



The City of Atlanta, Georgia

ProjectDox supports the Capital of the South in its long-term vision for environmental conservation and operational efficiency.



City of Atlanta Highlights

City population: 500,000

Metro population: 4.2 M (9th in U.S.)

Construction permits/yr. >5000

ProjectDox implementation:

Launched as the ePLANS program in June 2008, electronic plan submission is supported for tenant improvements and is currently being expanded to include all structures within City limits.

Green focus: Based on 2007 data, the expected green contribution of ePLANS per year is:

- 720,000 miles driven & 48,000 gallons of gas
- 864,000 lbs. of paper used (1,073 trees)
- \$168,00 in fuel costs
- 35,000 lbs. Carbon Monoxide emitted
- 29,000 hours of driving time
- 432 tons of paper requiring storage

Quotable quote: "We ran the numbers, and based on the paper storage and retrieval costs alone, we could not afford NOT to implement this technology. Quite frankly, I cannot see how any jurisdiction can afford not to."

Ibrahim Maslamani
Director, Bureau of Buildings

Overview

The City of Atlanta, known to all as the "Capital of the South", home to world's busiest airport and host of the 1996 Summer Olympic Games, has approximately 500,000 residents within city limits and a metro-area population exceeding 4.1 million – up from 2.7 million in twenty years – making it the nation's ninth largest metropolitan area. Atlanta is also well-known for its pivotal role in the American civil rights movement, leading to its establishment as a center of progressive policies and practices in the social and business arena. This and its temperate year-round climate have made Atlanta an attractive city and account for its steady, continued growth.

Within city limits, Atlanta's cityscape is constantly changing with new construction, restoration and renovation projects. Despite fixed borders, over two decades of prosperity had created a surge in requests to the city for building permits, heightening awareness for the need to streamline regulatory processes and provide better services to citizen customers. Atlanta government officials and personnel have also recognized the need to manage ongoing change in terms of long-term economic and environmental impact. Atlanta's commitment to reduce its use of paper and curb greenhouse gas emissions across all departments was solidified last year with the creation of the Office of Sustainability, which monitors city operations towards green responsibility.

Bureau of Buildings: Paper is the Problem

For Ibrahim Maslamani, Director of the Bureau of Buildings, handling paper throughout the regulatory approval and archival process was increasingly making less sense with respect to his objectives to manage bureau operations more effectively. In fact, it was clear that paper was easy to mishandle and required significant human resource time and effort. Paper was easy to misplace or completely lose track of across departments. It represented an ongoing and ever-increasing cost to store in city archives. Moreover, using paper is typically not a green practice. "We took a good look at all the real costs involved in moving plans and other documents manually through our approval process from beginning to end, and we needed another approach", Maslamani comments.

ProjectDox: The Right Approach

In order to optimize his department's human resource potential, reduce costs, improve services and drive green objectives, Maslamani decided to implement electronic plan (ePlan) technology solution as part of a broader information technology initiative. At the outset, the Bureau was concerned about proving the concept of electronic plan submission prior to making a protracted investment. They gave some consideration to software as a service (SaaS) offerings, but the limitations SaaS placed on tying ePlan technology with other department applications, scaling storage costs and security concerns led the Bureau to consider owning and managing the solution in-house. Hearing about ProjectDox through one of their existing technology vendors and comparing it to solutions they had been considering, Maslamani and his team decided to go with ProjectDox. The decision to deploy ePlan technology required two things: A coalition of support from city stakeholders and with it, proper funding.

Garnering Support and Funding

To build momentum for support, Maslamani and his staff undertook a major outreach effort through various means including email and print. Promotion of the ePlan idea was needed both internally within city departments and externally to the public; therefore urban planning, development groups, and home builders were targeted. The main objective was to clearly identify the benefits of applying information technology to the plan submittal, review, tracking and storage processes.

It's time to go paperless.

The Bureau also made presentations to internal stakeholders. City agencies that have a role in plan review were invited to participate in discussions leading to acquisition and then consulted extensively in design, testing and use of hardware and software in plan submittal, review, tracking and storage for client improvements to existing residential and commercial structures. As a result of that effort the city's Fire, Public Works and Police Department all agreed to use the solution with their plan review processes. Finally, the Bureau presented to its own staff, whom readily approved of the concept and then requested dual-screen systems to conduct reviews.



The overall response from internal and external stakeholders was unmistakable: Atlanta needed and wanted ePlan technology and the city council approved and allocated funding. For Maslamani, it was a foregone conclusion: "We ran the numbers, and based on the paper storage and retrieval costs alone, we could not afford NOT to implement ePlan. Quite frankly, I cannot see how any jurisdiction can afford not to. This is a much cheaper way to go, especially in the long run."

The Bureau created its own program identity, named simply "ePLANS", complete with its own logo, the design of which reflects the program's environmental and technological focus.



Rolling Out ePLANS

Atlanta's ePLANS system was officially launched in June 2008, and supported the city's tenant improvement permit and plan review process. The City chose to start with less complex, existing structure alterations and expand the reach of ePLANS. The City is currently working on extending ePLANS integration with their permitting systems to include the full range of structures requiring plan review and ePLANS is scheduled to be operational for all construction in Atlanta by the end of 2009. Plan files in PDF format are requested from applicants, and the status of the review is made available to designated stakeholders on the city web site. Approved plans are stored on local servers along with a digital tape back-up housed at a remote facility.

The Bureau of Buildings kicked off the program with training for both internal and external stakeholders, using on-site training sessions and several webinars. Architects, engineers, contractors outside of the greater Atlanta area were also invited and encouraged to participate in the training. Maslamani set up multiple, interactive sessions comprised of small groups specializing in tenant improvement projects. Feedback was solicited and lessons learned are being applied to future training design efforts.

ePLANS is Sustainable

James Shelby, Commissioner of the City's Department of Planning and Community Development and a long-time civil servant for Atlanta and the Bureau of Buildings confirmed the numerous benefits that ePlan technology provides to customers and the environment including reducing travel time to and from City Hall, reducing emissions from vehicles used for travel to/from City Hall, reducing fuel consumption and eliminating paper usage and storage. "By expediting the plan submission and review process and eliminating paper, ePlans helps make doing business with Atlanta easier, faster and greener. We're excited and proud to be setting the pace in this arena for the region and the state."

The following green calculations were provided by the City to underscore the environmental impact anticipated from the ePlans Program, based on 2007 permit volume:

- 720,000 miles driven & 48,000 gallons of gas
- 864,000 lbs. of paper used (1,073 trees)
- \$168,00 in fuel costs
- 35,000 lbs. Carbon Monoxide emitted
- 29,000 hours of driving time
- 432 tons of paper requiring storage

Maslamani sums it up by saying that building officials need to take the long-view when considering whether or not to add ePlan technology to their operations.

"While it took some real effort on our part to present the benefits of ePlan technology to everyone that it would be affected by it, the rationale makes so much sense that almost anyone can grasp its advantages. Short-term pain is quickly eclipsed by the return on investment in terms of human, financial and environmental resources. Our ePLANS system is tangible proof of Atlanta's ongoing commitment to responsible leadership on behalf of the community."



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