

A background image of the Detroit skyline, featuring several prominent skyscrapers and a body of water in the foreground. The image is partially obscured by a blue diagonal overlay on the left side.

ProjectDox® Case study City of Detroit, MI

Detroit has in recent years become known for its ambitious urban development goals. But just a few years ago, the city was experiencing challenges with their paper-based plan review system and needed support to efficiently manage the plan review process. With a focus on economic growth, the City of Detroit sought solutions to streamline permit procedures and attract investment.

Prior to implementing ProjectDox, Detroit relied exclusively on a paper-based plan review system, which led to obstacles like permit issuance delays, lack of transparency, and inter-departmental coordination issues.

Paper-based Plan Review Created Issues with Transparency and Collaboration

"There was often some miscommunication about whose turn it was to review, or between applicants and plan reviewers," said James Foster, General Manager, BSEED, City of Detroit. "Sometimes a plan reviewer would communicate to the applicant, who would then communicate back to another plan reviewer in another department and the message would be lost in translation," Foster said.

These challenges hindered development initiatives, discouraged investment, and slowed down urban revitalization efforts. The City of Detroit had been thinking about making the switch to an electronic

plan review process and when they welcomed a new mayor in 2014, Detroit began to undertake the reporting, analysis, and due diligence needed to invest in an ePlan solution. "Our new mayor was really focused on process improvement, and we realized that it was time to go digital," Foster said. In 2017, Detroit implemented and debuted ProjectDox.

ProjectDox Was "a Much Better Software" Than Alternatives

Detroit looked at several other electronic plan review solutions before deciding on Avolve's ProjectDox.

"The fact of the matter is that we found that ProjectDox was a much better software — more streamlined, more transparent, with better reporting, and more workflows."

James Foster, General Manager of the Development Resource Center and Plan Review for Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department (BSEED), City of Detroit.

Implementation involved training staff and integrating ProjectDox with existing systems, paving the way for a smooth transition to digital permit management, and the City of Detroit's staff were quick to adopt Avolve's solution once they understood the efficiencies it would bring to the City of Detroit.

"Once they realized that this software was easy to navigate and would create transparency in the plan review process, they really embraced it," Foster said. "People realized that ProjectDox would prevent potential conflicts, for example between a plumbing inspector and the Detroit Water and Sewer department," he said. "I think ProjectDox has made a big difference in the attitude of a lot of staff in the City of Detroit," he added.

ProjectDox is now used widely by departments across city hall, including BSEED (the Building Safety, Engineering, Environmental department), The Mayor's Office, the Planning & Development Department, the City Planning Commission, the Historic District Commission, the Board of Zoning Appeals, the Detroit Water and Sewer Department, DPW (Department of Public Works), the Health Department, the City Planning Commission, the recreation department, and the Fire Department.

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With Avolve, Detroit Increases Permits Issued by 150%

Since implementing ProjectDox, Detroit has experienced significant improvements in permit processing times and efficiency.

"In 2017, we were issuing about 3,000 permits a year and now we're issuing 7,500, and that number keeps going up every year," Foster said, while noting that the City of Detroit is reviewing around 12,000 permits for every 7,500 issued.

This has made Detroit more attractive to lenders and developers, further increasing the investments in development — a fact Foster said has a lot to do with the trust external parties they now have in the City of Detroit to move projects along quickly.

"When developers, architects, and lenders have confidence in a government process, it encourages them to invest. The confidence they'll be able to get their project permitted in a timely fashion, makes them much more likely to want to invest in a community," Foster said.

This, in turn, benefits the community, who now have access to everything from sculpture gardens to outdoor recreational space, urban farms, playgrounds, green stormwater infrastructure, and more. "If you're more attractive to lenders and developers, that's more money coming in terms of the permit processing fees, and you're also adding amenities for the community."

Detroit has become so attractive to investors that the city closed out 2023 with almost \$5 billion in development and is already on pace for even more in the coming year. "I can't even imagine how we would have been able to handle all of this if we were still using paper," said Foster.

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