



Entity ..... AOC  
Project Types: ..... Video Conf.  
Stimulus Funds: ... \$127,360  
Savings/yr: ..... \$4,644

## Video conferencing saves Oregon counties gasoline, time and \$\$\$

Meetings. Love ‘em or hate ‘em, you have to admit that some meetings are a necessity to getting a job done right.

But for the majority of Oregon’s 36 counties, sending officials to meetings in Salem the past few years was getting more difficult as county budgets became tighter and county officials became busier.

For Oregon counties, meetings in Salem mean:

- Multiple hours of lost work time spent driving
- Rising expenses for meals and overnight lodging, and
- Increasing gasoline expenditures.

Mike McArthur, executive director of the Association of Oregon Counties (AOC) since 2004, could sympathize when a Union County commissioner asked for an alternative to the face-to-face meetings. As a former Sherman County official, McArthur had made the five-hour drive to Salem and back many times and Sherman County had paid for the gasoline and other expenses for him to attend.

McArthur couldn’t predict the recession at that time, but he did want to see if there was a better way to accommodate county officials who had to come long distances for meetings. He also wanted to ensure that communications were not adversely impacted. He called on Larry Harker, AOC information technology manager, to research possible solutions.

Harker looked into the Oregon Department of Administrative Services’ video conference “bridge.” AOC even tried it with, according to McArthur, “moderate success.” The system was a bit confining for AOC’s need. Equipment had to be reserved with four-day notice, for example, making it impossible to call county commissioners to a meeting with members of Oregon’s Congressional delegation or state legislators on short notice, which is not uncommon. More significant, was that in 2010 the State chose to

privatize the video bridge. This meant AOC’s fee to use the system would increase by 50 percent and, for the first time, each connected county would pay a user fee. With meetings often lasting two to three hours, the price increase presented a budget problem for both AOC and the counties.

In November of 2009, McArthur saw a news release from the Oregon Department of Energy for a solicitation for stimulus (Recovery Act) funds for energy projects and one category was for projects that reduced transportation costs. The grant was administered through the Oregon Department of Energy as part of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program. McArthur

asked for AOC Board approval to apply for their own system. The counties had already made their investment in some video conferencing equipment and didn’t want to lose it. The Board supported his request to apply for the grant.

AOC staff had limited time to respond, but since much of the ground work had been completed by AOC Communications Manager Laura Cleland, they made the solicitation deadline.

**“The timing couldn’t have been better.”**

Laura Cleland  
AOC Communication Mgr.



**AOC Executive Director Mike McArthur, right, shows Oregon Department of Energy Project Manager Shanda Shribbs the new AOC video conferencing equipment paid for with Recovery Act (stimulus funds).**





**Several county administrators from local counties and AOC staff attend a video conferencing meeting on site in Salem and some attend through AOC's new video conferencing system. The new system was paid for with Recovery Act (stimulus) funding.**

Their proposal was to install a video conference bridge and associated equipment and software to support four meeting rooms at the AOC office in the Local Government Center in Salem, close to the State Capitol.

The rooms are of various sizes to accommodate a handful to 40 users at a time. It also allows several committee meetings to be conducted at AOC headquarters at one time which is common before board meetings. Part of the grant was for desktop web cameras so individual AOC staff members could work at their computer with a rural county staff to review a document together, for example.

The grant was for \$127,360 with AOC contributing \$59,000, much of the match in staff time. According to McArthur, the project could not have been done without the ARRA award.

"The timing couldn't have been better," said Cleland. "County budgets are pinched."

The system was operational in February 2011 just as the legislative session was underway. Eric Schmidt, AOC communications manager, is helping inform county officials and other potential users on the use of the system and meeting protocols when using it.

"There are 120 county commissioners and judges in

the state, their staffs and all county department heads who can use this system," said McArthur.

In addition, the Oregon School Board Association and the League of Oregon Cities in the same building as AOC can use the system for their meetings with state-wide stakeholders. AOC partners—the Association of Oregon Community Mental Health Programs and Oregon Coalition of Local Health Officials—also regularly use the system.

AOC staff monitors the system's use and captures the vehicle miles reduced when video conferencing is employed. AOC estimates, based on the meetings held in the first 10 months of 2009 and the distances attendees traveled, that the AOC video conferencing system will reduce county officials travel by a minimum 25,660 vehicle miles per year. Use by other organizations will add to this amount. At an average of 22.1 miles per gallon and gas prices at \$4.00 per gallon, this would mean an annual savings in gasoline costs of \$4,644. In addition, counties will save on staff travel expenses and be able to attend a "face-to-face" meeting when the weather is bad or other commitments limit their time.

"We are really excited about the opportunities this technology provides to save time, expense and gasoline, yet allow local officials to remain involved on a statewide level," said Cleland. "Everybody wins."



**AOC Deputy Executive Director Cara Fischer (from left), ODOE Project Manager Shanda Shribbs, AOC Assistant Jennifer Mendenhall, and Communications Manager Laura Cleland discuss close-out documentation on their video conferencing project that receive Recovery Act funds.**

The Oregon Department of Energy (ODOE) awarded this energy project with American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (stimulus) funds through the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program (EECBG). The U.S. Department of Energy administers the funds, approves the projects and reviews the state's progress. The Oregon Department of Energy received \$9,593,500 in EECBG funding. The period of performance is September 28, 2009 through September 27, 2012.

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