The Ultimate Guide
to Citizen-Friendly Government Website Navigation

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an MCCi brand

Let's talk about your website user experience.

User-friendly government website navigation ensures your citizens can access your services. This is your guide to using data to set up your agency's navigation menu.

This e-book draws from best practices for website user experience (UX) and web analytics and analysis our city and county users have shared with us. It aims to help you discover what your visitors are most often seeking so you can help them get where they're going faster.

In this guide, you'll learn about:

- The Stakes
- Mastering UX
- Citizen's View
- Menu Types
- Best Practices

"We get five phone calls a day from citizens trying to make a park reservation, but it's right on our site! Why can't they find it?"

If that sounds familiar, you're not alone.

38% of respondents to a Deloitte survey said that difficulty navigating government websites was their biggest challenge with accessing digital services.

It's notoriously tricky to set up your website navigation in a way that makes sense to all of your citizens.

The Stakes.

What problems will you likely run into if your government website's navigation isn't up to par? Reworking your navigation menu sounds like a big task—and it is! But why is it worth it? A user-friendly website can help you avoid:

Phone Calls, Emails, and Messages

Citizens are reaching out through phone calls, emails, form submissions, and social media, seeking information that seems accessible on the website but is not where they expect to find it. These phone calls take up your staff's time and over half of residents would rather interact with government agencies online.

Difficulty Staying Current

Convoluted navigation makes updating information on the website more complicated. This can lead to outdated information on your site, which complicates interactions with the public and increases the risk of providing poor service.

Distrust in Government Agencies

Residents who are dissatisfied with their digital experiences are less likely to trust government agencies. Distrustful residents are more difficult to govern, making life more difficult at every level of your organization.

Compounding Digital Inequities

Racial/ethnic minorities and lower-income Americans report higher difficulties with navigating government websites compared to their peers. While addressing the digital divide is a complex challenge, improving website usability can be a positive step forward.

Mastering UX Basics for Government Websites.

According to Deloitte's Michele Causey, "[Governments] often design our websites and services with our organizations in mind" rather than with the citizens.

Imagine this - your foot is injured and you need information about getting it treated. The doctor's website says things like:

- Tendon Injuries
- Ligament Injuries
- MRIs
- CT Scans

You don't even know the difference between a ligament and a tendon, much less which one you've injured! This website thinks like a doctor.

Now imagine that you go to a different doctor's website. It says things like:

- Schedule an Appointment
- What to Expect at Your Visit
- How Much Will I Owe?

This website thinks like the patient (or website visitor).

The same is true with your government website navigation. The solution to this problem lies in the User Experience (UX).

Mastering UX Basics for Government Websites.

User experience (UX) refers to the overall satisfaction and perception a person has when interacting with a product or system like a website. **"You need a concise navigation that's not overwhelming, but gives enough information for people know where to go," says GovBuilt Project Manager Cinesse Palagi.**

UX is a complex field that takes years to master. Keep these two important principles in mind:

Minimize Clicks.

Website pages should be accessible within two or three clicks (or taps for mobile users). For highly sought-after information, the fewer clicks the better.

This is a challenge because of the sheer volume of content that government needs on their site. As you move towards greater transparency, it's not always easy to know how to structure the information on the site in a user-friendly way.

Solving this problem means understanding what information your users find most important and making it easy to access.

Simplicity is Best.

Your visitors should complete their goals with minimal thought about where they will find information.

Government sitemaps often correspond with an internal organizational chart rather than how citizens conceptualize services. Many counties organize their websites by elected officials—auditor's office, tax assessor's office, and so on. Citizens may not know exactly what's handled by which office.

For example, a citizen wants to file a public records request may not know whether to go to the clerk, the individual department, or somewhere else.

Get Into Your Visitor's Head.

Website design with citizens in mind is a challenge. The solution is to look at the data to understand your citizens.

UX Data Analytics

Visitor behavior tools determine what users are looking for by providing analytics such as:

- Heatmaps that show what parts of a page visitors are looking at
- User session recordings that show patterns of how people are browsing your site

The most well-known of these tools is Crazy Egg, but there are a number of alternative options.

Keep Track of Questions

What questions do you most often get phone calls, emails, or form submissions about? Ask your public-facing employees for anecdotal evidence about questions they get, or better yet, keep tallies. If you're getting a lot of questions about something, that may indicate that people are having trouble finding it on your site.

