

Baltimore County, Maryland

COVID-19 TRIGGERS TSUNAMI OF CHANGE IN BALTIMORE COUNTY'S APPROACH TO DIGITAL SERVICES

Baltimore County is the third most populous county in the state of Maryland and boasts a diverse community which encompasses historic neighborhoods, 21,000 equine-related acres, and 214 miles of beautiful waterfront along the Chesapeake Bay. Baltimore County communities support an assortment of industries including education, government and health care. The County is part of the Baltimore and Baltimore Washington metropolitan areas and is also considered part of the Northeast megalopolis stretching from Virginia to Boston.

Over the past few decades, Baltimore County has seen significant growth and has transformed from a rural landscape to more of an urban setting. This growth has increased the demand for more government services, whether it be in land development and management, business licensing, code enforcement and more. As a result, the County has taken charge to meet this demand. Today, the County is surpassing expectations by processing requests faster, providing greater transparency, and offering convenient methods for submitting forms and applications leveraging Accela solutions.

Though the County has been a long-time partner with Accela, recent developments around the coronavirus pandemic has pushed the agency to refine their processes even further. This has ultimately led to greater protection of citizens and agency staff, while delivering a higher level of service.

The First Wave – A Quick Switch to Offer More Digital Services

When COVID-19 surfaced in Baltimore County, many government staff were caught off-guard; there were a lot of unknowns and with 23 agencies within its parameters, Baltimore County had to think quick on their feet in order to be able to continue to offer citizens the services they required. Fortunately, the agency already had an established relationship with Accela to deliver digital services, many of which were in place such as rental registrations, miscellaneous parking permits, animal service complaints, and code enforcement complaints.

The first wave to hit was a scramble to fill gaps in services due to shutdowns and government mandates. It also included the need to transition office



Population

827,370

Challenge

Tackle challenges in government services presented by COVID-19 by offering constituents new online payment processing and additional permits in the cloud.

Solutions

Accela Building
Accela Planning
Accela Business Licensing
Accela Right of Way Management

Results

- Enabled 3,500 agency employees to work from home successfully utilizing digital platform in a matter of weeks
- Stood up online payment processing for service transactions in 4 days
- Added new online permits for outdoor dining due to the COVID-19 pandemic in one day
- Increased the quality of service offered to constituents with faster turnaround times, high transparency into processes, and a convenient online portal to upload and submit requests
- Removed physical barriers with in-person transactions to protect the health and safety of constituents and agency staff by offering services online

About Accela

employees to productive at-home personnel. The agency quickly worked to identify top priorities to help the County continue to do business. One top priority: they needed online payment processing for incoming requests. The agency was already accepting online payments for a few of their permits and licenses using a PayPal adapter into the Accela system, so why not expand to include online payments for other additional services?

As a result, the County quickly stood up an Accela online payments module in four days in which constituents could easily select the type of payment they want to make and provide their reference record or permit number they're paying for and the amount they want to pay. This had an immediate impact on the County's goal to continue to deliver a high quality of service even through difficult circumstances presented by COVID-19.

In the words of Eric Tenney, Business Applications Manager for the County, "It was a big win for us to be able to implement this online payment module very quickly. I mean, we basically had it up in a matter of a week. And it continues to be huge. Now we're looking to add code enforcement payments. And we just had an inquiry about Fire applications. It's very, very simple, but it serves a good purpose and it helps eliminate the need for constituents to actually have to come into the County, and risk themselves and their health." The County is now processing anywhere from 100 to 500 transactions a day online.

The Second Wave – Adapting to New Norms and Adding Additional Cloud Services

The second wave came once the County realized additional public requests and services that needed to be moved online.

Rob O'Connor, Director Office of Information and Technology for Baltimore County recalled the experience, "Like our counterparts throughout the country and across the world, we have been on the frontlines of local government response to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 13th, we had 200 people working from home that day. Within three weeks, we had 3,500 employees working from home successfully, but it didn't stop there. I call this the tsunami, the first wave that came through. The next wave that came through was when agencies identified public needs and services that had to continue but couldn't get done in-person anymore. Nearly overnight we saw an exponential influx of emergency requests to put critical processes online. Having the tools in our toolkit and having the enterprise system in place made it easy to look at the business requirements and build something that is right out of the box to meet agency needs in less than 4 days was huge. We were glad to see that our expert teams, our end users, and our constituents all agreed that this process was simple and it allowed us to move faster than many other jurisdictions."

Accela provides market-leading solutions that empower state and local governments to build thriving communities, grow businesses and protect citizens. 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 challenges in the future. Accela is headquartered in San Ramon, California, with additional offices around the world.

Learn more

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

As additional services that required a push to the cloud came to light, Baltimore County was and is now able to scale and adapt to incoming requests. One such request came as an evolution to the COVID-19 virus itself.

COVID-19 Requires New Permit Types for Outdoor Dining

As restrictions fell on the County, public services came to a halt for many industries. Now businesses had to adapt to new norms. Restaurants and dining were one of the hardest hit industries. When the Maryland initially ordered the closure on indoor dining, eating establishments were only able to operate for carryout or delivery. When the state began to ease restrictions, restaurants started to be able to offer outdoor dining. Now tables had to be spaced to allow for social distancing and a regiment of rules were put into action. All of a sudden, the County was faced with a whole new set of challenges – how to regulate all of these new protocols? That’s when the agency leveraged Accela to start offering outdoor dining permits through the online portal. And they made an online checklist available with the CDC and restaurant association guidelines with instructions on what to do.

Being able to access and submit documentation online has made all the difference according to Mike Mohler, Chief Administrator Liquor Board for Baltimore County. He states, “The feedback has been tremendous because there are a number of documents that people have to submit to the agency. Depending on how much a restaurant wants to expand outside with a temporary use permit, it involves site plans, letter approvals from property owners, and the application itself. There are a number of documents that need to be sent to us, and quite honestly, I don’t recall getting 2 or 3 phone calls of ‘I can’t’. It has been very manageable for the everyday person.”

COVID-19 Jumping Point For Government to Move to Digital

Today, a new bar has been set for government. COVID-19 has been an inflection point in which digital services have become a must and not something on a wish list. By removing physical barriers, Baltimore County is protecting both agency staff along with the citizens they serve, while offering better services to constituents. Citizens can now access government services when and where they want with complete transparency into processes. Plus, agency staff can work from the safety of their homes in strenuous circumstances like those presented by this infectious disease.

In the words of Rob O'Connor, "The pendulum has swung. We have been working in the County for nearly a decade to empower individuals to work from home. For so long, there was hesitation because some agencies thought it would be difficult to effectively implement. But since COVID-19, we have seen the paradigm shift thanks to technology solutions that have shown staff can work remotely and provide productive service while promoting services online that can improve the experience for our residents. There is now transparency and people can see where their application is and they're getting a response immediately."

This new way of doing business is no quick fix. It is shaping the way governments will work far into the future and is defining new expectations for communities everywhere.