distribution

Y2K-Ready C'ville?
"We're Doing As Good As We Can Do," Says the City

The City Of Charlottesville has a great deal of work ahead to prepare for the much-ballyhooed Y2K bug, the computer error that will cause many embedded chips and computers to interpret 2000 as 1900.

Distribution recently spoke with Tom Hatch, the Director of Information Services for the City. He is, by default, the City's Y2K guy. Hatch is used to working with desktop computer systems, LANs, mainframes and such. Not dealing with end-of-the-world scenarios and embedded chips in police walkie-talkies and traffic lights. But who is used to that?

Charlottesville's initial problem is a lack of funding. "Some cities have put aside millions of dollars...we're very envious of those cities," says Hatch. It's not that we don't have the money, he says, it's that none has been specifically allocated.

The City has been working on a overhaul of their 60 network systems and 500 computers for some time, with the goal of Y2K compliancy in mind. Still, the systems are old, most of which are 80x86 pre-Pentium models.

The problem that many of these systems have is not only an outdated operating system (although even Windows 98, as shipped, isn't Y2K-compliant), but that their very motherboard won't work. The BIOS (Basic In/Out System) in these systems wasn't created with 2000 in mind.

As a result, the City plans a massive overhaul and upgrading of their systems, with a goal of having just about every system be a Pentium by the middle of this year. That's a lot of work.

But the desktop computers are the least of their worries. It's the embedded chips contained within radio towers, power distribution systems, gas pipelines and 911 systems that create the real problem. The most basic of devices — traffic lights — are far more complex than most people suspect.

Charlottesville's traffic lights, says Hatch, are "very, very sophisticated." Perhaps a little too sophisticated for their own good. There's no reason to believe that the day- and time-dependent lights will continue to function come 2000.

Downtown Overrun
Vendors Are Overwhelming The Mall

The Downtown Mall, especially at this festive time of year, looks increasingly like a flea market. Vendors have overrun the bricks like rabbits, with lines of tables and booths stretching for blocks, selling everything from suspiciously-low-priced brand-name sunglasses to incenses and perfumes to home-baked goods to knick-knacks to finely-crafted wearables.

While the $120 annual vending fee traditionally prevents people from selling absolute junk, Distribution remembers (from some years ago) a guy selling boxes of cereal, month-old copies of Time and boxes of Kleenex.

The City of Charlottesville makes it even easier to sell garbage now, by offering Christmas permits. Yes, just $5 can get you, too, a permit to sell anything you see fit, anywhere on the mall for the few weeks leading up to Christmas. There's no limit on the number of vendors or, apparantly, the amount to which they can sprawl out.

Perhaps it's time to consider a better system for vendors.

An auction system, perhaps? Spaces could be assigned, a few per block, for vendors to set up. They could be mapped out and auctioned off annually. No other spaces could be used, save for special events, such as the Wednesday Farmer's Market, First Night, and that sort of thing. This system would ensure that the City gets what the spaces are actually worth to the vendors -- far more than $120 -- and would eliminate the hangers-on that simply clutter up The

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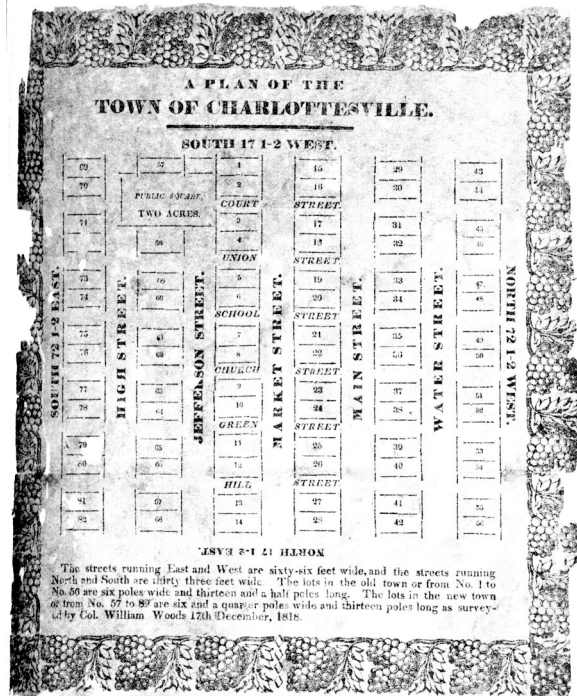
Renaming Downtown's Streets

We think that all can agree that the streets of downtown Charlottesville are terribly confusing. Tourists often get lost, though even locals may find themselves unsure of how to get from one side of The Mall to the other. Half of this problem can be chalked up to one-way streets and odd layouts.

