twincities.com   St. Paul Pioneer Press

North suburbs

LOCAL B

Sunday 6-1-2008

ARDEN HILLS   BLAINE   **CENTERVILLE**   CIRCLE PINES   **LINO LAKES**   LITTLE CANADA   **MOUNDS VIEW**   NEW BRIGHTON   **ROSEVILLE**   SHOREVIEW   **VADNAIS HEIGHTS**   WHITE BEAR LAKE

Wide Web, narrow look

How do so many cities end up with identical Internet sites?

By Brady Gervais
bgervais@pioneerpress.com

Visit the city of Bayport's Web site and you will see colorful foliage and a couple strolling alongside a rustic fence.

Wait, isn't that the same couple and fence on Newport's Internet site? And Sauk Centre's?

"They're walking forever," said a laughing Robin Stanislaw, a resident of Bayport. In fact, that picturesque walk comes up on the Web sites of nearly half a dozen other Minnesota cities.

"That's pretty uncreative," Stanislaw said this past week as she visited a local business in Bayport, a small Washington County community along the St. Croix River. "Couldn't they come up with a picture in Bayport?"

But the lookalike residents aren't that uncommon. Several cities throughout Minnesota share the same smiling faces, boat-on-the-water scenes and portraits of a boy sitting with his dog on their Web sites.

> Internet sites

Chalk it up to templates.

Meant to help communities create a distinctive space on the Web, the preformed design programs often mean one city looks much like the others.

St. Paul-based GovOffice, a division of Avenet Web Solutions, creates Web sites for 300 cities, county governments and other public agencies in Minnesota and has 1,200 accounts nationwide and in Canada, said marketing director Ross Heupel. Cities can choose a template, which is free, or have their sites custom designed. The going rate for customization is $400 and up. Cities pay a one-time license fee and a monthly Web-hosting fee.

It's up to the city to change the look.

"With one click they can change that template within seconds," Heupel said.

It appears that while many cities update their sites with meeting schedules and information on recycling and other programs, a few are not uploading the look of their town and residents.

Newport City Administrator Larry Bodahl didn't know that city's Web site matched those of several other communities until printouts were held up next to one another.

"It is like looking at picture frames at Target," he said.

Until a few years ago, Newport didn't even have a Web site, Bodahl said. Improvements will come with time.

"We're still in the neophyte stage," he said.

It appears the smiling girl featured on Falcon Heights' Web site has a twin sister in Lino Lakes. She doesn't.

"We've noticed that as well," said Justin Miller, Falcon Heights administrator.

So who is she? It's not clear. GovOffice designers choose photographs from a catalog.

Cities can personalize the banners on their Web sites with pictures of people who actually live there. And many include local landmarks, such as the state Capitol dome and skyline on St. Paul's site.

Miller said he's considering making Falcon Heights' site unique — for a small additional cost.

"It would distinguish us a little bit from the others," he said.

Marge Anfang, of Forest Lake, simply laughed when comparing the numerous matching Web sites, including her community's, which features a boat on a body of water. It's the same scene for Taylors Falls, Pine City, Staples and several others cities.

"It's funny," she said.

But Lino Lakes resident Ken Kurkoski said his city could work on making the Web site unique and appealing.

"Obviously, somebody has to get more original," he said.

Brady Gervais can be reached at 651-228-2171.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD WEB SITE?

Tips from one Web design firm on how to make your city's online presence helpful.

- Keep the content fresh
- Maintain a "magazine" look
- Keep it easy to read
- Provide interactive tools

CHECK THEM OUT

Sites with the same tree foliage/fence picture:

- Newport, www.Newport.govoffice.com
- Burns Township, www.burnstownship.govoffice2.com
- Bayport, bayport.govoffice.com
- Greenfield, www.greenfield.govoffice.com
- Paynesville, www.paynesvillemn.com
- Browerville, www.browerville.govoffice.com
- Sauk Centre, www.saukcentre.govoffice2.com
- Adrian, www.adrian.govoffice2.com

With the same boat on the water:

- Hancock, hancock.govoffice.com
- Pine City, pinecity.govoffice.com
- Taylors Falls, www.taylorsfalls.govoffice.com
- Staples, www.staples.govoffice.com
- Forest Lake, www.ci.forest-lake.mn.us

With the same faces across the top:

- Falcon Heights
- Lino Lakes

With the same boy and dog:

- Cohasset, www.cohasset-mn.com
- Eveleth, www.evelethmn.com

With the same campers:

- Nevis, www.nevis.govoffice.com
- Big Falls, bigfalls.govoffice.com