

# City Auditor's Report on Construction Permitting & SDCI Response and Progress

Presentation to the Seattle City Council Land Use Committee

**November 29, 2023**



**Seattle Office of City  
Auditor**



**Seattle** Department of  
Construction & Inspections

# What we did

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## Construction permitting process



# What we found

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The City should:

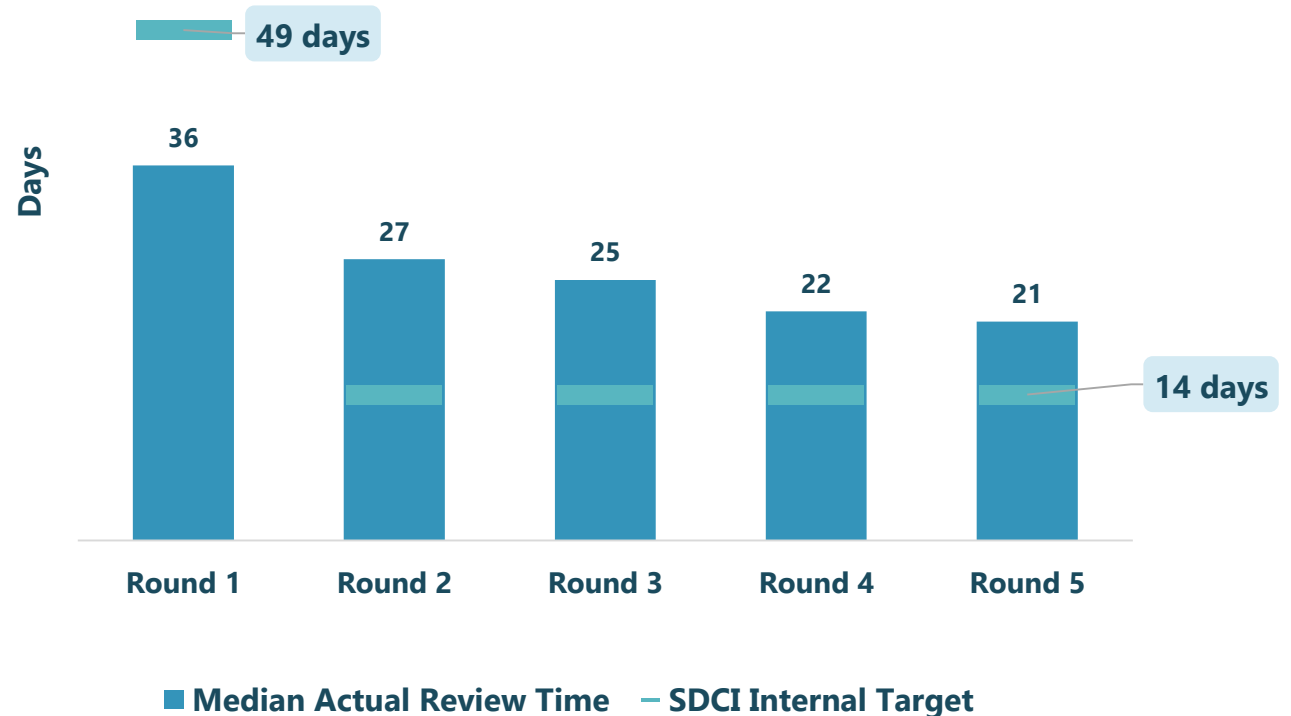
- Reinforce a customer focus
- Promote transparency and fairness
- Strengthen a Citywide approach
- Standardize review comments



# Reinforce a customer focus

Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should reevaluate its tracking metrics and reporting methods to reduce review times. Review rounds after the first are not meeting internal targets.

The City lacks a process to routinely collect customer feedback.



