Tacoma, Washington

Improving The Permit Process – A Quest to Hear The Customer and Support Innovative Solutions Services

On the banks of the Puget Sound, south of Seattle, lies the urban port city of Tacoma. As the third largest city in the state of Washington, Tacoma has been dubbed one of the "most livable areas" in the United States. Incorporated in 1875, the city hosts numerous cultural events and is home to a number of museums and outdoor activities.

Tacoma leverages Accela Building for permitting, site permitting, mechanical, plumbing, historic preservation and land use permitting. The city also plans to roll out other functions using Accela technology including long range planning.

With 130 Accela users across multiple departments and 10,000 customer contacts, Tacoma is a permitting powerhouse that helps facilitate the economic growth within its community. The agency continually strives for excellence and their quest to "hear the customer" and "support innovative solutions" makes the city stand out amongst its peers.

Trying to Fit a Square Peg in a Round Hole – Tacoma's Technology Challenge

Prior to adopting Accela Building, Tacoma was utilizing an enterprise-wide solution that became their permitting tool for Planning and Development Services. However, the agency quickly came to understand the solution was not built for permitting, and it could not meet their needs. Staff made double entries due to a lack of automation, creating inefficiencies in the permitting process. Citizens were also not afforded the ability to pay fees online or check the status of an application. These inefficiencies reflected largely on the citizen experience.

Jennifer Ward, from Tacoma's Planning and Development Services Department shared, "The citizen experience was difficult, because customers felt like there was a wall up between us and them. They had no way to see into the process and understand their application status, what was happening next, and who was reviewing it. As a result, they felt they had to call in, email staff, or come to the office for every single need. They were completely in the dark."

Population
213,418

Challenge
Adapt efficiencies to improve the permitting function both internally and externally

Solution
• Accela Building
• Accela Citizen Access
• Accela Mobile

Results
Saved 30 hours a month in processing over-the-counter permits

Saved 44 hours a month by offering ePermits

Eliminated third-party applications for application submission

Gained access to reports and open data to share across departments

Reduced office foot traffic and service calls

Free to Deliver on a Strategic Vision

A Modern Permitting Solution Impacting the Agency and Citizen Experience

Accela offered Tacoma the modern solution they were looking for. After implementing Accela Building, the City of Tacoma was able to reduce office foot traffic and service calls by providing customers 24/7 permitting access and complete visibility into their application status.

To further refine the office foot traffic, the agency created an inhouse system called "Tracker" to route customers directly to subject matter experts. This solution uses Accela API's to provide metrics on who the customer saw, how long staff spent with the customer, and captures all notes created by staff members.

By using Accela technology the city is now processing permits at a faster pace. In fact, the agency has saved their permit specialists nearly **30 hours a month in processing "over-the-counter" permits** (permits applied for, reviewed and issued same day). They have also been able to save these specialists an additional **44 hours a month by leveraging Accela to provide ePermits** (permits that require no review and can be obtained 24/7).

By reducing the amount of labor-intensive work involved in the permitting process, staff that were previously held up working on manual data entry were now free to work on the agency's strategic vision, such as improving customer communication. Staff were able to produce customer memos that greatly improved their citizen interaction and satisfaction. Staff were also enabled to start delivering "completeness reviews" on applications. As an added bonus, the agency discovered savings by being able to eliminate several third-party applications previously used to try and facilitate online application submittals.

Not Just About Improving Permit Processes

Another one of the most significant improvements the City of Tacoma found after implementing Accela were the reporting capabilities. Pre-Accela, the agency required a full-time employee to gain visibility into the number of permits being issued by the City and respond to customer inquiries.

Today, while permitting data reports are essential, other reports used by the organization range from level of service, staff time tracking to help guide business decisions around, and workload management. Reports are automated and open data can be shared across departments and the public. The data from these reports have been further enhanced by adding maps to graphically show the data. These reporting improvements only added to the growing momentum behind the agency's focus to "hear the customer" and "support innovative solutions".

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Jennifer Ward
Tacoma's Planning and Development Services Department
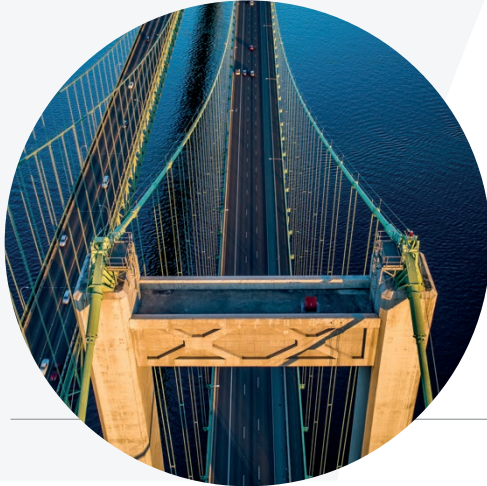
Agile Government Embracing Emerging Technology and Regulation

Adaptive Solutions for Changing Demands

Over the past three years, Tacoma has experienced many of the benefits Accela technology has to offer. However, this is just the beginning to an ever-evolving journey. The City is committed to innovate as its citizen's demands change.

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At the end of the day, the City of Tacoma measures its success by asking these two questions – Did we solve a problem? Did we deliver a product that met a need? And now, when it comes to improving City permitting, they can confidently answer yes.

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, to asset and service request management, finance, 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.

Learn More

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