San Antonio trims inefficiencies from street-cutting permits

SECTOR *Public Works*
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San Antonio, Texas, charms visitors with its many scenic and historical attractions. While the home of the Alamo and the cobblestone River Walk has managed to preserve history and culture, it has a burgeoning urban aspect to its personality as the eighth largest city in the United States.

San Antonio receives an estimated 90,000 applications for street-cutting permits each year. Before contractors can commence digging in streets or rights-of-way to repair or install utilities, they must apply for a permit with the city. By early 2001, the city's permitting process within the Department of Streets was stalled. The cumbersome, paper-based process slowed permit approval, and city officials could not access critical information. The process caused backlogs, suboptimal compliance revenue, and infrastructure project conflicts and delays. The system made it difficult to coordinate work and costly to rework the same sections of roadway.

In the first three months, the city registered more than 7,500 permits using the permit module. Staff members estimate they receive 90 percent of all permit applications online, and the number of employee hours required to approve a single permit application has decreased 71 percent from two hours to only 35 minutes.

Contractors seeking a street-cutting permit had to visit the department in person and fill out an application. Applications were forwarded to the right-of-way management office where they passed through multiple levels of review. City officials estimated it took an average of two employee hours to amend, approve, or reject a single permit application.

The city did not store approved paper permits in files organized by location. The lack of a central, easily accessible repository made accessing necessary information a complex and difficult task for city staff to track and find compliance violations associated with each permit. As a result, the city would schedule two projects for the same place and time, unnecessarily re-cut and resurface roads, and leave traffic barricades and detours in place too long. It also left the city's compliance revenue lower than it could have been.

Rising above the paper maze

In 2001, San Antonio's Department of Streets engaged an ESRI business partner, Syncline, Inc., to work with city staff and develop a prototype permit module solution. The team deployed the

MapCiti Permit Module, powered by ESRI's ArcIMS software, to manage the entire street-cutting permit process. The system provides comprehensive, Web-enabled permitting functionality and is integrated with the city's GIS. With a standard Web browser, department staff and contractors can access and view all street, zoning, and permit activity online using maps created with the permit module. Contractors can apply for street-cutting permits and obtain automatically calculated permit fee information at any time. Staff can review and approve permit applications and track permit compliance-all online. The module helps ensure that projects do not interfere with each other and that companies comply with city guidelines. An added benefit is that city officials can develop insight into trends and patterns in street-cutting activities that were not readily apparent with the paper process.

"Syncline has given us an unprecedented ability to manage the thousands of projects going on in the city at a given time and make sure they're done in an orderly fashion," said Joe Chapa, San Antonio's GIS manager. "[The MapCiti Permit Module] has enabled us to simplify our invoicing procedure so we are more effective at applying and billing compliance fees."

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"By putting this entire function on the Web, we save time and energy, both for ourselves and for the companies that work on the city's infrastructure," said Chapa.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS