

NO: R177

COUNCIL DATE: September 16, 2019

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## REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **September 12, 2019**

FROM: **General Manager, Planning & Development  
Acting General Manager, Engineering**

FILE: **6880-01**

SUBJECT: **Quarterly Update on Program to Reduce Building Permit Wait Times**

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## RECOMMENDATION

The Planning & Development Department and Engineering Department recommend that Council receive this report for information.

## INTENT

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an update on the strategy and program that was implemented in late 2018 to reduce permit processing time for single family building permits to 8 to 12 weeks.

## BACKGROUND

On December 17, 2018, Council considered Corporate Report No. R254; 2018 (Appendix "I") outlining a proposed new program aimed at reducing permit processing time for single family building permits and set a goal of a 10-week timeline.

On April 1, 2019, Council considered Corporate Report R058; 2019 (Appendix "II") providing Council with an update on the progress of processing time for single family building permits that was reduced to an average of 15 weeks.

On July 22, 2019, Council considered Corporate Report R162; 2019 (Appendix "III") providing Council with an update on the progress of processing time for single family building permits that was reduced to an average of 13 weeks.

With the processing time goal of an average of 10 weeks, staff have continued to implement the measures approved by Council, which included added staffing capacity, a triage system, and stream-lined drainage review and referrals.

## DISCUSSION

Although parts of the region are experiencing a slowdown in real-estate development, Surrey is still experiencing strong development activity, including the single-family building sector, which is reflected in the number of building permits applications.

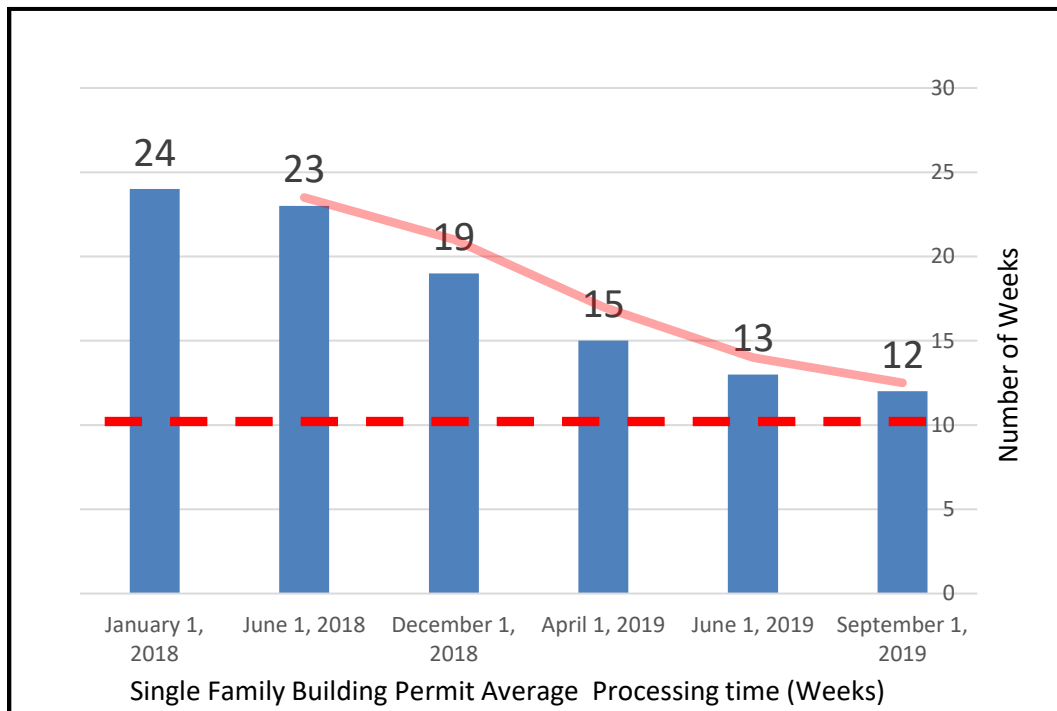
The continued changes and improvements made to the application review process are streamlining the building permit process.

Some of the previously implemented changes which are continuing to improve the shortening of the permit processing time include:

- Triage system introduced in early 2019, leading to complete building permit submissions;
- Plumbing permit applications can now be made online for most plumbing permit types;
- Streamlining of electrical permits fee calculation process; and
- Remote inspections for trees and landscape.

As noted in the appendices, additional staff and extended work hours are still being implemented to continue the enhanced service delivery and to further reduce the backlog of permits in the queue.

As a result of the process changes made, the current processing time for single-family building permits has now been reduced to a 12-week average for complete applications from the 13-week average in July 2019.



Over the last quarter, staff have continued to improve the overall permitting process for all types of building permits, with implementation of single family building permit digital intake and the pending implementation of digital plumbing permit intake.

