



## **The Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program**

### **Miami-Dade County, Florida**

#### **Introduction**

Buildings in Florida's Miami-Dade County typically fill up as quickly as they can be built. Between glimmering high-rise towers for vacationers or retirees, banks and offices that serve as the nerve centers of Miami's southward-looking economy, or schools and public buildings to support a growing population, South Florida has the look of a perpetual hard-hat zone. This steady pace of needed construction is maintained by an innovative building department and its Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program.

Launched in March 1999, the Program is a comprehensive web-based tool for expediting and streamlining the building permitting, plan review, and inspection process in Miami-Dade County. By issuing wireless hand-held computers to field inspectors, the building department provides faster and more flexible plan review and permit issuance service to developers and construction entrepreneurs.

The Program achieves this without compromising the building department's quality and code enforcement. This joint effort between the building and information technology departments has saved countless hours and dollars for the construction sector—not to mention at least \$175,000 in annual payroll savings for county government.

#### **The Problem**

Building code enforcement involves a mind-boggling number of plan reviews and permit issuances on any given day, as well as frequent and

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thorough inspections. Before the implementation of the Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program, the “permitting-plan review-inspection” cycle was a serious impediment to the pace of much-needed construction in South Florida. Automation was essential to streamlining or eliminating some of the most tedious aspects of the process.

In the past, when an inspector visited a building site, it took two days to turn around a notice of “pass” or “fail”. Construction would grind to a sudden halt, sites would be abandoned, and dollars and hours wasted. Nothing was resolved until an inspector finished his routes for the day and returned to the office to hand off the paperwork to a permit clerk, who required an additional day for data entry. This disjointed process was a serious problem for a department whose 135 inspectors conduct close to 500,000 inspections annually.

## The Solution

Automation is the key element of the Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program. The county website made the process of tracking plan reviewing by examiners transparent to interested parties. These reviews demand thoroughness and speed. To eliminate the time and resource-wasting problem of stopping construction while waiting for an inspector, the Miami-Dade website now allows self-scheduling. The website also includes a route map, a schedule, and a picture of the official available on the day of inspection. As for the inspection and data entry process, supervisors and patrons now receive results in just two minutes via wireless technology.

The improvement from two days to two minutes made an immediate impact on the development process in Miami-Dade County. Effects were evident upon introduction of the Building Permitting Automation Efficiency program. The building department’s transparency, expediency and flexibility have helped sustain the growth of this burgeoning metropolis.

## Relevance to Massachusetts

Global positioning technology is essential to the

Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program. Some attempts have been made to use this capability in Massachusetts. Massachusetts’ early attempts to expedite services with GPS were met with some unexpected roadblocks. MassHighway issued GPS-enabled phones to the contractors who tend to the Commonwealth’s highways during inclement weather. To the department’s surprise, the snow-removal contractors opposed this technological innovation. There were even threats of a plow strike. Contractors cried foul over a perceived invasion of privacy.

In reality, the GPS allowed pay to be doled out more fairly, with high-tech monitoring ensuring proper billing. It has made the coordination of efforts in the areas most affected by a storm much easier. The MassHighway program, which cost \$300,000 to implement and \$700,000 annually to administer, has optimized services in what had been a complicated administrative task.

The scenario was repeated in July 2006, when the state suspended 20 building and engineering inspectors charged with inspecting amusement parks, air tanks, and boilers. They refused to carry a new phone. After the union backed off and the employees accepted the technology, the inspectors were reinstated two days later.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

The Building Permitting Automation Efficiency Program represents a successful application of technology to the needs of a particular region. Its success, however, could be repeated throughout New England. Faster, more accurate permitting could make the development process simpler and cheaper, while ensuring that the resulting construction meets the highest standards of safety and quality.

1. *Boston Globe* July 11, 2006; *Boston Globe* July 13, 2006



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