



Jackson County, Georgia's Water and Sewerage Authority Revolutionizes its Budget Process



AGENCY TYPE
Special District

POPULATION
5,000

ANNUAL BUDGET
\$10 Million

Budgeting wasn't easy for Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority in Georgia. The agency's finance director, Judy Smith, previously worked on her budget by "exporting everything from my finance software and creating my own reports and drafts in Excel." Then, she "would export the most recent income and budget-to-actual data, create trending information from years past, and then create the budget from there". Every time a proposal was updated or the numbers changed, Smith "had to recreate the wheel."

Many of these same bottlenecks also hampered Jackson's management reporting. In fact, creating every regular report Smith sent to department managers, citizens, and bondholders took "a full day with our financial system and Excel". That took away from Smith's time to plan strategically with her team and respond to inquires from the public and the press.

This bottleneck forced Smith to run reports on a quarterly, rather than more frequent, basis. Running only quarterly management reports "constrained our ability to get insight." Smith references a department where "we were close to our limit on a maintenance line item and the department head needed information right now and couldn't wait." Without timely reports, Smith explains, "we hamper good decision-making, because we don't know if we are on target."

OpenGov Revolutionizes Jackson's Budgeting Process

Smith turned to OpenGov Budget Builder™ after learning about the product at the annual GFOA conference in Philadelphia. Smith saw the product as a "better way to communicate to my department managers where we are, and to let them manage their own budget".



Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority uses OpenGov Budget Builder to plan how it will allocate resources required to serve its community. (Photo: Thomas Wolff / Flickr)

OpenGov transformed the agency’s budget process. First, OpenGov simplified initial compiling of the previous year’s budgets and actual financials. Before OpenGov, Smith “used Excel to export the most recent income and budget-to-actual data, then create trending statistics from years past, and then create the budget from there.” This manual process took hours.

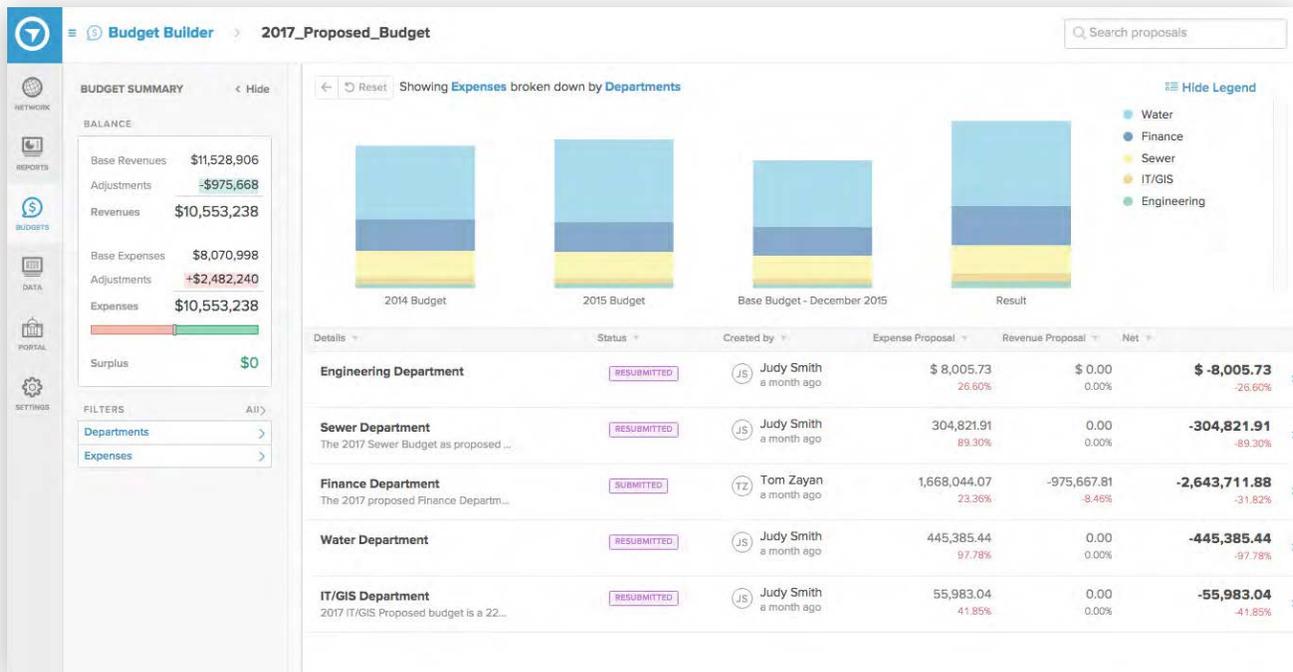
Now, because OpenGov Budget Builder integrates seamlessly with OpenGov Intelligence, a management reporting solution, Smith was able to pull the previous year’s budget and actuals in seconds. “Everything being integrated absolutely helps me manage the budget process,” Smith explains.

