City's Construction Permitting Needs More Customer Focus and Consistency

October 18, 2023

Melissa Alderson

Andrew Scoggin

David G. Jones, City Auditor

Seattle Office of City Auditor

City's Construction Permitting Needs More Customer Focus and Consistency

Report Highlights

Background

In this audit, we reviewed the City of Seattle's (City) construction permitting process from the intake stage through corrections. The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) is responsible for reviewing and issuing construction permits, though other City departments are often involved as well. In 2022, SDCI issued about 8,800 construction permits.

What We Found

We identified issues in the following areas:

- **Reinforce a customer focus**: SDCI does not actively track total permit review time, which is an important metric to customers. The City also lacks a process to routinely collect customer feedback.
- **Promote transparency and fairness**: We found inconsistencies and opaqueness in how construction permit applications are prioritized. Some SDCI employees shared concerns about fairness and ethics.
- **Strengthen a Citywide approach**: The City has engaged in permitting improvement efforts, but not all identified changes have been made. Additionally, there is not a unified approach to funding staff, nor an effective strategy for supporting permitting software.
- **Standardize review comments**: We found inconsistencies in how corrections are issued and evaluated for quality.

Recommendations

We make 11 recommendations to address the issues above. We recommend that SDCI improve permit timeliness tracking and use customer feedback to make process improvements. SDCI should also improve the permit prioritization process and evaluate its internal ethical culture. The City should act on permitting recommendations from past improvement efforts, re-evaluate department funding structures for permit staff, and develop a strategy for supporting permitting software. Finally, we recommend SDCI develop a standard process for performing and evaluating permit corrections.

Department Response

SDCI generally concurred with the findings and recommendations (see Appendix A).

WHY WE DID THIS AUDIT

This audit was conducted in response to Seattle City Councilmember Dan Strauss' request for our office to review the construction permitting process. Specifically, we reviewed:

- Process clarity, consistency, and timeliness
- The use of information technology tools
- Race and Social Justice Initiative impacts

HOW WE DID THIS AUDIT

To accomplish the audit's objectives, we:

- Analyzed construction permit application data
- Interviewed City officials who are involved in the permitting process
- Surveyed and interviewed permit applicants
- Researched construction permitting best practices

Seattle Office of City Auditor
David G. Jones, City Auditor
www.seattle.gov/cityauditor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **1**

REINFORCE A CUSTOMER FOCUS **3**

PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY AND FAIRNESS **8**

STRENGTHEN CITYWIDE APPROACH **13**

STANDARDIZE CONSTRUCTION PERMIT REVIEW COMMENTS **18**

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY **21**

APPENDIX A **23**
Department Response 23

APPENDIX B **24**
List of Recommendations and Department Response 24

APPENDIX C **29**
Results of Audit's Construction Permit Applicant Survey 29

APPENDIX D **30**
Seattle Office of City Auditor Mission, Background, and Quality Assurance 30

INTRODUCTION

Audit Overview

Seattle City Councilmember Dan Strauss requested that we examine the City of Seattle's (City) process for reviewing construction permits. Our objectives were to answer the following questions:

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

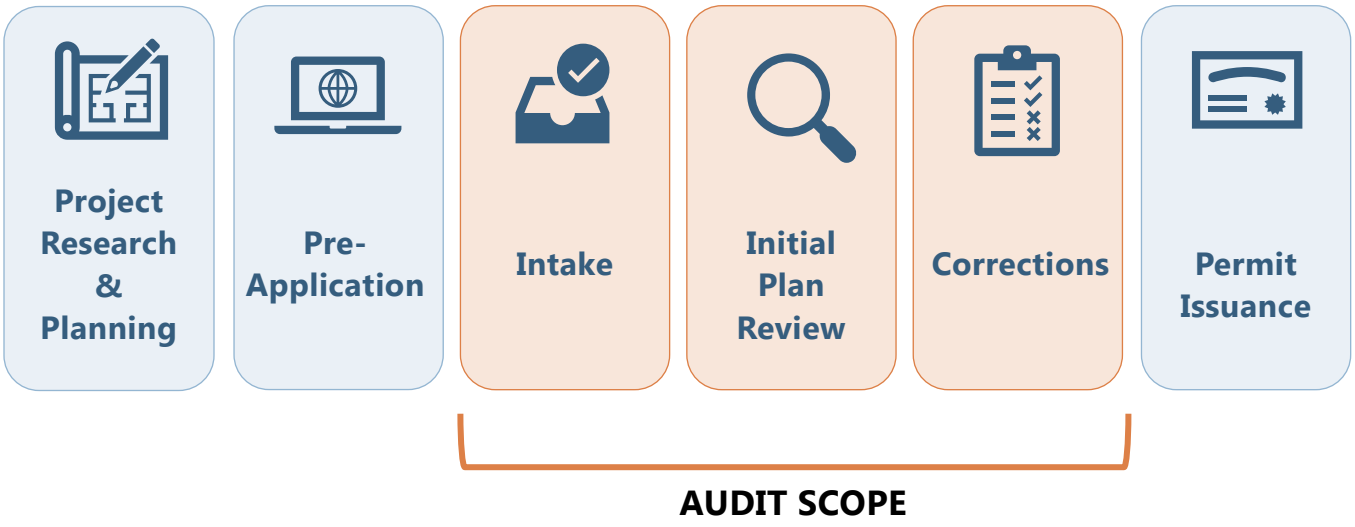
The scope for this audit included construction permit applications that were under review in 2021 and 2022. The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections generally concurred with the report's findings and recommendations (see Appendix A). The audit team for this project included Melissa Alderson and Andrew Scoggin, with contributions from Miroslava Meza.

Background

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) reviews and approves construction permits for the City of Seattle. SDCI is responsible for regulating and ensuring compliance with building and land use codes and policies. Construction permits are one type of permit that SDCI issues. Construction permits can be for new buildings or additions and alterations and can require a detailed plan review or a more abbreviated subject-to-field-inspection review. SDCI has issued about 8,800 construction permits in 2022.

The permitting process takes multiple steps and can involve other City departments. Customers first apply to SDCI for a pre-application and request an online intake appointment, during which the application is reviewed for overall completeness. Once the intake is completed and approved, SDCI assigns the application to the relevant review teams, which provide corrections to the applicant as needed to ensure compliance with building code and all other applicable codes and ordinances. Other City departments that can review and approve aspects of construction permits include Seattle City Light, Seattle Public Utilities, and the Transportation, Fire, Neighborhoods, Housing, and Parks and Recreation departments. SDCI issues the permit once the applicant has addressed all corrections and paid the final fees. Our audit focuses on the construction permitting process from the intake stage through corrections (see Exhibit 1).