# Reinforce a customer focus

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Recommendations:



Track by total  
review time



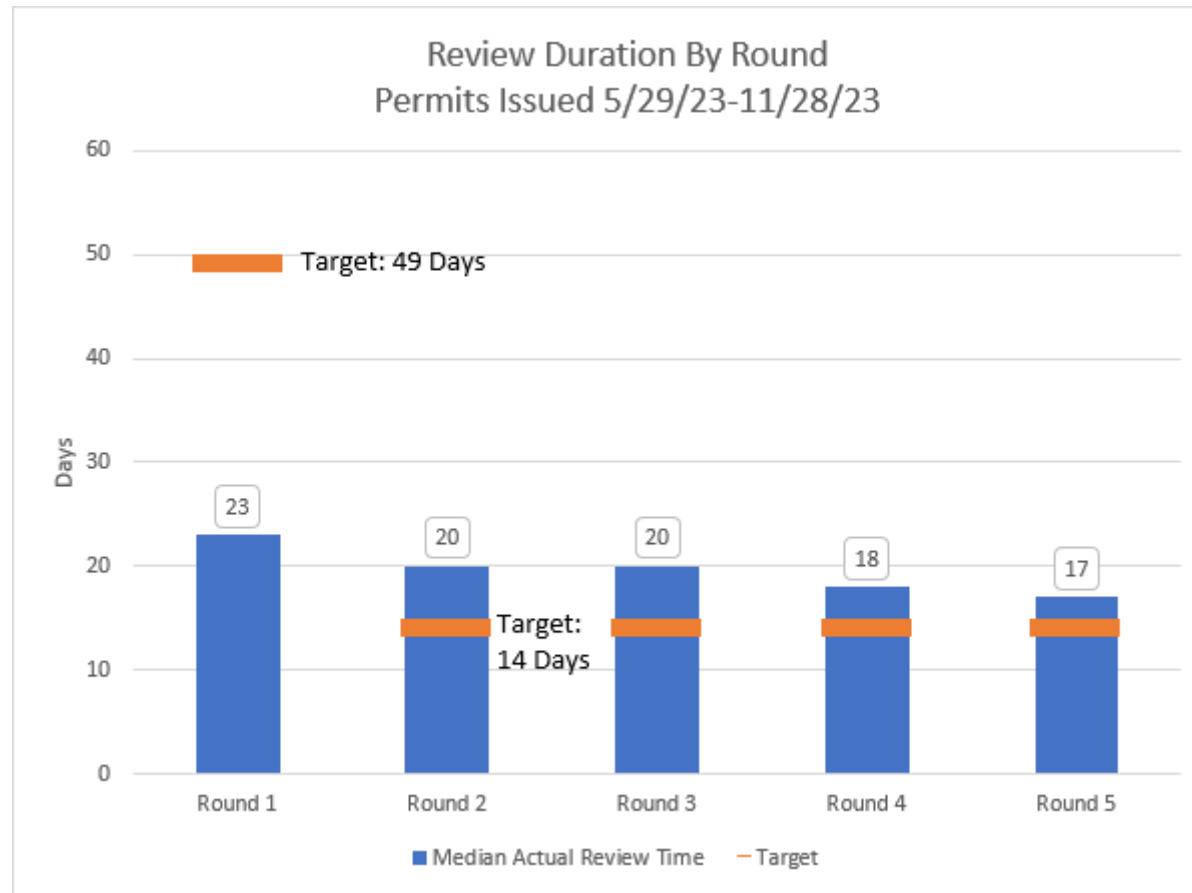
Complete  
Racial Equity  
Toolkit



Engage  
customers  
strategically



# Reinforce a Customer Focus: SDCI Progress



# Reinforce a Customer Focus: SDCI Progress

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- Implementing a framework to consistently measure key permitting metrics to track progress and identify areas of opportunity both internally and externally. **On track for completion in 2024.**
- Continued focus on collecting feedback from customers on the entirety of their permit application process to better inform the user experience. **Ongoing effort of the SDCI Executive Team**
- Development of a Permit-O-Meter - A visual dashboard available to the public that displays the status of a permit. **To be completed in 2024.**