UX Surveys

By collecting user feedback, UX surveys help you understand preferences, frustrations, and navigation habits. Questions can gauge ease of use, clarity of labels, and satisfaction levels to identify areas for improvement. UX surveys allow for quantitative analysis that highlights trends and common issues.

Google Analytics (GA4) is a goldmine of information to help you understand your audience's needs. Use this Google guide to set up GA4 on your website. If you feel like you're in over your head, you can hire a consultant to assist.

Navigation Menu Types for Government.

Once you've analyzed your data, it's time to decide how you want to organize your information onto your navigation menu. Let's look at navigation types and how they can be adapted and combined for *government* websites.
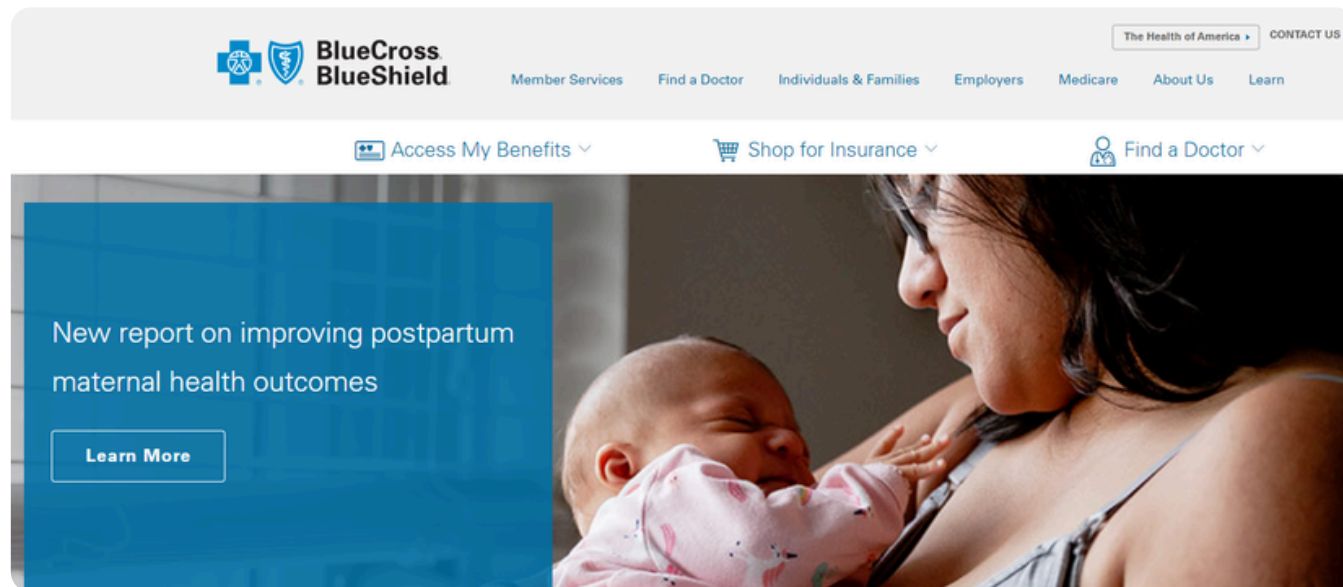
Action-Based Navigation

Action-based navigation menus list specific items that your audience is likely to want to take on your site.

In this example, Blue Cross Blue Shield use actions that visitors most likely need to take: Access My Benefits, Shop for Insurance, and Find a Doctor.

However, the nature of government websites is that there are often many informational pages that don't fit neatly into categories of actions.

Among many others, these could include calendars, meeting agendas, news items, historical records, or business directories.

While many governments use this as part of their navigation menu, it's usually not suitable for the entire site to be organized this way. Understanding this need for informational pages is one benefit of selecting a government-specific website provider rather than one that specializes in commercial web design.

Navigation Menu Types for Government.

Object-based navigation items are nouns. These might be product types on an ecommerce website, or types of information on a blog.

Object-Based Navigation

The Buchanan County, MO, website uses object-based navigation:

- About Buchanan County
- County Offices
- Resident Information
- Economic Development
- Service Center
- My Profile

Other government websites use departments as items on an object-based navigation menu. It's common practice for one of these items to say "government." The "government" tab can function as a catch-all for information.

