

Mayor's Development Task Force 2014 Process Summary, Recommendations, and Next Steps

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I. Purpose

The City of Asheville is committed to improving the quality and efficiency of the services we provide for both citizens and businesses in Asheville. As part of that commitment, Mayor Esther Manheimer created a development task force to provide recommendations designed to promote sound growth and development in the City of Asheville.

A. Historical Context

In 2009, the City of Asheville launched Development Services Department's one-stop-shop in an effort to streamline the permitting process and increase intra-departmental communication. The department combined under one roof representatives from the five City of Asheville departments that issue permits for construction: Public Works, Planning and Development, Water Engineering, Asheville Fire Department's Fire Marshals, and Building Safety. This was a result of research conducted by city management and recommendations from a Development Task Force launched in 2004.

Development permitting and construction in Asheville are at their highest point since 2008. The 2014 Mayor's Task Force was formed to build on the good work that has been completed, and provide recommendations to address the challenges in our growing community, balancing the needs of a diverse citizenry.

B. Structure

The task force met four times over the course of four months. Each meeting lasted for approximately two hours.

- **September 9, 2014 Meeting**

The purpose of the first meeting was to ground the stakeholders in the purpose of the task force. At the first meeting, participants discussed why they wanted to participate in the task force and what they hoped the task force would accomplish. In addition, they also discussed the following questions:

- Consider your most recent development or re-development project. What were some of the positive experiences? Were they expected or unexpected?
- Consider your most recent development or re-development project. What were some of the negative experiences? Were they expected or unexpected?

- **October 9, 2014 Meeting**

At the second meeting, the task force reviewed the results of an online survey they had completed. The September meeting notes and the survey results had been summarized into a list of challenges. During the October meeting, the stakeholders identified broader category names and organized the difficulties they have experienced within those categories. Using the challenges they had identified to date, the task force members voted to identify the higher priority challenges.

- **November 13, 2014 Meeting**

The purpose of the third meeting was to identify any challenges that had not been listed to date and to then engage in a discussion with City of Asheville staff on the challenges that the development community of stakeholders experience. During this discussion, City staff were able to provide insight on implementation, updates on actions that have already been taken due to the task force's feedback, and gain further clarity on challenges from the stakeholders.

- **December 11, 2014 Meeting**

The final task force meeting focused on reviewing and affirming the final report that would be made to the City Council.

C. Task Force Members

Participant	Association/Organization
Adrian Vasallo	Asheville Downtown Association
Alan Escovitz	Neighborhood Association
Alan McGuinn	American Institute of Architects of Asheville
Austin Walker	West Asheville Business Association
Bill Newman	Council of Independent Business Owners
Bob Patel	TDA
Bruce Hazzard	Downtown Commission
Bryan Moffitt	Historic Resources Commission
Debra Marshall	Asheville Board of Realtors
Ed Bradford	MSD
Henry Watts	Beverly Grant Inc.
Hunter Westbrook	Asheville Chamber
Jane Mathews	American Institute of Architects of Asheville
Jason Walls	Duke
Jeremy Goldstein	Planning Commission
Jody Goukas	JAG & Associates Construction
Lee Thomason	Biltmore Farms
Mary Love	WNC Green Building Council
Rich Cundiff	Asheville AIR
Roger Raper	PSNC Energy
Susan Wilson	Beverly Grant Inc.
William Wilcox	North Carolina Society of Engineers

II. Summary of Significant Concerns

Over the course of the task force meetings, the stakeholders provided meaningful detail into their experiences with the development and re-development process. This section provides a high level review of the significant concerns that the stakeholders identified. A more detailed review of specific challenges is provided in the next section of this report. Below categories are provided which provided umbrellas for organizing the stakeholders concerns.

- **Process and Procedure**

Process and Procedure challenges impacted the stakeholders as factors that would frequently complicate or delay their work. Multiple sub-categories for Process and Procedure challenges were identified, including:

- Inconvenience of the permit calculation and payment process.
- Timeliness of the process as related to the processing of permit applications, reviewing of permits, and closing out permits.

