

A panoramic view of the Seattle skyline under a clear blue sky. The Space Needle is the central focus, surrounded by various skyscrapers and buildings. In the foreground, there are green trees and a white semi-transparent banner containing the title text.

SDCI Permitting Audit Update

Photo by John Skelton



Seattle Department of
Construction & Inspections

Land Use Committee
June 5, 2024

SDCI's Purpose, Vision, and Values

Our Purpose

Helping people build a safe, livable, and inclusive Seattle.

Our Vision

To set the standard for awesome local government service.

Our Values

- Equity
- Respect
- Quality
- Integrity
- Service

SDCI Permitting Overview

- SDCI reviews land use and construction-related permits, annually approving more than 53,000 permits and performing approximately 185,000 on-site and 20,000 virtual inspections.
- SDCI's work includes permit review and community involvement with Master Use Permits (MUPs); shoreline permits and design review; review and approval of permits for construction, mechanical systems, site development, elevators, electrical installation, boilers, furnaces, refrigeration, signs and billboards; field inspections for all construction and trade-related permits; annual maintenance inspections of boilers, elevators, and refrigeration equipment; and home seismic retrofits.
- During the permit review process, we work closely with other City departments (Seattle City Light, Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle Public Utilities, Seattle Fire Department, Department of Neighborhoods, Finance and Administrative Services, Office of Housing, Seattle IT)

Audit Overview

Councilmember Strauss requested the City Auditor examine the City of Seattle's process for reviewing construction permits.

The City Auditor's objectives were to answer the following questions:

- 1) Are there opportunities to improve the clarity, consistency, and timeliness of the permitting process?
- 2) Is the City using the full potential of its permitting information technology tools?
- 3) Is the City's permitting process contributing to its Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) goals?

Scope of Audit*

Exhibit 1: We examined the construction permitting process from intake through corrections



**The scope for this audit included construction permit applications that were under review in 2021 and 2022.*

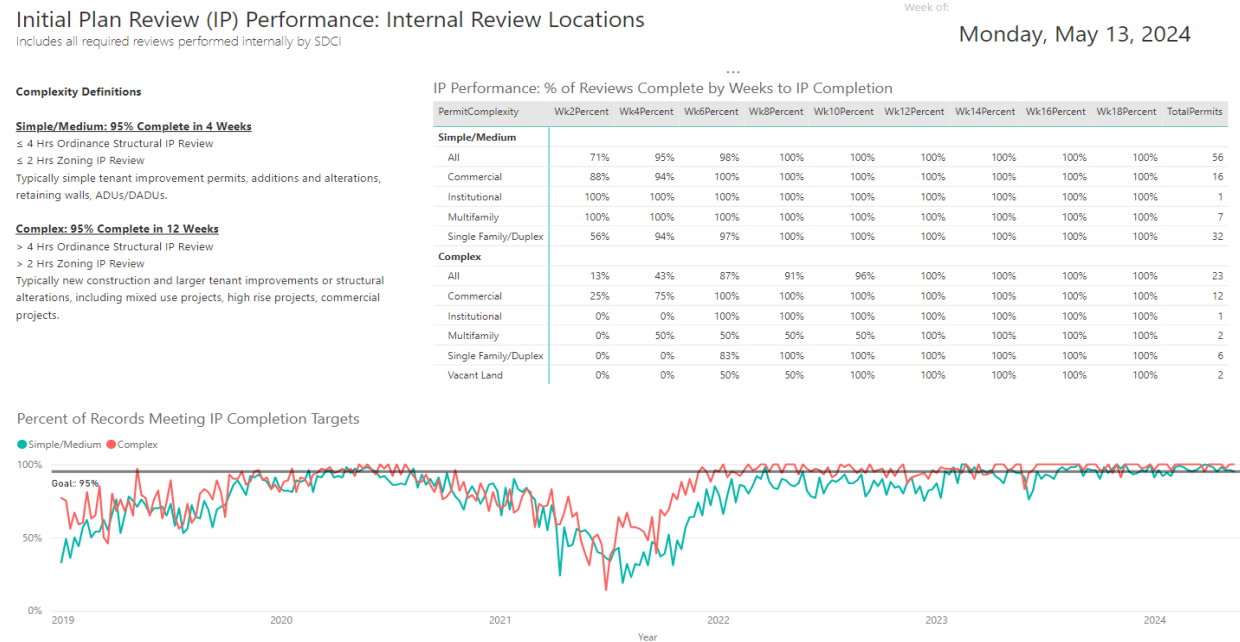
Recommendation 1

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should *develop metrics by construction permit type for total review time and a tracking process to support meeting those metrics.*

- The metrics and SDCI's progress on meeting those metrics, along with the methodology and notices of any data limitations, should be displayed on SDCI's website and updated regularly.
- The data should meet the needs and expectations of customers and include other City departments' review times. SDCI should also consider whether to publish its review queue on its website.

Recommendation 1 - SDCI Update

- Published data for permitting metrics tracking total Building Permit Timelines on public website including formatting and permit type breakdowns requested by customer stakeholders.
- Currently working with partners at the Seattle Information Technology Department to produce a report that will track Corrected Plan (CP) Review Performance in a similar way to the how SDCI currently reports on Initial Plan (IP) Review Performance, expected to be complete by Q3 of 2024.



Recommendation 2

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should address potential permitting barriers and equity concerns by incorporating the City's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) values into the permitting process.

- This should involve completing a Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) for the entire permitting process or several RETs for specific parts of the process. SDCI should consult with the Seattle Office for Civil Rights for RET guidance and support and with other City departments that are involved in permitting or have a stakeholder interest. In the RET, SDCI should evaluate the accessibility of their current process and tools, including considering the needs of customers who lack computer skills, people with disabilities, and people with limited English proficiency, among others.
- The RET should also include a stakeholder analysis to determine who is impacted by the permitting process and from whom SDCI should get regular feedback. The City should implement the recommendations that result from this effort.

Recommendation 2 – SDCI Update

- SDCI formed an Interdepartmental Workgroup focused on an Integrated Permit Improvement Program (IPIP)
- SDCI and SDOT opened Customer Service Desk on the 4th floor of the Seattle Municipal Tower to support the accessibility of SDCI's current tools and to assist customers who lack access to computers or skills to use them and people with disabilities.
- SDCI has completed several RETs in the past for specific parts of the permitting process and is committed to undertaking such work regarding the permitting process as a whole.



Recommendation 3

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should develop a strategic customer engagement program for their construction permitting process, which could include:

- Establishing customer service and satisfaction baseline data.
- Defining performance measures that relate to SDCI's strategic goals.
- A process to routinely monitor performance measures.

Recommendation 3 – SDCI Update

- Undertaking internal realignment to focus on Customer Success
- Working with Seattle IT to implement customer and employee feedback software into the existing permitting process workflow to establish a sustainable customer and employee engagement program.
- The information obtained from these tools will be collected and analyzed to be used for identifying and prioritizing opportunities for continuous improvement investments.
- Established baseline Volume and Performance Timeline metrics as well as baseline Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) metrics for the Virtual Applicant Services Center (Chat & Email). SDCI is also collecting data for services provided at the 4th floor in-person Customer Service Desk in order to optimize appropriate staff level coverage for the most regularly needed services requested through that resource.

Recommendation 4

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should solidify and make more transparent how it prioritizes construction permit applications for review. This could include:

- Creating a policy and providing training on how permit reviewers should prioritize projects assigned to them
- Improving the workflow screen in Accela to make the priority of projects clearer
- Reviewing and making updates to the Plan Review Priorities Guideline document (for example, considering the priority of medical or disability accommodations) and making it publicly available
- Creating a method to document when and why the prioritization process is circumvented

SDCI should coordinate with other City departments as needed to implement this recommendation.

Recommendation 4 – SDCI Update

SDCI PROJECTS Permitting Process

Plan Review Priorities Guideline
September 2023

Intent:
The City of Seattle's Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) recognizes that we must give some permit applications priority in our review process to promote health, safety, and welfare and to serve special needs. This guideline describes the projects that should receive priority and provides goals for staff to complete their review. SDCI staff should use this guideline to ensure their review is completed based on these priorities.


PLAN REVIEW PRIORITIES:

- o **Emergency:** SDCI staff shall begin review of emergency projects within 24 hours of being submitted for review. The Emergency designation will be made by the Principal Engineer/Planner, the Permit Process Leader, the Inspection Services Director or Chief Building/Electrical Inspector, the Engineering Services Director or Manager, or the Land Use Director or Manager, the Director, or by a supervisor acting on their behalf.
 - Emergency projects are life safety emergencies including:
 - o Landslides damage repair
 - o Repair of imminent structural hazards
 - o Earthquake damage repair
 - o Fire damage repairs
- o **Priority One:** SDCI staff shall begin review of Priority One projects within 48 hours of being submitted for review. The Priority One designation will be made by the Principal Engineer/Planner, the Permit Process Leader, the Inspection Services Director or Chief Building/Electrical Inspector, the Engineering Services Director/Manager, or the Land Use Director or Manager, the Director, or by a supervisor acting on their behalf. Examples include:
 - Field-ordered corrections, which would interrupt the ability to proceed with construction. (Note: This is intended to address unanticipated issues and does not include applicant-initiated revisions.)
 - Projects with *serious* anomalous issues (lost plans, missed review locations, misrouted, etc.) as identified by Resource Supervisors.
 - Property hazard emergencies other than life safety emergencies including:
 - o Landslide damage repair
 - o Repair of imminent structural hazards
 - o Earthquake damage repair
 - o Fire damage repair

