



DIVISION OF INSPECTOR GENERAL

KEN BURKE, CPA

**Clerk of the Circuit Court & Comptroller
Pinellas County, FL**



INVESTIGATION OF BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT REVIEW SERVICES PERSONNEL ALTERATION OF A PERMIT RECORD



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October 14, 2025

Kevin McAndrew, Director, Building and Development Review Services

The Division of Inspector General's Public Integrity Unit has completed an investigation of the following allegation:

- The Respondent fraudulently altered a permit record.

Based on documented evidence, facts, and other evidentiary information, such as testimony, we concluded that the allegation was **unfounded**; it was proved to be false, or there was no credible evidence to support it.

The recommendations presented in this report may not be all-inclusive of areas where improvement may be needed; however, we believe implementation of the recommendations will strengthen the current internal controls.

We appreciate the cooperation shown by the staff of Building and Development Review Services and Business Technology Services during the course of this investigation.

Respectfully Submitted,

Melissa Dondero

Melissa Dondero
Inspector General/Chief Audit Executive

cc: The Honorable Chair and Members of the Board of County Commissioners
Barry Burton, County Administrator
Tom Almonte, Assistant County Administrator
Jim McKillen, Building Official, Building and Development Review Services
Ken Burke, CPA, Clerk of the Circuit Court and Comptroller

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
Predicate	5
Allegations	5
Background.....	5
INVESTIGATION ACTIVITY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	6
INVESTIGATION FINDINGS.....	9
1. BDRS Does Not Have A Formal Process For Violations When Occupants Must Be Removed.	9

ABBREVIATIONS

Accela	Accela Civic Platform
BDRS	Building and Development Review Services
BTS	Business Technology Services
CAO	County Attorney's Office
CO	Certificate of Occupancy
IG	Division of Inspector General
NOV	Notice of Violation
TCO	Temporary Certificate of Occupancy

INTRODUCTION

Predicate

The Division of Inspector General (IG) received a complaint that a Building and Development Review Services (BDRS) employee (Respondent) altered a permit record in Accela Civic Platform (Accela), the County's permitting software, to mislead a customer.

Allegations

The IG's Public Integrity Unit investigated the following allegation:

- The Respondent fraudulently altered a permit record.

To determine whether the allegation was substantiated, we reviewed policies, procedures, and appropriate records. We also interviewed staff and other parties, as needed. Our investigation was conducted in compliance with the Quality Standards for Investigations found within the *Principles and Standards for Offices of Inspector General* as published by the Association of Inspectors General and *The Florida Inspectors General Standards Manual* from The Commission for Florida Law Enforcement Accreditation.

Background

Accela is a web-based workflow management system that automates the permitting process from application to project completion. BDRS uses Accela to track permit documentation and send notifications to customers about their permits. Customers can access Accela using a unique log-in and see the status of any permit associated with their account.

In March 2025, the IG was conducting a separate review of the building permit cited in the allegation above (see Report # 2025-21). During that review, IG team members accompanied the BDRS Building Official on a site visit of the building. The Building Official noted several deficiencies, including life safety issues. BDRS issued a Notice of Violation (NOV) to the customer, since the customer was occupying the building without a certificate of occupancy (CO).

After receiving the NOV, the customer reported to the IG that they were surprised by the NOV since they thought the permit was appropriately being processed through BDRS. The customer provided two printouts from Accela to the IG, which they indicated were printed within minutes of each other. The two printouts showed different permit statuses. The customer alleged a BDRS employee fraudulently changed the status to support the previously issued NOV.

INVESTIGATION ACTIVITY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Division of Inspector General uses the following terminology for the conclusion of fact/findings:

- **Substantiated** – An allegation is substantiated when there is sufficient evidence to conclude the allegation is true.
- **Unsubstantiated** – An allegation is unsubstantiated when there is insufficient evidence to either prove or disprove the allegation.
- **Unfounded** – An allegation is unfounded when it is proved to be false or there is no credible evidence to support it.
- **Justified** – An allegation is justified when it is proved to be true. However, the actions were appropriate in the circumstances.

Allegation #1. The Respondent fraudulently altered a permit record.

As noted above, a BDRS customer reported that they accessed Accela and noted the permit status changed from “approved” to “closed-expired” within minutes. The customer provided printed screenshots of the two statuses, which can be seen here:

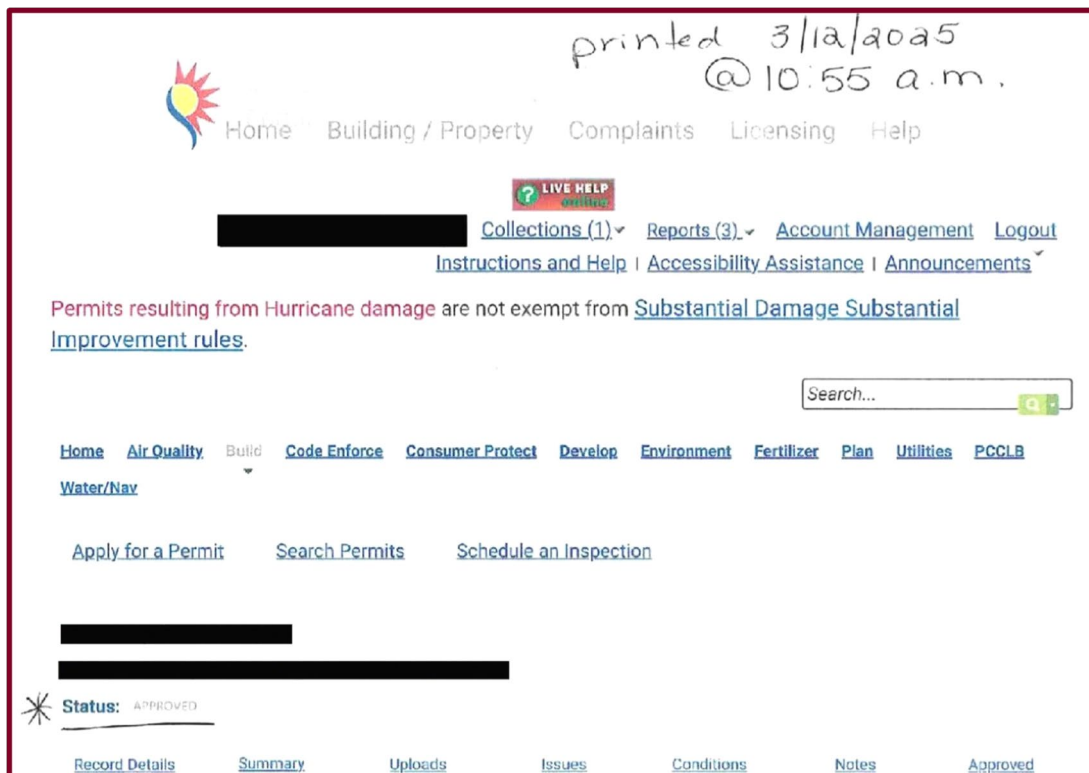


Figure 1 – Accela Screenshot 1

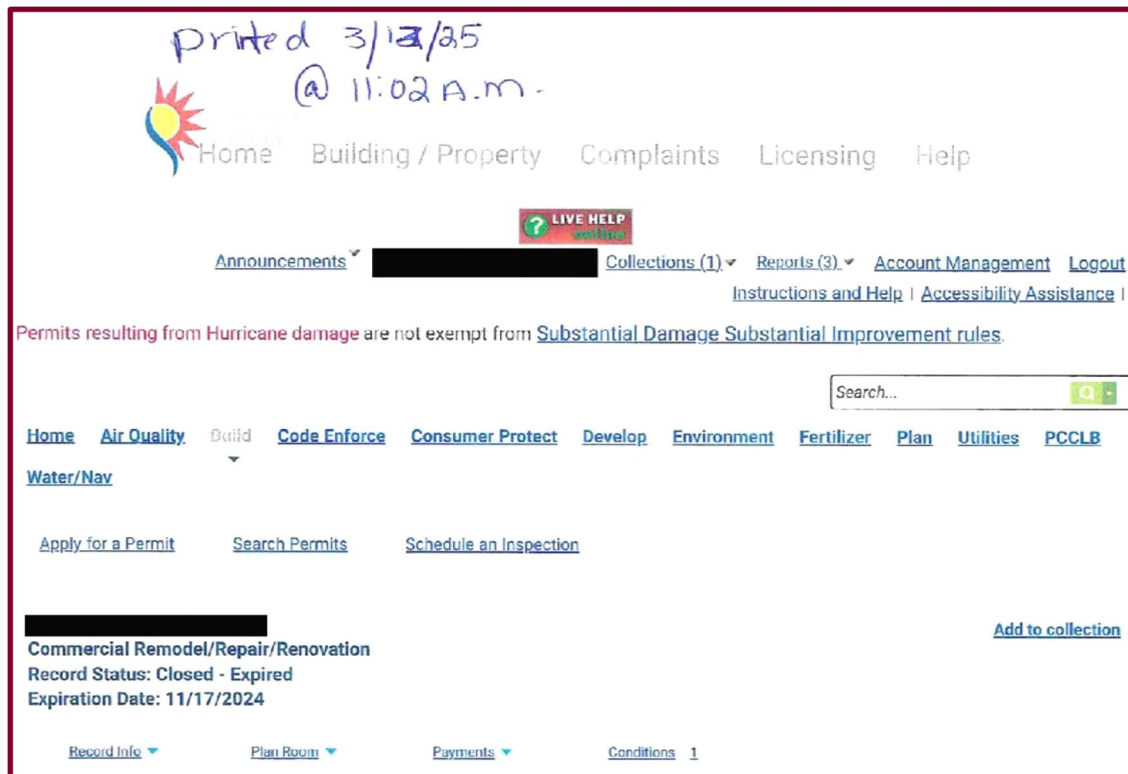


Figure 2- Accela Screenshot 2

We reviewed Accela and noted the application for the permit was deemed complete on November 29, 2023. We also noted that this building permit could not be in an “approved” status, as that is not an available status for building permits in Accela. Accela has the following statuses available for the permit on the external customer portal:

- Administrative Close
- CofC Issued [COC]
- CofO Issued [COC]
- Denied
- Expired
- Finaled
- Incomplete Submittal
- In Review
- Inspection Phase
- Issued
- Paid
- Pending
- Plan Review
- Ready to Issue
- Revisions Required
- Revoked
- Stop Work

- Submitted
- TCO Issued [Temporary Certificate Of Occupancy]
- Void
- Waiting for Applicant
- Withdrawn

We confirmed in Accela that the permit was “issued” on May 1, 2024, and was “closed-expired”¹ on November 17, 2024. We reviewed communications logs in Accela which showed email notifications were sent to the customer’s general contractor with warnings of the pending permit expiration 30 days prior to expiration, 15 days prior to expiration, and on the date the permit expired. BDRS management indicated Accela automatically expires permits after 180 days of no activity. We reviewed the status log, the workflow log, and the record logs in Accela and noted the Respondent had not entered any of the data contained in the logs.

We attempted to verify why the customer saw an “approved” status since it is not a building permit status available in Accela. We requested information from Business Technology Services (BTS) staff who manage Accela. BTS staff indicated that the status was most likely derived from the Digital Plan Room on the customer-facing side of Accela. The workflow log in Accela features a list of activities performed on the permit and shows several “approved” statuses for discipline-specific reviews.

Since the permit was not able to be in an approved status, and the Respondent had not edited any of the Accela logs, we determined the allegation was **unfounded**.

¹ We verified the “closed-expired” status using an internal Accela login. BTS indicated that in certain instances, Accela displays internal statuses on the external customer portal.

INVESTIGATION FINDINGS

1. BDRS Does Not Have A Formal Process For Violations When Occupants Must Be Removed.

BDRS does not have a formalized policy or procedures for processing an NOV that requires a building to be vacated. As noted earlier in the report, the IG accompanied the Building Official on a site visit in relation to an expired building permit. During the site visit, the Building Official noted there were life safety issues² and the customer was occupying the building without a CO. Therefore, BDRS was required to issue an NOV with a requirement that the customer had to vacate the building. The Building Official was unaware of the proper steps to take when issuing the NOV with a requirement to vacate and contacted the County Attorney's Office (CAO) for guidance.

After BDRS issued the NOV, the customer visited BDRS to reinstate the permit, and BDRS staff processed the reinstatement, so the customer believed the permit was active again. When BDRS management was discussing the reinstated permit, one of the managers indicated it should not have been reinstated; BDRS had to lock the permit and notify the customer that they were required to apply for a new permit. This resulted in less than satisfactory customer service and greater confusion for the customer.

BDRS management indicated there should have been immediate communication within department management or a lock on the permit so that staff knew the permit could not be reinstated. The Building Official indicated that there had never been an instance when they needed to notice an entity to vacate a building, and there was not a formal process for doing so. BDRS does have policies and procedures related to NOV's and indicated during our review that they would update them to include all necessary steps for vacating a property and ensuring staff are aware of the necessary actions.

Policies and procedures provide staff necessary guidance to perform departmental activities properly and provide management with the opportunity to ensure adequate processes and internal controls have been established. Written procedures help ensure staff perform activities consistently and according to management's expectations.

As noted above, in this scenario, the customer received misinformation that had to be corrected, which caused additional work for all parties. Without formal policies and procedures, there could be inconsistencies in how work is performed. In addition, when there are life safety or legal concerns, the County could be exposed to liabilities.

² Life safety issues noted were a second floor fire exit not properly installed and fire walls that had been completed but not inspected.

We Recommend Management:

- A. Update NOV policies and procedures to include the appropriate steps to take when occupants must vacate a building. This could include coordination with the CAO, proper communication within BDRS, and documentation in Accela to ensure that staff who access a particular permit or violation know the proper status.
- B. Provide training to staff on the policy and procedures developed in recommendation A.

Management Response and Action Plan:

A. Management Concurs.

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** James McKillen, Building Official, BDRS
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** Effective October 3, 2025

B. Management Concurs.

- ✓ **Individual(s) Responsible for Implementation:** James McKillen, Building Official and Cameron Vasser, Deputy Building Official, BDRS
- ✓ **Planned Implementation Completion Date:** Commences week of October 6, 2025 and will be included in on-going training sessions (no less than 2x/year) and will also be provided to all new employees that hold either a building inspector license or plan examiner license.



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