Process Improvement and Efficiency Potential

JANUARY14, 2026

Efficiency and Business Transformation Study

Contents

1.0 Executive Summary

The City of St. Helena (City) currently operates with a predominantly reactive management culture shaped by inconsistent processes, informal communication pathways, limited performance measurement, and a high dependency on individual knowledge. This creates operational variability, constrains capacity, and exposes the City to risk when turnover or competing workload demands occur.

This deliverable (3B) identifies a practical set of improvement and efficiency opportunities rooted in the development of a basic **Quality Management System (QMS)**. This includes strengthening Business Process Management (BPM), establishing a Daily Management System (DMS), implementing meaningful performance measures, and building foundational capabilities in project management, preventive maintenance, and knowledge transfer.

The Department of Public Works presents the greatest near-term operational and financial opportunity - particularly through implementing a Preventive Maintenance (PM) and asset management program. Administrative Services department requires standardization of core financial workflows and a clearer organizational structure. In addition, Community Development can promote greater consistency and improve customer experience by implementing expanded standard operating procedures, increasing portal utilization, and establishing more explicit expectations for turnaround times.

AI-enabled opportunities exist but must be aligned with real processes and actual staff needs. The most relevant use cases involve automation of administrative tasks, improved document/records navigation, predictive maintenance pattern detection, and support for customer-facing self-service solutions.

This report provides the foundation for Step 3D (technology modernization) and Step 4 (prioritized recommendations and roadmap). Together, these steps will help St. Helena shift from reactive operations to a more reliable, visible, and measurable operating system.

2.0 Introduction and Purpose

This deliverable, Step 3B – Process Improvement and Efficiency Potential, builds on the findings from the Current State Analysis (Step 1), the Information and Insight Analysis (Step 2), and the Organizational Structure and Staffing Component (Step 3A). It focuses on how the City of St. Helena can improve quality, reliability, and efficiency in the way services are delivered to residents and key stakeholders.

Its purpose is to identify the most significant improvement opportunities available to the City and to organize them within an overall QMS framework. The intent is to provide a fact-based understanding of where operational gaps exist, why they matter, and how they align with broader organizational goals.

This report will:

1. Describe the City's current management system and where gaps exist.
2. Provide enterprise-level and departmental-level improvement opportunities.
3. Introduce practical, low-complexity AI use cases aligned to real processes.
4. Connect opportunities to BPM maturity and the City's strategic objectives.

Insights from this report directly inform future deliverables: 3C (Cost Savings), 3D (Technology Modernization), and 4 (Recommendations and Prioritization).

3.0 Process Framework for Improved Efficiency

3.1. Quality Management System (QMS)

A high-functioning municipal organization typically operates within an explicit **Quality Management System** – a structured approach that ensures the City consistently meets customer expectations, statutory and regulatory obligations, and internal standards.

A practical QMS for a small city like St. Helena includes:

- **Organization Requirements** – Clear understanding of customer expectations and regulatory obligations.
- **Standardized and Documented Processes** – Workflows, SOPs, and defined handoffs.
- **Assigned Process Ownership** – Clear accountability for maintaining and improving processes.
- **Performance Measures** – Outcome and process indicators reviewed regularly.
- **Daily Management** – Visible, routine monitoring of operational status.
- **Structured Improvement Methods** – Common problem-solving tools and simple project management.

A QMS defines requirements, tracks compliance, and offers a structured response when standards are not met, helping departments organize improvement efforts.

Figure 1 – Quality Management System: Key Components and Relationships

3.2. Data Management System (DMS)

The City does not currently operate with a structured Daily Management System. As a result, work is often driven by immediate demands rather than planned operations. A basic DMS appropriate for St. Helena includes:

- **Daily or weekly huddles** to establish priorities, staffing, equipment readiness, and risks.
- **Readiness boards (MESS)** focused on Methods, Equipment, Supplies, and Staffing.
- **Visual indicators** of normal versus abnormal workflow.
- **Tiered escalation** to ensure issues are elevated and addressed.
- **Simple issue-tracking** to support root-cause analysis.

A DMS improves consistency, creates operational discipline, and narrows the gap between "what should be happening" and "what is actually happening."

