

PERMITTING PROCESS EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

DEKALB COUNTY



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1. INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of the work conducted in evaluating the permitting processes within DeKalb County to identify recommendations for the improvement of the permitting process. The recommendations are focused on the overall improvement of the permitting process with a particular focus on increasing transparency, predictability and consistency in process application, the identification of required technology to support the process, and the establishment of an organizational structure and staffing levels suitable for providing customer service efficiently, and at an appropriate level.

1. PROJECT FRAMEWORK.

The project team undertook this study after the County had already begun reviewing the permitting and licensing process and making preliminary improvements in the process. The County established an organizational framework consisting of three working groups that have been, and will continue to be, critical to the successful implementation of this effort. These groups include:

- **External Stakeholders Group:** This group composed of customers and other stakeholders have provided a useful sounding board regarding existing processes and procedures, key issues necessary to improve operations, and ensures that the project remains focused on improvements that will provide a high level of consistent, accurate and timely service to the public.
- **Internal Project Team:** Composed of staff and managers from permitting and business license operations have provided information and background regarding the existing permitting and business license processes. This group will be integral to implementing identified changes and improvements moving forward.
- **Steering Committee:** Consists of the Chief Operating Officer and other high-level County managers. The committee has focused on ensuring that the project is achieving the identified goals, has the resources needed, and the support

required for making the necessary changes (staffing, technology, training, etc.) needed to implement a “best in class” permitting and business licensing process in DeKalb County.

The project team has met with these groups frequently to brief them on progress, discuss issues as they are identified, obtain their input, and review draft recommendations as they were being developed. These periodic meetings will continue during the implementation phase.

1. PROJECT SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES.

The purpose of the study was to provide assistance to the County in reviewing existing permitting practices, policies, procedures, and resources with a focus on developing recommendations to improve the customer service provided by the County to its customers.

In conducting this engagement with DeKalb County the project team undertook the following steps.

- Detailed interviews with staff involved in the permitting processes including employees in the following functional areas: Planning & Sustainability, GIS, IT, Watershed, Fire and Business Licenses.
- Conducted data collection to gather relevant information regarding the services provided, the volume of work staff has to manage, and the time frames in which the work is completed;
- Conducted numerous interviews and focus groups with representatives of the Development Community to fully understand their perceptions of the levels of service provided by DeKalb County and to gather their input regarding major areas of opportunity for improvement. Additionally, a survey was conducted with customers to assess their satisfaction and identify potential areas of improvement.
- Conducted a SWOT analysis with staff to enable all employees who participate in the development review process to have input, in addition to the personal interviews conducted, on the strengths and opportunities for improvement in the development review process.

- Conducted an employee survey, with 128 responses received, to provide an additional opportunity for staff to have anonymous input regarding the strengths and improvement opportunities for the Permitting Process.
- Conducted observations of work activities in the permit center and business license counter to view staff conducting their business activities.
- Developed “as is” work flows of major permitting and business licensing processes.
- Performed a best management practices assessment comparing the County’s operational practices to key development review best management practices.
- Periodic meetings with the established steering committee and customer committee to provide updates on the project and to continuously solicit input.

These activities enabled the project team to analyze the current performance of duties, the duties assigned and allocated to staff, and the opportunities for improvement in the permit process. These analytical tasks that were conducted led to the recommendations that are contained in the later chapters of this report.

2. GUIDING PRINCIPLES UTILIZED IN THE EVALUATION.

In conducting the tasks during this initial phase of the permitting improvement study, the project team was continually working with staff regarding the following key questions: (1) What problem are we trying to solve?; and (2) What does success look like? We also utilized principles from the publication from the American Planning Association (APA) entitled: *The Development Review Process: A Means to a Nobler and Greater End*. This publication identifies specific ideas on how permitting and development functions should function. The following table compares those themes against the County’s current permitting function – showing how success can be viewed in comparison to existing constraints.

What does success look like?	What Problem are we trying to Solve?
Predictability including clear expectations, no surprises, and a clear decision process with decision points.	Unpredictability about service timelines including surprises in the permitting process that occur late in the process, multiple avenues for getting an answer, unclear and unmet timeframes for completing work.
Fair treatment with rules that are the same for everyone with the offering of trust to applicants by the County and the demonstration of trustworthy behavior by the County.	Disparate treatment of applicants where one project is handled different from a comparable project of the same type.
Accurate and accessible information that is easy to find and understand, with clear applicant requirements and standards.	Inaccessible information so that customers must hire professionals to navigate the system and applicants with smaller projects are left on their own to determine how to proceed.
Timely processing that establishes early tentative dates for hearings, guaranteed review turnaround times, and a continual focus on customer service.	Variable performance of staff depending on department resources, commitment to meeting performance metrics and standards, and no focus on customer service.
Reasonable and fair costs for application fees, sewer fees and development fees that are comparable with other jurisdictions.	Inconsistent fee structure that is not in relation to the work performed, which does not provide value for fee paid, and which is insufficient to cover full costs.
Competent staff with a team that possesses a balance of hard technical skills and soft people skills, and staff who fully understand their job, role in the permitting process and the use of available technology.	Undertrained staff with varying levels of experience, expertise and knowledge outside of their immediate area of focus or expertise.
Elegant regulations that fit the circumstances of DeKalb County, are easy to navigate, are rational, and that contain desired outcomes not requiring excessive efforts to attain.	Antiquated regulations that add cost and time but low value to the permitting process.

These measures of success will be continuously utilized throughout the remainder of the project to ensure that all changes and improvements are designed to move the DeKalb County permitting process toward noticeable and measurable success.

3. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS AND HIGH LEVEL IMPLEMENTATION PLAN.

The following table summarizes the recommendations contained in the report. A specific implementation plan allocating designated project team and County resources will be developed for guidance and project management of the actual implementation effort. This implementation plan will include a more finite timeframe for each

recommendation listing start and end dates, estimated level of effort and staff members that will be responsible for conducting the work necessary to implement the recommendation.

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
Technology Evaluation			
2.1 The County must upgrade or replace its current permitting software system in order to achieve many of the service improvements the County is seeking to implement.	High	Director of Planning & Sustainability	Immediate Start (implementation will take 18 months)
2.2 Continue the transition to a new web site, which should be easy to navigate, easy to update, and include basic permitting information including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guidelines with detailed information regarding business licensing application and renewal requirements - Add dynamic information on the web site, such as each day's list of inspections in order by inspector, to provide customers with a sense of when the inspector will arrive. - Fillable forms in PDF format that can be completed from home/office and brought in fully completed or emailed for submission. - Review and revise the contents of the business license web page, and create a link to that page from the main DeKalb page as well as from the Planning page. - Utilize the web site to help manage the business license renewal process. 	High	Associate Director of Planning & Sustainability	May through July 2014
2.3 The Department should clearly designate the individual responsible for ensuring information on the website is current and accurate.	High	Associate Director of Planning & Sustainability	May 2014
2.4 Further enhancements to the queuing software should be considered to enhance timely service to customers.	Medium	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
2.5 Fix the existing IVR system for permit inspections.	High	Development Administrator	May – June 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
2.6 Establish process for document management to allow different agencies to look at and share comments on a single set of plans.	High	Development Administrator	In progress
Permit Center			
3.4 <i>DeKalb County should continue planning for the acquisition and design of a new facility to house permitting operations that enables the Permit Center to accommodate all functions as outlined in this report, while also being designed in a more functional and business-friendly layout.</i>	High	Deputy COO for Development and Director of Planning & Sustainability	As soon as practical
Fee Analysis			
3.4.1 The County should consider an increase in the building permit fee and planning fees to cover the actual cost of services provided and for greater comparability with other entities.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.2 The County should consider the consistent implementation of a resubmittal fee for all applications that require more than two reviews beyond the original review. Application fees should be set at a level that incorporates two reviews within the base fee.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.3 The “move in as is” fee should be no higher than a fee for minimal interior renovations.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.4 DeKalb County should implement a technology and imaging fee designed to cover the maintenance, upgrade and utilization of effective technology practices. These fees should be allocated to a dedicated fund.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.5 The County should implement a reserve fund (of at least six months operating expenses) to provide a safety net against future market downturns.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
3.4.6 The County should implement an “expedited” plan review process that for an additional fee (to cover the cost of overtime) provides an expedited review for qualifying applicants.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.7 The County should adopt a formal cost recovery policy outlining the targeted level of revenues for the building permit function and other functions that will be covered by fees.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
3.4.8 Following implementation of the process and staffing improvements, the County should undertake a comprehensive fee study to establish new fees and a fee structure that ensure fees are established based upon actual time required to process applications following the reorganization and implementation of new policies, procedures and work flows. Best practices indicate a fee study should be conducted, on average, every five years.	High	Development Administrator	2016
Process and Operational Analysis			
Business License Process			
5.1(a) Have zoning conduct a pre-check of the application before it is accepted. At that time, applicant should also be informed if a CO or other permitting (e.g., life-safety inspection) is missing. The process should not proceed until the applicant has confirmed that zoning, CO, and/or pre-license inspections have been completed. In Fulton County, the business license application must include a letter from zoning indicating that the use is appropriate for the address. As a result, there is no risk that the applicant will complete the licensing application process and then learn that the zoning will not allow their building.	Medium	Business License Manager	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
5.1(a) Streamline the process of obtaining a safety approval, limiting the requirement for a CO only when there is a change of use (based on the building code use classifications) or significant construction. For all other new businesses or changes of tenancy, a simpler form should be required. In Fulton county, for example, a CO is only required for newly constructed buildings. For all other business license applications, a copy of the Fire and Safety inspection form is required.	High	Business License Manager / Fire Marshall	Summer 2014
Business License Renewal			
5.1(b) Implement a fully electronic process for business license renewals.	High	Business License Manager	With implementation of new software
5.1(b) In the interim, reduce the steps involved by having businesses calculate the amounts due using a form sent to them with the renewal, and/or an on-line calculator. Payment should be sent in based on these calculations, in response to the initial notice.	High	Business License Manager	Next renewal
5.1(b) Allow for electronic submittals of e-verify and other forms at renewal. The law establishing the e-verify requirement (HB 87) allows for electronic submittal as long as they are in conformance with Title 10, Chapter 12 of the Official Code of Georgia.	High	Business License Manager	With implementation of new software
Cashiering			
5.1(c) The cashiering function should be consolidated into dedicated cashiering positions.	High	Development Administrator	With implementation of Permit Technician position
5.1(c) The County should implement a more effective electronic check processing solution to streamline the payment process.	High	Development Administrator	With implementation of dedicated cashiering function

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
5.1.(c) Cashiering process should be updated to provide a standard and consistent approach to cashiering for permitting and business licensing to accommodate the changes being implemented and reduce the time currently required for processing payments.	High	Development Administrator	With implementation of dedicated cashiering function
General Permitting Process Improvements			
5.3 All processes should follow a case management approach. The case manager may vary depending on the type of permit (a planner for land use, an engineer for land disturbance, a permit tech or plans reviewer for building). However, in each case it should be clear who that case manager is, and that individual should be responsible for the overall process.	High	Development Administrator	With implementation of Permit Manager / Permit Technician positions
5.3 Greater effort should be made on the "front end" to ensure that applications are complete.	High	Development Administrator	With implementation of Permit Technician position
5.3 Where only a cursory review is required (e.g., setbacks for a shed or deck), this sign off should occur at the time of application, instead of being routed to zoning with more complex projects.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
5.3 There should be clear performance standards for every review entity in the permitting process, and this information should be tracked.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
5.3 There should be greater consistency among the processes. The wide range of approaches currently employed causes confusion and uncertainty. (For example, the difference in review approaches for city vs. county projects.)	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
5.3 Staff should be held accountable for following best practice approaches. For example, when applications are resubmitted, new issues should not be identified that were not brought up initially. While staff should not overlook non-compliance, repeated identification of new issues is generally indicative that staff did not conduct a thorough a comprehensive first review. The resubmittal review should be limited to ensuring that all initial comments have been addressed.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
General Operational Review and Analysis Recommendations			
7.B(1.1) An increase in the dialogue between the County (related to permitting functions) and the Construction Services Industry should be adopted including quarterly training and meetings, newsletters, and frequent outreach for input.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
7.B(1.1) The County should institute an email newsletter to increase the level of dialogue with customers that is focused on educating applicants regarding changing policies and procedures, providing educational information regarding code compliance, and discussing available training sessions.	Medium	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
7.B(1.1) The County should conduct an annual and ongoing customer satisfaction survey.	Medium	Development Administrator	2015
7.B.(1.2) The County should develop a concise "How to Manual" or "Development Guide" for use by the public and publish this document to the website.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.(1.2) The guide should include copies of checklists for each phase of the development process, as well as copies of all standard conditions of approval for each department/division.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
7.B(1.3) The conditions of approval utilized by all of the divisions and departments in the review of discretionary and administrative permits should be documented and posted to the Permit Center's website.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B(1.3) The Planning & Sustainability Department should take lead responsibility in facilitating the development of these written conditions of approval by all of the divisions and departments.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B(1.4) Post common plan check corrections on the County's website to provide guidance to architects and design professionals on the development requirements in DeKalb County.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B(1.5) The County should require all applicants to submit a checklist showing all corrections made in reference to comments received on all resubmittals.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.2. A quarterly development review training session should be implemented for all staff directly involved in the permitting process.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.2. The specific training topics for each meeting should be developed by staff but could include topics such as: customer service training, review of inter-departmental issues, more in-depth discussion of the role of a specific department/division, etc.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.2. A training needs assessment should be conducted for all staff involved in development review. Individual employee training plans should be developed that focus on maintenance of existing certifications / licenses and then expansion of skills.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
7.B.3. Monthly performance reports outlining the percentage of plan reviews and inspections completed within established time frames should be developed, distributed to key administrative and elected officials, and posted to the Internet. The report should be broken down by functional review area (i.e. – Planning, Building (by trade), Engineering, etc.).	High	Development Administrator	Fall 2014 (initial effort). Full implementation with new software
7.B.4. All of the departments and divisions should utilize the automated permit information system for all aspects of the development review process. This is especially critical for those departments / divisions that are not a part of the Planning & Sustainability Department.	High	Director of Planning & Sustainability	Summer 2014
7.B.4. The County must ensure all staff is fully trained in the utilization of the permitting software in order for its benefits to be achieved.	High	Director of Planning & Sustainability	Upon implementation of new software
7.B.5 The Department should develop a handout containing a matrix of who to contract for various issues to assist applicants in appropriately resolving issues.	High	Development Administrator	May / June 2014
7.B.5 The County's website should list by name and title, all individuals responsible for providing service to permit applicants and list their direct phone number and email.	High	Development Administrator	May / June 2014
7.B.5 All comments issues by plan reviewers, should list the relevant contact information for the individual reviewer to assist the applicant.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.5 The Permit Manager should be designated as the position responsible for the receipt, review and resolution of all complaints regarding service levels related to code compliance and enforcement issues within their specific areas of responsibility.	High	Development Administrator	Upon filling of Permit Manager position

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
7.B.6 The Development Services Division should document interpretations of the land development code and internal policies and procedures and make these available to the public on the County's website.	High	Development Administrator	2014
7.B.7.1 The County should develop a contingency plan that includes the use of external resources or overtime, when they are unable to complete workload within required timeframes.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
7.B.7.2 The Permit Manager should coordinate regularly scheduled training of plan review and inspection staff and be responsible for the ongoing quality of the in-house coordination.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.7.2 The Department must ensure that training occurs for each plan check and inspection discipline at least one hour during the scheduled training sessions. All employees should be assigned as presenters on a rotating basis.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.7.2 The County should conduct at least semi-annual training sessions that involve all participants in the development review process (fire, water and sewer, planning, engineering, and building).	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
7.B.7.2 At least quarterly meetings should be conducted with the plans review and inspection staff to identify issues that have arisen in the last quarter, discuss options for resolution, and ensure a consistent approach to service provision.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
7.B.7.2 The Development Services Division should develop a comprehensive manual of code interpretations as developed locally. The manual should be utilized for internal staff training and be posted to the website for use by the development/construction communities.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.7.4 The County must make a priority the determination of what technological changes are required to make the existing inspection request software fully functional. Once corrected, inspections requests for scheduling should only occur through the IVR – no email or phone requests should be accepted.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate
7.B.7.5 The Division should continue monitoring inspection services timeframes and staffing levels adjusted when less than 95% of inspections are completed within one day of request or when overtime utilization to conduct routine inspections becomes regular and ongoing.	High	Development Administrator	Ongoing
7.B.7.6 Inspection checklists should be developed and utilized by Building Inspectors to increase consistency. Completed checklists should become a component of the project file.	High	Development Administrator	May / June 2014
7.B.7.6 Inspection checklists should be posted to the County's website for use by customers.	High	Development Administrator	June / July 2014
7.B.7.7 The Chief Inspector should periodically ride along with each building inspector – at least one-half day every six to nine months to evaluate performance.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
7.B.7.8 Checklists should be utilized during the intake process to ensure submitted applications are complete. Incomplete applications should not be accepted.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014 (cncurrent with implementation of permit technician position)
7.B.7.8 Checklists utilized should be made available on the County's website for use by the public in self-evaluating their own applications in advance.	High	Development Administrator	Summer 2014
7.B.7.9 Require that any new construction requirements not previously imposed will not be enforced on current construction and future jobs until the industry is informed and a 60 day waiting period is put in place.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
7.B.7.9 Communicate any new plan review and inspection requirements to developers, contractors, and community through issuance of information bulletins, a newsletter, and all means of communications normally used. Distribute information bulletins describing the new requirement, and show effective date of implementation.	High	Development Administrator	Immediate and ongoing
Organizational Structure and Staffing Analysis			
6.2.1 The County should implement a true permit technician position that required ICC certification, in lieu of the existing permit technician position. These positions will be responsible for working the permit counter to assist the public, review applications as received, determine completeness, and assist applicants with understanding of the permitting process.	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible
6.2.2 An additional managerial position titled Permit Manager should be added to the organizational structure of the Department to provide support within the Development Services Division.	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible

Recommendation	Priority	Responsibility for Implementation	Timeframe for Implementation
6.2.3 As already planned by the County, the project team concurs with the plan to move business licensing into the Planning & Sustainability Department.	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible
6.2.3 The County should pursue the integration of Fire Inspectors into the consolidated Permit Center structure.	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible
6.2.3 The Water/Sewer Plan Reviewer position already identified by the County should be implemented as soon as possible. This will incorporate a critical plan review function into the centralized permitting center.	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible
6.2.3 <i>The inspectors currently performing inspections related to permitting activities (development construction and environmental compliance) should be fully integrated into the Development Services Division. As this change is implemented the County should implement a consolidated Inspections Unit with Development Services to ensure a consistent approach, performance standards and training program – as well as to implement additional cross-training of inspections staff.</i>	High	Development Administrator	As soon as possible
6.2.4 The cashiering function should be established as a stand-alone position at the point in time that the enhanced permit technician position is implemented.	High	Development Administrator	Concurrent with implementation of Permit Technician position

The detailed analysis and background information on each of these recommendations is contained in later sections of this report.

2. TECHNOLOGY EVALUATION

This chapter addresses the single, most critical area identified to-date as part of the Permitting Improvement Study. The existing technology in place in DeKalb County for permitting and business licensing processes is entirely inadequate. While technology alone rarely “fixes” a broken permitting system, technology is a critical element to effective provision of permitting services. Good technology makes processes simpler and more predictable for applicants and reduces the time spent by employees on basic tasks. The County has made recent technology improvements:

- Initial development of a new planning and sustainability web site, which includes clear, well-written permit guides to explain the permitting system
- Upgrading their current queueing software in the permit center,
- An ongoing expansion of GIS to make GIS available to the public.
- Purchase of a new document management system (implementation is forthcoming) to allow plans to be scanned and viewed by multiple review agencies across the County.
- An assessment of the current permitting software and options for upgrades and improvements.

The County needs to build on these accomplishments and continue to address technology needs in order to bring about real, sustainable improvements in DeKalb’s permitting and business licensing operations.

The project team identified numerous areas where technology deficiencies hinder the permitting process and where technology improvements could address issues experienced by applicants and employees. These are shorter-term improvements that could be made with minimal financial investments and are not dependent upon the implementation of an entirely new permitting system.

1. Permitting software must be fully integrated into the permitting and business licensing processes and utilized by all reviewing entities.

Dedicated permitting software has become a core component of permitting processes within local government. While DeKalb County has an existing permitting system (Hansen), there are several factors that prevent it from being utilized to effectively streamline the permitting process. These factors include:

- The existing software has not been routinely upgraded when new releases were issued. This limits available features and overall functionality of the software.
- The software was initially implemented in a manner that limits the functionality of the software to meet current business needs and to provide services in the most effective manner. Of particular importance, these limitations include:
 - inability to effectively track the routing and status of specific applications,
 - inability to track plan review times (for all submissions and resubmissions),
 - inability to view and track staff comments online (and for applicants to access these plan review comments electronically), and
 - no ability to accept electronic plan submissions.
- The manner in which the software was implemented limits the ability to easily modify workflows and data points to address known limitations and deficiencies. All changes require support from IT personnel to accomplish.

The County must improve the available technology handling the permitting processes to achieve many of the desired customer service improvements and business process efficiencies that have been identified and which will be implemented. It is important to note that the majority of the deficiencies with the existing system are not inherent to the software itself but the result of the approach used in implementing the software and the failure to upgrade to newer versions of the software as it was released.

The Matrix Consulting Group has worked extensively with the County during the last several months in conducting a thorough and collaborative review of the County's technology needs related to permitting software. This review, analysis and evaluation

included several key areas including functionality requirements, software costs (acquisition, implementation and on-going maintenance and training costs), data conversion ability and costs, software delivery approaches (direct purchase versus software as a service), and identification of specific software options. From this evaluation, several key issues were identified as needing to be addressed in the future to prevent the County from returning to a position where the permitting software system is not updated regularly and providing the functionality needed to efficiently process permits.

Based upon the analysis and the cost evaluation, the County should seek to acquire and implement a permitting system that is provided as a “Software as a Service” model. This approach ensures that the County will implement frequent updates to the software, limit the number of customizations, has available a system that remains current over time, and requires no onsite technology infrastructure (reducing costs and maintenance). This approach is best suited to providing predictability for the County related to cost, upgrade implementation, and a secure environment with an up to date technology infrastructure.

Hansen has newer versions that are capable of handling, or the ability to integrate with other software to provide, all critical functionality that the County is seeking in its permitting system. Continuing to provide services with the existing system will significantly limit the County’s ability to make transformation changes to the permitting process.

An effectively implemented permitting system will enhance the County’s ability to implement a permitting process that is:

- Transparent
- Consistent
- Predictable
- Timely
- Customer-oriented

These are key issues that have been identified by customers are currently lacking in many of the County permitting processes. While improvements can be made in many areas to address these concerns without changing the permitting system, continuing to provide services with the existing system will significantly limit the County's ability to make transformation changes to the permitting process.

In making a decision on which permitting system to utilize in the future, there are several broad categories of functionality that should be considered when evaluating the various alternatives. These include features and functionality related to:

- **Plan review tracking** – ability to enter initial and resubmittal dates for each application including date staff comments are issued and date plans are resubmitted by the applicant. This is critical to manage workloads and plan review times.
- **Permitting including the issuance and tracking of permits** – ability to view the status of each permit online.
- **Inspections scheduling and tracking** – whether directly through the permitting software or through integration with a stand-alone IVR system, all inspections must be tied to the individual permit and show the date, type and result of each inspection. Inspection results should be available online.
- **Workflow management** – ability to note for each plan review submittal and permit, the current status of the review, who the plans / application have been routed to, approvals or denials by individual reviewer. This feature would include electronic submittals and the ability to route electronically to each plan reviewer.
- **Online submittal and processing of applications** – this functionality addresses online and over the counter permits (those where no or limited plan review is typically needed) and electronic submittal of plans / applications.
- **Fee calculation and collection** – ability to calculate for each application submitted online the fee due to the County and the ability to make payment

online.

- **Customer communications through web-based customer services** – these online services would include inspection scheduling and results, online plan submittal, checking status of submitted applications online, and reviewing individual plan review comments developed by staff.
- **Inter- and intra-departmental communication and management** – ability for all County staff involved in review and approval of applications / permits to communicate regarding the conditions of approval, status of submittals, etc.

Upgrading or replacing DeKalb's current permit tracking software is a long-term endeavor. We strongly recommend that this process be fast tracked, but also that other improvements (such as to the web site) be made in the meantime, instead of linking all permitting process technology improvements to this major upgrade. The selection and implementation of a system of this nature typically requires at least twelve month to eighteen months to complete as follows: 6 months to procure (if RFP required), 5 to 7 months to implement and configure base system, 3 months for data conversion, and 2 months for system testing. Dependent upon what difficulties are encountered, a good estimate for achieving full functionality is twelve to eighteen months (assuming the implementation of the software is given priority by IT and Departmental staff). It also requires a significant investment of funds. The estimated first year implementation costs range from \$1 million to \$2 million; although opportunities exist to finance this initial expense. The ongoing, annual subscriptions costs for a Software as a Service model range from \$300,000 to \$400,000. Since the County will be making a significant investment of funds to implement a new permitting solution, the implementation planning and training (both initial and ongoing) is very critical.

The lack of training on the current software has been a major hindrance to effective and efficient use of the system. All employees would benefit considerably from additional training on the current Hansen system and any new system must include an extensive training effort for employees. Ongoing training should include frequent (i.e. – quarterly) training sessions to ensure all staff remain current in the software capabilities and functionality.

In selecting the new system, the following should be critical elements that are evaluating when making a choice as they relate to the implementation of other improvement opportunities that have been identified.

