

Roadmap to Approachable and Collaborative Building Permitting Process

Governance, Accountability & Economic Development Committee

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Key Improvements to Benefit All

The current plan review system needs to consider existing basic + systemic issues, including predictability.

Economic activity can be better fostered by starting with a 'yes' rather than a 'no'.

As high volume users, we understand how small changes to the system can make big improvements and better serve the Mayor's One Seattle Initiative to build a thriving, innovative, and equitable city we are all proud to call home.

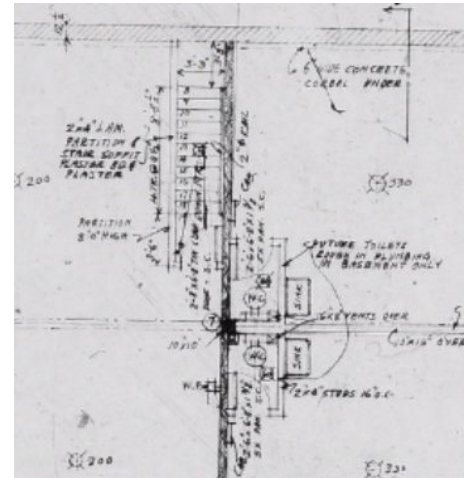
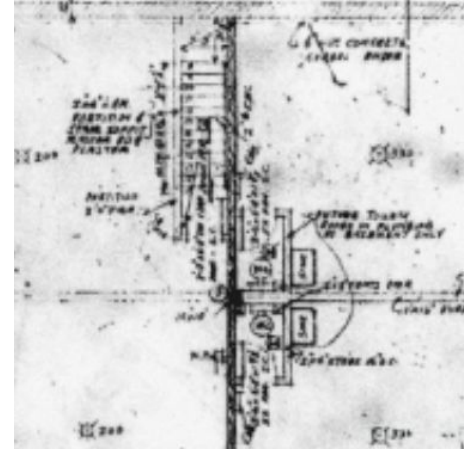
Customer Services

- Re-open microfilm to the public

See example of microfilm provided by SDCI, compared to copies obtained by a structural engineering firm using their own camera setup

- Re-open the public service desk

The service desk previously offered opportunities for the public and design professionals alike to receive guidance and coaching on the process. This provided opportunities for improved working relationships, but also provided an important source of guidance for those not working with a professional, contributing a more equitable process for all. While online services have made simple communication easier, they do not adequately address nuanced questions about codes and processes.



Customer Services - Continued

- Improve Staff Availability / Provide transparency & support during PTO

Due to a work from home culture, staff are frequently unavailable during business hours. Additionally, some staff seem reluctant to answer phone calls, however not all coordination makes sense over email. A standard reply within 3 business days for phone calls should be considered.

Furthermore, staff have no obligation to alert the public or design staff when they go on vacation or sabbatical. This can cause delays of weeks/months when a simple solution would be to assign a new reviewer and alert projects under review of the change.

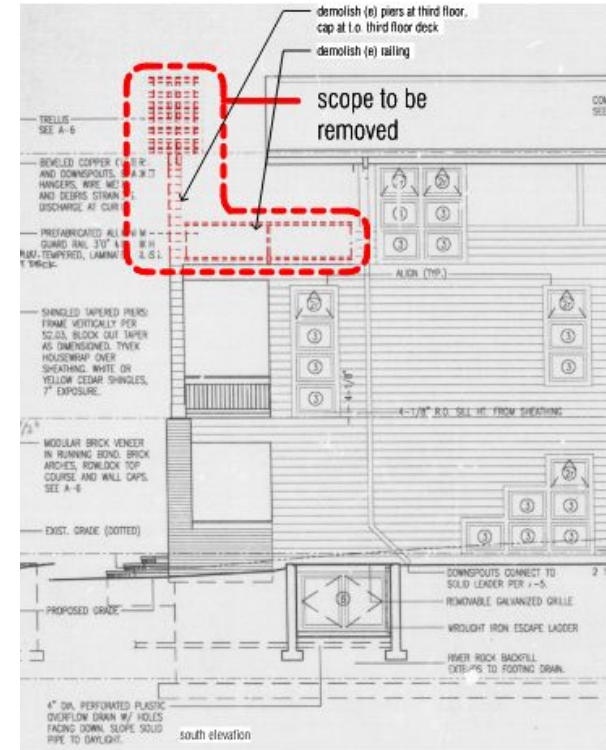
Re-opening the service counter to allow in-person coaching could also minimize the amount of calls and emails to reviewers. In-person coaching is an equitable solution for those unable to navigate the website, but also a way to reduce over-communication. Expanding the on-line services to include video conference coaching where drawings could be shared could also be less time consuming.

