Innovating on a Budget

How Technology Helps Small Governments Solve Big Problems

Somerton, Ariz., has traditionally depended on agricultural jobs, but the town is expanding its commercial service sector.

Innovation through modernization isn't just for large cities and counties. Small governments experience many of the same resource challenges and legal requirements, yet they're still expected to be responsive and efficient in spite of smaller budgets and fewer employees.

To improve their agility, forward-thinking leaders in Somerton, Ariz., and Archuleta County, Colo., are driving modernization of internal workflows and citizen-facing processes. By using cloud-hosted solutions to encourage economic growth, these small communities serve as models for their larger peers.

Small Governments, Big Problems

Small cities and rural areas have unique governing challenges. In the economic downturn, they experienced loss of state funding and revenue sources — yet service demands and infrastructure costs continue to increase. With limited housing choices, job opportunities and public transportation options, they remain low density and car-dependent.

Small planning and building departments are strapped by inadequate staffing and financial resources, and frequently impeded by opposition to change. As a result, unchecked development can be incompatible with historical areas and open space. Many small downtowns are in decline and struggle to retain their character and charm.

Creative application of innovative technology can help overcome some of these problems, as the planning and economic development leaders of Somerton and Archuleta County discovered.

Wanted: Opportunities to Thrive

Tucked into the southwestern-most corner of Arizona, the town of Somerton historically has depended on agricultural jobs in citrus and vegetable growing and processing. However, the town is expanding its commercial service sector with initiatives, including a downtown redevelopment plan that features incentives for businesses that relocate or upgrade existing facilities, a new light industrial-zoned business park and an annual business expo.

"There are many new opportunities for redevelopment," says Economic Development Director Hector Tapia. "Somerton has a lot of

Archuleta County, Colo., is a tourist destination with only 12,000 permanent residents.

PHOTO FROM ARCHULETA COUNTY

culture, history and uniqueness that we need to exploit."

Colorado's Archuleta County faces a different set of challenges. The county is a tourist destination with only 12,000 permanent residents. About 50 percent of its housing units are seasonal, with property owners from Texas, Arizona and the Denver metro area. And the planning and building departments are both one-person shops that share a permit technician.

"We need workflows, processes and tools for communication and sharing with out-of-town property owners," says John Shepard, Archuleta County's AICP planning manager. "We have to be as efficient as possible."

To develop thriving economies and be more business- and developer-friendly, Somerton and Archuleta County deployed Accela's cloud-based Land Management solution on the Accela Civic Platform. The solution offers tools to automate, simplify and accelerate critical land use and community development activities, including permitting, building safety, inspections and reviews, zoning, project planning and code enforcement.

A Faster, More Cost-Effective Path to Better Communities

Now that all of Somerton's inspection information resides in the Civic Platform's centralized database, the town's internal departments have access to all events, transactions and contact activities. "Right from the beginning of the process, we can be more efficient," says Tapia. "For example, because we interface with the county assessor, the parcel and owner data is automatically brought in when we create a new permit."

The new system eliminates employee errors in permit fee calculations as well. "When calculations are made by hand, mistakes are made," Tapia continues. "Now, we input the formulas into the Accela system and it automatically calculates the permit cost. It saves employee time and increases accuracy."

Archuleta County chose Accela's system over another solution that wouldn't have been a good fit for the district's small size. "As a small office, it was important to be able to integrate our processes into the new system without programming," says Shepard. "We have a limited IT staff and they're extremely busy."

"When you're a one-person office, flexibility is key. The flexibility of the cloud-based solution was a real plus," Shepard says. "With a limited IT budget, a locally hosted solution would have kicked us back another budget year. And Accela handles all the software upgrades and security issues."

Both Somerton and Archuleta County are working to open up external web access so that residents, businesses, architects, engineers and developers can access and track the progress of their permit applications and schedule building inspections.

"Out-of-town property owners and their developers can't always come down to the office and look over a set of plans," says Shepard. "It has to be easy for people from outside the community to access the information they need."

Leveraging the Cloud for the Win

With the Accela Civic Platform, Somerton and Archuleta County leveraged automation and the cloud to attain the same levels of service and agility once reserved for larger governments with bigger budgets. At the same time, they can support economic growth and development initiatives that allow them to overcome the challenges of governing on a shoestring.

"Smaller communities can benefit from driving innovation through the planning, building and economic development departments," says Tapia. "We can all create better communities when we work more efficiently, choose solutions that save money and are more transparent to our constituents."