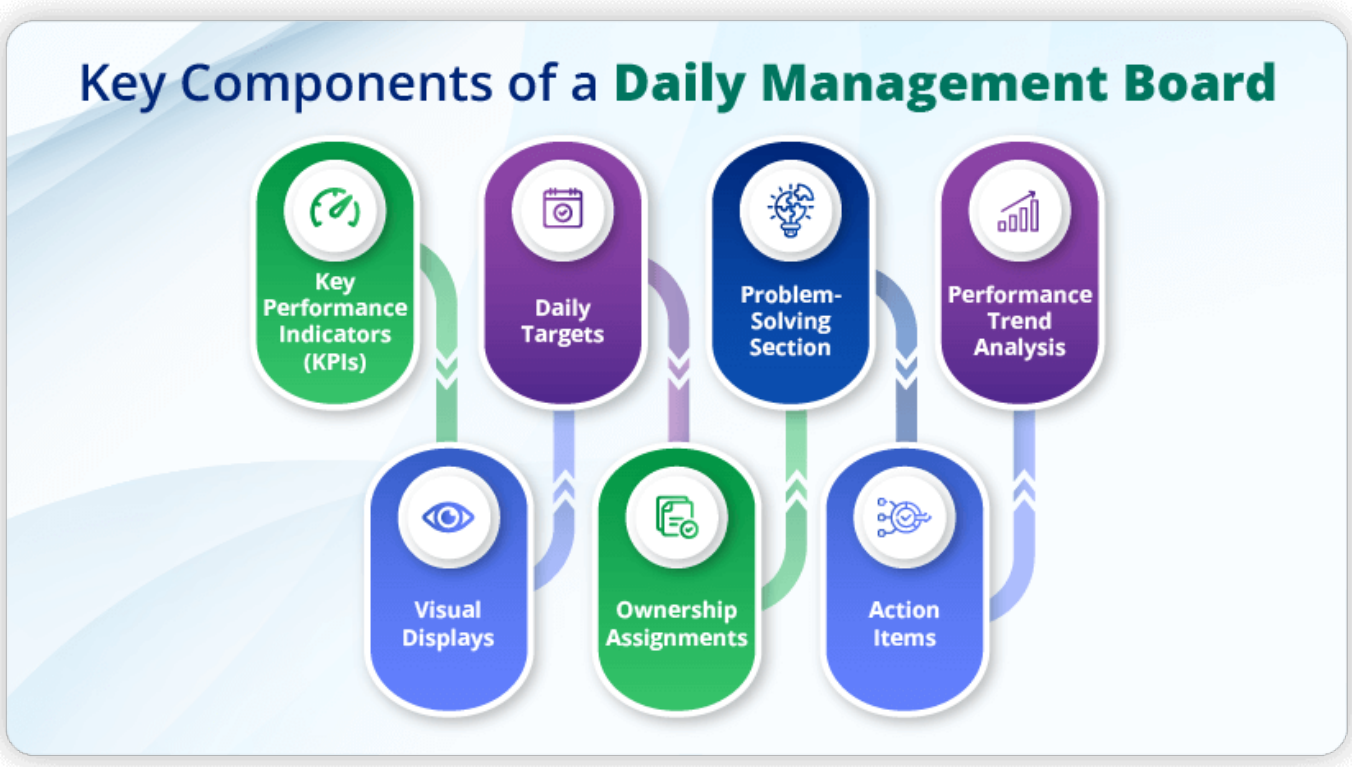
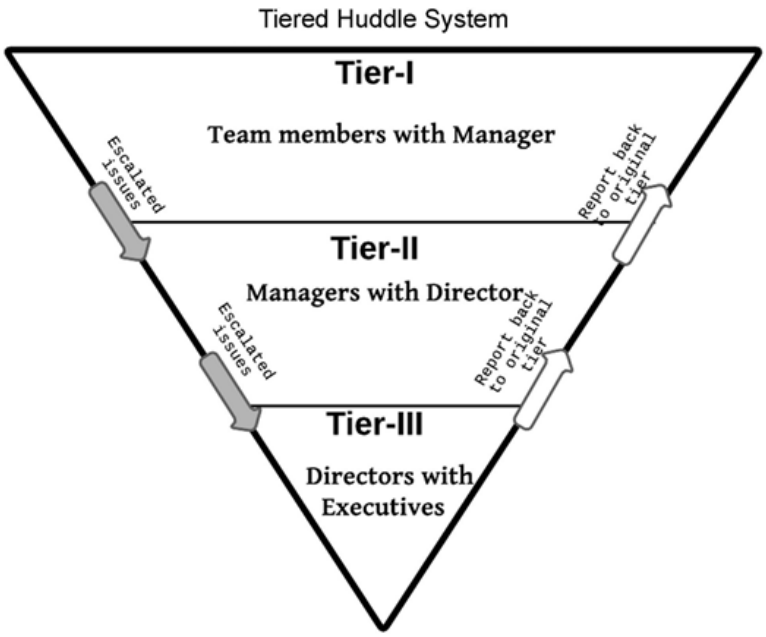


Figure 2 – Key Components of a Daily Management System: A Daily Management System board brings clarity and accountability to team operations by visually displaying key performance indicators, daily targets, problem-solving actions, and performance trends. It helps teams quickly identify issues, assign ownership, and track progress on action items.