After compiling previous years’ data, Smith used to have to manually prepare budget

worksheets for each department. She would “export the entire budget with all expense and revenue categories, manually break it out into departments, and then send department heads their budget sheets for review and modification.” Smith asked heads to return modified Excel sheets so she could merge them, but “they often returned on paper with pen marks on it, or a department manager would decide to present their budget proposal in their own way.”

With OpenGov Budget Builder, Smith no longer had to manually create sheets for each department and merge their proposals. Instead, there was one central place for the entire organization to submit proposals and supporting documents.

Smith was able to “quickly set up accounts for every department manager so they could



Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority completed its budget a month earlier than expected by building it in OpenGov.

go in and populate their own proposals.” She continues: “One of our managers was new to the process – this was his first budgeting experience ever – and he found it extremely easy to adjust his budget proposal by line item and then see the immediate impact.”

The single online portal for collaboration made it easy to spot errors. “It’s simple to see when you’ve skipped a cell because there’s nothing there, and that made it simple to check if things looked appropriate and send them back if necessary,” Smith explains. She could also immediately see whether the overall budget was at a deficit or a surplus, allowing her to adjust as necessary. And instead of endless email chains trying to understand who made which changes and why, Smith could see an automatic audit trail of every proposal – a feature she described as “extremely helpful.”

The Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority also cut back on paper generated during the entire budget cycle. Smith says, “This year I created a physical file with my budgeting documents, but I’m not sure I need it. It was an eighth of an inch thick, whereas in past years it has been over 4 inches.”

Jackson County Water and Sewerage Authority Finishes Budget a Month Early

Finally, the budget this year had “no squeaks, and saved my sanity,” says Smith. It was also completed a month ahead of time. That allowed the team to review the process in greater depth, get more buy-in from departments and other stakeholders, and hone their budget recommendation presentation to the board.

When it came time to present to the board, Smith explains how OpenGov helped: “Our budget was passed the night we presented it using reports and charts from OpenGov. I have to think that OpenGov played a part in helping to make this budget process the easiest I’ve experienced in my government career!”

OpenGov Made Reporting Seamless and Efficient

After Jackson County’s Water and Sewerage Authority adopts its budget, the agency needs to show departments and the board how they were performing. A day-long process of preparing reports now takes Smith “thirty minutes.” She adds, “once I export the report from my finance software, it’s simply a matter of checking the template and the numbers.”

This has allowed Smith to embrace a monthly reporting cycle, which gives departments the granular information they need to follow their

budget and change course if necessary. It has also empowered the appointed board to have access to more full information. “Many of the questions they have for me will be answered for them by OpenGov,” Smith explains, which allows her to focus her time on strategic priorities, collaborating more with colleagues, improving service delivery for the community.



When making budget requests, the team improved its collaboration around proposals, ensuring considered various aspects of service delivery. (Photo: iStock)

RESULTS

- ✓ Streamlined the budget process by eliminating manual reconciliation and encouraging online collaboration
- ✓ Finished the official annual budget a month early
- ✓ Saved a day’s work for each report, enabling more frequent updates and better strategic planning