Public Access to
Local Government Information Resources in
Saitama Prefecture

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I. Introduction

Ready access to information can enrich people's lives, increase their leisure time, and help achieve a higher level of productive activity. In recent years, Japan has seen a growing demand for information resources that will enhance the quality of life, as the population ages and lifestyles diversify. These changes in Japanese society are expected to continue in the future, and information will thus play an increasingly important role in everyday life.

If all the residents of Saitama Prefecture are to enjoy truly enriched lives in the 21st century, the "information gap" between different parts of the prefecture must be eliminated. An environment must be created in which all residents, no matter where they live, have full access to information services. In particular, the information held by local administrative bodies is a vital social resource that supports community activities, and it is therefore a major policy task for the prefecture to develop local government information services of various types suited to the various needs that these bodies serve.

Saitama Prefecture is carrying out a number of programs to bring information technology to the local community. Today, as examples of access to local government information resources, I would like to introduce two systems we have in actual operation, namely, the Sai-no-Kuni Information Network and the Saitama Prefecture Consumer Information On-line Network System.
II. Sai-no-Kuni Information Network

(1) Aims of the Network System

Greater regional information access is essential to the improvement of residents' welfare and the promotion of industry. It is also fundamental to the effort to correct excessive dependence on Tokyo—a dependence which has been growing at an accelerating rate in recent years—and to boost the capacity of local governments as information sources.

To provide the new infrastructure necessary for regional information access, we are forming a wide area network which links the prefectural government with the municipal governments and cultural facilities. (This will be expanded in stages to include other public bodies.) Using this info-communications network, we will build an info-communications system by means of which information of all types (administrative data, forthcoming events, etc.) can be supplied, collected, and exchanged.

(2) Effectiveness of the Network System

The network system is expected to be effective in two ways:

(a) It will strengthen liaison between the two levels of regional administration by encouraging the sharing of information and facilitating its distribution between the prefectural government and the municipalities.

(b) It will help improve services to residents by giving the public access to information closely related to their daily concerns.

(3) Outline of the Info-communications Infrastructure

The Network System actually consists overall of two systems. These share some of their infrastructure, while other elements of the infrastructure are separate.

The common base is the communications circuits that link the central computer and the network terminals. For these we use ISDN lines with a capacity of 64 kbps.
Next, let me outline the separate infrastructure of the two systems. The first of these is the Basic Residential Data Transmission System. Its central computer is located in the Information Systems and Data Processing Division in the prefectural government offices. The terminals are personal computers with commercially available communications software, located in each of the 92 municipal government offices in the prefecture.

The second system is the Cultural and Community Activities Information System, whose central computer is located in the Saitama Prefectural Citizens' Activities General Center. A total of 129 dedicated terminals known as "lobby terminals" have been placed in the 92 municipal government offices and in cultural facilities such as the prefectural cultural halls.

(4) Outline of the Systems

Next, I shall explain the details of the systems as they are now operating.

(a) Basic Residential Data Transmission System

Monthly surveys of population movement are returned electronically by the municipalities, collated by the Statistics Division, and the results sent out electronically over the network.

A system has also been set up at the same time to allow information in the prefecture's statistical database (operative since fiscal 1988) to be retrieved from the municipal terminals.

(b) Cultural and Community Activities Information System

Residents operating the terminals have access to such information as a guide to the prefecture's 117 cultural facilities or news of volunteer and study opportunities, and can also reserve seats to performances at the prefectural cultural halls and 16 other venues.

Further, certain kinds of information can be automatically accessed not only via ISDN but also over conventional analog (telephone and fax) lines, offering a convenient service to the general public.
(5) Development and Operation of the Network Systems

The prefectural government allocated the budget for this project in September 1993.

(a) Installation of Communications Circuits

Under the plan drawn up by the prefecture, ISDN circuits were installed to connect the 92 municipalities, cultural facilities, etc.

(b) Installation of Terminals

For the Basic Residential Data Transmission System, to ensure that all 92 municipalities were equipped to join the network, we installed a personal computer with the required software at each municipal government office.

For the Cultural and Community Activities Information System, the dedicated terminals were built with a special housing designed for placement in building lobbies. These were installed over a period of time as they were manufactured.

(c) Operation

For the Basic Residential Data Transmission System, because there were different levels of computer literacy among the staff of the 92 municipalities, to assist employees in using the technology the prefecture's Information Systems and Data Processing Division distributed a manual and provided group and individual training. The system has been in operation since March 1994.

The Cultural and Community Activities Information System came online in July, when all the dedicated terminals had been installed. During the first month the number of accesses via dedicated terminal, telephone, fax, etc., has averaged 1,296 per day—an auspicious start.

(6) Future Directions

We will work to provide a more effective wide area network through two programs:
(a) Establishing a facsimile network system.

This system will give residents 24-hour access to administrative information, news of forthcoming events, etc., supplied by the prefectural and municipal governments, using their own fax machines at home or at work, and for the price of a phone call. The system will be designed so that the prefectural and municipal governments can easily enter the information they wish to make available from fax machines in their own offices. Information to be carried will include guides to public service and other examinations, announcements of examination passes, and information on volunteer activities, doctors on duty outside regular hours, special local products, and tourist attractions.

(b) Expansion of the Basic Residential Data Transmission System

We will take steps to reduce the labor involved in simple data collection and promote the "paperless office" by extending the scope of the Basic Residential Data Transmission System to include monthly reports on day-care centers and progress reports on road improvement, and also by automating the subsequent processing of the data. We will also promote the sharing of information through links to various databases, and thus endeavor to correct the regional information gap and make full use of database resources.