- Easy migration of existing data to the new system (for ease of implementation and access of historical data);
- On-line applications, especially for “over the counter” type permits (critical to provide best in class service);
- Easy to use on-line interface that allows people to look up permit status and other information (such as inspection results)
- Workflow (absolute requirement to enable plan review tracking, online tracking and distribution of conditions of approval, electronic plan review distribution, and automation of business processes):
 - if/then ... if a restaurant THEN add FOG to review list
 - some consecutive processing (e.g., building only sees it on their screen once zoning has signed off) and some concurrent processing (e.g., plan goes to watershed and fire at the same time) dependent on business needs
- GIS integration (to simplify zoning checks, and other reviews)
- True inspections scheduling module (allows you to identify amount of time available for inspections by type and once that is full, inspections roll over to next day)
- Ability to easily track time-lines for permits, including originals and resubmittals; if possible, automatic routing of resubmittals based on who had comments.
- On line business license renewals (critical, and game-changing for the County)

While these functionalities are summarized at a high level, the functionality matrix evaluation provides a more robust and in-depth review of the specific features desired in permitting system.

The current system is no longer supported and does not include much critical functionality sought by the County – in fact many basic functions and abilities that would be considered elemental are not available including ability to track application location, status, workloads and backlogs, etc. The time-line for a transition varies significantly but if funding and manpower is made available and decision-making is streamlined, we have seen successful permitting software implementation occur in under a one-year timeframe. While achievable for DeKalb County, this will be challenging given the number of operational and other improvements that will also be occurring in the permitting and business licensing processes. If the software can be upgraded or replaced within that time, this process could be integrated with other improvements (e.g., process changes) that are part of the overall permitting improvement process. It is expected that the County will face a technology investment between \$1,000,000 and \$1,500,000 in the initial year of a new technology implementation.

Recommendation: The County must upgrade or replace its current permitting software system in order to achieve many of the service improvements the County is seeking to implement.

2. Internet Access and Website Services should be a Priority.

DeKalb's current web site is limited in usefulness. Information is missing or difficult to find. The site includes outdated information, expired links, and is missing extremely basic information, such as the location of the permit center. The main DeKalb web site does not provide a clear path to information on permitting or business

licensing. For example, the drop down menu under “I want to” does not provide the option of obtaining a business license or obtaining a permit or land use information:



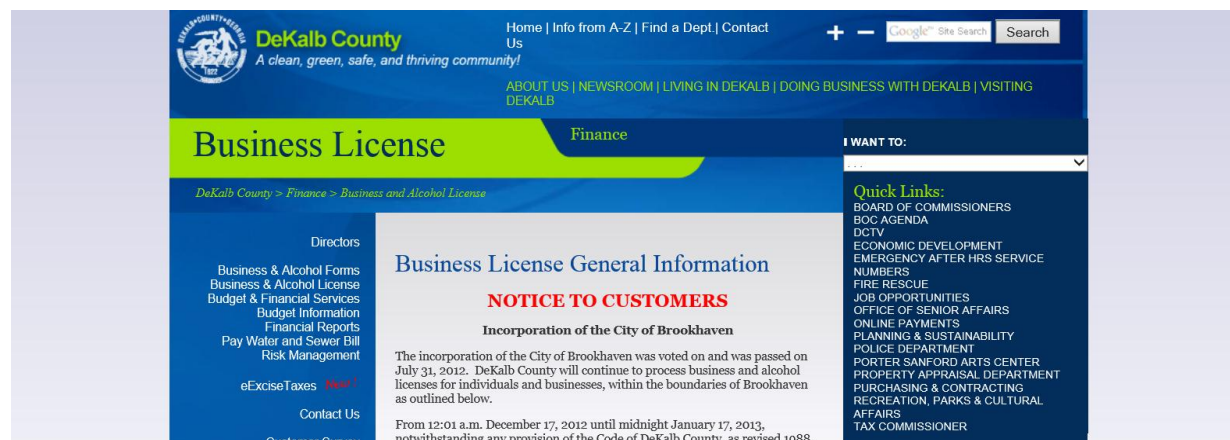
Compounding the confusion, there are currently two sites related to permitting, although this is transitional at the present moment:





The newer web page has a much better “look” but still largely consists of links to static PDF documents and lacks basic information. The quality of information in many PDF documents is good, but given the existence of outdated links on the older web site, there is reason to be concerned that these will not be updated as processes, policies, and personnel change. In addition, it takes a significant amount of searching on the part of an applicant to find needed information.

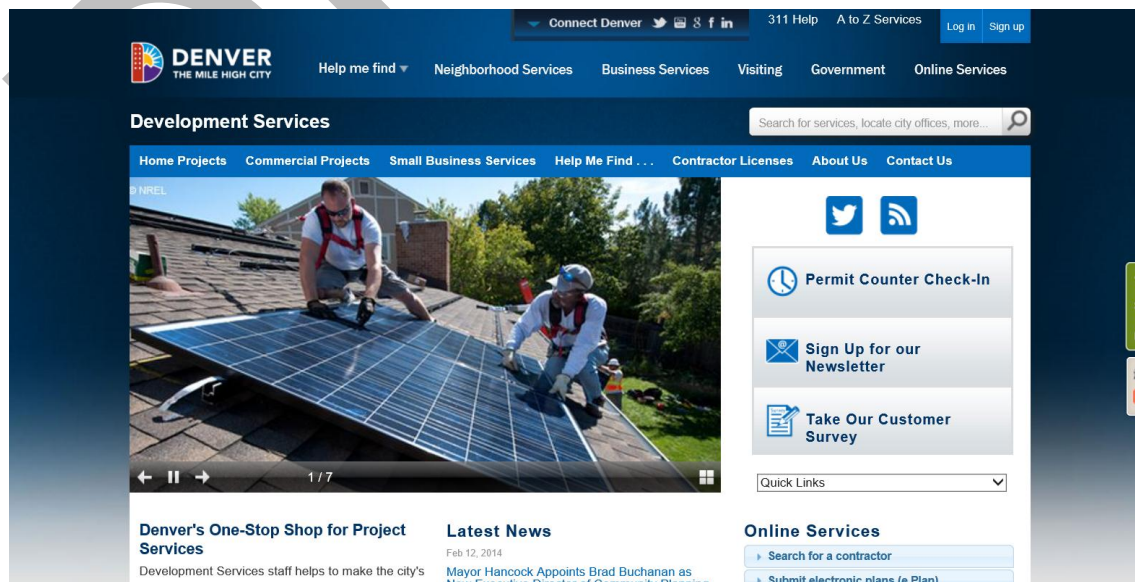
The business license web site has information that is out of date, as well as broken links. (For example, the link to a business license application simply sends the user to DeKalb’s home page.) This is a major issue because staff spend a significant amount of time on the telephone and in person answering questions regarding business licenses, information that could easily be provide in the web site.



As discussed in more detail under the process analysis, business license applications and renewals is a paper-based process that can require numerous back and forth mailings between applicants and County staff. In addition, applicants require information from the County in order to complete their renewals. Much of this could be eliminated with simple technology tools, such as an on-line renewal calculator that could be filled out and produce a bill for applicants.

There are a number of high quality web sites that could be used as a model. In particular we recommend the City of Denver which can be viewed at the following link:

<http://www.denvergov.org/Default.aspx?alias=www.denvergov.org/developmentservices>



and the City of San Diego: <http://www.sandiego.gov/development-services/index.shtml>



Both of these sites are well organized, easy to navigate and provide a wealth of information regarding permitting processes, standards, requirements, and contact information for staff.

Recommendation: Continue the transition to a new web site, which should be easy to navigate, easy to update, and include basic permitting information including:

- Clear and detailed information regarding business licensing applications and renewals.
- Add dynamic information on the web site, such as each day's list of inspections in order by inspector, to provide customers with a sense of when the inspector will arrive.
- Fillable forms in PDF format that can be completed from home/office and brought in fully completed or emailed for submission.
- Review and revise the contents of the business license web page, and create a link to that page from the main DeKalb page as well as from the Planning page.
- Utilize the web site to help manage the business license renewal process.

Recommendation: The Department should clearly designate the individual responsible for ensuring information on the website is current and accurate.

3. Queue software services can be enhanced.

The County has recently upgraded its queue software for use in the permit center. This update was badly needed as the existing system was no longer supported. However, given volume of complaints regarding wait times in the permit center, we believe that the County may want to consider, in the longer term, a virtual queue that allows people to get and wait in line without having to be in the permit center. This service is available from the current vendor as well as a number of others. Again, the City of Denver provides a good model, allowing people to get into line remotely as well as use the internet or their cell phones to check how long the wait is for different permitting counters.

Recommendation: Further enhancements to the queuing software should be considered to further enhance service to customers.

4. Inspections Scheduling

Inspections scheduling can be time consuming for employees and for contractors. The County had an IVR (interactive voice response) system that allowed for customers to call an automated line to schedule inspections. This system recently stopped working and is no longer supported. The County has set up a simple on-line query for inspection scheduling but it is extremely difficult to find on the web site, and is not directly linked to the County permitting software. The County should make restoration of the IVR system a top priority. In the meantime, the link for on-line inspection requests should be much more prominent on the web site.

The older system was limited in flexibility. For any inspection requested, it scheduled one for the next day, whether an inspector was available or not. It could not differentiate between inspections that would take ten minutes (e.g., a gas pressure test) or much longer (a final inspection for new commercial establishment), making workflow

management more difficult. As the county updates its permitting software, it is critical that there be an integrated inspections scheduling system that allows automatic scheduling of inspections, works through both telephone and internet interfaces, and links seamlessly with the County's IVR system.

Recommendation: Fix the existing IVR system for permit inspections.

5. Document management should be implemented.

One of the challenges of any permitting system is the need for people from multiple different agencies to look at and comment on a single set of plans. The County recently purchased on-base, a document management system that will allow plans to be scanned upon initial submission, and allow reviewers to access those plans electronically. This is a good interim step that should simplify the review process and that could reduce the number of copies of plans that must be submitted by an applicant. However, the system is not integrated with the County's permitting software and does not allow for any workflow associated with permits (i.e., once Fire has approved plans, forward them to Building). However, it will enable all staff to access a centralized document and make comments. Staff could be made aware of these documents awaiting review either an email notification process or the use of workflows within the permitting software. In the long run, the County will need to update its permitting software, ensuring that the document management function is integrated with workflow and communication tools available through the permitting software. This allows multiple agencies to comment on plans and see each other's comments, and to share comments with applicants.

Recommendation: Promote the use of document management to allow different agencies to look at and share comments on a single set of plans.

3. PERMIT CENTER EVALUATION

The use of a “permit center,” a single location where permit applicants can conduct all work related to obtaining permits, is considered a best practice. However, to be effective the permit center needs to be well designed and organized so that it is customer friendly and easy to navigate.

1. DEFICIENCIES OF THE EXISTING PERMITTING CENTER:

The current permit center brings most employees involved in permitting and licensing into a single location. However, it has several deficiencies:

- A confusing layout and poor signage. An inexperienced applicant would have little idea of how to navigate the center.
- The appearance is unfriendly, especially the use of dividers, which creates an appearance that clerks and other staff are hidden.
- The design does not allow for easy consultation among different disciplines.
- There are few areas where papers or plans can be unrolled and looked at.
- Many important forms and information sheets are difficult to find or unavailable, especially those related to business licenses.
- There is insufficient and easily accessible parking for customers.

While services can certainly be provided at the current location, providing customers with a best in class permitting center at the present location is virtually impossible. The negatives of the current location cannot be overcome due to parking and building structure limitations.

2. DEKALB’S NEW PERMIT CENTER NEEDS – KEY CONSIDERATIONS:

The following principles should be taken into consideration when considering what a new permit center should contain to meet DeKalb’s needs:

- 1) The permitting system should be designed so that people can get as much business done as possible without going to the permit center (using the internet or telephone). This is more convenient for customers and reduces traffic in the permit center, allowing staff more time to work with those who do require individual attention.
- 2) Within the permit center there should be clear signage and easy to follow information so that applicants can get information, forms to be filled out, etc. on their own without having to wait. Sometimes the public information is sufficient and no meeting is required. In other cases, it ensures that the applicant is informed and ready to transact business once their number is called. Many permit centers include “self-help” stations where people can look up land use information, as well as clearly marked brochures, blank forms, and checklists.
- 3) Customers appreciate co-location of functions, but will still become frustrated if they are required to stand too many different lines to transact their business. Therefore, where possible, individual staff members should be able to provide a broad range of information and services, so that “one stop” is not just one building, but as few lines/individuals as possible.
- 4) One goal of a permit center is to facilitate communication and coordination among different review disciplines (for example, building and fire or zoning). We have seen some permit centers where all disciplines are collocated, but there continues to be poor communication and coordination, forcing the applicant to “run interference” between different agencies. The layout, processes, and customer service standards in the permit center and throughout the permitting function should promote collaboration and problem solving.
- 5) Staff who spend the majority of their time reviewing plans or answering telephones should be located in a quiet place away from the public. However, it is helpful if they are accessible to staff in the permit center to answer questions, resolve issues, and provide backup support.
- 6) The layout of the permit center is directly tied to the processes that are used. For example, if land development, watershed, or zoning can provide on the spot sign-offs or do intake of permits, they need to be represented in the permit center. We anticipate a number of process changes to be made in the DeKalb organization and recommend designing the permit center layout with these process changes in mind.
- 7) The permit counter should provide a minimum of 10’ per permit technician in order to effectively serve the public. For DeKalb this means a minimum of 12 work stations (6 intake, 2 Zoning, 2 Land Development, and 2 for future growth or use by other units on an as-needed basis – such as a plan reviewer). The counter will also require space for two cashiering functions.

3. RECOMMENDED ELEMENTS OF THE NEW PERMIT CENTER:

Below are recommendations regarding the functional elements of a DeKalb County Permit Center.

- 1) **Reception and information center:** Customers should have an opportunity to start at an information desk where general questions can be answered. Because of the importance that the “first impression” sets in a permit center, we would recommend that the individuals staffing this desk not be responsible for answering telephone inquiries from the public. The individual staffing this location must have a solid understanding of the permitting and licensing processing to provide accurate information to customers and guide them where they need to go for service.
- 2) **Self-help area:** All permit forms and documents and information regarding business licenses should be available in this area. In the future, when more and better on-line information is available, “self help” terminals with land use and other permitting information could also be installed that would enable applicants to complete forms while waiting for service. Updating and improving the information available in this area (and on the internet) should be an ongoing effort.
- 3) **Waiting Area:** The waiting area must be of sufficient size and openness to provide an area where those waiting can not be overwhelmed with the activity occurring around them, and have the ability to complete forms or review plans while waiting.
- 4) **Permit processing:** Currently the process for submitting permits varies depending on the type of permit. We recommend that all permit submittals (including land disturbance) be managed by the permit techs, who should take a greater role in managing the permit process. The permit tech counter should allow for rolling out of plans so that they can be more easily looked at and checked for completeness.
- 5) **Consultation and Plan Review:** (zoning, land development, building, fire, watershed). For projects requiring a very brief review or a quick sign off, and for business licenses, or in cases where consultation with a subject matter expert is required. These typically would include staff from zoning and land development, with others (fire, building, watershed) available on-call or for set hours. We recommend multiple disciplines to be located close to each other along a single counter, to promote communication.
- 6) **Business licensing:** Business licensing techs should be located close to zoning, since business licenses require sign-offs from zoning enforcement and as recommended elsewhere, process changes may require zoning approvals prior

to processing by the business license clerks. This will remain as a separate service area from permit processing though physically located in the same area and sharing the centralized cashiering function.

- 7) **Cashier:** There are advantages and disadvantages to having a separate cashier window. As stated earlier, customers prefer to wait in as few lines as possible. However, requiring all counters to take money may be leading to greater delays in other areas. In addition, permit and business license techs have to take time away from other duties to balance cash drawers. If a cashier station is implemented, which at the present time we believe it should be, it should be adequately staffed and technical issues (check processing) should be addressed so that the payment process is quick and efficient. Electronic check processing systems should be utilized to process payments, and credit card payments should be enabled. These systems should be fully integrated into the permitting software and the County's financial system to reduce duplicate entry of data.
- 8) **Non-Counter Offices:** While there is great flexibility with the configuration and layout of the office space for those staff not allocated to the counter, it would be beneficial to have a facility that provides a more open floorplan so that staff can easily interact with each other. A large open space divided with cubicles is ideal in that it maximizes the use of space and enables the configuration to be altered as staffing levels change. For the majority of employees, dedicated offices are not required (and require a much larger facility floor plan to accommodate). Offices should be provided to managerial and supervisory employees.
- 9) **File Rooms:** The new permit center should have two dedicated file rooms. One for permitting activities and one for business licensing. The capacity of these two rooms should be roughly based upon what current storage needs exist. With implementation of additional electronic and online services (both for permitting and business licensing), storage needs should not increase significantly in the future and may decline.
- 10) **Expansion Capacity:** The new permit center must have the ability to be expanded in the future as staffing levels increase with increasing workloads. The exact amount of "expansion" space is hard to predict, but given the significant reductions in staff that occurred with the decline in construction activity, it is highly feasible that as permitting activities increase, staffing increases comparable to prior levels will be required in the future. At a minimum, the County should identify a space that provides 40% more space than is needed immediately to prevent being in a situation where either another relocation is required in the near future or selected staff have to be relocated to a different location (defeating the purpose of implementing the one-stop permit center).

These requirements are easily accommodated in a large space (such as a former retail outlet) that is remodeled for use as a permit center as these facilities typically have

wide open floor plans (enabling configuration as desired) and sufficient parking to meet customer needs.

4. EXAMPLES OF PERMIT CENTERS.

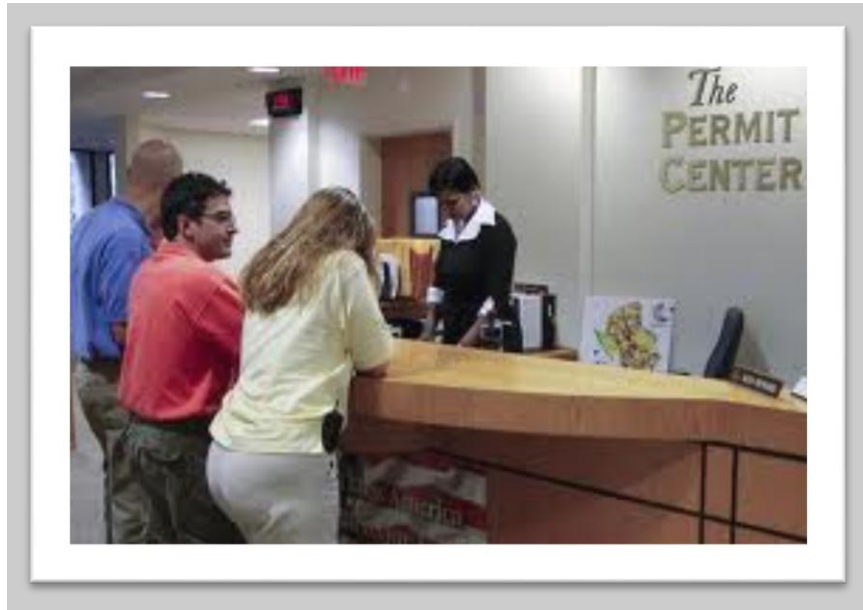
The following pictures of permit centers are provided to demonstrate visually how most permit centers that have been developed in the last decade are being designed. They show typically open lobbies with open counters for serving the public. Centers that are professional in appearance and utilize open space arrangements.

Lee County, Florida



This layout demonstrates open counter for permit intake, adequate room to review plans during intake, and a professional and welcoming office area.

Henrico County, Virginia



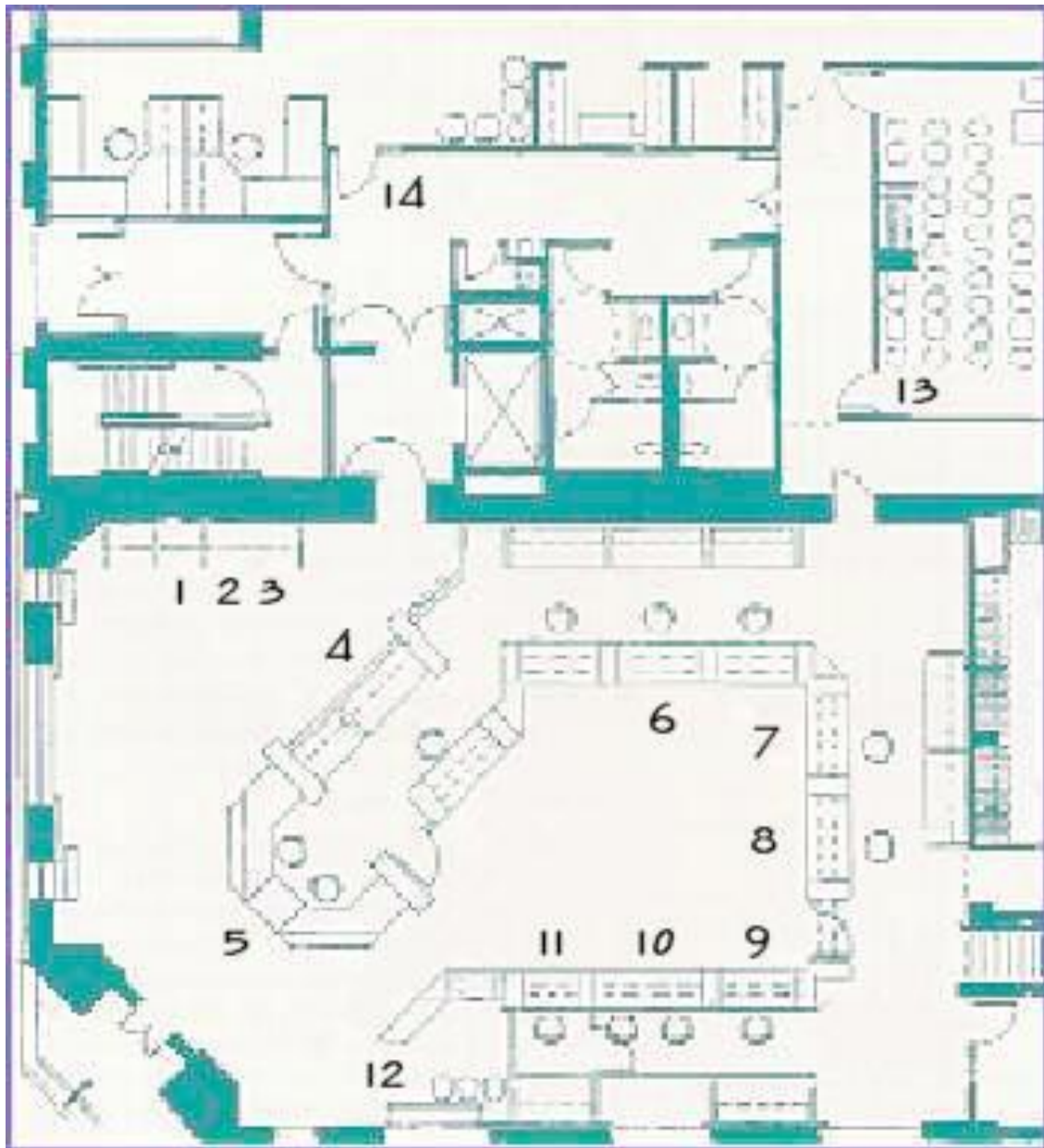
Another example of a professional appearance, open counter space and permit center area for staff.

Bellflower, California



Wide counters for plan review, open employee work areas behind counter.

In addition, below is a map and legend for the Permit Center for the City of Pasadena, which incorporates many of the recommended approaches in the layout of the permit center.

