

## **Introduction**

Sunnyvale, California is one of the first cities in the U.S. to effectively use web-based technology to make City Hall available to its customers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Sunnyvale's innovative E-OneStop service lets residents and businesses use the Internet to access property information, apply for building permits, and schedule inspections through an easy-to-navigate website. There are other jurisdictions offering some version of electronic permits, but no city has developed an online service as comprehensive as Sunnyvale.

Fully implemented in September 2002, the E-OneStop allows customers to complete many activities from the comfort and convenience of their own home or office. Customers can use credit cards online to pay for permits and an electronic signature for authorization. Its convenience increases compliance with building codes for health and safety.

## **Program Description**

Do-it-yourself is popular in suburbia where hardware stores, magazines, and television shows about house makeovers entice homeowners to take repairs and improvements into their own hands. They may know nothing about plumbing, electrical, carpentry or construction in general, but they are enthusiastic and ready to give it a try. They also are likely to know little, if anything, about building codes, city regulations, and the permit process. The situation is exacerbated in communities with large immigrant populations like Sunnyvale, California, where 25% of the population was born outside the U.S.

No one knows how many home projects are done without permits or inspections.

Noncompliance is usually not discovered until the home is sold or there is a serious problem.

Homeowners list two reasons why they did not obtain a required permit: 1) "I didn't know I needed a permit to do this;" and/or 2) "It was too much of a hassle to go to City Hall."

Permits are not just bureaucratic paper – they are important tools for government to monitor the mechanical and structural soundness of buildings and protect the health and safety of the public.

Sunnyvale is effectively using web-based technology to make City Hall open 24/7 so that residents can conveniently obtain building permits. E-OneStop lets the public use the Internet to access property information, obtain routine building permits, and schedule inspections through an easy-to-navigate website. Customers can use credit cards to pay for permits and an electronic signature for authorization.

E-OneStop allows customers to complete many activities from home or office, including:

- **E-Permits:** online forms for 17 different permits from replacement of a water heater to kitchen remodels, plus requirement information
- **E-Inspection Scheduling:** customer-set appointments for building inspections
- **E-Plan Check Status and E-Plan Check Comments:** up-to-the-minute status of building plans submitted for review and comments from all departments/divisions reviewing the plans

- **E-Histories:** complete histories of all building permits and planning projects so that buyers can trace the “pedigree” of a property
- **E-Zoning:** information on zoning districts, flood zones, lot sizes and dwelling units.

Consider a homeowner who is replacing an old water heater. The new one will be the same size and placed in the same location, so it may not be obvious that a permit is needed. A quick check via the Internet will tell this homeowner that a permit is required and that several safety features must be in place such as a seismic strap for earthquake protection, 18-inch clearance above the floor if the gas heater is located in the garage (for fire prevention), and a pressure relief valve terminated outside of the house for emergencies. All of this information is on the E-OneStop website. A few keystrokes and clicks, and the homeowner has the proper permit.

Several jurisdictions offer limited versions of electronic permits, but no online program is as comprehensive as E-OneStop. Sunnyvale's system is transferable to all communities that want to better serve their publics.

### **Program Achievements**

The City of Sunnyvale E-One Stop has achieved significant results in three areas:

- 1) It increases public access to government and makes it more convenient for customers (residents, contractors, realtors, etc.) to track information on parcels and to obtain permits. Customers save time using the Internet to take care of their business, rather than making a

special trip to City Hall, which also reduce traffic and helps the environment. This makes it easier for the public to comply with city permit requirements.

2) It saves thousands of hours of city staff time, more than enough to equal one full-time employee position, a financial savings of over \$65,000 for salary and benefits. Staff is able to spend more time in delivering other services to the public because routine permits and requests for information are handled automatically via the Internet, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The following 12-month summary (fiscal year 03/04) documents the public's use of the E-OneStop service and the approximate staff time saved.

- E-permits: 605 (303 staff hours saved)
- E-Inspection Scheduling: 1,319 (329 staff hours saved)
- E-Plan Check Status: 492 (123 staff hours saved)
- E-Histories: 4,137 (1,034 staff hours saved)
- E-Zoning: 2,399 (600 staff hours saved)

The usage of the E-OneStop for the current fiscal year is projected to be even higher.

3) Sunnyvale's proprietary software is licensed to a private firm which sells, installs, and maintains the online software programs for other jurisdictions throughout the U.S. The City of Sunnyvale receives a percentage of sales to add to its General Fund, an entrepreneurial approach to supplementing tax dollars with a new source of revenue.