



INFORMATIONAL MEMORANDUM

TO: Planning and Community Development

FROM: Nora Gierloff, DCD Director

BY: Rachelle Sagan, Permit Supervisor

CC: Mayor Ekberg

DATE: March 6, 2023

SUBJECT: 2022 Permitting Status Update

ISSUE

The Permit Center is providing a summary of the status of permit review procedures, staffing, timelines, and revenues in 2022.

BACKGROUND

Despite the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, the Permit Center served persons seeking permits or having other development-related questions well in 2022. Many permit-related processes have been streamlined and the vast majority of applicants continue to appreciate the time-saving convenience of the virtual service. In 2022, the permit counter received an estimated 520 walk-in customers. Without these virtual service improvements, an estimated 4,800 walk-in visits would have been required for the level of permit activity experienced.

The accessibility and capabilities of the website information were also improved, and we began allowing the public to schedule telephone and virtual meetings with staff from the website. In January 2020, before the pandemic, the DCD permitting page recorded 2,267 visitors. Site visits have steadily increased each year since with January 2023 recording 5,336 visits to the permitting page, a 235% increase over January 2020.

DISCUSSION

Process Improvements

In 2019 the City worked with the Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce to conduct outreach to evaluate customer satisfaction with the permitting process and seek ideas/input on potential areas for improvement. After listening to our customers and staff we developed and implemented a series of process improvements in 2022 that built on the findings and recommendations in that report, see Attachment A.

- **Automatic Permit Application Extensions**

The building code automatically expired any building permit application that had not been issued within 180 days of application. This meant that even if an applicant was responding to corrections and actively working on a permit they would have to ask for an extension or reapply. In 2022 we adopted a code change to automatically extend a permit application for 180 days each time an applicant resubmits a revision or correction. This has resulted in many fewer accidental expirations and less paperwork for staff and the applicant.

- **Emailed Notice of Permit Expiration**

Our previous process was to mail a hardcopy notice to the project contact at least 30 days prior to the expiration of an open building permit. Unfortunately, sometimes this mail was lost or the contractor had changed, leaving the owner without notice of an expiring permit

for an incomplete project. We changed to an email notice saving permit staff time and reducing the chances that permits expire prematurely.

- Pre-Cons Prior to Issuance

Contractors are required to hold a pre-construction meeting with City inspectors prior to starting construction to discuss traffic control, erosion control, tree protection, utility locates etc. Unfortunately, many contractors were skipping this step leading to violations, stop work orders, and damage to the environment. We changed to require that the pre-con be held as the last step prior to permit issuance to make sure that contractors have all the information they need to work safely in the City before breaking ground.

- Checklist for Project Finals

Often developers have a specific “grand opening” date in mind for a project but do not allow enough time for all of the various inspections to be completed or outstanding submittals to be reviewed. About a month prior to the desired project “final” the Permit Center provides the applicant via email with a list of outstanding inspections and open permits to aid them in their scheduling. This helps avoid a last-minute rush of inspections that we cannot accommodate without delaying other applicants. It also prevents requests for temporary certificates of occupancy to allow them to open to the public before work is complete.

- Virtual Intake Appointments

We began offering appointments with our permit techs to help applicants navigate the online permit submittal process. This helps reduce frustration for new applicants and increases the accuracy of their information. This has helped reduce the number of incomplete applications submitted and allows us to inform applicants about next steps after submittal, such as the need to go back into the system to pay for the permit after it has been accepted. These appointments have saved staff time and improved permit speeds.

- Rewrite of TMC 11.08 Right-of-Way Permits

Development review staff collaborated with the City Attorney on a complete rewrite of the right of way permit section of the code, reducing the number of different permit types and increasing usability. We have incorporated these changes into the permit tracking system and have produced new informational bulletins for the public.

