

Government Web sites that come in handy



John Deans

Web site they would post the latest version of the proposed legislation in PDF format that cannot be keyword searched. Basically they just scanned in the hard copies as image files and saved them as PDF-formatted pictures of the text pages.

Only government would do such a thing.

To keep a handle on all the product recalls managed by the federal government I have found two Web sites that are quite helpful. To get a focused view of consumer product recalls check out the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's Web site at www.CPSC.gov.

This handy Web site is charged with protecting the public from unreasonable risks of serious injury or death from thousands of types of consumer products.

The CPSC.gov site focuses on faulty products that could hurt kids so it may be a good idea to see if any of the stuff in your house is on their list. Most of the items have problems with small parts that can break off and choke little ones. Other products like roll up blinds and child cribs may have strangulation risks.

Another broader range of recalled products can be found at www.Recalls.gov which is a group effort by numerous fed-

eral agencies that include the EPA, USDA, FDA, NHTSA and the Coast Guard. This comprehensive site covers all sorts of things like automobiles, boats, bikes, food, medicine, cosmetics, and many others. I'm sure this is a trial lawyer's dream site of income possibilities.

Falling by to my favorite state, Texas, there are some good sites our people in Austin provide for us to utilize. For you fellow business owners a helpful site to check on the validity of a corporation is the Window on State Government at www.window.state.tx.us run by the Texas Comptroller Susan Combs.

I have used this site to check the filing status of my companies to make darn sure they are "In Good Standing." If a company has anything less than that status on that official site then their limited liability is in jeopardy.

One Web site that has been hopping the past year is the Concealed Handgun Licensing (CHL) web page at the Texas Department of Public Safety. The

site located www.txdps.state.tx.us at is where you would start by initiating the application process to be able to legally carry a concealed handgun in the state of Texas. I strongly recommend every responsible adult with no criminal record pursue getting their CHL to protect themselves and their families.

Just recently a multi-year effort has been completed to document and map the availability of high speed broadband Internet all across the state of Texas. The site www.ConnectedTX.org has a great interactive map that shows the coverage of wireless, DSL, cable, fiber and even cellular data access to the Internet. This site is critical to verify some sort of high speed Internet access if you are thinking about moving to a remote location in Texas.

Working our way to the local level the Washington County Appraisal district Web site has a wealth of information put right at your fingertips. At www.WashingtonCAD.org, you can look up who owns a prop-

erty, how much that property is worth, and when they paid their taxes.

This site came in real handy during the Washington County judge Republican primary race in March.

The site's navigation is on the left and under the "searches" section look for "owner search" and click on it. From there you can just type in someone's last name and hit the search button which will then display all the taxable properties they own in Washington County.

From there you can drill down and see the detail on each property along with the values over the past 10 years. You can also see when they paid their taxes and if they were late owing penalties and interest.

Washington County's official Web site is at www.co.washington.tx.us, and it provides some helpful information like burn ban status, election results, and the links to all the other 17 county departments. The complete Washington County government budget is available

on this site in two parts scanned in as a 42- and 40-page PDF document that is not keyword searchable — imagine that.

The city of Brenham has a great Web site at www.ci.brenham.tx.us which has all their financial reports online along with links to their 20 departments. Those all have their separate web pages and gobs of information related to their duties.

I was impressed how both the municipal court and utilities departments enable users to pay their fines or bills online via the Web site.

Bottom line: Though government at best may be a necessary evil, they have come along way over the past couple of decades by having all that office information at the public's fingertips through user friendly governmental Web sites.

Next week's column: Mobile Me.

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Thomas Paine once said, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one." I will let you decide which state of federal government is in right now but for today we'll try to focus on the positive site by reviewing some Web sites operated by federal, state, and local governmental entities that are actually helpful — no really.

When I want to get my gander up and be armed well with the latest bullet list of new legislation that is being debated in the U.S. Congress, I start at the House of Representative's Web site located at www.House.gov. Since bills have to originate from the House this site has the most up to date text of the legislative proposals that will somehow someday affect all of us.

During the health care debate I was constantly on the House.gov Web site and scanning through the 2,700 word Obama-Care bill to be able to effectively berate the congressional yahoos that were voting on legislation they were not even reading. It takes an immense amount of effort just to digest the legal-ease saturating the bills but the devil is always in the details.

What drove me nuts is numerous times on the House.gov