## **Single Family Building Permit Digital Intake**

In early September, staff began the soft launch of the digital intake for single family building permits. This step will lead to the beta testing of the complete digital permitting process for single family building permits from the time of permit application to final occupancy of the home. The public launch of the digital portal is scheduled to take place before the end of the year.

## **Plumbing Permits**

Following staff's review of the digital plumbing permit applications implemented the last quarter, improvements have been made, as requested by staff and clients. Staff are also working on expanding the digital plumbing permit applications to include backflow preventers and sprinklers, which were not included in the initial roll-out.

These additional digital permits are expected to roll out in first quarter of 2020 or possibly earlier. As noted in Appendix "III", since enhancing the digital intake of plumbing permit applications, there has been an increase in the percentage of on-line plumbing permit applications from 39% to 69% of permits done through the on-line portal.

## **Staffing**

In addition to service improvements to customers, staff completed the full roll-out of new mobile inspection hardware to all inspectors. This change allowed for enhanced mobile access to network data and processes during inspections.

The City has the privilege of hosting a talented and dedicated complement of staff including those within its Land Development, Area Planning and Building Division. They are processing a high volume of complex applications in a timely manner while providing guidance to first time clients. As previously mentioned, qualified staff are in high demand in the region as other cities are also dealing with high volume of work which translate in staff movement. The level of development in the region creates a very competitive market for a limited pool of talented resources. While the City has been successful in hiring highly qualified staff, key staff have also been recruited by other municipalities.

We continue with recruitment and training of staff to help provide an enhanced level of service to clients and colleagues.

## **Next Steps**

The next steps in continuous improvements for the permitting process will include further improvements on the landscape review process, which will finalize the introduction of standard forms for consulting Landscape Architects (reducing the review time associated with Sensitive Ecosystems Development Permits when required) and starting the roll out of the standard process for landscape security releases, introducing third party involvement in landscape inspections.

Staff are also in the process of defining the workplan for the continuous improvements planned for implementation and roll out in 2020 with the initial focus being on the tenant improvement permitting process.

For the fall of 2019, staff are planning an open house for builders of single family homes in order to receive feedback from clients and for staff to provide information that can help builders streamline their process.

Staff anticipate achieving the goal of 10 weeks processing time for single family building permits by the end of 2019, after which staff will focus on reviewing the processes associated with tenant improvement permitting.

## CONCLUSION

Staff continue to be confident that with the strategy put in place last fall, the new initiatives introduced and the continuous improvement process developed, the processing time for single family building permits will keep improving and the goal of 10 weeks average will be achieved near the end of the year.

*Original signed by*  
Jean Lamontagne  
General Manager, Planning & Development

*Original signed by*  
Scott Neuman, P.Eng.  
Acting General Manager, Engineering

JLL/RD/ar

Appendix "I" - Corporate Report No. R254; 2018

Appendix "II" Corporate Report No. R058; 2019

Appendix "III" Corporate Report No. R162; 2019

**CORPORATE REPORT**NO: *R254*COUNCIL DATE: *December 17, 2018*

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**REGULAR COUNCIL**TO: **Mayor & Council**DATE: **December 13, 2018**FROM: **General Manager, Engineering  
General Manager, Planning & Development**FILE: **6880-01**SUBJECT: **New Program to Reduce Building Permit Wait Times**

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**RECOMMENDATION**

The Engineering Department and Planning & Development Department recommend that Council:

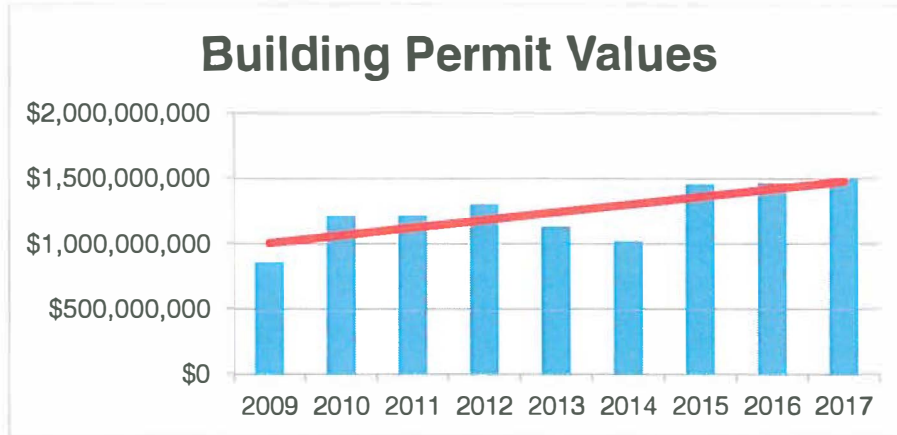
1. Receive this report for information; and
2. Approve the proposed strategy outlined in this report to reduce building permit processing time.