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



Source: Seattle Office of City Auditor.

REINFORCE A CUSTOMER FOCUS

Section Summary

In this section, we identify ways the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) can improve customers' experience with the construction permitting process. We found that SDCI does not actively track total permit review time, which is an important metric to customers. We also found that the City lacks a process to routinely collect customer feedback on the permitting process. This means that the full extent of permitting barriers is unknown and cannot be addressed. We make recommendations to improve timeliness tracking and use customer feedback to make process improvements.

SDCI should reevaluate its construction permit tracking metrics and reporting methods to reduce review times

"Gaining transparency into each reviewer's queue would be a huge help, allowing design teams to better plan workflow/next steps."

- frequent permit applicant

SDCI's current tracking metrics focus heavily on one part of the construction permit review process. SDCI's department-level target goals are only for applications' first-round review. The length of subsequent rounds is not tracked at the department level. As a result, SDCI focuses mostly on how long this first review takes instead of overall review time. We observed it was difficult to get accurate, up-to-date publicly available information on how long construction permits take to review and approve. Customers also pointed to this as an issue and requested more transparency on permit review times.

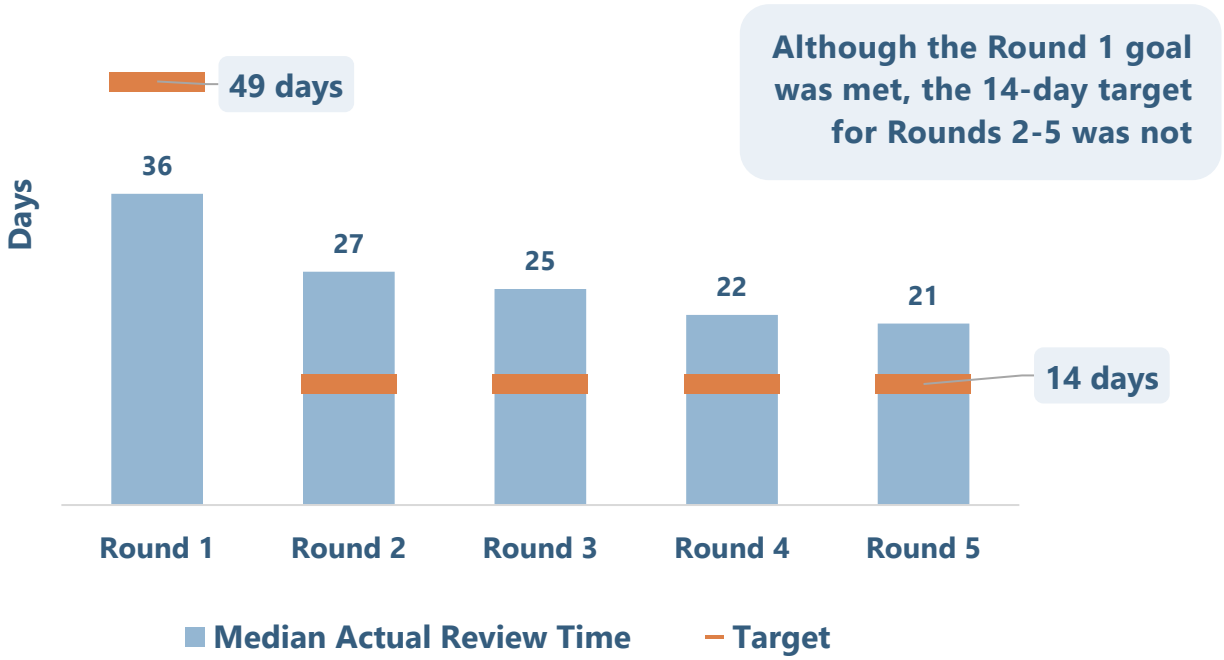
There is a lack of incentive for reviewers to consider the overall timeliness of permit applications. Reviewers are assigned due dates that dictate each round of review should take a certain number of days. However, SDCI does not actively track total review time for a permit while it is under review. Reviewers are held accountable for the length of individual review rounds but not overall permit application timeliness.

There are other challenges related to assigning and tracking work that may impact timeliness. After SDCI approves the intake of a permit application, supervisors assign the relevant staff to review the project. Once assigned, reviewers have access to the project in their online dashboard. However, SDCI does not consistently assign all reviewers to a project at the same time. We observed and SDCI employees said that sometimes staff are not assigned to review a permit application until near or past the target review date. SDCI supervisors also told us that they lack effective technology tools to track what reviewers are working on and monitor progress.

The City is not consistently meeting targets for the time it takes to review permits. We analyzed how long the City spent reviewing construction permit applications in 2021 and 2022. Among

applications with at least one review round completed, the median application spent 50 days in City review. But at least 10 percent of applications took at least 145 days, which is beyond the standard 120-day deadline specified by state law. Also, subsequent rounds of review beyond the first round do not appear to meet internal targets that the City sets for reviewers. For example, the median for a second-round review is nearly double the target (14-day target versus 27-day median). See Exhibit 2 for a comparison of internal review targets and actual review time by round.

Exhibit 2: City reviews beyond Round 1 do not meet internal targets



Source: Office of City Auditor analysis of Seattle construction permit data, 2021-2022

Due to the complexity of and exemptions within state law, we could not determine how often the City is out of compliance with required timelines. According to SDCI management, a new state law taking effect in 2025 will exempt construction permits from existing law, including required timelines.

Some applicants say adding time to the review process has negative impacts on their projects. We conducted a targeted survey of applicants with a high number of correction rounds to get their feedback. Out of 117 applicants we attempted to contact, 38 responded—82 percent said the timeline to get their permit was not reasonable. They said the timing of their applications had the following impacts:

- Increased costs or lost revenue

- Higher rents
- Difficulty working with lenders and raising money
- Abandoned projects
- Contractors losing or abandoning work or being motivated to "proceed with unauthorized work"

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.

SDCI lacks a systematic process to get customer feedback, which means that customers' needs may not be met

The City lacks a method to routinely collect customer feedback on the permitting process. SDCI's vision from their strategic plan is "to set the standard for awesome local government service." However, they do not have performance measures to evaluate how well they are achieving this goal and meeting customers' expectations over time.

