

Permitting Process Improvements



Objective

Have actions taken to improve the permitting process as a result of prior audit and consultant reports resulted in improved services?

Background

In 2014, the City hired a consultant, Zucker Systems, to analyze and identify improvements to the development process in Austin. The City had made several efforts since at least 1987 to identify improvements to this process.

In 2015, the City reorganized the development departments, creating the Development Services Department (DSD) which now serves to ensure homeowners, business owners, and contractors are in compliance with applicable City and building codes for all types of construction projects.

The Zucker Report, issued in 2015, included 462 recommendations with 397 assigned to DSD. It highlighted seven key priority areas to help focus City action and identified the most important customer complaint as the time it takes to get a project approved. The Zucker authors concluded that “dramatic actions as outlined in this report will be necessary” to make the needed improvements.

The City developed an Action Plan to detail its response to these recommendations. In February 2019, DSD issued a final report on all their assigned Action Plan items.

What We Found

The Development Services Department (DSD) has implemented changes to the permitting process, but aspects most important to customers, including timelines and cost, remain an issue. Also, the City can do more to educate all stakeholders about the process, such as when it is required and why it is important to help ensure health and safety issues are addressed.

DSD has worked to address recommendations for improvement, but some efforts have taken time to implement or not worked as intended.

1

DSD addressed customer concerns including staff training, facility issues, and technology solutions. However, additional staff was only recently added and some technology solutions are still not in place (see back for more detail).

DSD efforts have not fully addressed customer concerns with the process, including the time and cost involved to get a permit.

2

Staff are not consistently achieving established service level goals for reviewing plans. DSD does not actively track plan review times and does not seem to collect data in a way that could identify where specific delays exist. Also, most of the fees have increased for common permit types. Additionally, customer satisfaction metrics did not improve substantially and some customers expressed not seeing value in participating in the process.

Efforts to change commonly cited causes for timeline delays have recently been initiated.

3

These efforts include changes to current Code requirements as well as department coordination and staffing and supervision challenges.

What We Recommend

In order to address identified issues, the DSD Director should:

- identify and address specific causes for plan review processing delays,
- identify process improvements and ensure they are reflected in anticipated Code or other changes for consideration,
- prioritize implementation of key technology solutions, and
- target outreach and education to ensure people engage in the process.

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Summary of DSD Responses to the Zucker Report Seven Key Priority Areas

Zucker Report 7 Key Priority Areas	2015 Zucker Recommendations to Institute a Customer-focused Culture	Results (Based on DSD Responses and Audit Findings)
1. Finances 6. Staffing	Additional Resources [DSD] a. Including Specific Positions for [DSD] b. Move away from General Fund	Mixed – DSD noted that it took time to add resources and additional staff will have a delayed impact on customer timelines. DSD has transitioned to an enterprise department, but additional staff increases costs for the customer.
2. Management and Communication	Improvements to Management, including culture, training, and adding a Deputy Director for Operations to [DSD]	Mixed – Staff noted efforts related to training, but Code interpretation issues persist. DSD disagreed with the Deputy Director of Operations recommendation. DSD added a Deputy Director in November 2017, but this did not align with the recommendation. DSD is in the process of adding a “Customer Experience” unit.
3. Other Departments	Other Involved Departments Delegate Development Plan Review Functions to [DSD]	Mixed – DSD entered into “coalition agreements” with some, but not all, involved departments. Workflow timelines are not tracked by department. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some key departments just executed an agreement and at least one department agreement is not in place. • There does not appear to be full delegation of functions by other departments. • Planned facility that co-locates staff is expected to help.
4. Performance Standards	Changing and Meeting Specific Performance Standards	No – DSD changed performance standards that expanded timelines to better align with actual performance. This provided a more realistic customer expectation, but has not improved timelines or impacted customer satisfaction metrics. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan review timeline goals not consistently being met. • Audit staff unable to isolate departmental timelines, but learned DSD does not actively track causes for delays in the process to determine accountability and identify solutions.
5. Technology	Moving Aggressively with Efforts to: a. Accept Plans via the Internet b. Using Electronic Plan Check	Mixed – <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial DSD efforts related to electronic plan submissions did not work as intended and were delayed. DSD began accepting some plans electronically in 2018 and anticipates accepting all plans electronically at a future date. • DSD is planning, but has not fully implemented, electronic plan review. • DSD has implemented other technology solutions.
7. Project Managers/ Processes 6. Staffing	Develop True Project Manager System	No – DSD is no longer pursuing this recommendation citing that additional staff was not approved and a lack of interdepartmental authority. The electronic system does not actively identify delays related to project progress.