



October 11, 2018

Deputy Mayor David Moseley
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RE: SDCI Permit Delays & Recommended Process Improvements

Dear Deputy Mayor David Moseley and SDCI Director Nathan Torgelson:

Over the past several months, members of the Downtown Seattle Association (“DSA”) and the American Institute of Architects (“AIA”) have elevated increasing concerns over delays at the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (“SDCI”). Master Use Permits (“MUPs”) now take approximately 24 months on average to obtain. This is almost double the permitting time from a few years ago, at a time when permit volumes were also very high. Intake appointments currently take at least three months to secure. Approvals for demolition permits, once acquired with over-the-counter approvals, now take four to six weeks to be processed. These are just a few examples of lengthening permitting timelines that hinder the City’s ability to deliver office space for new jobs and affordable and market-rate housing in furtherance of City goals. There is no reason the City cannot reduce these timelines in order to better meet its goals.

Exacerbating permitting timelines has been the implementation of the new Accela permitting program. While Accela may have the potential to improve communication with the public, increase access to information, and streamline permitting, currently Accela has contributed to permitting problems.

Meanwhile, the increasing complexity of the code means that only the largest applicants are able to dedicate resources to tracking code issues and permitting timelines. This creates inequity in the system, where well-to-do applicants can understand the system, and individual applicants or those with less experience cannot. New consultancies are forming to help people read code and navigate the permitting system and all of its new additional requirements. Piling on to this complication is the addition of new staff members, and the loss of many experienced staff members/leaders. In some cases, staff (particularly new staff) lack clarity regarding new code, leading to inconsistent implementation and frustrated customers and staff alike.

Efficient permitting timelines directly support the City’s goals of quick delivery of affordable and market rate housing which increases affordability in our City. Between 2015 and 2017, the city added 67,000 jobs, but fewer than 23,000 new housing units were delivered. The Seattle Comprehensive Plan sets the goal of delivering 0.61 units per job, meaning the city fell short 21,000 housing units during that timeframe. Today, nearly 23,000 residential units are in the system awaiting permit approvals in downtown alone. We cannot afford to delay delivery of housing units during the current housing crisis.

Furthermore, reducing permitting timelines makes Seattle an attractive place to do business, as delivery of new commercial office space accommodates new jobs. Long permitting timelines harm all of these City goals and can also have a deleterious effect on staff morale.



DSA would like to support SDCI to work through these issues with the goal of increasing customer service, reducing permitting timelines, and delivering development projects to meet City housing and economic development goals.

Proposal for Support

- **Process Planning & Improvements-** Conduct organizational planning with support from a business management consulting firm. Evaluate current permitting practices and find efficiencies to reduce permitting timelines. Examine the relationship between code writers and permit reviewers to determine whether newly written code supports or undermines permit reviewers and permit timelines. This work aims to clarify department goals, improve staff morale, improve customer service, minimize staff turnover, reduce permitting timelines, and increase consistent application of code.
- **Staff Training-** Provide additional education and staff training to get reviewers up to speed on recently adopted legislation. Increased staff competency will improve morale, increase the level of customer service provided to applicants, and ensure consistent code application between projects.
- **Working Group & Customer Feedback-** Increase focus on customer service and interface with the public and applicants. Create opportunities for customer service feedback and oversight. Convene a working group of industry experts that meet monthly in order to understand the customer experience and collaboratively troubleshoot challenges with the permitting system.
- **Technical Support to Troubleshoot Accela-** Modify Accela to improve communication with the public, increase access to information, and streamline permitting timelines. DSA and its partners understand that SDCI has resources for continued IT support to evaluate challenges with the Accela software, provide immediate interventions, and determine a long-term fix. In addition, DSA recommends that SDCI consult a table of experts in the development community to understand the real-world challenges with the software. Members of the community would also like to reinstate features from the former software that communicate the phase of review and reviewer of individual applications, thereby encouraging staff accountability and government transparency.

Sincerely,

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