

Investing in People and Services

KEY TO TREASURER'S OFFICE SUCCESS

ARTICLE BY TIM WOOD . PHOTOGRAPHY BY M.KAT

Invest in resiliency. It sounds like a catchphrase you might hear in a commercial, but for Beaufort County Treasurer Maria Walls, CPA, it became a mantra and a concept to live up to, both in leading her staff and delivering services for residents.

"I heard a journalist discussing it on a podcast, and it just clicked for me," Walls said. "It's about investing in people and communities and giving your team the freedom and support to think differently so we can develop smarter systems to serve our residents, even in the midst of disaster or difficulty."

For Beaufort County officials faced with closing brick-and-mortar offices due to COVID-19, the challenge of providing leadership and services for residents became even greater. But when it came to residents paying their taxes, Walls said she and her staff were ready for the challenge.

"I'm just not the type of leader who waits for there to be a problem to fix something," Walls said. "You never know when there will be crises like this pandemic. Embracing this idea of investing in resiliency fell in line with our mission and core values and absolutely empowers us to better serve, regardless of what is going on around us."

The results of this investment? Success in telework, payment processing, and customer experience—three areas in which many organizations have struggled during the pandemic.

Beaufort County did not have an official telecommuting policy pre-COVID, but Walls had already tested the concept. "Three years ago, I had an amazing team member facing some personal changes that were requiring her to be home full time," Walls said. "We didn't want to lose her, so why should we have to? Thankfully, county administration allowed me to test the idea. Not only is she still on our team, but we learned how to lead telecommuting staff and then had a framework for other team members to follow."

While expanding the idea from one member to her 30-person staff was no small feat, Walls said other team members already had out-of-office work

experience, thanks to another customer service innovation—once-per-month remote office hours at Sun City.

On top of alleviating volume at their Bluffton office, team members were already comfortable with setting up remote technology, giving Walls the ability to transition her entire operation to remote service within a day of the county buildings closing.

With the brick-and-mortar treasurer offices closed, call volume increased three- to fourfold, going from 250-350 weekly calls to well over 1,000 per week. How do you handle that increase from home while caring for children?

"My kids are 2, 4, 6, and 8. Most of our team members are women, many with kids. So, it was all about having each other's backs," Walls said. "If one of our team member's kids was having trouble with math class or finding childcare, another team member stepped up to cover for them. I knew my team was amazing before this, but they have truly blown me away in how they've responded to all these changing dynamics."

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BEAUFORT COUNTY TREASURER,
MARIA WALLS IN OLD TOWN BLUFFTON



Getting ahead of evolving technological needs has also been crucial, both with email billing and the MyBeaufortCounty.com payment system. Back in 2015, Walls was asked by then-County Administrator Gary Kubic to work with Beaufort County's state delegation as legislators looked to make bill-by-email legal statewide. After successfully becoming law, Beaufort County was first in the state to offer e-billing to its taxpayers.

In 2017, Walls and her team launched MyBeaufortCounty.com, giving residents a more user-friendly means to pay property, boat, vehicle and business taxes all in one place—an experience that has grown since the start of the pandemic.

“Our partnership with PayIt has allowed us to expand beyond the treasurer's office and property tax payments, to equipping any county office with the ability to accept online payments through

MyBeaufortCounty.com,” Walls said. “And we're ready to assist in getting each department up and running.”

The Community Development office and Beaufort County's airports are now live on the app, and Walls said others will be transitioning to the app in the coming months.

The end result of all this customer-focused innovation: fourth quarter 2019 was the first time that residents interacted with the treasurer's office more online than in person.

“Online usage was up 46 percent before COVID, so we were already trending towards more digital interactions and were as ready as we could be when the offices closed,” Walls said. “Our customers tell us it's easier than Amazon to use.”

Earlier this year, the office launched an updated installment payment program allowing taxpayers to pay the upcoming year's taxes in advance—in any amount and as frequently as they like—via mail or through MyBeaufortCounty.com.

Next up: all three treasurer's office locations—Hilton Head Island, Bluffton and Beaufort—will have payment kiosks installed before year's end. “We're installing an exterior window touchscreen at the Hilton Head office and interior units at our other locations,” Walls said. It's based off the unique window Walls saw at the Engel and Volkers real estate office in Old Town Bluffton. “I took my kids for ice cream early in the pandemic, and I was blown away by this one-stop information window. We called the vendor, WindowVision, and asked if they could adapt their real estate-focused software for us.”

When Walls was first hired in 2011 by then-Treasurer Doug Henderson to take her first-ever government position, she said overcoming stereotypes was essential. “Government doesn't get things done; that stereotype is sadly well-earned and that's how I saw government,” Walls said. “We focused on building team culture to make this a place where people want to work. That has allowed us to be innovative and proactive so customers are constantly having a better and better experience.”

Walls leads the treasurer's office in a mission to serve with innovation and enthusiasm, creating an ease of service that turns a negative experience, paying taxes, into a positive. The approach is showing significant results. The countywide collection rate is over 98 percent this year, the highest ever, and investment returns are over \$5.7 million, another all-time high.

“We're making the taxpayers' monies work for them while we have it and constantly looking towards the future,” she said. “We may not know what challenges tomorrow will bring but when you invest in your team and put customers first, it is a recipe for success.”

Learn more about the Beaufort County Treasurer and discover the many resources available to you at beaufortcountytreasurer.com.

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