

To: COUNCIL

Meeting Date: 4/15/2025

Subject: Building Division Process Improvements

Submitted By: Tanya Gies, Chief Building Official

Prepared By: Tanya Gies, Chief Building Official

Report No.: 25-035-CD

File No.: C1101

Wards Affected: All Wards

RECOMMENDATION(S):

THAT Report 25-035-CD Building Division Process Improvements be received.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Purpose

The Building Division has been working on process improvements that were identified through a Process Review, using Lean Six Sigma methodology for improvement. The goal was to streamline the building permit process to improve permit process time and minimize challenges for both applicants and staff.

Key Findings

The following improvements have been completed to date:

- Webpage enhancements, to improve information sharing, including the implementation of the Cambridge Application Navigator, to make it easier for the public to access and understand the permit process.
- Implemented an online appointment booking system for shed and deck permits, to support over the counter (in-person or digitally) permit processing for sheds and decks, from May to September.
- Simplified permit submissions on the Online Application System make it easier for applicants to submit a permit application.
- Adding a request option to the Online Application System allows customers to request and pay for access to permit records and information, through the Building Division's routine disclosure process.

- Phased improvements to the Amanda permit process database system to improve efficiency, error proofing, data sharing and recording and better workload management.
- Building Division staff have assumed responsibility for Development Charge calculation and circulation to external agencies.
- Eliminated the Building Permit Deposit/Rebate Program to reduce administrative burden and eliminate holding of applicant fees during permit process.

Further enhancements being worked on in 2025:

- Additional Amanda System enhancements to reduce the number of folders being used (simplify the processes) and continue to add automation and data field rules for efficiency and error proofing.
- Moving to an online inspection booking process from the current phone request process.
- Divisional Policy and Procedure review and update.

Financial Implications

The process review and implementation of improvements have been completed by City staff and costs associated with this work are included in the Building Division Operating and Capital Budget, which is funded through user fees and not the tax base.

The Cambridge Application Navigator implementation was funded by the Housing Accelerator Fund Program.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT:

☐ Strategic Action

Objective(s): Not Applicable

Strategic Action: Not Applicable

OR

☒ Core Service

Program: Building Service

Core Service: Building Permits

BACKGROUND:

The Building Division issues an average of 1680 permits per year and frequently responds to general inquiries, application revisions and resubmissions.

In an effort to continually improve Building Division processes and improve the customer experience, the Building Division conducted a process improvement exercise using Lean Six Sigma methodology.

The process review was focused on the application stage of the permit process, from a customer's first inquiry or submission to building permit issuance.

Several areas were identified for potential improvements, an action plan was developed, and significant progress has been made in implementing the improvements.

ANALYSIS:

One of the most significant issues identified was the abrupt switch to a fully digital building permit process in 2020, which introduced challenging process changes and reduced opportunity for staff to have face to face interactions with customers.

Through an analysis of all potential root causes of increased permit process times, the following areas of improvement were identified:

Website and Communication

Customers' first interaction with the Building Division is often a search of our webpage. A review of the information available and its presentation on our website was completed.

Improved information sharing to permit applicants, so they better understand what to submit, and how, will result in better quality submissions and fewer phone or email enquiries, allowing staff more time to focus on plans review, resulting in faster review and process times.

Due to the complexity and variability of permit requirements, it was noted that a digital solution to help customers walk through their unique questions and project details would be of benefit. In January 2025, the Building Division launched a new tool called the Cambridge Application Navigator (CAN). Development of the tool and funding was provided through the Housing Accelerator Fund Program. The tool is integrated with the City's mapping software and helps customers understand the unique requirements for their project on their property.

Staff also created a new appointment booking system to allow for prescheduled meetings with staff, either digitally (MS Teams) or in-person, to expedite the issuance of shed and deck permits from May – September. When these types of permits can be issued over the counter it frees up staff time to focus on larger, more complex applications and reduces the number of touch points on a particular application.

Building Division staff will also be working with the Communications Department to share targeted information during Building Safety Month in May, to bring awareness to the public about why our service is mandated, how to connect with the Building Division and what the process looks like.

Online Application System

Simplified Building Permit Submission Process

The Online Application System is directly linked to the City's permit processing database (the Amanda system). The permit database was set up in ways that staff are trained to understand and be familiar with but are too nuanced to expect the public to navigate. To mitigate this, a new simplified application type was created to only require customers to submit the minimum amount of information required to start the application process. This minimizes errors during submission and reduces the number of phone or email enquiries.