But there's a part that nobody mentions much: the ridiculous street names. Not Market, Water, or Main -- those make plenty of sense. No, it's the fact that streets are numbered outward in both directions from 1st Street. Thus, there are two 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th...in fact it goes all the way up to both East and West 17th streets. Once North and South are factored in, things are terribly confusing.

"I can't get pizzas," says Max Fenton, a downtown resident and web geek. "They always show up six blocks away." Fenton can't simply say that he's on 3rd Street. Or 3rd Street South. No, he's 3rd Street Southeast. This, obviously, is impractical.

Back in the original City Plan, from 1818, the streets were to be referred to differently. From West to East, downtown's streets were Hill Street, Green Street, Church Street, School Street, Union Street and Court Street. As a historical reference point, Main Street was more commonly referred to as Three Notched Road.

Why not return to this system? Instead of damning the Second Street crossing, we'd curse the Hill Street crossing. There's no reason to totally eliminate the current numbering systems, but both systems could certainly be used side by side. As long as we're a city that prides itself on being so bloody historic, we should be willing to put a little more work into it.

Map taken from "Albemarle: Jefferson's County, 1727-1976," by John Hammond Moore, published by the Albemarle County Historical Society. Used without any sort of permission, but we will say that it's a wonderful, wonderful book, and recommend that you buy it.

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The publication of Distribution is an occasional event, covering news and topics that are not discussed elsewhere. We've been dormant for a while, waiting for things to talk about. (Unlike some publications, we only publish when we've got something to say.)

Beginning in 1994, we've been there to whine about Council, local politics, arts events or anything else that concerns us. We usually focus on the downtown area, though we're not ones to ignore larger issues of the city or county.

Will there be more of these? Sure, when we've got more to talk about. In the meantime, look for local events, publications and websites branded with "Evidence of a Misspent Youth Productions." It's a sure sign of quality. (And more fun than peanut butter.)

Love,
The Editors
XOXO

Fortunately, our 911 system is so antiquated that we don't need to worry: it's not computerized.

Baton Rogue, Lousiana, recently did a Y2K audit of their police, fire and rescue systems. They discovered, to their surprise, that their firetrucks were not Y2K-compliant. The rescue ladders will not go up come 2000. Bizarre.

What's frightening, though, is the large number of devices that nobody thinks to test. Or, more frequently, that people figure somebody else will fix.

"There are cloudy lines in beaurocracy," says Hatch. It's difficult for the City to know what must be fixed. Shared resources could just as easily be made into the county's problem, or the state's, or VDOT's, or even the federal government's. With little time left, however, there's no room for finger-pointing.

As for utilities, Hatch thinks that Charlottesville is in

> " We'll treat it like any hurricane coming. "

pretty good shape. The gas pipelines should function nicely for getting gas into homes, though whether it will get to Charlottesville from the initial supplier is up in the air. The same goes for power, although Hatch is working with Virginia Power on that. VaPower has a suspiciously optimistic graph on their website that says that they'll be ready in August of '99.

Hatch plans on adding a Y2K section to the Charlottesville City website soon, in order to keep people posted on the City's progress in addressing the problem.

No specific plans have been made to address potential food shortages, power loss or rioting. Hatch feels confident that existing emergency plans cover the problem well.

"We are [thinking about that]...we're in pretty good shape. We'll treat it like any hurricane coming. Everybody has contingency plans for loss of power or any approching emergency." There are plans for shelters and evacuation routes, he says, so they think that emergency services are pretty well covered.

Hatch seems to be sliding into his new unofficial Charlottesville Y2K Czar position well, though not without humility. "It is a new area for me. We're going to be consulting with experts...the nice thing about this problem is that everybody is going to have it."

