

## **Development Services Review Draft Action Plan**

On February 9, 2015, Council authorized Staff to undertake an operational review of the City's Planning and Development Services to facilitate operational efficiency within the organization to accommodate development opportunities within the City. The core objectives of the review include:

- To improve customer service
- To seek efficiencies in service delivery
- To improve quality, consistency and transparency in the City's Planning and Development Services

The review process to date has included the following elements:

- A review of the current level of service provision
- Engagement with staff, citizens, partners and customers
- Review of comparable municipalities and best practice
- Preparation of a Draft Action Plan

The review has examined how the City currently processes applications for all forms of development received in Planning, Building and or the Engineering service. The review has not looked at processes associated with policy formulation, the development and creation of By-Laws and/or City-wide work programs such as the construction of roads and/or sewers. In addition, the review has not included an Enforcement or Compliance function.

To ensure transparency, Staff has worked closely with the Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce to ensure that every opportunity has been afforded to the Business Community and all citizens in order to allow everyone the opportunity to express their views and input into the process.

As a result of the work undertaken, an Action Plan has been drafted which sets out some recommended changes to how the Service conducts its business. The proposed changes, if implemented, would not impact existing staffing levels but would enable staff to work more efficiently. The recommended changes would be implemented over a 12-24 month time frame. With the exception of Information Technology improvements, the majority of the recommended changes would be undertaken by Staff within the Division and would not have significant budgetary consequences.

You are invited to review the list of suggested service improvements and if you wish to make suggestions, please provide your comments in writing to [planning@sarnia.ca](mailto:planning@sarnia.ca) before September 15, 2015. Following the engagement

process, a report will be prepared by Staff and presented to Council for consideration.

## **Draft Action Plan**

- 1. Information Technology improvements (12-24 months)** - The number one concern expressed by citizens, Staff and customers is the quality and content of the City's web pages. Concerns included the ability of users to find information easily, access to mapping, lack of clear process maps, policies, procedures and By-Laws, the inability for applicants to submit electronic applications, and the inability for customers to view applications and make representations online. In addition there is concern that web pages were not regularly updated and are not customer-friendly or interactive. The City is currently undertaking a review of its Information Technology requirements and all issues raised in this Development Services review will be incorporated into the wider Information Technology Review to ensure a more accessible, interactive and customer-friendly facility.
  
- 2. Customer Service Improvements (12 months)** - It is estimated that Development Services currently process over 40,000 general enquiries and over 2000 applications annually. Staff workloads can be divided between statutory and non-statutory duties. The review has indicated that most customers recognize that processing applications in a timely manner should be Staff's priority. To ensure that Staff has sufficient time to undertake all their statutory and non-statutory duties it is recommended that some changes are made to the way that Development Services respond to general enquiries. The following modification to service delivery is therefore suggested:
  - a. Introduction of a daily Duty Officer at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Service Counter - Staff from Planning, Building and Engineering would be available to meet with customers at the counter for short 5-10 minute appointments. Appointments would be on a first come first serve basis and are designed to respond to general enquiries and not in depth development proposals where formal meetings would be more appropriate and encouraged. Staff would also be available to check completeness of new applications.
  
  - b. Introduction of a Customer Service Satisfaction Survey - to enable staff to obtain ongoing feedback from customers with regards to service delivery and performance.

- c. Development of Fee-Based Pre-Application Protocol - Frank discussions between Staff, applicants and consultees prior to the submission of Planning and Building applications can speed up and facilitate the decision-making process. While current meetings of this nature occur, there is no formal protocol for this service and a fee is not charged. It is recommended that a protocol be developed to facilitate such meetings. The protocol would establish the information required for such a meeting, including: who would attend, timelines, and issues that would be addressed at the meeting. Following the meeting, the City would communicate the outcome in writing to the applicant identifying any concerns, application requirements, and timeline associated with any submitted application. Although a modest fee is recommended for larger development proposals (\$250), small proposals (i.e. householder proposals) would remain free of charge.
  - d. Meeting Room for Private Consultation - A number of applicants have expressed concerns about the customer reception area on the third floor at City Hall and have requested that provisions be made for a small meeting room where they can discuss proposals in private.
  - e. Development of Online Applications/Fees - the ability for Staff to accept credit card payments for fees and services at reception.
  - f. Staff Customer Service Training - In order to develop improved customer service it is recommended that all Staff receive appropriate training on service-level expectations and file management. Providing customers with clear, consistent and factual advice and recording these interactions appropriately is essential for consistency in decision-making.
- 3. Process Improvements (12-18 months)** - The Department has reviewed all processes and where possible prepared flow charts to show current processes. Current timelines have also been mapped to enable Staff to understand where issues or delays currently occur in the decision-making process. A number of recommendations are proposed to improve the efficiency of the service from Staff, customers and citizens.
- a. Development of new application process maps, protocols, work flow tools and local performance indicators - This would include all application types to assist Staff and customers track applications

and meet expected timelines. Where statutory timelines are not identified in the Building Code, Planning Act or Municipal Act, local performance indicators should be developed to enable monitoring and measurement of performance.