A **Tiered Huddle System** creates structured, rapid communication channels at every organizational level, enabling frontline teams, managers, and executives to escalate issues, share updates, and align priorities efficiently. This approach ensures that problems are surfaced and resolved quickly, fostering a culture of transparency.

Figure 3 – Tiered Huddle System: This tiered huddle system would improve communication across City of St. Helena departments by ensuring timely issue escalation, clear information flow, and alignment from frontline teams to executive leadership.

3.3. Performance Measurement and Dashboards

St. Helena does not routinely use performance indicators to manage operations or inform decisions. Measures exist in many areas but are not:

- Consolidated
- Trended over time
- Reviewed regularly
- Used to drive improvement

The City will benefit from developing:

- A **City Manager's Dashboard** aligned to strategic priorities (See Figure 4)
- Department-level operational scorecards
- A performance review cadence (monthly or quarterly)
- Visual displays used in daily and weekly huddles

Measurement is the foundation for identifying variation, determining whether improvements are working, and prioritizing resources.

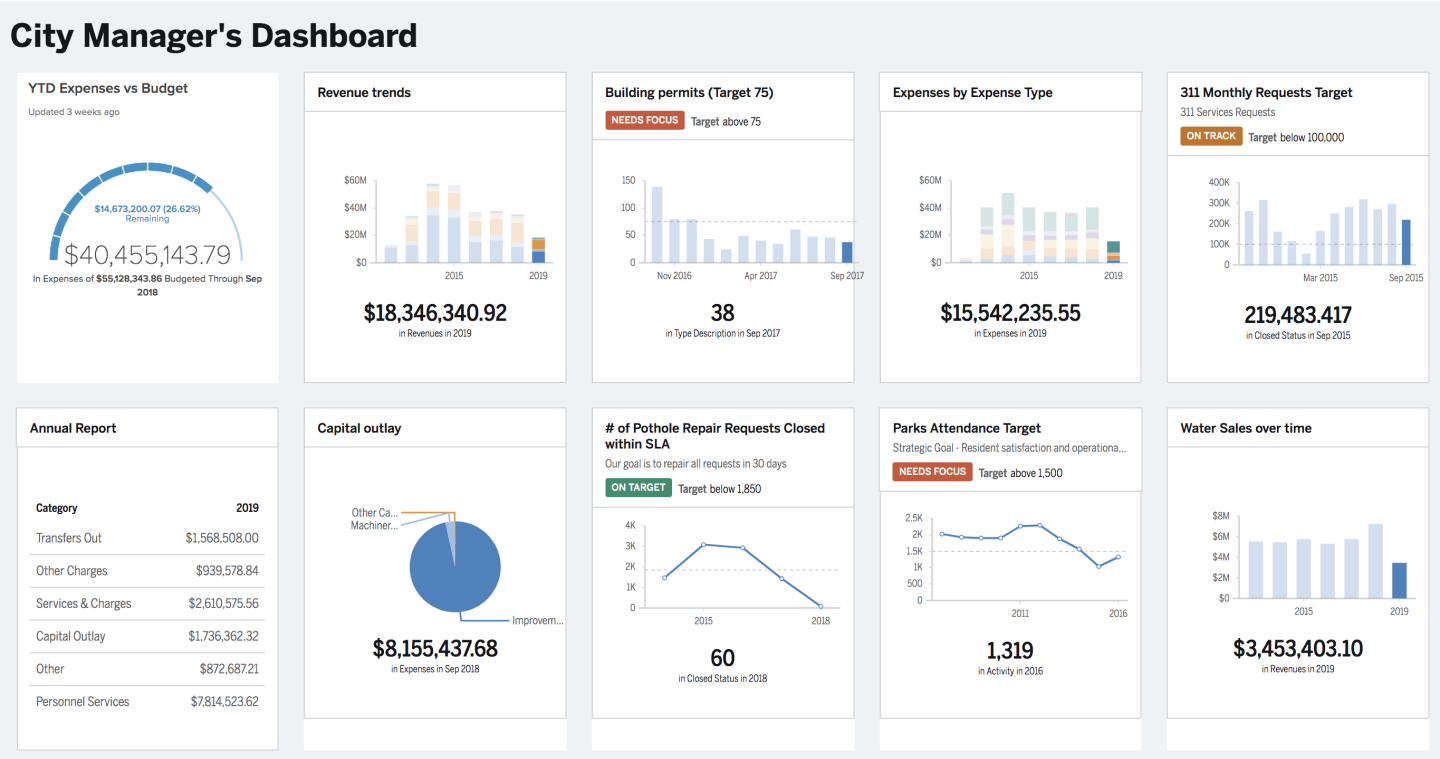


Figure 4 – Example of a City Manager's Dashboard: This example of a City Manager's Dashboard presents at-a-glance performance metrics across finances, service delivery, and operational targets to support executive decision-making and transparency.

3.4. Strategic Deployment

Strategic deployment is the disciplined process of translating an organization's strategic goals into aligned priorities, initiatives, measures, and accountabilities across departments and levels of the organization. Its purpose is to ensure that day-to-day work, improvement efforts, and resource decisions are directly connected to—and actively advancing—the City's strategic objectives, rather than existing as disconnected or competing activities. It creates a clear connection between:

- **True North** (what the City is fundamentally trying to achieve),
- **Strategic Priorities**,
- **Annual goals and measures**, and
