

## **Albemarle expands Web options**

By Jessica Kitchin  
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Things are getting easier for Albemarle County residents with a modem and a mouse.

The county's Web site, [www.albemarle.org](http://www.albemarle.org), received a 37 percent increase in average page visits per day from 2004 to 2005, and by nature, the site is constantly evolving. But to make navigation easier, the county has several major changes planned, including an overhaul this month of the Community Development page.

"We're doing a tremendous amount of business online," county spokeswoman Lee Catlin said. "So we're trying to make ourselves more convenient and more accessible for the residents, which is great for them and good for staff, too."

About 80 percent of county residents have Internet access at home, and all residents can use the Web at the county office buildings. The Community Development office, which includes the planning, engineering and zoning departments, has one of the most-used pages on the site, and staffers say they are often tied up with phone calls from inquisitive residents.

The new-and-improved site will include guides to understanding the development approval process, a glossary and development process flowcharts, among other things. A "Quick Links" box will offer answers to frequently asked questions, staff contacts and most-used forms. Many of the changes come directly from resident feedback.

"People have really let us know what they want," Catlin said. "This is to help people get informed and understanding the process, so they can be articulate when they need to be."

The changes come after a few months of internal site improvement, which has taken unknown hours of staff time since planning began in October. But officials expect the effort will be worth it. "It really extends our services to 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Catlin said. "It's like putting a self-service lane in county government ? and any time invested up front to making this happen will have a huge payoff."

Changes are constant in the world of the Internet, especially in a county that has evolving policies and revolving issues. For example, the county just launched a "hot topics" page so that people can track the status of high-profile developments such as Rivanna Village, Biscuit Run and North Pointe. Information on all projects that are in the works can be accessed on the site already, but the new page summarizes some of the more controversial developments in more general, understandable terms.

Brian Wheeler, executive director of the nonprofit Charlottesville Tomorrow, has gotten a first-hand view of the importance of the Web in public discourse through his work with

[www.cvilletomorrow.org](http://www.cvilletomorrow.org).

"I think the county has seen that when there's an information vacuum, the public gets very frustrated," Wheeler said. "The more information that's available and the easier it is to find in a user-friendly Web site, the better."

He pointed to his own site's transportation matrix, which presents all major upcoming road projects in the area, and the Piedmont Environmental Council's new online map of pending development projects as good examples of online tools.

And the county has even broader tools on the way. A new program, CityView, will cost about \$100,000, but will allow residents to track the status of development applications, inspections and various permits online. It's already being used internally at the county offices and is expected to be up and running for the public in June.

Additionally, the county plans to launch an extensive Geographic Information Systems program in the coming months that would allow residents to interactively map the county and compare variables across areas. In all, that is expected to cost about \$220,000.

The county also plans to launch other overhauls similar to the one for the Community Development page. Parks and Recreation, which saw a 180 percent increase in page visits from 2004 to 2005, is most likely to be next.

"It's really exciting," said Pat Mullaney, executive director of Parks and Recreation. "As more and more people have access to computers, these changes are becoming more and more important."

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[Go Back](#)