



Digital Transformation: Launching a Watercraft Registration System

Digital Experience: Agency/Program Solutions

State of Illinois
Illinois Department of Innovation & Technology

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Executive Summary

A Resident-First Digital Transformation

The Illinois Department of Innovation & Technology (DOIT), the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the Illinois Department of Revenue (DOR) collaborated to transform how Illinois residents register watercraft by creating a faster, simpler, and more accessible digital experience. Previously, residents were required to submit a paper registration form to DNR, pay use taxes through DOR, then submit proof of tax payment back to DNR, and wait for manual verification before a watercraft registration could be approved. This process resulted in delays, duplicate paperwork, and confusion for residents navigating multiple agencies.

Within just 13 months, the State launched a fully digital, resident-centered solution that allows residents to complete registration forms, submit tax information, and pay online in a streamlined experience. This initiative introduced real-time system integration that enables DNR to instantly verify tax compliance before approving registrations, eliminating many of the manual steps that previously delayed processing.

The launch of the Illinois Watercraft Registration System has significantly improved outcomes for residents and state operations. **During peak periods, processing times that once took up to three months are now typically completed within one week.** Residents can now access services online 24/7, avoiding unnecessary in-person visits and completing the process through guided digital workflows that reduce error and confusion. In the past year, **6,702 first-time watercraft registrations** and **39,467 watercraft registration renewals were completed** through the new system. Nearly half of the previously rejected paper applications that lacked tax documentation are now automatically resolved through system integration, improving efficiency and resident satisfaction.

Idea

Transforming Service through Digital Integration

Historically, registering a watercraft in Illinois was a paper-driven and time-consuming experience for residents. Residents were required to visit physical offices, manually complete forms, and navigate separate processes between the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Illinois Department of Revenue (DOR). A critical step in the process—verifying whether required use taxes had been paid—relied on manual coordination between DNR and DOR and mailing documents, often slowing the process.

During peak boating season, processing delays could stretch for weeks, creating frustration for residents eager to get on the water. These challenges disproportionately impacted rural communities, working families, caregivers, individuals with limited availability, and residents who faced transportation, language or accessibility barriers. The experience no longer reflected public expectations for fast, convenient, and inclusive digital government services.

To transform resident experience, the Illinois Department of Innovation & Technology (DoIT), in partnership with DNR and DOR, reimagined watercraft registration as a fully digital, integrated service centered on accessibility, speed, and ease. The goal was simple: allow residents to complete the registration process online from start to finish through a more connected and user-friendly experience. Using integrated agency systems, Illinois replaced a fragmented paper workflow with a unified digital pathway that allows residents to submit registration applications, complete tax forms, and make payments online. Real-time system integrations now automate much of the verification process behind the scenes, reducing delays and minimizing the need for residents to navigate multiple agencies or submit duplicate documentation. The digital experience provides clearer guidance, improved accessibility, and compatibility with assistive technologies, making the process easier to navigate for a broader range of users while creating a faster and more experience overall.

Highlights

- **Fragmented Paper Workflow:** Illinois replaced a fragmented, paper-driven watercraft registration process with a streamlined digital experience that simplified registration for residents and reduced reliance on mailed forms and manual reviews.
- **Improved Resident Experience:** Residents can now complete registration requirements online through a more accessible, user-friendly process supported by real-time verification and faster processing timelines.
- **Cross-Agency Modernization:** Integrated workflows and secure data sharing between DoIT, DNR, and DOR created a more efficient registration process.

Implementation

Building a Connected Resident Journey

The implementation of the Watercraft Registration System focused on improving the resident experience by addressing the most complex problem first: tax compliance verification and seamless data sharing across agencies. The initiative was designed to reduce resident frustration caused by disconnected paper-based processes, repetitive data entry, and unclear compliance requirements.

The project roadmap began by evaluating the existing paper-based workflow and identifying the points that created the greatest delays and frustration for residents, including manual reviews, duplicate submissions, disconnected agency processes, and tax verification requirements. From there, DoIT partnered with DNR and DOR to design a more connected digital experience that allowed residents to complete the registration journey online through integrated systems. A key milestone was the development of real-time data-sharing capabilities that enabled agencies to

verify required tax information automatically during the transaction process rather than through separate manual review steps.