- **Improvement initiatives and projects**.

This alignment ensures resources are concentrated on the most important activities and that projects reinforce, rather than compete with, each other. The strategic deployment structure will play a significant role in Step 4.

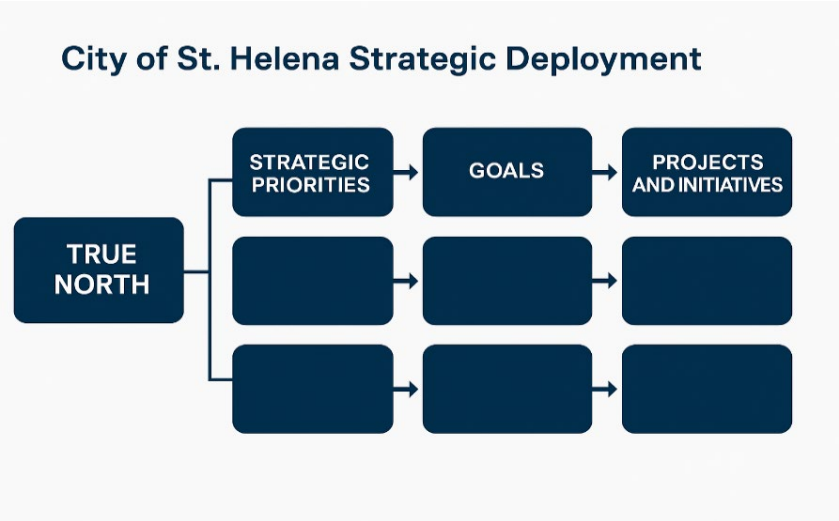


Figure 5 – Strategic Deployment Driver Diagram Template: This high-level model shows the intended flow from the City of St. Helena's long-term vision ("True North") to strategic priorities, goals, and the projects that support their achievement.

4.0 Enterprise Level Themes and Opportunities

The enterprise-level themes outlined below reflect patterns observed consistently across departments rather than isolated issues within individual functions. While each theme manifests differently depending on departmental responsibilities, together they point to a common root cause: the absence of foundational management systems needed to support reliable, scalable operations. Addressing these themes will reduce risk, improve service consistency, and create capacity for future improvement.

4.1. Insufficient Process Documentation and Standardization

Across departments, the City relies heavily on informal knowledge, individual judgment, and undocumented workflows to deliver core services. While this approach allows staff to remain flexible, it creates inconsistency in service delivery, lengthens onboarding time, and introduces operational risk when key individuals are unavailable. The absence of standardized, documented processes is a foundational constraint that limits the City's ability to scale capacity, manage workload predictably, or sustain improvements over time.

Core processes are undocumented or vary significantly by individual. Impacts include inconsistent service, extended onboarding time, and operational risk. Examples of areas needing documented processes:

- Work order processes
- Inspection and plan review steps
- Procurement and purchasing workflows
- Payroll and onboarding
- Budget development and monitoring
- Capital project workflow handoffs
- Staff scheduling and program planning

This represents a central gap in the City's business process management maturity.

