

Missoula, Montana

From Trading Post to Govtech Leader with Higher Transparency, Better Analytics, and Formulated Processes in Community Development

Settled in 1860 as a trading post, the city of Missoula, Montana, is situated where five mountain ranges converge – often described as the “hub of five valleys.” Encompassing more than 29 square miles of diverse geography, the City supports a lifestyle of outdoor living and recreation and has 400 acres of parkland, 22 miles of trails, and nearly 5,000 acres of open-space conservation land nearby. Missoula has been dubbed the Garden City due to rich fertile soils, large commercial gardens, and its position along the Clark Fork River.

Missoula, Montana continually strives for excellence within the City’s planning and permitting functions. The City has a clear, defined vision to share more data, drive paperless processes and become more transparent.

Missoula supports a staff of 80 employees that access and leverage Accela technology to streamline processes, eliminate bottlenecks and better engage with the citizens they serve. The City currently offers building, mechanical, electrical, sanitary, and water permitting and inspections online along with GIS and asset management for city-owned infrastructure. Making these services available in a digital environment has made it easy for citizens to make a request, see status updates, and pay outstanding balances 24/7 from any device, and virtually from anywhere.

Delivering an Elevated Citizen Experience

Consumers today expect quick and easy access for the goods and services they require. The “Amazon experience” has become the standard for how businesses run and thrive, and the same expectation now extends to government services. The world’s view of government services currently, however, isn’t always a positive one. In fact, 60% of consumers rate government experience at the bottom.*

In the words of Aaron Bowman, Building Official and Applications Software Engineer for Missoula, “Government deficiencies are often due to the lack of adoption of technology. It seems we are always 5, 7 and even 10 years behind the curve.” However, the city of Missoula, Montana is working to change that mindset.

The City has worked endlessly to uncover opportunities to implement efficiencies and redefine processes to meet the needs of their staff and public.

Now, citizens can apply for and submit requests, see status updates, schedule inspections, and pay outstanding fees for commercial and residential permits



Population

74,428

Challenge

Eliminate paper processes, share more data for smart decision-making, and become more transparent for increased citizen engagement

Solutions

Accela Building
 Accela Planning
 Accela Service Request Management
 Accela Business Licensing
 Accela Occupational Licensing

Results

More than 70% of permits offered by the City are applied for online, with a target of moving 98% of all applications online by early 2020

Achieved efficiencies to reduce needed staffing levels

Reduced office foot traffic and phone inquiries

Increased transparency into planning and permitting processes for citizens and agency staff

Better analytic data collection for more informed decisions



“Even though our workload has steadily increased over the last few years, we have been able to keep pace. We are no longer handing paper from one desk to another. Everybody is looking at the same plans at the same time.”

—Aaron Bowman, Building Official and Applications Software Engineer for Missoula

from the convenience of their home, office or job site. As a result, roughly 70% of the city’s available permits are applied for online, and Missoula plans to increase that number to 98% by early 2020. The agency is even finding architects and developers, that once were the City’s biggest opponents, are now some of their staunchest supporters.

Doing More with Less – From Paper to Digital

By offering online permit applications and electronic plan reviews, the city of Missoula has drastically reduced office visits by project owners. In addition, they have been able to reduce citizen calls for information by providing the means to self-serve. This has freed up Missoula’s staff to work on additional strategic initiatives for the Development Services department.

