



The City of Bend, Oregon

ProjectDox ePlan technology helps Bend provide state-of-the-art, sustainable customer service – even in a recession.



ePlan Praise from Bend Customers

I love ePlans. Sometimes it just isn't convenient having to come down to the city to go over corrections like we used to do... this is much more efficient. Plus, for us... it's nice to be able to download the finished, stamped plans and then email them over to Ford Graphics and then the subs can come in and grab copies when they need them... I LOVE THIS SYSTEM!!!!

Sherry Veenker, The Hollman Company, Bend OR

ePlans has been a great experience. It is very user friendly and you get updates on the permit status easily which is a huge benefit... I would definitely use the process again and would recommend any architect to use it. I just wish more jurisdictions would use the system. I am surprised that E-Plans is not apart of the LEED process. Being a paperless system, this should be incorporated into LEED certification point system.

Chris Record, Architect, Bellevue WA

I thought that the overall ePlan process went very smoothly and was efficient for all the parties. Especially for a company that is not located in Bend it prevented a lot of wasted travel time to submit plans. I also liked the idea with regards to the environmental aspect as well. There was no need to waste paper on printing plans for the city to review. I think that it is a great system and encourage the city to maintain it and also promote it in the future.

Jason Engel, Project Manager, The Neenan Company (based in Ft. Collins CO)

Overview

Located in Deschutes County at the geographic center of the state, the City of Bend is the heart of the scenic and rapidly growing Central Oregon region. Since 1990, Deschutes, Crook and Jefferson counties have collectively doubled in size, with Bend more than tripling its own population. During 2007, Bend's development activity percentages exceeded Las Vegas NV, making it the one of the nation's busiest growth centers.

Over the past six years, Robert Mathias, Building Official for the City, had been steadily applying information technology to his department operations. The idea of ePlan technology was something he'd already decided he would implement if he could find a viable product. None of the government software technology vendors he did business with provided a paperless plan submission, review and tracking solution. He kept looking and in late 2005, while searching the internet, he found ProjectDox, attended several demonstrations and was ready to move forward with ePlan at Bend. In May of 2008, Bend became the first community in the State of Oregon to implement a complete online solution for construction and land-use plan approval. It has enabled the Bend Building Department to further apply its service-centric philosophy and paved the way for a fully-integrated, electronic community development program that touches all city departments.

The Challenge: Raise the Service Bar Despite Economic Uncertainty

The unprecedented population growth in Central Oregon created a number of pressures for the Building Department. Between 2002 and 2007, the department staff grew from 12, to 20 and then 40 at the height of the construction boom. According to Mathias, Bend's relative geographic isolation made it difficult to draw from a large pool of local building and engineering talent, and outsourcing overflow to remote plan review services was considered too problematic. Maintaining a high level of service to citizens could only be solved in two ways: continue to grow and train a freshman staff, and figure out a way to do more with less, applying new technology to solve problems. For Mathias, deploying ePlan technology was a solid investment that would improve the city's ability to serve its expanding community in the near and long-term.

To secure funding for the ePlan system, Mathias presented the merits of ProjectDox tools and methods and told the City Council that he felt there was more value in ePlan technology than that of two new employees that were scheduled for hiring. The Council was in favor of a capital expense over the long-term commitment to human resources. Based on his budget projections, the ePlan system would pay for itself in 18-24 months. The Council approved.

It turned out to be a fortunate decision, as 2008 brought a severe economic downturn that slowed building activity significantly. The building department had to cut its staff back to 20 – a 50% reduction. This put a greater burden on the Department to sustain the status quo in terms of exceptional customer service. Rather than settle for business-as-usual, Mathias and his team exploited ProjectDox ePlan to improve customer service in the midst of economic insecurity, and to raise the bar for the entire Pacific Northwest.

Up and Running Fast

Bend's long-standing commitment to use new technology wherever possible made the implementation of the ProjectDox ePlan solution relatively straightforward. According to Melanie Paule, Support Services Supervisor, the team's past attention to streamlining processes within the department made adoption of ePlan fairly painless.

