

Boulder County, Colorado

Trading Work-Arounds for Workflows in Septic Permitting

Boulder County, Colorado is full of bustling urban areas, renowned national parks, endless outdoor activities, and is home to the University of Colorado, the largest university in the state. With attractions like the Flatirons mountain range and Rocky Mountain National Park, Boulder County packs a punch when it comes to outdoor activities for residents and visitors alike.

The Environmental Health Division sits within the Boulder County Public Health Department and oversees regulation of the natural and built environment in many facets, including food safety, body art, air quality and septic systems. The county regulates many types of septic, or onsite wastewater treatment systems (OWTS), including stand-alone, cluster, and even multiple systems on one parcel. In their jurisdiction there are areas with a high groundwater table, which results in special OWTS permit requirements for staff to enforce.

Unique requirements with tedious work-arounds

The Boulder County Environmental Health Division has more than 45 staff members, four of which are devoted to the OWTS program. They review septic plans to ensure proposed systems are in compliance with local, state and federal codes across different types of terrain and soil. With 300 OWTS projects in the county annually, they've got their hands full with incoming permits for new or remodeled structures built in areas not connected to a city sewer line.

For years, the county used a software system called EnvisionConnect by Decade Software to capture septic permitting data. And though it met their needs for some time, it became challenging to adapt the system to match their process when regulations changed. For example, they often had to track projects that had more than one OWTS on a given parcel, and because the EnvisionConnect system could only track one record per parcel, they had to create work-arounds to capture the data.

Dina Reavis, IT Manager for the Boulder County Public Health Department recalls the difficulty with tracking these unique permit-types, "In EnvisionConnect you could only link permits to one address, which made it really one dimensional. We needed a system that would allow us to link multiple permits to one property record," she shares. "Every time work was done on a parcel, we had to create a separate record to track it, which made it difficult to get a wholistic view of everything that had happened on that parcel."



Population

425,000

Challenge

Limitations of a legacy system made it difficult to make updates to changing process and requirements

Solution

Accela Environmental Health

Results

Removed the need for tedious work-arounds

Reduced manual steps like writing permits by hand

Improved property owner satisfaction

Ability to track facilities without having to attach them to an address or parcel number

Created room for improvement with GIS and field-inspection capabilities on the horizon



“We had a lot of improvements we wanted to make to our process, but as we looked at our options, we realized record-based tracking was limited in EnvisionConnect, and that was never going to change; which was the main reason we moved from EnvisionConnect to Accela.”

– Dina Reavis, IT Manager for the Boulder County Public Health

Not only was it tough to track information for each OWTS, it was also challenging to capture customer data and correspondence, making it difficult for staff to guide property owners on navigating the permitting process, and giving accurate information. Erin Dodge, Program Coordinator for the Water Quality Program, explains how their previous system didn't quite meet their needs. “Because we tracked each work item in a separate record, when a property owner called with a question, we had to individually open each record to understand the parcel history because it wouldn't populate across all records,” Erin explains. This issue made it tough for new property owners to understand what updates might be needed to a long-ago installed OWTS.