September 2023 Page 1 of 4

SDCI has reviewed, revised, updated, and published our Plan Review Priorities Guidelines on its external facing website.

SDCI has also reviewed, revised, updated, and published our Guide to Construction Permit Initial Plan Review Categories in its external facing website.

 Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections

Guide to Construction Permit Initial Plan Review Categories

SDCI assesses each submitted permit application to determine the complexity of the project scope in relation to how quickly all reviewers can complete the application's initial plan review. SDCI reviews applications in each category in the order they are received based on the completed application date. The completed application date is the date the applicant pays the intake fees due which happens on or after the date we screen the application materials submitted to determine they are complete.

SDCI has three main review categories with these target initial review completion goals:

Type of Application	Review Category	Expected Initial Review Time (for the combined Ordinance & Structural Reviews Only)	Target to Complete All Initial Reviews
Simple complexity projects <i>(e.g. minor additions or alterations)</i>	Full	Up to 1 hour	1-2 weeks
Medium complexity projects <i>(e.g. ADUs/DADUs, small single-family residence additions and alterations, small business tenant improvements, etc.)</i>	Full+	Up to 4 hours	2-4 weeks
Complex (Full C) "lite" projects <i>(e.g. smaller townhouse developments, larger single-family residence additions and alterations, larger tenant improvements, etc.)</i>	Full-C	Over 4 hours and up to 8 hours	4-8 weeks (internal target only)
Complex (Full C) projects <i>(e.g. new mixed-use buildings, substantial alterations, larger townhouse developments, new apartments and commercial buildings, etc.)</i>	Full-C	8 hours or more	8-12 weeks

Exceptions:

- Permits that require routing to other departments outside of SDCI (Fire/SDOT/Parks/etc.) will always be assigned to at least the medium (Full+) complexity category to allow for interdepartmental coordination.
- Permits that are to "establish use for the record" are always assigned to the Complex (Full C) "lite" category because of the permit history research needed for these projects being estimated at around 6 hours of review on average.
- Permits with an Emergency priority will always be assigned to the simple (Full) category.
- Permits using an approved standard plan for a one-family dwelling will always be assigned to the simple (Full) category.
- Demolition and grading permits will always be assigned to the medium (Full+) category.

For additional information about how SDCI prioritizes plan review, see our [Prioritization Guide](#).

Updated 2/1/24

700 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2000 | PO Box 34019 | Seattle, WA 98124-0019 | 206-684-8500 | seattle.gov/sdci

Recommendation 5

SDCI should evaluate its ethical culture and make any needed improvements. SDCI should consider the following:

- Periodic evaluations of the workplace culture and ethical environment through anonymous employee surveys
- An internal ethics policy to address situations that are unique to SDCI's work environment
- Ongoing ethics training that is tailored to SDCI's work environment and potential ethical scenarios employees may encounter
- A clear process for employees to anonymously report ethical concerns
- Leadership's demonstrated commitment to strong ethical values through their directives, attitudes, and behavior (also known as "tone at the top")
- Reviewing and determining which employees should complete the City's Financial Interest Statement form based on their responsibilities

Recommendation 5 – SDCI Update

- Using both customer and employee feedback to identify and prioritize opportunities for continuous improvement investments. Any ethical concerns identified through these feedback mechanisms will be routed to the appropriate resources in SDCI-HR for evaluation and monitoring of SDCI's workplace culture and ethical environment.
- Staff are required to complete SDCI Annual Ethics Training (previously offered regularly up until the pandemic), and all SDCI staff that have completed the training are being credited with completion in Cornerstone. We are also incorporating the City's online Ethics Training Overview into the New Hire Onboarding process.
- SDCI's Leadership has made absolutely clear to our staff that our Ethical Values are a top priority and has clearly identified and reinforced that Integrity as one of our leading departmental values, as indicated in our SDCI Strategic Plan.
- 100% completion rate for required employees of the 2023 City Financial Interest Statement Disclosure Form process; currently completing the 2024 City Financial Interest Statement Disclosure Forms and will require 100% completion of this as well.

