

Permits Plus and Accela Upgrade

In 1992, Washington County implemented Permits Plus for land management. Permits Plus has been a reliable system that met the County's original requirements with respect to the tracking and reporting of permitting processes. It is currently used by several departments, including Plan Review & Permitting, Planning and Zoning, Engineering & Construction, Public Works, Water Quality, and the County Attorney's office. Over the past decade, permit tracking and land management processes at the County have changed as policies and procedures change, staffing levels fluctuate, and technology advances. Prior to the installation of this automated system, all permitting processing were completed manually by hand. This manual system was very inefficient, therefore requiring the County to implement Permits Plus to increase efficiency and provide a greater level of customer service.

In 2004, Accela Wireless was installed for our field personnel to operate on a daily basis from the field in real time. Prior to this implementation there were many inconsistencies such as:

- Inspections inconsistent
- Documentation incomplete
- Duplication of work
- Excessive clerical work

The benefits of the new automated system included:

- Increasing efficiency
- Minimizes inspection time
- Increases inspection quality
- Enables more inspections to be completed on a daily basis
- Provides quicker inspection results
- Allows flexibility of schedules
- Allows permit processing in the field
- Provides greater service to customers
- Eliminates filing and clerical responsibilities
- Eliminates excessive phone calls and extra trips
- Enables quick administrative decisions
- Boosts employee morale

By providing these services, contractors, homeowners and developers were enabled to begin moving forward with the next phase of their construction as soon as the inspection had passed without even having to visit the site personally. This allowed the projects to be completed in a more efficient manner, therefore saving our customers time and ultimately money.

In 2006 Citizen Access (on-line permitting and inspection scheduling module) was implemented. This software enabled our customers to complete the following services twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week:

- Follow the review process of their building permit submittal and permit issuance

- Follow the status of their inspections
- Search and review permit history
- Schedule/Reschedule/Cancel inspections and check inspection results
- Check the status of Plan Reviews and Outside Agency Reviews
- Research payment history
- Search and review parcel information (property owner information)
- Track permits associated with Contractor licenses
- Apply and pay for trade permits on-line (plumbing, mechanical and electrical)

In January of 2012, the Permits Plus System was made an enterprise software system for the County. After pushing the current software to the maximum, it became evident that the software must be upgraded to a web-based platform. Unfortunately, the legacy platform of Permits Plus does not allowed the County to keep up with the changing times. Therefore, the formulation of an end users group or task team whose primary responsibility and focus is to collectively manage system resources, operations, and plan for future enhancements and upgrades was devised. Each of the members appointed represents a stakeholder for a division/department that utilizes the Accela platform resources and therefore has an equal stake, interest and responsibility in using and managing its system resources.

Over the past year and one half, the Task Force Team researched many software companies only to find that upgrading Permits Plus to Accela's latest solution, Accela Automation, was the best option in moving the software to the next level. Accela Automation will provide the County with the functionality provided by Permits Plus while allowing the County to take advantage of new industry-proven features and technology, successfully addressing constituent needs and expectations, and expediting internal process improvements.

The following objectives represent some of the anticipated benefits and efficiencies to be realized as part of this migration/upgrade effort:

1. Seamless integration with the County's Geographic Information System (GIS) to provide a geographic starting point and view of all land-use, zoning, and infrastructure information associated with a parcel, permit, inspection or plan
2. Mobile inspections with off-line and auto-synch capabilities allowing for work to be completed even when there is no network access, including in remote areas and during disasters
3. Enhanced cross-departmental workflow authoring capabilities
4. Expanded capabilities for applying and paying for permits and scheduling inspections through automated IVR (telephone) integration (Selectron)
5. Automatic display of jobs closest to a field user's current location, helping to reduce unnecessary travel time
6. Streamlined, real-time interaction between office and field staff, the public, businesses, and other key stakeholders

7. Improved access to information and reporting at all levels of the organization, by making permits and other records available across departments, from a single central location
8. Improved customer support for our citizens due to streamlined processes and self-service tools (Citizen web, mobile, and IVR features)
9. Automated processes to verify that fees are collected for all permits on a parcel or project before finalizing or sign-off; thereby minimizing the risk of not collecting certain fees as sometimes happens today
10. Provides field-based staff with the access to the same data, case histories, and maps as back-office staff – eliminating the need for multiple office visits for data lookup, entry, or calls in to staff
11. Allows builders, contractors and developers a simpler way to apply and pay for all of their needed permits via a single online shopping cart from home or office, and access to their permits and applications from a smart phone, if desired
12. New global search capability, allows users to execute wildcard and keyword searches to more easily locate information
13. Provides field staff with the ability to take a photo, or access an existing image, in the field; then make annotations or comments on the image and upload it wirelessly to the main database or County's Laser fiche electronic document management system
14. Web-based interface running from a central web server, rather than a thick Windows client on individual PC's
15. Compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and supports the use of assistive technologies, enabling public users with sight impairments to benefit from 24/7 access.

A CIP project has been created for the Accela platform's upgrade/replacement with funding having started in FY 2014. The kick-off meeting was held on August 18th, 2014 and the upgrade/implementation is underway with a projected go-live date in the early Spring of 2016.

The implementation of Accela Automation will make it easier to do government business. Customers will be able to effectively participate in and manage key civic functions, when, where and how they want. Hundreds of steps involved with the construction process can be streamlined and, you have the flexibility to define and manage the sequence of tasks to accelerate the workflow process. The solution saves time, increases productivity and connects government agencies to the businesses, professionals and citizens they serve.

Washington County is excited to be moving forward with the implementation of Accela Automation knowing it will provide even greater services than ever before, enabling a higher level of customer service for its customers. A community where key information is readily available at the stroke of a keyboard is a community where businesses can flourish with success.