4.2. Limited Performance Measurement and Visibility

The City currently operates with limited routine performance visibility at both the enterprise and departmental levels. While data exists in pockets, it is not consistently consolidated, trended, or reviewed as part of regular management practices. This limits leadership's ability to anticipate issues, objectively assess performance, or determine whether changes are producing the intended results. As a result, decisions are often made reactively rather than based on shared, real-time operational insight.

Without regular monitoring of performance, identifying issues quickly or measuring progress becomes challenging. Data should be:

- Easily accessible
- Trended over time
- Summarized visually
- Reviewed routinely
- Used to identify root causes

There is no City-wide dashboard, no department-level scorecards, and no structured means to monitor performance against goals.

4.3. Major Gap: No Preventive Maintenance Program & Asset Management System

One of the most significant operational gaps identified is the absence of a structured preventive maintenance and asset management approach. The City primarily addresses infrastructure and equipment issues after failures occur, which increases costs, disrupts service delivery, and heightens safety and regulatory risk. Without a basic understanding of asset condition, lifecycle, and maintenance needs, the City lacks the ability to plan work proactively or make informed long-term capital decisions.

The City primarily responds to failures as they occur, rather than scheduling work based on asset condition or risk. This creates:

- Higher long-term costs
- Greater safety and regulatory risk
- Shorter asset lifespans
- More emergency work and service disruptions
- Poor predictability in capital planning

A basic asset inventory, condition assessments, and PM schedule are essential first steps.

4.4. Lack of Project Management Framework

The City is managing numerous initiatives simultaneously, including capital projects, technology improvements, and operational changes, yet there is no consistent framework to define, prioritize, or monitor this work. Projects are often initiated without a common structure for scope, ownership, resourcing, or reporting, which contributes to competing priorities and limited visibility into staff capacity. This lack of a shared project management approach makes it difficult to align work with strategic objectives or assess cumulative workload impacts.

The City lacks a coherent way to see all projects, assign resources, evaluate workload, or ensure alignment with strategy. The absence of a project management structure leads to:

- Conflicting priorities
- Lack of visibility into staff workload
- Difficulty forecasting resource needs
- Delays due to unclear handoffs

A simple "light PMO" framework would add significant value.

4.5. Fragmented Interdepartmental Coordination

Many of the City's critical workflows span multiple departments, requiring timely handoffs, shared information, and aligned expectations. However, these interdependencies are not consistently defined or managed, resulting in coordination gaps that slow progress and create frustration for both staff and customers. Without clearly articulated cross-department processes, the City experiences avoidable duplication, rework, and variability in outcomes.

Key workflows cut across departments, yet handoffs are inconsistent and expectations differ. Interviews highlighted persistent coordination gaps:

- Conditions of approval and development review require coordination between Community Development and Public Works, but handoffs are inconsistent.
- Capital planning requires alignment with Finance, but communication is uneven.
- Technology support requires coordination between IT and all departments, but no ticketing or tracking mechanism exists.

This fragmentation results in duplication, delays, and inconsistent customer experience.

4.6. Limited Continuous Improvement Capability

Although staff regularly identify opportunities to improve how work is performed, the City lacks a formal, shared problem-solving process to consistently evaluate, prioritize, and address these opportunities. As a result, problem-solving is often informal and experience-based rather than grounded in documented root-cause analysis or common improvement tools, leading issues to be handled inconsistently or deferred due to workload. This limits the City's ability to achieve sustained, organization-wide improvements and reinforces reliance on individual initiative rather than institutional capability.

4.7. Workforce Capacity Constraints and Turnover Risk

The City's operational model relies heavily on a small number of experienced individuals who hold critical institutional knowledge that is not formally documented or embedded in standard processes. High workload demands and informal practices further concentrate this knowledge, creating vulnerability to turnover, extended leave, or shifting priorities, where even modest staffing changes can have outsized operational impacts.

As a result, departments report operating in "survival mode," with limited capacity for documentation, process improvement, or cross-training. These conditions underscore the need for stronger management systems, including a foundational quality management system (QMS) and a structured business process management (BPM) approach, to reduce risk and build organizational resilience.

