Moreno Valley, California

Improving Transparency in Fire Permitting

The City of Moreno Valley is located in Southern California, 60 miles from both Los Angeles and Palm Springs, and 75 miles from San Diego. Moreno Valley is one of the youngest cities in California, incorporated in just 1984. This makes economic development and public safety high priorities as the City grows rapidly.

Booming Growth

Moreno Valley is the second most populous city in the county. Due to its unique location, the city is growing quickly and all city departments are involved in the expansion. "The growth in Moreno Valley is very extensive, with a rise in new development ranging from tenant improvements to large one million square foot buildings being constructed from the ground up," explains Doug Bloom, Assistant Fire Marshal for Moreno Valley.

In light of the booming growth, the city welcomes over 24,000 residents and local business owners each year to its one-stop development services counter. While the economic development for this young city carries the promise of opportunity and community for residents, it can be challenging for city agencies to keep up.

Wildland Fire Incidents on the Rise

In the last decade, the State of California has experienced three of its five worst fire seasons of all time. And because the city is located in a mostly dry climate, with 50% undeveloped land, it has not been immune from wildfires. In June 2019, the Jerry Fire burned more than 500 acres within the city limits. Four months later, in October 2019, the Reche Fire burned more than 300 acres of unincorporated land. Both incidents posed an immediate threat to wildland properties, surrounding businesses, and residential structures in the city.

The city has attempted to address the threat of wildfires by inspecting vacant parcels and minimizing hazardous vegetation, reducing potential "fuel." There are around 1,800 vacant parcels over 11,000 acres inspected annually. The city's existing system of tracking inspections worked for a while, but as technology advanced, it became outdated, and unable to do what they needed.

Bogged Down by Outdated Systems

Kimberlee Krueger, Senior Application Analyst for the City, describes the Fire Department's challenges with wide-scale inspections. "Inspectors would do their inspections all on paper, then the data would be manually entered," Kimberlee explains. "Because we used multiple systems to capture inspection data, it had to be exported back and forth constantly. This created problems with versioning, overwriting crucial information, and made the data unreliable. We had no global view of our inspection program which meant details were missed."

Population
213,000

Challenge
Ramp up fire department activities to meet rising threat, when operations were stuck in legacy systems and work arounds.

Solutions
Accela Public Safety

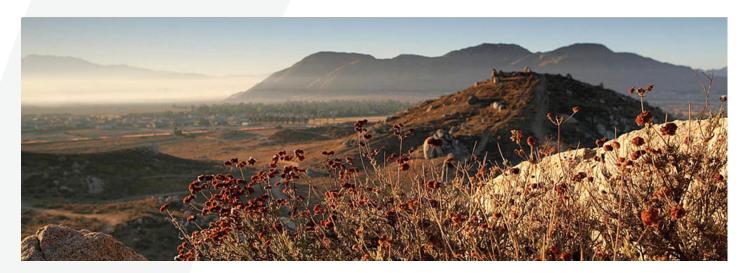**Results**
Decreased risk of wildfires

Greater inter-agency collaboration when data across city departments can be viewed in one system

Error reduction leading to improved property owner notification, and compliance results

95% reduction in required labor

Decreased risk of wildfires in rural areas susceptible to overgrown vegetation

Fire inspectors also had trouble seeing approvals from other departments while in the field, making it tough to get a holistic view of a parcel's permit history and approved use. "For example, if the fire inspector wanted to know the parcel's conditions of approval, they would have to come back to the office to look at the file or call in to have someone relay the information while they waited on the phone," Kimberlee explains. "It was not efficient."

Not only did inspectors struggle with accessing information in the field, but completing inspections had its own challenges. "Inspectors could not validate their location relative to the parcel's boundary lines, so they didn't really know whose property a violation occurred on," Kimberlee shares. "And because they used traditional cameras to document violations, the photos had to be manually uploaded and attached to the inspection back at the office. It was a really time-consuming process."

The Search for a Solution

To help them find a better solution, Moreno Valley Fire Department staff compiled a list of requirements that would streamline their regulatory activities. Their ideal solution needed to have the following:

- The ability to connect to the city's existing Geographic Information System (GIS) for parcel and owner data

- A strong mobile app that could locate inspectors and allow them to capture and attach photos of violations

- The ability to automate the process of scheduling inspections, property owner notifications, and assessing fees

- An online portal for property owners to easily track the status of submitted plans, permits, and pay fees online

- Reporting options that could give staff a global view of progress towards achieving department goals

They polled other agencies in the city, and decided that the Accela Civic Platform was the solution they needed.

