



**Internal Audit Report**

**Pinal County**

**Development Services Review Follow-Up**

**December 2024**

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# Pinal County Development Services Review Follow-Up Internal Audit Report

## Executive Summary

### Background

Pinal County Internal Audit performed a follow-up on the observations identified in the third-party Development Services (formerly Community Development) Review performed in March 2022 to evaluate the current state of the observations and the related actions that have been taken.

In March 2022, Pinal County engaged Glancy Consultants to review processes, procedures, and staffing levels in the Pinal County Development Services Department. To understand the issues, meetings were held with members of the Board of Supervisors, County and Department management and staff, and many customers including owners, developers, and engineers. Historic and current data was reviewed to determine the types and volumes of permits being issued and current timelines for various project types.

Per the FY22 third-party review performed by Glancy Consultants, the following is a brief description of the major issues noted:

- Intake and review of plans takes too long.
- The site plan and zoning preapplication processes do not give adequate direction for development of commercial and subdivision projects.
- It is difficult to get a return call or clear answer from staff in some sections.
- The delay in assignment of parcel numbers by the County Assessor negatively impacts productivity and delays permit issuance.
- Many permit types are not fully implemented in Accela.
- Customers have a difficult time navigating the online system.
- There is a lack of sufficient reporting or automation.
- Some divisions are understaffed.

Since the Glancy Consultants review, Pinal County has made significant strides in continually improving its processes. One of the primary efforts has been enhancing its Accela electronic permitting system. The process improvements include:

- **Transition to Cloud:** Moved from an on-site Accela system to a cloud-based version to increase efficiency and reliability. The cloud version went live in June 2024 after finalizing a 10-year contract with Accela in September 2023.
- **Collaboration and Benchmarking:** Engaged with various stakeholders, including Accela and other Arizona entities, to share challenges and best practices. Pinal County has taken cues from Pima County's earlier transition to the cloud and has maintained ongoing discussions for continuous improvement.
- **Training and Workflow Optimization:** Staff have been receiving online training with progress tracked weekly. Internal efforts are focused on enhancing workflows and automating processes to reduce the need for manual intervention.
- **Software Enhancements:** Adopted additional software tools like DigEPlan for electronic plan review, VuSpex for virtual inspections, and Forte for integrated payment processing to streamline the permitting process.
- **Customer Experience:** Launched the Accela Premium Experience, a customer-facing portal designed to simplify system navigation and improve the permitting experience.
- **Future Innovations:** Coordinating with Accela to test AI options and exploring new Accela modules for improve functionality for items such as restaurant inspections.

These measures aim to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and user-friendliness of Pinal County's electronic permitting system.

# **Pinal County Development Services Review Follow-Up Internal Audit Report**

## **Scope, Objective and Approach**

### **Scope**

The scope of the Pinal County Development Services Review Follow-up included the 2022 third-party Development Services review and current state of the Pinal County Development Services Department.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this review were to:

- Perform follow-up procedures on FY2022 third-party findings related to Development Services:
  - Inquiry with process owners
  - Documentation of remediation activity
- Evaluate actions taken to determine if action plans have mitigated the risks identified

### **Approach**

A summary of procedures performed during this internal audit included:

- Conducted process and internal control interviews around open observations for each process.
- Confirmed status of open observations with key personnel.
- Obtained evidentiary support, if applicable, to validate that open observations have been addressed in accordance with Management Action Plans.
- Established methods of addressing any open observations in a timely manner.

## Pinal County Development Services Review Follow-Up Internal Audit Report

### Summary of Results

Overall, the procedures performed by Internal Audit to follow-up on prior audit observations has affirmed that:

- 27 of 55 observations have been addressed and are considered closed
- 28 of 55 observations are in progress

Accordingly, 50% of the total previous open observations have not yet been fully completed by Management as of the date of Internal Audit's review. Although 28 observations are in the open status, Internal Audit noted 24 of the 28 (86%) open observations are 50% or more complete. Below is a summary of the % complete and a count of the open observations. Detailed information on Open Glancy Consultants observations is provided on pages 5 - 12 for reference.