5.0 Leadership Input Summary

Tasks 1 and 2 Observations: From structured interviews and meeting notes, leadership consistently highlighted:

- Difficulty maintaining visibility into workload
- Insufficient documentation
- Lack of cross-department coordination
- High dependency on individual staff knowledge
- Limited tools to support planning and prioritization
- Staunch support for greater structure and standardization

The organizational perspective is strongly aligned with the key improvement themes that have been identified.

Task 3A, Workshop 2 Observations: The findings and improvement opportunities identified in this report were further informed and validated through a series of facilitated leadership and departmental workshops conducted as part of Step 3A. While these workshops did not surface materially new improvement themes beyond those documented in this assessment, they served as important corroborating evidence. In particular, the workshop discussions reinforced the significance of previously identified priorities, including the need for greater process standardization, improved documentation and knowledge transfer, clearer workload visibility, and foundational capabilities such as preventive maintenance, asset management, and basic project management. The consistency between workshop input and the analysis presented in this report strengthens confidence in the prioritization of improvement opportunities and underscores their relevance across departments.

6.0 Department-Level Improvement Opportunities

Connection to Business Process Management Maturity

The City's maturity assessment shows that most processes fall within **Level 1** (ad-hoc, inconsistent) or **Level 2** (documented at the project level but lacking organizational consistency).

The improvement opportunities outlined above support movement toward **Level 3**, where processes are:

- Documented
- Owned
- Measured
- Controlled
- Integrated
- Supported by routine management practices

Level 3 is realistic, practical, and appropriate for a city the size of St. Helena.

Definition of Priority Levels

Improvement opportunities identified in the below assessment are categorized as Priority I (P1), Priority II (P2), or Priority III (P3) using an impact–effort evaluation approach. Each opportunity was assessed based on its potential impact on service quality, operational reliability, risk reduction, and organizational effectiveness, as well as the relative level of effort required to implement the improvement given current capacity, complexity, and dependencies.

This approach allowed the project team to differentiate opportunities that represent foundational, high-value improvements from those that are incremental or longer-term in nature.

Priority I (P1) opportunities represent high-impact, foundational improvements that address critical gaps in the City's operating model. These opportunities typically reduce operational risk, improve service reliability, and enable multiple downstream benefits across departments. While some Priority I items may require focused effort, they are essential building blocks for strengthening the City's overall quality management system and advancing process maturity.

Priority II (P2) opportunities represent moderate to high impact improvements that build upon foundational capabilities or address specific operational inefficiencies within departments. These initiatives generally require moderate effort and coordination but can be implemented once key structures or processes are in place. Priority II opportunities support improved consistency, visibility, and performance but are not as foundational as Priority I items.

Priority III (P3) opportunities represent incremental or longer-term improvements with more limited immediate impact or higher relative effort compared to their near-term benefit. These items may depend on prior implementation of Priority I or II initiatives, additional resources, or future technology enhancements. Priority III opportunities remain important but are best addressed after foundational improvements are established.

This prioritization framework was used to provide clarity on relative sequencing and focus, while recognizing that final prioritization decisions will be refined as part of subsequent implementation planning and recommendation development.

6.1. Public Works

Key Opportunities (Service Delivery and Operations)

1. **(P1) Establish a Preventive Maintenance (PM) and Asset Management Program**
    - Shift from "run to failure" toward scheduled inspections and preventive work for critical infrastructure.
    - Implement basic asset registers, condition assessments, and PM task lists to extend asset life, reduce emergency repairs, and improve safety and regulatory compliance.

2. **(P2) Develop Level 3 Process Documentation for Recurring Operational Workflows**
    - Document standard workflows for service requests, work orders, inspections, emergency response, and contractor coordination.
    - Define handoffs between Public Works and both Finance and Community Development.

3. **(P3) Field Technology Utilization**
    - Utilize mobile access to SOPs, maps, asset histories, and inspection forms.

4. **(P3) Implement a Basic Daily Management System (DMS)**
    - Introduce Methods–Equipment–Supplies–Staffing (MESS) readiness boards for daily clarity on workload, equipment status, and constraints.
    - Use short huddles at the start of the day to review performance and today's plan.
    - Capture issues that cannot be resolved locally and escalate them through a simple tiered huddle structure.

Key Opportunities (Capital Project Delivery)

1. **(P2) Clarify Capital vs. Operations Workflows**
    - Define standard processes for planning, budgeting and procurement, contract management, construction oversight, and project close-out.
    - Standardize interaction with Administrative Services for budgeting, procurement, contract management, and invoice approval.