- Permit Center Website and Checklist Improvements

The Permit Center webpage was separated out into two separate subpages organized by permit type: Construction and Land Use. Each page has been reorganized and populated with information pertinent to a given permit type. Additional drop tabs were also created to provide information more quickly to applicants. Additionally, new web pages were created to provide information for residents and applicants:

- *Property Research*
- *Low Density Residential (LDR) Development Standards*
- *Urban Forestry*
- *Design Review*
- *Critical Areas Regulations*
- *Shoreline Regulations*
- *Public Notice and Participation*



The last page, *Public Notice and Participation*, provides a centralized webpage for residents to learn about current and past public notices.

A QR code that takes users directly to this page will also be included on all mailed and posted notices moving forward, significantly improving the experience for interested parties.

Staffing

In the 2023-2024 budget 1.5 permit review FTEs were frozen, one was a full-time building plans examiner position that we had had difficulty filling and the other a half time planner position. We are maintaining Building review times by sending overflow projects to a consultant firm for review. Because each jurisdiction’s Zoning Code is unique, it is not cost effective to send planning reviews to a consultant. Therefore, when permit volumes increase, planning review times tend to increase as well. In the past, we have shifted staff between current and long-range planning to follow the workload but with the Comp Plan update underway we cannot pull any staff away from long range work. We had hoped to fill the budgeted Planning Intern position last fall to assist with sign permits, tree permits, and the recycling grant but we cannot fill it while we have a frozen union planning position.

Last year we converted an unfilled building inspector position to a second ROW/Infrastructure inspector position, based on workload needs. This has helped significantly, and they were just able to clear the last of the backlogged franchise permits. Now when we have high building inspection levels or need to cover our single building inspector’s vacations or sick leave, we use consultants, as well as ask the City of SeaTac for backup, or pull the plans examiner away from permit review and into the field. Overall, our staffing is very lean and “one deep” in key positions which is an issue that was identified in the 2019 Southside permitting report, even before the Pandemic’s staffing impacts hit the City.

Review Timelines

Historically the target time to the first comment letter or issuance of a permit had been 4 to 6 weeks. During the transition to electronic permitting and due to the pandemic, timelines had increased to 8 – 10 weeks for a first round comment letter or issuance. Currently the target is 7 weeks, with the intent of moving to 6 weeks at the start of Q2 in 2023. Over the past year the permit backlog has been nearly eliminated and processing times have decreased even as permit volumes have risen, and staffing has been reduced. Achieving this level of service has been a significant accomplishment by staff that should be recognized.

	September 2021	February 2022	February 2023
Fire Reviews	28 – 0 Overdue	41 - 1 Overdue	48 – 0 Overdue
Building Reviews	47 – 9 Overdue	11 - 4 Overdue	3 – 0 Overdue
Planning Reviews	128 – 95 Overdue	31 - 8 Overdue	38 – 13 Overdue
Engineering Reviews	178 – 78 Overdue	60 - 8 Overdue	61 – 8 Overdue

First number includes overdue, as well.

Permit Volumes and Revenues

During 2022, permit numbers increased over the preceding years for Building, Fire, and Public Works, and the value and revenues from construction also increased for Building and Fire. Public Works and Land Use both saw slight decreases in project values and revenues

generated. We generated almost twice as much permit revenue in 2022 as in 2021, though still below our historical average, and had the second highest yearly permit valuation ever.

Permit Stats, 2022 vs. 2021

Building

- Permits – Increase of 2%
- Value – Increase of 130%
- Revenue – Increase of 80%