- b. Development of a protocol for fast tracking priority applications - All applications should be considered in numerical order but occasionally applicants or Council request that an application be fast tracked or given priority. Currently there is no formal process and it is recommended, to ensure transparency, a protocol is developed. Each request should be considered on its merits, and only requests that have sound economic or social implications for the City should be entertained. Should an application be given priority status the rationale for the decision should be placed on file.
- c. Improved working relationships with external consultees (Utilities, Ministry of Transportation, Conservation Authority etc.) - A frequent criticism from many applicants was failure of external consultees to respond to City staff in a timely fashion following submission of an application. It is therefore recommended that measures are put in place to facilitate an improved service. Consideration should be given to:
- Bi-annual meetings with partners to discuss operational issues and improvements to service
  - A single point of contact between the City and each consultee.
  - Development of service level agreements, to establish agreed timelines for responses
  - Development of a system which identifies priority applications
  - Reassessment of the City's legislative obligations to consult under the Building Code and Planning Act, with third party consultees
- d. Development of protocol for public community meetings - Staff currently facilitate meetings on behalf of developers when large development proposals are submitted to the City for consideration. Currently, there is no formal protocol for such meetings. It is recommended that a protocol be developed which amongst other things would set out:
- Responsibilities for arrangements, venue, time of meeting, length of meeting and the notification process
  - The role of the Applicant, Municipality and Citizens

- How the outcome and feed back to the Community is presented and by whom
  - Meetings to be conducted under principle of a “respectful environment”
- e. Development of a regular internal planning/building applications groups meeting - A criticism of many applicants was the delay in receiving comments on applications after submission. In part the delay is due to the administrative way that applications are currently circulated to consultees both internal and external. To improve performance it is recommended that weekly meetings are arranged with internal staff (fire, building, engineering and planning) to discuss, review and enable sign off, of application files at the table.
- f. Review fees and charges for all applications - In discussion with applicants a few expressed concern about the level of fees charged by the Municipality in respect to applications. Most however thought our fees were comparable to other Municipalities and did not deter development. It is recommended however that all the Cities fees and charges be reviewed and where appropriate new fees and charges introduced to cover costs associated with service delivery.
- g. Development of local performance indicators - to measure and monitor performance in respect to statutory and non-statutory duties. Consideration will be given to a range of indicators covering a variety of applications, general enquiries and complaints.
- h. Development and use of timeline tool for major projects - Currently application process and timelines are not advertised or set out clearly for our customers on the City's web pages. It is recommended, however, that such information does become available as an outcome of this review. Furthermore, it is recommended that a Timeline Tool is developed for major projects that could be used for time-sensitive applications. The Timeline Tool would be an informal contract between the applicant and the Municipality that sets out the key milestones for an application. In order to achieve these milestones, the applicant and Municipality must share information and agree target dates so unnecessary delays are avoided in the review and decision making process. It is further recommended that where this tool is used, a formal pre application meeting should be undertaken in advance of submission.

- i. Review site visit protocols when assessing new development proposals - It is recommended that site visit protocols are developed to ensure that staff, when undertaking site visits, assess all existing development within a site to ensure compliance with relevant legislative requirements. Where unlawful development is found, the owners should be made aware of infractions and these should be addressed in a timely fashion.
- j. Review and simplify forms and how we communicate with customers - A number of citizens expressed concern about how the service presents information to citizens. Particular concern was directed towards the complexity of forms, and the verbose language used in official notices, reports and communications. Whilst legally certain information must be included in Reports and Notices wherever possible plain English should be encouraged. To meet this expectation it is recommended that Staff review all written material produced by the Service (application forms, Notices reports, e mails, pamphlets web pages, FAQ's) and wherever possible simplify and adopt principles of plain English.

**4. Staff development and Management (3-6 months)** - Internal management systems should be reviewed and developed to ensure Staff has the tools, knowledge, support and confidence to deal with their daily workloads effectively and efficiently in order to process applications expediently and ensure that Staff are providing correct information and guidance to applicants and the public. Recommendations include:

- Management to provide Staff with clear work priorities, direction and support
- Monitoring of workloads to ensure applications are dealt with in a timely fashion, including development of local performance indicators
- Management to monitor consistency in decision-making
- Management to ensure Staff receives appropriate training to undertake their duties and their professional competency development

**5. Committee and Council Training (3-6months)** - A reoccurring concern with some applicants was the quality and consistency of the decision making process. Whilst most applicants felt the reports written by staff were fair and robust there was some concern about the level of training given to Council and Members of the Committee

when applications were presented to them for determination. It is therefore recommended to improve consistency and quality of decision-making and that additional training be provided to these groups bi-annually to ensure they are fully aware of any new legislative requirements, which will assist in the performance of their duties.