Building Permit Reviews

- Intake and Screening

The extent of additional documentation for intake is continually being increased, even when there is no impact to project or review. This is a financial burden on businesses and homeowners.

Example: A homeowner wanted to remove a non-structural exterior trellis, which technically required a building permit. Screening required that the energy code checklist be filled out for the project even though the project was for exterior demolition only with no effect on the energy performance of the house.



Building Permit Reviews - Continued

- Improve Consistency of Review Cycles and Approvals

Permit issuance is frequently delayed because staff add additional correction comments while separate review components are still undergoing review, even after staff approval has been given for each component. This results in more corrections and additional time required. Staff reviews should be thorough and comprehensive. Once approved, the review should be final and no further comments allowed, unless there are fundamental changes to the project scoping.

Permit review times, correction cycles, and documentation requirements have increased for small projects due to expanded reviews and increased staffing levels. In the past, reviews such as ordinance, structural, and energy could be completed by the same staff member for small projects. Review times could be significantly improved for small commercial and residential projects by minimizing the number of staff assigned to review to a limited few to streamline process and timing.

Substantial Alterations

The existing standards for Substantial Alterations are unclear to the public.

After waiting months on a determination during plan review, if a project is assigned 'Sub Alt', the applicant is required to tack on additional upgrades related to structural and energy code requirements that widen the project scope significantly. The financial consequences are very costly for these add-ons and the current method of waiting until official review prevents applicants from effectively knowing this information prior to permitting to properly plan for their project.

Solution: Bring transparency and predictability to the process by producing a public list of 'Substantial Alteration' projects in recent years and what additional scope was needed to complete permit approval so applicants can better negotiate leases and budget the project to be successful.



Energy upgrades

The state energy code-required upgrades are extremely costly, particularly for existing buildings undergoing Substantial Alterations or change of use, and limit who and what businesses can take on project.

A suggestion would be to look at it more holistically, that changing out 1 window for a tenant space in an entire old building isn't going to cause real change in energy use and is extremely costly for a tenant to upgrade a building that isn't their asset. Another suggestion is to consider utilizing a % value of improvements rule similar to how SDCI addresses accessibility upgrades currently so it is more tied to the project budget.

Example: An indoor pickleball league would like to take over an existing empty warehouse space. The owners see no need to heat the space as the participants simply want a cover from rain. SDCI was requiring the 30,000 SF building be conditioned, triggering significant energy code upgrades. The tenant cannot afford to fully insulate the building and owner is not interested in contributing. Therefore, the warehouse remains empty and unused.



Change of Use

Minor changes of use within the same occupancy group classification frequently trigger a full plan review and additional upgrades unrelated to the additional seats (full tenant improvement upgrades or parapet bracing or similar). Full plan review unnecessarily increases the permitting timeline and the number of reviewers reviewing the project.

Example: Bar wanted to add 20 more seats where they were currently storing barrels. After months in full plan review, the applicant was asked to add another restroom and add fire sprinklers to the building. This is a small business hurt by Covid shutdowns hoping to gain a few more seats for better sales. The bar has 4 existing restrooms.



Next Steps for Continued Progress and Improvements

A standing workgroup should be the conduit between SDCI and architects/applicants so the process can become more transparent and accountable. This would create ongoing efforts to improve the process and keep everyone's interests in mind. This would also allow a contiguous open dialogue for collaboration and the opportunity for improvement on all sides.

Reducing opacity by publishing internal policies even if they are in progress would help all parties aim towards the same goal. Tip sheets can be published in draft format, still offering more information and educational resources.

SDCI should assign someone with decision making powers to lead the process improvements and client experience process. Then, when there are questions there is a direct person to contact, who has the power to make changes if needed.



Thank you for your time
and consideration.