

ORGANIZATION

Winona County

Imaging System Helps Winona County Recorders Office Survive \$7 Million Flood

Sprinkler heads set off by the collapse of a faulty ceiling caused \$7 million in damage to the building but didn't put the Winona County Recorder's Office out of business (they were down for a short period while we set up new stations to access the network). The sprinkler system poured 12,000 gallons of water into the 112-year-old courthouse building, damaging land record documents, forcing evacuation, and making it impossible to access the paper and microfiche documents stored in the building. Fortunately, the county had already stored the most frequently requested records on an imaging system that allows staff members to access them in seconds by document number or with keyword searches, compared to the 10 to 30 minutes that was often required to obtain documents in the past. "When the flood hit, we immediately moved to temporary offices in a vacant school building and an old bank building," said Mark Anderson, Information Systems Director for Winona County. "Because the server and archival storage were located in a separate, protected facility, we were able to log onto the network and resume limited service to customers that same day (again it took a few days to set up the offices, the documents were easily accessed but there was no immediate place to access them from). The imaging system also makes it possible to burn duplicate copies of records onto CDs and store them in a vault, providing an additional layer of data security."



The importance of the documents stored in the recorders office is based on the fact that they trace the ownership of land in the county back to the time that it was originally platted in the 1850s. These original plats and the transactions that have been recorded in the meantime, such as sales, splits, transfers and easements, are often critical to establishing the validity of titles and the locations of boundary lines in the present day. The recorders office serves

taxpayers, real estate agents, mortgage companies, and others who need to establish all of the details concerning ownership of a particular piece of land in the county. Today, the county records about 150 land transactions per day, and some run up to 50 pages. All of the documents were maintained only as paper drawings for the first 100 years of life of the recorder's office. About 50 years ago, the county began transferring documents to microfiche and storing them at the courthouse. This approach reduced the wear and tear on the documents but


made them somewhat more difficult to access and did nothing to eliminate the risk of damage in the case of a disaster.

Problems with paper and microfiche

When customers came into the office to access documents, a recorders office staff member would have to search through the microfiche to find what they needed, a process that could easily take 30 minutes. Due to the limited staff manpower, researchers sometimes had to wait for

hours to access the documents they needed. The difficulty of using the microfiche viewers meant the staff also had to spend considerable time assisting the researchers while they were working with documents. Management personnel of the recorders office was concerned about the risk of losing important documents as well as the amount of time required to access documents on microfiche. They asked Anderson to investigate imaging systems in an effort to provide for on-site storage and faster document retrieval. One of

the county's most critical requirements was strong support for the AS/400 system that the county used for most of its data processing needs. Anderson also was hoping to find a system that would, in addition to imaging land records, provide computer output to laser disk (COLD) storage of paper reports produced on the AS/400 that were difficult to access and took up large volumes of space.

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The county selected the Metafile content database because it met all of their requirements. The software includes an enterprise scanning application that provides scanning operators with a structured, easy to use interface that can adapt to unique scanning needs. The built in optical character recognition (OCR) application makes it possible to easily define sections of the document that coincide with each indexing field. As each field is accessed, the scanning application automatically zooms to that section, OCRs the content and places it in the field. The operator can check the information; and if it's correct, proceed to the next field. The software also automatically indexes and archives reports generated by the AS/400. It captures reports from AS/400 output queues in either standard or advanced function printing, indexes them and stores them on a Windows NT server where they can be searched on their full text and viewed with the same viewer used to view imaged documents. "I especially like the fact that the viewing software is so simple," Anderson said. "We can teach our customers how to use it in just a few minutes and then leave them on their own."

When the flood hit

The recorders office had made considerable progress in scanning documents by the time the flood hit. While just a few paper and microfiche documents were damaged, staff members were prevented from accessing all these documents for a considerable period of time because they were in an area that had been declared hazardous because of falling ceilings and possible asbestos contamination. Fortunately, the recorders office had already secured their imaging server at a separate location and was able to move into a vacant school building and establish limited networking service with the

server the same day (again we had access but it took a few days to restore the recorders office). "As soon as we were able to retrieve the documents that were damaged, we made copies from the microfiche and scanned them," Anderson said. "Our next step was making use of an available local loop to establish a DSL connection to our wide area network. Within a week the entire staff of the recorders office was working in the new facility with access to the documents on the imaging system," Anderson said. "Meanwhile the other departments affected by the flood were still waiting to re-enter the building to try and salvage their documents."

"Every municipal government needs an imaging system to preserve their valuable records and save time."

Mark Anderson,
Information Systems Director
Winona County

With the success of the imaging project, Anderson began the process of moving many of the county's reports over to the new software. "Our budget book is over 1000 pages long, and we used to have to print out a bunch of copies every month and send them around to users throughout the various county departments," he said. "Now the documents are automatically indexed on the Metafile server as soon as they are generated on the AS/400." Anderson said the process of providing electronic copies of the reports was very straightforward. He manually created a few definition files for the reports to be indexed and made the searchable version available over the network. The entire process takes about 5 minutes. The program works by reading the print spool file and converting it to a compact, searchable file that resides

on a Windows NT server. He also set up the program so that it automatically searches for new reports and indexes them on an hourly basis.

Substantial time savings

Users can search the reports on any field which makes it possible to find what they are looking for in seconds compared to the much longer period that was needed to dig through the lengthy paper reports. They can also cut and paste information from the reports into a spreadsheet, eliminating the time that they used to have to spend typing the numbers one by one. This feature eliminates the need to set up fields and determine in advance which ones will be searchable. The user can enter the invoice number, check number, vendor name, account number or whatever information they have at hand and easily find the document they need.

Anderson said that the biggest win in the installation of the imaging system was increasing security of critical documents. He points out that he can now easily cut a CD that contains specified records and stick it in a bank vault. "The other departments in the county have seen the advantages, and we are in the process of converting some of them over to the imaging system," he said. "For example our attorneys have 23 filing cabinets full of cases. Many of these files include important notes that are written in pencil on legal paper and can hardly be read after ten years or so. We have just begun scanning these documents, and when we are done, we plan to address the county administration which needs to preserve, among other things, hand written minutes of board meetings. Every municipal government needs an imaging system to preserve their valuable records and save time."

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