

# “SMART” GOVERNMENT IN A LESS-ADVANTAGED COMMUNITY: Meeting the Challenges In Imperial County

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***Abstract:** The new tools of e-government have begun to address and diffuse the weaknesses of government service delivery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The state of California among other states has a strategic vision to add to its orderly, stable structures of bureaucracy, the virtues of speed, cost-effectiveness, and quality and quantity of response to citizens that e-government provides. Imperial County, California was chosen as the site for discussion of how less-advantaged communities in California are addressing e-government. One partnership between two governmental entities—The Imperial County Office of Education and the Imperial County Irrigation District, named Project EdNet—was chosen for this paper as the working example to examine how the issues of the digital divide, democracy and equity can positively impact the citizens of less-advantaged communities in California.*

## I.INTRODUCTION:

**1.1.The Value-Added Impact of E.Government:** The toolbox of bureaucracy has expanded considerably in the information age. What implications do these new revolutionary tools have for government and its people? For one thing the new tools are designed to provide better, cheaper, faster and more responsive service to citizens, thereby diffusing the long-held beliefs that government is inefficient, expensive, slow and unresponsive to social needs. Heeks (1999) and others have suggested that the new refinements to bureaucracy from electronic sources arise principally in the areas of:

- *Speed* of outputs
- *Quality* and *Quantity* of outputs.
- *Cost-effectiveness* of out-puts.

Speed, Quality-Quantity, and Cost-Effectiveness of outputs by use of IT serves modern bureaucracies in several key ways: 1) In its Bureaucratic *Supporting Function*—it assists human resource executed processes, such as decisionmaking, communications, and decision implementation using data sources, data manipulators and organizers, etc. 2) In its *Bureaucratic Supplanting Function*—it automates (and may also eliminate) existing human resource executed processes, such as storing, processing and outputting information. 3) In its *Bureaucratic Innovating Function*—it provides new IT-executed public services. IT technology provides these new and expanded services 4) to *Internal Management*—for its operational requirements, such as planning and budgeting; to 5) *Public Administration Regulatory* requirements, such as its legal, judicial and fiscal needs; 6) to *Public Services*—such as education, health, transportation, public utilities, etc.; 7) to its *Dissemination of Public Information* requirements, such as press releases, government data collection (such as demographics and statistics); policies, performance indicators, etc. (Heeks, 16, 1999). This paper relates primarily to issue #3, innovation; issue # 6, expansion of public service; and issue # 7, the dissemination of information.

## 1.2. E.Government Collaborations:

The second thing that scholars have noted is that *e.government* lends itself to collaborative efforts across governmental entities. This paper, using a model from local government addresses the issue of governmental collaboration in a local community—the Imperial Valley in California. There are several significant advantages to such collaboration:

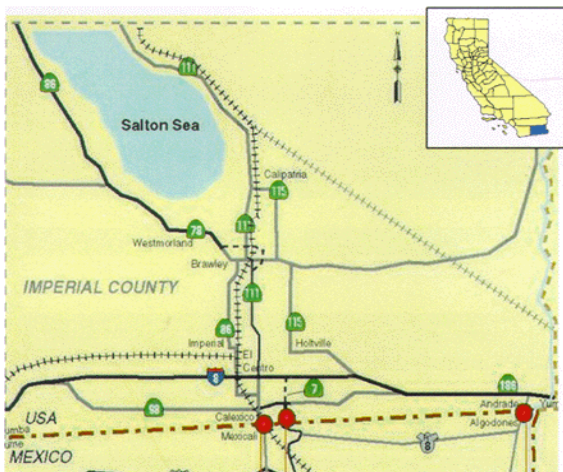
- *it brings* communities of interest together in new and different ways;
- *it permits* better sharing of scarce resources, and enhances cost savings;
- *it addresses* important “digital divide” and democracy concerns;

- *it enhances* regional development;
- *it provides* models for replication in other communities;
- *it builds* bridges for future development;
- *it leads* to a sense of shared communitarian values for technology entrepreneurship;
- *provides* empowerment to less-advantaged communities.

We see the above issues played out in an important coalition of governmental entities in the Imperial Valley of California.

**1.3. Imperial County 's Collaborative Venture Project:** One intergovernmental entrepreneurial model likely to serve as an example for less-advantage communities is the Imperial Valley Telecommunications Authority (IVTA). This is a joint-venture partnership between a governmental agency, the Imperial County Office of Education (ICOE), and a quasi-governmental entity, the Imperial Valley Irrigation District (IID).

**Map 1.1: Imperial County, California**



The project when completed will provide schools, the Imperial Valley College, San Diego State University-Imperial Valley

Campus, local city libraries and other public agencies access to this communication network.

