

# Wireless Solutions Improve Inspection Efficiency

Automation implemented in historic county.

**F**ounded in 1776 and named for General George Washington, historic Washington County is located in the northeastern edge of Maryland and is home to more than 140,000 residents within its 458 square miles. The county's Department of Permits & Inspections is responsible for issuing permits and licenses, reviewing construction documents, and inspecting buildings and structures for code compliance.

The department processes about 15,000 permits annually for residents and business owners.

In 2003, the department worked with Accela, Inc. ([www.govengr.com/accela](http://www.govengr.com/accela)), a government enterprise software provider, to implement software to automate many key activities including permit processing, work orders, and fee calculation. Automating those processes helped improve efficiency and led the county to realize it could do even more, especially in the area of inspections. The county's paper-based system was still being used for inspections, a tedious process for its team of 11 inspectors who continued to carry inspection sheets to the field and completed them by hand.

Under this system, management could not tell at a glance what areas inspectors had covered on a given day, how many miles had been traveled, or the amount of time spent on each inspection. Inspectors were not aware of what inspections their colleagues were doing, which made it difficult for them to help each other in the field.

Other challenges included accessibility. If an inspector arrived at the site and realized that he needed additional parcel or property information, he had to wait until he returned to the office to do this research. As a result, a second trip to the inspection site was needed to complete the inspection, or to issue correction notices.

Washington County sought to solve these challenges. "We wanted a solution that could improve efficiency and consistency in the field, but was also going to be easy to use," said Angela A. Smith, deputy director of the Department of Permits & Inspections.

Washington County once again teamed up with Accela to power its inspection teams with mobile technology. In October 2004, the county launched Accela Wireless™, which allows real-time access to agency database information from a mobile device in the field. Inspectors using this wireless application are able to input their inspection results in real-time or in offline mode, where there are no wireless hot spots available, and upload their data upon returning to the office. Real-time or offline, this shifted many inspectors' daily tasks from the office to the field. In Washington County, inspectors have wireless connectivity available



through a system that was set up by the county's Water and Sewer Department. Inspectors can connect to the Internet using the various access points throughout the county through radio/cell towers.

The inspectors, using Panasonic Toughbooks ([www.govengr.com/panasonic](http://www.govengr.com/panasonic)), were now able to access permit data in the field and complete inspections electronically. Training was straightforward. The wireless application was configured to match existing procedures in the department so inspectors did not have to learn a new process; they just had to be trained on how to use the new software system. The software provided drop-down menus, standardized comments, and checklists that made it easier for the county's inspectors to complete their inspections.

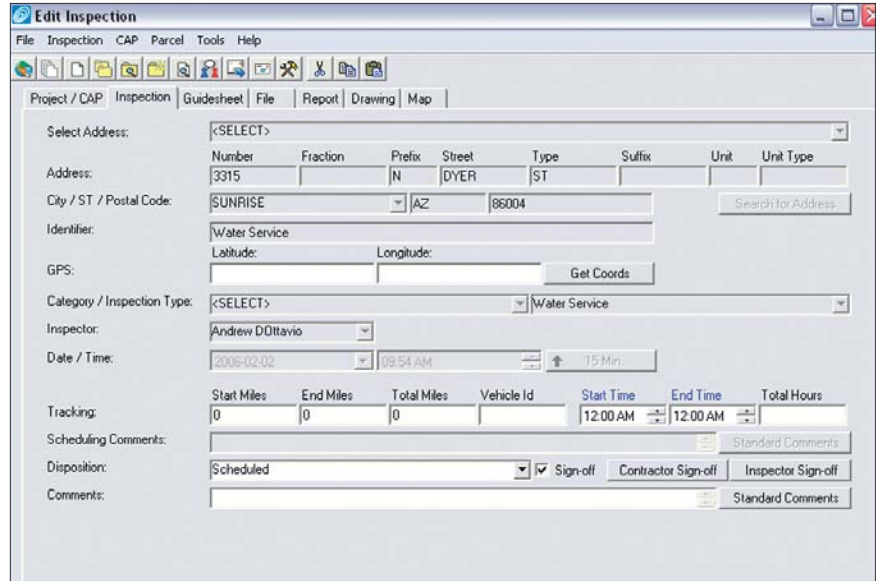
The wireless application helped improve scheduling and minimize inconsistencies in inspection reports. Data integrity improved, and inspectors were able to stay in the field longer to complete their daily inspections and download their own inspections as well as other inspections in the area assigned to their colleagues. Once an individual's inspections were complete, the inspector could begin working on other inspections in the area to ensure that all department inspections were completed by the end of the day.

