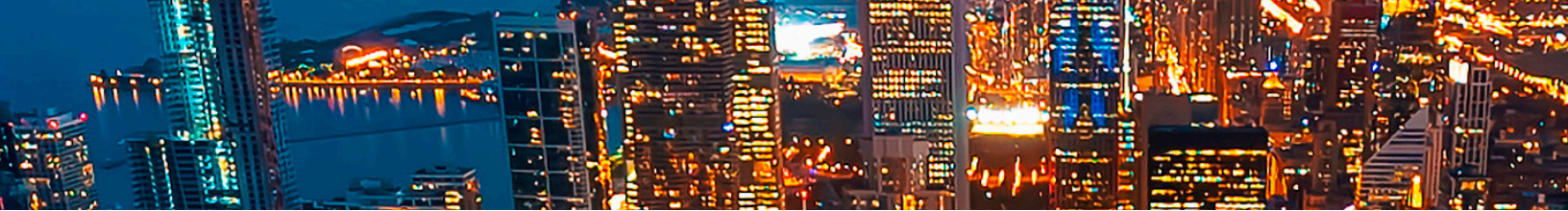


How Chicago Simplified its Building Permit Program





Each year, thousands of Chicago’s residents and businesses undertake minor projects that require a permit from the Department of Buildings (DOB), fueling the need for a simplified, streamlined online process for applying and approving projects.

These are smaller projects like building a garage, erecting a fence, replacing a roof or adding solar panels. They fall under the city’s fast-track process, known as Express Permits.

Express Permits account for one-third of Chicago’s building permits, but until recently the city lacked an efficient way to process them. That changed in November 2023, when DOB migrated Express Permits onto the city’s existing enterprise platform, Infor Public Sector (IPS) 11.

“We now have a fully web-enabled customer platform that allows users to apply for building permits for most types of building repair and small improvement projects,” says DOB Managing Deputy Commissioner Grant Ullrich. “Constituents can check their application status, pay fees and view inspection results completely online.”

Room to Improve the Customer Experience

“It’s embarrassing and I hate to admit this, but for a long time, 90% of these permits were done in person at City Hall,” says Deputy DOB Commissioner Martha Reynoso. “In this day and age, no one should have to pay for parking downtown to get a building permit.”

In 2020, the city made it possible to apply for some Express Permits online. The change was an improvement, but approval was still a cumbersome, mostly manual process.

“Constituents could send us photos and attach a letter of intent, and we would process those requests via email,” Reynoso says. “But all that back and forth took time. Even simple permits could take several days.”

Some homeowners or business owners would go to City Hall thinking they could pick up their permit only to learn they were missing a required document such as a contractor’s letter. Long email chains, multiple trips downtown and no way to track the process digitally made for a less-than-optimal customer experience.

To address these concerns and modernize the permits process, the city assembled a team that included DOB, the Chicago Department of Assets, Information and Services (AIS), city IT leaders and the tech firm Infor.

“My department’s objective was to migrate from the legacy system to the enterprise system while addressing security vulnerabilities and saving money on support services,” says Chicago IT Director Eric Tenfelde. “DOB wanted to do a process refresh on permits for the first time in 10 years. And they did not want to wait. Together, we took the time to build a common list of objectives and make each other’s goals our own. It sounds so obvious, but one of the things I learned on this project is the importance of partnership.”

“In this day and age, no one should have to pay for parking downtown to get a building permit.”

— Martha Reynoso, Deputy Commissioner, Chicago Department of Buildings



Building Success Together

On the business side, DOB was responsible for developing more efficient processes for the Express Permit program. On the technology side, AIS and Infor were responsible for software development, data migration and testing.

The overarching goal was to simplify, automate and speed up the permitting process, both on the front end for constituents and the back end for employees. But with 20 different permit types in the Express Permit program, it was complicated.

And because old and new platforms would be running in parallel for a period of time, some data had to be migrated, such as the database of contractors' names and license information.

Before the main migration could occur, the team had to ensure everything was working correctly while monitoring the quality of the data and processes. That meant the legacy and target systems were active while the team painstakingly completed 3,500 test cases.

"The testing was necessary because we wanted customers to like it," Ullrich says. "We designed the website with their experience in mind."

'A Big Win for the City'

Today, Chicago's system shows where an application is in the process from start to finish. Applicants can see exactly what is needed when they apply. And city staff have a streamlined system that saves time and improves communication with constituents.

Other city departments have already started adopting some of the features added in the migration, including the permitting solution from Infor. The Chicago Department of Transportation, for example, implemented an automated "e-acceptance" feature that lets a contractor confirm with a single click that they are the contractor on record for a particular job.

For Ullrich, perhaps the best validation of success came in an unsolicited email from a homeowner.

"He commented on how easy the process is now," Ullrich says. "That makes it all worthwhile. This is a big win for the city, as well as the city's constituents and contractors."

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