STAFF REPORT

City Council
Meeting Date: **2/11/2025**
Staff Report Number: **25-019-CC**

Informational Item: **Accela Civic Platform update**

Recommendation

City staff recommends that City Council receive this informational report regarding the Accela Civic Platform, which is used for permit/record review and documentation by multiple departments. No City Council action or direction is requested at this time.

Policy Issues

Replacement of the City's land management system was identified as a top priority of the Information Technology Master Plan (ITMP) in 2017. Implementing and maintaining a modern permitting system is critical for engaging with a customer base that expects online services, ensuring consistency across permit workflows, meeting deadlines and addressing regulatory requirements.

Background

The Accela Civic Platform is the land management system that the City uses for the day-to-day business operations of community development and public works. The system is used for processing various types of permits, including, but not limited to building permits, entitlement permits and heritage tree removal permits. It also facilitates the management and scheduling of building inspections and collection of permit fees.

The system provides applicants, residents, contractors, and other members of the public with the ability to submit permit applications online and access permit status updates around the clock, seven days a week, regardless of the City's regular business hours. Additionally, the City has integrated online payments, consolidated electronic document review and electronic signatures via DocuSign into the platform to streamline the process for users.

The original Accela implementation was approved by the City Council in June 2018, and the system launched in November 2019. On Oct. 10, 2023, the Council approved a five-year renewal agreement (Attachment A). As part of that renewal, City Council directed staff to provide an annual or bi-annual report providing the public's usage of Accela.

Analysis

Initial implementation

The Accela system launched in November 2019 with the modules and record types listed in Table 1. Within the Accela system, the term "records" is equivalent to "applications" or "permits," while "modules" are groupings of related records that might be overseen by staff members in the same division or department. Following the model of the City's previous permit system (Tidemark), the building division within community development was the primary focus, as that unit has the greatest day-to-day need for permit processing.

The planning division featured the second-highest number of record types, while the public works department had fewer record types but a higher volume of permits. Code enforcement and special events were also included, addressing operational needs for those record types.

Table 1: Record types deployed at system launch		
Work unit	**Record type**	**Description**
Building	Building Permit	New applications, deferred submittals and revisions available
Building	Demolition Permit	Removal of a structure
Building	Grading Permit	Standalone site work
Building	Limited Plan Check	Residential plan check services for electrical service upgrades, repairing or replacing furnaces, reroofing, sewer and water mains or repiping, and water heaters
Community Services	Special Event Permit	Events that potentially affect streets, have a large number of attendees, require police presence, etc.
Planning	Administrative Permit	In certain districts, uses like restaurant alcohol licenses, hazmat associated with main use, or child care centers require this action type
Planning	Community Development Director Action	Corner lot line elections, non-residential fences, noise ordinance examples, etc.
Planning	Monitoring	Post-approval follow-ups (e.g., development agreement annual reviews, trip count reporting) associated with Planning Commission / City Council actions
Planning	Planning Commission (PC) / City Council (CC) Action	All actions that require PC or CC action, such as use permits, architectural control, conditional development permits and rezonings
Planning	Planning Pre-Application	Proposals that require review or refinement before moving forward to action
Planning	Sign Permit	New or replaced business signage
Planning	Subdivision	Lot or condominium divisions and similar actions
Planning	Substantial Conformance	Review of certain PC-CC Actions that have modified plans
Planning	Zoning Compliance Letter	Documentation of past approvals and analysis of conformity and replacement, often required when a property is sold or refinanced
Police	Code Enforcement Case	Investigations of potential violations of municipal code
Public Works	Heritage Tree Permit	Removals or heavy pruning of heritage trees
Public Works	Public Works Encroachment Permit	Use of public right-of-way, such as for utility work or temporary storage pods
Public Works	Truck Route Permit	Use of city streets by vehicles that exceed weight limits (e.g., for construction)

Continuous improvements

When first launched, the Accela Citizen Access online portal was available for the public to review permit details, but online submittals were not yet enabled. With the COVID-19 pandemic and associated response in early 2020, online customer access became more critical. Staff created a new online pre-application tool for building-related permits, so that customer submittals could be vetted for basic compliance with plan set

requirements before commencement of building permit review. Additionally, "simple" record types, which have fewer submittal requirements and can be reviewed more quickly (e.g., encroachment permits), were enabled for direct online submittal.

In addition, new internal and external features were added to enable digital permit review and issuance. Most notably, the DigEplan electronic document review system enables staff to mark up project plans and other submittals with the specific corrections and clarifications needed. This electronic review system was linked with an operational change that requires all plan checkers (building, planning, engineering, etc.) to deliver one comprehensive set of comments, so the applicant is receiving all corrections at the same time.

Communications (i.e., automated emails sent by the system) have also been an area of focus and improvement. For example, building permits now include a detailed summary of all requirements for issuance, and this is sent at both the initial application intake as well as at the pre-issuance review stage. A dedicated mobile app was also added in May 2022 to facilitate contractor requests for inspection.

