday night's City Council meeting.

"It defies logic," Coleman said.

The Web site -- now found at www.raleighnc.gov -- is a lifeline for those who follow city business.

The old site had detailed information on zoning cases and other development, years of City Council meeting minutes and information about city programs. But in 2002, Brown University researchers ranked the site as one of the worst of those for the 70 biggest cities nationwide.

The goal for the new site was to make it easier to use for residents, who might not have been familiar with the old site or don't interact with the city often.

City Manager Russell Allen said officials knew they weren't ready to start up a complete Web site when they started the new one in December.

"This is what we call a soft launch," Allen said. "We acknowledge we don't have all the content on the Web site."

The old site averaged about 6,140 visits a day in November. Since Dec. 10, when the new site was launched, it has averaged about 6,650 hits.

Allen said the city put up the new site in December because it was ready to offer online registration for parks and recreation programs. More than 1,100 registrations have been completed online.

This spring, the city's utility customers will be able to pay their bills online, he said. And by then, all of the old information, along with new sections, will be on the new site. More information is being added all the time, Allen said.

"If our customers are big users of our Web site, if they would just be a little bit patient, we will get those things ... straightened out, hopefully in a format that they will feel more comfortable with," he said.

But frequent users say the city needs to move more quickly.

The new site has spawned enough gripes among frequent users that it is expected to be a topic for discussion at the next meeting of the Raleigh Citizens Advisory Council. The volunteer group, with representatives from across the city, advises the City Council.

Susan Holahan, the group's vice chairwoman, said the current state of the site isn't acceptable.

Holahan works with computers and maintains four volunteer Web sites. She said she would have thought the city would have contacted frequent users about the change. The city did hold focus groups.

"We would have expected them to contact the CACs and tell us what the plan was so we could tell people at the meetings, so we could publicize it correctly," Holahan said. "You will find that many people will be taken aback by this huge change."

Even still, Holahan is hopeful. She likes the new site's color and clarity of wording.

"I'm optimistic," she said. "But there are some things that should be corrected very quickly."

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