**INTENT**

The purpose of this report is to advise Council about the proposed strategy and new program being implemented to reduce the building permit processing in order to meet Council's expectations of 10 weeks' timeline to issue single family building permits.

**BACKGROUND**

Since 2010, development in Surrey has consistently exceeded \$1 billion in construction value. Each year sees an increasing number of permit applications. Over the past eight years, a number of initiatives have been implemented to better serve the increasing numbers of customers with the Engineering and Planning & Development Departments. These changes ensure that the City remains efficient and innovative in order to meet the increasing demand for development services.



**2010 - 2017**

Over the past seven years, a number of improvements in the development process have been implemented. Those changes have helped both staff and applicants improve efficiency and also streamlined the development and building permit process.

Highlights of those changes include: pre-application meeting process; Online Development Inquiry; a development tracking system was added to COSMOS; and the City’s online mapping system. A web portal was also launched to enable the Erosion and Sediment Control process.

The City Road and Right-of-Way Permits and Traffic Obstruction Permits were integrated into the electronic tracking system and COSMOS to provide automation, safeguards and enhanced data retrieval.

Further online services were implemented to help customers, including the addition of online inspection processes for the Plumbing, Electrical, and Trees & Landscaping Sections. All inspection areas integrated across sections, with new mobile technology.

Recently, digital plan submission and review was piloted with the land development engineers. Cost savings were passed onto the developers, as their engineers were no longer required to print or courier hard copies of drawings to City staff. The land development engineers have embraced this initiative.

A pilot project was initiated for the use of a surety bond (instead of the standard cash or letter of credit) as an alternate form of security associated with the Servicing Agreement for land development projects.

**2018**

The Engineering Department, Planning & Development Department, and the Information Technology Division began designing the process for complete digital building permit submissions, which will be first implemented for single family dwelling (“SFD”) building permits. This builds on the success of the Engineering Department’s piloting of a Digital Plan Review process. This improvement process, which is currently underway, is planned for full roll-out in the third quarter of 2019, once all testing has been completed. Piloting the digital review of Building Permits is currently underway, and the full process will be completed in 2019.

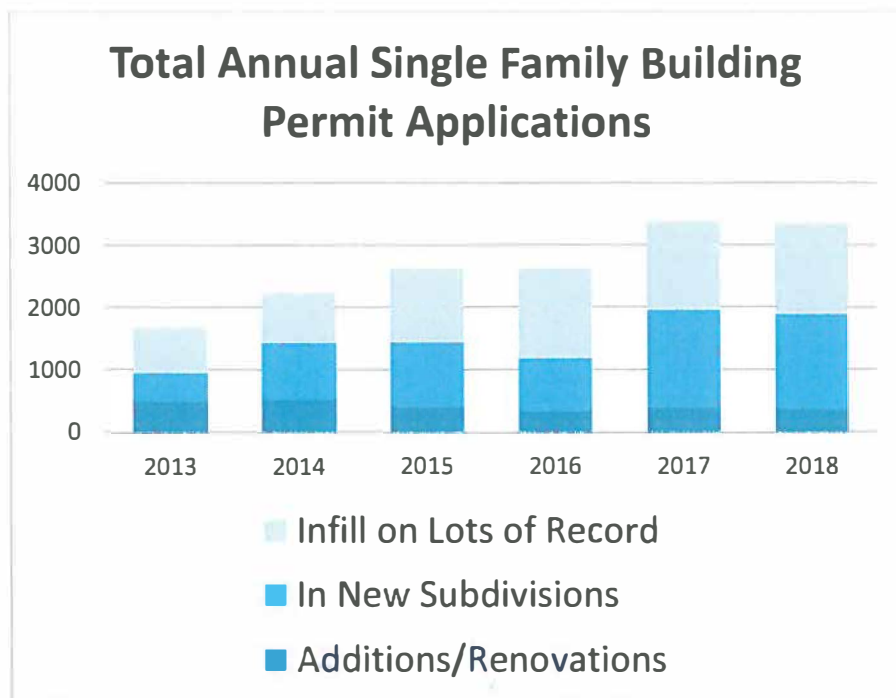
This new process will allow customers to apply for building permits at any time of the day or week by submitting the required documentation online. Staff will then proceed with digital review. Issuance of the permit and payments will be accepted online, and the existing mobile inspection process will follow. As a result, the complete building process, from building permit application to building occupancy, will all be available to the client through one simple online account.

