



# 8 Trends Transforming Community Planning

Streamlining Planning,  
Zoning, and Code  
Enforcement Processes

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## Agile Planning for Evolving Communities

The world's population is projected to increase from 7.6B to 9.8B by 2050\*, and the characteristics of the population are changing. Planners and the community planning function are responsible for creating environments that are suitable and appealing for a broad array of citizens to help their communities grow and thrive. Changing community characteristics that planners must address include:

- A resurgence of cities and multi-unit residences, with overall urbanization anticipated to increase from 54% to 65% by 2050\*\*
- An aging population with residents who have needs for convenient services close to home
- A shift in values from material to social, with tiny house communities, charter schools, and communal spaces emerging
- Businesses moving towards communal work areas, with shared administrative services for entrepreneurs
- Citizens seeking healthier lifestyles, with needs for walkability, bike-ability and healthy foods
- Citizens becoming more interested in sustainability with the demand for more efficient allocation of resources, including water, food and housing
- Increasing ethnic diversity that drives municipalities to plan for inclusion instead of exclusion, creating unity, while retaining uniqueness
- Growing interest around "Smart Cities" with services online, and information that is easily accessible through search and click functionality

To address the changing needs of residents, planning departments need a flexible development strategy when working on both long-range and short-range community plans. Planning commissions and code enforcement personnel must be aligned with department goals to deliver a seamless experience for citizens through improved processes and efficiencies in the back office.

## Planning Department Realities

Much of the work involved with zoning, plan reviews and approvals, and code enforcement is often done manually, with either paper documents and maps or static PDF files that require heavy use of snail mail, emails and phone calls for communication.

Planners may use a GIS system in the mapping process, which helps maintain map information and provides visualization, but does not address complex work processes, unstructured information management and communications needed in planning processes.

The result of manual, or partially-automated planning processes has been:

1. A looseness and ambiguity in planning detail, which results in many rounds reviews and enforcement effort
2. Excessive time and cost for reviewing plans from public works departments for infrastructure projects
3. Long waits and extremely high costs for developers and contractors for processing plan reviews through the planning commission, ultimately slowing development times and driving up costs for builders and citizens
4. Manual communications and data sharing with building departments for plan reviews and conditions. Inspection files must include code information and approvals, so inspectors have what they need to inspect building sites
5. On-site agency payments by builders. Though fees associated with planning are generally flat, as opposed to building, where they are calculated, payments must still be collected and processed. This requires additional manual efforts on the agencies part, which adds to the inconvenience and cost
6. Slow response and processing times of citizen complaints for code violations can escalate quickly, resulting in poor customer satisfaction and a lack of confidence in government agencies

Challenges such as these caused by manual processes add time to the day-to-day activities of a planning department, and increase the likelihood for errors in manual data entry, and demand in-person visits to agency offices for inspection routing and data information.

## The Accela Solution

Accela Planning Civic Application helps communities build and grow safely with zoning, plan review and approval, and code enforcement automation. The solution is designed for both public works projects and private developments.

Agency staff is empowered to manage project-specific applications, which require review against codes and requirements as defined in long-range planning documents. The solution simplifies processes for analyzing, inspecting, and decision-making on zoning variance applications associated with subdivisions, planned unit developments, and more.

Along with planning department staff, private developers and contractors also benefit from the functionality of Accela Planning. These licensed professionals can upload applications for many types of requests online, including zoning variances, building plans and any supporting documentation with the click of a button. They have complete



access to fee payment processing and real-time status checks from a secure portal. Now, plan change requests and comments are provided online, which reduces turnaround times significantly. Plus, Accela is plan agnostic, and can enable the review of plans in multiple formats, including Adobe, Bluebeam, ePermitHub, ProjectDox, and ePlanCheck.

Inside the planning department, the Accela platform enables parallel reviews across various entities, with collaboration and version control built into the system to reduce effort, mistakes and rework. As work begins, Accela automates the sharing of code change requests, conditions for approval, and code information with the building department, creating a unified and seamless experience across planning and building functions for employees, developers, and builders. This prevents many round of requests, manual paper handling, lost or misplaced documents, and document rework for planners and code enforcement personnel.

**“Over the course of one year, most departments are achieving their defined service level standards more than 90% of the time, and several are at 99% or better.” – Anaheim, CA**

The system also includes the ability to automate the processing of complaints, inspections, and code enforcement actions to ensure the well-being of a community. Code enforcement within the Planning Civic Application helps agencies maintain and enforce planning code against individuals, owners, contractors, properties, and businesses. This includes optimizing routes, having full access to needed data for inspectors in the field, and being able to capture needed data during site visits. Whether for follow-ups or proactive sweeps, agencies can use the mobile app within Accela Planning to create cases in the field and issue citations for violations using a smartphone, tablet or laptop to quickly move from citation to resolution.

