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Client Success Story

Mount Vernon 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 operations were being documented across spreadsheets, a server-based system and emails, leading to inefficiencies with workflow and a more tedious process than necessary. They had little to no preventive maintenance or facility renewal plans, were working reactively and couldn't provide the level of service they knew customers deserved.

Results

Mount Vernon's Facilities and Permitting teams now have enhanced record management, improved customer service, significantly improved performance metrics, and the ability to work collaboratively even while working remotely through COVID-19 Medical Emergency.

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Today, the city of Mount Vernon, Washington operates in a way its Facilities and Permitting teams could have only imagined a few years ago. Their story is an inspiring one for municipalities struggling with inefficiencies, proving you can transform from a team just trying to keep the day-to-day plates spinning to one that's swimming instead of sinking during a global pandemic.

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 did not exist. 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?' So, everything was unplanned. You just dealt with it as it came," 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. They had been using a server-based system, but because it lacked so much of the capability and reporting they needed, it didn't get used very much.

"We had spreadsheets on spreadsheets on spreadsheets spread 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 processing, reporting and payment were cumbersome and time consuming. Efficiency and effectiveness did not exist. Customer service to the development or local residents were lacking."

Finding the right software

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

"We have a multi-generational work force. 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, customer interaction and satisfaction."

Since implementing facilities operations management software, Chris says the biggest benefit has been getting valuable time back. Where it was once spent compensating for process inefficiencies, it can now be spent on working proactively.

"Brightly's customer service is amazing. Timely support, informative, in line with customer needs.

Chris Phillips
Development Services Director

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 an emergency generator project, 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 in May or June, so by the time firms submitted bids and they were approved, we had missed our good weather window for work getting done. Now city staff conducts this process at the beginning of the year in order to 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.

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**Chris Phillips**
Development Services Director

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 the process. 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."

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.

"The customers get an immediate thumbs up or down on what's going on, the system is automatically updated and we found we were gaining hours back on our inspection team because of that," Chris says.
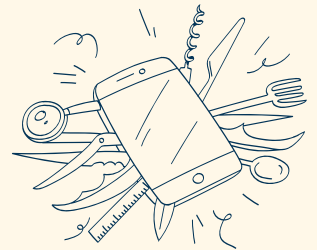
Having all information in a centralized location has also improved communication and documentation internally.

"Once we instituted SmartGov, I was no longer having to go through and do the forensics of, 'Here's what the developer says. Here's what my staff is saying. Let me get the email trail going back and forth. Let me get phone records going back and forth and figure out what happened. SmartGov has it all in there. I can see every email, notes that are added, the workflow. It captures all of that."

Serving a community during COVID-19

A huge win for Mount Vernon has been that, when the COVID-19 shelter-in-place order went into effect, the team was still able to work and serve their community remotely without missing much of a beat.

"The inspection module has worked out terrific. We went from having to be physically onsite, to within one day, we were able to develop 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 a week, and it's been working out perfectly," says Chris.

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"We have a contingency plan in place to support homeowners that experience an emergent plumbing issue, sewer issue, stormwater issue, hot water heater issue — all of these permits can be done on the portal — but they require an inspection. While other municipalities initially closed up shop or significantly reduced their ability to process requests. We planned a telecommute virtual office plan months ago, staff has ensured that the customer experience is the same and they are seamlessly making it happen. 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 four staff members from Island County spend two to three hours with us looking at how we do business. One of the main topics discussed is customer service, the ability to manipulate the software to meet customer needs and the necessity for continued staff training, because to emphasize workflows 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.**

Learn more: Brightlysoftware.com

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