Fire

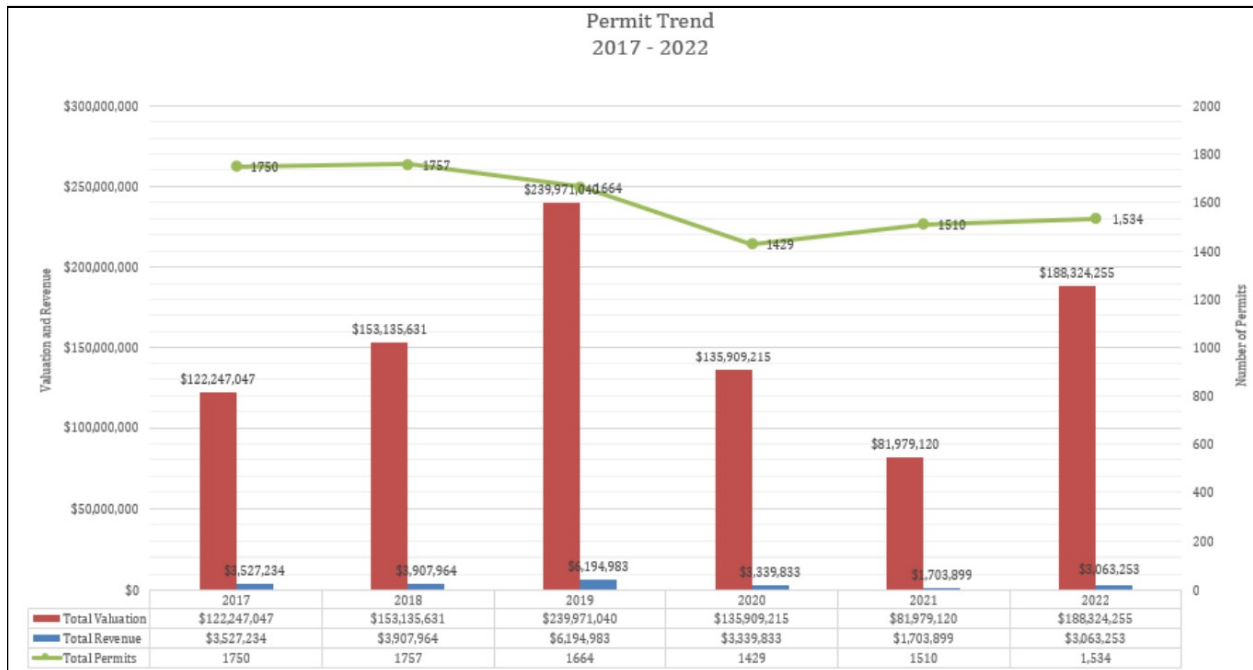
- Permits – Increase of 21%
- Value – Increase of 11%
- Revenue – Increase of 27%

Public Works

- Permits – Increase of 6%
- Value – Decrease of 69%
- Revenue – Decrease of 16%

Land Use

- Projects – Decrease of 14%
- Revenue – Decrease of 13%



FINANCIAL IMPACT

Permit revenues for 2022 covered about three quarters of the operating expenses of the Department, a significant increase from 2021 when they covered only 44%.

RECOMMENDATION

Information Only.

ATTACHMENT

A. Executive Summary from 2019 Southside Permit Process Report



Tukwila Permit Process Project Report

December 20, 2019

Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce

A Voice for Business, A Leader in the Community

14220 Interurban Ave S #134, Tukwila, WA 98168

(206) 575-1633

www.SeattleSouthsideChamber.com

Executive Summary

1. Summary of the Evaluation Process

Mayor Ekberg and City Administrator Cline approached the Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce (SSCC) to assist with an evaluation of the City's current development permitting and inspection services. The City has been implementing a series of incremental changes in recent years while moving towards a one-stop permit system. A variety of organizational and staffing changes has now provided an opportunity to advance the evolution of the entire system forward at this time.

Contracted Services. SSCC was asked to conduct an outreach process to evaluate customer satisfaction with the current system and to seek ideas/input on potential areas for improvement. The SSCC is not a direct user of the City's system, though many of its members interact with the City's system regularly. In this evaluation process, SSCC served as a mirror while conducting a series of interviews and outreach methods; asking focused questions, listening for trends, patterns, and key messages. The SSCC utilized a two-pronged outreach approach by interviewing both customer/users of the City's permitting and inspection system as well as separately interviewing involved City staff in order to identify areas of success and potential improvement.