Inspection Booking Process

Currently permit holders are required to phone an assigned Building Official to schedule inspections when they are ready. It requires them to leave a phone message with pertinent details and the Building Official will then schedule their day. This will be going online, using our Online Application System in 2025. Moving to digital inspection requests will help the Building Officials by reducing duplication of effort, and will provide more access to information for the permit holder.

Access to Records and Information

The Online Application System has been enhanced to allow the public to request access to records online through the Building Division's routine disclosure process. One of the Building Divisions most common inquiries was customers looking for permit information or records, and the creation of an application process through this system minimized the number of emails staff were tasked with managing, reduced duplication of effort and allow the public to pay online for their requests.

Permit Process Database (Amanda System)

The Building Division has been using the Amanda Database system to process building permits since 1999. The system has evolved and includes functionality that can be leveraged to reduce data entry errors, automate calculations and processes, enhance workload management and data reporting.

A comprehensive enhancement plan was completed and the Building Division worked with Technology Services to map out the resources required to complete the changes. This volume of work is substantial and is being done in stages. To date, the following improvements have been completed:

Development Charge Process

The Development charge calculation process has increased in complexity with legislative changes over the past few years that include calculating interest on development fees, setting timeframes for rate applicability and implementing various rate reductions and waivers due to use. The Amanda folders have been updated to automate calculation of fees based on these variables to limit user error and reduce the amount of time required to insert the data and create the invoice. It is estimated that the

enhancements reduced the amount of time to review, calculate and create an invoice from 45 mins per application to 15 mins.

Permit Process Time Records

Processes were made consistent for all permit types and training documents created to ensure the data being entered can be consistently recorded.

Data fields were enhanced to allow a chronological overview of permit process activity including all interactions between the city and the permit applicant. This allows better monitoring of real time permit process times and is used as a tool to identify pinch points in the permit process.

Statistics sharing with Stakeholders

Data fields were modified to align with stakeholder requirements to ensure other agencies are getting the most accurate data from the city. Consistency minimizes back and forth communication or misunderstanding about the nature of construction being permitted in Cambridge.

Process

Building Division staff took over the role of development charge processing from the Planning Division. This includes reviewing the permit application scope of work, calculating the City's development charges and circulating the Region and School Boards to obtain certification for their fees. This will limit the amount of work being done by other division staff during the permit process and can be added to existing permit process stages to create efficiency.

Eliminated the Building Permit Deposit/Rebate Program

The program was intended to incent permit holders to complete their construction projects and ensure their permits were closed out in a timely manner, however analysis of the program noted the effort to administer did not equal the benefit gained. The Building Division stopped the program on January 1st, 2025, and has begun an automated proactive permit close out procedure as an alternative method to facilitate the timely closure of permits.

Training, Policy and Procedures

Enforcing and administering the Building Code Act, Ontario Building Code regulations, City Bylaws and any other referenced legislation is complex and challenging. Having clear and concise training documents, interpretation policies and standard operating procedures is imperative for efficiency and workload management.

The Building Division creates interpretation policies as necessary and is scheduled to do a full policy and procedure review in 2025.

EXISTING POLICY / BY-LAW(S):

There is no existing policy/by-law that is impacted.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

The Building Division is self funded. Building Permit fees are collected to support the enforcement and administration of the Building Code Act and Ontario Building Code.

The process review and implementation of all improvements except the Cambridge Application Navigator have been funded through the Building Divisions Operating and Capital Budgets.

The Cambridge Application Navigator was implemented and funded as part of the City's Housing Accelerator Fund Program.

PUBLIC VALUE:

This process review and implemented changes are intended to improve the customer experience in obtaining building permits or building permit information. The Building Division aims to help the public navigate the legislated process.

While not one of the action items as part of Council's Housing Pledge, these improvements align with that pledge of finding ways to make building houses more efficient.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE INPUT:

Not applicable.

PUBLIC INPUT:

Posted publicly as part of the report process.

INTERNAL / EXTERNAL CONSULTATION:

There was no internal/external consultation undertaken.

CONCLUSION:

In effort to streamline the building permit process and enhance the customer experience in interacting with the Building Division, a process review was completed and improvements identified. The Building Division has made significant progress on the improvement action plan and continues efforts to complete enhancements and continually monitor performance.

While not specific to one of the initiatives, these improvements nonetheless align with Council's Housing Pledge to help the private sector build 19,000 homes by 2031.

REPORT IMPACTS:

Agreement: **No**

By-law: **No**

Budget Amendment: **No**

Policy: **No**

APPROVALS:

This report has gone through the appropriate workflow and has been reviewed and or approved by the following as required:

Director

Deputy City Manager

Chief Financial Officer

City Solicitor

City Manager

ATTACHMENTS:

Not Applicable.