Customers are frustrated with aspects of the permitting process. In our targeted survey of applicants, 66 percent (25 of 38) said they were dissatisfied with the process. Also, 61 percent said it was not clear who to contact in the City if they had a question, and 42 percent said reviewers did not answer their questions timely when they did contact them (Exhibit 3). See Appendix C for the full summary results of the survey.

Exhibit 3: Respondents to targeted survey were unhappy with process and communication

Source: Seattle Office of City Auditor analysis of applicant survey results.

"We had to involve an attorney, which helped as they had contacts to straight sources and were able to get answers"

- survey respondent

A 2020 study on the City's public permitting portal showed several areas for improvement. Customers use the City's online Seattle Services Portal to apply for construction permits. The study evaluated how easy the portal is to use by asking participants to complete tasks and rate their experience. Their satisfaction with the portal averaged 5.5 out of 10. Participants said the portal was confusing and lacked user guidance.

Customer service, review inconsistencies, and permit timeliness are common issues for applicants. We interviewed frequent permit applicants and asked about their experience with the construction permitting process. Many cited poor customer service as a common issue and noted it was difficult to reach permit reviewers by phone. Another applicant concern was permit reviewers being inconsistent in how they reviewed applications, both within SDCI and across City departments. Applicants said that it appeared that not all departments were following the same process. Permit timeliness was also a frustration, and applicants expressed desire for more transparency and consistency around SDCI's review timelines.

The City's Racial Equity Toolkit can uncover equity impacts. The City's Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) process requires that departments involve stakeholders in their development, implementation, and evaluation of programs. The RET directs departments to, "Gather information from community and staff on how the issue benefits or burdens the community in terms of racial equity."

"I cannot imagine what it would be like for someone who is new to the system or doesn't know technology or possibly has English as a second or third language. Impossible to navigate."

- frequent permit applicant

A RET is one of the primary ways the City identifies and examines potential equity issues of its programs. Ideally, City departments should complete the RET before they implement a new program, so that staff can be aware of and mitigate any unintended impacts. The City did not complete a RET for the implementation of their permitting software system, Accela. Further, we could not find evidence that SDCI has completed a RET related to reviewing construction permits or identified racial equity actions that are specific to the permitting process. Representatives from SDCI and the Seattle Office for Civil Rights told us there is value in completing a RET because process barriers likely exist, and improvements to the permitting process are still possible.

The full extent of permitting barriers is unknown and therefore cannot be addressed. The permitting process is complex and favors experienced customers and large developers. This is because experienced customers have familiarity and in-depth knowledge of the process, and large developers have specialized expertise and resources to support their projects. First-time applicants, homeowners, and small businesses may have more difficulty navigating the process and getting their permit approved when they need it. In our review of

construction permit application guidance, we found some potential barriers that some customers may face:

- Customers must create and submit construction permit applications online using software that may be difficult for some users to learn and navigate.
- The City does not offer in-person appointments for permit customers to meet with City staff. This limits customers' options to communicate with City permit reviewers to methods that require a computer and internet connection, which may create accessibility issues.
- Some of SDCI's online resources, including their "Tips" sheets, are only in English.

Without direct feedback from customers on the challenges they face, the City cannot evaluate the performance of the permitting process from the customers' perspective and make improvements to address equity issues.

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 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.**
- **Defined roles for SDCI employees who are responsible for implementing process improvements.**

PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY AND FAIRNESS

Section Summary

In this section, we discuss how the City can improve the transparency and fairness of the construction permitting process. We found inconsistencies in how construction permit applications are prioritized. Permit prioritization criteria are not made public, which means not all customers have knowledge of how their project should be prioritized. Some employees within the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) expressed concerns and confusion about the ethical culture surrounding the construction permitting process. We make recommendations to improve the permit prioritization process and for SDCI to evaluate its ethical culture.

The City is inconsistent and opaque in how it prioritizes permit applications, which may result in unfair treatment of customers

SDCI has internal guidelines for how it prioritizes construction permit applications. SDCI's Plan Review Priorities Guideline is an internal document that SDCI intake staff use to assign permit applications a priority ranking. The stated intent is to prioritize certain permit applications "to promote the health, safety, and welfare and to serve special needs." Examples of projects that are supposed to be prioritized include:

- Life safety emergencies
- Projects with serious anomalous issues
- Affordable housing
- Emergency housing shelters
- Projects identified by the SDCI director

Some of these priority rankings have specified review timelines and some do not. We noted that the Plan Review Priorities Guideline does not give priority to projects relating to medical or disability accommodations. SDCI may want to consider reviewing the prioritization criteria to ensure it is meeting the department's intent of serving special needs.

The City does not prioritize construction permit applications in a consistent and transparent way. We found that not all City departments were aware of SDCI's prioritization criteria for permit applications. This means that the permit reviewers across the City may be prioritizing permit applications differently. Frequent permit applicants we spoke with also communicated this concern. For example, the Housing Development Consortium, an organization that advocates for affordable housing in King County, told us that some

City departments do not appear to prioritize affordable housing project permits. Because of how the City reviews and approves permit applications, the prioritization (or lack thereof) of just one City employee can impact the timeliness of when the permit is issued. Consistent prioritization across all City departments is needed for customers to experience the benefit of the prioritization.

Beyond the initial project prioritization, we found inconsistencies in how SDCI staff prioritize the permit applications assigned to them. In interviews, staff noted using different criteria to decide which projects to work on. For example, some reviewers prioritize permit applications for which they are the last reviewer before the permit can be issued. Other reviewers work on projects strictly in priority order.

"[SDCI Manager] is great because we can call them, and they can push things through."

- frequent permit applicant

Some reviewers told us that they will prioritize a project if a supervisor directs them to or when a customer proactively contacts them to ask about status. In acknowledgment of potential fairness concerns raised by such communications from permit applicants, some SDCI employees told us they would like to have more department guidance on how to prioritize their work. Some SDCI employees also expressed concern about certain groups and people in positions of power appearing to have unfair access to SDCI staff to advocate for their projects.

The City's permitting software was not designed to support efficient prioritization of permit applications. SDCI supervisors manually assign permit applications to reviewers, and these assignments show up in the reviewer's workflow screen in the City's permitting software system. The workflow screen lacks important fields that reviewers need to decide what to work on, such as priority number and how long a permit application has been on their dashboard. As a workaround, employees can run a business report showing more detailed information. However, this is a static, point-in-time report and was not designed to be a long-term solution.