Customer Input Survey and Results Summary. The customer survey was deployed through an email invitation to participate and a postcard invitation if we did not have email contact information. The survey was also encouraged through social channels in an effort to capture as much data as possible. Customers and contact information were based on contacts provided by the City.

We wanted to assure those participating, many of which had active projects under review or consideration, that their responses could be anonymous and confidential. Doing so helped to ensure unfiltered feedback.

All information was captured as a way to help ensure the Chamber was collecting data from a varied pool that included large projects and representatives, as well as small and private projects. The information was also kept confidential, as requested by most of the respondents. Additionally, responses were combined with those of many others and then summarized in a report to further protect anonymity.

As you will see in the corresponding reports, anonymizing responses is an effective way to ensure responses cannot be linked to any one project, individual, or customer before incorporating it in the data.

Some customers participated in the survey only over the phone and with the greatest care to preserve both anonymity and confidentiality. The confidential surveys collected

included no personally identifiable information. Those responses were also combined with those of many others and summarized in the report to further protect anonymity.

The survey was deployed over email to 1005 people whose contact email was available. For those without an email contact, SSCC sent a mailed postcard. A follow-up reminder email was also sent. These methods were used to ensure the maximum engagement and awareness of the survey and to encourage wide participation. More than 200 individuals responded through the survey, focus groups, and interviews. Not all respondents answered every question as some did not apply to their particular situation or experience.

In addition, focus groups and individual interviews were conducted to dig deeper into the survey questions and answers. Each was completed by the party or parties that completed the initial survey. The focus groups and interviews provided more time to understand the “why” of the results generated and to also get a sense of the emotional foundation.

Staff Input and Results Summary. City staff members have key perspectives on the delivery of services to the public. Not only do they provide direct services to the customer, but they also are in the best position to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the current development permitting and inspection system.

Two methods were utilized to gather the staff members’ input: standard questions and individual interviews. The forty-four staff members were each provided standard questions and asked to provide written responses to the SSCC team. The individual interviews were open format, providing each staff member an opportunity to ask questions about the evaluation process, further expound upon their written answers, and to provide any additional input not addressed in the standard questions. The purpose of the interview methods was to identify trends, patterns, consistencies, and inconsistencies through dialogue and open discussion.

The SSCC team presented the initial report information at a staff briefing to both reflect the results of the question and interview process and to seek, through a group exercise process, any additional/clarifying messages listed below.

2. Summary of Key Findings and Requests

The Customer Survey, Focus Groups, and Interviews resulted in the following findings and requests:

- There is a clear trend of wants/desires from the customer perspective to:
 - Streamline systems
 - Clearly communicate processes,
 - Have processes and systems available online
- There is a clear pattern with customers either being very satisfied with the process or with being highly dissatisfied
 - Customers indicated that setting out expectations and clearly communicating the process would help increase customer satisfaction and experience
- Key messages that were commonly repeatedly were:
 - Desire to streamline
 - Desire for consistency
 - Desire for more online tools
- Potential areas of improvement mentioned included:
 - Providing online tools and systems for processing
 - Greater consistency in communication and decision-making
 - Providing clear expectations and communicating them to the customer
 - FAQs and similar information online

The staff question, interview, and group feedback process resulted in the following key findings:

- It “works” because of the staff
 - High quality of services delivered to the public is due to the dedication and professional qualities of the City staff, not because of the system
- Governance and operating procedures
 - No common understanding (nor formal document) setting the make-up, expectations, reporting lines, governance, and operation of the City’s one-stop system
- Cohesion and Communication
 - Individual departments have implemented their view or understanding of the one-stop concept, resulting in competing interests, budget and staffing imbalances, and conflicting methodologies
- Experience and Knowledge
 - Retirements and other departures of staff are resulting in loss of institutional memory. Many of the departing staff have been “making it work” in the absence of a clearly defined system
- One-deep staffing is crippling
 - Positions providing direct service to the customers must be officially backed up. Cross-training is essential and must be ongoing. There are currently one-deep and zero-deep staffing scenarios
- Technology
 - Underutilizing current technology. Need established user and technical support base (super users and user groups). Many individual “workarounds” exist as a result