# Reinforce a Customer Focus: SDCI Progress

- Continuing to work with the SDCI Anti-Racist Task Force and Change Team to continually incorporate RSJ principles in human centered design work. **Ongoing**
- Opening a new information desk on the 4th floor of SMT to help people who might not be comfortable navigating websites, prefer in person contact, or do not have technology resources. Use the information collected through these interactions to better inform communication with customers. **Q4 2023**
- Connection with the public through a variety of sources (Annual Seattle Home Fairs, webinars and videos on a variety of topics), modifying phone lines to better connect customers to the information they are seeking, and physical and digital copies of information presented in a variety of languages. **Ongoing**





# Reinforce a Customer Focus: SDCI Progress

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- Creation of a Customer Success Team to provide end to end customer support by funneling all customer questions to better inform process improvements and resolve issues, consolidating ownership of up-front customer service, and ensuring that the correct staff are answering customer questions. **To be completed in 2024.**
- Using feedback loops from customers to prioritize investments in ongoing improvements. **Ongoing.**
- Providing internal training, coaching, support, accountability, and role definition around permit process improvements. **Ongoing.**
- Develop a centralized location to easily access and publicly share key permitting metrics that track progress and identify areas of opportunity both internally and externally. **To be completed in 2024.**
- Ensure that decision making and accountability are clear in any escalation actions. **Ongoing.**

# Promote transparency and fairness

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The City is inconsistent and opaque in how it prioritizes permit applications.

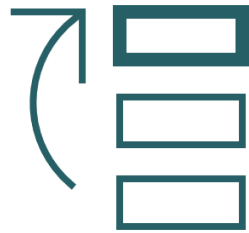
SDCI could do more to ensure a positive ethical culture.



# Promote transparency and fairness

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Recommendations:



Review and formalize  
prioritization process

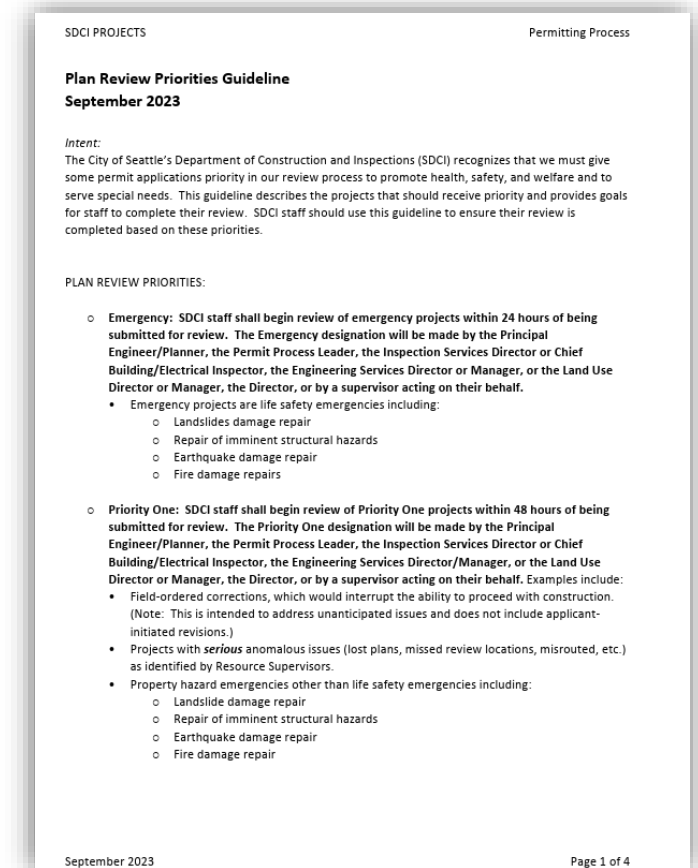


Evaluate SDCI  
ethical culture



# Promote Transparency & Fairness – SDCI Progress

- Published permit prioritization guidelines on our website for customers and staff. **Completed in 2023.**
- Expanding the use of documents such as a "Queue Management Guidance" to all departments and city review locations to enhance consistency across all reviews. **Ongoing collaboration with other departments.**
- SDCI has formalized a process for completing Financial Interest Statements (FIS). **Completed.**