Execution required deep coordination across multiple agencies and technical teams to ensure resident experience remained consistent across systems and services. The project brought DNR registration teams, DOR tax administrators, DoIT technical and enterprise teams, and vendor support partners. A formal Intergovernmental Agreement, which clearly defined agency responsibilities, governance standards, and data-sharing protocols, facilitated this project execution. The implementation also addressed technical challenges related to cross-agency integrations, authentication requirements, and modernization of legacy workflows. Rather than introducing a separate standalone platform, the solution connects agency services to a more familiar, accessible experience for residents.



Impact

Delivering Measurable Resident Outcomes

The new registration system created an immediate improvement in how residents interact with state government services. What was once a large paper-based process requiring mailing forms, manual reviews, and multiple agency interactions can now be completed online through a faster and more streamlined digital experience. In the first year following launch, approximately **7,000 digital watercraft registration requests for newly acquired watercraft** were processed through the new system. Additionally, Illinois processed roughly **40,000 watercraft registration renewals digitally in 2025**, reflecting the broader scale of the State's online watercraft registration services. The shift from manual processing to an integrated registration process significantly reduced transaction times, improved process efficiency, and minimized administrative delays associated with paper submissions, mailed forms and manual compliance verification.

Quick Facts

Processing time reduced
from **3 months to**
1 week

~7K new watercraft
registrations with use
taxes completed digitally

~40K watercraft
registration renewals
processed

50% of previously
rejected applications
now automatically
resolved

Before this initiative, registrations relied on disconnected systems, manual tax verification, mailed documentation and backlogs that could extend up to three months to complete. Watercraft registration applications containing missing or incorrect information frequently required two to three additional weeks for corrections and resubmission extending delays even further.

Today, integrated system validations and real-time verification capabilities help identify registration issues earlier in the process, improving accuracy and reducing the need for manual corrections. A boat owner can now complete registration steps online and pay required used taxes without additional follow-up, turning what was once a multi-step, multi-agency process into a single, cohesive transaction. This system also improves accessibility by providing 24/7 digital access and reducing the need for in-person visits or mailed submissions.

Beyond the immediate operations improvements, the project established a scalable framework for future digital modernization projects and intergovernmental collaborations. This approach provides a repeatable model for other tax-dependent registrations and paper-based workflows across state government. It demonstrates how a connected, efficient, and resident-centered government is achievable. As this model scales, it will support faster processing, improved data accuracy, stronger interagency collaboration, and digital accessibility public services.

The screenshot displays the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) website. The header includes the IDNR logo, navigation links for Governor JB Pritzker, Illinois.gov, Contact IDNR, and DNR A to Z, along with a language selector set to English. A search bar is located on the right. The main navigation menu lists various topics: About, State parks, Preservation, Conservation, Hunt/Trap, Boat/Fish, Law/Safety, Water resources, and Extractive resources. The breadcrumb trail indicates the user is in IDNR > Boating > How to Register or Renew... The left sidebar contains a 'Boating' section with links to 'How to Register or Renew Your Boat in Illinois', 'Handbook of Boating Laws and Responsibilities', 'Watercraft Frequently Asked Questions', 'More Watercraft Information', 'Watercraft Applications', 'Ask DNR A Question', 'Recreation Activities', and 'Parks'. The main content area features the title 'How to Register or Renew Your Boat in Illinois' above an image of a small boat on a lake. Below the image, the heading 'Select an Option' is followed by a list of links: 'Renew Your Expired Registration', 'Register New Watercraft in Illinois', 'Returned Watercraft Registration(s)', 'Transfer Ownership of an Illinois Title', 'Duplicate Decals, Title, Registration, Corrections', 'Register a USCG Vessel in Illinois', 'Transaction Fees', 'Do You Need to Do a Title Search?', 'Tax Requirements on Watercraft', 'Water Usage Stamp for Non-powered Watercraft', and 'PassengersRental'.