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# Mount Vernon, WA Uses Operations & Community Development Technology to Work Remotely During COVID-19

**CLIENT**
City of Mount Vernon

**GEOGRAPHY**
Mount Vernon, Washington

**POPULATION**
35,000

**CHALLENGES**
The city's facility operations were being documented with spreadsheets, a server-based system and emails, leading to inefficiencies with workflow and a tedious work order process. Preventive maintenance was nonexistent and facility renewal plans occurred when systems became inoperable and in disrepair. Finally, the entire staff was in a reactive maintenance mode and couldn't deliver their desired level of customer service.

**RESULTS**
Mount Vernon's Facilities and Permitting teams now have enhanced record management, enhanced customer service and significantly improved performance metrics.

**GOVERNMENT**

Today, the City of Mount Vernon, Washington operates in a way its Facilities and Permitting teams could have only imagined a few years ago. They have embraced transformation and transitioned from a team just trying to address normal daily operations to one that can flourish during challenging times like the COVID-19 pandemic by operationalizing previously planned emergency operations that incorporate telecommuting, utilizing Skype for inspections, establishing a FTP site for permit tech document review and launching Zoom as a meeting protocol.

Before finding the right software to manage maintenance and community development operations, Mount Vernon had a number of very apparent issues. For starters, they had no central place to house information. When someone needed to retrieve something, it was a process of scanning emails, finding the right spreadsheet or tracking down someone who simply had corporate knowledge of the issue. There was no day-to-day work order process, no preventive maintenance plan, and no facility renewal plan. The team was stuck in survival mode.

"Building a facility renewal plan or capital replacement plan was a teamwork challenge. It was, 'Oh, we have a leak in the roof. Let's have someone go look at it.' Or, 'The roof that's 50 years old is bad. What are we going to do?' Each and every day provided its own unplanned challenges or discovery moments. It was like Forest Gump's box of chocolates: You never know what you're gonna get," says Chris Phillips, Development Services Director in charge of overseeing Planning, Building, Engineering, GIS and Facilities departments.

**Some of their biggest inefficiencies were around permitting.** The server-based system they inherited lacked much of the capability and reporting city staff required, so it didn't get used very much.

"We had spreadsheets on spreadsheets on spreadsheets distributed across three or four different servers and different departments in order to make things work," says Chris. "As a Lean Six Sigma practitioner, conducting value stream analysis of day-to-day activity to include all aspects of permit, reporting and payment processing were cumbersome and time-consuming. Efficiency and effectiveness did not exist. Customer service to the development community, other staff members and local residents was lacking."

## Finding the right software

They were in need of operations management software that would assist them to track work orders; institute preventive maintenance, energy and facility renewal programs; improve permitting workflow processes and accept permit applications electronically. Thankfully, they found what they needed with Dude Solutions' maintenance and community development products, but it wasn't without a culture shift.

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"We have a multi-generational workforce. Change at times brings on extreme cautiousness and wariness. Once the team understood the purchasing of the software did not equate to layoffs or termination, they embraced the technology and the interoperability with other cloud enhancing tools, like cell phones, tablets, laptops, smartboard, webinar training opportunities, etc. It was terrific to see the team react to challenges, with all members collaboratively problem-solving during implementation, beta testing, process improvement and customer interaction."

Since implementing facilities operations management software, Chris says the biggest benefit has been getting valuable time back. Once the staff realized the power of Dude Solutions, they began working proactively to address all aspects of facility maintenance, saving time and money.

A highlight was getting a solid facility renewal plan in place. Chris reports **they had $50,000 in their facility renewal budget when he first came on board, and within one year of building a facility plan, they were able to increase the budget to half a million dollars.** Those funds are now going toward roofing projects, as well as a major HVAC project for a local police campus.

Their facility renewal timeline has also been streamlined.

"When I first got here, city staff was submitting RFPs or RFQs for facility renewal projects in May or June, so by the time firms submitted bids and they were approved, we had missed our good weather window for work being completed. Now city staff conducts this process in December after the budget has been approved by City Council. That way, by January, they can select construction firms to complete projects and maximize the good weather window."

As for the community development side of operations, Chris says the change in the way the permitting team is able to perform is night and day now that they have SmartGov™ fully integrated.

Speaking on what has changed, he lists, "Enhanced record management, permit metrics, time to complete, customer/applicant permit transparency. Also, electronic bill pay. **In six months, over 90% of all financial transactions occur online.** Inspections are completed more efficiently and effectively, because inspectors have mobile offices in each city vehicle, plus a cell phone or tablet to conduct inspections. And customers get immediate updates on all permit processes, if they desire. Same with code enforcement cases. It is very easy for me as the supervisor to review what my staff has completed, and the notes functionality allows for immediate response to the City Council, mayor or applicants. And on the electronic bill paying piece, we went from a few thousands of dollars a month to hundreds of thousands of dollars a month."

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**CLIENT SUCCESS STORY**
Mount Vernon, Washington

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## Streamlining processes & improving communication

Chris says the software has not only improved workflow but also communication with customers, and largely due to mobile capabilities that allow work to be performed anywhere. Now, a team member can pull up SmartGov on a mobile device, see what work is needed, complete it remotely and communicate results quickly.

"Customers get immediate information/feedback as city staff complete each portion of the permit process. These automatic updates provide a level of transparency that customers have not experienced before. Feedback has been very positive and both customers and staff are more efficient and effective at completing tasks which saves time and money," Chris says.

**Having all information in a centralized location has also improved communication and documentation internally.**

"Once we instituted SmartGov, I was no longer having to complete the very time-consuming 'permit forensics' when addressing a customer complaint, 'Developer says this. City staff says that.' Coordinating with IT to review all email correspondence and phone records. To say that this was painful is an understatement. SmartGov has it all in there. I can see every general note and notes with documents attached, including emails and letters between the customer and the city. Date and time stamps. It captures all of that."

## Serving a community during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Governor of Washington instituted a "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" initiative that basically encouraged a shelter-in-place order. Mount Vernon's team had discussed and demonstrated a concept of operations months ago. In less than 24 hours, they transitioned to a work-from-home concept that allowed them to remotely serve their community without missing a beat.

"The inspection module has worked out terrific. We went from having to be physically onsite, to within one day, staff developed a game plan of how to complete Skype inspections. We were able to troubleshoot and beta test, and now we've been completing virtual inspections for over a month, and it's been working out seamlessly," says Chris.

"Our staff developed a contingency plan months ago to support homeowners who experience an emergent plumbing, sewer, stormwater or hot water heater issue. All of these permits can be done on the SmartGov portal, but they require an inspection. While other municipalities initially closed up shop or significantly reduced their ability to process requests, Mount Vernon was generally business as usual. We had a plan for a telecommute virtual office months ago, staff has ensured that the customer experience is the same and they are seamlessly making it happen.

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Everyone on the team is 100% on board. Bottom line, customers are pleased with the transparency and efficiency."

Before and during the pandemic, the city has been committed to helping other municipalities around them find successful processes. "We have partnered with other municipalities in our county and adjoining counties. Most recently, we had Island County staff members on site and spent two to three hours exchanging best business practices. One of the main topics discussed was customer service, our ability to manipulate the software to meet customer needs and the necessity for continued staff training. Our staff trains every week for two to three hours where supervisors emphasize workflows and continuous process improvement which equates to employee efficiency/effectiveness/time saving, which equals customer satisfaction."

**Hear more from Chris Phillips about how to use technology to maintain operations through situations like COVID-19 on our** *Technology to Unlock COVID-19 Efficiency* **podcast episode.**