"How would you know if you haven't done it before?"

- frequent permit applicant

SDCI does not share their priority criteria with the public. SDCI intake staff decide the priority level based on how projects appear. This means that it is up to the customer to include enough information in their permit application so that SDCI staff can decide what priority a project should receive. Because SDCI does not make their Plan Review Priorities Guideline public, not all customers have knowledge of the prioritization criteria. Thus, some customers may not get their project prioritized when it should be.

The City's current permit review process allows prioritization of permit applications in a way that favors experienced customers.

> *"The squeaky wheel gets the grease. If I am complaining to [SDCI Manager], I can get mine faster."*
>
> *- frequent permit applicant*

Frequent customers we spoke with said they were somewhat aware of SDCI's prioritization criteria, and some said they used that to their advantage, though others said they saw no value. Frequent customers also noted they will contact permit reviewers or SDCI management directly to bring attention to their permit application and get it processed faster. SDCI facilitates a monthly meeting with select members of the Master Builders Association of Snohomish and King Counties, giving their members direct access to City permitting staff to discuss and advocate for their projects and specific interests. The absence of transparent and consistently applied prioritization criteria creates accountability concerns and gives an advantage to applicants with more experience and resources.

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.

SDCI could do more to ensure a positive ethical culture

Some SDCI employees expressed concerns and confusion about the ethical culture surrounding the construction permitting process. We interviewed employees involved in reviewing permit applications to learn how they approach their work. About 30 percent of the SDCI employees we interviewed commented on the ethical environment of the department, with several themes emerging:

- The City being influenced to make permit process changes by and for big developers, in particular the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties, which some interviewed employees believed might not be in the best interest of all customers
- SDCI managers and directors with secondary employment in the construction or development industry and having this, in the opinion of some interviewed employees, possibly be a conflict of interest for their City employment

- Supervisors or managers directing staff to prioritize some projects over others, which led some interviewed staff to question the rationale for the change in priorities
- Employees having close relatives within the department, which led some interviewed employees to question whether those relationships helped those employees advance in their careers

As part of our audit, we did not investigate these concerns to the extent necessary to substantiate them. We met with the Director of the Ethics and Elections Commission, who told us that they had not received any complaints about the permitting process in the past three years.

"City employees should recognize that public service is a sacred trust and should strive to live up to the highest ethical standards."

Seattle Municipal Code Chapter 4.16 – Code of Ethics

The City's Code of Ethics sets the "minimum standard" for employees to follow. One of the purposes of the Code of Ethics is to strengthen public confidence in the integrity of City government. The Code of Ethics emphasizes that employees should do their work impartially, without conflict between their duties to the public and their personal interests. The Code provides general guidance applicable to all City employees and does not go into detail about all potential ethical scenarios that could arise. Thus, the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC) refers to the Code as the "minimum standard" and recommends consulting with them on specific situations.

The City can provide transparency to the public by disclosing the appearance of conflicts of interest. This allows City leaders and the public to weigh in on the appropriateness of a situation and avoid potentially unethical situations. The SEEC provides two forms to assist with such disclosure. Seattle Municipal Code 4.16.080 requires certain City employees to disclose their financial interests annually through the Financial Interest Statement process. The Code mentions several City positions by name and leaves it up to department heads to identify additional employees who should complete the form.

We asked the SEEC to verify which SDCI managers and directors in their permitting divisions completed a Financial Interest Statement form for 2022. SEEC reported to us that over half of the managers and one director had not completed the form. SDCI should examine who completes Financial Interest Statement forms to determine if there is a reason for this inconsistency.

The SEEC also has a form for employees to disclose the appearance of conflict or impaired judgment for non-financial matters. Department management review the form, determine what action to take, and send a copy to the SEEC. SDCI could consider using this form and process or adopting their own that is specific to their department.

> *"The oversight body and management reinforce the commitment to doing what is right, not just maintaining a minimum level of performance necessary."*
>
> *- United States Government Accountability Office's Standards for Internal Control, standard 1.04*

SDCI could improve internal guidance and training on the department's expectations related to ethics. We reviewed SDCI's Workplace Expectations for Employees document and found that it refers to the City's Code of Ethics but does not offer ethics guidance that is specific to SDCI employees and the kind of work they do. SDCI's Workplace Expectations for Supervisors document does not mention ethics. We also asked SDCI about the ethics training they provided to employees. SDCI told us that, before 2020, the SEEC provided general ethics training to SDCI employees, but training was paused during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, neither SDCI nor the SEEC were able to give us details, such as who attended the training, when it last occurred, and the specific content of the training.

Management has a responsibility to create, communicate, and model a positive ethical environment. A positive ethical environment contributes to a positive workplace culture, which in turn impacts all aspects of an organization. Best practices state that management should establish clear expectations on appropriate ethical behavior, model that behavior to staff, and hold employees accountable. Effective and periodic training that is scenario-based and specific to employees' work environment should also be regularly provided.

Recommendation 5

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (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**

STRENGTHEN CITYWIDE APPROACH

Section Summary

In this section, we discuss challenges related to having multiple departments involved in permit review and make recommendations for improving collaboration. We found that while the City has engaged in many permitting improvement efforts, not all the identified changes have been made. This is in part because the City lacks a way to manage and follow through on improvements, especially when they span departments. Additionally, there is not a unified Citywide approach to funding staff who review permits. This means that some departments occasionally experience staffing challenges as permit demand fluctuates. Finally, we found that the City does not have an effective strategy for how to support technology essential to the permitting process.

The City has not followed through on all construction permitting improvement efforts, diminishing their impact

The City has engaged in multiple efforts to improve the construction permitting process over the years. Some of these efforts resulted in completed reports with recommendations. We reviewed seven consultant reports, published between 2012 and 2022, that the City paid for to recommend improvements to various parts of the construction permitting process. We also identified six active internal City-led projects and workgroups, including this audit, that seek to improve permitting.

The City has not implemented many of the recommendations from past consultant reports. This means that the City is not realizing the full benefit from past work and may be missing opportunities to make meaningful improvements for permit applicants. Below are some examples of outstanding recommendations:

- A 2020 consultant report on the usability of the Seattle Services Portal had several recommendations to improve system use. However, the City deprioritized those improvement efforts, citing lack of resources.
- A 2015 consultant report on SDCI's quality management system recommended they conduct audits on the permit corrections that reviewers issue to ensure quality and adherence to department standards; however, these correction letter audits are not consistently performed.
- A 2013 consultant report on Seattle City Light's permit review functions recommended four full-time employees to do plan review. However, they have just one.

