

Shrinking Permit Turnaround Times

Advantages to Modernizing Permitting Processes

Permitting for a Safer Community

When it comes to permitting, safety is the number one priority. By enforcing construction codes and standards specific to a geographic region, states, cities, towns, and counties protect their citizens from avoidable hazardous situations. Building codes give communities the best chance at defending themselves against structural failures and lower the risk of damage caused by the elements.

Take Japan's Horyu-Ji Temple Pagoda for example. As one of the world's oldest wooden structures, the pagoda has survived for 1,300 years and has stood through 46 earthquakes measuring 7.0 or greater. How, you might ask? After years of experimentation, Japanese builders learned how to adapt structures to Japan's seismic instability and high average annual rainfall by utilizing heavy eaves, disconnected floors, and a shock-absorbing center pillar.¹ Today, building departments utilize the same mentality, seeking ways to ensure and enforce codes for the structural stability of structures within their jurisdiction.

Though safety may be high on the priority list for building departments, facilitating the development of these "safe communities" is challenging. Often agencies hinder the growth of cities, towns, or municipalities with their inability to process permits quickly and efficiently.

Manual Processes Choking Productivity

The building permit function is a mandatory phase in most types of construction and demand can be extremely high at times, such as when destructive natural events occur. If high winds sweep through a community, roofing permit requests soar. Without automation, the process of receiving, reviewing and approving applications is often paper-based and manual across all the permitting steps. Let's take a closer look at what these manual steps might look like within the permitting process:

The manual permitting process:

1. A builder drives to the appropriate agency office and fills out a paper application form for the permit.
2. Permit fees are calculated by size of structure, cost of project and other factors. They are paid at the time of application in the agency office, usually with a paper check requiring handling.
3. The application sits in a queue before being reviewed. A paper file may be created for processing the permit.
4. An agency employee reviews the application for completeness and sends a letter or calls the builder if more information is needed. The builder must return to the office to provide the requested information.
5. Once complete, an agency employee routes the paper file for review depending on permit type. The review process may take anywhere from one to 30 days depending on the number of applications in the queue. This makes it difficult for builders to plan and resource the remainder of their project.
6. The reviewer manually pulls confirmation of plan approval, any conditional plan approval requirements, and any relevant zoning and code information for the type of work and jurisdiction. This is attached to the building permit file.
7. An inspection appointment is requested by the applicant. This often requires a phone call to an agency employee or IVR system. Inspectors review appointment requests and typically meet with their team to schedule their routes that night or the next morning for inspections that day.
8. The inspector meets the builder on-site and inspects the work. The inspector brings the paper file to the site for reference.

9. If additional information is needed in the field, the inspector must go back to the office to pick up more files or paperwork.
10. If revisions are requested, the process starts over for an additional inspection.
11. Once approved, the inspector provides the completed form to administrative staff who keys the permit information into the agency system. If paper files are used, they are stored in filing cabinets.
12. The builder now has the necessary permits and can move to the next stage of construction and possibly a new set of permits, starting this process over again.
13. After construction, the request for a Certificate of Occupancy and the payment of fees is often conducted in the agency office and handled manually.
14. The builder must visit the office to pick up the certificate and agency employees must attach the certificate and permits to the parcel record.

The processes and tasks described above cause extensive challenges for builders and agencies alike. These include:

- › Permit issuance times of up to six weeks or more for larger projects, making it next to impossible for builders to avoid unknown periods of downtime while waiting for permits and inspections. Manual processes also make it difficult to scale services when requests escalate from natural disasters or other factors.
- › Lack of transparency into the permit process and status, as length of time is determined by backlog and demand, and is hard for builders and back-office staff to gain clarity into the statuses of a permit.
- › Permit fees are often high for projects due to fee structures and number of permits needed. For residential construction, the national average for a single permit is \$1,221 and it can be as high as \$7,500 depending on location.²
- › The process is so onerous that there are “permit services and expeditors”, which are businesses that are paid just to manage the process of getting permits processed and expedited for contractors or homeowners. These groups that stand to lose with agency automation present roadblocks on the path to modernization.

Some agencies have started down the path of automation using first generation or point products to be more productive. However, agencies that want to encourage development and growth know the permitting process must be automated and seamless to make it easier and less costly for citizens. Automated processes save citizens time and money and also help agencies increase revenue and citizen satisfaction. The more permits issued through a building department, the more revenue is generated and the friendlier a community is for doing business.

The Accela Solution

The Accela Building Civic Application is a cloud-based software solution that automates the building application, permitting and inspection process. The solution moves all functions online, removing paper, manual steps and errors, dramatically cutting the time and cost of permit processing so agencies can more easily facilitate growth in their communities.

Permit Applications

Accela Building saves time for citizens by moving traditional counter services online. Instead of having to drive to the agency office and stand in line, builders may perform all permit application steps from within a specialized web-based portal including uploading documents relevant to the application and plan approvals for the permit. Builders have access to the portal from any location on any device. Builders are also empowered to pay fees with credit cards and ACH transfers, including the ability to set up and maintain funded trust accounts for those building companies who process numerous transactions with multiple project leads. An online experience for permit applications saves significant time for both applicants and agency employees.

Permit Processing

Agency employees use Accela Building to review and route applications to appropriate individuals. All documents and plans stay with the electronic case file, and automatic routing and workflow means tasks reach the right people at the right time.

Integrations with other systems allow reviewers to easily access zoning and code information and quickly attach it to a permit file. GIS support provides a visual representation of location-based information.