- Written Procedures
 - Written materials and procedures for staff to support their position and their work duties are limited and inconsistent. Many had developed their own, especially as “workarounds”
- Training
 - Noted absence of organized training for new employees and ongoing refresher training, especially in the technology areas
- Public education, access, and services
 - Website could be a more dynamic source of development information and direct services for the public (e.g., online permit applications, approval of routine permits, etc.)
- Fees and revenues
 - Concern that the City has not been pursuing available fees and other revenue sources for development permitting and inspection services

3. Summary of Common Themes and Expectations

The Customer and Staff input processes approached the same broad issues from very different perspectives. However, when combined they yielded the following common themes and expectations:

- A clearly defined Permitting and Inspection system is needed
- The City should commit a higher priority to development-related processes
- The system should ensure predictability and timeliness
- The system should be the source of consistent and reliable information
- Staff and financial resources, adequate to meet the goals and performance standards of the system, should be provided

4. Summary of Priorities and Opportunities for Improvement

The Key Findings and Common Themes from customers and staff provide the basis for a series of improvements. All should be undertaken in a timely manner (one or two at a time) and integrated into the ongoing operations of the City's permitting and inspection system.

- Define the City's one-stop permitting and inspection system
 - Identify and charter the team who must participate in this discussion and decision. The outcome should be the definition, operational configuration, governance, initial budget, and staff assignments (positions, not personnel) to implement the system
- Establish/enact the sequence & timing of implementation
 - Once an agreement is approved, establish/enact the sequence and timing of implementation. Address obstacles and needed changes
- Fill vacant positions (current or as redefined) immediately
 - Also, formalize and conduct training and cross-training on operating procedures of all staff assigned to the one-stop system
- Designate super users and charter initial user group(s)
 - Establish super users (2+) and initial user group(s) for the permitting system, and the various software packages

- Conduct refresher training for all assigned/involved staff
 - Training required for all assigned (and involved parent department staff) in the current automated systems
- Identify/prioritize the operational processes and procedures that need to be developed and/or updated
 - Conduct process to identify and prioritize the operational processes and procedures that need to be developed and/or updated to address the current concerns and gaps
- Review and update the website, handout materials and other public information
 - Establish a team to review the website, handout materials and other public information. Develop new and/or update promptly
- Promptly address any additional issues that arise
 - Encourage continuous staff engagement, and implement the continuous improvements

5. Next Steps

The Final Report and Executive Summary have been submitted to the Mayor and City Administrator. Following review, they will be able to determine the City's next actions, sequence and timing. Once the direction is established, the City can undertake the implementation of the decision(s).

Main Report

1. Evaluation Process

Mayor Ekberg and City Administrator Cline approached the Seattle Southside Chamber of Commerce (SSCC) to assist with an evaluation of the City's current development permitting and inspection services. The City has been implementing a series of incremental changes in recent years while moving towards a one-stop permit system. A variety of organizational and staffing changes has now provided an opportunity to advance the evolution of the entire system forward at this time.

Contracted Services. SSCC was asked to conduct an outreach process to evaluate customer satisfaction with the current system and to seek ideas/input on potential areas for improvement. The SSCC is not a direct user of the City's system, though many of its members interact with the City's system regularly. In this evaluation process, SSCC served as a mirror while conducting a series of interviews and outreach methods; asking focused questions, listening for trends, patterns, and key messages. Through this report, SSCC presents the compiled input gathered in a meaningful and organized manner. The SSCC utilized a two-pronged outreach approach, described in more detailed below, by interviewing both customer/users of the City's permitting and