Recommendation 6 & SDCI Update

The Mayor's Office should lead a coordinated effort to document all recommendations related to the construction permitting process from consultant reports and internal improvement efforts. City departments should then evaluate each recommendation to determine whether they intend to implement it and why.

Collaboration between SDCI and the Mayor's Office is ongoing regarding this recommendation. This includes reviewing historical documentation and recommendations related to the construction permitting process from consultant reports as well as ongoing internal improvement efforts.

Recommendation 7 & SDCI Update

The City Budget Office, in collaboration with other City departments, should evaluate the governance and funding structures of departments that review construction permit applications and determine if changes can be made to better position the City to quickly respond to fluctuations in permit demand while meeting customer expectations.

The City Budget Office (CBO) is working with departments on the 2025-2026 budget process as the City of Seattle faces a budget deficit and as part of this process will be reviewing all programs. In addition, the 2024 Adopted Budget included funding to improve the Seattle Fire Department's construction-related permit review and process supported by a new fee. The Innovation and Performance Team within CBO is also working with SDCI and other City departments to evaluate the entire permitting process and will collaborate on areas of additional system integration, process improvements, and workflow enhancements identified through that effort.

Recommendation 8 & SDCI Update

The Mayor's Office should develop and implement a strategy, including the required resources, for providing ongoing support for the Seattle Services Portal (Accela) and other software used in the construction permitting process. The Mayor's Office should collaborate with the Seattle Information Technology Department and other departments involved in construction permitting.

- The Mayor's Office, Seattle IT, SDCI, and other City departments continue to collaborate to ensure that necessary investments and adjustments are made in Accela.
- Realignment of the governance structure has taken place for the Enterprise, Permitting, Inspection, & Compliance (EPIC) Program as well as to shift to Software as a Service (SaaS) and to begin using Managed Accela Services (MAS) to increase internal IT capacity.
- The feedback mechanisms for continuously gathering customer experience helps inform methods for continuous improvement, a critical component of continuing to address the impacts of future changes to their technology.

Recommendation 9 & SDCI Update

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should evaluate which departments are using Accela for construction permit review and determine how to improve their integration and use of the portal. SDCI should coordinate with other City departments involved in the construction permitting process.

- Continued collaboration with the Mayor's Office, the Seattle Information Technology Department, and other City departments regarding this recommendation.
- Work is already underway to migrate the existing on-premises Enterprise-Wide implementation of Accela to the Software-as-a-Solution (SaaS) Online/Cloud-Based version of Accela -scheduled for completion in July 2024.
- The timing of any future departmental integrations is related to the backlog of known improvements/enhancements that have been limited by ongoing IT capacity issues together with the one-time delay necessary for the platform freeze required for the cloud migration.

Recommendation 10 & SDCI Update

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections should develop a department policy for how construction permit corrections should be handled including:

- What rises to the level of needing an official correction
- What is required back from the applicant to resolve the correction, including in what format
- At what point to contact the applicant to discuss the issues, such as after a certain number of correction cycles
- How this policy will be enforced

SDCI should also put relevant information about the policy on their website.

- We continue to work to meet these goals and encourage staff to make earlier contact with applicants when correction cycles exceed normal averages or when there seem to be communication gaps indicated by inadequate responses to corrections.
- Progress has been made on consolidation and consistency of these various policies across all SDCI teams/divisions and all City departments involved in permit application review.
- Continue to coordinate with the CI Team and IPIP to consolidate these policies into a more comprehensive and consistent department-wide (and potentially City-wide) policy.
- Small Business Permit Facilitator role helps navigate the process, including issues to consider, before and during permitting

Recommendation 11 & SDCI Update

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) should develop a process to monitor and evaluate permit application corrections. This process should be sustainable given current resource levels and provide reasonable assurance that permit corrections are meeting SDCI's standards of being necessary, understandable, code-based, directive, and specific. SDCI should track this information so that correction quality can be evaluated over time. To ensure the consistency of permit corrections, SDCI should involve and coordinate with other City departments that issue permits

SDCI will use the forthcoming Customer Experience and Employee Experience software to collect and route feedback to Technical Plan Review Supervision/Management for evaluation and monitoring of SDCI's ongoing correction letter quality.

Questions?

Nathan Torgelson

Director

Seattle Department of
Construction and Inspections

Nathan.Torgelson@seattle.gov

Andy Higgins

Customer Success Director

Seattle Department of
Construction and Inspections

Andy.Higgins@seattle.gov