The City lacks a system to manage and follow through on construction permitting improvement efforts. Because permit review involves many City departments, recommendations for improvement should be compiled and evaluated at the Citywide level. We found that this is not occurring. In addition, there is not an owner who is responsible for and empowered to implement the recommendations when they fall across department lines. This means there is no accountability system to ensure recommendations are implemented and improvements are made.

Customers frequently note City coordination as a major permitting issue. Many construction permits require multiple City departments to review and approve certain aspects of the application. For example, Seattle City Light is involved in reviewing requests for new electrical service, and the Seattle Fire Department reviews a building's fire alarm system. We interviewed and surveyed permit applicants about their experience with City permitting; a common complaint was the siloed nature of the process and inconsistencies across City departments. Customers told us that departments follow different processes and do not appear to communicate with one another. The design of the City's permit review process puts responsibility on SDCI as the process owner, without full control of the other City departments involved. This structure has, in part, created a disjointed and frustrating experience for customers. One active improvement effort, the Mayor's Housing Subcabinet Permitting Workgroup, has representatives from all City departments involved in permitting and can be a great opportunity to resolve some of these coordination issues.

Recommendation 6

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. The City should prioritize, assign an owner, and estimate a due date for each recommendation that is selected for implementation. Recommendations should be tracked in a central, publicly accessible location such as a dashboard to promote accountability.

Different funding mechanisms hinder the City's ability to respond to changes in permit demand

SDCI owns the permitting process, but other City departments are critical to the timeliness of permit reviews. Different departments have different staffing models and varying resource levels assigned to construction permit review. For example, Seattle City Light has one reviewer dedicated to permit review. Permit applicants have communicated concern with the timeliness of reviews completed by other departments. As part of an ongoing internal improvement effort coordinated by the Mayor's Office, the City is building a data tool that may make it easier to track which departments are taking longer to complete their reviews.

The City's permitting process operates at the department level, meaning there is not a unified Citywide approach to funding staff. This leaves each department to assign resources and make process changes in a vacuum that does not center the overall customer experience. SDCI uses permit fees to keep a certain number of core permit reviewers on staff to pivot quickly to changes in permit demand. They also have contingent budget authority to add temporary staff when demand is high.

Other City departments, such as the Seattle Fire Department, use the City's general fund and are limited in their response to fluctuations in demand. Fire Department review staff dwindled from eight to four employees after budget cuts in 2020. SDCI management said the Fire Department was a recent bottleneck holding up the permit review process. State law limits the ways the City can spend the revenue it earns from fees. The Fire Department is exploring how it can set aside extra funds to cope with budget reductions, similar to SDCI.

Recommendation 7

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 needs a better strategy to address IT needs in construction permitting

The City's permitting portal has experienced issues since its launch in 2018, weighing down the process for customers and staff. SDCI implemented the portal, also called Accela, in 2018. Now, customers must submit all permit applications online using this system. SDCI issued an apology to the public shortly after implementing Accela, acknowledging it was a "rocky rollout."

Accela has fallen short of stability targets. Accela was up and running 91.3 percent of August 2022 and 90.4 percent of December 2022. The internal goal is 99.5 percent. Accela's stability appears to

have improved in 2023—Accela was online 99.1 percent of the first five months of the year. Some City staff attributed performance struggles to internal servers, an issue that dates to Accela's launch. The City plans to move to a cloud-based version of Accela. City staff said that the move would take about a year. A consultant report notes that making the switch "doesn't represent a cure for all that ails" the City's permitting portal, but it would likely make it more reliable.

The City does not have an effective strategy for how to support technology essential to the permitting process. The City has made efforts to improve the permitting portal. However, during our audit, City staff and applicants reported performance issues with Accela, such as slowness or not saving information. They said this can delay work or require submitting information multiple times. In our survey of applicants, 42 percent (16 of 38) said they were satisfied with their experience using the City's website to apply for a permit, while 39 percent were dissatisfied.

Staff in SDCI and the Seattle Information Technology Department (ITD) work together to make improvements to Accela. SDCI permitting staff and management cited difficulty getting changes made to make their work easier, including requests dating back to its launch in 2018.

The City also appears to lack a plan to ensure its recently implemented electronic tool to review plans, called Bluebeam, remains viable long term. Most staff that we interviewed had a positive impression of using this tool, as did applicants we surveyed who reported using it. However, the tool recently experienced what staff called a "very catastrophic" error that made it harder for reviewers to do their work. SDCI's ability to maintain Bluebeam's stability is made more challenging because they have just one employee supporting Bluebeam, and they are serving in the role temporarily.

Acknowledging these issues, SDCI leadership identified the need for an IT governance strategy in their most recent strategic plan.

Other departments involved in the permitting process are not fully integrated into Accela, which may confuse customers. For example, customers must manually request a water meter, rather than this happening automatically as part of their permit application. Seattle Public Utilities staff said there have been times that homes were sold without having running water because there's no way for the department to flag this issue in the permitting process.

When first implemented at the City, only SDCI used Accela. City staff said there was not a focus at the time on how to coordinate using Accela with other departments. This continues to impact the permitting process. Seattle Fire Department staff said Accela is not

customized for its needs—instead, they have a separate supplemental database used for inspections, requiring staff to enter information twice.

The Seattle IT Department (ITD) has not always been able to get funding for positions to support the permitting portal. Other City departments now also use Accela for other types of permits, such as taxis and short-term rentals. ITD staff that support Accela are paid through the City's general fund and permitting fees. All departments who use the portal chip in funding—however, this can be challenging for general fund departments. ITD staff who manage Accela say this is not a good funding model and that they need far more staff than what the City approved in recent years. SDCI leadership said it's hard to get support for IT resources, including to keep current systems stable.

Recommendation 8

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.

Recommendation 9

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.

STANDARDIZE CONSTRUCTION PERMIT REVIEW COMMENTS

Section Summary

In this section, we focus on the corrections process and how to improve consistency among permit reviewers. We found there is not enough employee guidance that is specific to corrections, such as which application issues warranted an official correction. Further, there is no point of intervention for when employees should contact an applicant rather than continuing to issue corrections. We also found that the City does not have a policy to routinely evaluate the quality and necessity of permit application corrections.

