

BEYOND THE APP FOR THAT

By Amie Devero

There's an app for that! It's become the go-to answer for many modern municipal challenges. But often, that quick solution fails to address the real issue, and sometimes adds new problems for customers and municipal professionals alike.

In cities around the world, technology is being used to add efficiency, sustainability, better service delivery, and convenience. Public parking, especially under city umbrellas, is not immune to the fascination with all things tech. And like their departmental brethren, parking leaders can sometimes be overly fascinated with bells and whistles at the expense of addressing a challenge in the most comprehensive and strategic way. We've all seen the scenario in which a well-meaning parking department adds new access control and revenue collection equipment that solves a problem at a particular garage or street corner but fails to work with the existing citation equipment or can't interface with the city's finance department software. Revenue goes up, but tracking and reconciling it becomes a nightmare. These challenges typically cascade throughout an entire city enterprise, adding work and inefficiency even as they are intended to solve existing problems.

The reverse is also common. An enthusiastic city hall adds a new public works 311 app but fails to integrate it in such a way that department heads (including parking directors) can track repairs or maintenance requests generated by customers using the app. The solution creates a new problem even while the local newspaper lauds its coolness. Customers report issues, but only the reporting—not the response—is automated. Everyone, including the customer, ends up frustrated.

Stepping Back

Obviously, addressing the whole issue—including cross-departmental integration and enterprise-wide inclusion—is an expensive and a longer-term undertaking. That makes it daunting and less instantly gratifying. Our alternative is to keep doing things the same way, with a knee-jerk impulse to solve all problems with technology and without regard to the bigger picture. Leaving behind other departments and abandoning potential integrations that might ultimately produce genuine, enterprise-wide, long-term efficiency defeats the goal of sustainable growth and operations.

The more difficult, but better, approach is to take a step back and look at how it might be possible to

accomplish a sustainability or efficiency goal from a systems perspective. To compound the basic challenge of viewing things this way, everything in municipal government structure argues against that approach, as does everything in the commercial interests of service providers. For example, strategies are typically planned at the departmental or operational level without regard for the role of that function in the whole system. Procurement is also organized around functions and specs rather than overarching system cohesion. This reality is something every municipal leader confronts.

The status quo can be further reinforced by some vendors and their influence on the purchasing departments to which they sell. Because most vendors offer solutions within one or several functional areas, it is onerous if procurement specs demand a systematic solution, especially when the hope is for a multi-vendor, integrated architecture. Request for proposal (RFP) processes and the means by which vendors respond to them lack the flexibility to facilitate that kind of approach. No one is at fault. The problem is complex, and self-interests are at odds with the optimal way of approaching these needs.

For parking directors, the problem makes the task of adding sustainable improvements doubly hard. While everyone wants to add functionality and improve performance in his own area of responsibility, doing so without accounting for the entire system is short-sighted and can deepen the separation between silos. Resolving this tension between the view of the department and the entire municipal future needs to be front and center for all of us. Whether we are technology vendors, parking directors, consultants, purchasing agents, or city administrators, staying aware and committed to a cohesive, integrated, and connected future needs to be our watchword, even at the expense of short-term improvements. Going forward, we need to consider, discuss, and inquire into this issue. How we balance that commitment to integration and connectedness with our innate push for progress in our own areas goes to the heart of what it means to think about sustainability. **P**



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