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Building Officials Receive an Immediate Return on Investment from new Leading-Edge Permitting System

Case Study: Borough of Emmaus, PA

The fourth quarter of 2019 brought two big improvements to the office of Borough Manager Shane Pepe in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. First, veteran code official Ryan Wessner moved in September from Shakopee, Minnesota, to the Borough of Emmaus. He was picked for his building code and IT expertise. Second, the team from ICC Community Development Solutions installed the Munity[®] software in the Borough's Building Department in October.

That, says Wessner, was a big step forward. And as governments experienced community shutdowns in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the installation of the Munity cloud-based interactive system and its multiple functions allowed Emmaus' building department and fire service to continue working safely and efficiently with less direct in-person interaction.

"Everything is automated. It's extremely useful," he said. "Thank God we had this program installed in October. Plus, it works better than what we had before."

Wessner said cities that haven't integrated and updated their inspections process to a one-stop, cloud-based and interactive online processing system should be feeling the pressure to make the upgrade earlier than planned.

"The public probably doesn't notice how much they've been better served," Wessner said. "We see it. When you do things right and things run smoothly, people don't notice. Of course, when the reverse happens, you hear about it."

The move to Pennsylvania was a homecoming for Wessner, who came from this state. Emmaus looks like a rural town with a population of more than 11,400, nestled at the base of South Mountain in the Lehigh Valley. Near Allentown, it's an oasis with a Pennsylvania Dutch heritage at the western edge of the sprawling suburbia between Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York City. The community is proud of its buildings, its historic and thriving downtown, and a quiet quality of life. It was listed as one of the Top 100 "Best Places to Live" by Money magazine and has twice won the Delaware Valley Green Building Council's Sustainable Community Award. The Borough is also proud of its community services which was why upgrading to Munity was important in 2019.

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Back in Minnesota, Ryan Wessner was the building official for Rice County, just below the southern perimeter of the Twin Cities metro region. The office used a mobile permitting software to process and record building permits and other processes. Wessner became proficient with the system, but it lacked capabilities that make Munity a more universal and robust system. The data collection and access is important, but Wessner also likes that it can branch out into other city government functions and allow for quick, easy recall of a property's history and interaction with city services.

Gone are the stacks of application papers, drawers full of case files and boxes of archived papers. Keeping track of files, field inspections, permits and payments is much easier. The system has online capacities for the public to file for permits and provide information easily from home, he said.

"They can go online and complete an application. We approve it, and then it moves to the permitting system and add information as their project moves along. And we can track the fees," he said. "Nothing is getting lost. It just stays in one system."

It has proved to be especially handy for the building office staff. So far, there are three employees using the system regularly. The city fire service is also integrated with the system. Branching out to other departments' functions, like sewer system services, is in the works. That expands the scope of the files and connects Borough employees to more enriched information to make evaluations and base decisions.

"As of right now, we are trying to integrate with lateral inspections in the sewer system," he said. "Anything you want to do on that parcel, you can tie more services into it—the history of the property, the history of its occupants, photos and maps are easily called up. Zoning officers and billing officers can tie into it. You can find out what permits have been issued, what happens with inspections and the reports. You can find out whether there have been violations issued or if there's a complaint or a property maintenance problem. That's all

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valuable in determining what's going on with that property."

The Muncity system is used by the Borough's fire inspections service. It's helpful in obtaining and adding records for one-year, three-year, and five-year reports on commercial buildings.

"Muncity is more interactive with code enforcement and property maintenance. You can issue letters, track what departments have done with a particular location. It goes into a parcel. You can build files based on an address. All of our actions are in that parcel, and whatever has happened before is in there. It's simplified the tracking and created an archive for the parcel."

Also very important to the Borough's building inspection office has been a history of solid technical support from the Muncity team at ICC Community Development Solutions. Common complaints of other systems have been they don't have the wide scope of functions and information that Muncity has, or that a system was oversold or doesn't integrate with other office software. There is also no history of waiting weeks for service reps to call back when there's a problem or a question.

For the Borough employees, it's been an adventure to find out how versatile Muncity can be in performing new functions in other city offices.

"As far as customer support has been, there's a really good email connection online on their website. Their code guys are very prompt. Haven't had any issues," Wessner said. "They really want to work with you. They email and call right away. The story about the other system we had is we wouldn't receive answers for weeks at a time."

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