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Alameda County moving to an online permit system

By Bruce Mesnard, Vice President, Regional Sales and Business Development, MaintStar on April 25, 2017

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By putting permits online, Alameda County reduces constituent drive time, increases inspector efficiency

With citizens today going online for everything from ordering groceries to booking travel, government agencies are being pressured to follow suit.

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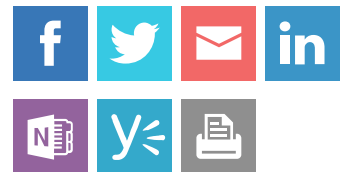
MAINTSTAR

The Alameda County Public Works Agency (PWA) is wholeheartedly embracing e-services and recently rolled out an online permitting system that's built on MaintStar software. MaintStar is a Microsoft CityNext partner that specializes in software solutions to help municipalities be more efficient and provide better citizen services.

PWA designs, builds, and maintains the roads, bridges, flood control systems, and other infrastructure in Alameda County, which sprawls along the east side of San Francisco Bay and is home to 1.5 million people.

The agency's permit system had always been paper-based and manual, requiring that builders and developers drive to the agency's Oakland office to complete and submit paperwork. Alameda County is huge; if you live at the outer edges, you have a 60-mile drive each way. So, if the county required changes to an application, even more driving ensued.

It was just as bad from the county's end. A small army of people processed permit paperwork and stored it in four different systems (corresponding to review, issuance, inspection, and archival phases). If office workers or field inspectors needed to consult that paperwork, they had a hard time laying their hands on it.

PWA issues 1,000-plus permits a year, so the inefficiencies were multiplied in a big way.

PWA brought us in to help solve the twin problems of poor citizen service and poor staff efficiency. PWA already used a couple of our solutions, the MaintStar Asset Management & Maintenance System and our Mobile Citizen Service Request System. It uses these to, respectively, digitally track all physical assets and give citizens an easy way to communicate with the county.

Using the MaintStar Permits and Inspections Module of our Community Development Management System, we helped PWA digitize the whole permit process. Our software uses Microsoft SQL Server as a database and runs on the Windows Server operating system. Microsoft software delivers maximum performance, scalability, and reliability. Plus, most of our customers, including PWA, are Microsoft shops, so our software interoperates well with what they already have.

Today, with PWA's new online permitting system, builders and

developers can complete their permit applications, request inspections, and review the status of their applications—all online.

If the county requires changes to a plan, inspectors digitally notate the plan and send it back to the developer. The developer can make the changes and resubmit it online. Over the course of a project, builders or developers save five to six trips into Hayward—that's about 10 to 12 hours of drive time. Valuing their time at around $100 an hour, that's a $1,100 average savings. Multiply that times 35 builders a month doing business with the county, and that's an annual savings of around $211,000 for private industry.

For the agency's part, it's able to offer modern, convenient online services to constituents. It's removed one full-time person from its paperwork army and reassigned them to the field, where they help with inspections.

And the field inspection process is far more efficient. Everything inspectors need is now available in digital form on mobile devices. Instead of driving into the office each morning to get a stack of inspection assignments, they receive their assignments digitally, complete with the daily driving route already mapped out. All the data they need, including past inspections, forms, and photos, are available digitally with a few taps on mobile screens. No more trips back to Hayward with associated delays.

Consequently, inspectors save one to two hours a day, which the county estimates adds up to a per-inspector savings of $187,500 annually. They use the extra time to do more thorough inspections or more inspections each day. And that's more efficient use of taxpayer money and a pretty good return on investment to Alameda County Public Works Agency.

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