Accela

SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

San Diego County Decreases Processing Time for Solar Permitting by 75 Percent

Located in the southwestern corner of California, San Diego County is the second-most populous county in the State, and the fifth-most populous in the United States. Encompassing gentle foothills, agricultural farmland and mile-high mountains, San Diego County is more commonly known for its idyllic climate, 70 miles of pristine beaches, alluring family attractions and year-round outdoor recreation.

Exponential growth creates challenges and delays

The Department of Planning & Development Services (PDS) for San Diego County is responsible for long-range land use planning, which determines how communities will grow. As the department that issues all building permits in the County, PDS has seen a 300 percent increase in solar permitting in the past five years and wanted to get ahead of the trend to best serve its customers.

Under the existing process, "if a solar company wanted to obtain a permit, we would send someone down to the county office and wait in line," says Tara Kelly, who sits on the board of the San Diego California Solar Energy Industries Association and works for a local solar company. "We were using company time, spending money on gas and sending three sets of plans."

While the department offered same-day permit processing for walk-in customers, the increasing volume of solar permits would eventually prove more than staff could handle. What's more, the current process conflicted with the County's internal goal of becoming a best-in-class IT organization in government with a clear focus on customer service. Recognizing the need for change, PDS wanted to develop a new way to process each solar permit faster by automating portions of the work, as well as by offering the permits online so that customers wouldn't have to drive to a physical office.

"Accela helps us take our online services to the next level. It allows us to provide an end-to-end solution for our business processes and allows us to meet the continuing and changing needs of our customers."

Vince Nicoletti, Building Chief, Department of Planning & Development Services

Population
3,263,431

Challenge
Update a time-consuming permitting process to accommodate soaring increases in solar permits and offer a better customer experience

Solutions
Accela Land Management, Accela GIS, Accela Mobile Office, Citizen Access, CivicData, e-PlanCheck

Results
Introduced end-to-end processing capabilities for solar permitting

Reduced processing time for solar permits by 75 percent

Optimized agency resources to keep up with a continuously rising workload

Saved customers time by enabling them to complete the process online, on their own time

Decreased paperwork by enabling customers to upload project plans electronically instead of requiring multiple sets of hard copies

Increased transparency by providing online access and updates during the process

How Accela empowers San Diego County

PDS, along with five other departments in the Land Use and Environment Group (LUEG), already used Accela Land Management on the Civic Platform, so expanding its use to cover solar permitting was a logical next step. According to Building Chief Vince Nicoletti, "The solar industry was a perfect candidate because they are high-volume, repeat customers."

The department decided to offer online permitting in addition to in-person services. "The primary goals of moving to an online permitting process were to improve the customer experience, ensure quality and reduce time and cost," shares Vince. PDS also stepped back and evaluated its internal processes, identifying opportunities to increase efficiencies with online plan submission and a dedicated solar review team.

PDS can now also create templates for common permit types and frequent customers that prepopulate several fields, greatly reducing processing time – an enormous advantage not only for customers, but for staff as well. The County also uses the solution to manage online payments. "The use of Accela technology allows us to automate much of the work, decreasing our staff time," states Vince.

The bottom line

Since bringing solar permitting online, PDS has experienced a 75 percent decrease in processing time for solar permits. Given that the department will process close to 6,000 solar permits this year, that is a considerable savings to staff and customers. In addition to solar, the Department now offers several other online permits and is processing more than 50 percent of all building permits online, which it considers to be an enormous success. Accela's online permitting process makes it faster and easier for anyone to get a permit, which allows PDS to pass down the cost savings to the customer.

"The solar industry is so appreciative that the County has stepped up to be a leader in solar permitting," says Tara. "It makes all of our lives so much easier. Companies are able to save time, money and resources and we're able to install solar more quickly. Our customers are happy – everyone is happy with this process."

With solar permitting volumes expected to rise 30 percent annually in coming years, Vince says the Accela technology will help his Department maintain its efficient service standards for the foreseeable future. "The online permits allow us to keep pace with the changing workload," he shares, "yet continue to process those permits in a timely manner."

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.

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