SDCI lacks a consistent process for handling construction permit corrections

Permit reviewers are inconsistent in how they approach the corrections process. During plan review, permit reviewers issue corrections for customers to fix issues with their application. We noted inconsistencies in how staff decide:

- Which permit application to work on
- What feedback constituted an official correction
- How to notify a customer when a correction is needed
- What was an acceptable correction response from the customer

"Nobody will take phone calls."

- frequent permit applicant

SDCI does not provide enough employee guidance that is specific to corrections. This includes what warrants an official correction versus an informal call or email.

In our survey, some respondents reported a positive experience working with staff, but others said reviewers were inconsistent in the amount of time they took to complete reviews and what they required of an application. Also, respondents requested to be able to address simple, minor corrections without going through a formal review cycle. One respondent said that in the issue they ran into, "a simple phone call could have cleared up the process."

"Reviewers regularly ignore requests for status or info."

- frequent permit applicant

SDCI's review process lacks a stated point of intervention for when to contact an applicant rather than continuing to issue corrections. SDCI management told us that they informally encourage reviewers to contact applicants after multiple correction rounds. However, SDCI staff and leadership acknowledged that some reviewers would rather issue a correction than call an applicant. This slows down the process for an applicant. Also, applicants do not always understand reviewers' written comments. In our survey, 34 percent of respondents said feedback from reviewers was not clear, while 32 percent said it was (34 percent were neutral).

Some review teams go through more rounds of review than others. For example, at the time of our audit, SDCI's Geotechnical team took an average of three rounds on lower-complexity permits, while the Energy/Mechanical team averaged one-and-a-half rounds. While SDCI management said some teams get more complicated projects, having a point of intervention may still reduce their number of review rounds.

Recommendation 10

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) 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 coordinate with other City departments involved in the construction permitting process in developing and implementing this policy. SDCI should also put relevant information about the policy on their website.

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

SDCI has evaluation criteria for permit application corrections. In response to quality concerns raised in a 2015 consultant report, SDCI created quality standards for corrections on construction permit applications. Corrections must be:

- Clear and understandable
- Based in the building, energy, and land use codes, and cite code section
- Note location in plan set
- Directive (identifies action needed)
- Necessary

This consultant report recommended that SDCI perform periodic correction letter audits so that supervisors could evaluate corrections against these standards.

SDCI does not have a policy to evaluate permit correction quality. SDCI attempted to perform regular correction letter audits but determined it took too much time for the value provided. In our interviews with SDCI staff, supervisors told us they found value in the audits and completed some when time allowed. Supervisors described

inconsistent levels of thoroughness and frequency in the audits they did perform.

> *"More consistency with permit reviewers would improve the process so there is more predictability."*
>
> *- frequent permit applicant*

The variance in permit corrections among City staff warrants ongoing evaluation. We interviewed SDCI employees and found that they consistently described their general approach to permit application corrections, or in other words, their plan review philosophy. Employees described their review as focusing on the big, important issues that would impact building performance and a need to balance review thoroughness with timeliness. Our review of SDCI training confirmed this plan review philosophy at the department level.

However, at the more granular correction item level, SDCI is not consistently meeting their quality standards. For example, a correction letter audit SDCI performed in 2020 found that only 29 percent of corrections were "necessary" for the project type reviewed. In addition, some permit customers we spoke with complained about the quality of permit corrections and about new corrections being added during subsequent reviews. If correction comments do not meet SDCI's quality standards, the City could be missing code requirements, confusing customers, or delaying the permit from being issued.

Recommendation 11

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.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

Objectives

Seattle City Councilmember Dan Strauss requested that we examine the City of Seattle's (City) process for reviewing construction permits. Our objectives were to answer the following questions:

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

Scope

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

Methodology

To accomplish the audit's objectives, we performed the following:

- Reviewed internal controls related to the construction permitting process, such as relevant SDCI policies, procedures, and training documents
- Interviewed officials from the Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI), including permit reviewers from the Engineering Services Division and Land Use Division; supervisors and managers of permit review teams; and employees from the Organizational Strategy and Support Division
- Observed City permit review staff performing construction permit reviews
- Observed an SDCI training session for new permit reviewers
- Interviewed officials from City departments that are involved in the permitting process, including: Seattle City Light, Seattle Public Utilities, the Seattle Fire Department, and Seattle Department of Transportation
- Interviewed officials from the Seattle Information Technology Department who are involved in supporting the City's permitting information technology tools
- Interviewed officials from the Mayor's Office and the Seattle Office for Civil Rights

- Analyzed SDCI's construction permit data for City review timeliness in 2021 and 2022 and compared to state timelines and internal targets
- Surveyed customers whose permit applications had gone through five correction rounds, with 38 of 117 contacted responding
- Interviewed customers who have submitted a high number of permit applications with the City to learn about their experiences
- Attended a monthly meeting between City officials and the Master Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties
- Researched relevant construction permitting best practices

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

APPENDIX A

Department Response

Seattle Department of Construction & Inspections

August 30, 2023

David G. Jones, CGFM, CIA, CISA
Seattle City Auditor
Office of City Auditor

David Jones, and Office of City Auditor staff,

Thank you for sending the final draft audit report on construction permitting: "City's Construction Permitting Needs More Customer Focus and Consistency." SDCI appreciates having been included as an active participant in this lengthy and thorough process. In general, SDCI concurs with all of the findings/recommendations in the final draft report. We appreciate the inclusion of our consolidated comments from the SDCI Executive Team and we also appreciate the need to have further discussion regarding a number of the recommendations, particularly for those recommendations that have already had significant investments/progress made this calendar year (2023), together with those that clearly extend beyond SDCI's area of authority and may have broader impacts to other departments across the city. There are many nuances to the complex system of permitting and we are committed to the core philosophy of Continuous Improvement in line with the audit's general theme of consistency and adding value to all our customers (including permit applicants *and others* who interact with the city).

Thank you for allowing us to participate in this audit process. We look forward to continuing to partner in the final outcomes and the ongoing work to address these findings/recommendations.

Please let us know if there is anything further needed from SDCI at this time.

Sincerely,

(On Behalf of Nathan Torgelson, SDCI Department Director and the SDCI Executive Team)

C. Andrew ("Andy") Higgins, MBA, CBO/MCP (he/him/his)
Engineering Services Director
Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections
O: 206-615-0568 | andy.higgins@seattle.gov
Facebook I Twitter I Blog

APPENDIX B

List of Recommendations and Department Response

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.

Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.

Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Pilot completion by end of Q4 2024 and ongoing improvements.

Department Response: SDCI is working on a list of known enhancements and improvements to its permit tracking system. Items already on this list are inclusive of tracking performance against correction cycles and total throughput time, including the goal of reducing average correction cycles through utilization of enhanced collaboration tools such as Bluebeam Revu and future SaaS solutions. Improvements are already underway on these metrics and our commitment is that these improvements will continue, including a focused realignment effort keying in on an improved end-to-end customer service experience throughout the entire permitting process.

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.

Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.

Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Ongoing/TBD

Department Response: Historically, SDCI has run several Racial Equity Toolkits (RETs) for various portions of the permitting process and is committed to eliminating potential permitting barriers and equity concerns. These efforts will continue and SDCI will work with the Seattle Office for Civil Rights and other City departments to assess the racial equity impacts of specific parts of the process identified by our customer engagement efforts in the future. SDCI is already actively working on updating and publicly publishing our Plan Review Priority Guidelines on our website in an effort to increase transparency.

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.
- Defined roles for SDCI employees who are responsible for implementing process improvements.

Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Pilot completion by end of Q4 2024 and ongoing improvements.
Department Response: SDCI is pursuing a potential mechanism for continuously gathering customer experience feedback across the entire process in order to be able to use that information in its efforts towards continuous improvement. SDCI is already collecting customer satisfaction scores in our Virtual Applicant Services Center environment, and we hope to expand that to our overall permitting process going forward. In addition, SDCI is considering a customer experience team that will service permit applicants from pre-intake to final inspection, to ensure a seamless customer service experience.

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.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Q4 2023 with ongoing training/transparency efforts to continue.
Department Response: SDCI currently has policies and procedures related to application prioritization, though historically these documents have been internal to the department and SDCI is committed to making these documents public facing and more transparent. SDCI has edited the Plan Review Priority Guidelines to give priority to projects relating to medical or disability accommodations, as suggested in the Audit and has placed this document on our publicly facing website, as well as on our internal website. SDCI is also committed to improving the tools supervisors and staff have to be more consistent in prioritizing work across the department and city.

Recommendation 5:

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (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

Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.

Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Q4 2024 and ongoing.
Department Response: SDCI is pursuing a potential mechanism for continuously gathering employee experience feedback across the entire department to be able to use that information in its efforts towards continuous improvement. This mechanism may include a way for employees to anonymously report ethical concerns. SDCI hopes to partner with other city departments (including Ethics & Elections and Seattle IT) to be able to create a more standardized ethics training program, like the annual privacy and security training that exists for all city staff. It is important to point out that there were no specific findings of any unethical issues or situations as part of this audit report. SDCI will work with Ethics and Elections to develop more guidelines surrounding SDCI staff with secondary employment in the construction and development industry. The Department nor the Office of Ethics and Elections have a mechanism to track who is filling out the Financial Interest Statement, but SDCI will also send out reminders to staff more frequently to complete the form. This finding is a good reminder that the department is responsible for ongoing/routine foundational training regarding its strong ethical values and the department is committed to more consistency and rigor around providing ongoing training and gathering feedback.

Recommendation 6:

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. The City should prioritize, assign an owner, and estimate a due date for each recommendation that is selected for implementation. Recommendations should be tracked in a central, publicly accessible location such as a dashboard to promote accountability.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): TBD
Department Response: SDCI will need to collaborate with the Mayor's Office regarding this recommendation and will continue to share all the historical documentation and recommendations previously related to the construction permitting process from years of consultant reports and internal improvement efforts.

Recommendation 7:

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.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): TBD
Department Response: 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.

Recommendation 8:

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.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): TBD
Department Response: SDCI will need to collaborate with the Mayor's Office, Seattle IT, and other City departments regarding this recommendation. Work is already underway to realign the governance structure 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. Creating feedback mechanisms for continuously gathering customer experience feedback across the entire platform to be able to use that information in our collective efforts towards continuous improvement will be a critical component of continuing to address the impacts of future changes to our technology.

Recommendation 9:

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.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): TBD
Department Response: SDCI will need to collaborate with the Mayor's Office, Seattle IT, and other City departments regarding this recommendation. Work is already underway to incorporate a number of processes and departments into Accela that have not yet fully implemented the tool. The timing of these implementations is related to the backlog of known improvements/enhancements that have been limited by IT capacity issues. SDCI and other City departments are also currently working with the Mayor's Office of Innovation and Performance 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 10:

The Seattle Department of Construction and Inspections (SDCI) 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 coordinate with other City departments involved in the construction permitting process in developing and implementing this policy. SDCI should also put relevant information about the policy on their website.
Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Pilot completion by end of Q4 2024 and ongoing improvements.
Department Response: SDCI acknowledges that these policies do exist within the department, but that they are inconsistently applied across all teams/divisions, as well as across all city departments involved in reviewing construction permit applications. SDCI is committed to working on consolidating these policies into a more comprehensive and consistent department-wide (and potentially city-wide) policy. (Note: SDCI will need to collaborate with the Mayor's Office and other City departments involved in order to be able to encourage implementation of something citywide.)

Recommendation 11:

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.

Department Concurrence: SDCI generally concurs with this finding.