## Encourages Teamwork

By implementing its wireless application, Washington County created an environment that encourages teamwork, unites its inspectors, and strengthens the entire department. Most importantly, the department is able to provide better service to its citizens.

The wireless application also gives department managers the metric information they need by providing a high-level view of how the department operates. The application allows inspectors to track mileage and time spent for each inspection. In addition, the managers are able to view a complete list of what inspections are being performed that day or that week and easily assess how resources are being distributed.

Within a few weeks after the implementation of its mobile government



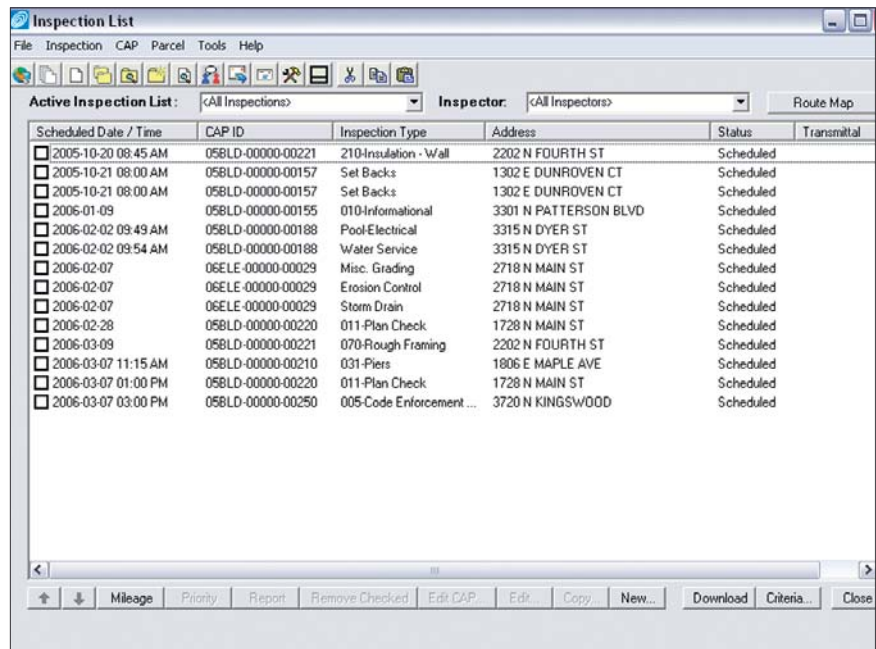
*Software is configured to match existing procedures in any department. Easy to use, the software includes drop-down menus and standardized comments for inspectors.*

application, the county saw great results. The time needed for administrative tasks by the inspectors was cut by about one hour per day for all inspectors. Without increasing staff size, the department instantly created 11 additional work hours per day.

“In order to work smarter, you must improve efficiency. Hiring trained, certified inspectors and having them produce two hours of clerical work every day is not working smarter,” stated Smith. “Implementing Accela Wireless

was one of the greatest decisions our department has made, and we know the process will only continue to improve.”

“Government agencies are beginning to see the benefits of implementing mobile government solutions at their agency,” states Robert P. Lee, Accela's president and CEO. “By streamlining the inspection process and giving field inspectors convenient access to enterprise data, agencies are able to respond more quickly to requests and provide a higher level of service to their citizens.” **GE**



*Inspection check list for inspectors and department managers to view what inspections are being performed by whom on any given day.*