# Reinforce a Customer Focus: SDCI Progress

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- SDCI has coordinated with Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) to create additional validation steps for completion of the FIS and has assigned a liaison to work with SEEC to annually validate the list of managers who meet qualifications to complete the form, rather than employees interpreting if they are required to complete the form. This liaison will now be able to track individual completion. This will also foster a contact for employees to ask questions or seek additional training. **Ongoing.**
- Increase frequency of Ethics training – will become a required part of onboarding and are standardizing dates/times per year when training occurs. **Currently working with HR and SEEC.**
- Educating staff on “safe-space” reporting options to Human Resources and Office of the Employee Ombud. **Ongoing.**

# Strengthen a Citywide approach

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The City has engaged in permitting improvement efforts, but not all identified changes have been made.

There is not a unified approach to funding staff nor an effective strategy for supporting permitting software.



# Strengthen a Citywide approach

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Recommendations:



Evaluate and  
prioritize past  
recommendations



Look at governance  
and funding  
structures



Create strategy to  
support permit  
software



Improve  
departments' use  
of Accela



# Strengthen a Citywide Approach – SDCI Progress

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- SDCI will need to collaborate with the City Budget Office and other City departments regarding this recommendation and will continue to share all the historical documentation and recommendations related to enterprise funding, operational reserves and set asides, contingent budget authority, demand/capacity planning, etc. in order to assist other departments involved in the permitting process in their efforts to be more nimble/responsive. **Ongoing.**
- We are also creating an Interdepartmental Workgroup to continue pursuing permitting process improvements identified by the Housing Sub-Cabinet. **On track for completion in early 2024.**
- SDCI created dedicated teams to improve the user experience for customers and employees and to focus on continuous process improvement. **Complete.**



# Strengthen a Citywide Approach – SDCI Progress

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- SDCI was recently awarded the 2023 Trendsetter Award for Connecting in Purpose-Permitting System Integration at this year's Accela Conference. SDCI has led this work for a decade through Permit System Integration ever since we purchased the initial Enterprise License for Accela. Other City departments who are involved in permitting are already looking at and/or are actively pursuing integrating other portions of their processes into the system. **Ongoing**



# Strengthen a Citywide Approach – SDCI Progress

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- Have all required internal stakeholders present/informed in the earliest point of a given permit. It may be beneficial to have all relevant reviews represented in the pre-submittal process for construction only permits. **Ongoing work to continue within SDCI and in collaboration with other departments in 2024.**
- Creation of a Novice Permit System Program to support first time permit seekers -- currently offered by SDCI for small businesses citywide. **Work to continue in 2024.**
- Rejuvenate the CPA (Consistently Prepared Applicant) Program to better screen and train applicants during the preliminary phases. **Redevelopment in progress.**

# Standardize review comments

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SDCI lacks a consistent process for handling construction permit corrections.

The City does not have a policy to routinely evaluate the quality and necessity of permit application corrections.



# Standardize review comments

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Recommendations:



Create a policy  
for issuing permit  
corrections



Consistently  
evaluate permit  
corrections



# Standardize Review Comments – SDCI Progress

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- SDCI is committed to working on consolidating existing policies into one comprehensive and consistent department-wide (and potentially city-wide) policy. **Ongoing.**
- Expanding the use of internal correction letter audits as well as collecting feedback from applicants regarding the quality of corrections issued across SDCI divisions and by all other City review locations. **Ongoing.**
- Explore reimplementing of staff-corrected plans for simple changes instead of issuing corrections. This requires coordination across departments and protocol development for consistency. **To be completed in 2024.**
- Removing elements of the permit review process that do not belong in the plan review correction cycle. **On track for completion in 2024.**

# Dig into our report

[seattle.gov/cityauditor/reports](https://seattle.gov/cityauditor/reports)



## City's Construction Permitting Needs More Customer Focus and Consistency

October 18, 2023

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