the chatroom

…a combination of information and opinion gathered from a variety of sources: articles, research, the Internet, experts and you.

hosted by David Newman

311. U-city. What are the implications?

Sit down, take a deep breath, sip a beverage, open your mind and stay awhile while we chat with:

*L to R. Panellists **Mark Laroche**, Chief Administrative Officer, City of Gatineau, **Don Cormier**, Senior Consultant, AtFocus Inc., Ottawa and **John Weigelt**, National Technology Officer, Microsoft Canada Co. at Summit's live Chatroom, held at GTEC in Ottawa, October 2006.*

IMAGINE A PLACE so wired that computer systems are built right into your home and office, even the streets, and that information from your home, your office, your doctor and hospital and your governments is shared. That ubiquitous city, that omni-present, all encompassing environment, is here… at least in some places in some ways.

At the annual GTEC show in Ottawa in October, *Summit* magazine hosted a 'live chatroom' on the implications of the U-city. It went so well that we decided to summarize it for readers herein.

Me, Dave Newman, as host, John Weigelt, Mark Laroche and Don Cormier provided their perspectives on the policy implications of the U-city – not just the huge potential infrastructure cost, the need to create central data resources, or homogenize widely diverse human and organizational systems and processes, let alone what level of government should do what – but does it complement or counter our humanity? What does ubiquity mean to one of the most ubiquitous attributes of humanity, the one that is often behind invention, innovation and revolution – our capacity for accidents, malfeasance and mistakes? And for those who occasionally suffer guilt or self-doubt, could we be creating a masochist's paradise? It might be nice if we could remotely control virtually every aspect of our own lives – unless we lose our remote control device – but how about others, including governments, having that same kind of access and control?

Who wouldn't want to have an immediate response to questions, get concerns addressed right away, or even actually get to the person who knows what they, and you, are talking about? 311 service – a telephonic and Internet citizen help desk providing a variety of one-stop shopping – is a baby step in the direction of the U-city, a tentative toe probe into water that seems tepid but could be very chilly indeed. 311 service has been introduced in some Canadian municipalities with considerable impact on organizations, workflow, management and staff. It seems to work, but 311 is not a panacea. Other communities have considered 311 and chose not to go there. Information Technology Manager Frank Mayhood from the City of Kamloops, participating in our 'live chat' from the audience, pointed out that political will, scope of change, infrastructure capacity, labour relations, sheer cost and, above all, client demand may often support a municipal decision not to go there.

The policy and process implications of all this interconnectivity are not only profound; they could be downright dehumanizing. Will you buy into this at some point in time? Let's chat!

Follow the yellow brick road!

Weigelt: Dramatic changes in technology make the U-city possible and have important policy implications for governments and citizens. We now see super computers in the hands of consumers, a connected environment with remote access to what used to be specialized data driven environments, truly interactive in nature. A specialist can monitor a heart patient while both follow their daily routine. Devices are easier to use and it matters less how we are connected; it is that we are connected in ways we never dreamed possible. But we must consider the unintended consequences.

Cormier: We work closely with cities, helping them prepare for 311 implementation. Their existing processes may be very fragmented with various points of activity all over the city. Bringing this together requires system and enterprise approaches that will see data stored and accessed in one place. Once the capacity is centrally oriented, the right technologies and devices must be put in place to use it effectively. For example, a few Canadian municipalities and utilities have field trials that use GIS equipment to track snowplowing progress and utility vehicle location in real time. This information can then be provided to citizens, estimating when they will be served. Integrating GIS and asset management systems also ensures that the closest vehicle with the right tools, training and capability is dispatched.

Laroche: Our 311 initiative came at the right time, just as Gatineau was dealing with the amalgamation of five cities, so we were already looking at integrating, adapting and homogenizing different systems and services. Our results were tangible and well appreciated, in part making the transition entailed in amalgamation smoother and more immediate for citizens. Our 311 service fills service and information requests or directs callers to the appropriate municipal resource. Gatineau citizens have

24/7, interactive response to their concerns making it a popular service. 311 also permits administrators to track calls and gather our own information to better address citizen concerns. But, to take advantage of it, city administrators have to adjust how they work, often profoundly.

