As the largest county in the state of New Jersey, Bergen County runs more solicitations than any other single entity in the state other than the State itself. The County’s purchasing department is responsible for procuring goods and services for nine departments, a sheriff’s office, a prosecutor’s office, a surrogate’s office, New Jersey’s largest public hospital, and more. Paper-based and highly manual procurement workflows limited the efficiency and impact of this complex and far-reaching purchasing team.

When Assembly Bill 3112—which makes it possible for local government and school districts in New Jersey to use electronic procurement (eProcurement) technology—passed, first on an emergency basis in June 2020, then readopted in April 2021, Bergen County was one of the first New Jersey public entities to take advantage of this new legislation. The County needed a solution that met their security, vendor experience, and interdepartmental collaboration needs—and Bonfire’s eProcurement solution fit the bill.

### KEY CHALLENGES
- New Jersey law was preventing the County from making the move to digital
- Paper-based processes led to human error, significant delays, and frustrated vendors
- Safety measures related to COVID-19 posited significant challenges to in-person bid openings and evaluator meetings

### KEY RESULTS
- By digitally transforming every stage of their procurement process with Bonfire, Bergen County was able to remain 100% compliant with New Jersey local public contracts law
- Bonfire’s award-winning client implementation and support led to seamless adoption for internal clients and vendors
- Agency and vendor data remained protected with Bonfire’s fedRAMP compliance, 99% uptime, role-based access, and virus security
- 50,480 pages of paper evaluations and bid submissions have been saved in less than one year
- Stakeholder collaboration and vendor satisfaction have seen significant improvements
Challenge

Paper-based processes lead to human errors, efficiency gaps, and frustrated vendors

Like any other American county, Bergen County’s Director of Purchasing Gerald Reiner explained, there are three main purchasing activities your citizens see—roads, parks, and plows. But all procurement professionals know that there is a lot more that goes on behind the scenes, and Bergen County—the largest county in New Jersey both geographically and population-wise—is no exception. Serving a population size of over 900,000 people, Bergen County’s purchasing department sources professional services, veterinary pharmaceuticals, playground equipment, golf accessories, and everything in-between.

The Bergen County purchasing team was limited to procurement processes that relied on paper and in-person meetings, which presented a host of challenges for every solicitation. Reiner used the example of a traffic signal repair parts bid to explain further: “That was a bid that had 400+ line items,” he said. “As you can imagine, when we received everything back in paper, we had to transpose all those items from paper into Excel and that could take anywhere from one to three weeks. And then we would have to go through and make sure that everything was evaluated side-by-side after we transposed them, and hope we didn’t make an error.”

Bergen County’s paper-based system continued with their vendor submissions as well, where bid openings would include opening a physical envelope. “There was just so much paper,” said Reiner. “I can’t tell you just how many paper cuts I would get with bid openings. Not to mention, as you’re sifting through papers and everyone’s eyes are on you, looking for every little mistake so they can contend the bid if it’s close, it just makes for a very high conflict moment.”

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When COVID-19 began to significantly impact North American public agencies, the state of New Jersey passed Assembly Bill 3112 on an emergency basis. This new legislation was initially designed to allow governments and school districts in New Jersey to use eProcurement as part of their purchasing process, and was passed because safety measures like physical distancing presented major hurdles to established public sector procurement processes, such as public bid openings and in-person evaluator meetings. Bergen County was one of the first New Jersey entities to jump on the opportunity to adapt to the pandemic by digitizing their paper-based workflows.

Bergen County needed an eProcurement provider that could support the following criteria:

**Cybersecurity.**
Bergen County needed a solution that protected their data while still ensuring a fair and transparent process. Criteria included fedRAMP compliance, consistent uptime, role-based access, and virus security.

**Vendor diversity and experience.**
To encourage more competition in their solicitations, Bergen County wanted a solution that increased vendor visibility into bids not just in their County, but in opportunities across New Jersey. In turn, this would give the County access to a larger pool of vendors. To ensure that vendors were able to submit their bids seamlessly and on time, the County wanted a solution that was user-friendly to vendors and offered vendor support via email and phone.

