



Anna Rolnicki,
Vice President of Marketing,
Cloudpermit

Online Permitting Services: Southwold's Transformative Journey

Explore how the Township of Southwold realized greater efficiency by moving its building permitting process to the cloud.

The building departments in the Township of Southwold and the Municipality of West Elgin have set a new standard in Ontario. They have transformed community services with innovative technology.

In 2020, Southwold became one of the first Canadian adopters of the leading community development platform, Cloudpermit. Corey Pemberton, Southwold's Director of Building and Community Services, was one of the first users in Ontario. He helped shape the permitting and inspection software.

He now manages West Elgin's building department. They were already using Cloudpermit before he took on this role over a year ago. This made it easier for him to take on the extra responsibility.

This software has since become a cornerstone for modernizing permitting in these two areas.

Over the past four years, cloud-based tools have helped transform permitting services in Southwold by:

- Streamlining large development projects
- Saving significant time and resources
- Strengthening customer service
- Keeping stakeholders informed
- Improving efficiency

STREAMLINING LARGE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

A standout project in Southwold was the Amazon Fulfillment Centre, completed in 2022 and operational by 2023.



Pemberton conducted daily building inspections at the site for months on his tablet.

"Cloudpermit made managing the Amazon Fulfillment Centre project much simpler," said Pemberton. "It streamlined tracking past and upcoming inspections, helped us organize photos, and centralized all our notes. We could easily refer to these photos and notes to ensure everything was well-documented."

The online system kept all projects related to this massive development in one centralized location.

"Working in the cloud ensured our inspection dates were accurate and kept us organized throughout the project," he explained. "We're confident that Cloudpermit will allow us to handle any future renovation permits for this project with ease."

SAVING SIGNIFICANT TIME AND RESOURCES

In recent years, Southwold experienced a major building boom. Recently, construction has returned to a normal pace with several major projects now completed.

"Time savings have been major for our team," he explained. "Before Cloudpermit, we'd take notes on-site and then re-enter them at the office for an hour each day. Now, we complete all parts of the inspections with tablets in the field and save that hour."

During the Township's building boom, a major advantage was saving a lot of administrative time. Eliminating duplicate work also contributed significantly.

"The time we saved by going online probably prevented us from needing to hire extra staff during our building boom," Pemberton shared. "Without Cloudpermit, we would have struggled to find additional staff given the decreasing labour

market at the time. I'm uncertain how we could effectively manage the job without software like this."

Most local government departments are quite small, with over half having nine or fewer employees. When one person leaves, it can have a profound impact.

He explained with an example: In a team of five staff members when one retires, the software allows the government to manage more easily until a replacement is hired and trained.

"Online software doesn't replace boots on the ground," said Pemberton. "It helps departments make the most of their staff and time by making jobs easier and more efficient."

This is especially important in a market with limited staff. Efficient resource management and productivity have become critical in today's shrinking job market.

As a result, the right software can make a huge difference for governments in a tough spot.

STRENGTHENING CUSTOMER SERVICE

Both Southwold and West Elgin have seen significant benefits from transitioning to online residential building permits.

"We encourage homeowners and contractors to use Cloudpermit for scheduling inspections," noted Pemberton. "The feedback has been positive, with nearly 100% of permit applications and inspection requests handled online."

The communities offer in-person assistance at the government office for those who need it. This ensures everyone becomes comfortable with the system.

"Customer service is a top priority for us," he continued. "We want our community to feel comfortable using our online permitting services. So, we're always here to offer support and help them succeed."

Reflecting on his experience with other software providers, Pemberton noted, "I've used other platforms in the past and have found Cloudpermit to be the most user-friendly system. We have an easier time showing first-time applicants how to navigate this software than we have with other systems."

KEEPING STAKEHOLDERS INFORMED

Online tools help local governments keep stakeholders involved and informed.

Cloudpermit automatically notifies applicants of inspection status updates because most inspections are scheduled online.

"Our homeowners and contractors are immediately notified when there is an update to their inspection," said Pemberton. "We also number all deficiencies, so it's easier for them to

understand what needs to be resolved and they can quickly work to correct any issues."

This instant notification system enhances transparency and ensures all parties have a clear understanding of the project.

"Working in the cloud is great because we can switch between tasks without losing any information," he explained. "Everything saves automatically, so we can always come back to where we left off."

Real-time updates and notifications contribute to a more efficient workflow for everyone involved.

IMPROVING EFFICIENCY

There has been a shift in the last several years, especially since the pandemic, to find digital ways to work.

"We were always looking to move online, reduce paper, and achieve greater efficiency," emphasized Pemberton. "It's all about finding the right software partner, and Cloudpermit was that for us."