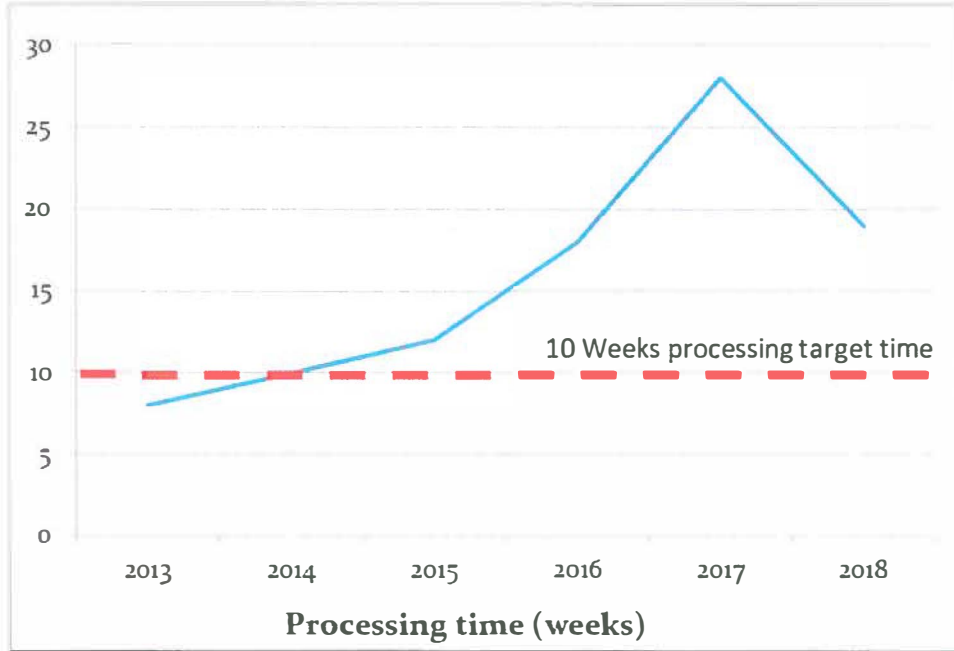
## DISCUSSION

While processing record numbers of building permits, staff has continued to implement innovative process improvements, allowing them to process applications more efficiently.

### Increased Numbers of Building Permit Applications

In 2015, the Province enabled legislation leading to the termination of land use contracts throughout the Province. This new Provincial legislation affected more than 7,558 existing single family lots in Surrey. Following the early termination process that was consequently approved by Council, this led to an influx of building permits from property owners wishing to build homes under the soon to be terminated Land Use Contracts. The graph below indicates a larger-than-average number of applications for building permits on infill lots of record.





This influx of infill building permits started in 2015 and continued into 2018. This has affected the turnaround times of building permits for SFD as each Land Use Contract is unique and requires a longer review time to ensure the house proposed meets the Land Use Contract requirements. Staff believes the peak of the impact from land use contract terminations has passed but expect to still see a higher than normal number of infill building permits for another year as the last of these are processed.

Another factor influencing the number of building permit applications is the Province of British Columbia that brought forward a new BC Building Code that was implemented on December 10, 2018. As per previous iterations of the BC Building Code update there has been a higher than usual number of building permit application that were submitted in early December 2018, ahead of the BC Building Code changes.

In order to meet Council's direction to reduce processing times for single family building permits, staff has implemented the following changes:

### 1. Staffing Levels

With the current increased number of applications, a review of staffing levels is required. In order to enhance the permit processing capacity, a total of 14 additional staff members have been added in a variety of functions, in order to ensure a higher processing capacity of building permits. With the additional staff members, working hours were extended, with some shifts beginning at 6:00 am and others ending at 7:30 pm. These extended hours allow for staff members to overlap their working hours with other staff involved in the review and processing of applications, which is integral to the permitting process. This schedule also ensures that staff members have time to meet with their respective managers if guidance is required on specific items related to a building permit.

With the current volume of development and construction throughout the lower mainland, all municipalities are currently searching for qualified staff able to process land development applications and building permits. This is a constant item front of mind for hiring managers and



support staff in Human Resources. The City has previously been successful in attracting talent through departmental mentorship programs, through recruitment campaigns in education institutions, and with the help of professional recruiters. While the City is often successful at hiring talent, we also suffer from other employers recruiting City staff. The cost of housing in the region is also an impediment in hiring and retaining staff. Currently processing times for single family building permits are 19 weeks and a target of 10 weeks is planned to be achieved by June 2019 or earlier if the current turnaround time and new application trend continues.

Funding for the additional staff is available from the 2018 fee adjustment approved as part of the 2018 budget, regular overtime yearly budget and 2017 operating savings carried forward to help fund additional auxiliary positions currently in the department. Staff will be reviewing fees in 2019 in order to ensure that the cost associated with the additional level of service is fully recovered through the permitting fees.

## **2. Implementation of “Triage” System**

Faced with an increasing turnaround time for SFD building permits, in the third quarter of 2017, staff met with the goal of reducing the processing time of SFD building permits down to a ten-week average. In order to achieve the proposed reduced turnaround time, staff implemented a “triage” system for SFD building permits, with three queues. Previously, all permits were processed according to their “in-date.”

