

City of Oakland, California

A Modern Approach to Fire Prevention

The City of Oakland, California has 425,000 residents and spans 77 square miles, making it the third largest city in the San Francisco Bay Area. There's something for everyone in Oakland: lively restaurants and community events, miles of parks stretching over hills that offer stunning views of the San Francisco Bay, and dense urban development from border to border.

The City of Oakland's Fire Department oversees an array of activities to keep the city safe—from special event permitting, to inspections of buildings and open space. With two different divisions responsible for the latter, the Operations Division and the Fire Prevention Division, their cross-functional efforts come with challenges, not only in coordinating regulatory oversight, but also providing emergency response services to the public they protect.

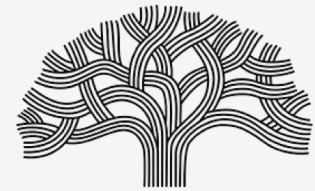
Addressing high risk areas first

Since 1923, the Oakland Hills have had more than a dozen major wildfires, resulting in significant damage, economic hardship and in some cases, lives lost. The area has a unique combination of dense housing across steep terrain, juxtaposed with miles of open space and forest. Dry summer and fall months coupled with strong "Diablo" winds, makes the area very susceptible to wildfires.

After the Oakland Hills Tunnel Fire in 1991 that destroyed 3,500 homes, the area was established as a "High Fire Severity Zone". As a result, the area is inspected by two fire department divisions annually. The Operations Division has fire suppression personnel from 11 firehouses who do vegetation inspections on 18,000 developed parcels, and the Fire Prevention Division has four inspectors who cover the 3,000 undeveloped parcels: all within a 40-day window. Add the 7,000 follow-up inspections generated by these activities, and the shared inspection workload adds up to 28,000 across both divisions every year.

This joint initiative, while reducing the fire risk of the area, added great operational challenges faced by the department. For example, prior to Accela, inspectors were using paper inspection forms in the field, and then manually entering the results back at the firehouse. Fire Captain Anthony Sanders explains, "If our inspectors were called to an emergency during an inspection, they'd have to rush out in the middle of what they were doing, often losing their progress if forms got lost in the shuffle, so they'd have to start from scratch when they returned to finish the job."

Even the preparation for these annual inspections presented a big challenge. "Before Accela, we would spend three weeks printing, collating and pre-sorting the inspection forms, and delivering them to each fire station responsible for those areas. After the inspections were finished, the forms had to be physically picked up by the Fire Prevention team and filed away in the Fire Prevention Bureau, resulting in lots of trips back and forth—just to deliver pieces of paper," Sanders continues.



CITY OF OAKLAND

Population

425,000

Challenge

Reduce reliance on paper processes, and improve accuracy and completeness of inspection data captured in the field

Solution

Accela Public Safety

Results

Decreased risk of wildfires with a faster and more intuitive approach to vegetation inspections on a mobile device

Eliminated uncertainty of property lines and who violations are assigned to with GIS mapping of parcel boundaries accessible in the field

Empowered the fire department to do more complete inspections in less time, with more transparency

Accela Partners helped add value in providing a highly customized experience for the department



“Something we’re really excited about,” explains Sanders, “is being able to take photos of the violations and attach them directly to the inspection report.

The photos are also stored in the Accela back-office so we can refer to them later.”

Fire Captain Anthony Sanders

Pressure for improvement

In 2016, after a high-profile fire incident in an unpermitted building led to loss of life and controversy, the City of Oakland saw the need to re-evaluate and upgrade their inspection processes and database. After considering a few vendors, they chose the **Accela Civic Platform** to help streamline their fire permitting and field inspections to reach more facilities in less time. Because the City of Oakland already used Accela for their building and planning departments, they decided it would be a good fit for the fire department as well.

Accela partnerships delivering value

City officials worked diligently to consider all options for the software implementation, and ultimately chose Accela partners, TruePoint Solutions for the oversight on the project, and CityGovApp for the mobile app to further enhance the experience for inspectors.

With the help of TruePoint and CityGovApp, the Oakland fire department vegetation inspection system was up and running in just one year. Now, instead of printing inspection forms and pre-sorting them, fire department staff use the mobile app to view their list of daily inspections right from the field over a WiFi or cellular connection. They can access information pulled into the Accela system through the Accela API, such as parcel boundaries on a GIS map, property owner information, and past permits or violations associated with a given address.

“Something we’re really excited about,” explains Sanders, “is being able to take photos of the violations and attach them directly to the inspection report. The photos are also stored in the Accela back-office so we can refer to them later,” he shares. This feature helps the department be more prepared if a property owner disputes a failed inspection. And, because the system is so configurable, Sanders is already thinking of ways to improve it. “Soon, we’ll be able to email inspection results to property owners directly from the app,” a feature that will save time and money in removing paper from the process.

With Accela, inspections can be done 100% in the field, and if inspectors get interrupted by responding to an emergency, they can pick up where they left off in the app the next day. “This capability alone has saved us hours of data entry into the system back at the firehouse, and also helps us capture all information we need to have a more complete inspection—it’s huge for us,” says Sanders.

The fire department now does more inspections in less time, has drastically cut their three-week preparation time and has allowed them to provide a better experience for property owners.

And, with other Oakland agencies on the Civic Platform, they can view data across agency lines, which gives them transparency and a holistic approach to government oversight and service—all on the Accela Civic Platform.

About Accela

Accela provides market-leading SaaS solutions that empower governments worldwide to build thriving communities, grow businesses and protect citizens. From planning, building, licensing and permitting, service request management, environmental health and more, Accela’s offerings accelerate efficiency and transparency in governments of all sizes. Powered by Microsoft Azure, Accela’s open and flexible technology helps agencies address specific needs today, while ensuring they are prepared for any emerging or complex challenge in the future. Accela’s solutions serve more than 80 percent of America’s largest cities. Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with additional offices around the world.

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