Percent Complete	# of Open Findings
76% - 99%	17
51% - 75%	7
26% - 50%	3
0% - 25%	1

## Development Services Review and Status – Open Observations

The following table outlines all open observations (Strategic Priority and Objective) from the Glancy Consultants Report, and a status update including estimated percent complete and estimated completion date from Pinal County Development Services Management.

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
1.1	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Assign one person to oversee changes and upgrades to ensure consistent permit types, workflows and customer facing information across all departments and divisions. Changes requested by one group should be vetted to see how they affect all other users.	<p>A workflow committee has been formed and meets weekly. The county customer interface is currently in process of being created on how to apply, etc.</p> <p>Two Accela Server Application Specialists have been assigned to Development Services. A Customer Service Manager has taken the lead on scheduling meetings and the creating the agendas while an Accela Application Specialist records and extracts requirements from involved groups.</p> <p>Additionally, there are bi-weekly meeting with Accela Managed Application Services.</p>	90% - December 2024
1.2	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Fully implement Engineering, Planning, Aquifer Protection, Building Code Compliance and Assurances into the system.	<p>The transition to the cloud-based version of Accela has been completed as of June 3. Additional functionality is in process of being added. The majority of workflow, statuses, and notifications have been revised since the transition has occurred. The workflows associated with the update are in the process of being approved and updated in the NonProd system for testing.</p> <p>Continuous improvement to the system occurs and is being tracked via Accela workbooks.</p>	90% - December 2024
1.3	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Create an Accela manual that includes minimum documentation and data entry expectations, status definitions, project hierarchies, and instructions for how to process all permit types. Provide training to all staff on the use of this manual and any updates as they occur.	<p>A workflow committee has been formed and is tasked with this. The Development Services team has completed updating checklists and forms, and they are currently functional, further enhanced through the workflow committee. Minimum documentation, data entry expectations, and instructions will come to fruition after the workflow is approved and finalized.</p> <p>Initial self-paced core curriculum has been laid out to active users within Accela. Management continuously monitors training progress on a weekly basis.</p> <p>In 2025, Policy creation will occur, and the manual will lay out the workflows and standard protocols.</p>	75% - September 2025

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
1.4	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Make more project and public records available to customers through the Accela Citizens Access portal (ACA). Having access to information like existing septic records, complaint status, Certificates of Occupancy, drainage reports and other geographic information system (GIS) information will enable customers to better prepare submittals without taking staff time for this research. Giving customers access to more permit information (project description, plan review and inspection status, review comments and results, etc.) will keep them informed on project progress and will significantly reduce calls to staff. Much of this information should be available to any registered user, not just the permit owner as is it is now.	Management noted redaction issue is a challenge, however, is planning to revisit with the attorney's office.	75% - June 2025
1.5	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Allow customers to obtain simple permits through ACA without staff involvement. Projects like minor mechanical repairs or replacements, electrical service replacements and plumbing fixture installations require no plan review and make up more than 10% of all issued permits. Allowing customers to enter their application, pay for the permit and schedule the inspection online, all without staff involvement, would improve customer service and save many hours of staff time.	Implementation has been completed. Workflow completion will occur by December 2024.  Additionally, a tiered permitting system has been implemented (major - 120 days, minor 60-90 days, and direct to permit - less than 10 days).	75% - December 2024
1.6	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Add demolition, manufactured home, grading and group home permits to the permits available online.	Manufactured Homes, TUPs, and grading are available online. Currently working on demolition, group homes, special density and septic. New processes will be captured by internal implementation team. These will be implemented in Phase 2.	90% - December 2024
1.7	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Include better descriptions and minimum submittal requirements, including a checklist, with each permit type in ACA so that customers are more likely to choose the appropriate permit type and to provide a complete submittal. Many of these minimum submittal requirement checklists will need to be developed.	New submittal bulletin is online with comprehensive list of submittal requirements. The County has purchased the Accela Premium Experience as part of the Cloud transition. All of the checklists, descriptions, workflows, and applications will be posted. Staff also intend to prepare self-help videos on key processes and submittals.	75% - May 2025

