



Submitted to:  
UNION OF BRITISH COLUMBIA MUNICIPALITIES  
**2008 Community Excellence Awards**  
**Best Practices – Website Category**

City of Richmond, BC Canada

www.richmond.ca

The screenshot shows the City of Richmond website homepage. At the top is a dark blue navigation bar with the City of Richmond logo and name on the left, and links for 'Help' and 'Contact Us' on the right. Below the navigation bar is a horizontal menu with categories: Discover Richmond, City Hall, City Services, Business & Development, Parks & Recreation, Culture & Heritage, and Public Safety. The main content area features the Richmond logo and 'Our Vision' statement: 'For the City of Richmond to be the most appealing, livable, and well-managed community in Canada.' Below this is a 'News' section with three articles: 'Richmond Oval to Host World-Class Anti-Doping Program for 2010 Winter Games', 'New Officer in Charge for RCMP', and 'Richmond Residents Give High Rating to Recreation Services'. To the right of the news section is a sidebar with links for 'Elections 2008', 'Program Registration', 'Report a Problem', 'Maps', and 'City Directories'. At the bottom of the page are links for 'Sitemap', 'Customer Feedback', 'Related Links', 'Disclaimer', and 'Privacy Policy', along with the address and hours of the Richmond City Hall.

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**Project Summary: City of Richmond Website Re-design & Dynamic Calendar**

The goals of this project have been to re-design the look and feel of the City Website in order to:

- enhance usability;
- add functionality to the home page;
- incorporate our new dynamic meetings and events calendar; and to
- incorporate our new City brand as well as the 2010 Olympic Venue City brand.

We have taken measures to put more emphasis on the primary site navigation on the home page as well as the sub-navigation menus and side-bar links in the content pages in order to improve customer usability. We have also introduced a new interactive tab system on the home page that provides more flexibility for using home page real estate. In addition, the ground has been laid for ongoing improvements, in the form of RSS feeds, email subscriptions, and an event registry for our Event Development Office all of which will enable us to push information out to our customers. We believe the new design of the City of Richmond Website will give it a fresh new look, while improving the customer experience through improved usability.

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## Summary Report

### Home Page and Sub-Page Design

#### Refreshed Look and Re-Branding

The City of Richmond website has a fresh new look with new templates, new images and we have introduced the new City brand identifier. We have also branded the City as a member of the Olympic family with the *Richmond Venue City* symbol.

The challenge for the designer was to create a design that would incorporate these logos while retaining our official City crest and full name designation of City of Richmond, BC, Canada. The steering committee selected an innovative design with a swooping shape in the header banner. This design very creatively incorporated all the branding information in a space efficient and visually pleasing manner.

#### Usability in Design of the Home Page

The City conducted focus group research to determine the effectiveness of our home page and navigation. Individual users from varied demographic groups were recruited from downtown Vancouver, and from our Front of House at City Hall in Richmond. They were given a series of items to look up on the site in a lab setting where navigation patterns and success level could be recorded. One of the key findings was that less experienced users were inclined to depend too much on home page links and they were not using the primary site navigation bar. With more than 7,000 html pages and tens of thousands of PDF documents submitted by over 30 business units, visitors gain much more from our site if they learn the navigation.

With sensitivity to the varied experience of our customer demographic, we decided to try to put more visual emphasis on the main navigation bar and to make the distracting content less immediately visible on the home page by putting it under a layered tabs feature. We also determined that right side-bar links had to be modified visually on the content pages so they would draw the eye.

Before



After – note the hover over creates a larger more visible response than before and it also has some movement as it is taller.