**State of the art technology.**
Bergen County needed a solution that was continually adapting to the needs of North American public procurement, and that also had the flexibility to customize the platform to their unique and complex needs.
Results

Bonfire improves the procurement process for the purchasing team, stakeholders, and vendors—all with secure, state of the art technology

Bonfire eProcurement software was able to check all of Bergen County’s boxes—and even elicited additional positive outcomes that they didn’t initially anticipate.

Implementation and support

As Reiner and his team prepared to implement Bonfire, one of the biggest challenges was change management—especially amidst the chaos of managing emergency projects during the pandemic. Bergen County’s dedicated implementation specialist and client success manager were crucial in alleviating any internal uncertainty or hesitation. “Our implementation specialist Krista was great because she not only helped us learn the platform, but she kept our implementation on track,” said Reiner. “We set the goals of the implementation early on and she kept us to them. And, in this world, we all know our lives get busy—so it was really good to get that extra push.”

“The help videos in the platform were tremendously useful to me in the beginning, when I wasn’t familiar with the system,” said Jacquelyn Tate, Purchasing Coordinator at Bergen County. “I’m one of those people who learns as I go, so when I needed something, I could look up exactly what I needed.”

Vendor experience

Bergen County has benefitted from the vendor database available to them in the Bonfire platform. Recently, they released a solicitation and were able to automatically send the opportunity to 7,000 vendors. This capability has also been impactful in curating a positive experience for their vendors. After participating in a virtual trade show for the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Reiner said, “We got an email from a random company who was just saying thank you. They had previously signed up on Bergen County’s online Bonfire portal, and because they were added to the Bonfire database, they were notified of an opportunity in Georgia, which they won.”

According to Reiner and Tate, in the past, vendors would forget a form to sign or miss a minute detail, and by default, they would be disqualified from bidding. Now, vendors are not able to submit their bid until all requirements are met, resulting in fewer frustrated vendors.

Interdepartmental collaboration

When asked where Bonfire has generated the most impact, Reiner said, “Interdepartmental collaboration. We can work with our internal agencies or even our external consultants and we know that everyone is
seeing the same information at once; we don’t have to worry about whether we sent the latest file or the latest mark-up.

Tate agreed. “Everything is in one place, it’s accessible for everybody, and it’s so easy to find what you’re looking for.”

**Client-driven technology**

Since Bergen County signed on with Bonfire a year ago, they have seen firsthand how the Bonfire team takes client feedback and translates it into product updates that make the platform easier to use and more in line with the realities of public procurement today. “The more updates we see in the pipeline, we’re just happier and happier,” said Reiner.

Ultimately, according to Reiner, all of these outcomes have led to more impactful results for the citizens they serve. “That’s the ultimate goal—you want to make sure that every dollar is spent as effectively as possible so that you’re positively impacting your community.”

When asked what advice he would give to other New Jersey public organizations considering the move to eProcurement, Reiner said, “Call us. We’d be happy to make you an observer on a project, invite you to a bid opening, or just sit down and have a conversation. We want to help anybody in New Jersey on the fence about eProcurement because we see the advantages for the vendor community and we see the advantages for the governmental community.”

As for smaller municipalities in Bergen County who may not have the headcount and resources as the County purchasing team, there’s good news—all towns in Bergen County have access to a Bonfire license through the County and can start making use of Bonfire’s quick and easy implementation right away.

Now that New Jersey’s eProcurement legislation has officially been passed beyond the emergency period, Bergen County is set up to use Bonfire for the long-haul.

“...We want to help anybody in New Jersey on the fence about eProcurement because we see the advantages for the vendor community and we see the advantages for the governmental community.”
See **Bonfire** for yourself

Learn how our intuitive, powerful, and easy-to-use platform can help you make better, faster sourcing decisions.

Request a Demo