In the spirit of continuous improvement, additional record types have been added, with a focus on anything that benefits from online submittals and fee payment, addresses an existing operational gap or responds to new actions required by State law. Specifically, Table 2 relays the 12 record types that have been implemented since the original system launch.

Table 2: New record types implemented since system launch		
Work unit	**Record type**	**Description**
Building	Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) Pre-Approval Review	In response to Assembly Bill 1332, 2023
Building	Building Pre-Application	Primary gateway for initial building submittals
Building	Construction Investigation	Covers reports of illegal construction as well as inadvertent damage from calamity
Building	Limited Plan Check/Residential HVAC	Replacement of original Residential Furnace record, to also cover condensers and heat pumps
Building	Photovoltaic Real-Time	In response to Senate Bill 379, 2022
Planning	Temporary Outdoor Use Permit	Initial pandemic response to interest/need of businesses for outdoor operations; not currently in use
Public Works	Commercial Storm Water	Standardizes the annual collection of infrastructure fees on certain properties
Public Works	Film Permit	Implements Municipal Code update regarding this type of activity
Public Works	Newsrack Permit	Implements Municipal Code update regarding this type of activity
Public Works	Streetary Permit	Permanent program for outdoor eateries, replacing the Temporary Outdoor Use Permit record type
Public Works	Water Connection (Menlo Park Municipal Water)	Requests for new or modified water connections within the Menlo Park Municipal Water service area
Public Works	Wireless Facilities Permit	Implements Municipal Code update regarding this type of activity

The Special Events Permit record type was also enhanced as part of its transfer to the police department. Additional record types are currently under consideration, including Building/Change of Address and Public Works/Fire Flow Request records.

Real-time reporting
The reporting capabilities provide a robust and dynamic platform for tracking, analyzing, and managing a wide range of permitting operations. With customizable dashboards and advanced analytics tools, the system enables City staff to efficiently monitor workflows, permitting processes and fee trends. Accela's reporting features also support compliance tracking and transparency, offering detailed insights into project timelines, performance metrics and community impact. Staff can generate real-time reports tailored to specific departmental needs, ensuring data-driven decision-making and improved service delivery for residents and businesses. The platform's integration with GIS further enhances reporting by visualizing spatial data and enabling a deeper understanding of trends across the city.

Usage
Overall usage of the Accela Civic Platform has been consistent, as shown in Table 3. Aside from higher record numbers in fiscal year 2020-21 (when there may have been a burst of permit activity following the most significant COVID-19 restrictions in early 2020), the total number of records per fiscal year has been around 4,500, with the building division the most active unit.

Table 3: Total records by fiscal year (FY)					
Work Group	FY 2020-21	FY 2021-22	FY 2022-23	FY 2023-24	FY 2024-25 (year to date)
Building	3,635	3,279	3,282	3,376	1,981
Planning	150	132	117	111	74
Police	44	17	4	12	15
Public Works	1,073	996	1,025	984	564
Special Events	3	20	21	24	12
Total	**4,905**	**4,444**	**4,449**	**4,507**	**2,646**

Customer feedback
In anecdotal terms, applicants have relayed overall positive feedback about the Accela platform, specifically the ability to apply for permits, pay fees, resubmit documents, and receive communications through the platform, including during non-business hours. Some frustrations have also been relayed, such as with occasional service outages and configuration glitches. Staff work to respond to feedback, whenever possible, to continuously improve the system. This includes looking for opportunities to simplify and standardize operations. For example, when developing a new Accela application type to address an existing process, staff review each step in the process to see if it is still necessary or can be eliminated and automate actions wherever possible.

Future considerations
The City may consider a customer survey tool after completing an online application process to help capture overall customer satisfaction and opportunities for continued improvement. If the City were to pursue an alternative land management system rather than renewing the agreement with the Accela Civic Platform at the end of the current term in 2028, this would require a multi-year planning process. This process would include assessing the City's needs, restructuring workflows, conducting the solicitation itself, preparing for data migration, executing a transition plan to ensure uninterrupted services, configuring the new software, and training staff on the new system.

Impact on City Resources

The current agreement with Accela is for a not-to-exceed total amount of $1,496,598 over a period of five years, or $299,320 per year, for a term ending in November 2028. No new costs are associated with this informational update.

Environmental Review

This action is not a project within the meaning of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines §§15378 and 15061(b)(3) as it will not result in any direct or indirect physical change in the environment.

Public Notice

Public notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with the agenda items being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting.

Attachments

A. Hyperlink – Oct. 10, 2023 Staff Report #23-231-CC:
menlopark.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/3/agendas-and-minutes/city-council/2023-meetings/agendas/20231010-city-council-special-and-regular-agenda-packet-w-pres.pdf#page=105

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