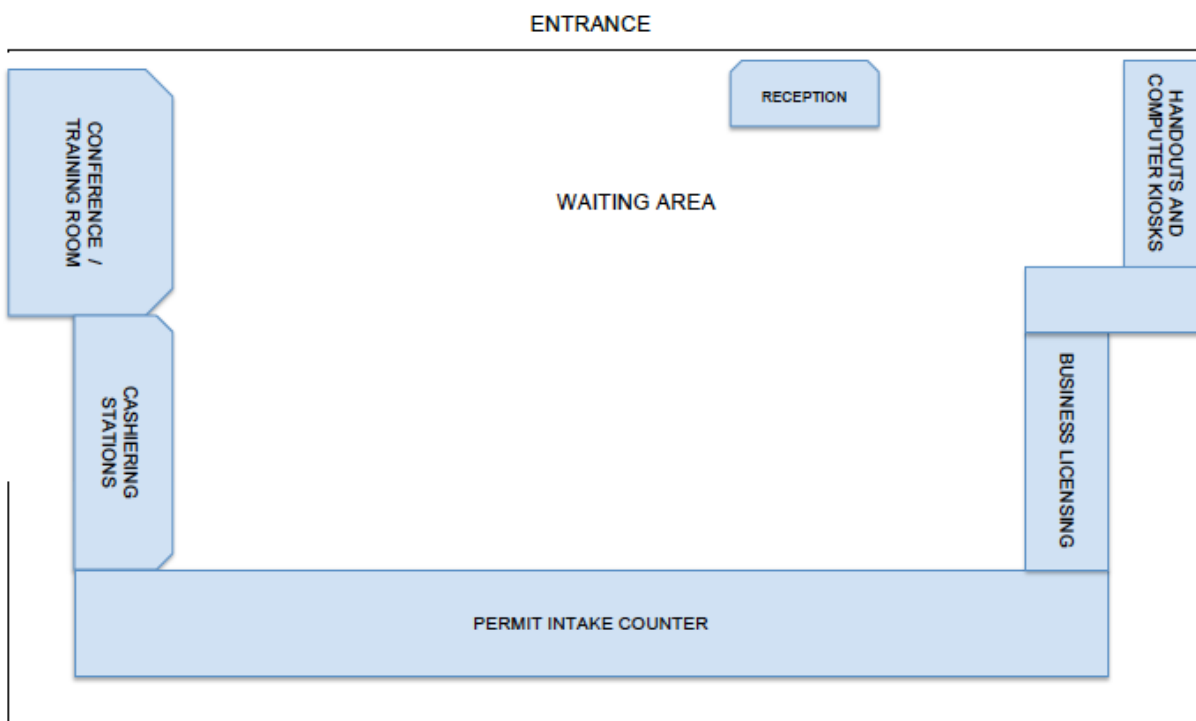


The following sections details the role of numbered station of the permit center shown above:

1. **Research Stations:** Computer terminals will provide the public with direct access to property and project information in the city's land use management and optical records systems.
2. **Permitting Computer System:** The land management database, the Tidemark system, contains basic property data and tracks development-related project information such as approvals and conditions of approval.
3. **Optical Imaging System:** The optical imaging system transfers paper documents to computer files, eliminating research time and the possibility of lost files. All city departments will eventually use this system for records management.
4. **Information Center:** Public information materials available at the Information Center include brochures, maps, and code excerpts.
5. **Reception Desk:** The central receptionist asks key questions of customers and directs them to the appropriate service counter or staff person. The receptionist also provided general information on any of the Permit Center services.
6. **Triad Review:** Multiple staff perform combined reviews of medium-sized projects with over-the-counter or 24-hour service.
- 7-8. **Consultation:** Specialized staff may be called to answer specific technical questions or questions unrelated to plan review.
9. **Fire Plan Review:** Fire plan review is available daily from 10:00am. to 3:00pm. Review with a fire plans examiner is available for fire sprinklers, fire alarms, tents, and small tenant improvements.
10. **Permit Processing:** Permit technicians take in plans for routing, accept permit applications, issue permits, and schedule inspections.
11. **Cashier:** The central cashier collects fees and issues receipts for all development review functions.
12. **Park Reservations:** If you would like to reserve a picnic area, field or facility to host private parties or sports events. (not applicable for DeKalb County).
13. **Hearing Room:** The Permit Center offers a 40-seat hearing room for most public meetings and hearings. This room can also accommodate training session, public education meetings, etc.
14. **Permit Center Manager:** The Permit Center Manager oversees the re-engineering and implementation of the city's construction and development processing program.

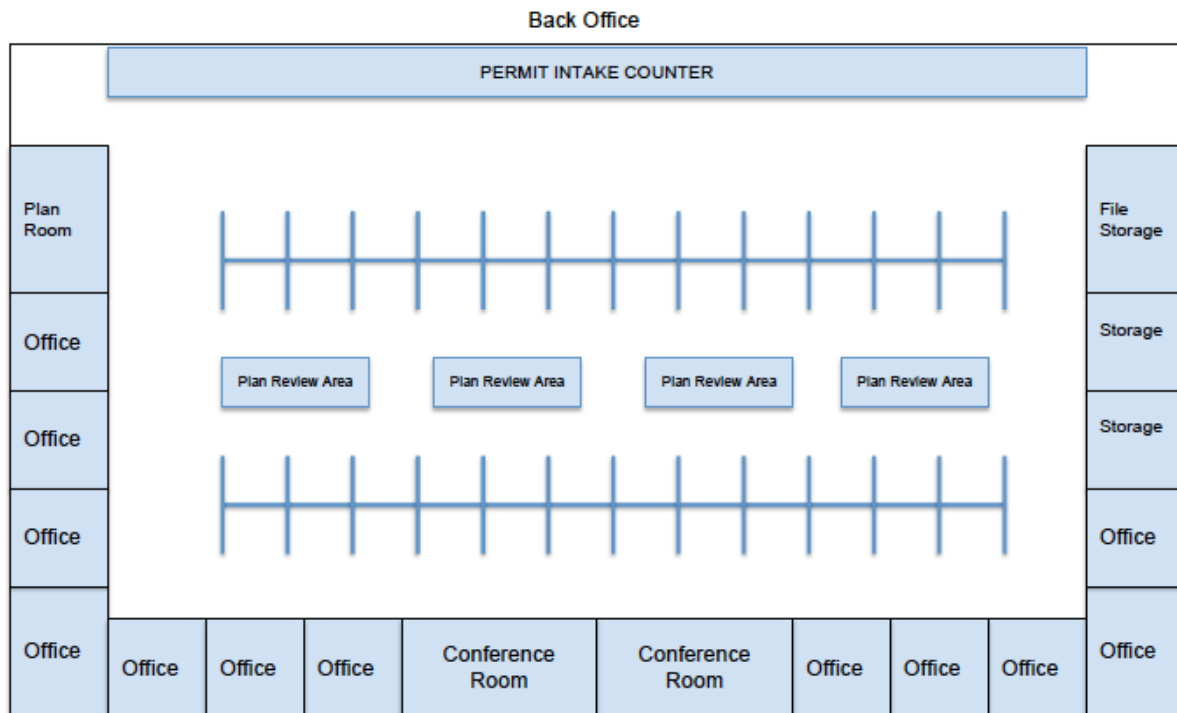
4. CONCEPTUAL DIAGRAM OF PERMIT CENTER REQUIREMENTS FOR DEKALB COUNTY.

The following diagrams are presented as one concept of how a new permit center could be arranged. The layouts show the major functional areas / requirements listed above arranged in an open format suitable for establishment of an new and more business friendly and open center format. It is important to remember that this is presented not as either a scaled drawing or a final proposed layout but rather as a conceptual plan for achieving best practices permit center functions. The first diagram shows the front office operation for the permit center – the lobby, intake counter, and public service areas.



The second photo shows the back office area of the permit center – staff office and work areas, plan review storage areas, etc. As previously noted, it is important that

the County select a location that will provide space for future expansion should the need for additional staff increase as permitting activity recovers.



The establishment of a new permit center is one that should be given full support of the County even though it cannot be implemented immediately. The cost for implementation will depend heavily upon location of the new facility but if it is placed outside of downtown Decatur, the cost differential per square foot should enable acquisition of a larger space that the equivalent cost downtown providing for the future growth needs of the permit center.

Recommendation: DeKalb County should continue planning for the acquisition of a new permit center that enables the Permit Center to accommodate all functions as outlined in this report, while also being designed in a more functional and business-friendly layout.

4. FEE ANALYSIS

As with most local governments, DeKalb County charges a number of fees related to land use and development. By the time a developer has completed the process of developing a piece of land, he or she may have paid dozens of different fees amounting to thousands of dollars.

The major fees include:

Planning fees: For any project requiring planning approval. Some of these involve review by multiple departments as well as the community council, planning commission, and board of commissioners. Others are purely administrative permits and variances that require only planning approval. These tend to be a flat fee.

Land development fees: For review of all land-development issues, including erosion control and infrastructure. These are often based on the size of the land and/or the number of units involved.

Building permit fees: For structural review and inspection of projects. This is based on the cost of construction.

Fire fees: Site plan review (for fire truck access, etc.) as well as for specific fire permits such as sprinklers.

Water/sewer: These vary greatly depending on the water usage, number of connections, and anticipated demand on infrastructure.

A summary of fees appears on the following page. Note that the table lists the most common fees charged but is not an exhaustive catalogue of every fee that a developer may be charged.

DeKalb County Development Fees

PLANNING FEES	
Rezone	\$500 - 750
Land Use Amendment	\$500
Special land use permit	\$400
Modification	\$250
Variance	\$300
Sketch Plat	\$300 + 10/lot
DEVELOPMENT (ENGINEERING) FEES	
Land Disturbance review	\$300
Land Disturbance inspection	\$25-\$50 acre
Residential Development	
Development engineering review	\$300 + \$15/lot or unit
Erosion control review	\$150 + \$15 per acre
NPDES	\$40 per acre
Inspection	\$100/acre, min \$200
Commercial Development Permit	
Development engineering review	\$300/acre, min \$300
Erosion control review	\$10 per acre
NPDES	\$40 per acre
Inspection	\$100/acre, min \$200
Other	
Recording fee	\$100 + \$20 per lot
Final plat review	\$200 + \$5 / lot
BUILDING PERMIT FEES	
Move in as is	\$400-\$550
Building permit	\$5 per \$1000 of construction cost
FIRE FEES	
Fire site plan	\$100
Life Safety	\$100
Alarm/Sprinkler/Fire Line	\$150
Fire inspections	\$100
WATER FEES	
Fats, Oils, Gas	\$100-325
Water access	\$2000 and up
Sewer Access	\$2000 and up
Backflow	\$60

The bulk of this analysis focuses on building permit fees, because these tend to be most easily compared across jurisdictions and tend to be the highest cost item for permit applicants.

1. FEE CALCULATION PROCESS.

(a) Building Permit Fees:

DeKalb, like most cities and counties in the US, calculates building permit fees based on the cost of construction. DeKalb's basic building permit fee is \$5 per \$1,000 in construction cost. For new construction, the cost is calculated using standards published by the International Code Council (ICC), based on the type of construction and type of occupancy for the building.

Plumbing and electrical fees are based on fixture counts (the number of outlets, toilets, sinks) or the type of work (meter loop, based on amps). This approach, while common, also requires that greater staff time be spent on counting and calculations than if a single flat rate were utilized based upon project type and/or project size.

The County does charge a plan revision fee for resubmittal. This fee is between \$25 and \$50 and does not currently come close to covering the actual costs of providing services associated with the processing and review of resubmittals.

One anomaly in building permit fees is the charge for "move in as is" -- a change of tenant (without change of occupancy classification). These fees range from \$200 to \$400. An applicant who is only re-occupying a space may pay a higher fee for doing no work than he or she would for actually renovating a property. Many jurisdictions don't require a new permit and CO when a tenant is changing unless there is a change in occupancy classification or use classification. One that does have the same policy,

Gwinnett County, charges \$30 for the permit plus \$50 for the CO, substantially less than DeKalb.

(b) Other Permit Fees:

Water and sewer fees were established based on a cost of service study in 2009. The fees were established to reflect the cost of water and sewer services offered by the Department of Watershed Management, and vary depending on the service (water tap, sewer main tap, fire line, etc.)

There does not appear to be a clear methodology to the establishment of other fees. Planning fees do not appear to be set at a cost-recovery level. A Special Land Use Permit, for example, involves many hours of staff time in pre-application and round-table meetings, as well as conducting research and preparing reports and recommendations and attending public meetings. The cost of this permit is \$400.

Land disturbance and land development permit and inspection fees are typically based on the size of a project, by acre, unit, or number of lots.

Fire reviews are a set amount, regardless of the size and complexity of a project. They are typically \$100 for a life safety or site plan review.

2. CONSISTENCY WITH BEST PRACTICES.

In evaluating the fees for DeKalb County, we compared the existing approach with best practices and common practices throughout the nation.

(a) Standardized Construction Costs:

Many cities and counties rely on self-reporting on construction value by the applicant when calculating their fees. While DeKalb's approach of using the ICC tables can be a bit complex for applicants, this produces a more reliable cost estimate and

eliminates any incentive on the part of the applicant to under-state the construction cost on the permit application.

(b) Timing of Fee Collection:

DeKalb collects all permit fees at the time of application. This is most common for permitting operations, although some jurisdictions collecting a “plan review” portion at application and the balance at the time of issuance. Others collect all fees at the time of issuance.

(c) Refund of Fees:

Because the permit fee is designed to cover permitting AND inspection costs, DeKalb will refund 50 % of the fee if the project is abandoned after the review is completed. The refund process can be time consuming for applicants, but it is less cumbersome than charging two separate fees at two times, and is less likely to result in un-funded work than collecting fees at the time of permit issuance. We recommend that this be continued.

(d) Re-Submittal and Re-Inspection Fees:

DeKalb charges a fee if plans must be resubmitted, and for re-inspection. This approach encourages applicants to provide the correct information and be ready for inspection the first time. As previously noted, these fees do not currently cover the actual costs of providing services. As new fees are implemented, these should be established at levels that fully cover the cost of providing services (both resubmittal review and reinspection of work in the field).

3. ISSUES RELATED TO FEES.

The following sections summarize critical components of an effective fee structure for permitting activities.

(a) Cost recovery:

Best practices indicate that the building permit fee is designed to cover the costs associated with conducting a permit plan review, inspections, and issuing a Certificate of Occupancy. Under this approach, the costs associated with ensuring that a project is safe and constructed according to code are considered part of the cost of construction, to be paid for by the permit applicants, not by taxpayers from the general fund. We recommend a complete cost recovery study to determine the extent to which fees are covering the costs associated with providing review and inspections services and whether slightly higher fees would result generate revenues that could be used to improve the speed and efficiency of the permitting process.

The County should also assess the costs of Fire, Planning and Land Development and make a determination as to whether these should also fully recover costs. If so, these operations would need to be included in a cost of service study.

(b) Residential versus commercial rates:

Commercial projects are usually more complex and time consuming to review and inspect than residential projects of similar value, especially in DeKalb as residential projects do not receive a structural review by building inspectors. In addition, commercial applicants tend to place a higher premium on the speed of the permit review process than on the cost. In response to this, some jurisdictions charge a higher

rate for commercial projects, and use the added revenue to provide resources so that review can take place more quickly. Orlando, Florida for example charges a base fee and then \$3.50 per \$1,000 of construction cost for residential projects. Orlando's cost based fee for commercial projects is between \$6 and \$8. DeKalb County may want to explore differentiating commercial and residential fees, but caution that raising commercial rates without improving services could cause a negative reaction on the part of applicants.

(c) Minimum permit fee:

Any project, no matter how small, will incur some fixed costs for the County. Many jurisdictions establish a minimum permit fee or charge more for the "first \$1000" of construction value than for subsequent amounts of value. For example, the City of Atlanta charges a base \$25 technology fee. Orlando charges \$50 or \$60 for the first \$1000 of construction cost. DeKalb may want to consider doing the same to better capture the fixed costs associated with any permit project, no matter how small.

(d) Sliding rates based on project cost:

In addition to charging a minimum or base fee, many jurisdictions reduce the amount charged/\$1000 as the size of the project increases. This is because the marginal cost of review tends to go down as the size of the project increases. In other words, it costs less to review one \$100,000 project than four \$25,000 projects or than a \$10,000 and a \$90,000 project cost. This can make the fee calculations overly complex, but some sliding scale is consistent with best practices and would better reflect the actual costs associated with the permitting function.

Sample Sliding Scale Fee Schedule City and County of Denver, CO	
Valuation of Work	Permit Fee

\$1 to \$500	\$20
\$501 to \$2,000	\$35
\$2001 to \$25,000	\$35 plus \$8 for each additional \$1,000 of cost over \$2,000
\$25,001 to \$50,000	\$220 plus \$8 for each additional \$1,000 of cost over \$25,000
\$50,001 to \$100,000	\$425 plus \$7 for each additional \$1,000 in cost over \$50,000
\$100,001 to \$500,000	\$770 plus \$5.60 for each additional \$1,000 in cost over \$100,000
\$500,001 to \$1,000,000	\$3,010 plus \$4.75 for each additional \$1,000 in cost over \$500,000
Over \$1,000,000	\$5,385 plus \$3.65 for each additional \$1,000 in cost over \$1,000,000

While we believe the Denver model is more complex than necessary, DeKalb may want to adopt a similar approach where the cost per thousand declines for larger projects.

(e) Fixture-Based Fees:

The practice of charging fees based on the number of outlets, sinks, toilets, etc. is becoming less common. This approach requires the applicant to provide a significant amount of detailed information at the time of application, information that may change during the course of the project (.e.g., number of outlets). It is also not directly tied to the cost of providing a service. When updating fees, DeKalb should look at establishing plumbing, electrical, and mechanical fees based on materials and labor cost, instead of based on fixtures. Gwinnett County charges \$6 per \$1,000 of cost for electrical, mechanical, or plumbing-only permits. (Their rate for construction is \$5 per \$1000.)

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS.

Because of the range of methodologies used by different jurisdictions to calculate permit fees, it is difficult to compare permit fee schedules without providing some context. For this analysis, assumed four different projects and compared costs of permitting for these projects. The benchmark counties were:

- Atlanta
- DeKalb
- Denver
- Fulton County

- Gwinnett County
- Mecklenburg County
- Orlando

An overview of the fee structure for each is provided in the following table:

BUILDING PERMIT FEE METHODOLOGY	
Atlanta	\$25 technology fee plus \$7 / \$1000 of construction value
DeKalb	Construction cost (as determined by ICC building valuation data) * .005
Denver	Between \$3.65 and \$8 per \$1000 of construction cost, depending on size of the project.
Fulton County	Between \$3.50 and \$12.25 per \$1000 of construction depending on the size of the project.
Gwinnett County	Residential: .25 per square foot of heated floor area. Other: Square footage * multiplier (ranges from .54 per sf to .01 per sf)
Mecklenburg County	Between \$2.78 and \$12.83 per \$1000 of construction value depending on the size of the project
Orlando	RESIDENTIAL: \$50 for first \$1,000 + \$3.50 per additional \$1,000 of construction cost; COMMERCIAL: \$60 for first \$1,000 + \$6 to \$8 per additional \$1000, depending on the size of the project

The following charts provide a comparison of the building permit fees for four different projects in each jurisdiction:

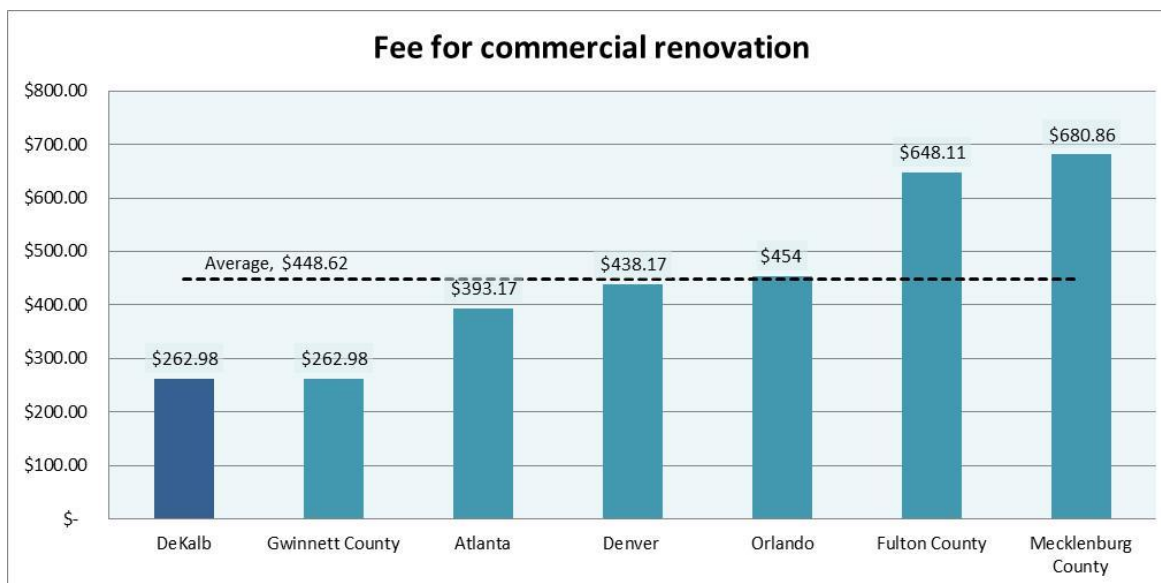
- New Commercial Construction (mercantile) with construction type IB
- Commercial Addition (mercantile) with construction type IB
- New Residential Single Family Home with construction type VB
- Addition to Residential Single Family Home with construction type VB

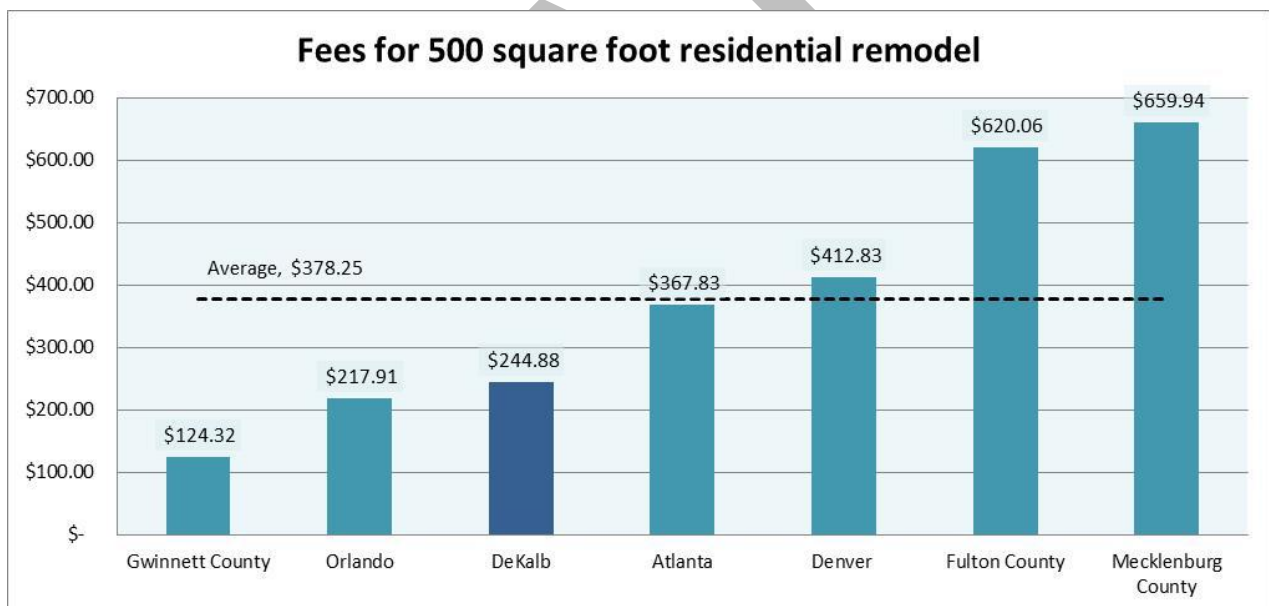
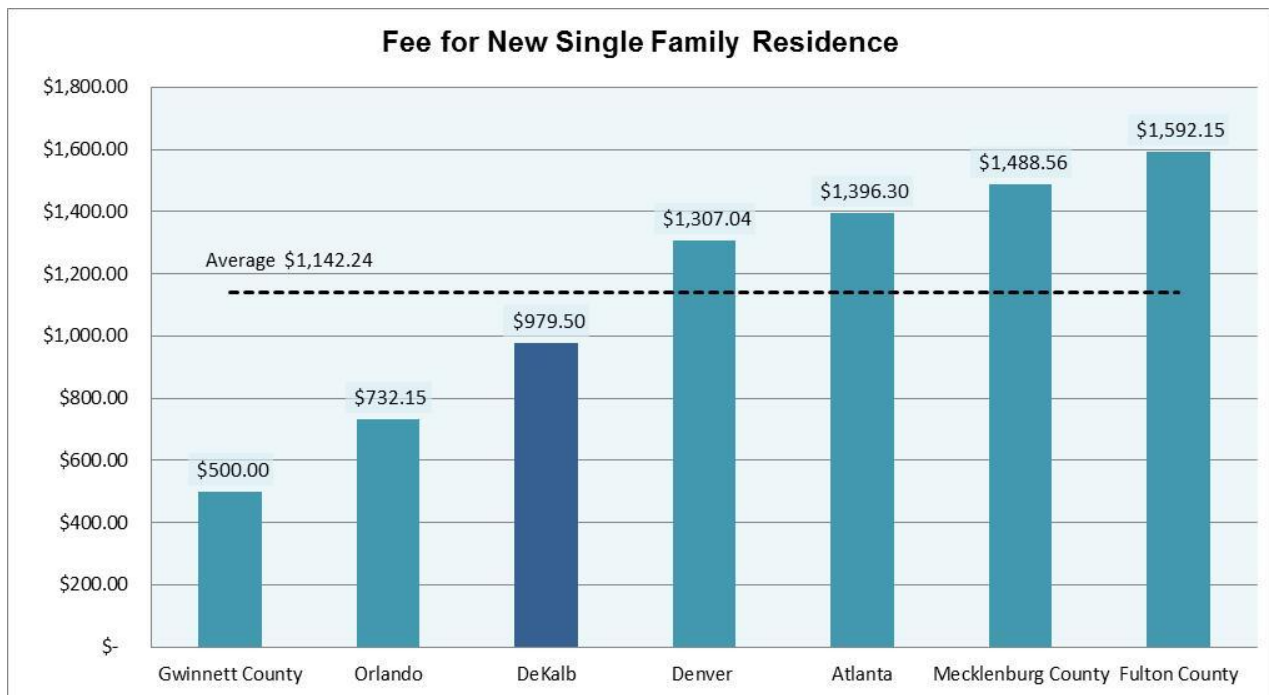
This comparison enables us to determine where DeKalb falls, in relative position, to these comparison jurisdictions on fee costs. As shown in these comparisons, overall DeKalb County typically has lower fees for permitting functions than comparable entities. Of note, Gwinnett County and DeKalb county use the same methodology to calculate fees – charging .005 times the estimated construction cost – but the construction cost estimates used by Gwinnett County for new construction are much lower. In addition, Gwinnett County does not differentiate between construction types.

The relative costs of permits positions the County well should the need arise to increase fees to cover full costs of providing services – without impacting their ability to be competitive in the development arena.

DRAFT

Permit Fee Comparisons: Case Studies





Conducting a meaningful comparison of planning and land development fees in these jurisdictions is significantly more challenging. There is little consistency in how these fees are established, and on what basis, across governments. Some establish fees based on the cost of construction or the number of linear feet of water systems, roadways, and size of curb cuts. Some charge all fees as part of the planning permit,

but incorporate costs from other disciplines (engineering, transportation). In addition, review undertaken by DeKalb's Land Development office are, in other jurisdictions, the responsibility of a different department, such as public works or transportation, or even an independent agency, such as a water authority.