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
1.8	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Use Accela functionality to assign, route and monitor review status and to track review and inspection time on projects. The current process includes a combination of reports, spreadsheets and system generated emails to identify workload, and projects that slip through the cracks can be stuck for weeks without a review.	Underway, all divisions are now using Accela for these functions. Workflows and forms are currently being updated by the implementation committee. The Accela Application Specialists is responsible for tracking and training.	90% - December 2024
1.9	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Coordinate application and task statuses throughout the department. Revise application status to only change at major milestones. Currently, the application status changes with each completed review and the resulting status often confuses customers.	The system is being used and is working. The new system will require ongoing tracking and oversight. The cloud version of the software includes Accela insights software, a dashboard program to help monitor status updates for various workflows.	90% - June 2025
1.10	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Use related records to establish relationships between related permits on a project (SPR, Floodplain Use, Building Permit, etc.).	Continually working on this with the workflow committee. GIS has been incorporated into the system. Transition with GIS functionality is complete.  Additionally, training individual teams for relating records.  There will be a future effort to link parcel numbers.	75% - June 2025
1.11	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Use project names that better identify the project (in place of the owner's name). As an example, use the name of the business and a short description of the work being done on commercial projects. For residential projects, a brief description of the work being permitted (e.g. new house, detached garage or gas line repair).	As part of the transition, staff are working on a specific naming convention to ensure projects are easily identifiable. The implementation committee has discussed with the Accela Managed Application Services team to define the best way to handle this. Development Services also intends to implement a permit decision tool as part of the Accela Premium Citizen Experience landing page.	75% - June 2025
1.12	Properly implement Accela permitting system	Review process and workflow for plan changes (after permit issuance) to ensure Accela best practices are being used. Current workflow procedures change application status after each task is completed which affects the ability to determine the current status and notify customer when ready. It would be preferable to reduce application status changes.	The implementation committee is working on modifying workflows. These workflows will be used to work with the Accela Managed Applications Team to address workflow changes where needed. The intent is to improve efficiency and expedite permit issuance.	90% - June 2025

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
2.1	Streamline the Intake process	Evaluate minimum submittal requirements and train staff on the reasons for each requirement.	Staff has created and implemented a minimum submittal check list and sign off for customers. An implementation committee has been formed and meets weekly to work on workflows, checklists and Standard Operating Procedures for each approval type.	80% - June 2025
2.2	Streamline the Intake process	Eliminate reviews from workflow when possible, including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Air Quality from permits like rooftop solar and MPE</li> <li>o Aquifer Protection from permits like pools and repairs or projects on sewer</li> <li>o Flood Control from rooftop solar, MPE, remodels and pools not in floodplain</li> <li>o Addressing from projects with existing house and address</li> </ul>	Cloud implementation has made this streamlined. Air Quality may need to be included on the permit in certain situations involving extensive trenching. It's suggested to use a custom field on the record instead of incorporating it into the workflow. Management is in the process of updating.	90% - May 2025
2.3	Streamline the Intake process	Consider use of a virtual counter using Google Meets or a similar application to allow customers to meet virtually with counter staff to discuss their project, review submittal documents together and facilitate the acceptance of the application. As an example, Maricopa County Planning & Development has implemented a virtual counter using QMatic and Microsoft Teams.	Staff currently uses virtual platforms on a daily basis in multiple divisions to meet with applicants. Examples include Google Meets, GoTo Meetings, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom meetings.	50% - June 2025
3.1	Enhance the preapplication process	Mark up and go over site plan to clarify comments.	Separate committee that is evaluating site plan process. Will separate into 3 separate categories (major - 120 days, minor 60-90 days, and direct to permit - less than 10 days). This is currently in final review amongst County staff and has not been fully finalized for implementation. Discussions are on enhancing the tiered approach and the creation of checklists to help categorize the proper tier within the permitting system.  Additionally, DigEPlan will be implemented after purchase has been completed.	90% - December 2024

