

HOW TO MAXIMIZE THE USE OF
TECHNOLOGY TO

Create the Ultimate Community Development Citizen Experience



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State and local governments are recognizing the critical importance of the customer experience (CX) in community development services and are devoting resources to improve it.

While the public sector has long aimed to enhance customer satisfaction by delivering consumer-like experiences, public agencies are resource-challenged, so they have been slower to prioritize this area.

Yet leveraging technology, like land use platforms and electronic plan review, to improve citizen services pays dividends across an agency, from increased efficiency to better visibility, and supporting communities in meeting their long-term goals.

Accela and Avolve Software spoke with local jurisdictions and industry experts to investigate the critical role of technology in supporting better citizen experiences for planning and permitting services.

Citizens bring expectations for CX to the public sector

Governments undertake a vast array of tasks, yet citizens often gauge their satisfaction based on personal encounters with jurisdictions, particularly when issues arise. They're likely to dwell more on waiting in line at the DMV or navigating the labyrinth of building permit approvals than to take stock of their well-maintained roads or seamless waste disposal.

Complicating the landscape is the historical friction between citizens and governments that stems from perceived ambiguity and a lack of transparency.

For so long, the rules for permitting, planning, and the building processes seemed to be almost ambiguous or hidden from view. "The interesting thing is that the information was not hidden, it just wasn't easily accessible," says Christine Brakefield, CBO, Solution Consultant Manager for Avolve Software.

Moreover, as individuals encounter seamless digital experiences in other aspects of their lives — whether it's ordering groceries, streaming movies, or completing onboarding processes at work — they inevitably transfer those expectations to interactions with local governments, including civic applications.

"Agencies have realized that if they don't keep up with the consumer expectations created by online experiences, they're going to exacerbate citizen frustration for the services that they provide — services that often have expensive consequences," says Brian Wick, VP of Product Marketing at Accela.

Jurisdictions big and small have recognized that what benefits citizens ultimately benefits the community.

"Any way that we can make the permitting process easier for not only the contractors and the designers, but for the everyday citizen within the county, is going to benefit us as a community."

Kemper Elder, CBO, Chief of Residential Plan Review, Chesterfield County, VA.

Leveraging technology, for example, in the permitting and plan review process, allows local agencies to deliver on citizen expectations for smooth, always-on, digital services while streamlining the permitting and plan review process to drive efficiency and better meet community goals.

How citizens benefit from streamlined, consumer-focused processes

Digitalizing the permitting and ePlan review process significantly improves the citizen experience in a myriad of ways.

Transparency

Jurisdictions interviewed noted that among the most common applicant questions relate to the permit processing timelines. "I think the biggest question we get from applicants is 'where are we in the process?'" says Rita Anderson, Plan Review Manager at Memphis and Shelby County.

Lacking readily available information, citizens often contact jurisdictions seeking clarity as they coordinate the multiple stakeholders involved in the building process. However, a digitized permitting and ePlan review process provides citizens with continuous transparency, enabling them to understand the status of their permit in the review process at any given time.

"The digital aspect of Accela and Avolve means that the status of the application, where it is in the workflow, all of that can be found online," says Wick.

Continuity of business

Without a digital submittal option for planning proposals and permit applications, citizens are confined to the operating hours of land management government offices, needing to spend significant time away from their jobs.

“Just a few years ago, it was perfectly OK to require a developer organization, a homeowner, or contractor to go into an office with copies of their plans. That’s no longer the case,” Wick says.

In addition to the ways technology has shaped the expectation for always-on services, natural disasters and health crises in recent years has limited the ability to access offices or created a sudden increase in the demand for support. This has only further highlighted the need for digital options for submittal and plan review and approval.

Communities that have made technological investments in land use development and electronic plan review avoid business interruptions by enabling continuity of operations.

“Despite challenges from the environment, we’ve been able to meet our division goal, ‘Continuity of Business,’ because we have these smart tools, like electronic permitting and plan review, that allow us to work from anywhere and still be connected to our customer base,” says Nidia Logan-Robinson, Deputy Director, Division of Planning and Development, Memphis and Shelby County.

Greater efficiency across all processes

Replacing paper-based processes or a fragmented mix of digital and manual solutions with a seamlessly integrated permitting and plan review system offers significant efficiency benefits.

Platforms such as Avolve and Accela collaborate through integrated workflows, ensuring that all data generated to create an approved plan set is shared within the tools.