Cinesse Palagi explains, "It's worth challenging whether the term 'government' is clear and intuitive to all users. Some users may understand it (audience: employees, other municipalities, people in government, etc.) while others (community members, local businesses, outsiders) might find it vague or confusing." She guides agencies towards using more specific language that describes the function or purpose of that section. For example, you can use "services" or "public resources" to replace "government."
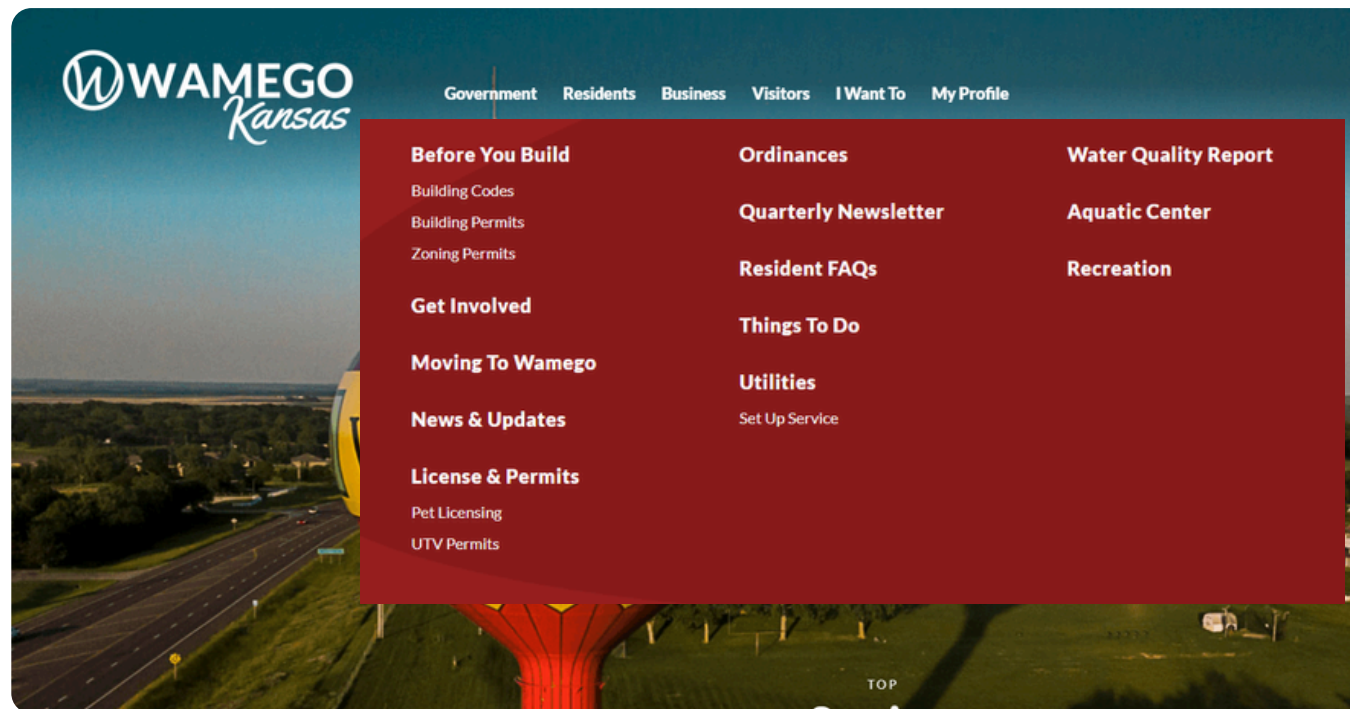
Navigation Menu Types for Government.

A third approach is to list the types of website visitors as top-level navigation items. Applying this to a government website, you might have navigation items reading: "Residents," "Business," and "Visitors."

Audience-Based Navigation

One thing to consider with this type of navigation is that the "Residents" tab, for instance, will have a great deal of information that then needs to be sorted. Sub-items under this menu may include action-based items that residents often need to do. The downside is that this may result in more than two clicks.

Take a look at how Wamego has solved this. Clicking on "Residents" brings up a full-screen menu with items and sub-items. While this is a lot of information to take in, it does minimize further clicks in most cases.

Navigation Menu Types for Government.