There is also less consistency among jurisdictions regarding whether planning and land development fees recover the full costs associated with their operations. In some cases, policy makers may believe that there is a broader public benefit to this work or may be concerned about the economic development impacts of fees set at a full cost recovery level.

Despite these issues, a comparative analysis does help provide guidelines for the County in reviewing their fees.

Mecklenburg County has simplified the fee calculation and payment process, while ensuring that the fees fully reflect the work required by different agencies to review and issue permits. In DeKalb, applicants pay a fee to planning, and later to land development (through multiple permitting processes, sketch plat, land development permit, and final plat, separated by review and inspection). This process makes it very difficult for applicants to predict the full cost associated with a permit.

In Mecklenburg County there is one fee paid, collected by the Planning office, but the fee clearly breaks out the cost centers associated with the project:

Check Submittal Type	Preliminary Plan Subdivision Submittal	Planning	CDOT	Fire	City Eng.* Plan Review	City Eng. Grading	City Eng. Residential Tree Ordinance/ Inspection and Residential Tree Preservation	City Eng. Detention	Provide Payment Amount	Total Paid
	RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION	\$1,375	\$2,320	---	\$3,925 per Project + \$100 per acre	\$4,485+\$150 per denuded acre	Res. Trees & Tree Preservation \$1,735 + \$15 per denuded acre	\$2,400 + \$100 per denuded acre		
	NON-RESIDENTIAL SUBDIVISION	\$1,075	\$2,320	---	\$3,740 per Project + \$50 per denuded acre	\$4,485+\$150 per denuded acre	Commercial Trees \$1,565 + \$10 per tree ----- Tree Preservation \$1,400	\$2,400 + \$100 per denuded acre		
	PLANNED MULTI-FAMILY	\$1,875	\$2,320	\$250	\$3,925 per Project + \$100 per acre	\$4,485+\$150 per denuded acre	Commercial Trees \$1,565 + \$10 per tree ----- Tree Preservation \$1,400	\$2,400 + \$100 per denuded acre		
	MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT <i>All Single Family Lots On Public Street(s)</i>	\$1,375	\$2,320	---	\$3,925 per Project + \$100 per acre	\$4,485+\$150 per denuded acre	Commercial Trees \$1,565 + \$10 per tree ----- Tree Preservation \$1,400	\$2,400 + \$100 per denuded acre		
	MIXED USE DEVELOPMENT <i>(If Being Developed With Any Multi-Family Units)</i>	\$1,875	\$2,320	\$250	\$3,925 per Project + \$100 per acre	\$4,485+\$150 per denuded acre	Commercial Trees \$1,565 + \$10 per tree ----- Tree Preservation \$1,400	\$2,400 + \$100 per denuded acre		

Mecklenburg County also appears to charge fees more in-line with the specific costs of a project. For a four acre subdivision, the total cost would be \$17,540, of which \$13,595 is directly related to land disturbance and engineering. In contrast, DeKalb County's fees for the same project (incorporating the sketch plat, land development permit, and final plat) would likely be \$2,500 or less, with \$1,630 related to land disturbance.

Gwinnett County's fees are roughly comparable to DeKalb's, and the similar project would cost around \$2,425. Fulton County's land disturbance fees are similar to DeKalb's, but inspection fees are calculated quite differently, making a comparison impractical. Inspection fees are based on linear feet of infrastructure. Atlanta's fees would include a flat fee of \$2080 for review and inspection of subdivision plans and land disturbance plans for a four acre subdivision, as well as additional fees based on the number of linear feet of infrastructure being installed.

The City of Denver charges a site development plan review fee that for a similar project would total \$4,800, but in addition will charge for design review and approval of

sanitary and storm sewers (2.5 % of construction cost), review and approval of curb and gutter plans (\$500 - \$9,000) depending on the scope, and in some cases surveying services (\$2,500 and higher).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations will strengthen the County's approach for development fees and the associated operational impacts.

Any comprehensive fee changes must be accompanied by a detailed cost of service study and should be implemented only in conjunction with significant service improvements in the County. However, we do believe several short-term reforms can be implemented more quickly and prior to the conduct of a comprehensive fee analysis and rate establishment based upon cost of services provided.

(4.1) DeKalb County should increase the level of some fees.

As shown in the comparative fee analysis conducted, DeKalb County fees, at the present level, are lower than many comparable communities. This provides the ability to make modest changes in fees to assist in developing the required revenue stream needed to implement needed improvements and staffing while still remaining competitive. Any change at this point in time should be done conservatively since we have provided a strong recommendation to conduct a comprehensive and actuarial fee study following the permit process redesign is completed.

Based upon the comparative analysis conducted, the County should consider interim increases during the permitting improvement study to increase the building permit fees from .005 per thousand of construction costs to .006. Similarly, the costs for planning and land development permits appear insufficient to cover the basic and actual

costs of processing applications and should be increased slightly to be more in line with the average of comparable communities. This is even more critical because at the present time the County is not covering the full costs of all positions providing services in these areas. The positions have been subsidized through other cost centers. At a minimum, these should be increased \$25 to \$50 per application until changes have been implemented and the fee can be established based upon actual cost of service provided.

Recommendation: The County should consider an increase in the building permit fee and planning fees to cover the actual cost of services provided.

(4.2) Staff Should Consistently Implement a Resubmittal Fee, but only for Applications Requiring More Than Three Submissions.

The County currently charges resubmittal fees for most applications, including building permit applications, fire reviews, and engineering reviews. Resubmittal fees are recommended because they encourage the applicant to ensure that an application is complete and ready to approve. However, it is standard in the industry to expect at least one resubmittal, and charging a fee for each resubmittal may lead to frustration on the part of the applicant. In addition, the fee amount (\$25 for a residential application for building, for example) is probably too low to create any strong incentive to improve the quality of applications. We recommend setting fees at a level that fully cover the initial review and up to two resubmittals as part of the original filing fee. Any plan that requires reviews beyond two should be subject to a resubmittal fee set at a level designed only to cover the actual costs of performing the review.

Recommendation: The County should consider the consistent implementation of a resubmittal fee for all applications that require more than two reviews beyond the original review. Application fees should be set at a level that incorporates two reviews within the base fee.

(4.3) The fee for “move in as is” permits should be decreased.

As noted earlier, the “move in as is” fee appears to be out of synch with DeKalb’s other fees, as well as with other jurisdictions. We recommend that this fee be dropped to a nominal level, reflective of the time involved in conducting a basic safety and egress inspection.

Recommendation: The “move in as is” fee should be no higher than a fee for minimal interior renovations.

(4.4) A Technology Fee Should Be Established to Provide Dedicated Funds to Maintaining Technology Necessary for the Development Review Activities.

The technology currently in place, and being implemented, by DeKalb County is critical to the performance of duties by staff and to implementing many of the online and more efficient processes outlined within this evaluation. Recently, the Development Services Division had to rely upon getting an allocation from the County Commission of general funds to upgrade antiquated hardware (specifically desktops) and software (the q-matic software in the permit center) in order to address deferred upgrades to basic technology. This approach is contrary to best practices, which indicate that technology costs should be fully covered by the Development Fund and paid from revenues received from permitting applications submitted by customers.

In the future, to ensure that sufficient funds are available to maintain the technology investment, the County should strongly consider the implementation of both a technology fee and imaging fee during the next fee adoption. This fee should be designed to cover the costs of supporting technology upgrades or new systems to automate these processes. These fees would be directly tied to the cost of purchasing and installing the systems and placed in a dedicated fund that can only be utilized for

technology purchases / refreshment that will benefit the development process.

Recommendation: DeKalb County should implement a technology and imaging fee designed to cover the maintenance, upgrade and utilization of effective technology practices. These fees should be allocated to a dedicated fund.

(4.5) A Reserve Fund Should Be Established for the Permitting Function to Enable a More Effective Handling of Varying Workloads.

The County should consider the implementation of a dedicated reserve fund for the permitting activities that is targeted at a level sufficient to provide no less than six months of operating expenses.

Construction activity levels are cyclical and may vary dramatically from year to year. Permitting fees designed to cover costs at an “average” activity level tend not to be sustainable during a recession or other lull in building activity. The result is layoffs that lead to a loss of skilled workers and an inability to deliver services, especially building activity picks up again.

Since workloads vary from year to year, and the work activities associated with permit fees often span more than one financial year (especially for larger projects where inspection activities may occur months after fees are collected), a reserve fund provides a financial cushion that the Department can utilize when workloads drop significantly in a short period of time. A modest reserve account would enable the Department to better weather cyclical variations in revenue while maintaining a staff contingent sufficient to meet existing workloads. This reserve account will also provide some level of protection from the County having to dedicate general operating funds to support the permitting activities during economic downturns that significantly reduce permit revenues.

Recommendation: The County should implement a reserve fund (of at least six months operating expenses) to provide a safety net against future market downturns.

(4.6) The County Should Provide an Expedited Plan Review Fee and Process for Certain Priority Economic Development Projects.

There are often situation that arise where applicants – due to conditions or situations beyond their control – need to have plans reviewed in a time period shorter than that provided for under the County’s normal processing time goals. While staff may not always be able to accommodate these situations, the County should develop and implement a procedure for accepting applications under an “expedited” review process. Typically, these expedited review process require the payment of an additional fee – above and beyond that required for normal plan review. The fee should be set at a level that is designed to cover the actual costs of staff providing the review on overtime. The expedited plan review would be conducted based upon the availability and willingness of staff to work overtime to complete the review. If staff is unable to meet the expedited review (or are unable to work the overtime to conduct the plan review), the fee would not be charged to the applicant and the application would be handled through the normal review process.

In implementing the expedited review, the County should establish reasonable guidelines and conditions for the types of projects that will be eligible for this program. They should be focused on those projects that have a demonstrated economic impact for the County and the specific criteria should be established in conjunction with Economic Development staff. The program should be conducted on a pilot basis and reviewed after six months. This program should be available for both land entitlement applications and building permits.

Recommendation: The County should implement an “expedited” plan review process that for an additional fee (to cover the cost of overtime) provides an expedited review for qualifying applicants.

(4.7) The County Should Adopt a Cost Recovery Policy.

The County should adopt a formal cost recovery policy outlining the percentage of costs for the permitting process that will be covered by fees. Most communities have adopted a target of 100% cost recovery (including applicable administrative costs for general county services) for the building permitting function. In the project team’s experience across the nation, the standard prevailing practice is that fees are utilized to support the development review function and the general fund does not subsidize this service.

Even though the permitting operation is established as a special revenue fund, the County should adopt fees that fully and completely cover the costs of service provision at the desired service level. To do this, the first decision that must be made is whether the County desired to cover the entire costs of the permitting function from fees or to have a general fund subsidy.

The establishment of a formal policy is necessary so that fees can be established and maintained in the future at the appropriate level to cover processing costs. Future increases in fees should be considered whenever the existing fees are not covering the cost for providing services at the adopted service levels.

Recommendation: The County should adopt a formal cost recovery policy outlining the targeted level of revenues for the building permit function and other functions that will be covered by fees.

(4.8) Following Implementation of the Permitting Changes, a Fee Study Should be Undertaken.

After the County has implemented the majority of the changes desired to the permitting process, a comprehensive fee study should be undertaken to establish a new fee schedule. This schedule should be developed in accordance with the adopted cost recovery policy, incorporate the technology and imaging fee, and ensure that fees are in direct proportion to the cost of providing services. The only rationale reason for not establishing fees under those parameters is if the County needs to maintain a competitive environment with surrounding Counties. However, most decisions are not made based upon the application / permitting fees but rather the performance levels of the County in getting an application through the process to an issued permit.

During this fee review, the County should consider further streamlining of the fee approach, addressing the policy issues addressed previously in his section:

- Flat rate for mechanical, electrical, and plumbing permits based on the cost of construction instead of on fixture counts, to simplify fee calculations and facilitate more online calculations.
- A higher relative fee for commercial versus and residential projects.
- Reducing the “per \$1000” rate for projects over a certain cost level.
- Setting a minimum permit fee.
- Simplifying the planning and land development fees while clearly identifying and recouping all costs associated with review and inspection of these projects.

A comprehensive fee study for a County of the size and complexity of DeKalb would typically cost between \$35,000 to \$45,000. Best practices would recommend a comprehensive fee study be conducted about every five years to ensure that the fee structure and individual fee levels are established at a level appropriate to actually provide the services related to the processing of a specific application type. Over time,

especially in organizations where significant change is undertaken, a more frequent review of fees should be considered. This is important especially where new processes and technologies are being implemented that substantially change the status quo.

Recommendation: Following implementation of the process and staffing improvements, the County should undertake a comprehensive fee study to establish new fees and a fee structure that ensure fees are established based upon actual time required to process applications following the reorganization and implementation of new policies, procedures and work flows. Best practices indicate a fee study should be conducted, on average, every five years.

5. PROCESS AND OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS

This chapter provides an overview of the evaluations conducted regarding two key areas: processes utilized and the key operational characteristics of the permitting process.

1. PROCESS ANALYSIS – PERMITTING PROCESSES.

This section presents an analysis of the business processes in use for business licensing and permitting in DeKalb County, Georgia. The purpose is to identify deficiencies in the current process and provide recommendations for process reforms to improve the speed and efficiency of operations. For each process identified we provide information on:

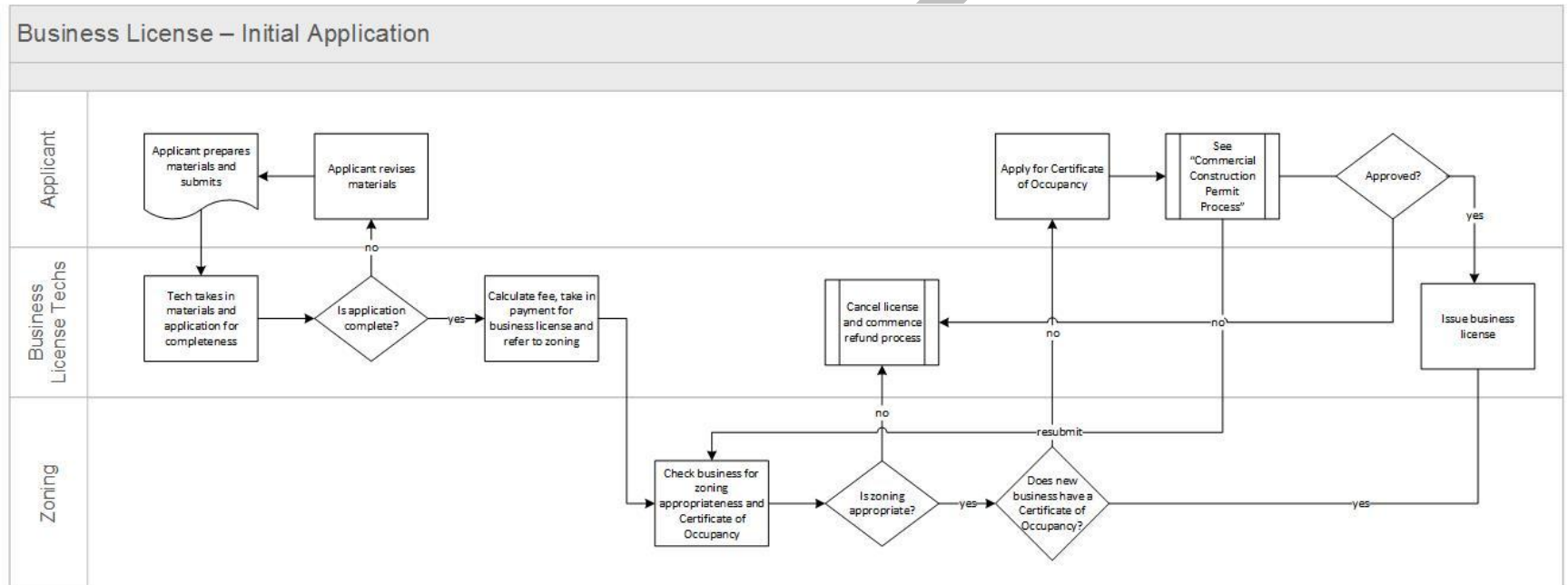
- Documentation of the current process
- Identification of issues and potential areas of improvement
- Recommended process changes

(a) BUSINESS LICENSING

All businesses in DeKalb are required to obtain business licenses and pay certain taxes based on their operations (typically gross receipts and number of employees). In order to obtain the license, the business must have:

- An application signed by the business owner and notarized
- For partnerships, a notarized letter from all partners
- A notarized letter from the landlord (if not owned)
- A Certificate of Occupancy for the space
- A US Citizen/qualified alien affidavit
- An e-verify affidavit
- A home occupation registration form (if applicable)
- A sanitation account number (including for home-based businesses)
- Expected gross receipts and number of employees

A flow chart of the process is shown on the following page.



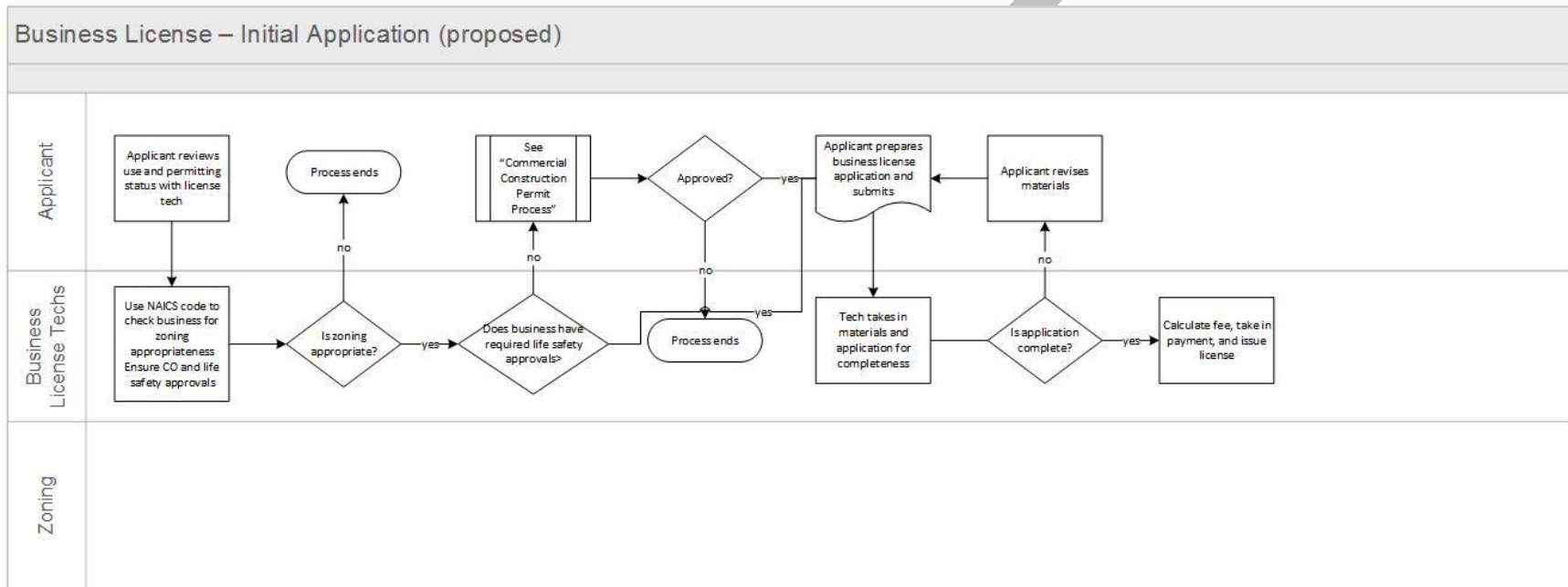
The following elements of the process create inefficiency or confusion:

- Applicants go through significant effort, including payment, prior to zoning review. If zoning review determines that the use is not allowed or there is another barrier to issuing a license, the work was done for no purpose. In addition, a refund must be processed, which is complex and time-consuming.
- The requirement to obtain a Sanitation Account Number, notarized affidavit's, and other materials can also halt the process and requiring multiple visits to the permit center.
- The process of obtaining a Certificate of Occupancy can be onerous and time consuming. This leads to delays in obtaining a business license and fees related to the license

Recommendations:

- Have zoning conduct a pre-check of the application before it is accepted. At that time, applicant should also be informed if a CO or other permitting (e.g., life-safety inspection) is missing. The process should not proceed until the applicant has confirmed that zoning, CO, and/or pre-license inspections have been completed. In Fulton County, the business license application must include a letter from zoning indicating that the use is appropriate for the address. As a result, there is no risk that the applicant will complete the licensing application process and then learn that the zoning will not allow their building.
- Streamline the process of obtaining a safety approval, limiting the requirement for a CO only when there is a change of use (based on the building code use classifications) or significant construction. For all other new businesses or changes of tenancy, a simpler form should be required. In Fulton county, for example, a CO is only required for newly constructed buildings. For all other business license applications, a copy of the Fire and Safety inspection form is required. Cobb county does not conduct any checks for CO or life safety. (This approach is not recommended, and would not be consistent with code).

Proposed process:



(B) BUSINESS LICENSE RENEWALS

DeKalb County issues approximately 12,000 business license renewals every year. However, currently the office send outs renewal notices annually with a significant number (approximately 10,000+) are returned to the County as undeliverable. This is an extremely wasteful (of both staff time and postage expense) and the process should be changed to provide more electronic and online processing of renewals. Additionally, the renewal process mainly occurs during January through May, after all business licenses expire at the end of December. Over time, the renewal process must be modified to provide for the renewal process to occur prior to expiration.

The renewal process includes the collection of business taxes based on the number of employees and gross receipts for the business. In addition, every year the employer is required to provide an e-verify affidavit and a US Citizen/qualified alien affidavit. An outline of the current process is provided on the following page.

The following elements of the process create inefficiency or confusion:

- The process can require up to five mailings back and forth before the renewal is completely processed. This is largely because the County requires the business to send them information regarding gross receipts and employees, which they then use to generate a bill, which is then sent to the applicant. The bill must then be returned with payment.
- The volume of applications to be processed leads to a several day to several week delay in entering the applications (and checks) into the system. For businesses required to show their license for a bank loan or other reason, this delay can cause major problems.
- While the process requires less back and forth in person, the business license office is overwhelmed during renewal season, so in-person renewals can require an extensive wait.

Recommendations:

- Implement a fully electronic process for business license renewals.

- In the interim, reduce the steps involved by having businesses calculate the amounts due using a form sent to them with the renewal, and/or an on-line calculator. Payment should be sent in based on these calculations, in response to the initial notice.
- Allow for electronic submittals of e-verify and other forms at renewal. The law establishing the e-verify requirement (HB 87) allows for electronic submittal as long as they are in conformance with Title 10, Chapter 12 of the Official Code of Georgia:

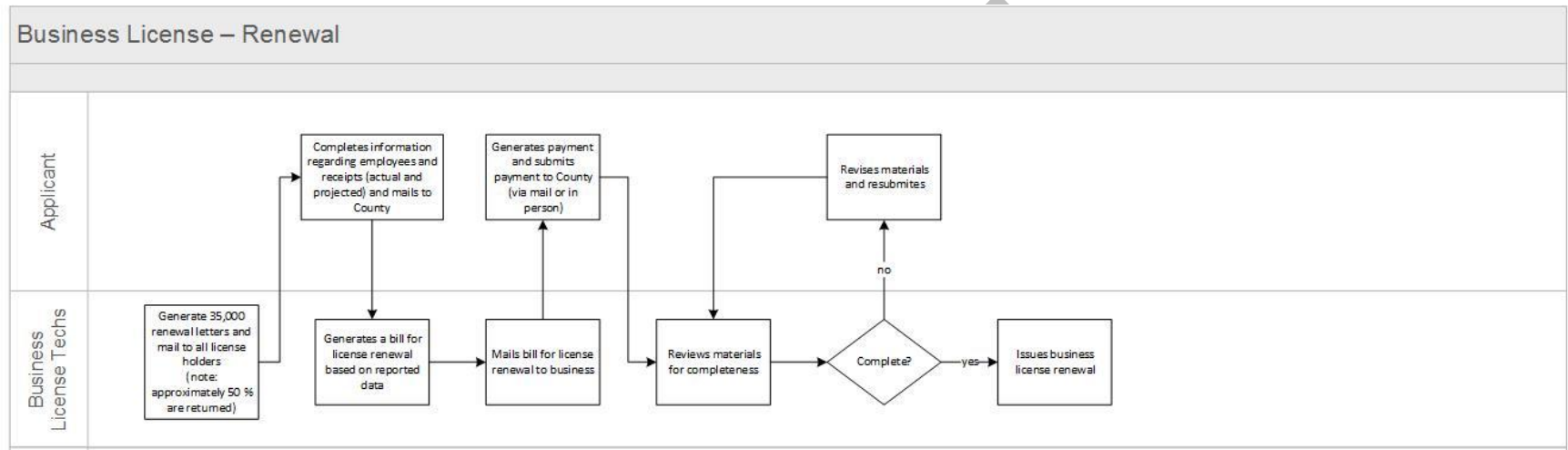
OFFICIAL CODE OF GEORGIA ANNOTATED

**TITLE 10. COMMERCE AND TRADE
CHAPTER 12. ELECTRONIC RECORDS AND SIGNATURES**

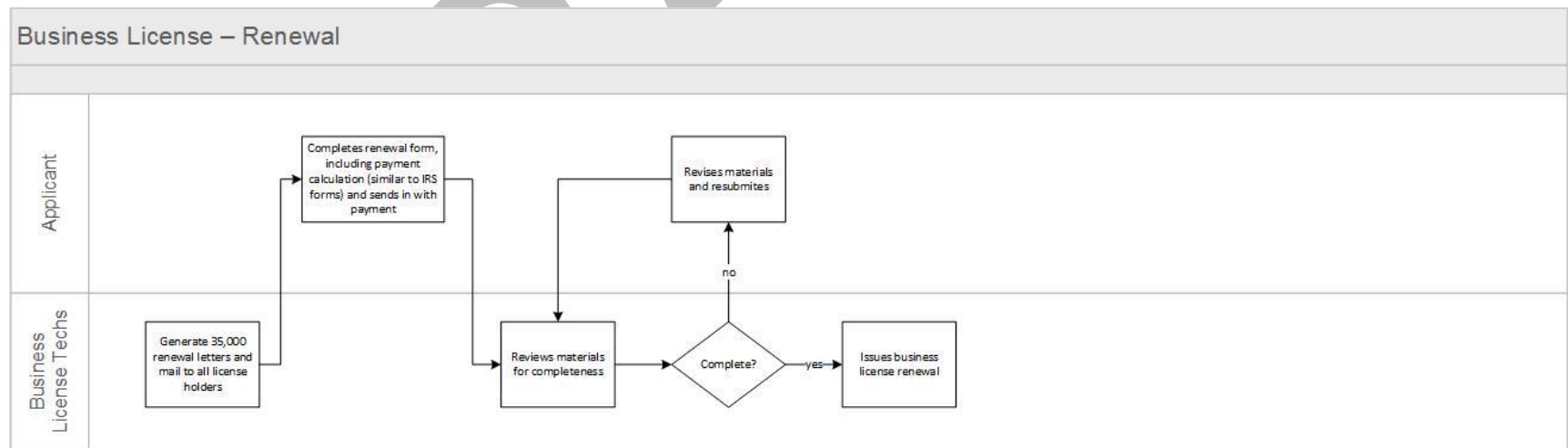
10-12-11. Satisfaction of notarization, acknowledgement, verification or oath requirement

If a law requires a signature or record to be notarized, acknowledged, verified, or made under oath, such requirement shall be satisfied if the electronic signature of the person authorized to perform those acts, together with all other information required to be included by other applicable law, is attached to or logically associated with the signature or record.