For the past four years, the Southern Ontario community has gained significant benefits from online services. This trend shows no signs of slowing down.

"Cloudpermit's team makes the time to listen and ensures we are using the best software we can," he concluded. "It's been four fantastic years, and I'm still impressed with the platform and love working with it."

Southwold and West Elgin are poised to adapt and thrive as technology evolves.

Looking ahead, the commitment to digital innovation promises even greater efficiencies and benefits. This progress can serve as a model for other governments aiming to modernize their permitting services. ■

Learn more at cloudpermit.com.

Anna Rolnicki is Cloudpermit's Vice President of Marketing. She uses her extensive marketing and communications experience to share important government stories. She can be reached at anna.rolnicki@cloudpermit.com.

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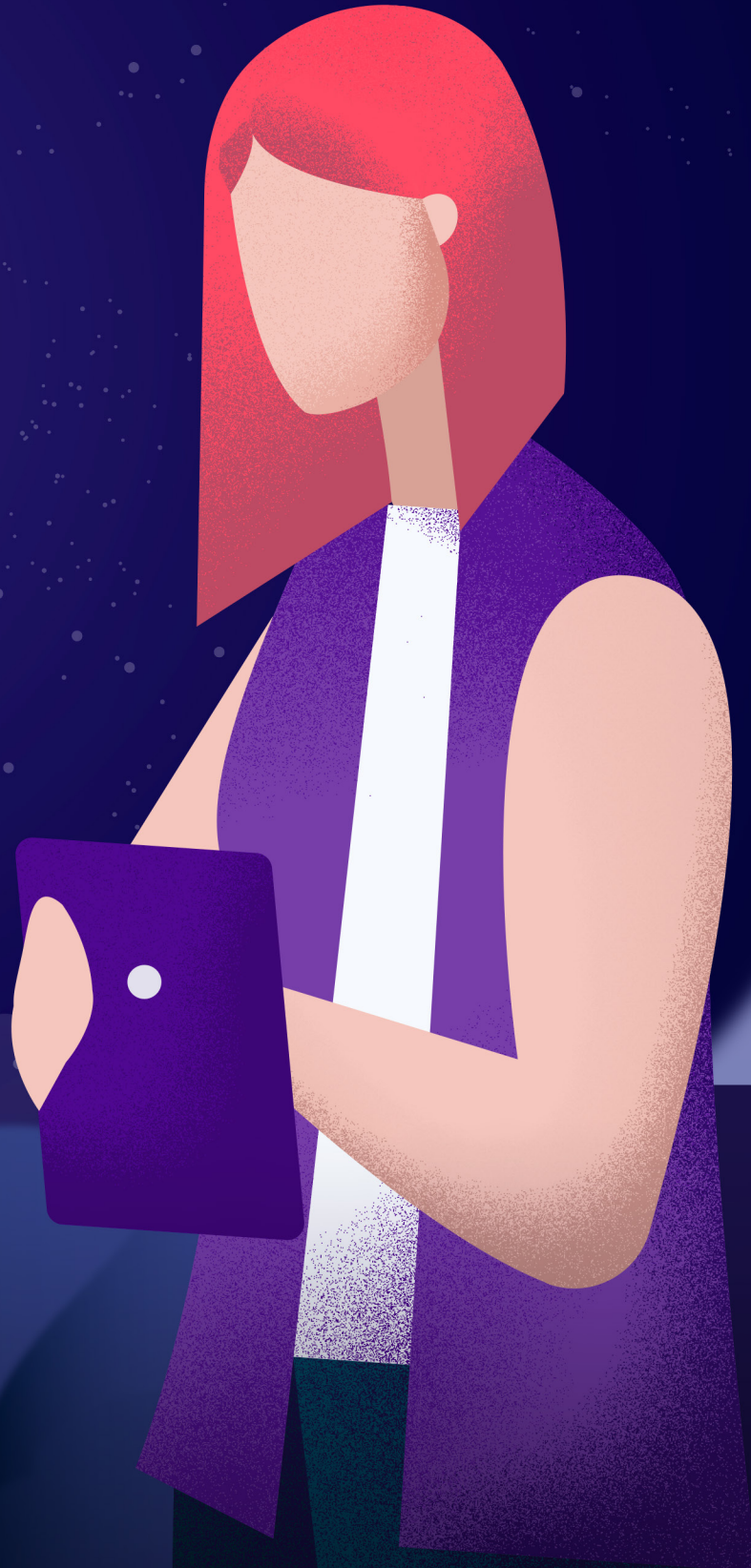
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