A good option for many government websites is a hybrid of these three types of navigation.

Hybrid Navigation

One hybrid navigation example is the City of Salina, KS. Their top-level navigation menu items include audiences (residents and businesses), objects (government, jobs, and payments), and a large menu of actions.

The items listed on this user-friendly menu are based on research into the most common actions that users want to take when they visit the City of Salina's site. **It is clearly designed with the end user, rather than the internal government user, in mind.**
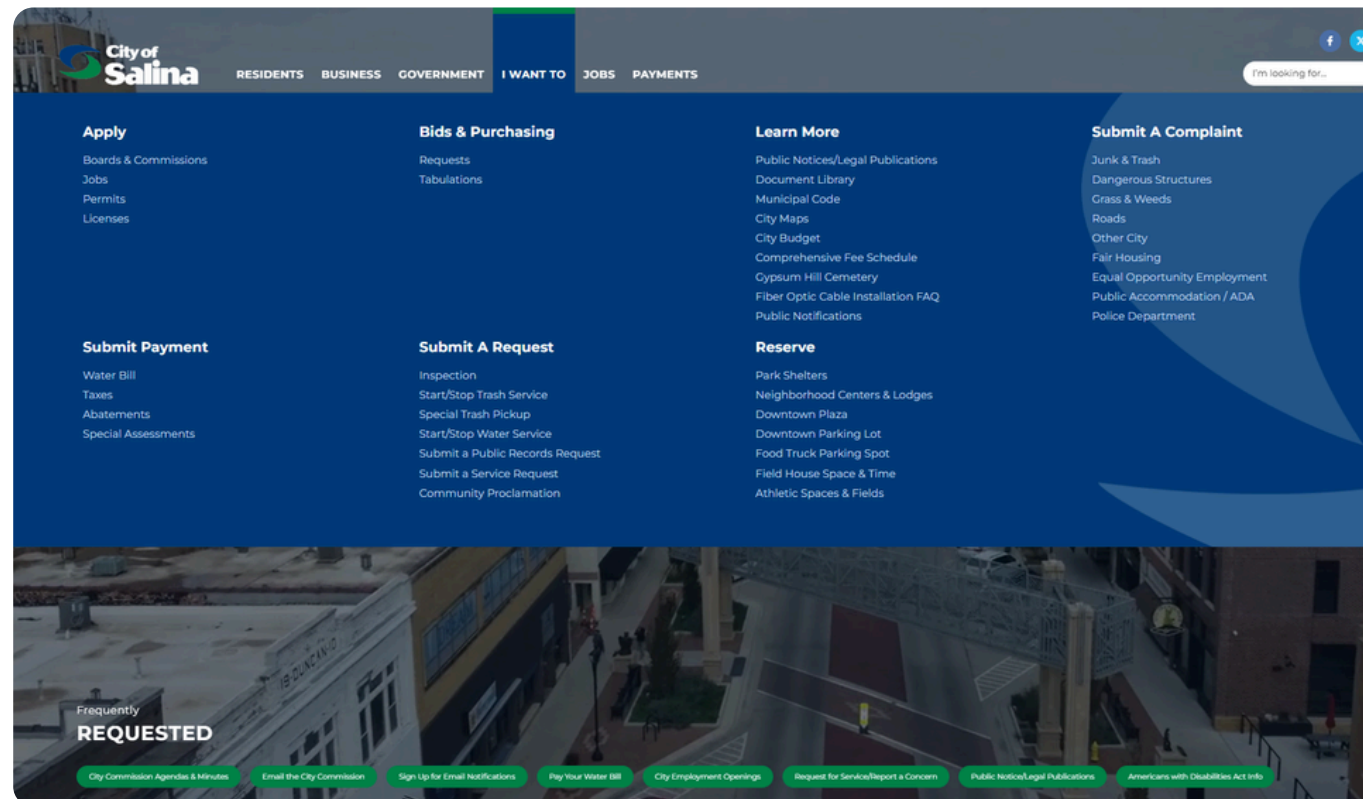
Design Your Website for Multiple Demographics.