Current Business License Renewal process:



Proposed process:



(C) CASHIERING

DeKalb County takes in payment for permits for a number of functions.

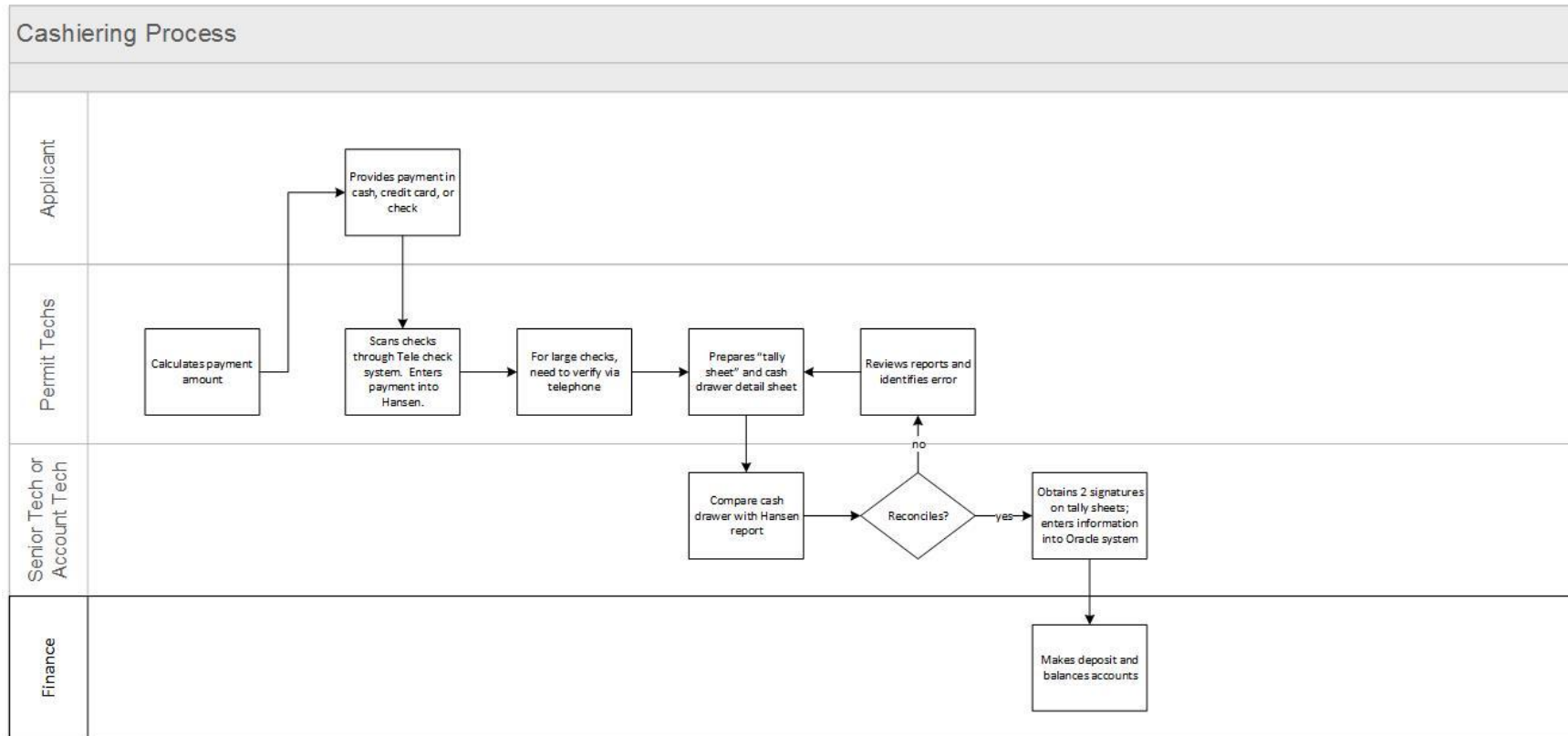
Depending on the source, the individual responsible for intake varies:

Payment item	Individual responsible for intake	Where processed
Building permit application	Permit tech	Permit tech takes in payment and processes it.
Reinspection fee	Permit tech or office assistant	Either permit tech station or information counter
Land Development permit application or resubmittal	Land Development engineer	Payment is walked over to permit tech counter for processing.
Planning permit	Planner	Checks or cash taken in and processed at planning office. Credit cards customers are walked to the permit center.
FOG permit	Cross-connection specialist or admin in Watershed	Currently taking in payments.
Water/Sewer Connection Fee	For County projects, paid at the counter with building permit application. For City projects, paid to watershed directly (check).	All fees taken in through the permit center.
Business License Fee	Business license clerk	Clerks take in payment and process.
Business License Excise Tax and Alcohol License Fee	Senior accounting technician	Most of these are checks that are mailed in

The following individuals have cash drawers:

- Permit techs (4 - 5 drawers)
- Business license clerks (3 drawers)

An outline of the current process is provided on the next page.



The following elements of the process create inefficiency or confusion:

- The Tele Check system requires telephone verification for all checks over a certain amount. (That amount seems to vary depending on station.) The verification process can be extremely time-consuming, up to 20 minutes in some cases. This causes delays in the permit center and is an inefficient use of staff time. Telecheck also often requires other information, such as telephone numbers, etc. that can make the payment approval process very time consuming.
- Individual reconciliation of cash drawers is time-consuming for permit techs and is an item that leads the center to stop accepting new customers at 3 pm, well before the conclusion of the work day
- Business licensing and permitting follow different procedures for cash drawer reconciliation. In business licensing, the clerks prepare a tally of their drawers (and other money taken in) but are not able to see the Hansen report indicating how much should have been taken in. Permit techs do have access to the Hansen report. The process should be consistent.
- There is considerable duplication of information that needs to be entered into Telecheck and into Hansen.

Recommendations:

- The cashiering function should be consolidated into dedicated cashiering positions.
- The County should implement a more effective electronic check processing solution to streamline the payment process.
- Cashiering process should be updated to provide a standard and consistent approach to cashiering for permitting and business licensing to accommodate the changes being implemented and reduce the time currently required for processing payments.

2. A “BEST PRACTICE” MODEL FOR PERMITTING PROCESSES.

The other processes that were analyzed involve some form of permitting, typically in one of the following categories:

- **Land Use or Variance:** These are processes that involve granting permission under the County’s Land Use code. These include: sketch plats (delineation of borders for a subdivision), land use code amendment, and variances.
- **Land Development/Land Disturbance:** These processes are for approvals for work to be done to land that may affect drainage, infrastructure, access to services (e.g., fire protection), water/sewer systems, and environmental quality.
- **Building:** These are permits for construction, alteration, or change of use to a property.

Staff from the various departments and divisions associated with permitting may be involved in review for any or all of the above types of permits. The category of permit determines where the permit originates, but many departments provide input into many different types of permits and approvals. For example, Fire will review land use and land development permits to ensure that there is adequate access for fire trucks, and will review building permits to ensure that the construction meets life safety requirements.

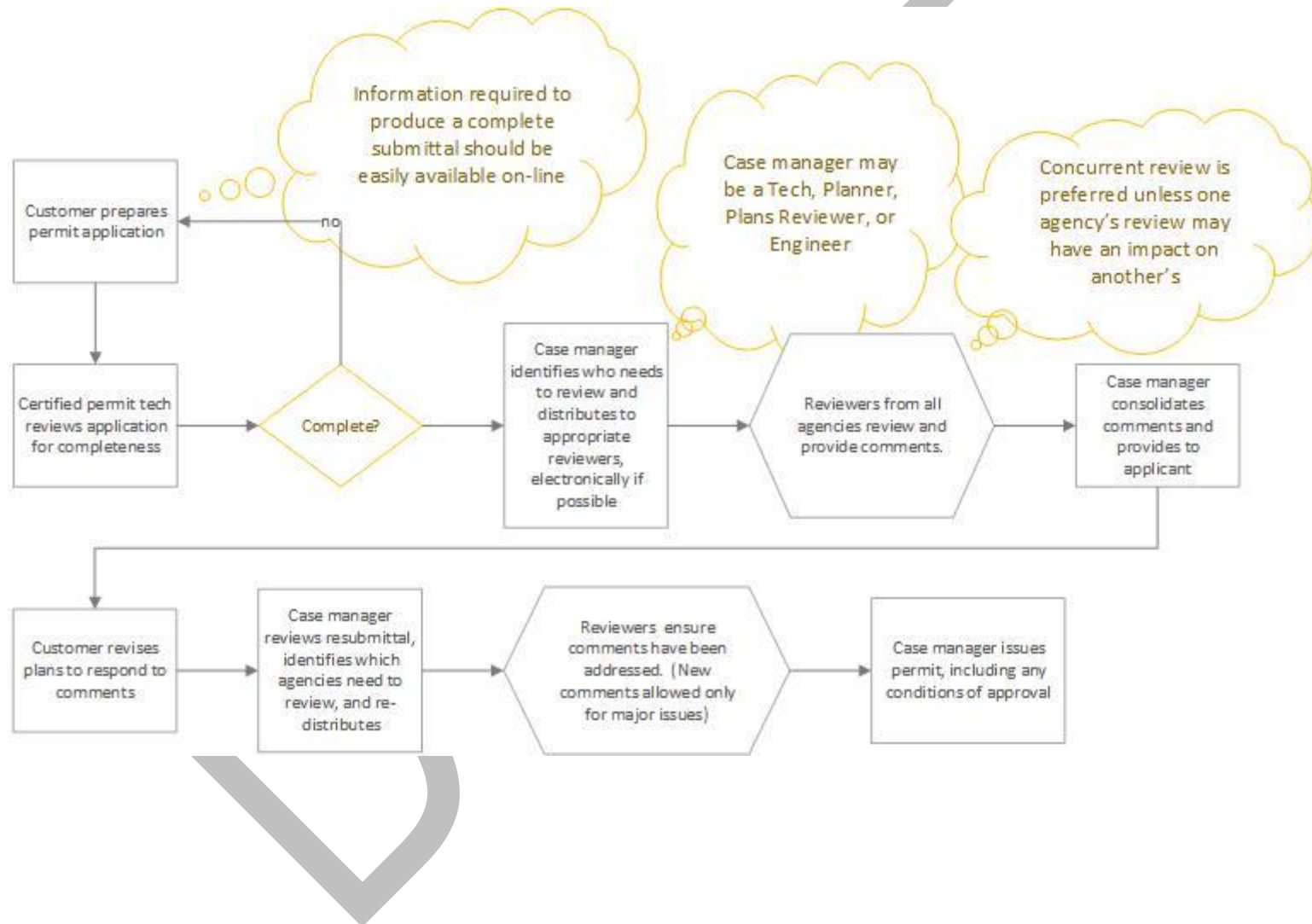
There are variations in terms of process and issues for every permit category and for every permit type within that category. However, overall the process of accepting a permit, reviewing, providing comments, and issuance should follow the same general best practices, with variations when required by the specific situation of that permit type. Best practices include the following:

- A case manager oversees the processing of the permit, including: identifying which agencies should be involved in review, consolidating comments from reviewers, communicating with the applicant regarding the permit, and addressing any conflicts that come up among the different review agencies.

- Where the issues from one review agency may have a major impact on the project design, or could prevent the project from moving forward, that review should happen first. For example, a zoning review may identify that a certain use is not consistent with zoning regulations, or that the design of the building does not meet setback or height requirements. Since these findings could be fatal to a project or require re-design, zoning should look at and approve plans first.
- Where the issues being examined are distinct, the review process should be concurrent to reduce time. For example, if fire and watershed are looking at very different issues, they can be reviewing the permit concurrently.
- For resubmittals of plans (after initial comments are received), the review should focus only on whether comments have been addressed. New issues should not be identified unless they are critical to life-safety or arise due to plan changes that were made between the initial and second submission.

Below is a flow chart providing a high-level example of “best practices” for permitting processes.

BEST PRACTICE PERMITTING



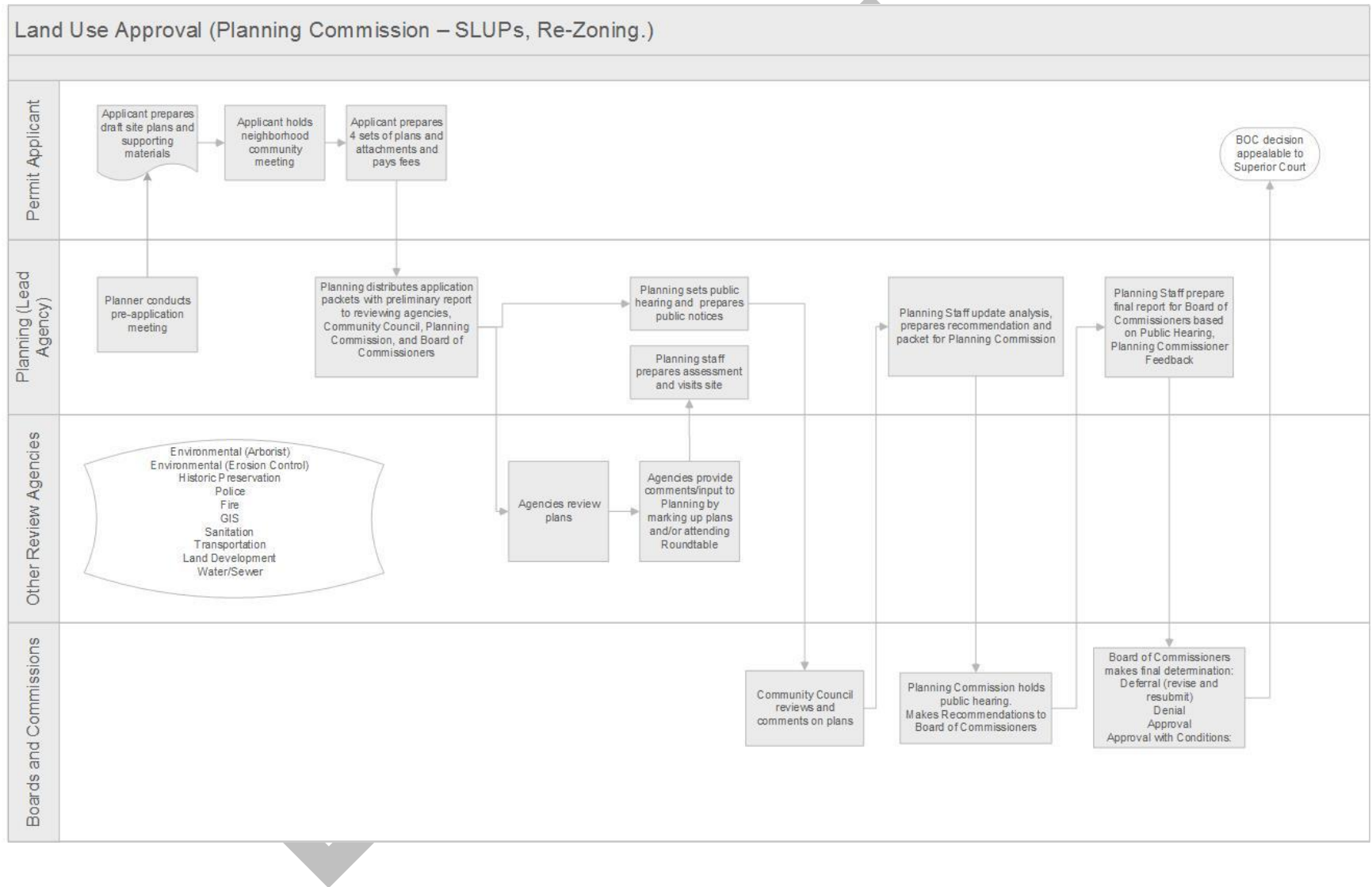
(A) Analysis of Land Use Permitting Process.

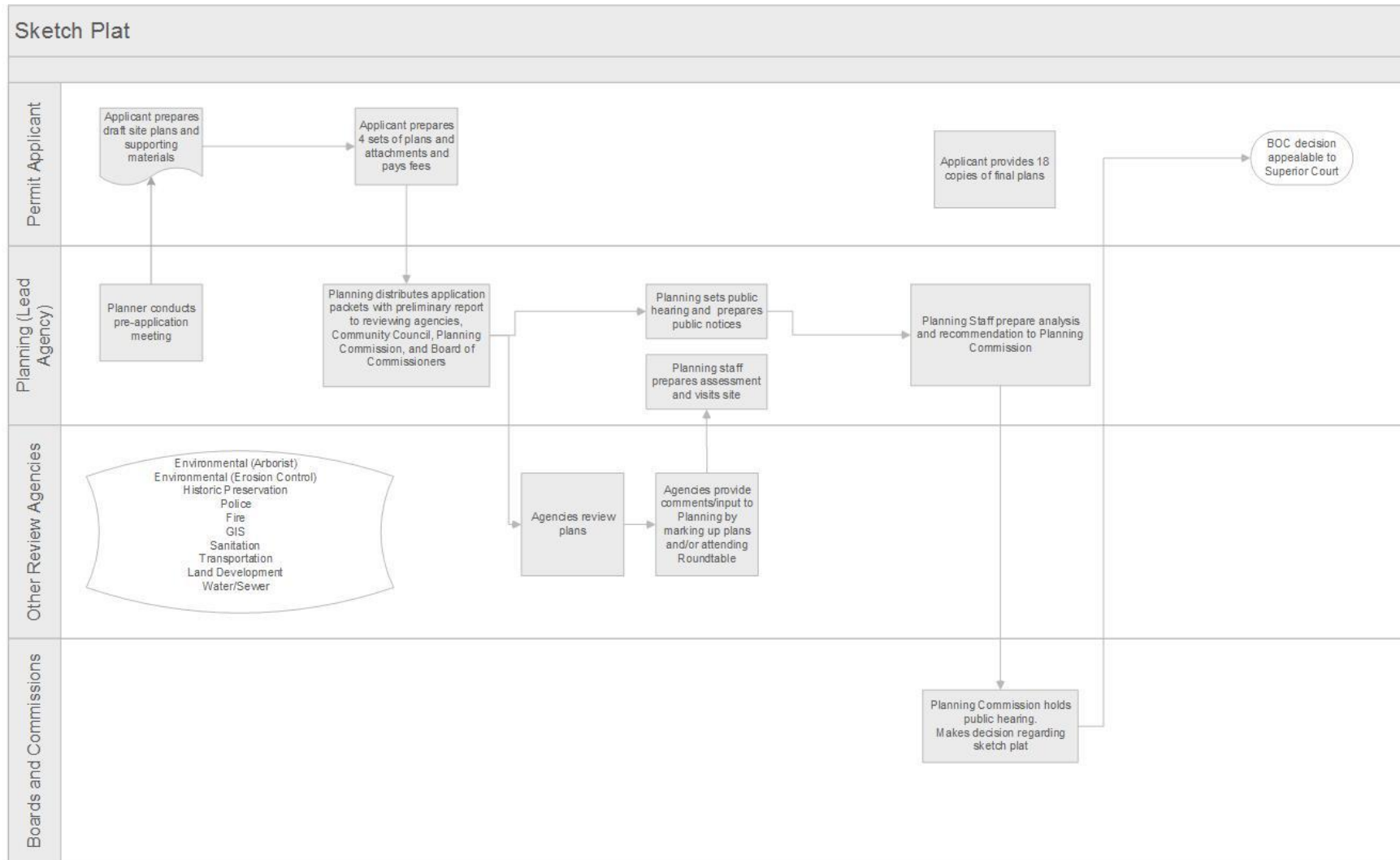
The Land Use approval process is generally consistent with Best Practices. In particular, a planner acts as a case manager, and all comments are consolidated by that case manager either in writing or during a Roundtable meeting with the applicant. In addition, the meeting is scheduled at the time that plans are distributed.

The following issues may warrant further investigation to continue to improve the process:

- Although not depicted in detail in the above flow-chart, GIS plays an unusual role in this process. It appears that GIS is used to address confusion or discrepancies regarding ownership of land, location of lot lines or borders, etc. In addition, the process for updating land use information in GIS based on land use approvals can be difficult and time-consuming.
- Some applicants have indicated that full sets of plans are required to be sent out to agencies that rarely if ever comment, or who only need a small amount of information (instead of a full plan set). The department should review the scope of distribution of plans, both in terms of who receives plans and how much information they receive.
- When numerous agencies are involved in reviewing a set of plans, some communities have successfully deployed electronic plan review, which ensures that all agencies are looking at the same information and allows for comments to be consolidated in a single, electronic location. The County may want to move towards this model.

The following two pages illustrate the Land Use permitting process for DeKalb County: first for the majority of land use approvals and second for sketch plats.





