

**DISSOLVING BARRIERS & INCREASING TRANSPARENCY
IN DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES**

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Introduction

Need a building permit? Want to be environmentally sound and avoid printing multiple copies of your plans for submission? Want to know which city departments have reviewed your plans and what their comments are? Want to see the changes your architect made to address the city's comments on your building plans? Want to do it all from the comfort of your home office? Then you'd better be developing your project in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Salt Lake City is the only city in the world where development customers can submit their project plans online, pay for building permit(s), monitor the plan review process, instantly access review comments, see architects' changes to submitted plans, and be notified the instant a permit is issued all without using a single piece of paper or visiting a single city office. After taking the concept of an integrated review process to new levels by incorporating 10 different modules into a single accessible and transparent database, Salt Lake City has pushed e-development to new heights by fully integrating project review software with project tracking software. When people said it couldn't be done, Salt Lake City didn't listen.

The Challenge

Previously, submitting development plans prior to obtaining a building permit was a cumbersome, difficult process. Each of the reviewing entities (as many as 7, depending on the project size and scope) had to have its own hard copy of the plans. With offices scattered among three buildings around the city, simply applying for a development permit could easily absorb most of a workday. Waiting in line, filling out the necessary application, and submitting payment at each office took all the fun out of starting a new project – and finding out how the review was progressing was even worse. Phone calls and emails tracking a project's status ate up time that customers and staff could have used far more effectively.

In 2007, Salt Lake City decided enough was enough. After painstaking research on best practices and visits with other municipalities, City leadership committed \$1.98M in one-time funds and \$120K in annual maintenance to solving the problem. The city contracted with Accela™, the national leader in government development software, to connect all of the disparate reviewing entities with a single shared database that could be easily accessed by staff, elected officials, developers, and the public.

Other cities had utilized Accela Automation™ software to combine the review processes of three or four groups, but Salt Lake City challenged the company: incorporate modules for ten city entities. Blinking twice and swallowing hard, Accela accepted the challenge and jumped in. Devoting the city's Development Review Administrator to the project full time, Salt Lake City committed not only the funding but the staff resources to achieve the near-impossible. A scant year later the system went live. Suddenly every petition to the Planning Division, every building permit application, every development inspection, and every zoning enforcement case could be accessed with a few keystrokes and couple of mouse clicks.

Impacts

So how does it work? Every time a petition or plan is submitted to the city, the information is entered into the shared database where it is assigned a number and workflow. From that point on, a

project's progression can be tracked as individuals responsible for a portion of the review update the database as their work progresses. Now, Engineering comments are readily and simultaneously accessed by the Transportation Engineer and Plans Examiner in different locations, speeding the review process and eliminating time spent tracking down comments across departments.

Logging into the web interface allows applicants to verify the status of any project from initial land use petition through final building inspection. Data from permits and petitions dating back to 1979 have been integrated into the database, allowing review staff and property owners to readily access vital information without spending long hours at the records archive. Land use planners easily collaborate with colleagues in other disciplines to move projects forward. Building inspections can be scheduled online, and inspectors email results to the contractor before leaving the jobsite using wireless notebook computers. Zoning enforcement officers upload photographs and enter violation codes that trigger automated letters to property owners – all with the ease of a few mouse clicks.

Transparency took on a whole new meaning as barriers between development team members dissolved. Now when a subcontractor reports that the city's holding up an electrical permit, the project superintendent simply logs into the system – and discovers the application was submitted just that morning. Owners awaiting a demolition permit check to see when the architect submitted reuse plan changes in response to plan review comments. Land use planners see at a glance project comments from other divisions – and who's still working on them.

Going Farther

The system is a hit, and even long-time employees initially resistant have been converted to the benefits of the new technology. Front line customers, city staff, and interested citizens have access to the same information whenever and wherever they need it. Field inspectors provide real time results to their customers, minimizing delays and improving accuracy. And just when everyone got comfortable thinking the improbable had been accomplished, someone asked the question: Wouldn't it be great if we could manage project documents as well as we manage project data?

Enthused by the progress already made, the team pushed forward, identifying Avolve Software's ProjectDox™ as the next step to further success. ProjectDox creates a secure, online site for file sharing that enables change notification, threaded discussions, change history tracking, and markup collaboration. Heedless of the caution that "it hasn't ever been done," Salt Lake City worked with Accela and ProjectDox to develop a unique interface that incorporates the best of both programs. The staff time and fiscal resources devoted to the challenge proved well worth it.

Live since August 17, 2009, the integrated system is eye popping. Documents received or edited in ProjectDox tie neatly into Accela's project tracking. Comments made by the Plans Examiner are readily apparent to staff in Fire and Public Utilities, who also see others' comments, eliminating needless repetition and highlighting potential conflicts before multiple sets of plans are drawn. When the revised plans are submitted, there's no more time wasted combing through plan details to ensure unrequested changes didn't creep in. ProjectDox compares the new set of plans with the original submission, identifying and layering changes immediately (and making the \$300,000 price tag highly palatable).

The environmental benefits of the new system only add to the sweetness of success. With the availability of electronic plan submission, customers no longer come into the office lugging seven sets of rolled plans. In fact, customers don't have to *come* to the office at all. ProjectDox and Accela enable them to complete an application, submit the necessary paperwork, and pay all the fees online. Since plan review comments, plan re-submittals, permits, and inspection results all transmit over the airwaves, travel to city hall doesn't take up customers' valuable time. Impacts to fuel usage, air pollution, road wear, and traffic haven't been measured but if **ALL** permits that Salt Lake City issues in one year were done electronically, ProjectDox estimates that Salt Lake City and its customers will save approximately, 360,000 miles driven, 512,000 pounds of paper and prevent 2,300 pounds of hydrocarbons from being released into the atmosphere.

Conclusion

By listening to customers and refusing to believe it couldn't be done, Salt Lake City has set a new standard for project development, proving that capitalizing on technological advances, environmental awareness, and excellent customer service compliment rather than compete.

Innovation/Creativity

- Organizational improvements
 - Consistency
 - Transparency
 - Communication
 - Improved environmental sustainability
- Technologies used
 - Accela Automation™ software
 - Avolve Software ProjectDox™
 - Salt Lake City interface (co-developed by Accela and Avolve)

Citizen Outcomes

- Access to internal city processes
- Improved service and accountability
- 24/7 information access
- Cost savings with paperless plan submittal
- Immediate and electronic inspection results

Applicable Results & Real World Practicality

- Highly applicable to other jurisdictions

Presentation

- Live demonstration
- PowerPoint
- Handout materials