

CREATING GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS THAT CAN SUSTAIN ANY DISRUPTION

In this *Government Technology* Q&A, **Chris Phillips, Development Services Director** for the City of Mount Vernon, Washington, explains how long-term planning and a turn to cloud solutions helped him improve government operations and community development even amid disruption.



Q What did operations in your department look like before the COVID-19 pandemic?

When I came to Mount Vernon three years ago, I assessed all functional aspects of the department, including staffing, training, equipment and performance. The City's server-based maintenance and permitting systems were at the end of their service life; the department was significantly reliant on paper-centric filing and submission protocols; and there was a reluctance to integrate cloud-based solutions. Over the next three years, we evolved from an antiquated system to an agile cloud-based operations management system, and we partnered with Dude Solutions to manage our maintenance and community development operations. Once the comprehensive transition was complete, we prepared for a worst-case scenario (snow storm, earthquake, loss of power, etc.). Over the next year, the staff worked three to five days at home to practice utilizing our hybrid cloud-based and server systems which fundamentally enhanced the way we conducted business.

Q When COVID hit, what were some of the biggest challenges you and your team faced?

Our staff had already demonstrated the ability to function remotely in case of an emergency with our integrated cloud-based solutions, however, challenges did arise. Pre-COVID, permitting questions were addressed at our front counter customer-friendly kiosks. When COVID hit and city hall closed, this was no longer an option. Additionally, we had to address how we would conduct building and engineering inspections. Since residents/customers were at home, they didn't necessarily want us in their spaces. We also faced financial and personnel challenges. The city's general fund budget was cut by \$5.3 million; we permanently furloughed three of our team's full-time employees; and all other employees were required to take 56 hours of furlough time — all this was accomplished without a drop in service levels.

Q How did you begin to prioritize and address those challenges?

It was an all-hands-on-deck evolution. First, we replaced in-person pre-application and follow-on meetings with Zoom conferencing and exchanged

large pieces of complex information via an FTP site. We completely automated the permit submittal and payment processes via our cloud-based portal. For field inspectors, we created a virtual inspection protocol using FaceTime or Skype and the "mobile office" vehicle WiFi. Finally, we significantly improved the facility work order, planned maintenance and facility improvement processes by incorporating tablets, cell phones and cloud-based systems from Dude Solutions to facilitate improved connectivity.

Q What have been some of the biggest improvements to your operations and community development as a result of using cloud-based technologies?

Integrated cloud-based solutions have been the strategic imperative. While other municipalities were trying to figure out next steps or how they were going to meet customer demands, it was a very easy transition for my team. City staff members are extremely agile, and can work from any location. With cloud-based technologies, there is no interruption in processing due to server issues. We now have seamless integration and communication. This has allowed us to go from a rigid paper-centric permit system to something that is flexible, transparent and cost effective. It has also reduced paper utilization by 90 percent.

Q What best practices would you suggest for government leaders who are looking for similar solutions to COVID-19 challenges?

My philosophy centers on the following motto: train, staff and equip. When I first arrived, we flattened the organization, making sure everyone had an equal voice in offering ideas and feedback. This helped us get buy-in for our solutions. We thoroughly trained staff on the newly procured cloud-based systems. Finally, we incorporated a continuous process improvement functionality that encourages all employees to discuss challenges to our standard operating procedures, determine reasonable solutions and incorporate those solutions/lessons learned into our business model. This refinement has significantly improved internal work conditions and allows us to provide the best possible service to our community.



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