It's time to go paperless.

"We had already spent time optimizing our internal workflow and had achieved a process that we could map well in ProjectDox," said Paule. "There were a few people in the department that were hesitant about change, but overall we were ready to dive in and make it work."

The bigger challenge would be promoting ePlan to city agencies involved with plan review and educating customers. The Fire, Engineering, Environmental and other review departments typically used pencil and paper checklists that were circulated by hand. With ePlan, they now had an opportunity to participate in a fully electronic, automated workflow that required some changes in thinking. Yet, it did not take long for all the review departments to embrace the system. Mathias is currently directing the incorporation of Planning, Engineering, Signs, Fire, and Public Works into the ePlan system as well as other parts of the organization.

On the customer side, ePlan technology cut out a number of manual steps — such as creating letters on paper and mailing them to customers via the Post Office — that were costly in terms of time and labor, adding days and even weeks to the process. "Our ability to distribute plans and correction notes instantly and reduce our overall turnaround time caught people off-guard," notes Paule. "In some cases, we've been able to achieve a single-day turnaround, and one architect actually told us we were too fast, because he built the old, manual review time-frame into his own schedule. Our quick electronic response meant he had to work even faster — something he wasn't used to!"

"We estimate that we're seeing at least a 50% reduction in the overall process per review," comments Mathias. "We could probably squeeze out some more efficiency, but the truth is now the real delays are nearly always on the customer side of the cycle." He also points out that remote companies such as national retail and restaurant chains that want to build in Bend will not need to travel as often or be concerned about communication and process delays or breakdowns. Local and remote customers applying for permits and submitting plans have been quick to express their approval. (see **ePlan Praise from Bend Customers** on first page)

In less than a year, the Building Department can boast that 60% of its plan submissions are electronic, and Mathias is pushing for 100% in 2010. This aggressive schedule is partly due to the care that is taken to introduce new customers to the ePlan process. City customers are still able to deliver blueprints to the counter as in the past, but the paper is scanned and uploaded directly into ProjectDox. "My job is to make sure they understand the benefits of ePlan submission," says Paule. "When they come to the counter with blueprints, I'll educate them and give them a secure invitation to ProjectDox via email so they can come and try it out. I've been watching the results, and we get a 70% response rate. People are very interested to see what ePlan technology can do for them — and they are not disappointed."

Customer-Service, ePlan Evangelists

Since the initial ProjectDox deployment in May of last year, Mathias and his associates have become evangelists for ePlan technology within the city and beyond. True to his commitment to serve citizens better in every possible way, Mathias is not keeping his success a secret, but continues to educate anyone who will listen to him. "I cannot say enough about it. My peers in this industry often think that because they are taking in a PDF file via email and opening it on a screen that they're performing an electronic submission and review. Best-practices calls for much more and it's possible right now."

Within Bend itself, ProjectDox continues to spread its positive impact. Steve Meyers, Director of Information Technology for the City and a champion of ePlan technology, reports that more and more departments are requesting access to the system. "We had the head of Public Works tell us recently that he's waited too long and wants to jump into ePlan — with both feet," affirmed Meyers. "My goal is to provide an integrated technology environment to every city department that needs what we have to offer. ProjectDox is already touching quite a few departments, and is high on our list of software tools to promote across all the agencies that can use it."

Beyond city limits, Mathias' voice is being heard as well. He hosted the Oregon Building Officials Association last summer and his success has brought visits from the City of Seattle and other jurisdictions in the Pacific Northwest. The news about ePlan at Bend is also being spread nationwide through Mathias' various industry associations and contacts. "We're proud of our commitment to technology as a means of serving our community. And we're also proof that you don't have to be a big city to be on the cutting edge, that technology can be a means to offset economic disruption. No matter what happens in the future, we're headed in the right direction — and the phone keeps ringing."



