FOCUS ON:
Our Plan Review Team: Transitioning from pen to paperless options

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New technology offered by the Plan Review team helps reduce time and costs associated with the permitting process.

With so many advances in technology, people are more connected to real-time data than ever before. The Plan Review Team in the Department of Planning and Development has evolved with these advances, creating paperless options to reduce the time and cost associated with the permitting process.
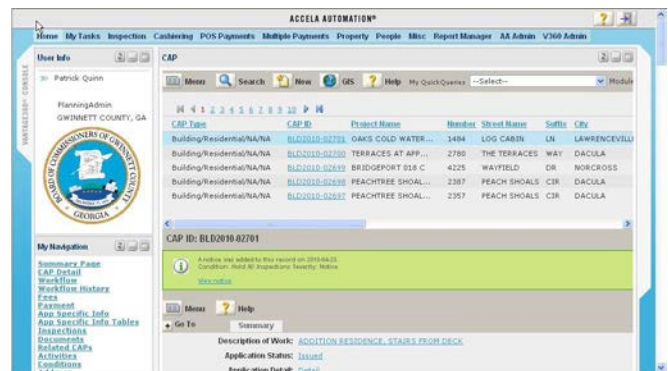
Adena Fullard manages the Plan Review Division, which consists of four sections: Building, Development, Stormwater/Water/Sewer, and Fire. Members of the team review submitted development and commercial building plans to ensure they follow County ordinances and development codes. Depending on the type of project, each section of the team may be required to review the plans. In addition, other county and state agencies may be involved in the process.

The team offers pre-submittal meetings to developers and designers to help them understand the plan review and permitting process and identify major issues that may avoid costly delays. Once the layout design has been prepared, the project is submitted to the county and the team begins the review process. The review process typically involves requiring slight adjustments to the original design and resubmittal of

a corrected plan. The designer may experience multiple in-person visits to the Planning and Development office in order to clarify their design changes. "Over time, we realized that there is a more efficient way to do this and transitioned to a paperless option, which has been extremely beneficial to the plan review process," Fullard said.

In 2014, the team kicked off a project to incorporate Accela, a permitting and inspection software platform that allows developers and designers to submit their plans electronically for review. The program was officially launched in April 2015. A designated gatekeeper for the section downloads the electronic plans to check for readability and notifies the appropriate reviewers.

The Accela program allows reviewers from various work sections to view plans and make edits simultaneously. Reviewers, designers, and developers can also access plans at a construction or development site.

According to **John Cross**, IT systems architect for the Accela program, "reviewers from each section can review the plans concurrently, saving time in the process." Reviewers can create an overlay to the originally submitted plans with their comments and visuals, so that designers can see all the changes in one document. Once the edits are made, the plans are sent back to the gatekeepers to send to the designers. "Since the plans are electronic, inspectors, developers, and designers can access the plans while they are at a construction or development site," said Cross.

While other jurisdictions are using the Accela program in their review and inspection process, Planning and Development took it one step further to incorporate the software into its customer service process. In addition to electronic plan submittal, the department now offers a paperless customer sign-in module for walk-in customers that tracks their wait time and documents their needs.

The customer sign-in module has worked so well that it earned the department an Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties in 2015. "With about 50,000 visits to the Planning and Development office per year, this one-stop shop approach has made it easier for permitting, plan review, and inspections to take place, in addition to providing our customers with excellent service," said **Kathy Holland**, Planning and Development deputy director.

The customer sign-in module helps department staff keep track of nearly 50,000 annual visitors to the Planning and Development office.