The first and fastest queue is for building permits for renovations to SFDs. The second queue is for SFDs in new subdivisions. These permit applications are easier to expedite, as all services and lot grading will have already been taken into account as part of the prior rezoning and subdivision process. This drastically reduces staff processing time for those permits, as the only major issues associated with the permit are receiving a complete submission from the applicant, zoning compliance, and building code compliance. Staff is confident that SFD building permits in new subdivisions will achieve the ten-week processing time within four months or fewer.

The third queue is for new SFD building permits that are on the aforementioned infill lots. These permit applications are the most complicated to process, as they require a more detailed review by staff in various departments in order to ensure servicing of the lot is adequate, tree protection objectives are met, storm drainage has been fully detailed and can be implemented without impacting neighbouring properties, and the submission from the applicant is complete.

## **3. Tenant Improvement Permits**

In addition to the discussed changes in the SFD building permit process, throughout 2018, changes have also been implemented to expedite the Tenant Improvement Permit (“TIP”) application review process. The number of TIP applications received often spikes in relation to the commissioning of new multi-tenant commercial buildings. In 2008/2009 the number of TIP applications per month ranged from 35 to 70 with an average of approximately 50 applications per month. From 2016 to 2018 the number of applications per month ranged between 55 and 90 with an average of approximately 65 applications per month. In order to improve the turnaround time for the issuing of these permits, the review process structure has been adjusted so that relatively simple TIPs, including simple revisions, can be dealt with by the inspectors in the field. Supplementary staff members processing TIPs have also been added in recent weeks with a goal of initiating reviews sooner with earlier feedback provided to clients. With these changes implemented we believe that we will be able to achieve a 10 weeks turnaround for simple TIPs,

this by the end of January 2019 while continuing to improve the TIP review process for more complex application to reach a 10 week turnaround time by mid-year 2019.

#### **4. Drainage Review**

Most, if not all, new SFD building permit applications include a basement. Calculation of the minimum basement elevation (MBE) required to achieve gravity drainage for storm water adds to the complexity of permits in infill lots. This part of the permit process, and added complexity, create a constraint in our process. As such, additional resources have been added in order to ensure MBE reviews are not holding up the permit process. Engineering Department and Planning and Development Staff have also met with a number of design consultants to ensure their submissions will meet our design criteria thus avoiding long delays associated with resubmissions.

#### **Referrals**

Building permits for infill lots of record need to be referred to other Departments to ensure all requirements are met, such proper servicing for the proposed new home, or the driveway location meeting the transportation safety requirements.

Parts of this referral process are still paper-based and are not keeping up with the remainder of the review process. As such, this process currently under review as part of the wider digital permitting process implementation, with the goal of eliminating paper-based referrals. This change is being implemented incrementally, as it requires software programming changes in the current tracking system. Most importantly, the leveraging of our digital drawing review technology will help stream line this process with opportunities to coordinate input from the various groups within the City on one digital design submission thus avoiding conflicting direction being given to applicants.

#### **Processing Time Trend-line**

With the new “triage” system, the addition of staff, the improved referral system, and the extended working hours, the trend for processing times of SFD building permits is currently trending down. The average SFD building permit processing time has already been reduced to an average of 21 weeks and staff anticipate the trend to continue downward over the next six months, by when the ten weeks’ processing time is expected to be reached.

Typically in Surrey the processing time for single family building permits has been between eight to twelve weeks. Currently the processing time is nineteen weeks and is projected to be at ten weeks by June of 2019 or earlier.

#### **Digital Queue Monitoring**

With changes implemented by the BIT team to the digital tracking system, managers in the Planning & Development Department will now be able to access dashboards with real-time information. This will provide them with a summary view of all permits in-queue, of average processing times, and of staff workload. This new tool will help ensure managers align anticipated and required staff resources with the current application volumes and forecasted

processing demand. This new tool is currently being implemented, and will be of great help to managers in achieving and maintaining the permit processing turnaround time goal of ten weeks.

Communication with the industry is critical in ensuring all stakeholders are apprised of process changes both planned and currently being implemented. Staff regularly meets with the Development Advisory Committee members, Land Development Consultants, Builders and Contractors to provide updates and encourage them to provide feedback.

## **SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS**

The work of the Engineering and Planning & Development Departments to improve the land development and permitting processes supports the objectives of the City's Sustainability Charter 2.0. In particular, this work relates to Sustainability Charter 2.0 themes of Economic Prosperity and Livelihoods, and Infrastructure. Specifically, this work supports the following Desired Outcomes ("DO"):

### **Economic Prosperity and Livelihoods**

**DO6:** Efficient land use and well-managed transportation infrastructure are in place to attract businesses and support a thriving economy.

**DO16:** Surrey's businesses are active participants in the community and create economic value in a way that generates value for society.