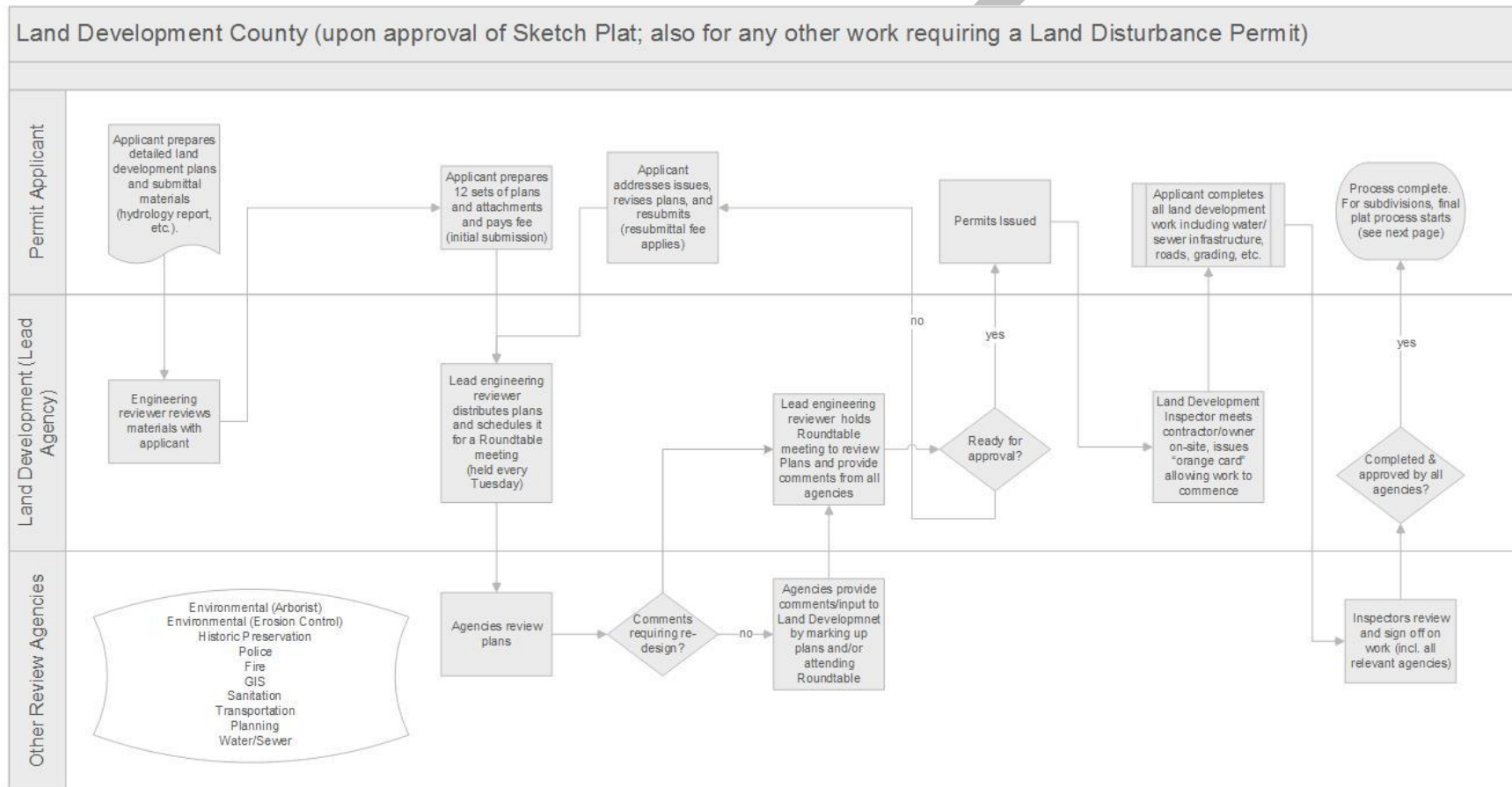
(B) ANALYSIS OF THE LAND DEVELOPMENT / DISTURBANCE REVIEW AND PERMITTING PROCESS

The Land Disturbance process varies based on two major parameters:

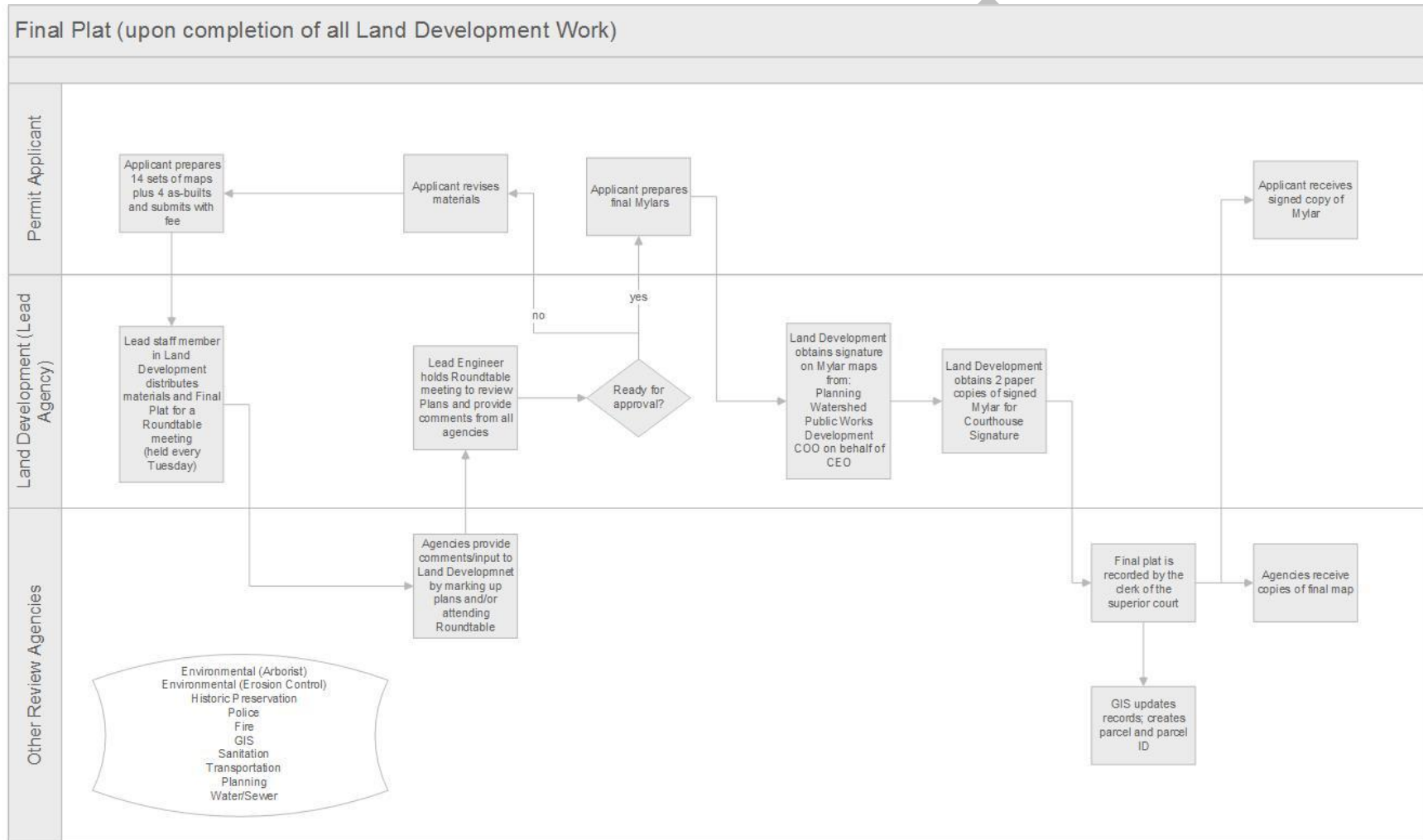
- **City vs. County:** County projects receive a full review, while City projects (for incorporated cities within DeKalb County) are only reviewed for Fire, Water, and Infrastructure issues that may affect the county. Two cities (Decatur and Atlanta) do their own Fire site review as well.
- **Commercial vs. Residential:** The sequence and role of Land Disturbance is very different for commercial versus residential projects. For example, for new single family homes, all Land Disturbance work must be permitted AND COMPLETED before a building permit is even issued. For commercial projects, the process can be managed concurrently.

Land Development also manages the Final Plat process (which occurs after Sketch Plat approval and all Land Development work is permitted and approved.)

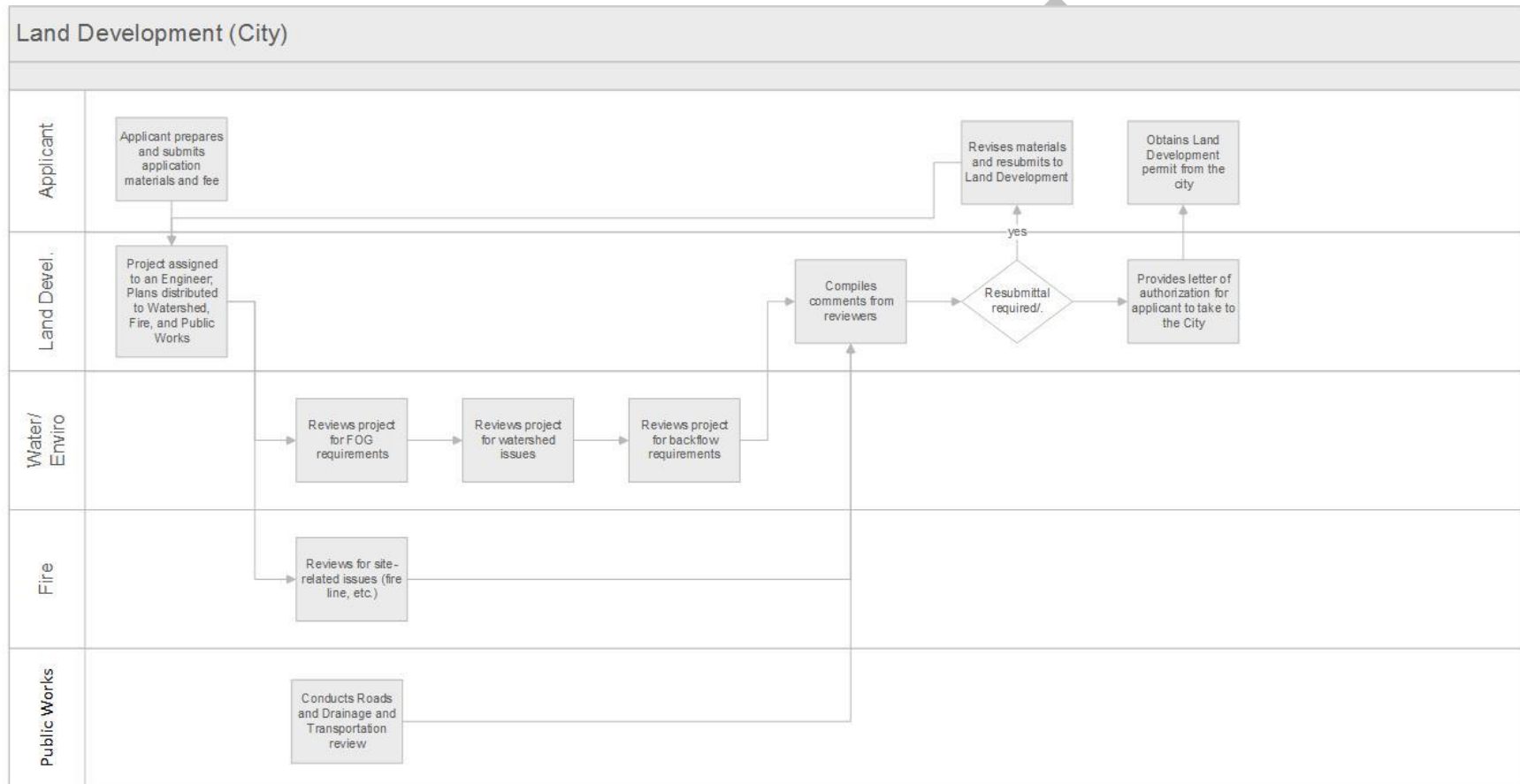
On the following page, the Land Development process for County projects is provided in a flow chart.



For plats (subdivisions), the Land Development process is followed by a Final Plat:



The City review process is similar, but involves fewer reviewers:



The Land Development / Land Disturbance permitting process is generally consistent with Best Practices. In particular, an Engineer is assigned to every project and acts as a project manager.

The following issues may warrant further investigation to continue to improve the process:

- As with Land Use projects, the role of GIS seems to indicate technical problems with getting information correctly conveyed into the County's GIS system and, in turn, into other IT systems.
- There appears to be significant duplication between the agencies who review plans at the Planning stage for projects that go through Planning and then Land Development. Below is an outline of the agencies that may look at a single project during three different steps in the permitting process:

Department	Sketch Plat	Land Development	Final Plat
Planning/Zoning/Overlay	•	•	•
Environmental – Trees	•	•	
Environmental – Erosion Control		•	
Fire (site/line)	•	•	•
Building			
GIS	•	•	•
Police	•		•
Historical Preservation	•		
Watershed (W&S and/or BF)	•	•	•
Sanitation	•	•	
Transportation	•	•	•
Roads and drainage	•	•	•
Inspector- Environmental			•
Inspector – Land Development			•
Land Development	•	•	•
Health Dept	•		•
BOE	•		•

Projects that go through these processes may end up requiring dozens (by one count, over 40) of sets of full-sized plans to be distributed out to agencies, many of whom have little or no feedback. Planning and Land Development should work together to determine whether the duplication of review agencies could be reduced, as well as whether as much detail is required for all of these agencies.

- In some cases, it appears that changes may be made to Land Development plans based on comments from different agencies (e.g., Fire and Watershed) but

that the changes are not reconciled into a single plan set. As a result, there may be changes on one set of plans that is not on another. All comments should be compiled in the end in a single set of approved plans that reflects comments from all reviewing agencies.

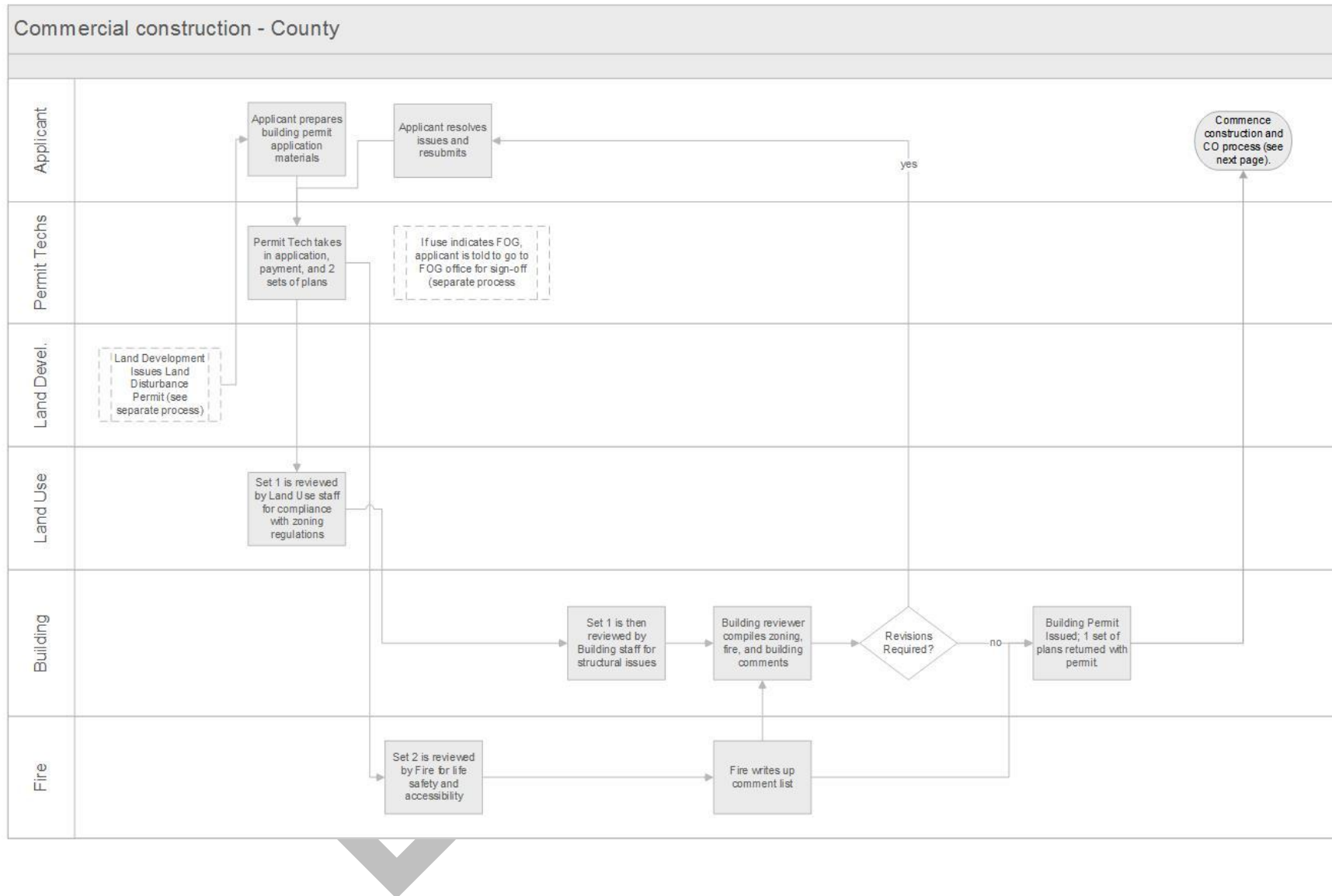
(C) Analysis of the Building Permit Process.

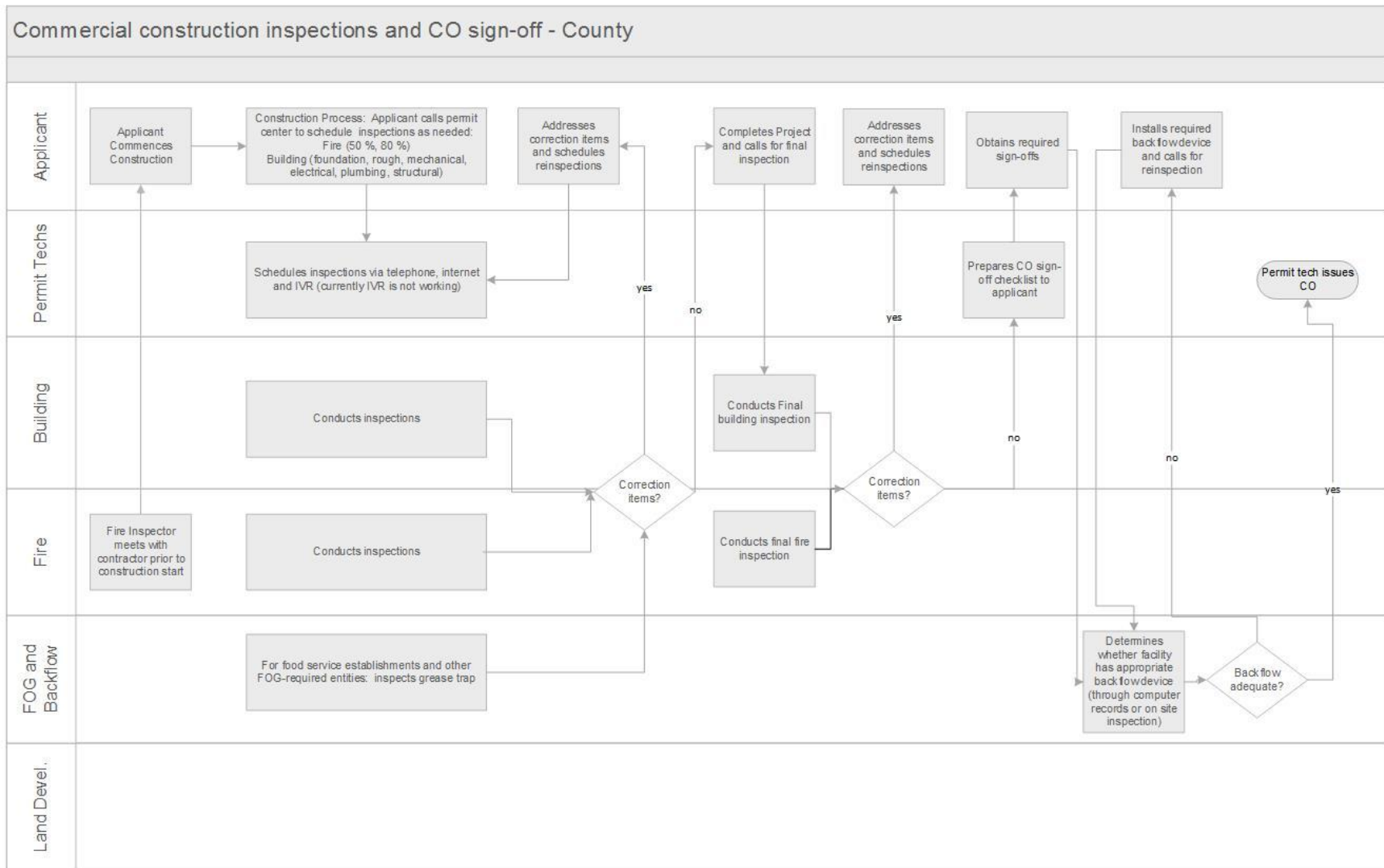
As with Land Disturbance, the process of reviewing and issuing building permits varies considerably based on:

- City vs. County: The County is minimally involved in City-originated projects, with the exception of fire and watershed.
- Commercial vs. Residential: No structural (Building) review is done for residential projects. Therefore the process and routing is completely different based on whether a project is commercial or residential.

DE KALB COUNTY REVIEW RESPONSIBILITIES FOR BUILDING PERMITS		
	County located projects	City-originated projects
Residential	Reviewed by zoning and land development only.	No County involvement
Commercial	Reviewed by building, planning, fire, and land development. (Watershed typically doesn't review County projects; the basis for their reviewing City commercial projects but not County is unclear.)	Reviewed by: fire, watershed.

On the following page is a flow chart of the review process for County commercial projects.





There are a number of issues related to the current process that may cause inefficiency and confusion:

- There is no case management approach. Plans are moved to different bins when review is completed, but no one is overseeing the whole process. As a result, there is no accountability for review times. (On a positive note, Building does review comments from the reviewing agencies and provide them as a set to the applicant.)
- Permit applications are accepted at the counter with no review for completeness. They then may not be looked at for several days or longer. If there are glaring omissions on the application, the time spent waiting for a “first look” from a reviewer is wasted time for the applicant. Best practices recommends a balanced approach, where plans are looked at by a qualified individual (certified permit tech or a building plans reviewer) before being accepted.
- If a FOG review is required, this is a completely different process and not integrated into the building permitting process. Applicants are told to “go to FOG” if they may have a function that requires a grease trap or other mechanism; however the permitting process is distinct and not tracked as part of this process.
- Although Backflow is not part of the permit review process, every commercial project is required to get a sign-off from the Backflow office, even if no plumbing work is being done, before a Certificate of Occupancy can be issued. This has caused confusion and even bewilderment on the part of applicants, especially small commercial tenants who have no responsibility for plumbing in to and out of a larger building (for example, a strip mall). Their CO is held up as the issue is resolved.
- Requirements that Certificates of Occupancy be used even in cases of minor renovations.

The Certificate of Occupancy requirement is a major source of frustration among applicants and warrants more detailed analysis.

Typically, under international building code standards which form the basis for Georgia’s building and fire code, a Certificate of Occupancy runs for the life of a building, unless there is a change of use (use codes are specified in the building code) or significant structural alterations to a building. In addition to posing a burden on

applicants, the CO requirement for minor alterations and change of tenancy with no change of use may be problematic for the County: it certifies that the structure is in compliance with current building codes, even though the building may have been constructed under earlier versions of the code.

In addition, the requirement that a new business or tenant obtain a CO leads to a number of other requirements, such as a backflow inspection. DeKalb county customers interviewed for this study said that the CO process (especially as a precursor to a business license) can become paralyzing, as they have to unearth original architectural drawings or obtain new ones in situations where there are extremely minor renovations or even no work done. This is especially problematic because it leads businesses to give up on efforts to obtain a business license, which results in lost revenue for the County.

Chapter 120-3-3 of the Georgia Fire Code, which is based on the International Fire Code, specifically states that the CO runs with the building. This language is also in the Official Code of Georgia, Annotated:

(c) Every building or structure ... shall have a certificate of occupancy issued by the state fire marshal, the proper local fire marshal, or the state inspector before such building or structure may be occupied. Such certificates of occupancy shall be issued for each business establishment within the building, shall carry a charge in the amount provided in Code Section 25-2-4.1, shall state the occupant load for such business establishment or building, shall be posted in a prominent location within such business establishment or building, **and shall run for the life of the building**, except as provided in subsection (d) of this Code section.

(d) For purposes of this chapter, any existing building or structure listed in paragraph (1) of subsection (b) of Code Section 25-2-13 and which comes under the jurisdiction of the office of the Commissioner pursuant to Code Section 25-2-12 shall be deemed to be a proposed building in the event such building or structure is subject to **substantial renovation, a fire or other hazard of serious consequence, or a change in the classification of occupancy**. For purposes of this subsection, the term "substantial renovation" means any construction project involving exits or internal features of such building or structure costing more than the building's or structure's assessed value according to county tax records at the time of such renovation

Similarly, DeKalb County Code states that the CO is only required in the case of a change in the TYPE of occupancy or nature of use. In addition, it states that the CO certifies that a structure meets current code requirements.

Sec. 7-35. Certificates of occupancy, tenancy.

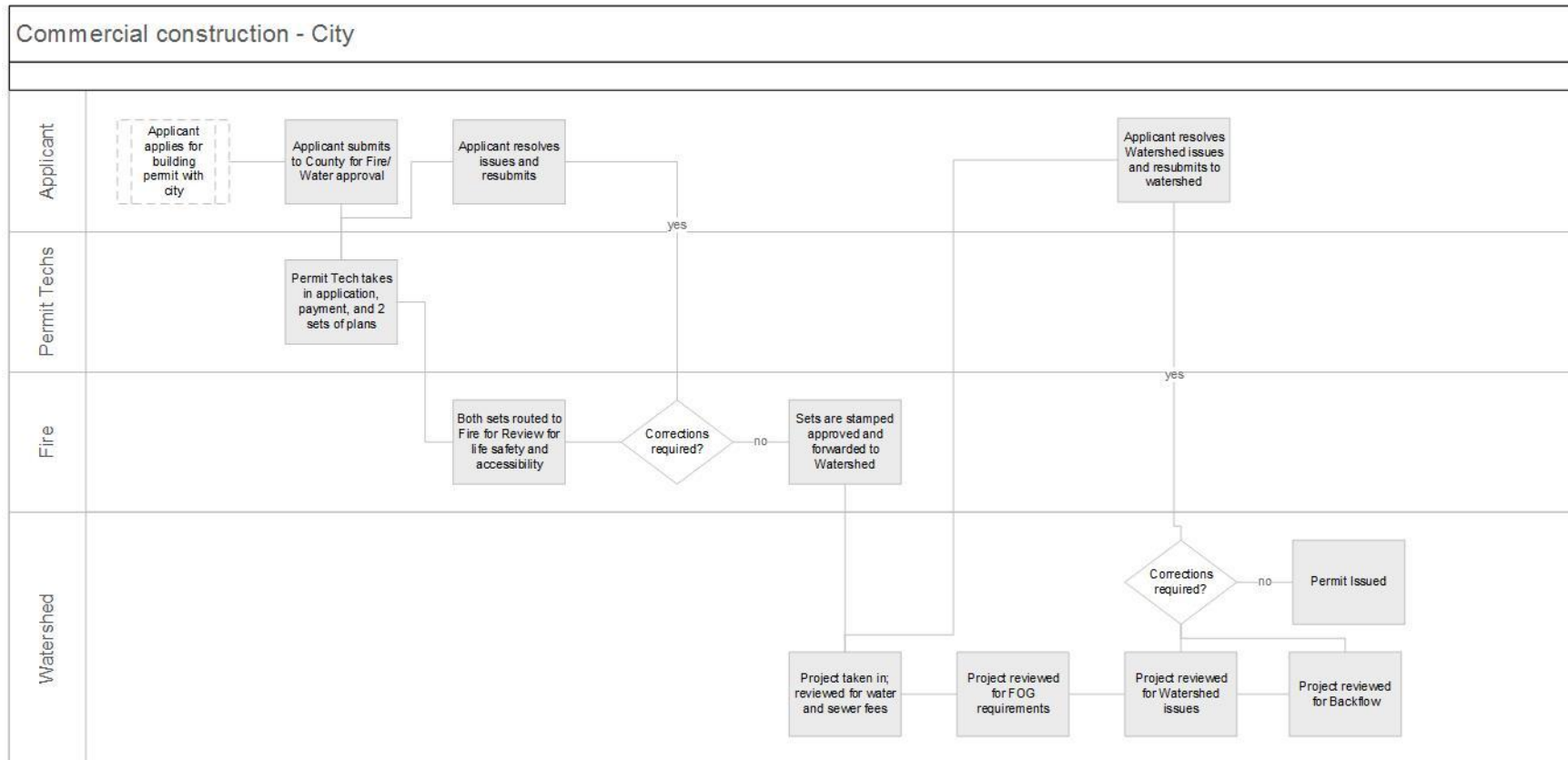
(a) Required. No building or structure or portion thereof shall be occupied or a change made in the type of occupancy or the nature of the use of an existing building or part thereof until after an appropriate certificate as required by this section has been issued.

