

CITY OF EL PASO, TEXAS

El Paso, Texas, Speeds Service by Automating Processes and Connecting with Citizens Online

Tucked in the westernmost corner of Texas between the scenic Franklin Mountains and the sprawling Rio Grande river, the City of El Paso is the largest U.S. city along the Mexico border. With its warm, sunny climate and culturally diverse population, El Paso is frequently recognized for offering its residents a high quality of life, including low crime rates and a top performing economy with job growth that's among the highest in the nation.

Paper-driven processes, disparate databases and a lack of mobility and online services

Effectively serving citizens and the broader community was becoming increasingly difficult for the City of El Paso, Texas. More than 26 municipal departments, ranging from Environmental Services Department (ESD) to Planning and Inspections, were struggling with manual, paper-laden processes and the resulting inefficiencies. Slow response times to citizen requests and complaints, delayed permit and license applications and approvals, and backlogged caseloads were just the beginning.

Departmental data was managed with outdated legacy systems in disconnected databases, which required ever-increasing storage capacity. Because plans and permits required multi-department reviews, they were printed and physically transported from one department to the other. Files occasionally got lost in transit, which would reset the review process back to zero.

Another challenge was the lack of online and mobile services. It was nearly impossible to offer citizens a fast, comprehensive update about the status of a case. Likewise, field employees such as code inspectors had no access to case histories and no ability to document new and evolving issues in real time. This complicated and delayed various processes for approval and dispute resolution, costing City departments – and the citizens they served – valuable time and money.

This also contradicted the City's goal of being a technology leader and providing excellent customer service. "Remaining at the forefront of change and making it easier to do business on a day-to-day basis for our constituents" is a key priority, says IT Director Enrique Martinez, Jr. He learned that ESD was implementing the Accela Civic Platform and it was catching the attention of other departments. It soon became the main solution that would help address many of the City's operational challenges and position it as a service and technology leader.



Population
672,538

Challenge
Paper-driven processes, siloed departmental data and outdated legacy systems were dragging down performance, efficiency and customer service levels across all City departments

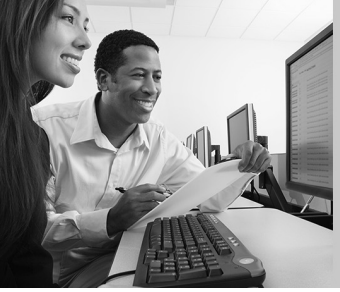
Solutions
Accela Asset Management, Accela Environmental Health, Accela Land Management, Accela Licensing and Case Management, Accela GIS, Accela Inspector, Citizen Access, CivicData, Electronic Document Review

Results
Consolidated multiple disparate software systems and databases, bringing everyone on the same page

Achieved goal of 24-hour response times to various citizen requests

Decreased commercial building permit issuance time from three months to as few as 7-8 days

Reduced multi-department commercial plan review timelines from an average of 15 days for first review to only 2-3 days



Making it easier for citizens to conduct day-to-day business

How Accela empowers the City of El Paso

“When I first started working with Accela, it was more of a vision for all the various departments to work together,” says ESD Director Ellen Smyth, who heads the first department to implement the Accela Civic Platform. Now, she says the City has traded the chaos of managing six or seven types of databases across multiple departments for one centralized system that can be easily configured by individual departments to meet their unique needs.

Departments are able to share information in real time via a single, flexible technology platform that reduces storage issues associated with multiple databases. Features such as Electronic Document Review (EDR), which enables department users and citizens to upload electronic files such as applications, blueprints and other documents, have helped to expedite processing times and improve the overall citizen experience.

Similarly, with Accela Inspector, field employees ranging from code inspectors to trash collectors can quickly report issues as they occur in the community, and upload quality photos of properties or situations to substantiate the City’s position on a citation, citizen dispute or other matter. They can also instantly access updates from other departments in the field as they arrive at an address, which helps streamline permitting and licensing approvals.

“Our philosophy is that municipal government needs to remain at the forefront of change, so we’re continually adapting our business processes and making them more efficient,” explains Enrique. “One of the big things is a key focus on customer service, really listening to the voice of the customer and providing them technology. The Accela Civic Platform allows for that.”

ONE SOLUTION: DIFFERENT DEPARTMENTS

After ESD implemented the Civic Platform, other departments quickly realized its power. Ellen shares their strategy for getting everyone on the same page. “We had a representative from every single one of those departments come and work together for practically six full months so that we all under-

stood each other’s challenges,” she shares. “It was really effective, when you started doing the workflow, to be able to hear other department’s perspectives on why that would or wouldn’t work.”

The intense, cross-agency collaboration resulted in a final product that advances both the City’s objectives and the individual departments’ performance.

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Enrique Martinez, Jr.
IT Director

ESD improves service to internal and external customers

Encompassing core functions such as code enforcement, animal services and solid waste management, ESD is a big department with eight divisions supported by roughly 80 field officers. According to Ellen, switching from a paper-driven process to an automated, online system enables inspectors to work more cases more effectively and efficiently, which makes citizens much happier.

