



# Georgia Deploys Technology to Revolutionize Campaign Finance & Ethics Disclosures

INNOVATIVE NEW SOLUTION INCREASES TRANSPARENCY & ACCOUNTABILITY

**T**ransparency is one of the core tenants of a healthy democratic republic. However, managing information on consistently record-breaking political campaign contributions and volumes of personal financial disclosures is a massive obstacle – one that state ethics commissions across the U.S. are constantly working to overcome.

By deploying technology from public sector software company Civix, the Georgia Government Transparency & Campaign Finance Commission has completely revolutionized how people file and find disclosures – and how the Commission fulfills its mission.

## AN OUTDATED SYSTEM

The Commission administers and enforces the provisions of the Georgia Government Transparency and Campaign Finance Act. As such, it's tasked with collecting campaign contribution disclosure reports, personal financial disclosure reports, and lobbyist disclosure reports. It advises and educates the public on aspects of the Act and investigates potential campaign finance violations. Certainly, having accurate, accessible data is essential to fulfilling these functions.

Prior to the new Civix system, the Commission was relying on a decades-old legacy system that primarily relied on paper forms that were electronically stored. It lacked robust auditing features, so enforcement was a painstaking, often time-consuming process.

"Without the ability to easily obtain and quickly analyze reams of data, we couldn't efficiently enforce the Act," said Robert Lane, the Commission's Deputy Executive Director and General Counsel. "Our job is to arm the public with information about the people who are asking for their votes. It's critical that we can do this in real time, quickly spot violations, and hold people accountable. This technology enables us to uphold the Act, and it empowers the public with easy-to-access and easy-to-understand information."

## IMAGINING A NEW WAY

In many areas, the Commission's legacy system made fulfilling its mission next to impossible. Hence, the Commission staff issued an RFP, eventually choosing Civix to help completely reimagine the system. Civix has a 10-year history of working with Georgia agencies under different branches of government and tailoring those products for statewide use.

With the range of interrelated functions it oversees, the Commission was looking for an all-in-one solution.

"Civix offered the most comprehensive out-of-the-box system. It's one that we were able to modify to meet our unique requirements," said Erwin Yap, the Commission's Director of Business Operations. "It brought together campaign finance and personal disclosures into a single, seamless system."

"The new system eliminates manual processes, making entering, accessing, and analyzing data fast and easy. This means we're able to offer the public near real-time transparency," added Yap.

Automation makes compliance easier to ensure because the system incorporates the statutory requirements specific to each election – even as they change, such as limits and thresholds. It also automates communications, meaning filers will receive notifications to remind them when disclosures are due, and the system notifies them when they're noncompliant. Georgia's system even takes it a step further, automatically calculating and generating fines that the filers can then pay online.

## UNPRECEDENTED USABILITY

As the name suggests, the Georgia Government Transparency & Campaign Finance Commission serves the public. Its primary customers are public officials, candidates for public office, campaign and non-campaign committees, lobbyists, researchers, and media. Each has varying levels of technical aptitude and unique needs. The new system is incredibly easy to use to

serve everyone's interests best, featuring user-centric design, built-in templates, and visual reporting.

"Simple, modern, and secure - the new solution quickly enables access to key ethics information," said Mike Wons, president of Civix Government. "The public, including researchers and members of the media, can view the information pretty much in real time – without the need for a login or any special credentials. With this, Georgia is leading the nation in transparency and accountability."

Before implementing this new system, a Commission staff accountant poured over all the filings to ensure compliance. That process is now automated. As soon as a report with potential violations is filed, the technology instantly flags it. "For too long, public trust has eroded in part due to the protracted period of time, often several years after the fact, that it took Commission staffers to hand audit each and every campaign account. Moving forward, the Commission will be able to process and audit information to ensure compliance in a quick and efficient manner that ensures confidence of the public in the process." said David Emadi, the Commission's Executive Secretary.

Relying on paper filings, Georgia's old system made it difficult to get a complete view of an individual's records, making it tough to see how much donors contributed to a given campaign and how much politicians accepted from a given individual or entity. Now, all those records are unified, meaning the public can clearly see the flow of money in politics and hold elected officials accountable.

The system's highly visual dashboard, UX/UI, and template reports make using it easy. Getting there, though, was no simple task. "The process of building and then implementing the new system took buy-in and consistent dialogue from numerous entities and partners, both public and private. "Doing so in this manner did not always lead to the quickest or easiest solution in addressing a problem, but it ensured the right solution for everyone was ultimately reached," Emadi said.

"We approach every solution from the perspective of the end user," said Wons. "In this case, we had any number of end users, from campaign staff to reporters, to commission auditors, to Joe Public."

To ensure the system worked for everyone, Civix's development team relied on hundreds of use cases where they navigated the system and assessed its functionality from the perspectives of different potential users.

"We weren't done until everything lined up. We wanted to ensure a smooth, frictionless experience for everyone, meaning the navigation and content had to be intuitive and information had to be accessible – a click or two away," Wons added.

#### ENSURING ADOPTION

"The best system in the world won't do us any good if no one will use it," said Lane.

Some insiders in Georgia still had a sour taste in their mouths from when a new reporting system was launched many years ago. As we all know, technology tends to decay over time; this system began to fail which ultimately resulted in a search for a new and improved eFiling system. The newly appointed members of the Commission wanted to avoid repeating history, so they proposed a soft launch.

"Early in the year, just a handful of filers were invited to use the new system. To their delight, it worked flawlessly. Nonetheless, over the next several months, the system was fine-tuned, the new process was socialized, and the Commission released a series of tutorials on how to use it once it became required. By allowing a limited number of users to participate in our 'soft launch' and rollout, we were able to identify minor bugs and issues that were maybe unforeseen, but are not atypical in encountering any technological software, addressing the issues, and correcting them before the system went live with the greater collection of users across the state filing their first reports into the new system," said Emadi.

The system went fully live in June of 2021 and successfully processed more than 11,000 transactions in 600 filings.

"We've been thrilled with the success of the system, it's a complete game changer here in Georgia," said Lane. "We were skeptical they could pull this one off, especially on the timeline we demanded. We're pleasantly surprised to say the least."

#### A WIN-WIN-WIN

The new system is a win for everyone involved: filers, the public, and Commission staff.

Filers now have an easy online method for completing their reporting requirements. The system automatically notifies them ahead of deadlines, calculates figures to warn them if they are approaching limits, and alerts them if they're in violation.

**"You no longer have to be an accountant or a campaign finance expert well versed in the current rules and regulations," said Lane. "The system walks you through the process and lets you know if you've got something wrong."**

The Commission also benefits because now it is immediately aware of violations. Also, back-office staff no longer has to engage in manual financial accounting as the system automates the process and makes online payments by candidates and public officials possible.

Most importantly, the public wins with this new system. It facilitates transparency. Rather than needing to spend hours on end digging through reports and calculating figures, any interested party can see a complete, unified record in just a few clicks and keystrokes.

"Every state in the Union ought to be following Georgia's lead on this," said Wons. "Transparency of information is power, and the Commission is empowering the state's entire populace."