

A Tax Director's Vision Becomes Reality

Guilford County was more than ready to upgrade its archaic technology into a comprehensive end-to-end solution.

Farewell to the Infamous Green Screen Applications

Like many counties across the country, Guilford County's property tax and appraisal system was a hodge-podge of pieces built on a mainframe dating back to the early 1980s. The system encompassed green screen applications, four-foot-high paper piles, filing cabinets busting with index cards, and frustrated staff members who often felt like they had their hands tied when it came to quickly fulfilling requests.

"It was a very archaic environment," said Ben Chavis, Guilford County's Tax Director. "Some staff accessed some parts of the system; others accessed other parts. Barriers and bottlenecks choked the data flow. Ownership transfers could take six to 18 months old before we could post to our Web site. The public obviously deserved better."

Chavis had a clear vision of what he wanted. He envisioned a comprehensive system that would be integrated from top to bottom. Data would flow seamlessly from the Register of Deeds to the GIS system to LR/CAMA to billing and collections to finance and to their web site—and back again as needed—with as few hands touching the data as possible.

The question for Chavis: Was there a vendor and a software solution capable of implementing his vision?

The Search for the Solution

In May of 2008, Guilford County released a detailed RFP. Eight companies responded.

After a thorough, systematic review of four companies—both local and national—Guilford County selected NCPTS as its system and FARRAGUT as the service provider.

Other companies promised to develop the pieces that they didn't have in place, for example, a motor vehicles system that conformed to NC regulations. "Only FARRAGUT offered a comprehensive integrated NC-based system that offered the whole ball of wax," said Chavis. "Written with the latest technology, NCPTS is comparable to national offerings. But it is statutorily driven according to NC law."

Chavis also liked that NCPTS is a North Carolina home-grown system now in its third iteration. Originally developed by FARRAGUT for Wake County, NCPTS today is owned and managed by the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners and is offered to NC counties without licensing fees. Participating counties collectively set the vision, determine the best capabilities, and share the maintenance cost of the NCPTS software.

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— Ben Chavis, Guilford County's Tax Director

About Guilford County

With a population of 480,362, Guilford County is the third largest county in North Carolina. The county includes the cities of Greensboro and High Point and encompasses a large part of the thriving metropolitan area called the Triad.

About NCPTS

NCPTS is a comprehensive property tax and appraisal system built by NC counties to harness their ideas, talents and best practices. NCPTS integrates the property tax work flow including valuation, assessment, billing and collections. Owned and managed by the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC), NCPTS is offered without licensing fees. Currently, ten counties use NCPTS to manage day-to-day operations, improve collection rates, reduce operating costs and provide better service to taxpayers.

About FARRAGUT Systems, Inc.

NCPTS software implementation, support, and enhancement services are provided by the program's preferred vendor, FARRAGUT. NCACC manages the vendor's relationship and services. Founded in 1992, FARRAGUT helps local governments close the gap between the potential of technology and the reality of achieving measurable value—including more revenue, better service, and improved productivity.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

NCPTS Ownership & Participation

NCPTS Participants	Population	Production Year
Wake County	897,214	1999
Wayne County	113,811	2002
Henderson County	103,669	2003
Catawba County	159,125	2004
Harnett County	115,761	2004
Pitt County	159,057	2006
Mecklenburg County	913,639	2008
Randolph County	142,151	2009
Guilford County	480,362	2009
Orange County	129,083	2009

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Currently, ten counties (comprising 33% of the state’s population) use NCPTS.

“Knowing that the state’s two largest counties use NCPTS was important,” said Chavis. **“It just makes sense. NCPTS puts us in the same boat with a consortium of counties working together to make a better system. Not only did we inherit a good system, but as other counties come on board and add their ideas and input, the product will only become stronger.”**

An Integrated System

Production of NCPTS’s Land Record/CAMA module began in February 2009 and production of the Billing and Collections module began in July 2009. The system was completed in July 2010. “There were benefits to implementing in a poor economic climate, said Chavis. “Slowed ownership transfers made it an ideal time.”

Still, like any significant system overhaul, there were challenges. Good training helped overcome some of the resistance to change. “On July 6th 2010, I walked into my office here in High Point with a ‘not so enthusiastic attitude’ about having to learn NCPTS,” said Sarah Minnick, Deputy Tax Collector, Guilford County. “After several moments of frustration, due simply to not knowing how to navigate our tax system, the gates of heaven opened up and in walked Travis Coleman [Software Developer/Quality Assurance Lead, FARRAGUT]. In my 18 years of doing collections and learning many ‘new systems,’ this transition has been made easier by Travis.

Every question, he would answer or find an answer to, when I needed him, he was there ready and willing to “take on” my challenges.”