So, will Charlottesville work January 1st, 2000?

"Of course, we cannot absolutely know. I'll probably be right here, talking to somebody like you. It'll be a real interesting Monday." •

Downtown Mall. This will help both the "real" vendors, and the consumer at large.

Tony LaBua, owner of Chaps Ice Cream on the Downtown Mall, pointed out that the beauty of free enterprise is that any merchant can sell anything that they want in whatever fashion that they want. With that in mind, he added, "but obviously licensing is too cheap and should reflect more of a standard of respectability to the merchants."

If some sort of restriction, be it this or another, is not put in place, things certainly won't get any better. The difference between the number of vendors in 1994 and this year is huge. In another five years, should this trend continue, there won't be room to walk. It's time for a change.

(And don't even get us started on the vendors at First Night every year selling airhorns and silly string...) •

Slang Term of the Week

ISH: Formerly only in use as a suffix denoting "somewhat" or "to an extent" (cute-ish, cold-ish, Swedish), there has been a recent increase in the use of Ish as a word of its own. The term is noncommital and vague, and similar in usage to "kinda" or "alright". In fact, it resembles most the French "comme-ci, comme-ça", being neither a positive nor a negative. •

Items o' Interest

BAR / City Council Spat

With increasing frequency, City Council has begun to disregard the recommendations of the Board of Architectural Review. Most notably with Council's ruling regarding demolition of historic buildings on West Main Street. Perhaps if we're going to have a BAR — a panel of experts — we should listen to them. We're not opposed to progress, but proper procedure is not followed, bad decisions are frequent made. Shades of "Charlottesville 2000"?

Mall Crossing Review?

Way back when, when the 2nd Street mall crossing was created, City Council resolved to have a review of the crossing after a one-year testing period. It's been nearly three years, and still there's been no review or analysis of the success or failure of the crossing. Based on the number of people that drive across it the wrong way, and the amount of deterioration The Mall has incurred, it might be time to get rid of the brick-crushing crossing. Better late than never.

A Brief Zen Poem

if you're happy and you know
it what is the sound
of clapping one hand whoosh whoosh

Youth Curfew Still Being Fought

The ACLU case fighting Our Fair City's curfew law (Schleiffer vs. City of Charlottesville) lost as expected in the Fifth Circuit Court. However, the three-judge panel had a dissenting vote, a judge who could not support Charlottesville's curfew. This dissension makes it all the more likely that the Supreme Court will take the case, should the ACLU appeal. Schleiffer, et al, stand a good chance of winning in the Supreme Court.

At the time of its passing, Council promised a full analysis of the curfew one year after it was instituted, which should have been many months ago. That analysis hasn't yet appeared, and Distribution's attempts to gather statistics on curfew-hours arrests and curfew violations were rebuffed by the city. (Full Disclosure: Distribution contributor Waldo Jaquith is a plaintiff in that case.)

Wachovia ATM

Now that Central Fidelity has been bought out by what may be the worst bank ever (horror stories abound), the new bank, Wachovia, has decided to make a few exterior changes to their downtown location. They've changed the ATM. Instead of the well behaved old ATM, they have one with full-motion video and blaring audio that runs ads for Wachovia, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The peace and quiet of "The Historic Downtown Mall" has been shattered.

While we don't know of any law that specifically bars this, think of it this way: Should any one store do anything that we wouldn't want every store to do? It's time for Wachovia to go back to a good old fashioned black-and-green text-based ATM. That knows when to shut up.

The Rapture Billards Statue

Make it go away. Please.

Traffic Light at 3rd and Water Streets

For whatever reason, there is a traffic light at the corner of 3rd Street SE and Water Street, at the intersection by the parking garage by Nationsbank. While this is probably useful to the Williams', one wonders if this is worth the tradeoff for the time that people spend sitting at a red light on Water Street. It's not as if 3rd Street, which is one way and dead ended, gets much in the way of outgoing traffic. It's probably time that the city noticed how useless this light really is. Perhaps it could be moved down to the eastern end of the mall, up by Market Street, where a new light is slated to be added. •

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