While the above represents the first phase of the project, the IVTA partnership is more ambitious than that. The entrepreneurial model can accommodate other public agencies in the area beyond schools and education facilities. It is envisioned that member agencies from various public organizations will come on board once the system is in place.

This entrepreneurial venture satisfies the two important components identified by Everard, concerning governmental IT entrepreneurship: 1) provision of enabling technologies; 2) provision of a network for communications (*ibid*, 23, 2000).

## II.THE IVTA MODEL OF INTER-GOVERNMENTAL IT COLLABORATION:

**2.1. Government Without Boundaries:** A major innovation across this nation in the last decade was shown when governments integrated efforts across boundaries--geographic, teleological, and economic--to share resources and assist each other in solving policy problems. The Joint Powers Agreement between IID and ICOE states this mission.

On the Federal and state levels governments have begun working together via a forum called "Government without Boundaries." This group, developed by state Chief Information Officers (CIOs) brings more integration and standardization among levels of governments and their respective agencies (Governing, August 2001). Some local governments, e.g., Palo Alto, have become contractors and consultants for other cities. Palo Alto, which has high IT connections and capabilities, will bring in \$200,000 from its contract to its neighbor, East Palo Alto alone. Similarly, states are contracting with each other to supplement services they lack, instead of buying a whole system for themselves. Thus, Hawaii purchased at \$11 million from Arizona for processing time that would have cost up to \$40 million outside government. Arizona runs this project from its administration mainframe, with some programming modifications to fit Hawaii's requirements. It runs the program, however, staff that manages its own programs.

As these types of intergovernmental relationships become more common they are being known as GSPs or government service providers. Rather than contracting with a private company, cities find it easier to contract with GSPs who can better understand their governmental constraints and challenges. Governments are thus generating revenue out of marketing e.services.

**2.2. Addressing The State's Mission for E-Government:** One important priority of California Governor Gray Davis has been to improve informational technology for governmental agencies in California. The Little Hoover Commission, 2000, revealed the surprising fact that despite California's fame as the birthplace of the electronics industry, it has lagged behind 41 other states in terms of applications to government. (See Appendix I). Overall across the national state governments are putting a priority on state colleges and universities to expand their capacity in IT education to develop future workers (Little Hoover Commission. iv, 2000). Both these needs are being addressed by the joint partnership between IID and ICOE in the Imperial Valley.

**2.3. Provides Empowerment for Less-Advantaged Communities:** Imperial County has an unemployment rate of 33%--the highest in the state of California. Joint tax returns for married people average \$19,180, and are the lowest in the state. Median income is \$14,205, which puts this county as last among California's 58 counties. The geographic location of Imperial County encompasses 4,282 square miles of desert, cultivated land and rocky and barren mountains. It has one of the lowest population densities in the state. The county consists of three medium-sized cities, several small towns, and hundreds of square miles where there is no population. The population is 67% Hispanic. Sixty-two percent of the Hispanic population 25 years and older do not have a high school diploma. Almost 1/3 of the families living in the region receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Nearly 40% of the minority children live below the poverty level.

This area has been identified as a federal *Enterprise Community*. The development of an *Empowerment Zone* application endorsed by the school Superintendent's group and local school boards, and through

collaboration with city and government officials. IVTA's efforts now provide for better meaning to the term "enterprise community." It will empower this community to learn, work, and compete in the next millennium with much needed technology resources and improved access to information.

**2.4. Digital Divide and Democracy Concerns:** The geographic isolation, and limited economic resources of the Imperial Valley has to date been a factor in slower educational, economic and social growth of the region. Because of this there have always been concerns about lack of access and opportunity in this less-advantaged region compared with other California communities to the West and North. Indeed these are concerns that have preoccupied citizens in several significant ways in the last decade.

Among these is the issue of democratic access to information, and equality of access to information, for all citizens advantaged and disadvantaged alike. Here government, as the example shown by IVTA, is being responsive to these needs for its citizenry in the Imperial Valley. IVTA has noted: "*Where a person lives should not be a deterrent to that individual's opportunity for success.*" (Project EdNet, September 2002.) Another constitutional issue is the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's property and equal protection clauses. By its efforts IVTA here sees itself as helping fulfill this important mandate of the U.S. Constitution.<sup>1</sup>

**2.5. Shared Resources & Cost-Savings:** The Imperial Valley Telecommunications Authority came together in 2001, to utilize a multimillion donation of fiber opticware from IID. The IID Board of Directors also passed a resolution to additionally provide the IVTA with no-cost access to their installed communication poles throughout the region, and no-cost access to other communications resources such as microwave tower facilities. This donation and grant funding obtained, helped the authority off to a good start. Additionally, member agencies that are on board, or will join in the future are expected to voluntarily contribute additional financial resources, cable, fiber and other personal property to the

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<sup>1</sup> **Amendment IV:** asserts that no State shall deny any person of life, liberty or property, without due process, nor deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Authority, which will then become the property of the Authority. Each member local public agency will also contribute voluntarily technical expertise and time of their own employees to the Authority. Savings will occur also via the cost-sharing agreement related to the joint development, operations, maintenance and growth of the network by each member local public agency.

