



## County Information Technology Authority Formed

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Understanding that necessity is generally the mother of invention, county elected officials and department heads began meeting last year to discuss ways to save money and promote more efficiency in government through the development and use of technology. What the group found out was what everyone already knew—that, historically, many county departments had received nominal or no funding for automation from county coffers and that, even when funding was available, the lack of collaboration and coordination between agencies in planning for and implementing computer-based systems had created gaps in service delivery and further promoted duplication of work.

To begin tackling problems, county officials established in November the Liberty Information Technology Authority, an intergovernmental agency responsible for the “establishment, maintenance, and regulation of a county-wide, governmental wide-area network.”

The authority executed inter-agency contracts and adopted bylaws during its first official meeting on November 20th. Initial members of the authority include the four elected, constitutional county officers—Probate Judge Nancy Aspinwall, Sheriff J. Don Martin, Tax Commissioner John Henry Rogers, and Clerk of Superior Court Barry Wilkes—Chief Magistrate Melinda Anderson, Atlantic Judicial Circuit District Attorney Tom Durden, and County Administrator Joey Brown, who represents the Liberty County Board of Commissioners and other adjunct county departments and boards. During the authority’s first meeting, Wilkes was elected inaugural chairperson of the board, Brown as vice-chairperson, and Clint Stanley, the county’s director of information technology director, secretary.

“The formation of the (Information Technology) Authority is another example of how blessed we are in Liberty County, having elected officials and heads of county departments who are willing to work together on problems that direly need solving. Everyone sitting around the table at our (board) meetings has been elected or hired to look after the best interests of the citizens of this county. As such, they are stakeholders in technology and realize that, unless we work together to facilitate, direct, and manage technology within the county, whatever we can afford to do within our respective offices with the modest resources available to us will not yield the most favorable outcome for those we serve,” Wilkes said.

Brown sees the role of the authority as being critical to the county’s technological future. “It was formed to insure compatibility and efficiency in computer purchases and to help further establish a user-friendly network by which common data can be disseminated to departments and the public. We believe it will aid in improving efficiency within county government,” he said. The Liberty County Board of Commissioners inked the agreement establishing the authority in November and will serve as the fiduciary agent for the authority.

The first initiative of the authority was to conduct a preliminary assessment of the technological needs of the county’s various governmental agencies. “While some agencies and departments have managed to computerize record keeping and operations despite limitations on funding, the authority’s immediate goal is to identify what can be done to promote parity and thus ensure that all sectors of county government are automated efficiently. Common sense tells us that doing so will enhance delivery of services and will help reduce duplication of clerical and record keeping tasks. Working together, we will save on equipment and software purchases but, even more so, collaboration will help ensure that whatever one department does will mesh with what another department does, especially when there is the likelihood of sharing data,” the authority chairperson explained.

Wilkes said many county departments are already sharing data through a wide-area network and are working together to provide better services to taxpayers through similar electronic partnerships. For example, tax commissioner John Henry Rogers and his staff already have online access to statewide real estate information filed in superior court clerks’ offices, both locally and statewide. With Wilkes’ assistance, employees of the tax office can access electronically the statewide index to deeds maintained by

the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority, a state agency that operates a statewide network for collecting and disseminating Uniform Commercial Code, real estate, and court information. In return, tax records maintained by the tax office have been made available online to Wilkes and his staff and are accessible to title abstractors, attorneys, and the public on computers situated in the real estate records room of the clerk's office. Wilkes' office and the county tax assessor's office also share electronically real estate and tax assessment records maintained respectively by the two departments. Similarly, the Clerks' Office provides the magistrate judge's and state court solicitor's offices access to court records and the Liberty County Sheriff's Office's traffic citation program is integrated via a network with the Clerk's Office's case management system.

"These are just examples of the kind of data-sharing that is possible when everyone works together for the greater good. When a person researching the title of ownership on a parcel of land needs property tax information, they no longer have to leave the courthouse and go over to the tax commissioner's office in the courthouse annex to view them. They can simply pull up the data on (clerks' office) computers for immediate access. Likewise, tax commissioner's and tax assessor's employees no longer have to come to the clerk's office to look up copies of deeds for taxation purposes. They simply go the Clerks' Authority website on the Internet, locate the instruments they are looking for, and view and/or print online an actual copy of them," Wilkes explained. By law, the clerk's office is required to transmit real estate and personal property information to the Clerks' Authority daily. The data is stored on the Clerks' Authority servers and is available via the Internet to the public for a nominal cost. Access is provided at no cost to the tax commissioner's and tax assessor's offices.

"Connectivity to other departments for sharing information and increasing workers' efficiency is a top priority," Brown said. Last year, all county offices gained access to a high-speed communications network through another collaborative venture involving resources provided by the Clerks' Authority. Wilkes, Brown, and Johnny Smiley, former director of the Atlantic Judicial Circuit's Child Support Recovery Unit, facilitated a contract with the Clerks' Authority to provide low-cost, high-speed communications to all governmental agencies in the county. "Projects such as this directly benefit county departments technologically but, even more importantly, they produce a tangible savings to taxpayers, which is always a concern to elected officials and those of us working in county government," Brown added.

According to Wilkes, the technology authority has begun identifying avenues for providing more and more data online to county departments and to the public. Members are dedicated to facilitating Internet-based access to public records, minutes of meetings of county boards and agencies, and other information of interest and value to citizens of Liberty County. "The possibilities are infinite when everyone agrees to work together to find solutions," he concluded.

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