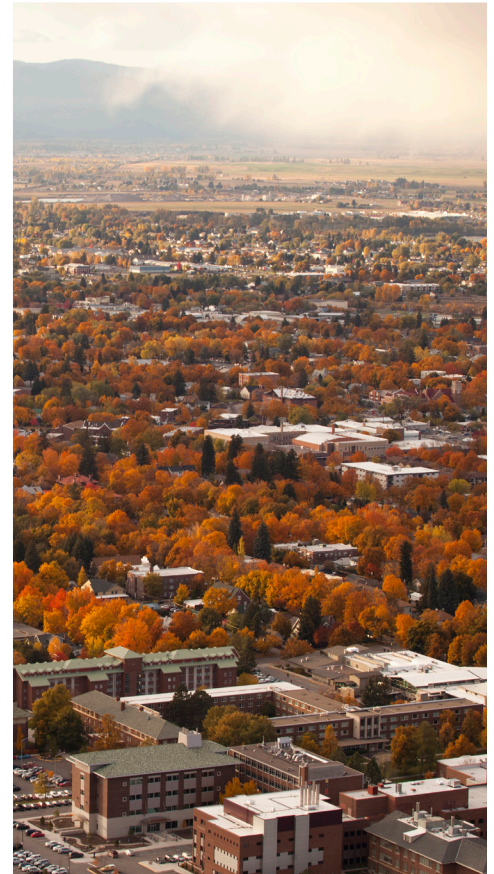
Looking back, in regards to the taxing workload placed on the agency’s staff, Aaron said, “We were on the verge of hiring additional permit coordinators for the intake process. Now that we have online processes in place, we are still busy, but we aren’t getting constant complaints from current coordinators that they don’t have time to finish their work. There are also no longer complaints from citizens saying they are having to wait to sit down with a coordinator.” Aaron continues, “even though our workload has steadily increased over the last few years, we have been able to keep pace. We are no longer handing paper from one desk to another. Everybody is looking at the same plans at the same time.”

By automating and streamlining processes and offering services online, the agency is able to do more with fewer resources. They are able to completely eliminate the need to scan plans into the City’s filing system. Plus, by moving to a digital environment, the city no longer has the need to store paper documents. This reduces the need for an entire full time employee headcount.

Breaking Down Barriers with Transparent Civic Services

Not only has the agency improved efficiencies, Missoula has also been able to increase customer satisfaction by delivering transparency into their services. The City is breaking down barriers in which government processes are perceived to exist in a black box, where items are submitted and no communication is provided until a permit is issued. Now, citizens, architects, developers, and contractors can log into an online portal and instantly see the status of their application. They can now more easily schedule the next steps in the planning and permitting process.

It’s not just the customer who has gained increased visibility into planning and permitting processes either. Agency staff now have a clear picture into back office processes. Applications are routed to the right people at the right time. Users can easily log into the system to access outstanding tasks assigned to them. This transparency has made for happier employees and citizens alike.





A Big Data Initiative to Eliminate Bottlenecks

Much of the success which Missoula's Development Services has seen in improving efficiencies is a result of the City's focus to uncover bottlenecks and provide clarity into operations. This has allowed the agency to fill gaps and strengthen weak areas in workflows and processes. To measure this success, Missoula is analyzing multiple variables including public comment, permit review cycle times, internal staff comments, and a generalized feeling of efficiency within these areas.

Better analytic data collection has empowered not only agency staff to make more informed decisions, but has also opened this data up to constituents to help them ensure their projects are running on time and on budget.

Partnering With Citizens

The city of Missoula is committed to working to improve customer satisfaction and having a unique working relationship with their constituents. The city considers their citizens as partners in developing a high quality community that attracts residents and businesses alike.

When project owners take an active role in the planning and permitting processes they become more than a customer. The City wants to help their citizens take part in driving efficiencies to accelerate community development. As a result, those making requests get through the process quicker and are happier.

With this perspective, the city of Missoula has accelerated community development and is on the leading edge of technology for a jurisdiction their size. They understand and accept that "traditional ways of communicating and providing service to their citizens are no longer efficient or satisfactory to a generation that is connected and that wants information in real time."** As a result, the City and those that work within its limits, are now enjoying the convenient, transparent, and ultimately faster services to get things done.

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.

Learn More

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

* eRepublic Government Experience Research 2019

** <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewarnold/2018/02/09/why-millennial-citizens-want-governments-to-be-more-active-on-social-media/#2207b0025c41>