(b) Certificate of occupancy.

(1) Issuance. A certificate of occupancy shall not be issued by the building official until the building, structure and intended use complies with all applicable requirements of the zoning ordinance, all construction is complete and all required final building, plumbing, mechanical, gas, electric, fire, health, vegetation protection and site drainage inspections have been performed and approved.

Scope. The certificate of occupancy certifies that all final inspections have been completed and the structure has been erected, to the best of the county's knowledge, in compliance with applicable Code requirements at the time of the issuance of the certificate.

The process for review of City projects depends somewhat on the city, but in the most cases only involves Fire and Watershed. This process is illustrated on the next page.

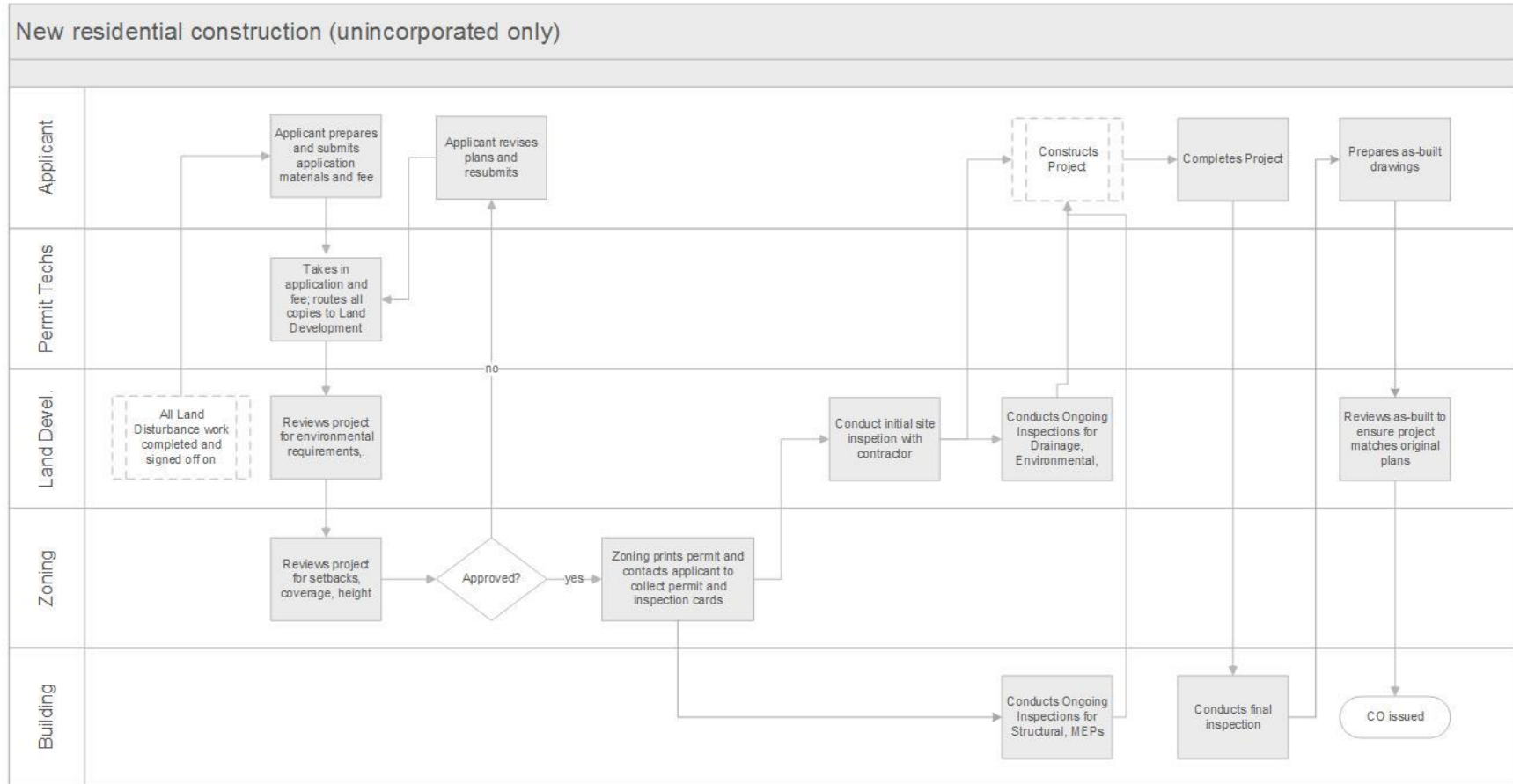


Although this process does not require input from building, land development, or zoning, it can be time-consuming for applicants. Below are some of the key issues identified with the current process:

- There is no case management approach, and applicants have no clear point of contact to determine the status of their permits.
- The review process is consecutive, with projects first obtaining approval from Fire before Watershed reviews them. This causes unnecessary delays, especially since review comments from the two agencies are unlikely to conflict with each other.
- It is unclear why City projects go through a full Watershed review, while County projects do not. Unless there is a clear difference in the substance of the projects, both should be subject to the same process and level of scrutiny.
- The Watershed review process is consecutive – plans are sent to three different offices for review, one after another. While processing time within the offices is not long, there is unnecessary time spent waiting, for example, for a FOG review for a retail establishment.
- The applicants are going through two, parallel processes – obtaining a building permit from their City building office and then obtaining the correlating water and fire approvals from the county. The customer is being placed in a position of liaison, reconciling to the two agency review processes. It may be worth exploring ways to get projects referred by the City offices directly to the county, so that the applicant does not need to submit in two locations. Under this scenario, the County would become a reviewer or “sign off” on a City permit.
- In interviews, reviewers from Fire and Watershed indicated that the process and responsibilities for the two agencies are clear. However, comments from applicants contradict this. For example, staff indicated that a project is not forwarded to Watershed until all fire comments have been addressed. However, an applicant indicated that this was not his experience. Similarly, staff indicated that Watershed calls when the review is complete but this did not occur in at least one instance.

The County is not involved in building permits for residential projects within cities.

The following page illustrates the process for residential building permits in the County:



This process primarily involves only Land Development and Zoning, until the construction phase, when Building conducts structural as well as Mechanical, Engineering, and Plumbing inspections.

There are a number of issues related to the current process that may cause inefficiency and confusion:

- There is no case management approach. Roles and responsibilities for the two major reviewing entities (land development and zoning) are unclear. For example, in some cases, Land Development will contact the applicant directly with comments. In others, Zoning compiles comments from both agencies.
- It is unusual for there to be no structural review before a permit is issued. While no clear problems with this approach were identified, it can lead to the following issues:
 - Important safety issues are missed because they are not clearly evident at the time of inspection
 - Issues are identified at the time of inspection, requiring expensive “field corrections.” In most cases, builders would prefer to learn of issues before construction starts.
 - The work involved at the inspection stage is much more extensive as no review of the plans has been done to ensure code compliance.

3. GENERAL PERMITTING RECOMMENDATIONS

DeKalb County employs a wide range of permitting processes, depending on the origination of the permit, the location of the project, and whether that project is commercial or residential. Some of these processes are more consistent with best practices than others. The following are our overall recommendations on process issues:

- ALL processes should follow a case management approach. The case manager may vary depending on the type of permit (a planner for land use, an engineer for land disturbance, a permit tech or plans reviewer for building). However, in each case it should be clear who that case manager is, and that individual should be responsible for the overall process.
- Greater effort should be made on the “front end” to ensure that applications are complete.

- Where only a cursory review is required (e.g., setbacks for a shed or deck), this sign off should occur at the time of application, instead of being routed to zoning with more complex projects.
- There should be clear performance standards for every review entity in the permitting process, and this information should be tracked.
- There should be greater consistency among the processes. The wide range of approaches currently employed causes confusion and uncertainty. (For example, the difference in review approaches for city vs. county projects.)
- Staff should be held accountable for following best practice approaches. For example, when applications are resubmitted, new issues should not be identified that were not brought up initially. While staff should not overlook non-compliance, repeated identification of new issues is generally indicative that staff did not conduct a thorough a comprehensive first review. The resubmittal review should be limited to ensuring that all initial comments have been addressed.

These issues and new approaches to service delivery should be clearly addressed during the training program recommended for staff during the implementation phase of this engagement.

B. OPERATIONAL REVIEW AND ANALYSIS.

In reviewing the existing processes and procedures utilized by DeKalb County in the permitting and associated functions, there are several recommendations that have been developed with a focus on improving the level of service provided to customers and to more efficiently and effectively utilize staff resources. These recommendations have been developed to address issues identified (through the employee survey, customer feedback, and best management practices evaluation).

In general these recommendations are designed to further enhance and improve operations in the following key areas:

- 1) Transparency of Operations;
- 2) Efficiency of Operations;
- 3) Clarity of expectations;
- 4) Effectiveness of Operations; and
- 5) Customer Service.

There are many existing strengths of the permitting operation that can be built upon to successfully implement these changes. The recommendations provided need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner over several years to achieve the full impact on service improvement that all parties are trying to achieve.

1. SEVERAL EFFORTS SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN TO IMPROVE THE COMMUNITY OUTREACH EFFORTS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE PROVIDED BY THE COUNTY.

During the course of the study, it was noted that the County has a weak working relationship with the development community, in general, and a poor level of perceived customer service. This was noted in interviews with staff and more particularly during interviews with the development community. While the project team interviewed many individuals that expressed positive interactions with the County staff, in selected

instances and areas, and individual staff in resolving issues, there is a larger percentage of customers who noted significant concerns in these areas. It is interesting to note that overall, the level of customer service was generally perceived as more positive, though still not at a level that would be defined as “good”, from applicants that work on a regional basis versus those that work primarily on a local basis.

The following points identify some specific recommendations that are designed to address the specific concerns raised to the project team during the study and assist the department in demonstrating to elected officials and the development community their full desire to implement a “culture of service”. These recommendations are designed to strengthen the County’s relationship with the development community and implement a customer focused service delivery approach.

(1.1) The Level of Dialogue Between the County (related to permitting) and the Development Community Should be Increased.

Staff involved in the permitting process need to focus on providing a much higher level of communication, dialogue and interaction with the development community in a proactive manner – not simply working with them when problems arise or interacting on a reactive basis. This should be started by implementing quarterly training sessions and meetings hosted by the Planning & Sustainability Department (with participation from Watershed, and Fire) for those practicing in the development industry to inform them of changing policies, new code requirements, and providing education on the application of the codes. In addition, staff should routinely attend meeting of local Contractors Associations, Homebuilders Associations, etc. for more informal interaction and dialogue. To address this issue, the project team suggests that the County should

partner with the local construction industry associations to jointly sponsor these sessions and garner participation.

Most communities that implement this approach utilize a one to one and a half hour meeting that is focused on a specific topic. The format should vary by topic but typically would include a presentation by staff on the topic at hand, a period of questions and answers, and a time for informal interaction between the parties.

Additionally, the department should periodically issue a newsletter targeted towards information the construction industry can utilize in their interactions with the County staff. Typically, these newsletters would cover issues such as changing code requirements, training opportunities, education regarding new codes or code interpretations that are planned for implementation, etc. These newsletter should be posted on the County's website and emailed directly to all individuals that sign-up to receive them.

Finally, the Department should consider implementation of an annual survey of the development community to evaluate their level of performance. This can be accomplished through the use of a short on-line survey. Staff should consider whether there are a significant number of customers that wouldn't be able to respond online and if so, hard copy forms of the survey should be available in the permit center in addition to on the kiosk recently implemented in the permitting center lobby. Additionally, comment cards should be made available to all applicants at the issuance of the permit on a post card, asking them to evaluate the level of services provided on their case.

The Planning & Sustainability Director should have staff develop a customer comment card that is distributed to all individuals / firms that submit development and

permit applications. This comment card should ask that the applicant rate the County on several key factors:

- Level of Customer Service Provided (rating each department/division interacted with);
- Accessibility of staff;
- Thoroughness of staff;
- Satisfaction with the process;
- Specific areas / individuals that provided exceptional service;
- Specific areas / individuals where service problems were encountered; and
- An opportunity for the applicant to make general comments about the process.

A semi-annual report should be developed outlining the level of satisfaction provided to applicants. Information gathered from this survey should be utilized for on-going evaluation of staff and improvement of the process.

It is important to note that these educational and outreach efforts will require time on the part of staff to implement. This time will obviously reduce slightly their time available for performing other primary duties (such as plan reviews and inspections).

Recommendation: An increase in the dialogue between the County (related to permitting functions) and the Construction Services Industry should be adopted including quarterly training and meetings, newsletters, and frequent outreach for input.

Recommendation: The County should institute an email newsletter to increase the level of dialogue with customers that is focused on educating applicants regarding changing policies and procedures, providing educational information regarding code compliance, and discussing available training sessions.

Recommendation: The County should conduct an annual and ongoing customer satisfaction survey.

(1.2) A “How to Develop in DeKalb County” Guide Should Be Developed.

At the present time, no comprehensive “how to develop guide” is available for use by the public in a manner that makes the County’s requirements easy to understand and readily understandable for all customers. A comprehensive how to guide should be developed that covers the entire development review process from project concept through the final certificate of occupancy. In developing this guide, the County needs to ensure that it is developed in a “plain English” approach that is understandable by a variety of audiences and not just those that work within the development arena on a daily basis.

This document needs to be more than a simple recitation of the ordinances and codes, but clearly explain the steps of the process, how to comply and appropriately submit an application, and identify the review that will be conducted by staff. Within this document, it would be appropriate to include copies of checklists for each phase of the process that clearly identify to the applicant the information that must be submitted and why it is required. Also included within the document should be a section that clearly outlines the review time standards that have been adopted by the County.

Another critical component of the guide should be a section outlining the standard conditions of approval for each of the reviewing departments/divisions. Each reviewing entity should document their standard conditions of approval for inclusion in this manual and posting on the website.

Recommendation: The County should develop a concise “How to Manual” or “Development Guide” for use by the public and publish this document to the website.

Recommendation: The guide should include copies of checklists for each phase of the development process, as well as copies of all standard conditions of approval for each department/division.

(1.3) The Conditions of Approval Utilized by All of the Divisions and Departments in the Review of Discretionary and Administrative Permits Should Be Documented.

The formalization and publication of the various reviewing Departments' policies and procedures will provide a more consistent and customer-focused service level. The development of these includes a number of distinct elements, including the following:

- The documentation of the conditions of approval utilized by all of the divisions and departments in the review of discretionary and administrative permits;
- The development of a policies and procedures manual, and
- The use and application of checklists for the review of applications submitted at the Permit Center.

These elements are discussed in greater detail in the sections below.

In the consulting team's experience, one of the primary methods for assuring consistency in the completion of plan check activities, whether it is a building permit plan check, final development permit plan check, or conditional use plan check, or any other type of application review, is to document and publicize in writing the standard conditions of approval. The Planning & Sustainability Department should take the lead in the development of this effort.

Other divisions and departments involved in the development review activities should follow suit and develop, in writing, their own standard conditions of approval. This would include Watershed and Fire. These standard conditions of approval (related to land development applications) should be posted on the Planning & Sustainability Department's website – related to the Permit Center - for use by the

general public and the development community in knowing what will be expected from them when applying for permits.

The Planning & Sustainability Department should take lead responsibility in facilitating and publicizing the development of these standard conditions of approval by all of the divisions and departments.

Recommendation: The conditions of approval utilized by all of the divisions and departments in the review of discretionary and administrative permits should be documented and posted to the Permit Center's website.

Recommendation: The Planning & Sustainability Department should take lead responsibility in facilitating the development of these written conditions of approval by all of the divisions and departments.

(1.4) The Entities Involved in Plan Review Should Publish a Common Plan Check Correction Comment Library on the County's Website.

Each of the departments, divisions and entities involved in plan review should develop and publish on the County's website a listing of common comments and corrections noted during the plan check process. Separate documents should be developed for each Department and Division that lists the most common ten or twelve comments noted by Plans Examiners on applications reviewed. These corrections should be analyzed, with the most common comments for each construction type (residential or commercial) posted on the County's website.

As an example, the type of corrections noted for the Building Permit function could include the following topics.

Fire protection	Mechanical, electrical, plumbing
Room sizes, lighting, ventilation	Noise insulation
Exits, stairways, railings	Energy conservation
Roofing	Foundation requirements

Masonry	Framing
Garages	Plot plans
Elevations	Floor plans

The posting of the correction library will provide guidance to architects and design professionals in understanding the unique requirements for development / construction in DeKalb County, and should include the requirements of all divisions and agencies involved in the review process in the County. It will identify those corrections most commonly noted during the review process and provide a “check list” for the design professionals to utilize in checking plans prior to submission. Many examples exist from other communities of these type of documents to serve as a guide for staff in developing a comparable document for DeKalb County.

Recommendation: Post common plan check corrections on the County’s website to provide guidance to architects and design professionals on the development requirements in DeKalb County.

(1.5) Staff Should Implement Policies That Require the Review of All Resubmittals for Completeness.

Several changes in the procedures utilized for processing revised plans (for all submittals to the County for both land development applications and building permits) should be implemented. The County should implement a checklist approach for resubmittals that requires the applicant to identify for each comment received, the action taken in the resubmitted plans to address the comment. While this is currently being done in some cases, it is not a universal practice for all types of applications. Upon resubmittal, the permit technician should ensure that each comment has been addressed prior to deeming the resubmission complete and accepting it for review.

Recommendation: The County should require all applicants to submit a checklist showing all corrections made in reference to comments received on all resubmittals.

2. TRAINING FOR STAFF SHOULD BE ENHANCED TO IMPROVE THE LEVEL OF SERVICE PROVIDED TO THE PUBLIC.

In addition to the enhanced public education efforts, the County should commit to a significantly increased level of staff training and education to ensure that all staff are not only fully trained in their technical areas of expertise, but have a common understanding of the entire permitting process, and the level of customer service expected to be provided. Prior to the development of a training plan for staff, the Managers of the Planning and Sustainability Department should conduct a training needs assessment that includes not only their staff, but staff from Watershed and Fire. The training needs assessment should be based upon a variety of efforts including:

- Survey of staff to identify desired training topics,
- Identification of training hours and topics necessary to maintain existing certifications (i.e. – trade certifications for Building Plan Examiners and Inspectors and AICP Certification for Planners),
- Training targeted at expanding existing skills and provide greater cross-utilization of staff,
- Training required to utilize existing technologies, and
- Training in project management techniques, customer service, etc.

From the training needs assessment, individual employee training plans should be developed for each employee. Ideally this would be accomplished annually as part of employee performance evaluation and goal setting sessions.

This training should include a quarterly meeting of all staff involved in the permitting process for a joint training session to address issues of inter-departmental

and inter-divisional focus. Topics for these quarterly meetings should be developed by the Permit Manager based upon issues seen and addressed during the preceding quarters. Additionally, at these meetings customer service principles should be covered in areas such as: responsiveness to emails and phone calls; assisting individuals in meeting submission requirements, etc.

Another useful area of training is for these sessions to provide, on a rotating basis, general training on the major technical areas reviewed by each Department and Division so that employees in other Departments and Divisions become more aware of the issues reviewed by those in other areas. The purpose is not to make all employees technically proficient in the reviews conducted by other Departments/Divisions, but to ensure that everyone is aware of the major areas of review in each department and to gain a better understanding of the role played by each department in the process.

Recommendation: A quarterly development review training session should be implemented for all staff directly involved in the permitting process.

Recommendation: The specific training topics for each meeting should be developed by staff but could include topics such as: customer service training, review of inter-departmental issues, more in-depth discussion of the role of a specific department/division, etc.

Recommendation: A training needs assessment should be conducted for all staff involved in development review. Individual employee training plans should be developed that focus on maintenance of existing certifications / licenses and then expansion of skills.

3. MONTHLY PERFORMANCE REPORTS SHOULD BE REFINED AND PUBLISHED SHOWING THE PERFORMANCE OF EACH DEPARTMENT / DIVISION AGAINST THEIR PLAN REVIEW AND INSPECTION TIMEFRAMES.

There are currently few reports that are developed and distributed that document the performance of staff related to their development review functions (plan review times and inspection cycles). This is principally due to limitations in the existing

technologies. The project team would recommend that the County develop detailed reports that are sufficient for communicating performance in these key areas and that differentiate performance based upon initial plan review time and resubmittal plan review times. This report should be standardized so that they can be easily developed from data captured in the permitting system rather than requiring staff to expend significant time in their development. The only difficulty here is that the software is not necessarily set up to capture all required data fields. This is discussed further in the section detailing technology utilization.

Additionally, there should be varying level of details for these reports based upon the intended audience. For example, there should be a more detailed report for use on a day to day basis by project managers and staff assigned to the plan review and inspection process (so that performance by department, division, function and trade – especially in plan review functions – can be ascertained, monitored, and evaluated), a more summary report should be prepared and provided to the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Executive Officer for use in understanding the current status of projects. Finally, a report should be prepared that is suitable for monthly distribution to the Board of Commissioners that outlines project status and staff performance. These reports should show the percentage of applications and inspections that are completed with the established time frames.

To facilitate this effort, the County must adopt clear performance targets for initial and subsequent plan review performance.

Copies of the report distributed to the Board of Commissioners should also be posted to the County's website. This will enable staff to share information regarding

performance with the development community and interested citizens on the level of activity occurring and the performance of the County against established performance levels. This level of transparency and reporting of performance will, assuming staff are able to meet plan review and inspection targets, demonstrate to the public that the County takes seriously its commitment to timely service provision.

Recommendation: Monthly performance reports outlining the percentage of plan reviews and inspections completed within established time frames should be developed, distributed to key administrative and elected officials, and posted to the Internet. The report should be broken down by functional review area (i.e. – Planning, Building (by trade), Engineering, etc.).

4. ALL STAFF INVOLVED IN DEVELOPMENT REVIEW SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO UTILIZE THE AUTOMATED PERMITTING SYSTEM.

The County has made and is planning to make, a significant investment of time and money in the replacement of the existing permitting software. To fully gain and realize the efficiencies that can be realized from this software, all individuals that review, process or inspect permitted activity must be required to utilize the permitting software. The systems under consideration are all capable, either individually or through integration with other software, of performing a broad range of tasks including the following:

- Plan review tracking;
- Permitting including the issuance and tracking of permits;
- Inspections scheduling and tracking;
- Workflow management;
- Online submittal and processing of applications;
- Fee calculation and collection;
- Customer communications through web-based customer services;

- Telephone-based voice response services; and
- Inter- and intra-departmental communication and management.

All of the departments and divisions involved in the issuance of permits need to fully utilize the automated permit information system for all aspects of the development review process to achieve the benefits of a comprehensive system. Of greatest significance is the need for all routing, plan review comments, sign-offs and approvals to occur within the implemented permitting systems. External spreadsheets, tracking and approval processes must be eliminated. This utilization should be required of all involved County Departments and assistance provided to them to move away from self-developed methods to the full utilization of the available technology. Some of the difficulties that have been noted with the existing use of software are lack of staff training and the failure of some divisions to fully utilize the available technology. The remainder of the existing issues are due to the manner in which the existing software was implemented. The County must make a reasonable investment of time and funding for training on the software so that it is effectively utilized.

Absent **all** entities utilizing the implemented development review and permitting software, many of the desired improvements will be difficult to implement. Since many of these review entities are not under the control of the Planning & Sustainability Department, they have no direct control over ensuring that these other Departments effectively utilize the software or follow the desired procedures. This represents a risk to the organization to fully implement the desired development review improvements unless clear direction is issued countywide. All divisions must use the permitting software system to enter and track comments, review applications, and sign off on

approvals.

Recommendation: All of the departments and divisions should utilize the automated permit information system for all aspects of the development review process. This is especially critical for those departments / divisions that are not a part of the Planning & Sustainability Department..

Recommendation: The County must ensure all staff is fully trained in the utilization of the permitting software in order for its benefits to be achieved.

5. THE COUNTY NEEDS TO FORMALIZE A CONTACT WITHIN THE PERMIT CENTER FOR APPLICANTS TO UTILIZE IN RESOLVING PROBLEMS.

A common complaint heard during the study was the fact that many, if not most, issues could not be resolved at the appropriate level within the County (i.e., with staff assigned to conduct plan review duties) and that many individuals were not aware of who to contact for assistance when they encountered problems in either the quality or timing of services provided. While many individuals who do significant work with the County contact either a member of the Executive Management Team (Department Director, Deputy Chief Operating Office, Chief Operating Officer) or in many cases elected officials (Chief Executive Officer or County Commissioners).

Many applicants indicated a difficulty navigating their way through the system. This is not helped by the fact that there are **NO** employee contact lists on the County's website nor no contact information contained on issued comments. Applicants are left to figure out who to contact by whatever means available. These individuals are either contacting the wrong individual or choosing to by-pass the department entirely and contacting elected officials for assistance. The perception that resolution can be achieved faster through the involvement of elected officials or a member of the Executive Team is not a situation unique to DeKalb County; however, it is one that appears much more prevalent here than in other jurisdictions. This approach generally

causes both the expending of significant staff resources unnecessarily or a delay in resolving the process compared to when the applicant directly contacts the correct individual who can assist them with their issues.

