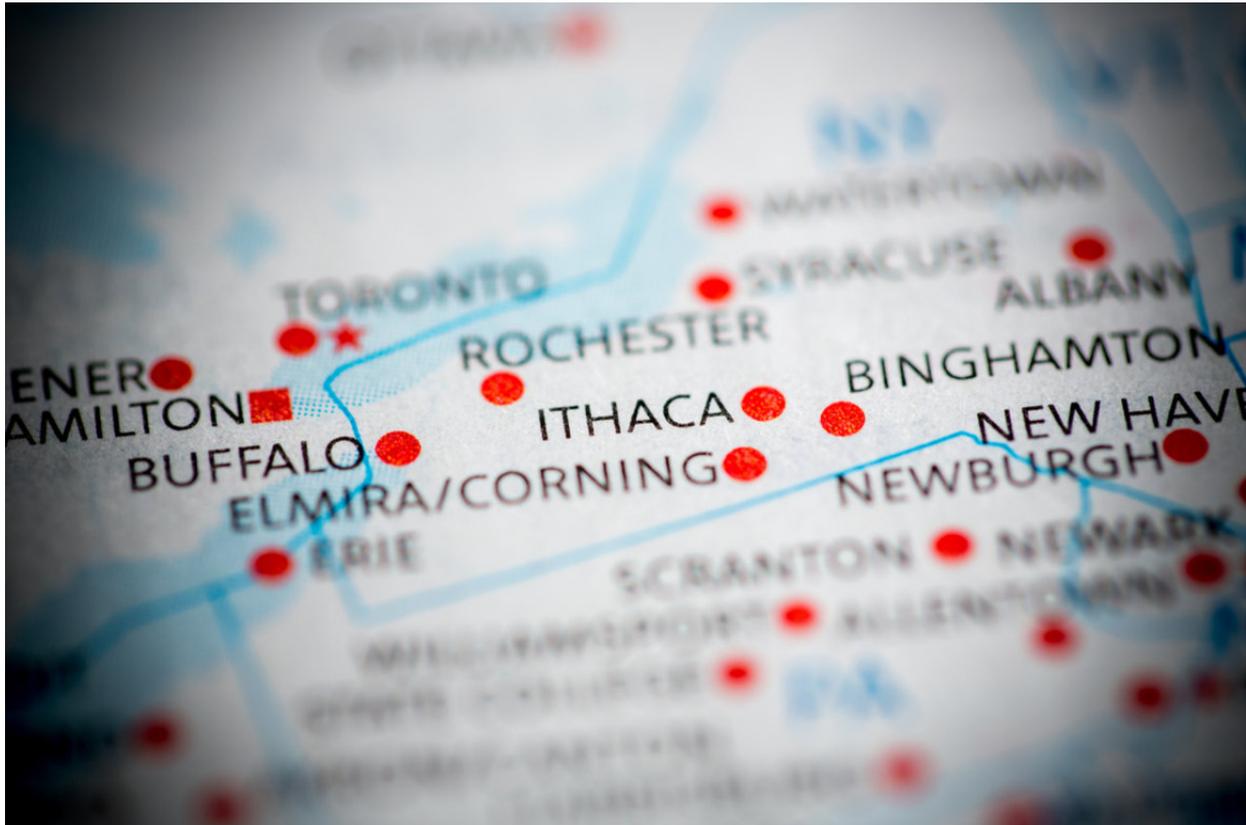


## Sunshine Week: Shared Services Agreement Helps Ithaca, N.Y., Promote Transparency with Technology

March 16, 2016



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Each year, the city receives up to 1,000 FOIL requests. Each request, which affects most of the city's departments, must be acknowledged within five days and responded to within 20 days (unless a reason for an extension is given). If the city fails to comply, it is liable for legal fees.

While we recognize FOIL as a fundamental public right, our previous manual process surrounding FOIL requests was often difficult to manage, making it stressful for employees to meet state-mandated deadlines. Responding to requests took weeks and generated large volumes of paper. Commonly requested documents were not

saved, so if they were requested again in the future, the entire process would need to be repeated.

We decided it was time to re-engineer the process using technology made available to us by joining the Tompkins Shared Services Electronic Records (TSSER) group, a collection of municipalities in Tompkins County that have agreed to join a shared services agreement under the auspices of Tompkins County.

That technology — an enterprise content management (ECM) software system by Laserfiche — allows us to automate FOIL request processing so we consistently meet those deadlines with increased accuracy and efficiency.

We began by using the system's electronic forms software to intake FOIL requests. Citizens have access to these forms online 24/7, without having to travel to City Hall. We then collaborated with our primary users —the City Clerk's Office, the City Attorney's Office and the police department (who receive the majority of FOIL requests) to configure a workflow that would automatically notify a requester that the request was received, route requests to relevant departments, send reminders when a request was pending and collect any relevant fees. The workflow also automatically stores all information in our Laserfiche repository, which enables the city to track what requests are frequently made — such as meeting minutes, budget information, plans and studies, and police blotters — and make that information available to the public through a Web portal.

Automating the process streamlined requests, making the whole experience easier for both requesters and city employees tasked with making information available to them. We no longer use interdepartmental mail when processing FOIL requests, which saves multiple days and makes it much easier to comply with those deadlines. What started as an initiative to provide better public service and access resulted in reducing the time it takes the city to process a request by an average of 35 percent — and saving 7,000 hours of employee time in just one year.

In addition to these benefits, the new system allows the city to take the burden and responsibility of compliance off of individual employees. With the saved time, employees can refocus energy on crucial tasks that require deeper thinking and decision-making. The benefits have motivated us to start thinking about automating more processes and optimizing our records management program.

Along with our growing population, advances in technology will continue to change how we operate, and our journey to provide the best possible service and access will never truly end. But we at the city of Ithaca are proud of the enhancements we have put in place to empower and enlighten our community, and are committed to keeping the sun shining on city records year-round.

*Julie Holcomb is the city clerk for the city of Ithaca and Alan Karasin is the city's senior network administrator. Holcomb and Karasin will host a [webinar](#) about promoting government transparency by automating the public records request process March 22 at 1 p.m. ET/11 a.m. PT.*

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