Improvements All-Around

After the Fire Department chose Accela as their software vendor, it didn't take long to see the benefits.

By reducing the different sources of record management systems, the process became more efficient for inspectors. "We can track all pending inspections along with the completion rate each month. This allows our monthly annual inspections and state mandated inspection deadlines to be completed on time," Assistant Fire Marshal Bloom remarks. "In general, the system helps us capture a lot of good data not only for state reporting, but also for monitoring our own progress. Inspections used to be slow because we did everything manually. We weren't able to look at any metrics because the data was unreliable, but that's different now."

Another improvement for the Fire Department is the ability to access data from other city departments also using Accela, "We have five modules on Accela: building, planning, code enforcement, special district fire, parks, and transportation," Kimberlee explains. "The data repository for our annual fire program is the GIS system. Inspectors can use the system to search for records in the building department's module to get inspection history, square footage, and other information. They can also use the platform to view conditions of approval issued by the Planning Department."

The Fire Department also uses Accela to manage their complex billing process. "For our annual fire permits, we first conduct and complete the inspection and then the fees are assessed and invoiced," Jackie Lankhorst, Permit Technician for the City of Moreno Valley explains. "The way we used to process billing would take staff days to complete a full billing cycle. Now, with Accela, we not only save administrative time, but we can provide accurate billing reports for the management team."

Though the team saw improvement across their business process, some of the biggest strides were achieved through the utilization of the modern mobile app, provided through an Accela partner, CityGovApp.

Mobile App

CityGovApp provides highly customized mobile applications for Accela customers who have unique needs beyond what is included in Accela's mobile application. The Moreno Valley Fire Department created two mobile applications to address the Fire Department's needs. "Through CityGovApp, we have customized the Fire Hazard Abatement app, and the Daily Inspector app to manage annual and construction inspections," Kimberlee explains.

Now, when inspectors finish an inspection in the field, they can send the results directly to property owners, along with the photos and comments attached. "We're able to get inspections completed quickly using our tablets and can email the reports immediately—which has been a nice improvement for us," Assistant Fire Marshal Bloom explains. This functionality in the mobile app allows them to keep property owners informed in real-time, which has reduced confusion and calls into the office.

"Inspectors don't have to call-in or come back to the office to look at paperwork or research data anymore. It's all done from the field, which is important because the other city departments involved aren't held up by our process," Jackie explains.

Now, instead of using traditional cameras and manually attaching images to files back at the office, inspectors can determine which parcel they're on, and photograph violations right in the app. "The app automatically timestamps the photo with the current date, APN (Assessor Parcel Number) and record number and attaches it to the record as proof of the inspection," Kimberlee explains. This allows for a better experience for both property owners and the Fire Department. "We can even use speech-to-text on our tablet and it will dictate what we saw right on the checklist," shares Assistant Fire Marshal Bloom.

The Bottom Line

Largely, it's the automation of the Civic Platform that has really added value for the Moreno Valley Fire Department. "The inspection is conducted, then the customized scripts run automatically to trigger different actions such as calculating the billing amount or flagging the record for additional review," Kimberlee explains. "This has been a big improvement for our cost recovery in addition to tracking what's been done and what's still pending. We also offer an online payment option for our customers which lets us provide great customer service, and has resulted in more payments made on time," Kimberlee explains.

Overall, Moreno Valley has seen a 95% reduction in labor, and an increase in productivity. "We've reduced the hours our Hazard Abatement process takes from 1,144 hours and four full-time inspectors, down to 58 hours across three full time inspectors. The whole process went from taking two months to three days," Jackie shares. "The Accela system has reduced errors significantly, improved the accuracy of metrics, and ensures better rates of compliance."

"Now we can use data to see if we need to hire more people, what our inspection rate is, and we have a much better sense of how efficient we're being. With Accela, we can answer these questions, whereas we couldn't before," Kimberlee shares.

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Jackie Lankhorst,
Permit Technician,
City of Moreno Valley

About Accela

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.

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