

Weston, Florida

# Touchless Technology – Realizing the Benefits of SaaS Solutions

When it comes to safety and one of the best places to live and work, the city of Weston, Florida is consistently ranked number one by the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, and other media. With A-rated public and charter schools, the lowest crime rate per capita in the county, class 1 fire department rating and class 2 building code effectiveness rating, it's clear this city has its house in order.

More specifically, when it comes to development services, Weston has emerged as a leader in the govtech arena. Over the past several years, the city went through a major digital transformation initiative to improve service delivery and agency efficiency. Weston began by moving to a digital environment and then made their move to the cloud, all just in time to tackle major disruptions in the market caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, among other unanticipated challenges. These modernization efforts have not gone unnoticed. Neighboring cities and jurisdictions have looked to Weston as a model agency, and the city has been ranked number one in a recent *Digital Cities* survey profiling departments leveraging technology to enhance city services and advance city priorities.

Since becoming an Accela customer in 2017, Weston, FL has leveraged Accela Planning, Accela Building, and Accela Short-Term Rental solutions to offer online services to constituents and become “extremely self-service oriented”.

## Fueling Tech Modernization – “We Would Rather You Be Online Than In Line”

Prior to Accela, The City of Weston was utilizing an antiquated system for planning and permitting that had no public-facing portal. The city was relying on customers to physically come into the office and submit paper applications and plans for review.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Weston would see close to 200 customers in the office on a daily basis to submit applications, make inquiries, and pay outstanding fees. With the goal to improve service delivery to constituents, Weston went to work implementing the Accela system and refining internal processes and procedures. The agency quickly adopted the motto, “We would rather you be online than in line.” And their hard work paid off. Today the city sees anywhere from one to 25 people a day come into the office, an **87.5% reduction in in-person foot traffic**.

Technology modernization efforts have also changed the way building and planning department staff at the city of Weston work. Not only were the majority of constituents utilizing the city's online services, but agency staff were starting to realize some of the benefits a digital environment offered.



### Population

70,614

### Challenge

Improve service delivery to constituents and department staff while maintaining and supporting Accela software

### Solutions

Accela Planning  
Accela Building  
Accela Short-Term Rentals

### Results

87.5% reduction in office foot-traffic (pre-COVID to Today)

Repurposed 75% of staff time to focus on quality assurance and strategic efforts

80% decrease in plan review turnaround times

Removed pressures on agency staff from workload involved with maintaining and supporting datacenters

Reduced number of resources required to make system upgrades

Implemented dashboarding via Microsoft Power BI to improve production levels



For example, prior to Accela, 75% of a permit tech’s time was sunk into data entry – typing what a customer had written on a piece of paper. Now, these technicians have become plans coordinators, spending more time working on quality assurance and focusing on strategic initiatives. As a result, Plan Reviewers, Inspectors and Building Officials downstream spend less time worrying about permit submission quality issues.

Plan reviewers also benefited from the online services. They could still go to work and get their job done quickly and easily from a remote location.

Both agency staff and constituents alike have benefited from the digital transformation the city has undergone. Fewer people were coming into the office, higher quality services were being offered and processes were more efficient than ever before. Today, the city can complete some plan reviews in as little as a day, which is an **80% decrease in plan review turnaround times**.

While things were going well at the city, Weston knew there was still more that could be done to optimize their Accela implementation. That’s when they decided they were going to make the ultimate jump to the cloud.

### Three Benefits a Cloud Solution Could Bring to a Digital Services Offering

When considering the transition to the cloud, Weston began their journey by identifying the benefits a SaaS solution would provide. In the end, they concluded there were many justifications for making the move, but three of them really stood out.

First, in the words of Ryan Fernandes, Director of Technology Services for the city, “By being on-premises, even in a virtual server world, there were still dependencies on IT having to do some caring and feeding in our own data centers.” This took time and resources from IT staff and not having to look after their data centers would take a lot of the weight and liability away from the city. Weston no longer needed a physical presence. They could lean on Accela to be the touchpoint for the public and not have to rely on their internal network.

Fernandes continued, “Secondly, from an access and cybersecurity standpoint, it allowed us to shed some of the liability associated with us managing internal connections coming in, especially from the public, where we could offload some of the responsibility.”

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Lastly, Fernandes addressed staying up to date on the latest and greatest versions of the Accela solutions. He stated, “Thirdly, and maybe most importantly, is dealing with upgrades and patching. In my opinion, there is no better group to deal with those nuances than the software vendor themselves.” This ensured the agency could take full advantage of the features and functionality available to them without having to maintain and support the system.

Other benefits came to light as the agency moved closer to the cloud. When talking security, Tony Hernandez, Software Developer at Weston mentioned, “By moving to Microsoft Azure there were fewer concerns with taking payments.”

Weston also felt adding additional data insights to their current reporting would also be beneficial. By leveraging Microsoft Power BI, the agency now has a great summary analysis tool in place to easily identify production levels and even see where a permit is throughout its lifecycle.

Microsoft dashboards provide a high-level view of permits that have been opened and viewed. Insight into plan reviews and review cycles have helped the building official filter out any anomalies. Its allowed staff to see and track the journey of any given permit. Plus, if anyone called in with an inquiry, agency staff could quickly identify any hold ups with complete transparency into processes.

When talking with Fernandes about utilizing Microsoft reporting he stated, “Offloading responsibility into one of the more mature clouds has helped us. And being a Microsoft shop, we are using Power BI and other Microsoft tools to connect to our information and dissect it.”

Now, with higher visibility into performance, solutions that required fewer resources to support and maintain, and better processes in place, the city was able to face anything.

## Touchless Technology in a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a major game changer. Fortunately, Weston was able to handle the challenge with ease. Fernandes recalled, “One thing we certainly learned with COVID is that we needed to be less dependent on physical things. In talking with some neighboring jurisdictions that deal with the physical nature of plan reviews and submitting documents, we heard they put bins outside that forced people to come and take their drawings and drop them off. Then somebody would physically come out and grab their plans.” Accela solutions removed that physical barrier by helping the city offer services online.

“The great news is that we were able to tell people – just keep doing what you’re doing. Permit runners’ architects and engineers dealing with multiple jurisdictions reported their experience with us was seamless.”

“Now what you’re going to see is big (SaaS) adoption moving forward and some of the old trepidations associated with cloud operations will be pushed aside as we have proven this model can operate in an efficient, effective, stable and secure manner with no loss to service delivery.”

With the vision to deliver constituents next level services, the city of Weston Florida has come to realize the power of ingenuity fueled by the right tools. Now, as a nationally top-ranked digital city, those that live and work within Weston can all experience the benefits offered by improved service delivery from the cloud – whether it be requesting a permit, working on zoning and rezoning, dealing with code enforcement issues, and more.



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Technology Services

## 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

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