

LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Award Project Evaluation

Project ID	GG-6
Title of Program	Permitting Application, Review and Approval Program
Program Category	General Government
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Implementation Date	10/26/2015
FLSA Designation	Exempt
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Description of Productivity Improvement

Brunswick County's building department went paperless last year by replacing paper building permit applications with electronic forms that are available online. This use of technology significantly improved the permit application and review experience for both applicants and government employees without hiring additional staff.

The electronic building permit applications allow the building department to digitally capture information and eliminate the chance of lost or missing information. Along with saving paper and paper-related costs, the department was also able to automate the building permit review and approval process using Laserfiche electronic content management (ECM), a software that the department has had since 2006. Using feedback from contractors and the many departments that are involved with building permit review and approval—including planning, permitting, fire, environmental health, storm water, engineering, utilities and code inspection—the Management Information Systems Department built a workflow that automatically routes building permit applications to the correct personnel for review. The automation takes the burden of routing documents off of employees, enables multiple departments to review permits simultaneously—expediting reviews—and automatically sends email notifications to the applicant to inform them of how far along the permit is in the process.

When applicants are ready for the building department to inspect the item covered by the permit, they complete another electronic form online to schedule an inspection. This electronic form is automatically populated when the applicant enters the project and permit number, eliminating incorrect data entry. This data is also pushed to a geographic information system (GIS) for use by inspectors out in the field.

Inspectors out in the field use iPads to view maps that contain information about all the buildings they are scheduled to inspect. They can approve or deny inspections real-time through the iPad, a more efficient alternative to the former process that required inspectors to drive back to the central office to submit paper documents and addition data input.

Upon submitting inspections results, an automated electronic notification is sent to the applicant regarding the results and when applicable, an automated electronic notification is sent to the appropriate utility company for electrical connectivity.

Description of why this project was initiated

In 2015, Brunswick County was rated the fastest growing county in North Carolina and the 30th fastest growing county in the United States. Due to this growth, the county has examined operations to improve efficiency and maintain a high level of service without added cost to the people of Brunswick County.

With population and industry growth comes an influx of new building projects, highlighting the need for efficiency in the building permit application review and approval process. About 80 percent of Brunswick County’s building permit applicants are regular contractors who are familiar with the process—the building department needed to expedite these reviews in order to assist the growing number of first-time applicants who may need more guidance in submitting their applications.

Permitting clerks previously spent hours scheduling inspections over the phone, which presented another opportunity for improvement via online electronic forms. And field inspections—that formerly required inspectors to drive back to the county’s central offices to submit paper forms in order to approve or deny inspections—were another area that could benefit from the use of new technology in the form of GIS and ECM.

Quantifiable results (sustainability, cost savings, cost avoidance and/or a higher level of service).

Indication of what resources were used and what was done with any accrued time savings

Prior to this initiative, it could take up to six months for building plans to be reviewed. Since going live with the new process in October 2015, the building department has processed more than 1188 full building permit applications and 1356 change out/trade applications. Beyond processing a greater number of applications, employees are able to spend more time assisting first-time applicants who are unfamiliar with the process.

Inspection scheduling, which is now completed online rather than over the phone, has relieved permitting clerks from hours of answering calls and enabled them to process more than 16,133 inspection requests since the new system has been put into place.

The increased efficiency has also been achieved without hiring additional staff, leveraging existing technology resources.

By leveraging a software that was already utilized by the county and developing a solution in-house that facilitates the total building permit process from planning, applications, inspections scheduling, mobile inspections results, inspection notifications, Certificate of Occupancy, and utilities power turn-on notifications; the county did not incur the cost of a vendor supplied solution that cost thousands of dollars. Future updates will also be performed in-house that will negate further future cost.

Other descriptive information

For a detailed technical description of the reengineered building permit application process with screen shots, please refer to the Laserfiche Solution Exchange article, "How Brunswick County Went Paperless in the Building Department" (<https://www.laserfiche.com/solutionexchange/how-brunswick-county-went-paperless-in-the-building-department/>).

Michael Read, Brunswick County Deputy MIS Director, and Coby Walker, Programmer at Brunswick County, also hosted an educational webinar to help other organizations that may be interested in a similar solution. This webinar, "Paperless Permitting and Building Inspections in Brunswick County, NC," can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1AKPOq5OG8>. To view the article or the webinar, please copy and paste the links into your browser.