“Our goal was to have a 24-hour response time to any complaint that is called in by a resident, and that’s a huge success we’ve been able to achieve with Accela,” she says.

With comprehensive case histories at their fingertips through Accela Inspector, inspectors in the field can more accurately

determine what type of citation is appropriate for a property based on prior issues at the address, which helps drive better outcomes if the citation is disputed.

Since most City leaders rely on numbers, reporting is another big benefit of Accela. “When we get a call from city council, we’re able to run a report and it makes it so easy to communicate how much work we’re doing,” she says, compared to the old way of tedious number-crunching, Excel spreadsheets and manually double-checking everything. “We can run reports per inspector, per region... It’s easy to understand and they can use it for budgetary purposes.”

Planning and Inspections speeds permit reviews

As Director of the Planning and Inspections department, Mathew McElroy heads a team that handles about 5,000 transactions per month and roughly 3,000 building permits per month, in addition to other types of permitting and licensing.

“Things are a lot faster under the Accela system,” Mathew explains. “Electronic Document Review allows us to get away from paper and do all of our trade reviews – whether it’s electrical or plumbing – simultaneously, as opposed to linearly.” Before, it wasn’t unusual for a developer on a new commercial project to wait 90 days for all the required building permits to be issued. Now, they’ve decreased the turnaround to as little as seven to eight days.

“All of the components that Accela has built for us allow us to be as responsive as we can be to our taxpayers and our citizens,” he says. In fact, developers and contractors no longer have to visit the office; instead, an online portal, Citizen Access, lets them file permits, upload supporting documents and even pay online, which helps to further accelerate the permitting process and promotes faster community development.

Tony De La Cruz, a senior plans examiner within the department, echoes Mathew’s enthusiasm for Electronic Document Review. “Right now, we’re looking at prioritizing new commercial building permits because those are the

ones that are generating new jobs, generating new revenue for the city,” says Tony. “At this point, with the Electronic Document Review process we’re setting up, we’re able to reduce our average timelines from typically 15 days for our first review to about two to three days.”

Fire Department boosts efficiency

Within the Fire Marshal Division of the City’s Fire Department, Shawn Hanke handles permitting and code enforcement. Cross-departmental communication was the biggest operational challenge faced by his group, but Accela has resolved that problem by making it possible to open up electronic case files to other divisions and departments, so everyone can add to a case as new information develops.

“When I go to a business, and I notice they’ve had a lot of complaints come in, from the health department to building issues, and I’m going in there and finding a bunch of fire code violations, then obviously we have some issues with that place,” says Shawn, adding that his department often uses pictures and documents uploaded by other teams – and vice versa. “If we’re all working together, [the information] is more accessible to everybody. It speeds the process, makes it smoother.”

System configurability has also proved important to the Fire Department. “Through Accela, we’ve been able to add a few things and eliminate a few things that weren’t necessary for us,” he explains. “We really customized it for the Fire Department and for the way that we think, the way we document things.”

Reporting was also critical. Instead of having to go to each inspector and ask them how many inspections they did that day, or how many they have pending, Shawn simply uses Accela. “It helps with budgeting because if I have an inspector with 85 pending cases and he can only get to 30 of them, then I need to bring in another inspector,” he says.

The bottom line

With many of El Paso’s departments using Accela products, the City is able to offer substantially improved customer service with faster response times on everything from



complaints about property cleanup and trash collection to filing building permits and completing code inspections. Consolidating cross-departmental data into one dynamic, configurable system that's accessible online and in the field allows groups to create an integrated, holistic view of cases for faster, more effective resolution. In some instances, turnaround times have dropped from three months to a few days. Other departments such as ESD, which had a backlog of cases, can now offer a 24-hour response time.

The citizen experience has significantly improved in other ways, as customers can now stay connected with the City through Citizen Access. They can file applications for permits, upload supporting documents, get status updates and perform several other online transactions, saving them time and the inconvenience of office visits and phone calls.

Department leaders are proud of the solid, connected foundation they're building with Accela, and everyone is excited about the future possibilities. Tony, with Planning and Inspections, shares, "Hopefully, we will be one of the first cities that goes fully digitized with our permitting requirements – permitting, licensing. That is the overall goal of our city manager, our director and our department as a whole."

About Accela

Accela provides cloud-based civic engagement solutions for government. Accela's Civic Platform, which includes open APIs and mobile apps, enables and improves core processes for city, county, state and federal governments. Accela's solutions uniquely address the diverse needs of their constituents by making publicly available information more accessible. The Accela Civic Platform includes solutions for land management, asset management, licensing and case management, legislative management and more. With more than 2,000 customers worldwide, Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with offices in San Francisco, New York, Portland, Melbourne and Dubai.

Learn more

Visit www.accela.com or call us at (888) 722-2352