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
3.2	Enhance the preapplication process	Provide a list of required permits and any prerequisites.	Currently, review comments from each department are provided to the applicant to assist with the formal application and requirements from each division. Working on permit lists for site plans and plats. Recently established a mandatory post 1st review meeting to itemize deficiencies and outstanding needs. District Managers can assist by proactively reaching out to applicants within Supervisory Districts that need additional support or questions answered.	90% - December 2024
3.3	Enhance the preapplication process	Ensure the requirements are applicable to the project (no boilerplate).	See #3.1 above. Three-tiered approach and questionnaire will address this.	90% - December 2024
3.4	Enhance the preapplication process	Simplify traffic and drainage requirements for minor projects (for example, do not require a drainage or traffic study unless warranted).	See #3.1 above. Three-tiered approach and questionnaire will address this.  Specifically for traffic a memo has been created and drainage is currently under review.	90% - December 2024
5.1	Reduce delay in issuing Assessor's Parcel Number	An Assessor Parcel Number (APN) is required for permit issuance. It is vital that the time for issuance of APN's is reduced.	Currently waiting for permanent APNs, issuing temporary addresses to ensure they are as close to final as possible. This could involve assigning a provisional APN that could be finalized once the Assessor's Office completes their review. Development Services is working with the Assessor to mitigate this.	10% - June 2025
6.1	Coordinate offsite and onsite improvement inspections	Separate onsite development permit could be issued to track and inspect work outside of the building.	Discussion underway involving the fee schedule update. Public Works are now issuing both at-risk and formal grading permits. Inspections are provided by Public Works.	90% - June 2025
7.1	Allow third party approval for residential solar projects	Streamline solar permit review by getting SolarApp+, which is a program that allows customers to answer questions related to their installation to determine if the proposed project complies with current code; in order to approve their project and inspection list generated.	Management is currently working on an alternative plan. This new approach aims to address the situation more effectively. Payments are controlled by APS. Management has engaged a solar permitting company and obtained a quote. Currently in the evaluation phase of the quote.	50% - June 2025

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
8.1	Review manufactured home permitting process	Review fees to verify that department costs are being recovered for these permits.	The County hired MGT Consulting to perform a fee study update for Building Safety. The study is complete, but staff was asked to wait until 2025 to take before the BOS. In addition, Development Services are doing a fee study for Aquifer Protection Permits and are doing a fee study for all of the Development Services fees in 2025.	90% - June 2025
9.1	Reduce staff contacts per permit	Allow Homebuilders to use trust accounts so fees can be collected without a round of back and forth with the customer.	Finance has been working through this, there are concerns about the interface with the Treasurer's Office. This is a standard practice in other entities. The Treasurer's Office serves as the bank and needs to be a key part of this process. Development Services will need to follow their lead as to whether or not the County would pursue this option. Development Services is exploring other integrated payment options that are built into the Accela interface (i.e. Forte and PayPal).  Additional discussions with management are needed as homebuilder trust accounts present accounting challenges.	50% - June 2025
10.1	Increase staff training and accountability	Performance expectations set and measured to include productivity, quality/accuracy, response times and customer service.	Training modules have been established for all active Accela users. These include Civic Platform Basics, Working with Records, Workflow Management, Working with Fees, Managing Payments, Working with Inspections, People and Property, Working with Conditions, Working with Documents, Working with Filters, Working with Sets, Working with Activities, Working with Accela GIS Maps and Working with Accela Electronic Document Review.	90% - December 2024
11.1	Explore virtual inspections	Conduct video inspections using a mobile phone or tablet for simple or low risk inspections, minor projects and simple corrections.	Budget has been approved. The team is working with procurement to procure. Looking to purchase and have installed before the end of November. Inspector already hired to conduct virtual inspections. Have already used trial version. No learning curve needed, once installed will be able to utilize immediately.	90% - December 2024

#	Area for Improvement	Recommendation	Management Status Update	Estimated % Complete and Completion Date
12.1	Review Zoning Ordinance requirements	Zoning Ordinance should be modified to better define the building setback and how it is applied.	The Zoning ordinance is currently being updated by Michael Baker International. Draft language in the zoning code update is intended to clarify this issue. Setback measurement has been changed to measurement from the foundation/stem wall. In January 2025 a Zoning Code update will be out for public comment. Anticipated adoption of full zoning code modifications is Fall 2025. If Board desires, a separate text amendment can be run sooner.	90% - September 2025

## **Appendix A: Statement of Limitations**

This report (e.g., report of findings/recommendations, table, chart, summary) provides Pinal County management with information about the condition of risks and internal controls at one point in time. Future changes in environmental factors and actions by personnel will significantly and adversely impact these risks and controls in ways that this report did not and cannot anticipate.