### **Infrastructure**

**DO21:** The city has excellent communications infrastructure that provides affordable and effective connectivity across the community.

**SD2:** Develop and manage our assets to adapt to technological change.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the recent changes implemented in the queueing system for permits, the addition of staff resources, extension of working hours, mentoring programs, added digital and process efficiencies, and real-time data available to managers, staff are confident they will meet the targeted timeline of a ten-week average processing time for single family dwelling building permit issuance in 2019. Process restructuring is also being implemented to Tenant Improvement Permits, which are important to the health of the economic and business sector of the City.

The Engineering Department and Planning & Development Department recommend that Council:

1. Receive this report for information; and
2. Approve the proposed strategy outlined in this report to reduce building permit processing time.



Fraser Smith, P. Eng., MBA  
General Manager, Engineering

JLL/RD/FS/ar



Jean Lamontagne  
General Manager, Planning & Development



## CORPORATE REPORT

NO: R058

COUNCIL DATE: April 1, 2019

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**REGULAR COUNCIL**

TO: Mayor &amp; Council

DATE: March 27, 2019

FROM: General Manager, Planning & Development  
General Manager, Engineering

FILE: 6880-01

SUBJECT: Quarterly Update on Program to Reduce Building Permit Wait Times

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**RECOMMENDATION**

The Planning & Development Department and Engineering Department recommend that Council receive this report for information.

**INTENT**

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an update on the strategy and program that was implemented in late 2018 to reduce permit processing time for single family building permits to 8 to 12 weeks.

**BACKGROUND**

On December 17, 2018, Council considered Corporate Report No. R254; 2018 (Appendix "I") outlining a proposed new program aimed at reducing permit processing time for single family building permits with a goal of achieving a 10 weeks timeline.

With the processing time goal of an average of 10 weeks staff have continued to implement the measures approved by Council, which included added staffing capacity, a triage system, and stream-lined drainage review and referrals.

**DISCUSSION**

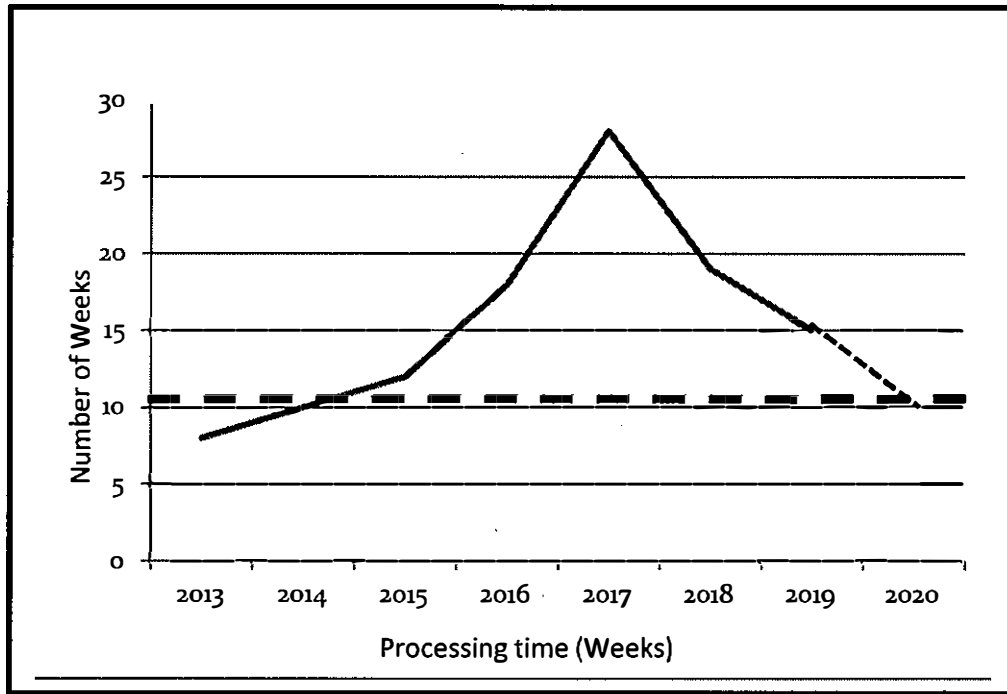
Surrey is still experiencing strong activity in the single-family building sector which is reflected in the number of building permits that were applied for over the past three months. External factors will also influence the number of building permit applications received.

For example, a new BC Building Code came into effect on December 10, 2018. There is always a higher volume of permit applications the weeks preceding a new building code coming into force. Similarly, the changes put forward by the Province introducing Bill 52, which regulates the size of homes within the Agricultural Land Reserve, contributed to a sudden increase in permit applications.

With the triage system that was introduced for single-family building permits, processing of files continues to improve by allowing the less-complicated files to be reviewed faster without being

impacted by more complex files. Also, this approach has allowed us to assign more specialized resources to the complex files that require additional review and more communication with the applicant through the review process.