Overall, Chavis said the staff bought into the new system with an enthusiasm that surprised him. “The staff has been wonderful,” he said. “The system we had in place was so archaic. They were ready for change.”

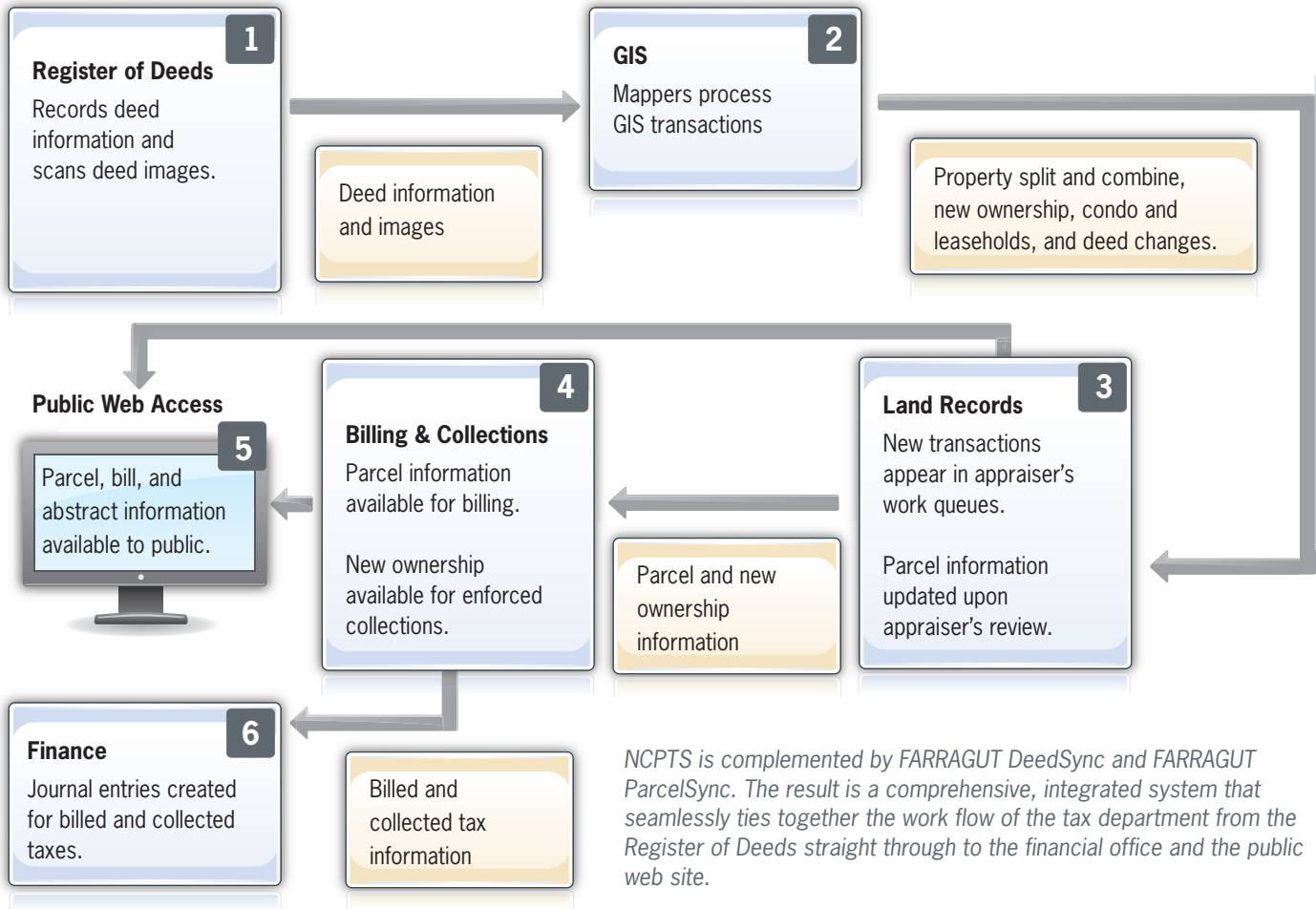
On the front end, NCPTS is a web-based, feature-rich software system. Instead of having to toggle between seven to 10 applications and rely on other departments, stacks of paper and filed index cards to get the information they needed to do their jobs, staff members now typically have no more than two to three applications open on their desktop. “It’s just a matter of pointing and clicking,” said Jim Roland, Assistant Tax Collector, Guilford County. “We can go from the assessment side to the billing and collections side and back to find information. It’s extremely fast. It’s all right there.”

But if the system seems simple, easy and seamless to users, it’s only because of the complex, multifaceted integration put in place on the back end.

