ProjectDox Case Study
City of St. Paul, MN

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The City of St. Paul, the historic capital of Minnesota, is bordered on two-thirds of its boundaries by 26 miles of Mississippi Riverfront. Nearly 170 years old and considered a "built-out" city, St. Paul's building and planning efforts focus on a balance of redevelopment and historic preservation, protecting assets and improving the quality of life for its 300,000 residents.

The City was hearing more and more from citizens that a more efficient plan review process was needed - and electronic plan review was becoming the standard in the region.

Redevelopment surges in St. Paul

With major redevelopment projects in play such as the Ford Auto Plant Site, which is a 20 year 122 acre plan - the City knew they needed a digital solution to automate and accelerate the building and planning review and approval process.

"The longer the project sits with the City, the more it costs the Developers. We want more development and permits, that's our business. We needed to find a way to make it easier and faster."

They focused on five key success criteria for choosing and implementing a new solution:
1) Improve customer service and experience
2) Increase safety with improved documentation and communication
3) Reengineer processes to improve employee experience
4) Reduce review cycle times
5) Eliminate paper

USA: +1 602-714-9774
sales@avolvesoftware.com
www.avolvesoftware.com

Ford Plant - Highland Bridge Site Redevelopment

- 122 acres
- 3,800 housing units (20% Affordable Housing)
- 150,000 SF of retail space
- 265,000 SF of office space
- 55+ acres of parks, recreation fields, open spaces and waterways
- 10+ miles of bike and pedestrian paths
- Largest urban solar array in the Twin Cities area with 100% of site electricity from renewables

A major factor in selecting ProjectDox was that it was already a successful standard solution in use in the region that applicants were familiar with using in other jurisdictions.

Critical success factors

Focus on improving customer service and experience

The inefficient paper-based plan review process that had been the mainstay in St. Paul required applicants to navigate numerous separate City facilities, walking six blocks via skyway, and submit up to 17 copies of plan sets for review.

Customers described the process of submitting their paper plans for review as a "black hole." They lacked visibility in the process as to who had the plans within the City, and they didn't have a useful timetable for next steps. With development surging, the City knew they needed a better process.

According to Deputy Director of Safety and Inspections, Travis Bistodeau, "Our focus was primarily on the customer service and satisfaction side of things – minimizing the hassle for our customers. That's the selling point we used with our elected City leadership to secure funding for a digital solution."

The City was able to avoid a lengthy RFP process by effectively communicating this public need to leadership, and secured funding for electronic plan review through the City's Enterprise Technology Fund.

Avolve enabled a two-part procurement for the City spanning two budget cycles to accommodate their budgetary limits, but still get the solution in place as soon as possible for the community to start seeing value.

Increase public safety by improved documentation and communications

A major goal of going digital was to better ensure safety of structures and the public.

Bistodeau says, "The process at the time in St. Paul was disjointed, and planning items could get missed." When staff made required changes on a paper plan, it could be easily missed by another reviewer, or the impact of that change could be misunderstood. With paper plans you also have the limitation of "human" measurement.

By using electronic plans and computer measurements, City Planning can be confident in their assessment. These practices have improved the safety of St. Paul residents and visitors by making site/building plans easily available to safety and emergency response staff.

"Within our region ProjectDox was already so well represented, many to most of our customers were already using it in other cities and at the State level, which made for an easy adoption in our community. 2021 data indicates a 20% increase in number of permits for 500K to 2M projects, but it's now taking 40% less time to produce those permits!"
Mary Gleich-Matthews, IT Project Manager

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Process reengineering and a better experience for city employees

City employees were also experiencing this "black hole" effect. According to IT Project Manager, Mary Gleich Mathews, "Sure, Building Plan review staff know that the Sewer Division needs to review the plans, but they may not know exactly which staff member has the plans or when they've completed their review. Departments are physically separated, the right hand didn't know what the left hand was doing."

Gleich-Matthews also realized that it was critical to fully assess and reimagine the automated plan review business processes so as not to duplicate the same old bottlenecks when moving from paper to digital. "We took the opportunity to restructure and reset some old habits."

Reducing review cycle times and paper brings extraordinary results in service and efficiency

Electronic plan review has enhanced the review experience by enabling electronic review, workflow, collaboration, document management and updates.

And it has measurably reduced the cycle time for reviewers and applicants to submit, review and complete plans, thereby accelerating development within the City.

Data captured from the Building Department illustrates how City staff is proving efficient in their work and use of the new digital technology with review times reduced by over half.

Average Building Plan Review Time in Days

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	Pdox
44	46	48	38	20	24	22	
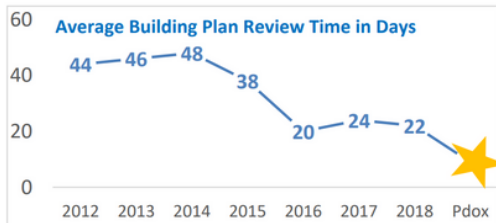
Contact Details

USA: +1 602-714-9774

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