2. **(P3) Introduce Project Visibility Tools for Capital Programs**
    - Maintain a single list of active and planned capital projects, showing status, schedule, budget, and risks.

Key Opportunities (Utilization and Performance Measures)

1. **(P2) Define a Core Set of Operational Measures for Public Works**
    - Examples include percentage of preventive versus corrective work, response times for service requests, and backlog levels.
    - Trend these measures visually and use them in Public Works huddles and monthly City leadership reviews.

6.2. Community Development

Considerable progress has been made in recent years, and opportunities now center on consistency, clarity, and customer experience.

Key Opportunities:

1. **(P1) Strengthen Standard Work and SOPs for Key Processes**
    - Document end-to-end workflows for permitting plan review, inspections, zoning amendments, and code enforcement.
    - Incorporate "standard conditions of approval" templates by application type to ensure staff are not reinventing requirements each time.

2. **(P2) Expand "Rapid" or Over-the-Counter Permit Pathways**
    - Identify additional permit types that can be expedited with minimal review.

3. **(P2) Cross-training and Knowledge Transfer** to reduce dependence on individual specialist

4. **(P2) Clear Turnaround-time Expectations**
    - For applicants, with communication templates to reinforce consistency.

5. **(P3) Enhance Use of the Online Permitting Portal**
    - Continue shifting customers from phone calls and paper processes to the portal for intake, status updates, and inspection scheduling.
    - Use portal data to monitor cycle times, bottlenecks, and customer pain points, then target improvement efforts to those areas.

6. (**P3) Enhanced Coordination with Public Works**
    - Improved coordination during development review and public improvements.

7. **(P3) Formalize stakeholder engagement for major code and zoning changes**
    - Leverage the planned zoning update study sessions as a model for ongoing, structured forums with developers, architects, residents, and other stakeholders. Document the process for these sessions so they can be repeated and improved over time.

6.3. Administrative Services

Administrative Services is facing significant workload and capability challenges, particularly in accounting and finance. There are also opportunities to integrate and streamline technology platforms and to clarify roles.

Key Opportunities:

1. **(P1) Raise Process Maturity in Core Financial Workflows**
    - Document and standardize processes for accounts payable/receivable, purchasing, payroll, budget development/monitoring, and financial reporting.
    - Clarify approvals, thresholds, and segregation of duties to improve internal controls.
    - Eliminate unnecessary variation in how departments submit invoices, purchase requests, and journal entries.
2. **(P2) Reduce Manual Work through Automation and Better System Use**
    - Improve utilization of existing systems such as Springbrook and OpenGov to move staff away from spreadsheets and manual reconciliation.
    - Identify "quick win" automations for invoice processing, expense coding, and budget monitoring.
3. **(P3) Improve Transparency and Communication with Departments**
    - Create simple, standardized financial dashboards for department heads.
    - Use monthly check-ins with department leaders to review financials, resolve questions, and plan.
4. **(P2) Clarify organization and reduce structural risk**
    - Align financial analyst roles under Administrative Services to improve independence and objectivity in financial analysis and reporting.

6.4. Community Services

The library is relatively mature in its management practices and performance, especially when compared to national benchmarks for similar-sized communities. Parks and Recreation functions are more limited in scope but are highly visible to residents.

Key Opportunities

1. **(P2) Balance Efficiency with Service Quality at the Library**
    - Document core processes such as circulation, programming, and outreach so they can be sustained with fewer staff if required.
2. **(P3) Integrate Community Services into the broader QMS and DMS**
    - Use simple readiness boards and huddles to manage daily operations (e.g., facility readiness, staffing, events, and maintenance needs).
    - Develop basic measures such as program participation, facility utilization, and customer satisfaction.

6.5. Cross-Cutting: Project Management and Enterprise Visibility

A consistent **project management framework** is absent across departments, which prevents the establishment of a unified and integrated perspective on the complete project portfolio. The City currently manages various improvement initiatives, capital investments, and technology projects simultaneously; however, there is no consolidated view of:

- Project Charters and Governance
- The total portfolio of projects.
- Regular project review cycles
- Staff assignments and allocation of time.
- Alignment with strategic deployment
- Resource allocation oversight

Key Opportunities

1. **(P1) Launch a Simple, City-Wide Project Management System**
    - To improve oversight and consistency, the City should create a standardized project charter template. This will guide teams in starting, planning, and tracking projects, ensuring all key elements are covered from the start.
    - A single City-wide project list gives leadership visibility into all projects and should be reviewed regularly to support prioritization, resource allocation, and issue identification. These reviews also help align with strategic goals and encourage interdepartmental collaboration.

