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## Case Study: City of Vandalia

# A Smooth-Running Building Department

The To-Do list at the City of Vandalia Department of Development & Engineering Services (DES) would look familiar to anyone involved in code enforcement: review plans, issue permits, conduct inspections, respond to complaints, and collect fees. What is different about this department is the ease with which the staff moves from task to task.

At the counter, a contractor hands plans and permit applications for a kitchen bump out to Office Manager Vicki Hawse. She logs the plans into the parcel management system, noting the address and other key information. When the phone rings with a complaint about a neighbor's shabby fence, Hawse pulls up the parcel record on her PC in a few seconds, and verifies that the owner was issued a citation and did obtain a permit to construct a new, higher fence that should fix the eyesore.

Over on Ted Baker's desktop, a new task item appears, prompted by Hawse's earlier submission. As Chief Building Official, Baker reviews the plans and opens a desktop window to work on permits. A handy "Code" tab lets him see setback requirements, circuit capacities and so on. He might check on old permits pulled for the residence to look for issues that could come up in the course of new construction and flag them for the inspector's attention. Using drop down menus and check-off boxes, he indicates which associated inspections are required. Satisfied that all the information is correct, Baker clicks his mouse and goes on to his next item. In the background, Muncity™ automatically calculates fees, generates permits and invoices, sends out notifications and updates the parcel record.

Nearby, Building Inspector Chris Mastrino, back from a busy morning, enters his field reports into the system. He pulls up a parcel summary page, where he can search by parcel, application, permit or certificate of occupancy, complaint, occupant or building. He begins filling in fields on the first inspection report. As he types, the system starts showing parcels that match, allowing him to find what he's after with only a few keystrokes.



As he works on a report, Mastrino may upload a photo or add a note that automatically attaches itself to the parcel record. Any fee collection he notes will automatically be added to that day's Fee Report. At any time, he can click on his schedule to check on his afternoon appointments and planning review meetings. Periodically, interval inspections automatically show up on his daily tickler list.

And as the work continues, there are two things you won't see much of in the Vandalia DES office: paper and frustration. What you will see instead is a highly integrated team operation in action.

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## Overcoming A Parcel Data Dilemma

Property information wasn't always so accessible and processing didn't always run so smoothly at the Vandalia DES. "We went to computers a few years back," recalled Mastrino. "But what we had was a DOS-based database system that was pretty bare-bones and not easy to use."

Calling up a parcel record could be tricky. For example, command line retrievals required exact entry. Keying in "Maple," "Maple Street," "Maple St" or "Maple St." would only return an exact match. Depending on past activity, there might be multiple duplicate records for that particular parcel created by accident. And the information in one might very well pre-date or contradict the data in another record, leading to compounding errors.

By 2014 the system had reached the end of its useful life and the original developer was no longer around to support the system. It was time for a more robust solution that did more than just manage parcel records.

The entire department had input into identifying its successor. "When we went looking for a replacement," said Baker, "we wanted some specific things, including ease of use, convenience, pull down menus, the ability to do property searches, and built-in complaint tracking. And we wanted everything to be integrated. As it turned out, we got what we wanted with our new Muncity system."

## Taking Back The Records

The department interviewed several vendors. "What impressed us most about the Muncity demonstration was the software integration and ease of use," recalled Mastrino. "Implementation was fairly smooth," he said. "ICC Community Development Solutions cleaned up and moved over our old database. That process was transparent to us; all we saw were exceptions that only a DES employee would know how to resolve."

After a week's worth of group and one-on-one training with a Muncity technician who had handled their solution integration, the DES went live. "We're happy with ICC Community Development Solutions," said Mastrino. "Anytime we've had a question, the Muncity technician talks us through it or gets back to us with a fix." Mostly, the DES takes Muncity for granted.

## Transforming The Work Environment

The department is running Muncity's Building Department Module. It unites parcel history, inspections, complaints and fees within a single desktop environment. It's easy to issue a permit, check on inspections or prepare for a planning meeting while working on the same parcel.

"The system allows us to manage all our parcel data in one place. And it makes it much more easy for our department to manage the work," commented Baker. An integrated calendar with scheduling tools allows Baker to check on his team's workload in a few clicks. If he notices that Mastrino has inspections at opposite ends of the city, he can reschedule the appointments to allow more travel time.

One favorite benefit? "The system consolidates the functions I need to do," said Baker. "For example, I can set up fees and notifications on the same screen I use to issue a permit. And it integrates the workflow among our team." Automatic notifications and task queuing sends work where it needs to be done. Notes accompany the work. "If I see that there was a drainage problem on the parcel a few years back," said Baker, "I can note that for Chris to eyeball for that when he's inspecting a foundation, for instance. Notes help us share information that can help ensure public safety, which is what we are here for."

Mastrino is a big fan of Muncity's templates and pull-down menus in his daily work. "Let's say I have the inspection window open for a parcel. I click on the expand button next to 'Inspections' and bam, there's a list of all the possible inspection types. When I select one, the categories of fill-in boxes on the screen change automatically."

Mastrino said Muncity makes him more efficient and accurate. "The way the system is set up, I can find what I need quickly. I can go out with an inspection form specific to that property that I've created in the system. Then when I record my inspection report I can be faster and more accurate because the template matches."

Hawse, who is often at the front lines with residents and contractors, appreciates how Muncity simplifies her work. "It's easy to look up an address and respond to a customer immediately," she said. "Suppose a neighbor calls us about a vacant house. Because the system tracks complaints and permits, I can pull up the complete picture in seconds and get an idea of what needs to happen. I can use the system to send an email to Ted to flag the property and generate a 'Dear Neighbor' letter from a template in practically no time. And all of those actions become part of the parcel record for the next person who needs to work on it."

Baker has the following advice for other building departments looking for a parcel management solution: "Make sure the vendors show that your old data is convertible to the new system. And compare how you operate today to how things will run with the new system. ICC Community Development Solutions minimized changes. We only needed to adapt somewhat and it all worked out."

Asked what his team would do if he threatened to shut down Muncity, Baker said, "They would mutiny." Obviously, Muncity is the preferred way of doing business at the Vandalia DES.

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