As a result of the changes made, the current processing time for single-family building permits has now been reduced to 15 weeks average from the 19 weeks average in mid-December 2018.



As a whole, over the last three months, staff have been able to process approximately 30% more applications than they did over the same period last year. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of applications waiting to be processed despite the impact of the New Building Code and Bill 52 noted above.

Staff will continue to improve the overall permitting process for all types of building permits. Some of the improvements that were made available to clients so far in 2019 include the following:

- Electrical Inspection results being sent electronically to clients;
- Plumbing Inspection results being sent electronically to clients;
- Roll out of on-line commercial plumbing permit application;
- Standard template for arborist reports;
- On-Line inspection requests for tree barriers, replacement trees and bonding releases;
- Photographic pre-screening of tree inspection requests to minimize failed inspections; and
- Standardized process for landscape security release and streamlined inspection process.

Upcoming additional improvements that will be available to clients will include an on-line portal for digital single-family building permit application and processing; currently scheduled for roll-out fourth quarter 2019.

As noted in the December 17, 2018 Corporate Report additional staff and extended work hours have been important in helping the City enhance service delivery. These new resources have helped both in terms developing process improvements as well as providing increased capacity to process permit applications and enquiries.

Planning & Development and Engineering staff members are also involved in continuous improvement training and new tools are being developed that will help them in providing accurate information that in turn will help them in their day to day work and communication with applicants.

## CONCLUSION


The City of Surrey has a talented and dedicated complement of staff including those within its Building Division. They are processing a high volume of complex applications in a timely manner while providing guidance to first time clients. Qualified staff are in high demand in the region as other Cities are also dealing with high volume of work. The level of development in the region creates a very competitive market for a limited pool of talented resources. While we have been successful in hiring highly qualified staff, we have also seen key staff being recruited by other municipalities.

At this point, we are confident that with the strategy put in place last fall the processing time for single family building permits will keep improving and the goal of 10 weeks will be achieved before the end of the year.



Jean Lamontagne  
General Manager, Planning & Development

JLL/RD/ar



Fraser Smith, P.Eng., MBA  
General Manager, Engineering

Appendix "I" - Corporate Report No. R254; 2018

*Appendices available upon request*

NO: R162

COUNCIL DATE: July 22, 2019

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## REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: Mayor & Council

DATE: July 17, 2019

FROM: General Manager, Planning & Development  
Acting General Manager, Engineering

FILE: 6880-01

SUBJECT: Quarterly Update on Program to Reduce Building Permit Wait Times

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## RECOMMENDATION

The Planning & Development Department and Engineering Department recommend that Council receive this report for information.

## INTENT

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## BACKGROUND

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## DISCUSSION

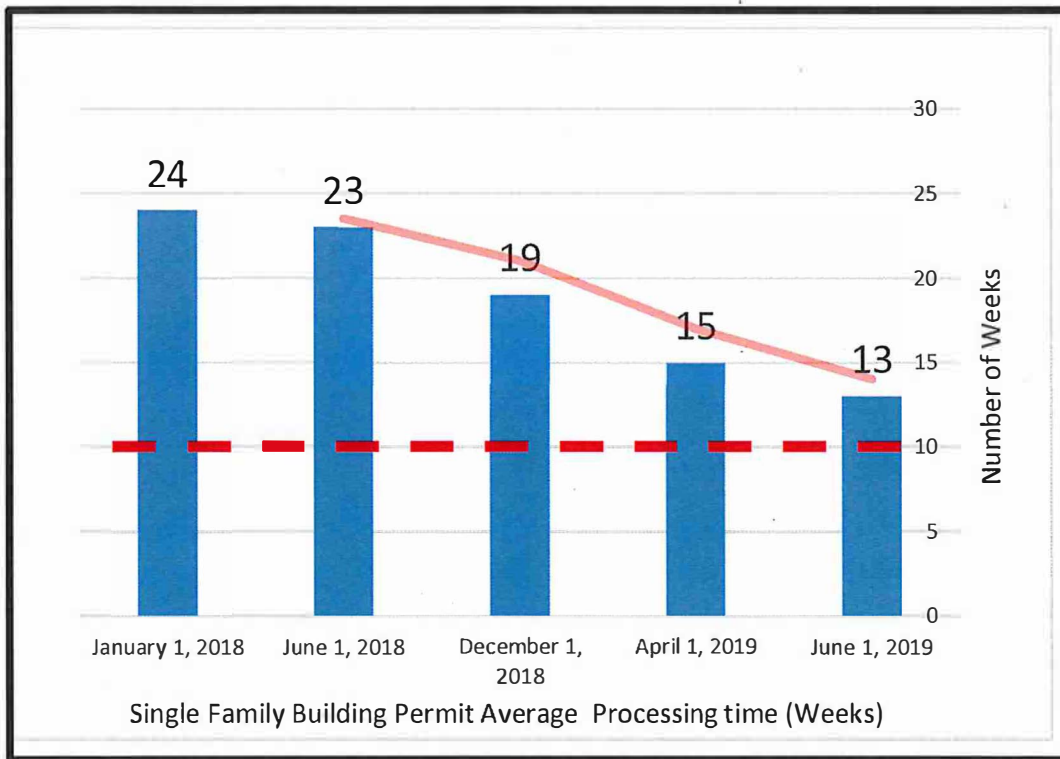
Surrey is still experiencing strong activity in the single-family building sector which is reflected in the number of building permits that were applied for over the past three months. External factors also influence the number of building permit applications received. For example, a revised Metro Vancouver Development Cost Charge has triggered a higher volume of residential building permit applications for multi-family residential projects.

