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From Hundreds to Thousands of Inspections: How Pittsburgh Is Winning the Permit Game.

It was once practically impossible to get a building inspected in the city. Now it's easier than ever.

Government agencies are always talking about ways to make their operations more efficient and less frustrating to deal with. But very few have managed a change in culture as dramatic and expansive as the one that's taken place in Pittsburgh's building inspection department.

When Bill Peduto was elected mayor in 2013, the department was known as a backwater. Inspectors didn't have cellphones. Or computers. Or even email addresses. Contractors and residents hoping to arrange an inspection would have to play telephone roulette, hoping to find someone at a desk who could pick up the phone. Given the nature of the department's work — going out and inspecting things — this was often an exercise in futility. Developers sometimes waited up to 12 weeks just to make an appointment.

Now Pittsburgh's inspectors are equipped with modern communication tools, and the department is moving toward online permits. Just being able to send text messages to inspectors makes an "amazing" difference, says contractor Chad Sipes. "Before, the system was terrible," he says. "They were so out of touch, it would hold up the project. I'm not saying the system has changed to the point where they'll be there the next day, on demand, but at least you have the chance to schedule something."

In addition to communicating with the outside world, the department has revamped its internal use of technology. Not that long ago, enforcement work was all done on paper. An inspector would take a form out into the field and then jot down some notes that might get typed up later. Now the entire system is mechanized, with complaints logged and tracked in a database. Where the department used to perform a couple of hundred inspections a month, referring about 30 cases to the courts, it now handles thousands per month, with 800 cases sent to the courts. "It's dramatically more efficient, while using the same amount of people," says Maura Kennedy, who directs the department.

Maybe it's the same number of people, but it's a different cast of characters. There's been 50 percent turnover since Kennedy took over three years ago. Every job description in the agency has been changed, with employees old and new undergoing extensive training. Employees have received more than 150 additional certifications over the past two years. That means that instead of having to send five different people out to check on various aspects of a project, the department can now send out one person who holds five certifications. Because the agency had been known in the past as a black hole for training, the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry happily provided a \$37,000 grant to help the process along.

All of these improvements make the department run more smoothly. More important, they aren't getting in the way of the city's building boom. Thanks to Pittsburgh's recent emergence as a tech center and a magnet for millennials, the number of building permit applications has been growing by

20 to 30 percent during each of the three years Peduto has been in office.

If applicants were still having to stalk inspectors, countless projects would have been delayed. “The old building inspection bureau never would have been able to handle this growth,” says City Councilman Dan Gilman. “It wasn’t set up to do it.”

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