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Why Is Government Still Using Windows XP?

Vanderburgh County, Ind., with a population of just over 180,000, faces a bill between \$500,000 and \$1 million to upgrade its computer systems from Windows XP. The police department in Washington Township, N.J., faces \$70,000 in upgrade costs. Over in Monroe Township, the police department there is looking at upgrade costs in the vicinity of \$100,000. That's a lot of money for small counties and municipalities still trying to crawl out from under years of fiscal hardships.

On April 8 – one week before the annual tax filing deadline – Microsoft will no longer support its long-running operating system (OS) known as Windows XP. What that means is that Microsoft will stop all technical support for the software, including updates and security patches. Windows XP has been running since 2001, and has become the workhorse operating system for major enterprises, including all levels of government. Today, nearly 30 percent of the computers in the world still run XP, including 95 percent of the world's automatic teller machines, according to NCR Corp. Nobody knows how many computers in government still rely on XP, but the fear is that far too many will still be using it when the deadline passes.

The biggest concern for the laggards is the potential for security breaches. With Microsoft no longer providing security updates, Windows XP increasingly will become vulnerable to hackers, thieves and even foreign agents interested in disrupting government operations. Just one compromised computer on a government agency network exposes the other machines to attack. "There's no way I would encourage anyone to use Windows XP," Trey Ford, a security strategist with Rapid7, a Boston-based data security company, told the *Boston Globe*. "I won't let anyone in my family run XP."

But as cash-strapped state and local governments are finding, the desire to upgrade faces the cold reality of funding. "I think government's situation is unique compared to other sectors, given the funding challenge," said Brian D. Kelley, CIO for Portage County, Ohio. "It's not as simple as replacing a box."

Kelley points out that any time an operating system is upgraded, IT managers have to make sure a host of peripheral devices, including printers and barcode scanners, for example, are compatible. If not, they will require upgrading as well. Besides devices, the upgrade will also force investments in new versions of application software, some of which is unique to the public sector. Kelley, who sits on the board of directors for GMIS International, the largest membership organization for government IT managers, says the phase-out of Windows XP is a hot topic among the membership. "There's a complexity to this that goes beyond the basics," he said.

Microsoft says the 12 year-old operating system no longer addresses today's business or technology needs, nor does it address security threats. The newer OS, such as Windows 8, released in 2012, has dramatically enhanced security and better support for government's growing mobile workforce, according to Stuart McKee, chief technology officer for state and local government at Microsoft.

"We have been working with all of our state and local government customers very closely over the last 24 months to cooperatively plan their migration strategies," said McKee. "For customers still using Windows XP, we are proactively working with them on how best to ensure support, which is

going to be unique to each one.” Microsoft’s large state and local government customers have custom support agreements in place that will ensure the systems still running XP are as safe as possible, according to McKee.

But small government entities don’t have the clout or funds to pay for such custom support. In Washington Township, police Chief Rafael Muntz said an upgrade is needed so that the department can access critical, Web-based databases, such as the National Crime Information Center database that tracks stolen property, court systems to search warrants and the county’s public safety network. All would be cut off because of security concerns. Without access to those databases, the township’s police department would basically shut down, he told the news outlet NJ.com.

Microsoft is offering a number of special upgrade offers and programs to help reduce costs and deal with the transition, including up to \$350 back per device when a government agency purchases a device running Windows 8.

Kelley says that government IT managers all agree that migrating to the next operating system is a necessity. “Unfortunately, everyone is in different stages,” he said. “It’s not happening at once or on time. Some governments are far ahead on this, while others continue to struggle because of funding issues.”

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