As we pursue these developments, we hope that every municipality will make effective use of the system for the free exchange of information.

III. The Saitama Prefecture Consumer Information On-line Network System

(1) Aims of the System

Consumer issues are becoming more complex under the impact of social and economic changes such as advances in science and technology, the aging of society, and internationalization. We are therefore seeing certain trends in the types of problems about which consumers seek advice. An increasing variety of complaints about door-to-door sales and similar dealings are being received
each year, and few of these can be solved easily as their handling often calls for specialized knowledge. Contracts and marketing methods are also becoming increasingly sophisticated, and inexperienced young people in their twenties, as well as many elderly people, are falling victim to unfair practices.

The system aims to help solve problems brought to the consumer advice services by storing information on actual cases, product tests, and consumer issues, and making it available on-line to the advisory staff at Consumer Service Centers and other agencies.

(2) Effectiveness of the System

The system is expected to be effective in three ways:

(a) In cases where harmful effects are likely to spread, e.g., when a new unfair practice is reported in another district, information can be obtained rapidly and made instantly available, thus preventing harm to local consumers and stopping the spread of the practice.

(b) Advisory work will become more efficient as the outcomes of past consultations and related materials are readily available.

(c) By supplying product test results and other consumer information, we can close the information gap between consumers and manufacturers and help meet diverse consumer needs.

(3) Scope of Information

The information handled can be broadly divided into three types:

(a) Consumer advice

Information on consumers' complaints and requests for advice received by the prefecture and municipalities

(b) Product tests

Information on product tests (trial purchases and comparisons) carried out by the prefectural Consumer Service Centers and other agencies.
(c) Consumer affairs

i. Listings of films, videos, slides, reference materials, books and magazines held by the prefecture and municipalities

ii. Courses, lectures, training seminars, and events sponsored by the prefecture and municipalities

iii. Directory of instructors for seminars, etc.

iv. Guide to consumer groups and recycling locations

v. Guide to advisory services and testing locations operated by the national government and industrial organizations

vi. Information related to daily life and product use

(4) Outline of the System

The host computer is the general-purpose computer in the office of the Information Systems and Data Processing Division. Information stored in the database is retrieved in packets via terminals installed in the offices of the advice services. As of July 1, 1994, there were five terminals in prefectural offices (four Consumer Service Centers and the Consumer Affairs Division) and 14 in the municipal Consumer Service Centers and other agencies, making a total of 19.

It is planned to improve the service by stages in the municipalities, taking into account the population size and the development of the consumer administration in each, as measured by the number of Consumer Service Centers and advice corners, establishment of specialized organizations, volume of complaints received, etc.

The terminals are also connected to the Consumer Affairs Information Network System of the Japan Consumer Information Center via the prefecture's host computer, giving nationwide access to some 1,330,000 items of information related to advice on consumer affairs.
(5) Operation of the System

Whenever new information is generated by the work of the agencies that administer consumer affairs, it is entered on an official input form. In addition to the Consumer Affairs Division, participating agencies include the Consumer Service Centers at both prefectural and municipal levels. All the forms are sent in, usually by mail, to the Consumer Affairs Division.

There the information is transferred to floppy disks by keyboard and optical character reader (OCR), then sent to the host computer after error checking. It is then stored in the database by processing and accessed from the terminals. As of March 31, 1993, a total of 59,240 items of information had been stored, and 17,671 searches were made during fiscal 1993.

(6) Development of the System

In developing this system, a study group was established within the prefectural government. Based on its findings, we proceeded with the basic design in fiscal 1990, detailed designs in fiscal 1991, and program development and data transfer in fiscal 1992. After preliminary trials, the system came on-line on April 1, 1993. As Saitama Prefecture adopted its official nickname of "Sai-no-kuni" in the same year, the system has been named "System Sai."

(7) Future Tasks

The system is designed to support the consumer advice services by supplying information to the advisory staff at the Consumer Service Centers. To ensure that the relevant information can always be found quickly when needed, we must provide the database with fuller information resources and thus make the system more effective in consumer protection.

IV. Conclusion

The two systems I have introduced today serve mainly to supply the prefecture's residents with information closely related to their daily lives, in coordination with the municipalities. There is also a need to enable public access to information held by local governments in such fields as welfare,
medical care, industry, the environment, and disaster prevention, by utilizing the full range of information technology. To meet these needs, the prefecture is working to provide a variety of information systems.

Saitama faces a number of problems specific to the prefecture, and all departments of the prefectural government are working toward their solution through various measures.

(1) Saitama has the nation's largest number of residents who commute out of the prefecture to work or attend school. According to the 1990 national census, the figure was about 1.19 million people, of whom some 1.09 million commute to Tokyo. As a result, many sectors of the commuter railways experience passenger loads that are over 200% of normal capacity. There is thus a need to ensure more comfortable commuting conditions.

(2) Saitama's population is aging at one of the fastest rates in the country, and a major increase can be anticipated in the urban-type population of elderly people who have few ties with their local district. There is thus a need to create an environment in which the elderly can lead secure and fulfilling lives in the local community.

As one effective way of solving these problems, I see us utilizing the info-communications infrastructure to build telecommuting systems and network systems that will facilitate contacts among people.

As we enter the 21st century, lifestyles and work styles will become even more diversified. In order to solve the varied problems faced by the prefecture's residents and respond to their needs, we will continue our efforts to build efficient information systems while consolidating the info-communications infrastructure and improving the environment for information access in Saitama Prefecture.

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