- Insufficient process for dealing with outstanding permits so that they don't impede on the progress of new projects.
- Unexpected requirements that are identified late in the process.
- **Customer Service**
 Customer Service challenges were significant sources of inconvenience for the stakeholders. While the challenges are not all overly complicated, they were frequently sources of significant frustration and lost time for the task force members. Multiple sub-categories for Customer Service challenges were identified, including:
 - Inability to submit plans digitally.
 - Limitations of current staffing model at the Development Services Department, which contribute to significant amounts of time spent waiting in line or to meet with staff.
 - Technological stumbling blocks that effect work flow including, navigating the current online permit tracking system and the acceptance of credit cards for payment processing in the Water Department.
- **Communication**
 Communication challenges discussed by the stakeholders focused on the effective sharing of information between the various offices of the Development Services Department and the users of the DSD. Multiple sub-categories for Communication challenges were identified, including:
 - Insufficient communication between relevant City offices leading to confusion and cumbersome processes.
 - Lack of communication to the public on changes to policy.
- **Education**
 Education challenges were present for multiple groups. Including people that do not work as extensively with the Development Services Office and have not learned how to effectively prepare for and navigate the development process, continued training for design professionals on the offered we-based business services, and on-going professional development and expertise training for staff. There were no sub-categories for Education challenges.
- **Culture**
 Culture challenges related to the stakeholders perception that Development Services staff do not always feel empowered to make decisions out of fear that their decisions might be seen as wrong at a later stage. There were no sub-categories for Culture challenges.

III. Detailed Review of Challenges

Following is a more detailed review of the challenges, organized by category, which the task force identified through their process. In some instances, participants provided thoughts on ways to address their challenge. This input has also been included in a column described as "Request".

Finally, the third column represents the total number of votes a challenge received during the prioritization process.

Category: Process and Procedure Challenges		
<i>Sub Category: Permit Payment</i>		
Permit payment process.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take forms and our credit card information. If all is in order, charge and email a receipt. If not in order, contact us and we'll return to correct problems. 	2
Cost of plan review fees to be paid in advance, especially on large-scale projects. Don't always know full cost when applying. Causes time delays for staff and contractors	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start work with a flat fee, pay any additional fees (based upon needs and complexity of project) before the release of permit. 	
<i>Sub Category: Fee Fatigue</i>		
The cost of developing larger and more complicated tracks. All the fees associated with planning, water, sewer, storm water, road and pedestrian infrastructure reduce room for profit.		3
<i>Sub Category: Permit Processing and Timeliness of Work</i>		
Too many rounds of submitting, receiving comments, responding to and making changes, and on and on and on and on.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider allowing for regular scheduling of a pre-review meeting to look at issues and requirements. This would be particularly useful for existing buildings to problem solve early. Also valuable to hold these during the design phase. Provide and advertise the availability of online checklists. Provide education on Asheville policies and procedures to out-of-town professionals. 	7

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consider that some boilerplate comments included in review process can reflect negatively on design professional from the point of view of their client. 	
Lengthy water closeout and approval process. Especially as water sample submitted at start is only good for 30 days.		1
Lack of clear estimates of time required for the process, start to finish.		
<i>Sub Category: Permit Retrieval</i>		
Being surprised by an outstanding permit on a building that is unrelated to new work.		1
<i>Sub Category: Permit Requirements</i>		
Getting surprised with unexpected/unknown additional requirements. (ex. unexpected Green issues)		
Category: Customer Service		
<i>Sub Category: Digital Submission</i>		
Not being able to submit, and re-submit, plans digitally.		9
<i>Sub Category: Staffing</i>		
Development Services office not being opened on Fridays.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consider splitting staff hours to cover more days. 	6
Too much wasted time waiting in line at Development Services office.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a “by appointment” line. ▪ Have a “fast lane” for design and development professionals. ▪ Implement expedited review process. ex. Alexandria, VA and Charlotte and Raleigh, NC ▪ Return forms to public side of counter in Development Services 	4

	office.	
Cannot currently get TCO on Fridays.		2
Time loss during process due to backlogs and delays.		
<i>Sub Category: Credit Card Processing</i>		
Can't use credit card at Water Department	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Update payment process technology to use credit cards. 	
<i>Sub Category: Computer System</i>		
The new computer system isn't smooth. Want to be able to track where in the process a permit is. Miss getting expected completion date. Too many permit numbers.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a Master Permit Number. Provide more tracking information. Such as, whose desk is it on, what action is being taken, where is it going next, and when will it get there? Keeping us informed is an important part of customer service. Work with a small group that will focus on the web based business services. A mixed group of professionals and DSD staff. They can develop a "punch list" on the problems with the current system and needs for more efficient work. Provide regular training for professionals on how to use the web-based business service tools 	
Category: Communication		
<i>Sub Category: Communication to Public</i>		
Lack of communication to public and vested stakeholders on changes to City policy that will impact upcoming projects. (ex. easements required for underground		

utility work)		
Sub Category: Lack of Communication Between Departments and Services		
Inter-department confusion and lack of communication. (ex. water wants one thing, planning wants another. Development Services staff require one thing and site inspectors request another. Lack of communication between Development Services staff.)	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get site inspection comments in writing to improve continuity. Sometimes, site inspectors want things that aren't required. Having their inspection comments in writing would help. 	5
Cumbersome process to contact each office to send out appropriate staff for final inspection.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Final Inspection notice should be sent to one office and then the notification should go out to all parties for final. 	1
Disconnect between Transportation and DOT.		
Delays on MSD reviews.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> More communication between MSD staff, City staff, and developers/designers. Let's meet early to understand each other's needs. Build on the idea that City staff and development professionals can be part of the same team and work cooperatively together. Continue to add clarity to the timeline. We know MSD tries for a 2-week review, but unknown timeline between City and MSD for example. 	
Category: Culture		
Seems like staff feel it is safer to say "No" right now. They don't feel empowered to make decisions and stick by them.	Request: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shift the Development Services culture to one where staff are 	7