The most recent changes made to the application review process has resulted in files being ready for review earlier than before which helped with the triage process that was introduced earlier in



2019. One of the key benefits of the triage process is that complete applications with plans that are consistent with City by-laws and servicing requirements have their permits issued more quickly than those that are of incomplete or that are inconsistent with City by-laws. Consequently, this has led to a performance-based review process where complete applications are processed more efficiently.

As a result of the process changes made, the current processing time for single-family building permits has now been reduced to a 13-week average for complete applications from the 15-week average in March 2019.



Over the last quarter, staff have continued to improve the overall permitting process for all types of building permits, with implementation beginning first for single family building permits. Some of the improvements that were made available to clients in 2019 include:

- Remote inspections of Tree Barriers, and replacement trees, with more than 30% of inspections being done without staff visiting the site.
- Plumbing contractors are now able to apply for most plumbing permits online. Contractors that register for our online portal get faster service, allowing them to:
  - Apply and pay for permits;
  - Track permit statuses;
  - Receive inspection results by email;
  - Automatically calculate accurate permit fees;
  - Submit permit amendment requests by email; and
  - Roll out of on-line commercial plumbing permit application.
- Roll out of a series of short videos outlining the process involved in building a home in Surrey. These will help first time clients wishing to build their first home and will guide them in the process.

Since enhancing the digital intake of plumbing permit applications, there has been an increase in the percentage of on-line plumbing permit applications from 3% to 46% in the commercial sector and from 49% to 61% in the single-family sector.

On July 8, 2019, Council approved Corporate Report R146; 2019 (Appendix "III"), which changes how electrical permit fees will be calculated. This change will further streamline the permitting process for single family projects allowing shorter process for issuance of electrical permit.

As noted in Appendices "I" and "II", additional staff and extended work hours are still being implemented to continue the enhanced service delivery.

### Next Steps

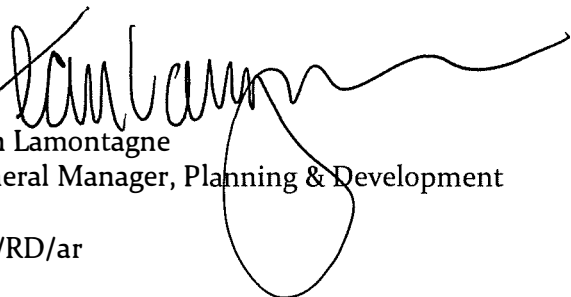
The next steps in continuous improvements for the permitting process will focus on the landscape review process, which will introduce standard forms for consulting Landscape Architects (reducing the review time associated with Sensitive Ecosystems Development Permits when required), establish a standard process for security releases, introduce third party involvement in landscape inspections, and implement remote inspections for replacement trees.

Staff are also completing internal testing of the on-line single-family Building Permit Portal, to be ready for piloting in the third quarter of 2019 and launch in the fourth quarter of 2019.

### CONCLUSION

The City of Surrey has the privilege of hosting a talented and dedicated complement of staff including those within its Land Development and Building Division. They are processing a high volume of complex applications in a timely manner while providing guidance to first time clients. Qualified staff are in high demand in the region as other Cities are also dealing with high volume of work. The level of development in the region creates a very competitive market for a limited pool of talented resources. While the City has been successful in hiring highly qualified staff, key staff have also been recruited by other municipalities.

Staff continue to be confident that with the strategy put in place last fall, the new initiatives introduced and the continuous improvement process developed, the processing time for single family building permits will keep improving and the goal of 10 weeks average will be achieved near the end of the year.



Jean Lamontagne  
General Manager, Planning & Development

JLL/RD/ar



Scott Neuman, P.Eng  
Acting General Manager, Engineering

Appendix "I" - Corporate Report No. R254; 2018  
Appendix "II" Corporate Report No. R058; 2019  
Appendix "III" Corporate Report No. R146; 2019

*Appendices available upon request*