**2.6. Keeping Resources Within the Region:** The existence of IVTA will help retain and recruit valuable resources within the Imperial Valley. Thus the potential threat expressed across the nation that small, less advantaged communities might find their services being outsourced—e.g., personnel management and financial services—to cheaper venues, outside the United States (such as in Asia) (O’Looney, 5, 2000). The IVTA has vaccinated itself against this threat by its efforts so far, and might well find it being a supplier of services, rather than a buyer.

**2.7. Building Bridges for Future Development:** In the case of the IVTA, one of its targets has been to create a “backbone” to public agencies who will be able to access telecommunications networks to assist them in providing their services to the public (Joint Powers Agreement). As more public agencies are integrated into the fiber and aerial network, more citizen-customers of this county will, naturally be benefited, but it is also anticipated that with such a push from IVTA, each agency, itself, will leap forward to additional creative IT cost-effect, reliable, customer-service efforts.

**2.7. System Integrity and Protections:** A number of guidelines safeguarding the integrity of the system are in place. Here the IVTA is concerned with protection of constitutional rights of privacy, safeguarded by the 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments. These issues of privacy center around individuals as well as government itself. With regard to the latter point, government information that has been inaccessible in the past is becoming more and more available—internal memoranda, records, executive meeting sessions, and other electronic files that may contain sensitive, confidential, or potentially damaging information. Thus, the agency sees part of its mission as monitoring the system to see that it is not used inappropriately. Additionally, the agency is concerned with maintaining the integrity of the system itself. In

particular the agency seeks to provide precautions to ensure that the telecommunications network is not overloaded or excessively utilized. The IVTA has set up guidelines to ensure that the applicable governmental laws and regulations are not violated. The agency has also set up procedures for the removal of any member agency that has failed to meet its obligations under the agreement with IVTA.

#### SUMMARY:

Bureaucracy, which has been associated with stability, slowness, and limited outputs, has taken on its antithesis—flexibility, speed, and expansion of outputs in the electronic age. While criticisms still remain about issues like democracy and access in this less-advantaged community, new focus on these issues by the IVTA will likely help to accommodate these vital values into 21<sup>st</sup> century local government in the region.

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#### APPENDIX I:

All states have some form of e-government in place. States have been ranked by their digital readiness in a survey, the results of which are presented below. This survey was conducted by three entities: The Center for Digital Government, the Progress and Freedom Foundation, and Government Technology Magazine (<http://www.centerdigitalgov.com/center/Final-Rank.doc>):

<u>State</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Rank</u>
Washington	93.0	1
Kansas	89.0	2
Alaska	84.1	3
Illinois	81.5	4
Utah	80.1	5
New Jersey	79.1	6
Georgia	78.8	7
Wisconsin	77.3	8
Maryland	77.1	9
Texas	76.4	10
Michigan	75.8	11
Pennsylvania	73.4	12
Idaho	70.4	13
Nebraska	69.8	14
South Dakota	69.8	15
Virginia	69.4	16
Arizona	68.0	17
Louisiana	67.5	18
Nevada	66.4	19
Iowa	65.8	20
Colorado	65.1	21
Missouri	63.9	22
Oregon	63.4	23
West Virginia	63.3	24
Florida	63.1	25
Indiana	62.9	26
Connecticut	62.4	27
Massachusetts	62.4	28
Kentucky	61.3	29
Ohio	60.8	30

Arkansas	60.1	31
South Carolina	59.8	32
New York	58.4	33
Montana	57.1	34
Maine	57.0	35
North Carolina	57.0	36
Minnesota	56.1	37
Mississippi	56.1	38
Delaware	54.8	39
Tennessee	51.0	40
New Hampshire	50.9	41
California	49.6	42
Hawaii	49.6	43
Oklahoma	47.1	44
Wyoming	47.0	45
Vermont	42.3	46
North Dakota	41.1	47
New Mexico	40.0	48
Alabama	35.3	49
Rhode Island	30.0	50