Procurement is affected too.

Cormier: Implementation of 311 opens up procurement streams as more municipalities review both existing technologies and their current ability to share information across the enterprise. Just in terms of processing capabilities, they can see how their systems talk to each other, even within their existing models. For example, HR and asset management systems can be related to GIS and be integrated into procurement requirements, both for what we need today and for the future.

Weigelt: Procurement is already in the midst of change, some of it technology driven and some accountability driven. The U-city provides procurement experts with all the administrative tools to communicate effectively and access the scope of information that makes their work both more effective and influential. It implies greater accountability and transparency for suppliers and administrators. There is a greater capacity for ongoing process improvement, best practice sharing and access to information on a global basis. That in turn puts more and better tools in the hands of procurement specialists.

Laroche: A major implication is the improvement in the type and accuracy of information that can be gathered to better inform suppliers. User requirements and statements of work can be more fully and accurately addressed, making requests for proposals more comprehensive. We can gather and process more and better information regarding potential supply sources, supplier availability and performance and create better individual contracts. We can also look at synergies between different types of procurements and commodity purchases. On an administrative level, we can manage more information more easily

and correlate that information more readily. That also means greater accountability for both administrator and supplier.

Because we can, we should?

Laroche: When introduced, all citizens need to know clearly what 311 is, what it does, and what it can and cannot do for them. Providing 311 is a living process. You must do the up-front work to adapt systems and processes to the services included and do the necessary training to make sure that it interacts with city staff effectively. It must be constantly monitored and tweaked to keep it working. You must constantly look for applications that can be improved through inclusion in the service and for opportunities to add new services.

Weigelt: WiFi gives us seamless worldwide connectivity, bringing into play almost limitless resources and expertise immediately and in real time. This has major implications for first responders in emergency situations, for example. The variety and flexibility of devices makes it now possible to reach 100 percent of the community at the same time. For governments, this connectivity even means we can reach out to the disenfranchised and bring them into our democracy. In South Korea, they are building a ubiquitous city, New Songdo City, provided with full connectivity infrastructure from the ground up. For many cities, putting the infrastructure in place is a formidable physical challenge, one most reach for incrementally. The policy challenges that follow are at least as profound. It is important that we spend time and effort to get it right.

Cormier: With so many more data points being created that can measure activity and quality, resources can not only be more efficient, but more reactive, to get what is needed, where needed, when needed. 311 provides more openness and access to the city. During the Calgary floods, they could immediately plot on a multi-media map where flooded basements reports were centred, set priorities and deploy resources to address it. Where people may have previously received a busy sig-

nal in high traffic periods, they now get directed where they need to go. Where blue pages may have had 200-2,500 listings, citizens now dial one number to get answers to 70-80 percent of the generic questions asked, or link directly to the person or department needed. Web presence adds the element of self-service for the citizen resulting in timely, convenient and immediate 24/7 service fulfillment.

The cart before the horse?

Weigelt: Moving forward with technology, we must not forget our humanity. People are important. We need to train people effectively to actually use the technology. We need to know, too, how we can turn it off. Like most technology driven change, the U-city can become whatever we make it. So it is crucial that we look at the implications of using these technologies, determine the ways we want to use them and set our policies and processes accordingly. We can use these to adapt ourselves to fit in with the technology or adapt the technology to fit in with our humanity. The mix is up to us.

Laroche: Gatineau learned that 311 service must be driven by client demand; citizens must be able to choose what they require. That also means that elected officials must be on side and actively participate in transitions, implementations and ongoing functions. In the public sector, one of the ways we can be most effective is to be open and accountable, to compare experiences and share best practices.

Cormier: Make sure that 311 is what you want. It may not be right for every municipality. The change piece is critical. It is important to understand up front that you are partnering with the unions, with employees and citizens and with the political side. You are creating a high performance environment for continuous improvement, not one of 'big brother.' The technologies need to be an enabler. If the people and the processes are not aligned to deliver effective service, then the technology by itself cannot be expected to deliver a solution.