2. **(P2) Align Projects with Strategic Deployment**
    - As the City refines its "True North" and strategic priorities, ensure that major projects are explicitly linked to those priorities and to improvement in defined performance measures.
    - Defer or discontinue projects that do not clearly support the City's strategy or that cannot be resourced adequately.

7.0 AI-Enabled Opportunities for a Small City

AI offers high-value opportunities with minimal risk and aligns well with the City's size and capacity constraints. The goal is to make work easier, faster, and more consistent - *not* to add complexity.

Guiding Principles

For a city of St. Helena's size, AI opportunities should:

- Be tightly connected to real processes that are already being improved through BPM and DMS, not stand-alone experiments.
- Augment staff, not replace them, freeing time for higher-value work and better customer service.
- Start with small pilots using available capabilities (e.g., AI features in existing financial, permitting, or document-management systems).
- Respect public-sector expectations for privacy, transparency, and fairness in any resident-facing use.

7.1. AI Opportunities by Department

Administrative Services	
Invoice and payment processing assistance	▪ Use AI-enabled tools to extract data from invoices, propose account codes, and flag potential duplicates or anomalies for review by staff. ▪ Reduce manual data entry and speed up the AP cycle while maintaining human approval for payments.
Budget monitoring and variance analysis	▪ Automatically highlight unusual spending patterns or budget variances and generate simple narrative explanations that can be reviewed and refined by finance staff. ▪ Support department heads with AI-assisted "budget briefings" that summarize key trends for each department. ▪ Drafting staff reports and summaries.
Automated HR onboarding packet preparation	▪ Automated generation of onboarding materials for new hires.
Document search across financial policies and procedures	▪ Allow staff to query policies, procedures, and prior memos in plain language (for example, "What is the current purchasing threshold for formal bids?") rather than hunting through shared drives.

Public Works	
Work order triage and prioritization	▪ Use AI to classify and prioritize incoming service requests based on descriptions, photos, and location, routing them to the right crew and indicating urgency. ▪ Over time, learn common patterns that can inform staffing levels and PM schedules.
Preventive maintenance planning	▪ Predictive analysis for PM scheduling ▪ Analyze historical work orders, failures, and environmental data to recommend PM intervals and highlight assets at higher risk of failure. ▪ Support long-term capital planning by forecasting replacement needs based on usage and condition trends.
Field staff support	▪ Provide mobile, natural-language access to SOPs, checklists, and asset histories, so field staff can quickly find the right procedure at the job site.

Community Development	
Permit intake and completeness checks	▪ Use AI to pre-screen applications for completeness, flagging missing documents or inconsistent information before staff review. ▪ Provide applicants with clearer instructions and checklists generated from standard conditions of approval and code requirements.
Resident and developer self-service	▪ Implement AI-powered FAQs or chat on the City's website and permitting portal to answer frequent questions about permit types, timelines, and required documentation, reducing phone calls and walk-ins.
Document and code navigation	▪ Allow staff to query zoning code, design guidelines, and prior approvals using natural language, improving consistency, and reducing time spent searching.

Community Services	
Customer Focus	▪ Use AI to analyze participation patterns and demographics and to suggest program times and topics that better match community demand. ▪ Summarize survey feedback and open comments to identify themes for improvement. ▪ Drafting outreach materials and promotional content.

Enterprise-Level Uses	
Cross-cutting applications	▪ Apply AI transcription and summarization tools to City meetings, focus groups, and staff interviews, producing structured notes, themes, and follow-up actions. ▪ Reduce time spent drafting minutes and improve follow-through on commitments. ▪ Provide secure, role-based search across key City documents, policies, and reports, so staff can quickly gather background when working on a new issue or project.

These AI examples support and accelerate the functional structure the City should build.

8.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

The City can significantly improve reliability, efficiency, and customer experience by focusing on:

- A simple, practical Quality Management System
- A Daily Management System with readiness boards
- A preventive maintenance and asset management capability
- A basic project management framework
- Documenting and standardizing core processes
- Performance dashboards and scorecards
- AI-enabled tools tied to real workflows
- Advancing BPM maturity to Level 3

These improvements form the foundation for modernizing technology and developing a long-term roadmap. Blackberg will provide further recommendations and details in Deliverables 3C, 3D, and 4.