County being recognized for leveraging technology

By Ben Bailey

Over the last 10 years, the Community Development Department has been investing a lot of time and effort to streamline the permit workflow process, ensuring maximum efficiency while leveraging the latest technology, all while making sure the projects meet the requirements of all state and local codes. Back in 2014, it began with exploring ways to expand our inspection scheduling options beyond relying solely on phone calls. Now, fast forward to today, contractors have four options to schedule inspections: by phone, through an online portal, via a cell phone app, or by text.

We've also increased our level of communication and transparency using technology. Through the Citizen Access Portal on the Charlotte County website, you can research and track code cases, permits, and development plans. Our Graphic Information System website is one of the best in the state, offering detailed information on zoning, future land uses, and flood zones, which is crucial for designing successful projects. With automated emails and texts, the days of driving to a job site to see if a job passed an inspection, are over. Inspectors now use iPads in the field to pass or fail inspections, instantly notifying contractors by email. This allows them to make real-time decisions on scheduling subcontractors.

We were fortune enough to implement electronic plan review software just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. This allowed contractors to upload building plans electronically, eliminating the need to visit our office to drop off paper plans. It's been a game changer – now 80-90% of our permits are submitted online, significantly reducing wait times in our lobby. Contractors can apply for permits online at any time, even after business hours, saving them time and money by eliminating the need for a trip to our office.

Previously, assigning inspection requests was a daunting task handled by several staff members who spent hours sorting through large volumes of paper inspection requests and distributing them to inspectors. Now, we have software that sorts and assigns more than 1,100 inspection requests our department receives daily. It automatically assigns these requests based on the inspectors' licenses and geographic areas. The assignments are then sent directly to the inspectors' iPads, along with GPS coordinates, eliminating the need for manual lookup. This advancement has saved the department tens of thousands of dollars annually in man hours.

Our efforts to leverage technology have not gone unnoticed. Charlotte County has consistently ranked in the top ten of the National Association of County's Digital Counties Survey over the past several years. The Center for Digital Government and NACo honor counties that embrace innovative technology, data governance, cybersecurity, and equity efforts for more responsive and effective governance. This year, Charlotte County ranked 8th nationwide among jurisdictions with populations 150,000-249,000, an improvement from 10th place last year. The county is one of only seven Florida counties to earn the award.

We look forward to continuing this trend by finding more efficient and effective ways to serve Charlotte County through the use of technology. Stay tuned for more good things to come this year,

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