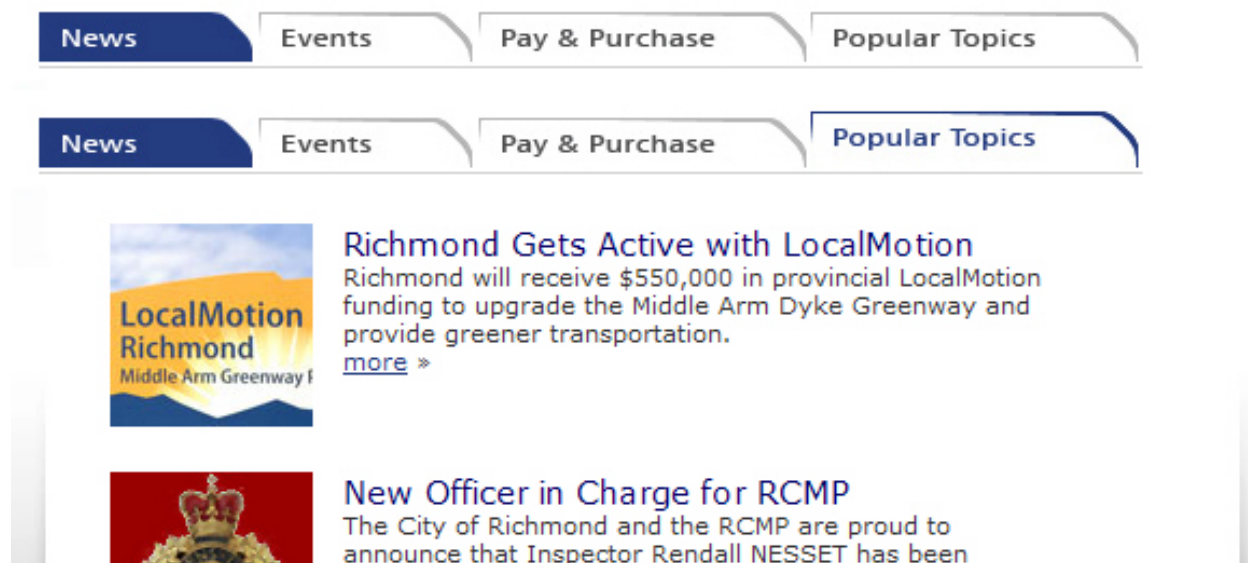


In addition to the brighter colour and sharper image, the overall design now carries the eye to the navigation with effective use of white space.

## Functionality in Tabs Feature

The tabs feature was introduced to us through best practice research where it was found to be used for another purpose on a City site. It was included along with many other ideas in the discussion stages with our designer. The designer recognized the opportunities presented with the use of tabs: increased home page real estate to accommodate the long list of things we wanted to include, while simultaneously reducing page clutter; the ability to camouflage distracting content links for a short time while visitors gained awareness of the other home page content and navigation features; and the ability to introduce more interactivity on this page.

The tabs feature also enabled us to move our City News content to the centre of the page and to introduce our new calendar of events giving community events more prominence on our home page.



Note the dark blue emphasis on the active tab and the change of colour indicated when a mouse hovers over the Popular Topics tab, and again an increased height creates an illusion of movement with the hover over. The tabs are also set to cycle at intervals of 12 seconds to prompt users to view hidden content.

Richmond has a robust content management system. We were pleased to discover that our system vendor had a tabs “pagetype” plug-in that would fit the bill with only minor customizations to replicate the new design of our site. The tabs were designed to be soft in appearance to avoid detracting from the main navigation, to be interactive when moused over and to change colour when selected. The tabs pagetype had functionality built in that allowed us to automate the tabs to change after a set amount of time giving prominence to other content in turn after users have had time to take in other page elements and navigation.

