



## City of Newport News, VA

How the City of Newport News is raising the bar for open government

### OVERVIEW

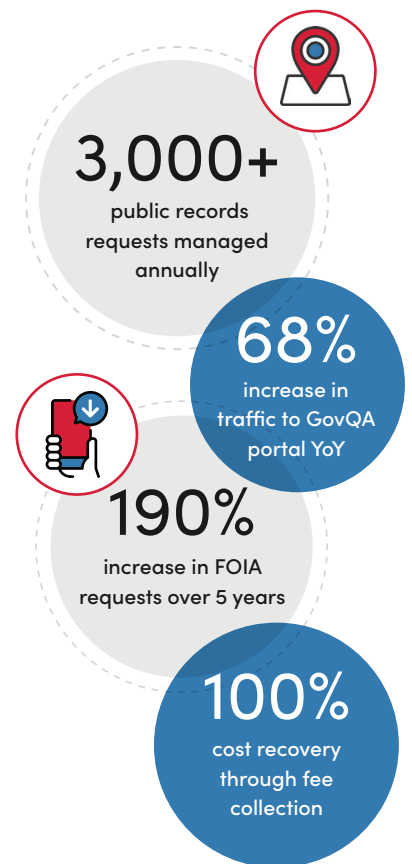
The City of Newport News, Virginia, faced a surge of more than 3,000 annual public records requests, which strained limited staff and exposed inconsistent practices across departments. The city responded by establishing a centralized, city-wide Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) protocol that required all requests to flow through Granicus' Records Request Management (GovQA) platform. This approach unified intake, tracking, and fulfillment, enforced consistent processes, and strengthened compliance. As a result, Newport News earned national recognition for its award-winning efforts to build trust and transparency, setting the bar for advancing open government.

### SITUATION | A GOAL TO FOSTER CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Public records requests in Newport News were growing rapidly, driven in part by surging demand from attorneys and increasingly complex records, including body camera footage. More than 3,000 requests annually made it difficult for the limited staff to maintain compliance. The city also lacked a centralized system or consistent processes; individual departments tracked requests in their own ways — like spreadsheets, emails, or not at all— leading to incomplete data and reporting gaps.

### MUST HAVE SOLUTION

Records Request Management



“

The city's new FOIA protocols have been touted as excellent by the Virginia Coalition for Open Government, and traffic on our GovQA portal has increased 68% year over year.”

Mayor Phillip D. Jones | Newport News, Virginia



**“Newport News’ goal was to implement digital solutions and best practices to increase the city’s accountability and transparency to its constituents, improve the public’s knowledge of the city’s activities and operations, modernize the city’s response to data needs identified by the public, and foster civic engagement,”** explained LaDonna Seely, FOIA coordinator for Newport News.

## **SOLUTION | “GO-TO PLACE” FOR OPEN GOV**

The Office of the City Attorney hired a dedicated FOIA coordinator to manage a city-wide uniform protocol for responding to FOIA requests — like redaction requirements, retention guidelines, processing costs, and staff training. The protocol requires all requests, regardless of how they are received, to be entered and managed in Granicus’ Records Request Management.

### **Newport News uses Records Request Management to:**

- ✓ **Streamline the intake, tracking, and fulfillment** of public records requests.
- ✓ **Standardize consistency** for how all departments manage requests.
- ✓ **Ensure compliance and efficiency** in responding to constituents.
- ✓ **Democratize access to high value datasets** while protecting privacy.

“I love that GovQA makes it all so easy,” said Seely. “I get the credit, but Granicus created the tool.”

The city leverages Records Request Management’s FAQ, archive functionalities, and GeoHub open data portal to proactively publish frequently requested datasets — like salaries, code violations, and crime statistics. “We now proactively provide direct access to city data sets in consumable and accessible formats to all of our residents,” explained Mayor Jones.

**“We’ve had the archive functionality available to us for years, and I had long laid out the benefits, but it never gained support,”** said Seely. **“Our new mayor is all about transparency, and he made it a priority.”**



#### REALITY CHECK:

63% of surveyed public records professionals identified vexatious or redundant requests as a top concern.

Source: [Trends in Public Records Request Management Report](#)

All non-exempt records are published to the archive, allowing self-service access to information. Staff can now direct requesters to the public archive instead of repeatedly locating, redacting, and uploading the same documents — reducing duplicate work and saving valuable time. When some requests can include as many as 400 files, that's a lot of time and effort saved.

**"Whenever there is an available property, or abandoned property, up for sale, and developers are interested, they ask for all these documents,"** Seely offered an example. **"We get tons of requests for the same address at the same time. Instead of reproducing those records, I can just send them to the archive. All the information is already available."**

#### TRENDWATCH: The rising complexity of public records in state and local government

According to the latest [Public Records Complexity Benchmark Report](#):

- Complexity has risen **72%** since 2018
- Request volume has increased **161%**
- File sizes have grown **438%**
- Video files alone are up **173%**





## RESULTS | CULTURE OF OPENNESS

Newport News significantly improved how it manages public records, delivering award-winning gains in trust and transparency.

**“Traffic on GovQA has increased 68% year over year since implementing the archives function,” explained Seely. “Newport News was named an All-America city for its work actively engaging residents in strengthening democracy through local action and innovation, and received ‘What Works City Silver Certification,’ awarded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, for excellent use of data to enhance citizen services.”**

Capturing every request in a centralized system provides complete visibility into workload, response times, and resource allocation — data that was previously unavailable and is now used to demonstrate program value. These insights helped justify additional staffing, including expanding the FOIA role to full-time and adding support within the police department.



### PROOF POINT:

60% of surveyed public records professionals cite staffing shortages as a challenge.

**Source:** *Trends in Public Records Request Management Report*

“Over five years, Newport News saw a 190% increase in requests. Tracking everything centrally has helped us understand workload and resource needs,” said Seely. “It really makes a difference by giving us accurate reporting and statistics to prove that it’s worth it.”

The city has also successfully implemented cost recovery practices, using Records Request Management’s billing and invoicing tools to generate enough revenue from FOIA fees to fully cover the platform’s cost.

**“The Granicus team showed me how to input everybody’s hourly rates and figure out what to charge for different requests,” said Seely. “Now we’re bringing in enough money with our fees to pay for our subscription.”**



Meanwhile, enhanced public access through the records archive and open data initiatives has empowered residents, developers, and journalists to find information independently — so much so that media outlets now use the archive to identify story ideas. “I love knowing that I can make it as automatic as possible for everybody,” said Seely.

These noteworthy outcomes have created a continuous cycle of transparency, reinforcing a culture of openness across the city and earning recognition at both the state and national levels for advancing public access to information.

#### BRIGHT IDEA: Keep learning after launch

Seely’s advice for getting the most out of the Records Request Management solution is to stay curious, use the resources available, and don’t be afraid to ask for help. Newport News continues to uncover new ways to use the solution — from load balancing and retention tools to billing, invoicing, and more.

**A commitment to the following ongoing learning has helped the city make the process more valuable over time:**

- Watching [Granicus Learning](#) videos.
- Exploring the system a little bit more each day.
- Leaning on the Granicus team’s expertise.

**“I think I have watched every single training video, at least twice,”** said Seely. **“The Granicus team has taught me all kinds of tips and tricks to really use the tool as robustly as possible.”**

*This story highlights the hard work and innovation that earned Newport News, VA recognition as a winner in the 15th Annual [Granicus Digital Government Awards](#), honoring exceptional achievements in digital government.*

## Begin the journey!

Ready to deliver exceptional outcomes?

[Contact us](#)