Accela Planning delivers an online citizen-facing portal to accept and review citizen complaints or questions, and builders and developers plan applications. For example, Bernalillo County, New Mexico leverages Accela technology to allow builders, developers, and citizens 24/7 access to plan review comments, inspection history, land data and interactive GIS maps, and can easily generate reports based on record and time parameters selected by a user. With more self-service options, tasks that have previously taken days to complete now take just hours, or even minutes, leaving staff more time to focus on other job functions.

**“Tasks that have previously taken days to complete now take just hours, or even minutes, leaving staff more time to focus on other job functions.” – Bernalillo County, NM**

Providing a user friendly online portal for citizens allows community residents to easily submit a request at home or on their mobile device, at any time, and receive real time updates on their submission. Not having to visit an agency office to submit a complaint increases the likelihood citizens will submit requests for investigation, helping create safer, more appealing communities.

### Features of Accela Planning

Accela Planning is a full featured platform for public works projects and private development. The solution is SaaS-based, so all the hardware infrastructure, software infrastructure (OS, Database, security, etc.) and application software is managed in Accela’s highly-secure data centers.

The solution brings all functionality needed for the breadth of the planning process and is flexible enough to accommodate the unique needs of any agency and is designed for the ease-of-use of employees and citizens.

The Civic Application comes with a pre-built set of components to speed implementation and lower overall costs. These include workflows, user interfaces, record types (specific data fields) and reports. The pre-built components were created through numerous engagements with planning departments across various regions and incorporate planning best practices to provide value to Accela customers.

Features of Accela Planning include:

1. Workflow management to automate tasks and functions needed for planning processes. The system can assign tasks, track reviews, associate documents and information to tasks, while keeping the most complex processes running smoothly
2. Online customer portal providing a “consumer-like” experience to apply, verify status, pay fees and conduct property research quickly and easily. As a result, agencies reduce in-person visits and phone calls, and improve customer satisfaction
3. Modern and intuitive user interface with HTML5 and responsive design providing a seamless experience for agency staff, and citizens, on any device
4. Full-featured mobile platform, with role-based apps to allow inspectors and code enforcement personnel to efficiently manage their routing, access all needed documents and information in the field, and get more work done

**An Accela Planning Civic Application customer on the east coast recently went from 20,000 calls a year to 3,400.**



5. Online payments system with credit card, ACH, and trust account capability to increase convenience for citizens and remove the manual payment processing work from agency employees
6. Built-in reporting to give administrators and managers the information they need to manage agency productivity, exposing bottlenecks or process congestion, and highlighting areas for process optimization or redesign
7. GIS integration to easily produce interactive maps and visualizations, making planning and code enforcement data easy to leverage and understand
8. Electronic Document Review and management to ensure all relevant documents are searchable and secure. And with version control in place agency employees can be confident they are always working on the latest version with the ability to review plans created in multiple formats
9. Platform-wide integration capabilities, with APIs, SDKs, and open data, allowing developers to integrate with existing software solutions to meet the unique needs of any community

### Benefits of Accela Planning

There are significant benefits to agencies by moving the planning function online into a cohesive, integrated and fully-digital platform.

- 1. Promote economic growth** – Accela Planning reduces much of the manual and labor-intensive work for accessing master plans, variance applications, and processing reviews and approvals with public works projects, and approving applications from private entities. Speeding the plan review and zone variance requests from builders means more development and faster growing communities.
- 2. Creates more livable communities** – Accela automates the inspection and enforcement of planning codes to ensure growth plans are being adhered to and communities are developing as intended.
- 3. Saves money** – Accela Planning automates the workflows associated with plan reviews and approvals allowing agency employees to process more reviews, code enforcement officers to perform more inspections, and employees to spend less time searching for plans or information. This saves time, money and improves agency productivity.
- 4. Increases inter-department communication** – With Accela Planning, planners can link agencies by communicating approvals, comments, and reviews on projects that share a regulatory burden. This eliminates agency confusion for what has been signed off on. With a single source of truth, planners can ensure other agencies are on the same page.

**5. Improves builder efficiency** – Getting plans reviewed faster, online and with less work means builders and developers can keep their projects on schedule and on budget. The increase of planning information managed in Accela Planning means less questions and confusion, fewer reviews, and faster approvals, and the ability to always know where plans are in the process, so builders, contractors and citizens can manage their time and resources more productively.

**6. Improves citizen satisfaction** – With online citizen request management, agencies can respond faster to citizen complaints, managing code violations and take corrective action faster, with increased transparency.

With ever-changing demands from citizens, planning departments face an ongoing struggle to deliver safe communities that meet the needs of their residents. However, manual or semi-automated processes that are labor-intensive and inefficient make it challenging to achieve success, frustrating both agencies and their citizens.

Luckily, there is a way to achieve a unified seamless experience that bridges the gap between planning and building functions with parallel plan reviews, collaboration and version control across various entities. The Accela Planning Civic Application helps automate processes to increase efficiencies, and ultimately help communities build and grow safely as they were intended.

Learn more and schedule a demo  
for your agency today  
[www.accela.com/planning-next-step](http://www.accela.com/planning-next-step)