What is an Integrated System?

While many vendors claim to offer integrated solutions, some are merely referring to an interface. An interface is a link to different systems from different companies. This differs from a truly integrated solution that is built on a core that is maintained and supported by a single vendor. In an integrated system, users enter data once and it automatically flows through the system. That means no more redundant data entry, fewer errors, less frustration, and a better use of precious resources. It adds up to real-time consolidated information. All these benefits translate into improved productivity, decreased operating costs and improved quality of service.

A High-Level View of Guilford County's Integrated End-to-End Work Flow



Realizing New Efficiencies

There is hardly a business process that has not, in some way, been touched by the new system. Examples of new efficiencies abound. To name a few:

The Commissioner's Report

Previously, producing a monthly report for the board of county commissioners required two weeks of effort (approximately 60+ hours). In a process reminiscent of "Where's Waldo," generating a single figure required sorting through a ream of 500 printed pages. The process also required written requests to the County IS group to generate data. "Now, we go into NCPTS, plug in some parameters, it churns for two seconds, and spits out the report," said Elliot Thompson, Administrative Services Supervisor, Guilford County.

"It's all automated. The report takes 10 minutes of one person's time. This example speaks volumes to the efficiency of our new system."

Assessment Correction

In the legacy system, the staff relied on batch processes to make changes, even to a simple request such as fixing a misspelled name. Any change could easily take six weeks. "Now we can make immediate changes," said Greg French, Assistant Tax Assessor/Personal Property, Guilford County. "I can send a corrected tax notice in 10 minutes if the property owner accepts e-mail. I really enjoy being able to solve someone's problem right away."

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Refunds

Refunds used to be a cumbersome, back-logged process requiring extensive effort. As one example, the staff was previously able to view the dollar amount of an overpayment, but not the payer. Because they couldn't assume the payer was the property owner, they would conduct research. This involved handwriting information on a piece of paper and then opening another application (if that application operated that day) to seek the information. Now, with a few keystrokes, an image of the check can be pulled up. All told, in the legacy system, perhaps 100 refunds could be processed in a good day, estimates Thompson. With NCPTS, the County has processed upwards of 1,100 refunds in a day. "It's amazing," said Thompson. "The research time has easily been halved and much of the refund process is now automated."

Transferring Information from the Register of Deed to the GIS Department

Previously, the ROD would make paper copies of each recorded deed. Those copies would then be added to four-foot-high stacks of paper organized by townships. These paper copies (which had already been keyed in by the ROD) would then be re-keyed for the mappers' use—a tedious process that created bottlenecks. In the new system, FARRAGUT DeedSync takes the index information recorded by the ROD, links it to the scanned image, and presents it to the Tax department for further processing. "There's been a huge elimination of repetitive data entry," said Stephen Dew, GIS Manager, Guilford County. "DeedSync allows us to maximize and streamline data entry from the ROD. This has allowed us to get away from organizing and processing data by township to doing things chronologically."

"The in-house efficiencies have been tremendous," said Chavis. "We have found ways to do things in less time with less people."

From Slow Service to Self Service

Perhaps the most visible benefit has been the new public web site. Not only is it more comprehensive, but the data is far more accurate and timely. It reflects real-time updates made by County staff.

The previous web site projected many of the same legacy applications that faced Guilford County staff. "No one was going to take the time to get through those screens," said Chavis. "But now taxpayers can easily navigate to the information they seek, and even pay online, a feature we didn't have before. It is awesome. It allows us to provide services in ways that don't involve staff time. That's critical given the current economic climate."

For example, in the past, individuals couldn't look up their motor vehicle bills online. "That's about 10 percent of our tax base, but it consumes about 80 percent of our time," said Chavis.

Vision Meets Reality

The system empowers taxpayers. They can now conduct much of their business with the tax department easily and efficiently online. Their needs can often be met via a same-day e-mail versus waiting six weeks for a letter. The system empowers staff. "We used to be bound by the limitations of the mainframe. It would be somewhat embarrassing when the taxpayer would make simple requests, such as an e-mailed duplicate tax statement, that we simply couldn't fulfill," said Thompson. "Now we are in modern times. Our new system is far more flexible."

As for Ben Chavis, the Tax Director, he is enjoying one of those rare happenstances when your vision is translatable into reality. The system is quickly closing in on his most ambitious goal: a one-day turnaround on straight property transfers. (This compares to a turnaround time of 6-18 months in the legacy system.)

"NCPTS was the best among all the systems out there," said Chavis. "I felt that going in, and it was beautiful to see how all the processes worked out, and my intuition turned out to be true: that FARRAGUT was indeed the right software provider for us and NCPTS was the right software package."