Brightly

Client Success story

One of the largest counties in the US Streamlines Permitting with Brightly's SmartGov

Client

One of the largest counties in the US

Vitals

- County covers several thousand square miles.
- The county employs around 1,200 people.
- The Community Development department, which includes planning and zoning, engineering, building and safety environmental quality, and a sustainable building program, employs 32 people.

Challenges

The county needed a standardized, efficient and fully digital way to manage the building permitting process, which involves customers and staff from a number of different departments.

Results

By maximizing its use of Brightly's SmartGov, the county has been able to:

- Digitize all permitting tasks, allowing employees and customers to access and use the portal remotely
- Manage a 61% increase in the number of permit requests while maintaining the same number of staff members
- Significantly shortened the average number of days for handling a request

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The Concerns

While the county had been using Brightly SmartGov solution for several years, it was not using the software at full capacity. When the current business manager for the county's Community Development division was hired in 2017, "we were still in a paper world," she says. "We would take customer plans at the counter, scan them in and upload them into the software to start the permitting process. Every division was doing it differently and every person in each division was not doing it like their peers. It was messy."

The county's average time from permit application to issuance and closure for a given permit in the system could take months, even though actual processing time was closer to 15 days to meet mandated timelines; staff was not utilizing the software consistently or regularly to show the progress of permits and was instead relying on e-mail and counter communications. Getting each permit through the approval processes of planning and zoning, wastewater, sustainable development and engineering required lots of emails among staffers in various divisions.

The Solution

The business manager led the county's efforts to learn how they could use the software to streamline and simplify the permitting and zoning process. She worked closely with Brightly's tech support and her county's IT department to learn more about the possibilities and potential of SmartGov. When she learned that the software includes a customer portal, she knew that would be a key to streamlining the entire Community Development department.

For most of 2019, her team digitized files and trained each division on how to complete the entire permitting process through SmartGov. The county opened its online customer portal in January 2020, making it possible for customers to apply for permits and "upload their plans in their pajamas at midnight and still get it done," she says.

The timing was fortuitous, as the coronavirus pandemic forced office closures two months later, and county staffers were able to complete zoning and permitting requests from home. "Being able to go totally digital and put everything online with SmartGov saved us," said the business manager.

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The Results

The county experienced a building boom during the pandemic, and permit volume has remained high since early 2020. Despite a 61% increase in building permit requests, the county has managed those requests without adding new staff. This change was largely due to the streamlined process that SmartGov provides. Prior to SmartGov, customers would receive papers and permits they needed on time, but staff was not inputting updates or changing statuses in the system itself.
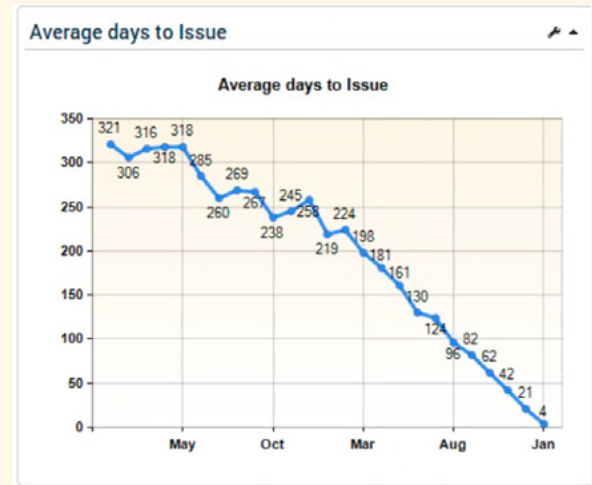
Not only were customers able to submit building permit requests digitally, but county staffers were also able to work from home throughout the pandemic, keeping the economic engines running. "We would have drowned without SmartGov," the business manager says. "Building would have come to a halt and our local economy would have suffered."

After extensive training, divisions that once handled each permit request in its own unique way are now all on the same page. "When a new hire joins a division, the people in that division are training them on how to use the system to work effectively with people throughout the organization," says the business manager. "And there's no more emailing each other to ask if files have been uploaded or approved. Everyone just looks at the portal and checks the status. SmartGov allows for great communication among our staff and instant feedback for customers."

Looking ahead, the county is working to digitize historic files, such as parcel histories, that can be added into the system. "So many of our staff are stuck working in the office because they need the paper files for their research," she says. "Eventually, we'll be able to have people who don't even live in the county work for us researching permit requests."

"Moving the county's entire building and zoning management office online takes time, because the right data is crucial for using the system efficiently and effectively," the business manager says. "If you don't put good data in to begin with, then you haven't set yourself up to collect good data," she stated. "But if you have the right mindset and understand how to set up the system and maintain it, it's the best thing ever."

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Average days to Issue

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