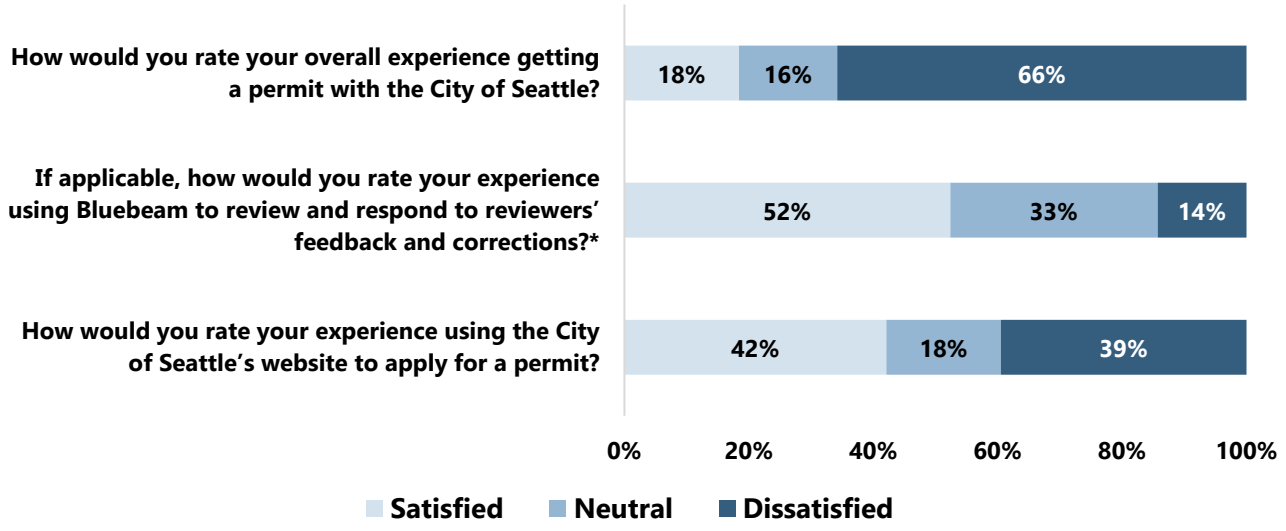
Estimated Date of Completion (Qtr./Yr.): Pilot completion by end of Q4 2024 and ongoing improvements.

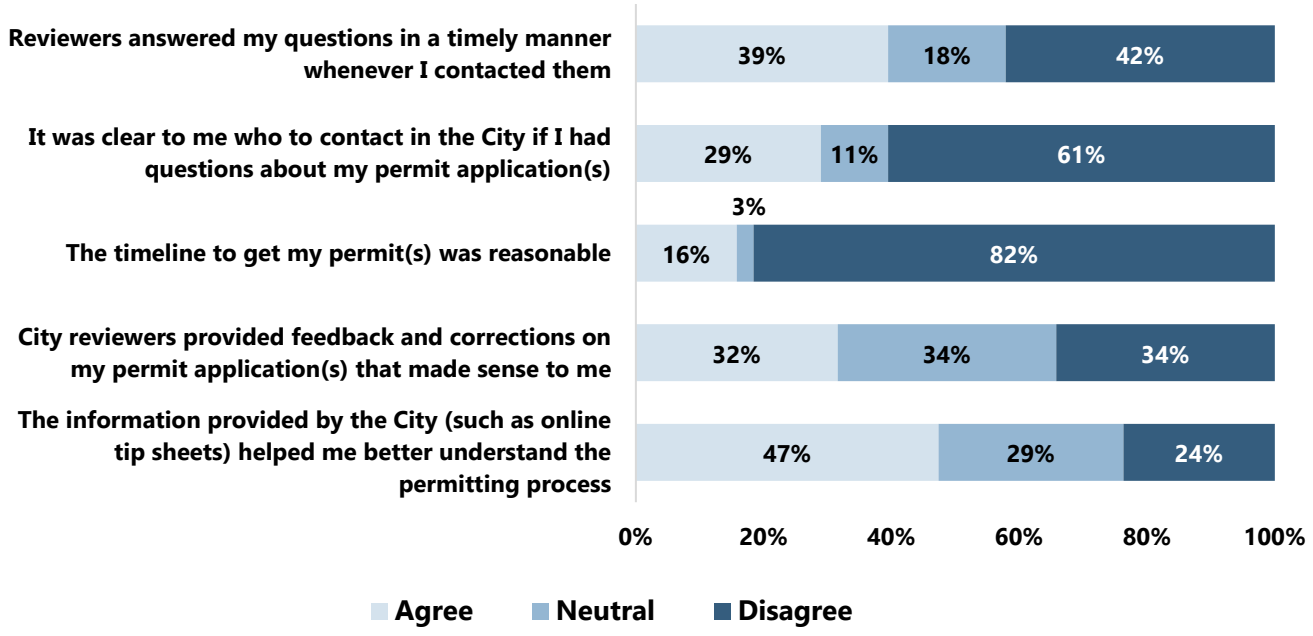
Department Response: SDCI acknowledges that correction monitoring processes do exist within the department, but that they are inconsistently applied across all teams/divisions, as well as across all city departments involved in reviewing construction permit applications. SDCI is committed to working on consolidating these practices into a more comprehensive and consistent department-wide (and potentially city-wide) process. Implementation of a mechanism for continuously gathering customer experience feedback and employee experience feedback across the entire process will be critical in maximizing our efforts to measure whether permit corrections are meeting SDCI's standards of being necessary, understandable, code-based, directive, and specific. (Note: SDCI will need to collaborate with the Mayor's Office and other City departments involved in order to be able to encourage implementation of something citywide.)

APPENDIX C

Results of Audit's Construction Permit Applicant Survey

We conducted a survey of applicants with a high number of review rounds to gain an understanding of their experiences and impressions of the construction permitting process. We sent our survey in May 2023 to 117 applicants with at least five rounds of review. Of those, 38 responded. The graphs below contain summary data for questions where we asked applicants to rate their experiences.





*This figure is among the 21 of 38 (55 percent) survey respondents who reported using Bluebeam.

APPENDIX D

Seattle Office of City Auditor Mission, Background, and Quality Assurance

Our Mission:
To help the City of Seattle achieve honest, efficient management and full accountability throughout City government. We serve the public interest by providing the City Council, Mayor and City department heads with accurate information, unbiased analysis, and objective recommendations on how best to use public resources in support of the well-being of Seattle residents.

Background:
Seattle voters established our office by a 1991 amendment to the City Charter. The office is an independent department within the legislative branch of City government. The City Auditor reports to the City Council and has a four-year term to ensure their independence in deciding what work the office should perform and reporting the results of this work. The Office of City Auditor conducts performance audits and non-audit projects covering City of Seattle programs, departments, grants, and contracts. The City Auditor's goal is to ensure that the City of Seattle is run as effectively, efficiently, and equitably as possible in compliance with applicable laws and regulations.

How We Ensure Quality:
The office's work is performed in accordance with the Government Auditing Standards issued by the Comptroller General of the United States. These standards provide guidelines for audit planning, fieldwork, quality control systems, staff training, and reporting of results. In addition, the standards require that external auditors periodically review our office's policies, procedures, and activities to ensure that we adhere to these professional standards.

Seattle Office of City Auditor
700 Fifth Avenue, Suite 2410
Seattle WA 98124-4729
Ph: 206-233-3801
www.seattle.gov/cityauditor