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Bend, Oregon

The following article written by Peter Sachs appeared in Bend's local newspaper, *The Bulletin*, on July 16th, 2008.

Bend's 'ePlan' a Regional Test

Other Northwest cities take notice of \$143,000 Web planning software

By Peter Sachs / The Bulletin

Published: July 16, 2008 4:00AM PST

When the architects for Les Schwab Tire Centers dropped off the complete set of blueprints at Bend City Hall for the company's new headquarters, it weighed in at 600 pounds. But that's just one set, and the city requires two. So in came more than half a ton of paper for city examiners to review, page by page.

But a new Web-based system will save all that paper in the future. The system for tracking and reviewing building plans, which Bend's building division has been using since May, has caught the attention of officials in Portland and Seattle, and a county in Washington is ready to make the switch to the system as well.

Bend is the first in the state to use the system and one of only a handful in the country.

The ePlan system cost the city \$143,000 for the software, new computers, 32-inch flat-screen monitors and a large scanner. It eliminates the need for architects to bring in huge rolls of blueprints when they want to build a new building and makes it faster for city examiners and architects to make revisions and corrections. City inspectors and contractors can compare plans on laptops in the field rather than having to lug bundles of blueprints.

"It's just a whole different way of thinking," said Robert Mathias, the city's building division manager.

On Tuesday, two building officials from Clark County, Wash., visited Bend to see the system in operation. They are planning to switch to the ePlan system this fall. Their visit to Bend reaffirmed their desire to make the move.

"It seems like they're really happy with it," said Lou Malattia, Clark County's plans examiner supervisor. "It seems like everybody's willing to jump onboard, so that's encouraging."

Today, a team of 13 people from Seattle's building division will get a comprehensive look at Bend's system, as will one person from Portland's building division. And on Thursday, the city will give a presentation on its transition to the Web-based system at the annual conference of the Oregon Building Officials Association, which is being held in Bend.

"This is what happens when you do it first," Mathias said. "Everybody wants to see it."

But Bend's trailblazing hasn't been without risk.

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The \$143,000 investment was marked in the city's budget but came on the leading edge of an economic downturn that has forced the city to lay off 33 people, many of them in Mathias' department.

Mathias was aware he was taking a big risk in making the city the first in the region to try a relatively new system.

"Until May 1, when we did our first real customer, it was spooky, because if it was a flop, I would have pretty much been a goat," Mathias said.

So far the city has used the software to review about 30 commercial projects, including the new Kohl's department store slated for the Bend River Promenade, said Kerry Granger, a permit technician for the city.

Traditionally, builders and architects traded reams of paperwork with city inspectors and examiners with each project. The new system lets anyone, whether building a large commercial project, a single home or an interior addition, submit plans online and skip the trip to City Hall.

Builders and architects would have to fill out several forms by hand, then leave two sets of blueprints with the city to review. A city plan examiner would then write up a detailed letter with changes that needed to be made, mail that back to the architect and wait for new blueprints. When those plans came in, the city's examiners would carefully have to review the new and old ones, side by side on large tables, to make sure all the changes had been made.

Bend's new system puts all the blueprint pages in electronic format that anyone in the building division can review on large computer screens. Architects can upload their drawings and city examiners can look at them immediately, adding notes and circling things that need to be changed. Architects get an alert that they need to make revisions.

When a new draft gets uploaded, examiners can instantly compare changes in the new and old versions, said Art Hogen, the city's lead commercial plans examiner.

"All in all, we're saving, starting off, probably 25 percent in time," he said.

With those kinds of savings, Mathias hopes to recoup the cost of the system in the next 18 months. And this winter, he hopes to get the city's engineering and planning divisions on board, since they currently review paper versions of blueprints.

That's all good news for Clark County's Malattia. Their system will likely cost more because the price has gone up, but part of it is being covered by a grant.

"It doesn't look like it's going to be that big of a learning curve or anything like that," he said.

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