Some commercial websites only target a specific demographic (like a jewelry brand that caters to high-income women 35-50 years old). But your website needs to be easy to navigate for as many people as possible. This means accommodating for:

Age

Younger adults, who are often more technologically savvy, prefer:
- Visually appealing and modern design elements
- Interactive features
- Quick access to relevant information

Older adults prefer:
- Straightforward navigation with clear categories and minimal clutter
- Larger font sizes and high-contrast text
- Information that is organized by category

GovBuilt Project Manager Kimberly Fund notes that there was a brief fad in government websites to use "Live," "Work," and "Play" as the main headers, but this would only work well in younger communities.

"If you do that in a retirement community, they will have no idea where to click. They'd be like, 'Live, work, play? I want to pay my water bill!' she says.

User Language Skills

Ideally, users should be able to toggle the menu items into their native languages (find data in your Google Analytics).

However, if that isn't possible, simplify the wording as much as possible. For example, use "Ask for" instead of "Request" for your most used items.

Device Types

A mobile-responsive website displays correctly on all devices, including mobile phones, desktops, tablets, even smart TVs.

Most mobile-responsive government websites hide the main navigation menu, making it accessible via a 'hamburger' icon for smaller screens.

# Multiple Paths and Duplicate Information.

One way to accommodate all these different needs and preferences is to provide multiple navigation paths to the same page. This practice is controversial among UX professionals, but we fully support it for government websites.

What does this look like?

The City of Salina has the option to pay your water bill either from the main navigation menu or from a button on the homepage.

Why is this effective?

- Older website users usually use the main navigation menu, while younger visitors tend to scroll down the page right away to find information. In either case, it's easy for them to find out how to pay their bill.