	<p>empowered to make final decisions. Help them feel safe to say “Yes”.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourage staff to work with designers/developers to solve problems. ▪ Collaborate with staff early in the design planning phase, particularly for existing buildings. 	
Loss of institutional knowledge of staff with deep knowledge of codes.		
Category: Education		
Volunteer commissions can get too focused on critiquing the artistic merits of a project and re-designing it.	<p>Request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide better instruction to volunteer commissioners on what their role and purpose is. Provide them with guidelines for their work. ▪ Have the City review the selection process to consider if it is being done in the most effective manner. 	
Lack of understanding in general public, small business owners, and small contractors on the building codes and permitting process.	<p>Request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provide a clearinghouse of resources to assist those more unfamiliar with the system. For example, collaborate with an appropriate group (such as the Asheville Design Center) to create a list of professionals that can speak with those “lay people” to provide complimentary advice. This would help to alleviate some of the burden currently being born by the DSD staff. 	

IV. Actions Taken to Date

Process & Procedures

- Can now apply and pay for single-trade permits on-line
- Can schedule all inspections on-line
- Provided training to design or contracting offices on how to effectively use the new permitting system
- Research early assistance (a.k.a. pre-application) models to be adopted and applied
- Proposal to move Level II projects away from the Planning & Zoning Commission is in process
- Created a “Development Project Coordinator” position in the department to help liaison with customers and facilitate projects through the entire process.

Education

- Information and training meetings for volunteer commissions are being scheduled
- DSD regularly staff attend community and professional organization meetings to share new information (practices, policies, trends, etc.)
- The DSD provides continuing education (74 hours in 2014) in all trades for plan review and inspection staff across the region.

Communication

- A plan for website corrections and enhancements is currently in development
- Currently working with a consultant on resolving inefficiencies with the new permitting software (affects communication between disciplines and functions)

Culture

- Provide policy and technical training to new staff to build confidence in decisions
- Created a mentor program for new or less experienced staff to work with senior staff
- Developed an informal appeal route for staff and customers to utilize when decisions are questionable
- Initiated the creation of a shared reference documenting decisions and rationale used
- Developed a plan to retain senior and/or valuable employees (no employee turnover since adopted).

Customer Service

- Researching software products supporting electronic submittals and plan review
- Researched and selected a lobby queuing management system to be implemented in the winter/spring.
- Hired and trained 17 new staff members in 2014.
- Water resources now accepting credit card payments.
- Currently working with a consultant on resolving inefficiencies with the new permitting software.
- Exploring options for a new “Business Technology Project Manager” to help with translating business practices into technology based processes.

V. Next Steps

This task force was the beginning of a review and improvement process for the Development Services Office and other relevant departments in the City. The appropriate staff will continue to review this feedback to establish appropriate actions that can be taken and the prioritization of implementing those changes.

A. Priorities

Priorities will be established through a weighted evaluation process that takes into consideration a variety of factors including:

- Time needed to complete initiative
- Availability of resources
- Sequencing of initiatives
- Feedback from community

B. Ongoing Feedback

There is the opportunity to implement several strategies for ongoing meaningful discussion and feedback with stakeholders that were included in the task force.

- **Business Process and Technology Specific Task Force**

Several technology related challenges were identified, including the features of the current online permit system. Multiple members of this task force expressed an interest and willingness to serve on a technology specific task force that could provide ongoing specific feedback to the technology and website team to help them understand the challenges from the users point of view and strategize on resolution ideas. An important first step of this group will be to create a specific list of the challenges they experience and identify the functions that would help them to effectively do their work.

- **Process Improvement Updates**

The members of the task are highly invested in the Development Services Department operating under an efficient system that appropriately enforces code and maintains public safety. Continuing to update the task force members and other stakeholders regarding ongoing actions is an important action for the Development Services staff. These types of updates could be woven into existing meetings and also incorporated into any future education or outreach meetings that are planned. Some potential methods of disseminating information identified by this task force include:

- Include updates on process improvements at the bi-annual Development Forum.
- In the case of a major change, send out a special email to development professionals to help spread the word.
- Include Development Services staff as guest speakers at association meetings, such as AIA , to discuss changes or particular issues.

- For an Advisory Committee of stakeholders that meets regularly with Development Services staff to provide feedback and insight on continued improvement efforts.