

How can municipalities optimize public services?

Joanne Hyde, City of Thorold & Notarius

This article reflects the views of Ms. Joanne Hyde, city clerk for the City of Thorold from April 2021 to April 2022. Ms. Hyde is actively involved in training municipal employees in Ontario.



It's the morning and you take your shower. You leave home and start driving down the road. At the corner, you notice that the park has a brand-new playground structure.

We tend to forget it, but behind the services and infrastructure we use are often our cities, our municipalities and, most importantly, the local governments that make them work. Without these administrators and elected officials who quietly toil away behind the scenes, our quality of life would be greatly diminished.

Joanne Hyde is one of those exceptional beings who, without us realizing it, influences our lives day after day. As the city clerk in the City of Thorold, one of Ontario's fast-growing cities perched on the Niagara Escarpment, she is the cornerstone of compliance, transparency, and information access. The public, staff and elected officials rely on her legislative expertise to ensure that regulations are adopted in due and proper form.

"The Office of the Clerk is integral to bringing information together and ensuring openness and transparency"

If anyone can optimize a city's performance in streamlining performance in information management and public services, it's her.

At the heart of public engagement

If you ask a child what they want to do when they grow up, you can bet they won't say: **"My dream is to be a city clerk!"** Yet the profession is at the core of essential legislative services and democracy itself.

Joanne is no exception to the rule. She knew that working in municipal government was for her when she began her professional career working in the Chief Coroners.

"We were working on a case and I asked the Chief Coroner: 'Why is it so important to know the logistics of this accident?' He said: 'Knowing why an intersection is either a two-way or four-way stop is critical to saving lives and knowing

where to place a stop-sign can prevent future fatalities. And that decision itself on where those stop signs go is up to the local government.'"

Today, Joanne plays an integral role in executing the actions and contributing to the deliberation necessary in these types of decisions. Whether it is for the construction of a new road or building, or holding elections, she ensures that the candidates, elected officials, and experts all do their part for the public good.

"That policy framework behind the decision and that decision-making process is what drives me."

With her experience over the years in municipalities such as Burlington, Guelph-Eramosa, Caledon, and now Thorold, Joanne knows the challenges of the municipal world well. For her, the adoption of new technologies is the way forward if municipalities are to ensure quality services and, most importantly, meet citizens' expectations when it comes to information access.

"Many of us are looking at responsible economic growth and at infrastructure and development. It's important for municipalities to have neighbourhoods that are inclusive, age-friendly, and vibrant. But the most important is service modernization."



Technology: an asset for administrators

Joanne points out with amusement that while many people automatically use technology to shop or book their hotels in a few clicks, it is not always a reflex for municipal governments.


“Why can’t we use technology in our work lives if it makes sense in our personal and social lives?”

As municipalities increasingly need to deliver efficient services with fewer and fewer resources, Joanne notes that technological tools make municipalities more productive in a cost-effective manner in order to meet citizens’ growing expectations.

To support her position, she cites social media and numerous online applications that allow cities to communicate relevant information better, in addition to being able to track its uptake among citizens.

“Having that ease of access to information will ultimately help our communities. Without our residents sharing how they feel and expressing their needs for local government, it’s difficult for us to gauge that service delivery.”

Beyond communication, Joanne thinks that technology is a major ally for municipalities that want to simplify and modernize processes that have become convoluted.



“Why can’t we use technology in our work lives if it makes sense in our personal and social lives?”

“In the clerk’s office, we investigate different opportunities to modernize our processes that might be slow, redundant, or bureaucratic [...]. For me, I just want to be able to further explore and integrate technology platforms that improve automation and service delivery.”

One of those solutions that makes all the difference for Joanne and the City of Thorold is ConsignO Cloud, our electronic signature platform.

ConsignO Cloud: tailored for municipalities

“Many of the documents that I was finalizing could take up to two weeks to complete. With Notarius and ConsignO Cloud, we are able to get those out to our partners within hours.”

Joanne Hyde has heaps of documents to sign each week. Whether it is contracts, minutes, or agreements to be approved by city council, she must obtain signatures that public safety and economic development projects need in order to move forward.

“We started to use the platform for anything and on everything that we could: anything that required a quick and easy way to secure a document and get that signing authority that we needed.”

She noted that ConsignO Cloud made a world of difference during the pandemic, especially because the technology is designed to ensure the legal reliability of documents and the integrity of the information they contain following the application of trusted electronic signatures.

“Being able to provide that audit of when and where the signatures were applied really helps meeting legal requirements. It’s not just about our agendas, minutes, bylaws, and agreements, but virtual commissioning. There is anything that you can apply it to, that audit is so important because it’s proof.”

Moreover, while many people may see the adoption of a platform like ConsignO Cloud as intimidating at first glance, Joanne does not hesitate to express that it was adopted very quickly and everyone understood how it worked in minutes.



“It’s an anywhere and anytime solution. Because everything is digital, it helps us to see where we can implement it next and be creative!”

“Any party can get on their cellphone, enter the code, and just hit Approve and Sign. It’s been super simple. It doesn’t matter if you’re a technology wiz or not. It was very easy to implement. Signatories appreciate it because they no longer have to come into the office. Even if someone is out of the office or on vacation, you can sign at any time.”

Building on her experience with city council, by-laws and minutes, the municipality also uses the platform for human resources documents and for contracts with external partners. But because

Joanne likes to constantly modernize services, she wants to build on the success of its implementation to use trusted electronic signatures on all documents that require authentication.

“I’m currently working on its implementation in the City of Thorold. How we can use the platform to sign off on building permits or any other documents that can reduce the use of paper documents. [...] It’s going to be so much easier when building inspectors are off-site.”

Since all documentation from the platform is generated in PDF/A format, Joanne points out that the municipality meets its legal obligations for archiving conformity. This means that when future generations access the information, its integrity will be guaranteed for decades to come.

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Inspiring the next generation

Passionate about municipal democracy, Joanne has also made it her mission to pass on her knowledge so that future generations of administrators are better equipped. As she notes, in Ontario, there are a maximum of 444 city clerks. The entire body of democratic and procedural knowledge of municipalities lies in very few hands.

"More municipal employees are coming without the depth of experience or knowledge that some other leadership positions have. With the retiring workforce, we are losing that knowledge. On the flip side, we are getting new knowledge on how to use digital platforms because the younger generation has grown up with the technology."

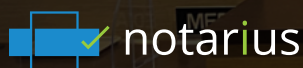
In partnership with Durham College in Oshawa, she has helped develop a program to educate new municipal administrators. She hopes to instill a sense of concern to ensure political neutrality, civic engagement, and administrative creativity with the help of technology.

"We're living in a world of apps and online technology; we must learn how to adapt to those changing needs to move towards digital transformation. It's not just for larger municipalities with IT resources; it's about being creative with the resources that you have."

When asked about the most important aspect about working in the municipal world, she says:

"Get out of your box. That's why it's so important to continuously learn, learn from your network and other people because there will always be somebody else out there to inspire you."

At Notarius, we must admit that seeing Joanne Hyde help municipalities in their digital transformation inspires us. People like her fuel our motivation to build a digitally reliable world every day.



The world is going digital.
Be digitally reliable.



notarius.com



info@notarius.com



1 888 588-0011