

Cities turn to phone apps to enforce zoning codes

by **Jim Walsh** - Mar. 13, 2011 08:16 PM
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With Valley cities straining under the weight of budget cuts, more are turning to smartphone applications to combat weeds, graffiti, green swimming pools and blighted houses.

The apps offer a high-tech way to improve government efficiency, eliminate red tape and focus efforts to enforce city zoning codes.

At a minimum, cities such as Phoenix, Mesa and Goodyear are viewing the apps as a way to improve communication with residents as smartphones multiply.

Avondale is at the forefront of this digital assault, using an app called PAM 1.0, developed by [App-Order.com](#). The app allows code-compliance officers to investigate complaints in a few easy steps and generate violation notices more efficiently.

Avondale code-compliance specialist Martha Ortiz demonstrated the system by using a smartphone to take a picture of a vacant house with a yard full of weeds. The phone's GPS recorded the address automatically. Ortiz then scrolled down a menu and checked the specific code violations.

Ortiz also can add notes to create a running log of inspections. When she returns to her office, she uses the information to generate a report that is mailed to the property owner.

The program is based on the technology initially developed by a sister company solely to combat graffiti.

Graffiti Protective Coatings currently has graffiti-abatement contracts with Avondale, Mesa, Goodyear, Tolleson, El Mirage, Tucson, Pima County and the Arizona Department of Transportation. Under its system, a city official or resident sends a GPS-coded picture of the graffiti, and a truck is immediately dispatched to remove it or paint over it.

Avondale agreed to be the test case for expanding beyond graffiti to all sorts of code violations.

"We're always looking for ways to make the code-enforcement officer's job more efficient," said Gina Ramos-Montes, Avondale's neighborhood and family-services director.

The Avondale app is named after Pam Altounian, Avondale's code-compliance manager, who developed a list of specifications for the program to make it useful to code-compliance officers throughout the nation.

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"It allows our citizens to send any concerns they may have. Communication is better with this program," Altounian said.

The app developers say they hear that often.

"Everywhere we go, people tell us, 'We dreamed about something like this,' " said Barry Steinhart, general manager of both App-Order.com and Graffiti Protective Coatings.

App-Order.com customizes the app for each city's use free of charge. Cities pay \$20 to \$50 a month for each employee using it.

Phoenix, Goodyear and Mesa are experimenting with the app, using a more cautious approach by making it available to residents for reporting a host of neighborhood issues.

More than 2,400 Phoenix residents have downloaded the app as a supplementary way to report graffiti, stolen shopping carts, trash and weeds, said Erynn Crowley, deputy director of neighborhood services.

"We have some regulars who use it all the time, and they love it," Crowley said.

But Crowley said Phoenix has no plans to purchase the full program, which would allow city officials to investigate complaints and issue citations.

"We're trying to be cost-conscious. We have a system that works," she said.

Mesa recently released to residents the app for reporting graffiti and potholes and other transportation issues. Previously, only about a dozen city employees had access to it.

Mesa has a more complete code-compliance

program under review and hopes to release it to residents for reporting purposes later this month.

"I'm a huge fan of the application," said Craig Blum, Mesa's field-operations superintendent. "We don't just use it for graffiti. We use it for (burned-out or broken) street lights. We use it for illegal dumps. What a tool and time saver it is for us."

Buckeye officials recently attended a demonstration of how the app works in Avondale.

Bart Weiss, manager of the utilities-support division for Hillsborough County, Fla., near Tampa, said that he has 35 employees from various departments experimenting with the app during a six-month trial period.

Weiss' goal is to encourage teamwork among employees whose jobs involve inspection and enforcement.

For instance, a code-compliance inspector could use the app to send information to the sheriff's office or the transportation department.

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Weiss said the county saves \$90 every time the app prevents another employee from being dispatched.

"It's easy to get specific, accurate information to the right people quickly," Weiss said.

In February alone, Hillsborough staff members generated 306 reports, he said. In the past, many employees might have ignored a problem they spotted because it wasn't part of their job or because it was time-consuming to call someone.

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