“It’s all in one place versus having different repositories for data, one being the permit record of the process and then the plan review,” says Wick. “These are all very significant aspects of improving efficiency, shortening time, and creating transparency.”

“Innovation brings efficiency, and any time you make a system better and more efficient, that translates to cost savings and the potential for more revenue.”

Benjamin Dunn, MPA, CPM, Building Division Director of Polk County, FL.

Technology also improves agency efficiency, which indirectly affects CX, having a powerful impact on the overall experience. “It has reduced internal confusion, which ultimately is a benefit for the customer.”

Nidia Logan-Robinson, Deputy Director, Division of Planning and Development, Memphis and Shelby County.

Technology confers jurisdictional benefits, too

Encourages long-term investment

A consumer-like experience to streamline and simplify the permitting and plan review process can help local agencies win external investment.

“Developers expect that agencies are going to be using smart technology. They expect to have a similar experience in Memphis and Shelby County, as they do in Atlanta, or Houston, or New York,” says Logan-Robinson.

“How easy it is to build in a specific jurisdiction can be a meaningful differentiator when organizations are considering where they want to invest,” adds Brakefield.

This, in turn, aids agencies in meeting long-term development goals and generating additional revenue through permitting fees, on top of the added economic benefits of said development.

Improved compliance

With easier-to-use processes and systems, agencies experience improved compliance with various regulations. “Citizens are going to be more willing to apply for a permit instead of going about it the wrong way and to try to build it without a permit, then perhaps run into issues down the road,” says Elder.

In addition to simplifying the process, technology can help educate citizens, leading to better adherence to regulations.

“I think the digital plans have also brought more awareness to regulations,” says Aaron Bowman, Building Official and Systems Applications Manager, Missoula, MT. When Missoula went digital, they stopped manually red-lining plans and rather sent the plans back to individuals to correct.

“We quit re-designing the plans for the public and began to kick plans back to the draftsman. Then, instead of submitting the same issue again and again, applicants began to learn the correct process,” he adds.

Technology success hinges on integration

When it comes to improving CX, partnered technology aids a seamless experience by providing critical functions and streamlining the process for the applicant and jurisdictional staff.

Yet, for these technologies to be useful, it's essential they are seamlessly integrated.

"If you have systems that don't work together, then you have manual steps, and that's where the potential for inefficiency and errors comes in."

Brian Wick, VP of Product Marketing at Accela.

For Memphis and Shelby County, improving the citizen experience was the primary goal behind their digital transformation. "The customer is the focal point of everything that we're doing, and all of the investments that we've made," says Logan-Robinson.

When it came time to select permitting and electronic plan review tools, integration drove their buying decision. "The reason we chose Avolve as our ePlan review vendor is because of the seamless integration with Accela," Logan-Robinson says. "We wanted customers to feel like it was one experience; like they were using the same site, the same tool solution," she adds.

Bolstering the citizen experience with technology

Local governments are increasingly prioritizing the citizen experience, dedicating resources to meet the digital expectations of today. Leveraging technology improves efficiency and transparency and aligns with citizens' evolving expectations for seamless, digital services.

By embracing integrated solutions for permitting and plan review and prioritizing citizen-centric approaches, jurisdictions can maximize the benefits of technology to meet community development needs, today and tomorrow.

How to leverage technology to support CX

1. Create a solid business case.

The City Council will need to understand how and why new technology will support CX both today and tomorrow. They'll want to know the immediate cost-benefits but also how this investment will support the jurisdiction in the future.

"It's important to think about the case for growth for your city, your county, for the next 20 years," says Logan-Robinson.

"Local agencies should strive to demonstrate how tools like this will help them be more attractive to developers of all sizes and diverse project types in 20 and 40 years because those are the kinds of tools that we need to have a thriving development ecosystem," she adds.

2. Remain open to digital process opportunities.

To realize the greatest benefit from a technology investment, jurisdictions must remain open to new processes. Rather than digitizing a paper process, agencies benefit from rethinking the process entirely.

"You should abandon your paper process and move into your digital process. If you don't, you're going to bring in a lot of bottlenecks and bad habits from your paper process and you," says Bowman.

3. Dedicate the appropriate resources.

New technology requires change management. To support new processes, jurisdictions need to dedicate resources beyond simply allocating funds to ensure success. "When you purchase technology, set time aside for your staff to be able to put in the effort so that it can be successful," says Brakefield.



Avolve Software

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