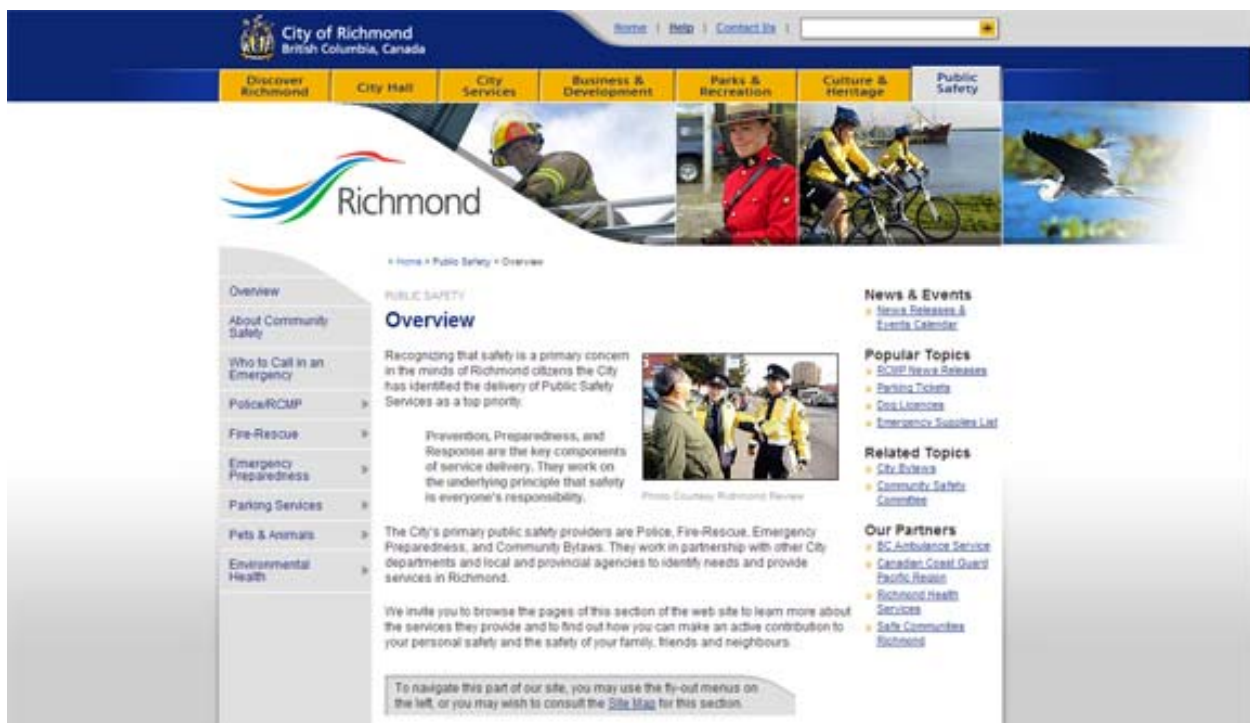
The site architecture and the functional design of the navigation on the home page and sub-pages has not been significantly changed. We have retained all of the qualities that have made [www.richmond.ca](http://www.richmond.ca) an award winning website. The navigation is compliant with established web standards.

## Usability in Design of the Sub-Page

The header banner design from the home page was carried over to the template for the content pages. Banners for each section would introduce new photos with varied impressions of our City.

Nearly all content pages have a menu on the left and a list of helpful links in the right sidebar. Our usability study confirmed what other usability research had found, that visitors were not interacting with sidebar information on the right side of the page. This was attributed to the presence of advertising on the right on many popular websites. To resolve this we wanted to put different visual emphasis on these links, but without competing with the main menus on the left.

The solution was to remove all the lines and backgrounds separating the links on the right from the main content area. This gave the visual appearance that the links were part of the page content. More emphasis was then placed on the main menus on the left by giving them a grey background and a unique shape that integrated with the banner design. All of these visual elements work together to draw the eye to key points on the page.