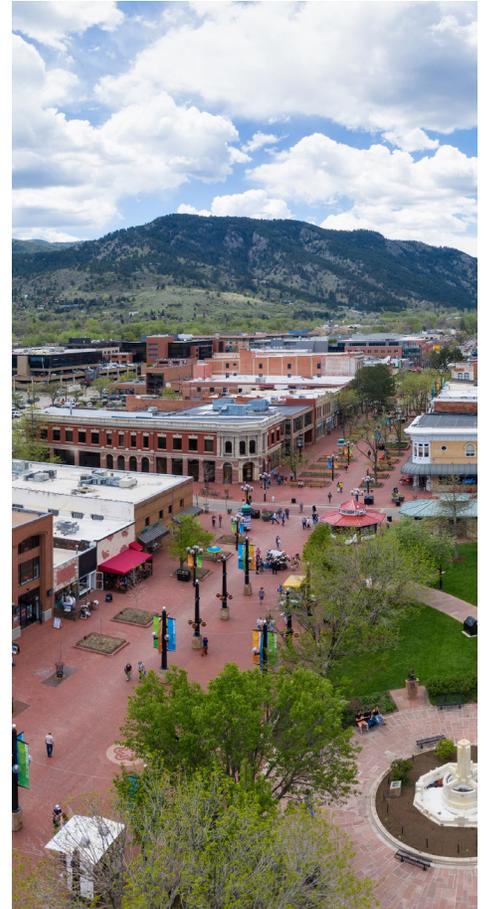
The lack of flexibility in their previous system made it challenging to adapt to new regulations, too. When requirements changed, they couldn't just configure the system to track the newly required information. Erin recalls, “When new regulations were introduced, things became more complex; with more specific installation requirements and more moving parts for existing permits and it was beyond what our database could capture,” she noted. “Our staff had to spend a lot of time manually writing permits in paragraphs describing the requirements for that type of permitted system – it wasn't sustainable.”

To redesign or replace?

The lack of options for tracking new information was beginning to impact the health division's operations, prompting them to explore other options. They researched the Accela Civic Platform because the Boulder County Land Use Department was already using the Accela system, and Accela had recently acquired Decade Software – making it the next logical upgrade to health division's system.

When introduced to the system themselves, the health division found the Accela Civic Platform more flexible to accommodate the changes they needed. “We had a lot of improvements we wanted to make to our process, but as we looked at our options, we realized record-based tracking was limited in EnvisionConnect, and that was never going to change; which was the main reason we moved from EnvisionConnect to Accela,” Erin states.

Dina and her team worked hard to prepare for a move to the Civic Platform. They documented all of their processes, engaged staff who might be impacted by the new software, and painstakingly redesigned their workflows. “We sat down and mapped out our processes: we talked about reports, we created a wish-list, and we did a lot of data cleanup, which was really useful when it came time for the project to kick-off,” Dina shares.



Smart technology delivering real benefits

In just six months, the OWTS Program was up and running on the Accela Civic Platform, and they immediately noticed the benefits. Division staff could easily view all historical permit data in one place, making it easy to reference, “In Accela, you can actually comment on the parcel page, so we use it as a customer management tool, which has really improved the satisfaction of property owners calling in for information,” Erin explains.

The environmental health division especially liked that they could create a record to track anything, whether it was attached to an address or parcel. Dina shares that “With Accela, it is much more multi-dimensional, because you can link multiple things to one to one record.”

And, because the Accela system is so flexible, it was easier for them to capture the data they needed to do their job. “The fact that you can make relationships between records is huge for us. For example, if a new system is installed, and 20 years later they replace the tank, you can create a parent-child relationship linking the original OWTS to the new tank, so it’s easier to track changes to the system over time,” Erin explains.

Now, instead of spending time on manual processes like looking through files to see if property owners have been notified of upcoming permit expiration dates, the system helps them automate those things. “Before, we had to go through a file drawer and manually look at folders to decide if a permit was expiring because there were just too many places to look in the old system; it was difficult to find the information,” Erin recalls. “Now, with Accela, the system notifies property owners automatically by email when their permit is about to expire. We don’t have to manually mail them letters or send an email at all. It’s great!”

Keys to success

When asked what the secret to the project’s success, Dina and team all agree that pre-planning was key. “The fact that we did all that work up-front, before the project started really paid off. We thought through processes; made lists of exactly what fields we wanted to capture, and drafted what the reports would look like,” Erin recounts. “We also engaged our entire team for input, and it was absolutely integral to have both back-office and field users at the table, so they could buy into the process.”

Now, with the Accela Civic Platform, the environmental health division’s water quality program has a bright future, with a more configurable system that better meets their needs. Next up for the department is phase two of the project, which will move their other environmental health programs into the same Accela system so they can achieve the same efficiency and processing power gains realized by the water quality program.

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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