- On mobile, it takes three taps to find where to pay the water bill in the main navigation menu, but it's visible almost immediately when scrolling down the page.
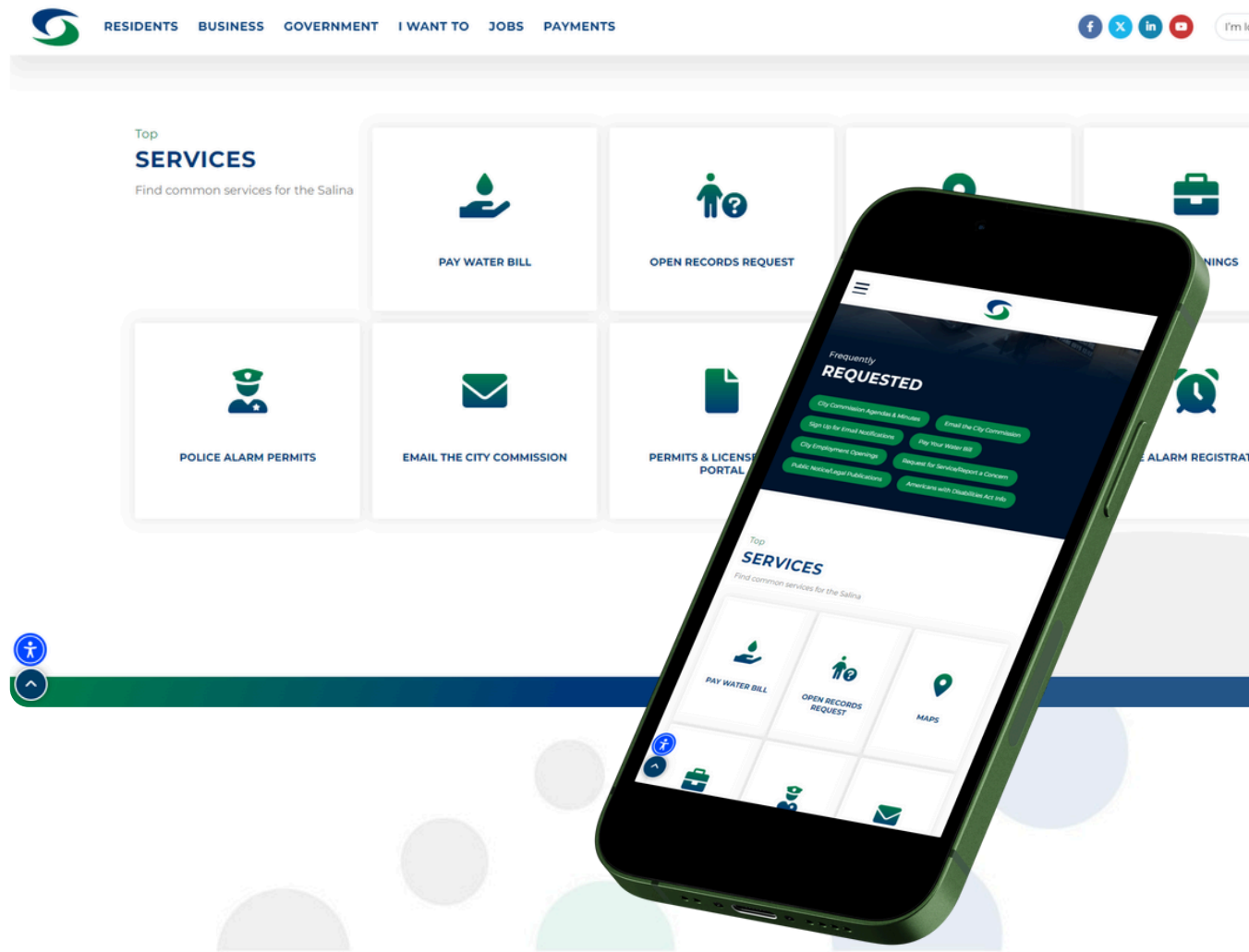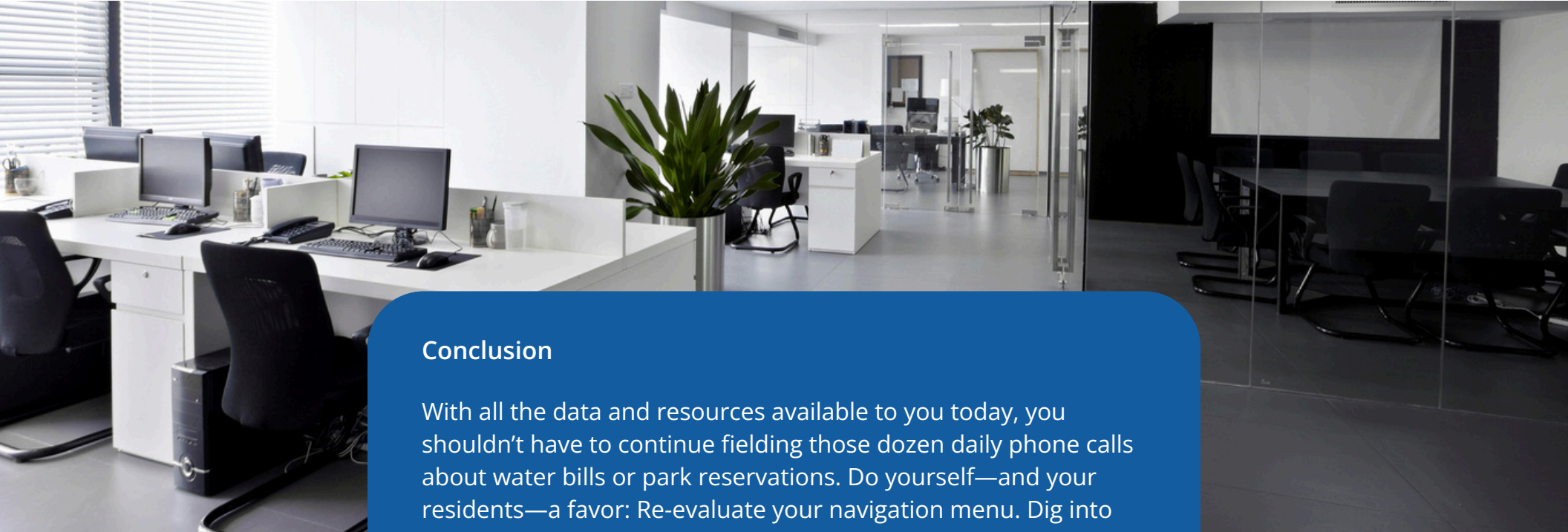
Conclusion

With all the data and resources available to you today, you shouldn't have to continue fielding those dozen daily phone calls about water bills or park reservations. Do yourself—and your residents—a favor: Re-evaluate your navigation menu. Dig into your data. And most of all, think like a citizen, not like a government official.

GovBuilt creates useful, navigable websites you and your citizens will love. Ready to take the next step towards better citizen services? Visit GovBuilt.com!