Inspections Information Technology Fee
Isle of Wight County, Virginia

Need for the Program

Isle of Wight County is a rural county located in southeastern Virginia on the western outskirts of the Hampton Roads region. Isle of Wight covers more than 319 square miles. The permitting/inspections process involves a number of interdependent steps which require back and forth input from the County and the permit holder. Traditionally, Isle of Wight's permitting process has relied on face to face, manual, paper-based transactions and/or a series of phone calls to convey inspection results and requests which were limited to the County's normal operating hours. Due to the rural nature of the county and its location, builders in Isle of Wight are often from other localities in Hampton Roads, the greater Richmond area and even North Carolina - which could be an hour and a half or more from the physical location of the County's Inspections Department. When making in-person round-trip visits to the Inspections Department, permit seekers/holders can easily loose (3) hours or more in productive time.

Traditionally, the Building Inspectors received their assignments first thing in the morning, left to go into the field to perform inspections, posted a

manual inspections report at the job site, and did not return to the office until late in the day with their inspection results. Permit Technicians would then enter the information into the computer system, well after the fact. The associated delay with the data transfer often resulted in a significant time lag before the Technician had the needed information to respond to inquiries from permit holders leading to numerous phone calls and frequent construction delays.   Access to real-time, electronic information is critical to a streamlined inspections process and efficient work flow scheduling on the part of both County employees and the permit holders. Additionally, because of the paper-based system, permit holders were required to submit two (2) copies of their plans for review. Depending on the nature of the project, the plan reproduction costs can be significant for customers.   The ability to review plans electronically has eliminated the reproduction costs.

With the contraction of the economy, Isle of Wight's budget has also been squeezed. Over the past three (3) years, the Inspections Department has eliminated one building inspector and an inspections permit technician. As a result, the remaining staff has picked up the duties previously performed by these two (2) individuals. Additionally, being sensitive to any additional tax burdens levied on the citizens of Isle of Wight, the County has

been reluctant to increase the local tax rates to fund new equipment purchases that may primarily benefit non-taxpayers.

Program Description

In September 2011, Isle of Wight County implemented a 5% technology fee that is added to each building inspection permit application. Since its inception, over $21,000 in technology fees have been collected. Thus far, the fees have allowed the County's Inspections Department to purchase 3 iPads, 2 laptops and 2 large screen TVs. The iPads and laptops allow for real-time field inspection information entry and the large screen TVs are used during the plan review process. In addition to the equipment purchases, since the implementation of the technology fee, the Inspection Department has initiated an on line Customer Self Service (CSS) portal which is available through the County's website 24-hours a day. Through the portal real-time inspection results are available via the internet and can be emailed directly to the permit holder immediately after the completion of an inspection, and digital plan submission and reviews are possible. CSS also allows permit holders to request inspections, follow-up on permits pulled (ordered), make payments online, and review the status of their permit as well as determine additional information or items required by the

permit holder to move to the next phase in the permitting/inspections process.

Program costs

Isle of Wight's out of pocket expenses have been for the purchase of equipment used by the Inspectors in the field and for plan review – 3 iPads, 2 laptops, and 2 large screen televisions. Direct equipment costs thus far have been slightly less than $5,000. Funding for the equipment was provided via the Inspections Technology Fee. Isle of Wight was able to utilize existing features in the County's MUNIS Financial System as the basis for the Customers Self Service feature at no additional cost. To provide internet access to CSS it was linked to the County's existing website which is maintained internally.   There was staff time involved with researching the existing software's capabilities and initial setup and testing of the CSS application and the link to the County's website.

Results/Success of the Program

The Inspections Information Technology fee was implemented with six (6) key objectives all of which have been achieved. The key objectives were:

✓ *Provide information in a more timely fashion*. The permit technicians and permit holders no longer have to wait for inspection results to be hand delivered back to the Inspections Office before the information can be utilized efficiently. An additional benefit of the online data has been that often Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests can be handled directly by the inquirer without putting any added burden on County staff. Another benefit is that a permit holder can provide answers to questions the inspectors may have while onsite to perform an inspection. In the past, often simple questions like the need for a lock box code or key hiding place have prevented an inspection from being performed. With electronic devices in the field, the inspectors can contact the permit holder directly and quickly resolve these types of stumbling blocks.

✓ *Open additional lines of communication between the Inspections Office and permit holders*. The number of phone calls and walk-in traffic to the Inspections Department has been decreased dramatically. Customers can now access pertinent permit information online 24-hours a day. Customers can also schedule a permit inspection 24-hours a day rather than being limited to just the Inspection Department's regular office hours. Additionally, some projects could

require five (5) or more other county departments to sign off on project before a Certificate of Occupancy can be obtained. CSS allows permit holders to monitor the status of their permits and identify outstanding issues so that they can make direct contact with the appropriate department to rectify any holdups.

✓ *Offer a mechanism to obtain a permit without having to make in person visits to the Inspections Office*. Customers no longer have to apply for permits in person, resulting in significant time savings for many of our permit customers.

✓ *Eliminate hard copies – saving printing costs for both the Inspection Department and permit holders*. Inspection requests and reports can now be entered directly into the computer system and hard copies of plans are no longer needed.

✓ *Decrease the plan reproduction burden on permit holders*. Plan documents are often very expensive to reproduce. Prior to the ability to accept plans electronically, at least two (2) copies were required with the permit application. Electronic plan submission can represent a significant savings to the applicant.

✓ *Reduce storage space needs*. The Inspections Department has virtually eliminated paper copies of permit information and plans. By

utilizing an electronic filing system, the physical storage space needs of the department have been decreased.

Worthiness of an Award

Isle of Wight has successfully created a program that is paid for and utilized by the end users – not the local taxpayers. The Inspections Information Technology Fee has allowed the County to purchase equipment needed to utilize and expand the use of existing technology to better accommodate the needs of their customers. The success of the program is best summarized in the words of one of their regular customers:

"I just wanted to send you a quick note about how much I like the Munis website for scheduling and tracking permits and inspections. It makes it a lot easier than always having to call in to check on the status of permits, and I can see if my subcontractors have gotten their permits or not. I also like the ability to access it 24 hours a day, construction is not a 9-5 job so being able to access this information any time day or night is also helpful. The email confirmation of the inspection results is probably the best part of the system, I know whether something passed or failed from an email sent to my phone regardless if I am on site or not and I no longer need to keep track of

all the results paper left by the inspectors. Thank you for trying to keep up with technology. Most of the other municipalities we work in do not have any system like this. It has made it easier to track and schedule everything, even with the high volume of homes we have under construction."

Trenton Kunes

Senior Project Manager

Ryan Homes