To further speed the process, Accela delivers electronic document review, allowing multiple reviewers to share, mark-up and comment on documents, and approve plans simultaneously while managing versions from within the interface. The solution enables building departments to eliminate paper documents and plans, remove the risk of lost documents or files, decrease errors in data entry and deliver performance reports to management and administrators. Accela Building drastically reduces the time to review tasks from days or weeks, to hours or even minutes, giving staff the ability to process more permit applications faster without having to increase staffing levels.

“Accela reduced turnaround times for residential permits from three weeks to three days, and for commercial permits from two months to five to ten days.”

– City of McAllen, TX

For applicants using the Accela Building portal, they now have 24/7 access to plan review comments, inspection history, land data and interactive GIS maps. Now builders have a clear vision into the status of their permits.

Inspections

Accela Building makes it easy for inspectors to perform onsite inspections from their mobile devices, allowing them to stay 100% in the field, saving time and effort, reducing errors and allowing them to perform more inspections in their work day.

The system automates inspection assignments based on geographic region and inspector discipline. The scheduling and routing capability allows team leads to assign, schedule and route inspections to optimize scheduling for the team, or setup automatic scheduling based on workload, geography or inspection type. Managers can also schedule inspections, manage inspectors and inspector schedules, and view data remotely.

An important part of Accela Building is the data provided to inspectors in the field. All relevant data, including permit history, plan data, conditional approvals, and other relevant data are available on the inspector's mobile device. If they realize they need new data when they hit a site, Accela Building gives them access to real-time information from the agency database when they are in the field. They can both view and update information, leading to fewer trips to the office and faster approvals.

The system allows inspectors to record data from the field during the inspection, including adding notes and photographs, or attaching other data, rather than waiting until they return to the office. This means higher productivity and faster turnaround times.

Inspectors may email inspection reports directly to the customer, or print them in the field, which dramatically increases the speed in getting results to builders.

Finally, inspectors can work in areas that may not have connectivity. Accela Building has features to allow them to work offline, creating cases, capturing information, and accessing the reference information they need on their mobile device. When they are back online, the system synchronizes their information automatically as they transition to their next inspection.

Accela Building Features

Accela Building brings together several Accela technologies into an integrated solution for the permitting process. Features include:

- › **Permit processing in the cloud** – The system is hosted in the cloud, so agencies don't have to worry about setting up a hardware and software infrastructure, or load and maintain application software. Accela manages the entire system for agency customers.
- › **Workflow management** – Accela Building automates the tasks and functions needed for permit processing. This system can assign tasks, track reviews, associate documents and information to tasks, and keep processes running smoothly and on time.
- › **Accela Citizen Access portal** – Accela's citizen portal ensures builders can easily submit permit applications, make payments, check status, schedule inspections, upload information, and gain a better sense of the permitting process and status of their applications.
- › **Accela Mobile** – Allows inspectors and code enforcement officers to carry their "offices" with them. It provides all the functionality they need on their mobile tablet computers to manage their schedules, route their travel, view GIS data, download needed information from agency systems, complete inspection reports, upload data captured in the field, and submit inspection reports electronically.
- › **Online Payment Processing** – Access payment options for credit cards, ACH, and trust accounts to increase convenience for citizens and remove the manual payment processing work from agency employees.
- › **Electronic Document Review** – Removes the need for paper in the permitting process. Agency employees can upload digital documents, comment on and markup documents, ensuring they always have the unstructured information needed to complete their inspections and process permits.
- › **Integration to GIS** – GIS capabilities produce interactive maps and visualizations, making planning and permitting data easier to understand.
- › **Online reporting** – Accela provides management insight into the metrics and data about the broader permitting function. This helps managers measure, track and analyze permitting processes to uncover opportunity to improve employee speed and effectiveness.
- › **A modern and intuitive user interface** – HTML5 and responsive design provide a seamless experience for both agency staff and citizens on their desktop and mobile devices.
- › **Platform-wide APIs, SDKs and open data** – Allows developers to integrate data and processes across complementary solutions to meet the unique needs of an agency.

Accela Building Benefits

- › Improves developer productivity – Getting permits faster and with less effort means builders can build more and save time and money in the process. They can schedule jobs more effectively and do a better job of keeping development projects on schedule and on budget.
- › Increases agency productivity – Accela Building increases inspector effectiveness and speed, and capacity to do more with less. In-office agency personal can handle more requests and process more permit reviews in a shorter amount of time.
- › Provides better management of public funds – The solution decreases phone calls, foot traffic, and paper handling and storage. Agencies become “greener” and reduce the public funds needed to process permits.
- › Generates more revenue – Processing more permit applications in a shorter amount of time increases the fee revenues coming into the agency.

The City of Cleveland, for example, has seen a 70% increase in demolition contracts awarded to them monthly by automating the permitting process using Accela Building.

- › Improves citizen satisfaction – Accela Building makes it easier for builders to do business with the government, which improves their satisfaction and promotes the growth of communities.

As building departments work to modernize the way they connect with citizens through the building process, both agencies and the people they serve benefit. Eliminating manual activities helps agencies issue more permits faster, generating greater revenues, while helping their communities grow safely. Builders and citizens profit as well, with shorter wait times, 24/7 application access, and greater visibility into the status of their permits, allowing builders to hit project deadlines.

Learn more and schedule a demo for your agency today at

www.accela.com/building-next-step

References

¹ <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/1997/12/18/why-pagodas-dont-fall-down>

² <https://www.homeadvisor.com/cost/architects-and-engineers/get-a-building-permit/>