

**Creating a More Sustainable State Web Presence
For the State of California
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The California State Information Technology Strategic Plan, as proposed to be updated effective November 2005, directs the California Portal Steering Committee to complete the following actions, the purpose of which is to establish “an enabling management and technical foundation for the transformation of government, making the technical solution implementation process more customer-focused, strategic, efficient, and economical”:

“The California Portal Steering Committee will guide development of a new State Portal including: (a) identification and design of shared services; (b) definition of the technical architecture and governance process; (c) identification of additional projects to leverage shared resources; and (d) by July 2006, approval of the first architecture for the state portal.”

In this document, I present for discussion and action by the Portal Steering Committee several critical strategic decisions that we must take before any sustained and detailed planning can occur. Our recommendations, if adopted by the Governor’s office and other stakeholders, will commit substantial resources to a multi-year change process and, if our decisions are truly wise, to an essentially permanent change in the way the State develops and maintains its presence on the Internet.

Decision 1: Using a “communities of interest” approach, the State should develop and maintain one or more “Web Centers” (including a State-level “California Web Center”) that assist users in navigating quickly to desired government information and services.

The IT industry’s adoption of the phrase “portal” has created substantial confusion. It is not at all clear exactly what a “portal” is or is supposed to do. It is time to bring plain language back to the table so everyone can understand what is intended. The first step to plain language is to banish the word “portal” from our vocabulary.

To some people, the word “portal” has signified the development of a single web-hosting environment where all of an organization’s web pages are maintained. The California State Portal, in its initial design and implementation, seemed to suggest this approach. If we adopt the federated management and governance approach described below, we will be rejecting this meaning of the word “portal.”

More commonly, the word “portal” simply refers to a set of web pages and links that assists users in finding desired information or services on a purely functional basis even though the user may not know anything about the way an organization is organized. Most of the links and information on the California home page and related pages fall into this category. The idea was supposed to be that users could come to one web site, www.ca.gov, and easily find anything they needed or wanted from State web pages.

In essence, these type of web pages serve as a “web center” or index which connects users to all other State web sites dealing with specified subject matters. These pages serve a function quite similar to a call center or help line where customer service representatives can help guide callers through the bureaucracy. Given the size, scope and complexity of state services, there remains a need for “web centers” to help guide users through the “Internet bureaucracy.”

The implementation of this concept is likely to require several levels of “Web Centers.” For many users, a State-level Web Center (a “California Web Center”) available at www.ca.gov will still have great value. We will also be needing web centers for certain common governmental functions or operations (e.g., “California Taxes Web Center” or “California Health Web Center”). These categories are already reflected on www.ca.gov, so it should be relatively easy to identify initially some communities of common interest to develop and maintain these second-tier web centers.

Decision 2: The State should adopt a “federated” management and governance approach to the development and maintenance of the State’s Internet presence.

In general, the State’s Internet presence should be developed and maintained by staff who are closest to the programs that own the information to be presented on the web or that have regulatory responsibility for transactions to be processed on the web. This is, in fact, the way the State’s presence on

the Internet has developed over the last decade, and there is no compelling reason to alter this basic approach. To the contrary, there is every reason to think that sustainable Internet development can take place only if the responsibility for development and maintenance lies close to the personnel responsible for each program that is represented on the Internet.

While most development and management should occur at the departmental level, there are a few functions that are common to most agencies where there are significant benefits to be achieved from a shared services architecture (e.g., Identity and Authentication Services, Payment Processes, Collections Management). In a shared services environment, a few individual departments would be assigned responsibility for developing and maintaining one or more of the shared services and making sure that those services are available to all other departments. A shared services architecture can function effectively and smoothly only if there is a general State Web Enterprise Architecture that defines at a high level how individual departmental web sites can interoperate with the shared services.

In sum, the State should adopt a “federated” management and governance structure consistent with the above.

Decision 3: The State CIO should immediately seek commitments from appropriate agencies to assume responsibility for specific shared services, and those commitments should be brought back to the California Portal Steering Committee for review and ratification.

Implementation of the shared services component of Decision 2 above will require the commitment of significant departmental resources by departments that are assigned the responsibility of developing and maintaining shared services. This can be accomplished only after discussions with specific departments to determine which departments are both willing and capable of taking on enterprise-wide responsibilities. The State CIO should immediately commence these discussions and bring recommendations for the assignment of shared services back to the Portal Steering Committee for review and, as appropriate, ratification.

Decision 4: The State CIO, with advice from the Portal Steering Committee, should adopt a new banner for State web pages that uses less space and facilitates co-branding with State agencies and departments.

Compared to corporate Internet branding and industry best practices, the current State banner uses too much space on every web page, distracts users from the more important information on the page and can leave users confused about where they are on the State's web pages. The State banner should be revised so that it more simply and directly brands a page as a state web site without otherwise interfering with the presentation of information or services on the page.

The existing branding includes more than just the banner. It includes very structured look-and-feel requirements. The State CIO has authorized the Franchise Tax Board and the Office of Emergency Planning within the Department of Health Services to redesign their web pages to be more customer-centric without the limitations imposed by the existing look-and-feel requirements. Once these departments **have** finished their redesign efforts, the Portal Steering Committee will be in a better position to reconsider the existing look-and-feel requirements. Until such time as that reconsideration has taken place, all other departments should continue to observe the existing look-and-feel requirements.

Decision 5: The existing State Portal hardware and applications should be decommissioned as soon as practicable. Current clients **and agencies which that infrastructure **supports** should immediately begin planning to develop and maintain their own Internet presence.**

The current State Portal hardware and applications, though an award-winning improvement in the State's Internet presence when initially designed five years ago, has proven to be unsustainable and unmaintainable given the resources available to us. Its technical architecture is too complex and difficult to maintain over time.

There are only a small handful of customers that take advantage of the State Portal's web hosting services. They are as follows:

- California Film Commission
- Commerce & Economic Development Program
- First Lady's Office
- Governor's Office
- I-Bank

- MyCalifornia
- Office of HIPPA Implementation
- State CIO
- Tourism

The State Portal has failed to attract any new customers to its hosting services in over three years, and several of the customers listed above are already working on standing up their own web sites.

The State Portal offers a few other services, including a web search tool, a survey system, an email and wireless alerts system, and an Amber Alert notification system. Of these services, the only one used by a substantial number of departments is the search tool, and there is widespread agreement that the search tool does not work very well as an effective finding tool. Many of these enterprise-wide functions will have a place in the shared services architecture described above, but the particular implementation that we now have, no longer serves the State's needs.

The time has come formally to direct the decommissioning of the State Portal.