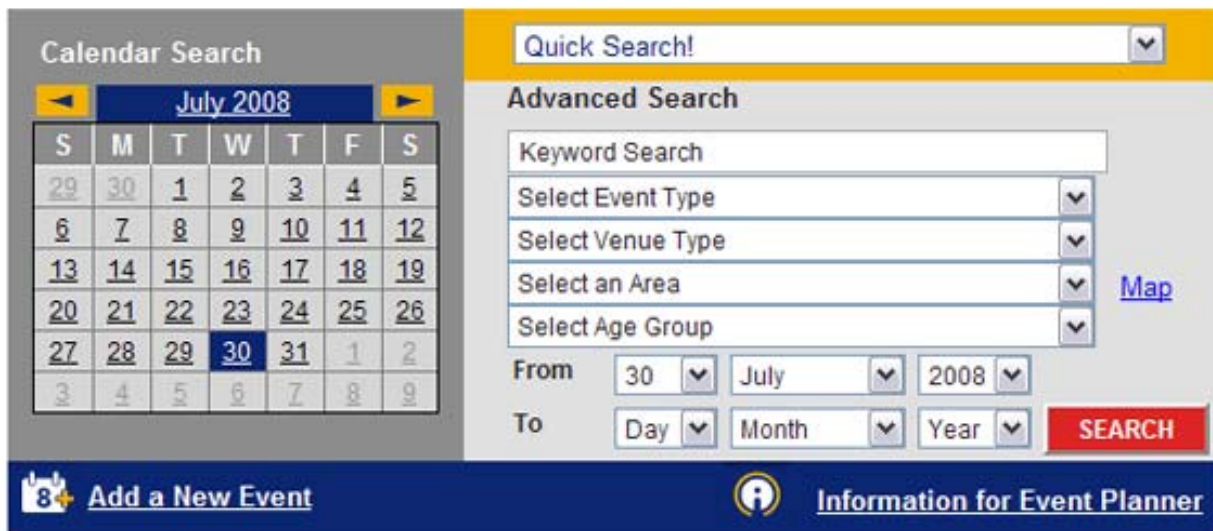


The challenge in implementing this design came when it had to be applied to our content. As our site was growing, variations on the main section templates were added to accommodate wide content and other special content. There were also a number of pages that were not included in the menu navigation, and pages that had been inactivated until they were needed again. Scripts had to be applied to the site to ensure that these variables were not lost when the standard templates were implemented. We engaged the services of our software vendor to ensure that this went smoothly. Everything was tested on a development site before changes were applied to the production site. Problems were identified and resolved before implementation.

## Calendar of Events Database

The new Calendar of Events database and event search functions will provide a more efficient tool for submitting and collecting meeting and event information as well as displaying it in a variety of places and formats on our website.

Building the Calendar of Events Database required the design of a dynamic form that would efficiently gather event data in such a way that it could be recovered through a number of different or combined search criteria. The objective was to be able to create a variety of web pages from the data collected so that events lists could be displayed in various contexts on our site without the need for staff to re-enter data.



The screenshot displays a web interface for event searching. On the left, a 'Calendar Search' section shows a calendar for July 2008 with the 30th highlighted. On the right, an 'Advanced Search' form includes a 'Quick Search!' dropdown, a 'Keyword Search' input field, and four dropdown menus for 'Select Event Type', 'Select Venue Type', 'Select an Area', and 'Select Age Group'. Below these are date pickers for 'From' (30, July, 2008) and 'To' (Day, Month, Year), followed by a red 'SEARCH' button. At the bottom, there are links for 'Add a New Event' and 'Information for Event Planner'.

For example, data can be pulled to create a Calendar of Arts Events for the Cultural section, Sports Events for the Sports and Fitness section, or Local Area Events for a community centre page. It can also be used to create Council meeting calendars. In addition, data had to be collected in a consistent manner to permit searches to work effectively. To ensure this, the database was pre-populated with City venues including community facilities, schools, churches, hotels, etc. All address and venue type information was entered with the data. Parks data was drawn from our existing Parks Database. We also devised a system of event categories that could be applied in a drop list.

It was recognized that many events would be entered by City staff at recreation facilities. To make this process more efficient, a log in feature was introduced to enable us to store user information so that it only has to be entered once.

A search interface was designed and implemented in our site so that users could search for events by a variety of criteria, or click on a number of set quick searches. All search results include links to an event details page with all of the necessary information and available links. The search page has links to the submit-an-event form and to the (information for event planners, a new section being developed in conjunction with phase two of this project.)

Because the submit-an-event function is open to the general public, an administrator interface has been built so that City staff can approve or decline events based on an established criteria.

The new Calendar of Events was introduced to the site on July 23 2008 along with the new template and home page design. A large number of events have already been populated to the database. When the event data has grown sufficiently and is more comprehensive, we will begin replacing our static event content pages with dynamic ones.

### **Google Mini Search**

To improve search capabilities on our site and improve usability we have incorporated a new Google Mini search appliance. The Google Mini Search was introduced with the new look and feel of our site, and though work is ongoing to enhance its features it has already improved many aspects of our search functionality.

### **Ground Laid for Ongoing Improvements**

In the process of developing the new design and reviewing new pagetype plug-ins offered by our vendor, we have laid the ground to push more content out to customers by: introducing RSS links in the home and news pages; including an Email link on our home page to sign up for subscriptions; and in the second phase of development of our events database we will enable event planners to register events online with our Event Development Office. This office will help ensure that event planners have the necessary permits and are familiar with services offered by the City to support events in our community. We have also acquired a Google Maps integration page type that will allow us to improve our site information over time.

### **The Power of Team**

The success of Richmond's website can be attributed to effective team collaboration within the City and with our Consultants. This project was advanced through the collaboration of our IT Web Team, the City Communications Team, Graphically Speaking, and Active Network Ltd., as well as City Department staff who support and maintain our web content.

Building on past successes, and planning for future development, we have worked to make our site more responsive to our customers. We are submitting our project for consideration for a UBCM award because we are all proud of what we have accomplished together to make a contribution to our vision "*For the City of Richmond to be the most appealing, livable, and well-managed community in Canada.*"

These and future improvement can be explored at: [www.richmond.ca](http://www.richmond.ca)