

Development Approval Coordination Strategy and Process Review

ISSUE

To support continued improvement and the provision of high-quality services to the building and development sector, Administration is undertaking a strategy to focus on improvements to the development application, review and approval processes managed across several civic divisions.

BACKGROUND

In the past six years, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken to consider program changes, enhancements and reduction of operational issues, including the Development Civic Service Review (2017), Infill Roundtable (2017), Building and Development Operational and Fee Review (2018), Streamlining Downtown Development Process, addition of City Centre Planner (2018), as well as the initiation of the Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw Review project in 2019. Each of these initiatives has resulted in program enhancements, including policy amendments, incentive program changes, streamlined approval processes and other changes.

In addition, program enhancements to move to online services have been underway, led by Building Standards in collaboration with Community Standards, Information Technology, as well as Planning and Development. In 2020, Capital Project No. 2169 – Urban Planning and Development Program Enhancements was approved to support delivery of a system that will include online submissions, review and communications, application tracking for applicants and collaborative internal reviews through an e-permitting system.

The new e-permitting system has been launched with Phase 1 for building permits going live as of March 15, 2022. Phase 2 is in early stages and will include various planning approval workflows coordinated by the Planning and Development Department. Phase 2 is expected to go live in early 2023. These workflows will include many of the collaborative review processes used for development applications of various types and scales.

CURRENT STATUS

Development applications of various types are reviewed by a variety of civic departments, each tasked with a particular area of responsibility and authority. Depending on the type of application, a collaborative referral process may require up to eight different civic departments to review, comment and approve. Each department has specific responsibilities for regulations, specifications and standards and will review applications or proposals to meet these requirements. In addition, external agencies may also need to provide input and approvals, such as SaskEnergy, SaskPower, etc. or others. The combined review process is in place to ensure new development can be serviced, meets policy and bylaw requirements and does not create undue effects to

other aspects of the city/community infrastructure. As new requirements, policies or regulations are added, either by the City or other regulators, the review process is adjusted as required and timelines may be impacted.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Larger or more complex development may have a number of groups involved – both from Administration as regulators/reviewers, as well as from the proponent. For example, a proponent may have water and sewer, transportation and planning consultants involved in preparing various aspects of a proposal. Due to a variety of regulations and requirements, as well as the number of consultants and reviewers involved, applications may require several cycles of review and adjustment before they are approved. Improvements to this review/adjustment process are expected to result from the adoption of the e-permitting system. However, application processing by the City is only part of the cycle. Improvements can also be made through additional education and awareness, and improved documentation of requirements, processes, eliminating common application submission mistakes, etc. Through Phase 1 of the e-permitting system, additional effort has been placed on providing enhanced education and documentation to assist applicants. This will continue in future phases of implementation.

Additional consideration also needs to be given to ensuring all requirements and regulations serve their intended purpose and add value. As new regulations are brought in to address public interests for such things as safety, environmental sustainability, community health, etc., these important community-building goals may add additional cost and time to development. Effective communication and administration of regulations must ensure public or community goals are achieved while working to ensure resulting impacts to development applications are acknowledged and where possible, mitigated. The strategy being undertaken by Administration will take a multi-faceted approach to consider strategic changes which can continue to improve and enhance quality and timeliness of the application, decision-making and development approval processes.

Building and development industries are heavily regulated, not just by the City, but by other provincial and federal agencies, as well. As noted above, regulations reflect necessary public interests, but they also impose both cost and time burdens to development. Working together with the building and development industry to improve processes recognizes that safe and effective regulations, delivered in an efficient manner, serves interests of both parties and end users of the development.

What Have We Heard?

Civic departments involved in reviewing and approving development applications have been receiving requests for a number of operational improvements from a variety of sectors, including the building and development industry, non-profits, business owners and residents. Since 2017, engagement with the development industry has identified numerous process improvements and systemic operational issues that could be resolved. Key goals identified were for faster and timelier reviews, improved service

and communications during the review process, assistance with problem-solving and alternative solutions and overall streamlined operations.

What Are We Going to Do Next?

Administration is initiating work to have a renewed focus, on the review and approval process for development, throughout the organization. This will include:

- A dedicated Manager to lead the coordination of efforts;
- A review of best practices among Canadian municipalities;
- Ongoing engagement with industry stakeholders, external agencies and members of Administration to co-identify solutions and trial new options;
- An action plan to conduct systematic process reviews across reviewing departments, incorporating previously identified issues and areas for improvement identified during earlier reviews;
- Ongoing coordination with e-permitting implementation work to optimize the “out of the box” solution through that program; and
- Coordination with on-going initiatives such as the Urban Forestry Management Implementation Project, Development Levy Implementation Project, Green Network Implementation Plan, Growth and Infill Communications Project and the Corridor Planning Program, among others.

The intent of this work will be to optimize review and approval processes by providing clear documentation and requirements, streamlined application processing, reduced redundancies and improved communication methods for both applicants and internal reviewers. This work will support the implementation of Phase 2 of the e-permitting system.

The plan for strategic changes across the spectrum for development review and approval processes will involve:

- Administration working to streamline approaches and processes and providing the appropriate education and information for the building and development industry;
- Building and development industry partners helping identify and co-create solutions and as applicants, ensuring information is complete and accurate at time of submission to help streamline and expedite the review and approval process; and
- City Council through consideration of the impacts of new and existing requirements for development applications to the overall review and approval processes. For example, new policy requirements may require a developer to undertake additional technical studies, adding time and cost to the process. As another example, if additional public information sessions and communications are required for certain types of development, this will impact the length of the review and approval process. Consideration should be given to whether this impact is outweighed by the public benefit created by the requirement.

How Do We Compare to Others?

Part of the approach outlined in this report will be to review actions by other municipalities to improve their operations. The [Canadian Home Builders' Association Municipal Benchmarking Study \(2020\)](#) provides an overview of current state and interesting approaches being used across Canada. Further review will occur, as noted above, to identify any leading practices that would add value in Saskatoon.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The dedicated Manager role for this strategy will come from an existing permanent position within the Planning and Development Department. No other financial implications are anticipated at this time. As process improvements and changes are identified, future reports will be brought forward if there are financial implications associated with the changes.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no privacy, legal, social or environmental implications identified.

NEXT STEPS

Administration will pursue the actions outlined in this report. Resulting changes that require approval by Committee or City Council will be brought forward in reports as necessary.

REPORT APPROVAL

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SP/2022/PD/PDCS/Development Approval Coordination Strategy and Process Review/cm