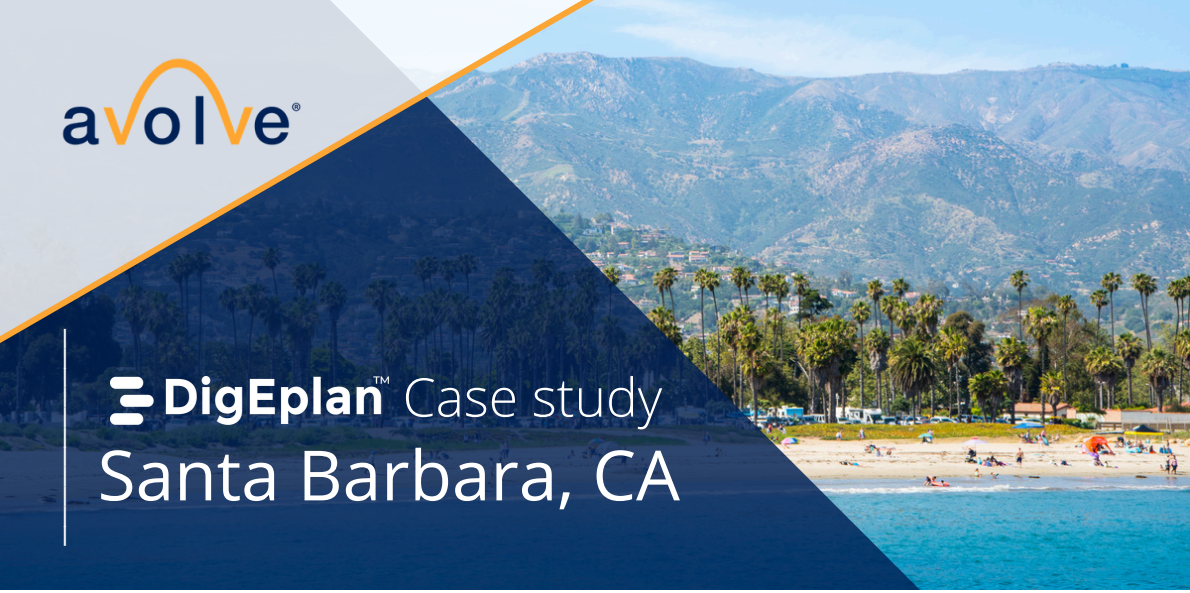

DigEplan™ Case study
Santa Barbara, CA

The City's building division reduced application acceptance timelines by approximately 35% within the first year of using DigEplan, eliminating manual document handling and giving front-office staff back hours of their day."

Before upgrading to Avolve, the City of Santa Barbara had already transitioned to digital permitting through Accela—a shift that expanded access for applicants but also revealed limitations in the City's internal plan review workflows. Internal departments relied on different tools and processes for plan review, which created inconsistency for staff and sowed confusion for applicants. Following the transition to the new Accela Cloud platform, Santa Barbara realized it was time for a dedicated electronic plan review software.

Fragmented Plan Review Workflows

While having a permitting system in place was a great start, Santa Barbara's lack of an electronic plan review system translated to disjointed, fragmented plan review experiences where various reviewing parties cobbled together their own ad-hoc systems.

Building staff entered comments as conditions in Accela, while Public Works had their own system, relying on a basic PDF tool.

As Santa Barbara's IT Applications Analyst Nicole Folman described, "each group was doing something different," which made the process difficult to support, hard to standardize, and impossible to scale.

These inconsistencies became more apparent as plan sets grew larger and more complex for the growing city. Staff experienced lagging performance issues when opening files, particularly when working remotely. The PDF reader they used "was super slow with large plan sets," Folman said, noting that reviewers regularly voiced concerns about their ability to effectively complete plan review. For many reviewers, simply opening plans became a bottleneck in the review process.

Administrative Burden Fell on Front-Office Staff

Since Santa Barbara brought on a digital permitting system without an electronic plan review tool that allowed for markups, applicants actually lost clarity as the City digitalized their community development workflows.

Without visual markups, staff relied on long text-based correction letters where they tried to explain the changes requested on additional sheets of paper to correspond back to the plan set. But this approach, comparing drawings to text-based descriptions, required applicants to interpret where the issues were within large plan sets.

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"Our corrections weren't always clear to the applicant because they were on a completely separate Word doc," Rutledge explained. "We would write out a sheet explaining the corrections, but the applicants would ask, 'where on the sheet'? Now imagine that with a 30-page plan set. Having a permitting system without a plan review tool was not a great system," she added.

The manual nature of this process created a huge administrative burden that most heavily fell on front-office permit technicians. Responsible for intake and completeness checks, staff were required to download files, rename them to meet record-keeping requirements, re-upload documents, and manually preview plan sets.

"It was such a headache," Rutledge said, adding, "It was essentially someone's entire job."

The slowdown showed up in the numbers. Application acceptance times rose sharply in 2022 and stayed elevated through 2023, as plan volume grew and front-office staff absorbed more manual work.

As the workload increased, these inefficiencies compounded. "There was a time when our counter staff created a click count in an Excel spreadsheet to count how many clicks they were having to do just to go through their process," Rutledge said. "That's how frustrated they were."

Santa Barbara Selects Avolve's DigEplan for Its Integrations and Markup Ability

To address these challenges, Santa Barbara concluded that an electronic plan review solution was needed and evaluated several solutions. The goal was to streamline the plan review process itself, reduce the administrative burden placed on staff, and improve the overall user experience for applicants.

Ultimately, the City selected Avolve's DigEplan for its tight integration with Accela, its ability to support true plan markups, and the product's straightforward licensing model.

Implementation focused first on Building and Public Works, with Fire participating as a reviewer and Planning positioned for future adoption**.**

Santa Barbara partnered with GovPath as their implementation partner to handle the transition.

"They were super knowledgeable and always had answers to our questions. If the answer wasn't yes, they always had an alternate solution that would work just as well, if not better," Folman said.

Avolve Brings 35% Faster Intake and Clearer Reviews to Santa Barbara

With Avolve's DigEplan in place, reviewers can now markup plans directly and return visual comments tied to specific locations on the drawings. Since making the switch to Avolve, Santa Barbara's applicants now receive markup reports that highlight only the sheets with comments, making corrections easier to understand.

Rutledge noted that feedback from local architects has been especially positive. "They absolutely love that we have an easy-to-read markup report," she said.

The impact on front-office operations was immediate—and measurable. Santa Barbara experienced a 35% reduction in application acceptance time comparing the year before DigEplan to the year after implementation. "It's significantly cut our time," Rutledge said, referring to the reduction in time spent managing files and waiting for documents to load.

In addition to these significant time savings and efficiency gains, DigEplan has also improved coordination among reviewers. By placing all comments directly on the plan set, staff can more easily see one another's feedback earlier in the process. Rutledge explained that this visibility helps reviewers consider how their comments may affect others, calling it "really helpful" for collaboration.

And from an IT perspective, consolidating plan review into a single system has simplified support. Folman noted that instead of trying to understand multiple workflows, "it's just nice to be confident that I know the system," she said.

As Santa Barbara continues to modernize its development services, Avolve has become a core component of that effort bringing clearer reviews, faster intake, and more consistent experience for everyone involved, all the while reducing application acceptance times by approximately 35%.

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