As part of the educational effort described earlier in this report, initial efforts should be made to educate the construction industry on the appropriate individuals to contact to resolve various types of problems or issues. Obviously, individual plans examiners should be initially contacted for questions regarding the comments they issued or the individual inspector if there is a concern with the reason for failure. However, when the issues rise above this level, it needs to be made clearer whom the applicant should contact within the County for assistance. This needs to be individuals below the Director level – and once implemented, should be initially the Permit Manager. These individuals should be involved in the resolution of only the most complex and difficult of issues. If they are routinely involved in handling minor issues, the time they have to spend on addressing the larger issues involving the management of the department will be significantly reduced. The Department leadership needs to empower staff at a lower level to feel comfortable providing assistance to applicants in resolving processing issues.

The Department should develop a matrix that shows the appropriate contact for various types of issues and widely distribute this information. This matrix should clearly indicate when the Plans Examiner or Trade Inspectors should be contacted versus what types of issues should be taken to the Director / Building Official.

Since the area of concern was generally split equally between issues related to resolving plan review issues and those related to inspections, one individual should be

designated as the ombudsman to handle issues between applicants and plans reviewers that are not successfully resolved between the applicant and plans reviewer.

This role should be assigned to the Permit Manager.

Recommendation: The Department should develop a handout containing a matrix of who to contract for various issues to assist applicants in appropriately resolving issues.

Recommendation: The County's website should list by name and title, all individuals responsible for providing service to permit applicants and list their direct phone number and email.

Recommendation: All comments issues by plan reviewers, should list the relevant contact information for the individual reviewer to assist the applicant.

Recommendation: The Permit Manager should be designated as the position responsible for the receipt, review and resolution of all complaints regarding service levels related to code compliance and enforcement issues within their specific areas of responsibility.

6. ZONING CODE INTERPRETATIONS SHOULD BE POSTED ON THE PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY DEPARTMENTS WEBSITE.

The Planning & Sustainability Department should develop an interpretation log that records how various provisions of the zoning code are interpreted in cases where the application of certain regulations is not entirely clear. Now is the ideal time to implement this approach with the County in the process of implementing a new zoning code. Since this essentially provides the County “a clean slate” related to zoning code interpretations, each interpretation that is made should be formalized, documented and publicized on the website for use by the public. These interpretations would only include those that have applicability beyond a single case – meaning those that are not entirely site specific.

The interpretations should be developed in a consistent format that provides, at a minimum, the following information:

- Effective date of interpretation.
- Section of the Code / Regulation referenced.
- Description of the interpretation.
- Legal basis for the interpretation (if applicable).
- Applicability of the interpretation – outline of the circumstances under which the interpretation is applicable and not applicable.

This type of sharing of information will increase the ability of applicants to prepare submissions that are in line with the policies and procedures being enforced by staff and may eliminate the need for revisions to be made in applications. Again, it is critical to note that only those interpretations that have been fully reviewed and that are intended to be utilized for all future applications should be included in this manual.

Recommendation: The Development Services Division should document interpretations of the land development code and internal policies and procedures and make these available to the public on the County's website.

7. ANALYSIS OF THE BUILDING PERMITTING OPERATIONS.

This section presents an analysis related to specific recommendations related to the Building permitting functions and its' staff interactions with the public, as well as, approaches that could be utilized by the staff to enhance the effectiveness of the services provided.

(7.1) A Contingency Plan Should Be Developed by the Development Services Division to Address Key Workloads.

The adoption, publication and monitoring of work activities against established timeframes for completion will create (appropriately so) an expectation from the development community that the established timeframes are real – and will be met consistently by staff. This is not a current perception within the community at this point.

The industry perception is that the time it takes to get review comments issued significantly exceeds the established timeframes and in fact, that there really are no established timeframes for plan reviews. This is the one of the single largest issues of concern with the Division's customers that were expressed to the project team.

The County should adopt formal review targets for each permitting type. The following recommendations are sample guidelines for representative categories:

Type of Application	Sample Processing Time Goal (inclusive of staff and applicant time) (in Calendar Days)
Variance	60
Special Exception	60
Conditional Use Permit	90
Development Review Permit	90*
Site Plan / Plat Review	90*

Review	Target Processing Time – Initial Review (Business Days)	Target Processing Time – Resubmission (Business Days)
Small Projects (addition, remodels, tenant finish, etc.)	10	5
Large Projects (Commercial, Industrial, Office, Multi-family)	20	10

Plan review targets must be adopted for all land development and building permitting reviews. Those reviewing entities that are not part of Planning & Sustainability must conform to the same adopted review timeframes. Ideally, resubmittal reviews should be ½ the time of the initial review.

As previously noted, the major change that the project team would recommend is that the performance measures for plan reviews (both residential and commercial) be separated into two categories – performance on completion of first review and performance in completing resubmittal reviews. To ensure that timeframes established

can be met, the County needs to take a proactive approach and develop a contingency plan that outlines the steps that will be taken to meet performance standards when changes in workload exceed the capacity of the existing staff to meet them. This contingency plan should outline the conditions under which different options will be utilized. The options should include the use of the following:

- **Overtime** – for staff to work additional hours.
- **Cross-training** – to provide an internal “backup” to the existing staff that conduct plan review functions specifically for building inspectors and to a limited extent plan reviewers. Over time, all building inspectors should be cross-trained to handle several trades, and opportunities to cross-train all inspectors (on at least basic duties) would provide a greater opportunity to fully utilize each position.
- **External Resources** – such as contract plan reviewers contracted with the County or the utilization of external part-time plan reviewers.
- **Professional Resources** – such as the utilization of the International Code Council’s (ICC) Plan Review service. As the professional association for the building code industry, this association also provides contract plan review services. This service is especially beneficial for large and complex projects and ensures reviewers have the required expertise to appropriately review the project.

The actual resource utilized is less important than the development of an effective strategy to address workload increases and/or backlogs when staff are unable to meet plan review targets. The contingency plan should provide examples of when each type of resource will and will not be utilized and ensure – in the case of external resources – that appropriate preparation has occurred to have these resources available when needed (i.e. – evaluating, selecting, and pre-approving contract resources for use by the County). The establishment of performance standards alone will not improve the performance of the permitting operations. These standards must be

ones that can consistently be met – meaning that performance to the goals should be targeted at 95% or above.

Recommendation: The County should develop a contingency plan that includes the use of external resources or overtime, when they are unable to complete workload within required timeframes.

(7.2) A More Formalized Employee Training Program Needs to be Implemented for Inspection Staff.

The County needs to implement a more structured and formalized training program for all staff assigned to development review functions to address several customer service and operational issues that are impacting their ability to deliver services as effectively as possible. The Permit Manager and supervisor of the Inspections Staff should hold a short regularly scheduled training session (no less than biweekly) that provides on going and refresher training for their assigned inspection staff. This is critical not only to ensure the level of knowledge and skill remains high, but as importantly to ensure consistency between staff members. Applicants are easily frustrated when staff does not provide consistent answers, reviews, or inspections. The easiest method to maintain internal consistency between staff is to ensure frequent and ongoing training and discussion.

Dedicated time for codes training separate from or a part of regularly scheduled staff meetings is essential. It is an important factor in achieving consistency among staff and developing interpretations that are utilized consistently throughout the County by all staff. It is recommended that these meetings be regularly scheduled and coordinated by the Building Official (for building permit / inspection staff) and by the Director (for all other staff). Assigning training subjects to inspectors and plans examiners is an approach that works well for most communities. There is significant

training and accomplishment achieved when people have to prepare and present training. The Building Official and/or Permit Manager should present training on problematic subject areas involving significant code interpretations or application.

In addition to regularly scheduled training for inspectors and plans examiners, coordination and consistency can be enhanced by periodic (at least semi-annually) meetings between fire inspectors, plans examiners, building inspectors, technicians, planners and all personnel who participate in the permitting process to review operations and contribute to efficient delivery of services. Involving everyone who serves in the permitting process will ensure that all good ideas are heard and allow everyone to participate and take advantage of resolution of all matters. If consensus cannot be achieved, supervision and management may have to make decisions and publish their findings. This kind of effort will give all personnel the opportunity to be involved, provide input and take ownership for the process.

Additionally, at least quarterly meetings should be held between the plans examiner and building inspectors. These meetings should be focused on two primary areas: (1) joint training codes and code interpretation / application; and (2) discussing problems that have arisen in the past quarter that involved differing opinions between the plans reviewers and inspectors regarding code interpretation and application. The goal of this effort is to have a consistency in application and effort between the plans review function and the inspection function so that issues are identified during plan review rather than being addressed in the field by inspectors.

Recommendation: The Permit Manager should coordinate regularly scheduled training of plan review and inspection staff and be responsible for the ongoing quality of the in-house coordination.

Recommendation: The Department must ensure that training occurs for each plan check and inspection discipline at least one hour during the scheduled training sessions. All employees should be assigned as presenters on a rotating basis.

Recommendation: The County should conduct at least semi-annual training sessions that involve all participants in the development review process (fire, water and sewer, planning, engineering, and building).

Recommendation: At least quarterly meetings should be conducted with the plans review and inspection staff to identify issues that have arisen in the last quarter, discuss options for resolution, and ensure a consistent approach to service provision.

(7.3) The Development Services Division Staff Should Develop a Code Interpretation Manual to Ensure Consistency of Plan Reviews and to Educate Customers Regarding Expectations.

While the County is utilizing a set of national building codes and local ordinances, generally as adopted by the State, to govern the construction activities within the County, there are, at times, areas within these codes and guidelines that require further explanation and/or clarification. These are commonly referred to as “code interpretations” and are typically made by the Building Official for local processes or procedures and utilized by field Building Inspectors. At the present time, there are no comprehensive listings of code interpretations or clarifications that they have been made are available to the public.

The Division should memorialize all local code interpretations and clarifications of local policies and ordinances into a comprehensive manual that contains the text of the code, the staff’s interpretation of this code, and the manner in which it will be enforced. Once developed, this should be posted on the County’s website. This will provide clear detail to customers on the action that needs to be taken in order to comply with the existing building codes.

The manual should be maintained as an up-to-date document, utilized as part of the periodic training sessions for plans examiners and building inspectors and posted on the County's website for the development community. Providing this information, in advance, to the construction community provides an additional opportunity for them to self-educate regarding DeKalb County's expectations and to voluntarily comply with the regulations. It also demonstrates the County's service commitment to its customers.

Recommendation: The Development Services Division should develop a comprehensive manual of code interpretations as developed locally. The manual should be utilized for internal staff training and be posted to the website for use by the development/construction communities.

(7.4) In the Future, the County Should Further Utilize the Capacity of the Available Software to Streamline the Inspection Request Process.

The existing inspection scheduling software has the capability to utilize various "workflow systems" to automatically process requested inspections either through on-line request or through the integration of an interactive voice response (IVR) system with the permitting software. However, there have and continue to be many issues with the system working appropriately. These workflows can be set up to recognize, based upon the inspection requested and its' location, which inspector should be assigned the work.

The system can be set up to ensure that a particular inspector is not assigned more than he or she is capable of completing with the workday. This recommendation can be implemented at any time as the system can be modified to account for changes in geographic areas and changes in inspector certification. However, there have and continue to be many issues with the system working appropriately. A high priority should be on determining what is required from a technological basis to improve the

functioning of the inspection scheduling process. Following implementation of these improvements, all requests for inspections should only be accepted through the IVR – email or phone requests should not be allowed.

Recommendation: The County must make a priority the determination of what technological changes are required to make the existing inspection request software fully functional. Once corrected, inspections requests for scheduling should only occur through the IVR – no email or phone requests should be accepted.

(7.5) The Monitoring of Inspection Completion Should Continue.

The Development Services Division is currently appropriately monitoring inspection requests, inspection completion and generally is completing all inspection requests within one day of request. The division has adopted a standard of conducting all inspections requests within one day of receipt. This is the appropriate standard that should be utilized, as it is the prevailing practice in the industry. This activity should be continually monitored and staff deployment and assignment should be modified when less than 95% of inspection requests are completed within one day of request. The division should utilize overtime as its first defense against dropping below this standard but if it is routinely unable to meet the same day standard or the use of overtime becomes routine and on-going, additional staff should be considered.

To provide a consistent approach to providing inspection services across the County, the Fire Department should continue to maintain their adopted 24 hour response time for inspection following request. The same monitoring and reporting should be conducted to ensure this standard is being met.

Recommendation: The Division should continue monitoring inspection services timeframes and staffing levels adjusted when less than 95% of inspections are completed within one day of request or when overtime utilization to conduct routine inspections becomes regular and ongoing.

(7.6) Provide Inspection Checklists to Each Inspector and Require Their Use on Each Inspection.

An objective of the Inspections function of the Development Services Division is to provide not only timely inspection service, but also to ensure that the inspections provided are consistent interpretations of the building codes. There are a number of steps that should be taken to enhance the level of consistency in building code interpretations. These steps are described in the sections below. Although provision of training and periodic staff meetings can be utilized to ensure consistency of interpretations another approach to enhance consistency of inspection code interpretations is through the development and use of inspection checklists.

The Division should review existing checklists and develop or revise additional ones for conducting building inspections. While not an exhaustive list, examples of checklists should include the following types of projects:

- Residential Foundation
- Wood Frame Shear Walls
- Underground Plumbing
- Rough Plumbing
- Rough Electrical
- Mechanical
- Insulation Drywall
- Interior and Exterior Lath
- Swimming Pool Spa and Hot Tub
- Building Inspection
- Water Heater and Hot Water Storage Tank Replacement
- Temporary Service Pole
- Re-Roofing
- Copper Water Line Re-Pipe
- HVAC Unit Change-Out

Interviews with inspections staff indicate that inspections checklists are not routinely utilized during inspections. The lack of use of these checklists can result in a deterioration of a standard level of service provided by the Division, both in terms of

content and quality. Use of checklists will improve consistency and increase transparency in the inspection process and assist when the Department implements more cross-trained Inspectors. The Division should also make these checklists, and inspection results, a part of the permit file. Over time, the Division should integrate these checklists into the permitting software to enable use and completion in the field either on laptops or tablets.

Recommendation: Inspection checklists should be developed and utilized by Building Inspectors to increase consistency. Completed checklists should become a component of the project file.

Recommendation: Inspection checklists should be posted to the County's website for use by customers.

(7.7) The Inspection Supervisors Should Periodically Ride Along with Each Building Inspector.

Another methodology to address the lack of consistency in inspections would be a quality control program. The program would ensure that consistency is being achieved, and assurance of the expected employee performance. A suggested program would consist of the following:

- Have the Inspection Supervisors ride, for at least one-half day every six to nine months, with each Inspector to observe their inspection procedures.
- The Inspection Supervisors should visit major jobs periodically alone to review the results of inspections by building inspectors and visit with contractors to discuss the inspector's customer service demeanor. Findings should be documented and the reviews and findings submitted monthly to the Chief Building Official.

Recommendation: The Chief Inspector should periodically ride along with each building inspector – at least one-half day every six to nine months to evaluate performance.

(7.8) The County Should implement Intake Checklists to Enhance Service to the Public.

The plan review function, both in terms of comments issued and time for receiving comments, was by far the most significant concern (though not a major issue) expressed among all individuals interviewed from the construction industry. Many, if not most, of the architects and design professionals indicated during private discussions that they ended up agreeing with the code interpretations of staff and the changes required, however, the delay in receiving initial comments impacted their overall perception of the timeliness of the process.

The first area of change that must be implemented within the process is a change in the intake process and procedures for permit applications. The front counter staff, those individuals that directly interface with the public on an on-going basis, have a significant impact on the performance levels of the County. At the present time, the individuals responsible for the intake function have limited code and process knowledge to assist the applicant at the counter. Staffing changes for this position are contained in the next chapter. However, one process change that should be implemented includes the utilization on intake checklists.

Detailed checklists should be developed (as part of the development manual) that outline submittal requirements for each permit type. These checklists should be utilized during intake to ensure applications are fully complete. If the application is not complete, it should not be accepted by the County. While this approach will be a major change for the County, if appropriately implemented with extensive public education and the provision of detailed checklists regarding submission requirements, the quality of applications being reviewed will increase over time. Based upon the project team's experience with other communities that utilize this approach, the County should also

note a decrease in the number of reviews conducted as items that previously would have been noted as incomplete on the first plan review cycle, should be significantly reduced. As noted, checklists must be developed for each functional plan review type and these need to be made available to the public for their use in self-evaluating their applications prior to submission.

Recommendation: Checklists should be utilized during the intake process to ensure submitted applications are complete. Incomplete applications should not be accepted.

Recommendation: Checklists utilized should be made available on the County's website for use by the public in self-evaluating their own applications in advance.

(7.9) The Division Should Communicate New Building Code Requirements to the Construction Industry Before These Requirements Are Enforced.

When inspectors bring new information received at outside training, or realize that something that they have not been requiring is in the codes, they immediately call for corrections. This causes hardship for owners and builders when construction approaches have to be modified, resulting in an impact on project costs and job completion deadlines. Contractors are entitled to sufficient notice time in order to prepare for requirements not previously imposed. It is reasonable that any changed requirements not previously invoked be communicated and a 60 days grace period notice be provided for implementation, and that these new requirements should not impact jobs under construction.

Recommendation: Require that any new construction requirements not previously imposed will not be enforced on current construction and future jobs until the industry is informed and a 60 day waiting period is put in place.

Recommendation: Communicate any new plan review and inspection requirements to developers, contractors, and community through issuance of information bulletins, a newsletter, and all means of communications normally

used. Distribute information bulletins describing the new requirement, and show effective date of implementation.

DRAFT

6. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND STAFFING

This final chapter presents an analysis of the plan of organization used for the permitting process in DeKalb County. The vast majority of the staff involved in the development review process are concentrated in one Department – Planning & Sustainability with other staff located in Business Licensing, Watershed, and Fire. At present, this still results in a very segmented approach to providing permitting services – as staff are not operating under a single supervisor with consistent policies and procedures, expectations, and levels of accountability.

The existing organizational structure has resulted in several managerial and service delivery issues in providing permitting services including:

- The lack of a single individual with the authority to oversee the permitting process on a day-to-day basis with a focus on resolving issues arising in different functional areas;
- The lack of unified and consistent processes and systems that cross functional areas, including computer systems, approaches to data collection and reporting requirements, and public education efforts;
- The lack of a single “culture of service” to the customer;
- Some confusion or unclear understandings from the customers of the County’s permitting process regarding who to turn to in resolving problems and the perception that there is a lack of accountability among departments; and
- Varying service levels to the customer.

There appear to be some opportunities for improvement in the plan of organization utilized for the permitting process that can easily address these concerns. Several of these key decisions have already been made to improve the existing organizational structure and efforts are underway to implement them. These include:

- **Merger of job descriptions for fire and building plan reviewers:** This will result in staff being cross-utilized to perform plan review duties of both positions and will enable them to be more flexible in work assignments based upon changes in application types.
- **Implementation of Permit Manager:** This position has already been developed and advertised and the County is in the process of hiring for the position. This will provide a single individual response for overseeing the permit center on a daily basis.
- **Transfer of Land Development:** Last year, the land development unit was transferred in the Building Division. This increases the interaction with other plan reviewers and places key review functions under a common management approach.

Determinations have already been made to transition the business licensing function into the permitting center under the control of the Planning & Sustainability Department. Based upon recent changes in staffing levels throughout the organization, the project team's analysis and review indicated that, generally, staffing levels are appropriate in aggregate throughout the divisions; however, individual staffing allocations will need to be continually monitored during the implementation phase and following the technology implementation and adoption of performance standards to ensure that the allocated staffing remains sufficient to handle incoming workloads.

The issues impacting service delivery are more due to process and procedures in place rather than due to an inadequate number of staff (except in isolated areas). Additionally, given recent workload decreases occurring due to the change in development trends and a declining economy, staff reductions have been made in most areas to realign the number of staff with workloads. With the economy strengthening the County needs to be in a position to add staff to ensure service levels are maintained once they are improved.

Based upon work with other communities, the following are typical processing times and workloads for selected positions. These standards can be utilized to determine staffing requirements as workload varies (increases or decreases).

Position	Standard																						
Building Inspector	12 to 16 inspections per day 80% of day allocated to inspections (including travel)																						
Fire Inspector	12 to 16 inspections per day 80% of day allocated to inspections (including travel)																						
Plan Reviewer (all types)	<p>85% of workday allocated plan review.</p> <p>Hours required for initial review:</p> <table> <tr> <td>New commercial/industrial buildings</td><td>20.00</td></tr> <tr> <td>New multi-family residential</td><td>20.00</td></tr> <tr> <td>Commercial Remodel / additions</td><td>7.0</td></tr> <tr> <td>Tenant improvements</td><td>6.0</td></tr> <tr> <td>Patios</td><td>1.0</td></tr> <tr> <td>Pools and Spas</td><td>1.5</td></tr> <tr> <td>Miscellaneous construction</td><td>2.0</td></tr> <tr> <td>Signs</td><td>0.75</td></tr> <tr> <td>Variance / Conditional Use</td><td>2.5</td></tr> <tr> <td>Site Plan Review</td><td>4.5</td></tr> <tr> <td>Conditional Use / Site Plan</td><td>6.5</td></tr> </table>	New commercial/industrial buildings	20.00	New multi-family residential	20.00	Commercial Remodel / additions	7.0	Tenant improvements	6.0	Patios	1.0	Pools and Spas	1.5	Miscellaneous construction	2.0	Signs	0.75	Variance / Conditional Use	2.5	Site Plan Review	4.5	Conditional Use / Site Plan	6.5
New commercial/industrial buildings	20.00																						
New multi-family residential	20.00																						
Commercial Remodel / additions	7.0																						
Tenant improvements	6.0																						
Patios	1.0																						
Pools and Spas	1.5																						
Miscellaneous construction	2.0																						
Signs	0.75																						
Variance / Conditional Use	2.5																						
Site Plan Review	4.5																						
Conditional Use / Site Plan	6.5																						

The project team will work with the County in the implementation phase to develop specific standards applicable uniquely to DeKalb County. This will enable an on-going evaluation of staffing requirements. Given the lack of consistent, accurate and reliable data from the permitting system regarding processing times, these cannot be calculated at this time and would make concrete staffing recommendations unreliable.

We will continue to develop specific staffing requirement recommendations in the coming months as better data is developed and clearer procedures are implemented.

1. A NUMBER OF PRINCIPLES WERE CONSIDERED IN EVALUATING THE PLAN OF ORGANIZATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT REVIEW PROCESS.

In evaluating the plan of organization and the management systems utilized by DeKalb County for the development review process, the Matrix Consulting Group utilized a number of principles for organizational structure. These principles are presented in the paragraphs below.

- **The development review processes are organized on a 'form follows function' basis** with a clear, distinct and comprehensive sense of purpose or mission for each functional area. Functions should be grouped consistent with their periodic interaction, common information systems, delivery of services which are linked in some way, etc., resulting in functional cohesion.
- **The organizational structure fosters accountability.** The organizational structure should foster accountability among management and supervisory staff. While this criteria needs to consider the performance management systems utilized, the organizational structure itself can facilitate or impede the performance of an organization through various means including excessive fragmentation, inconsistency among functional units, etc.
- **The plan of organization enhances communication and coordination.** The number of handoffs/exchanges required among different divisions/departments providing service to the customer should be minimized. The structure should enhance shared knowledge and understanding among divisions and departments. The channels of communication should be clear and consistent.
- **Staff resources are utilized efficiently.** The plan of organization should minimize administrative overhead. Workload should be distributed/shared to maximize the productivity of staff through peaks and valleys and offer cross-functional capabilities (e.g. to balance workload of staff across current planning and long-range planning). Processes should be standardized to enhance the efficiency and customer responsiveness of services (e.g. the permit, plan check, inspection, and code enforcement processes).
- **The potential of human capital is enabled.** The plan of organization should enhance career development opportunities, training and recruitment and retention.

- **The quality and responsiveness of services provided to customers is improved.** The plan of organization should enable staff to provide better service to the customer in terms of cycle times, user friendliness, performance management, quality control, and consistency in the application of policies and procedures. Customers are the hub – with the organization designed around them.
- **Each department and division in the permitting process have been placed at a level in accordance with its importance in achieving county-wide goals.** Departments or divisions have not been placed too high in the organizational structure or too low, relative to their importance.
- **The span of control for any manager or supervisor does not exceed the number which can be feasibly and effectively supervised.** The trend is to widen span of control. In the last decade, the introduction of information technology has not only spurred the trend toward wider spans of control, but enabled these to put in place without impacting the services provided.
- **The number of layers of management does not result in a tall, narrow configuration.** Organizations with many layers are associated with centralized decision-making. Flatter organizations tend to have decentralized decision-making, as authority for making decisions is given to the front line employees.

Each of these broader principles was considered in the development of the recommendations that follow. In general, the project team supports and encourages the County to continue to centralize key permitting functions under the responsibility of the Planning & Sustainability Department.

2. THE COUNTY SHOULD CONTINUE CONSOLIDATION OF PERMITTING FUNCTIONS.

The following diagram graphically depicts the progression that DeKalb County should make to improve permitting function consolidation. Currently, the County is near the middle of this chart. While many of the functions are consolidated and integrated within the permit center operation, there remain several key functions that fall outside of the current oversight of the permitting center. The County does not yet provide a

permitting process that is fully integrated and seamless; it provides a service that consists of some silo-based services that a customer must maneuver through.

The County should continue to make progress toward the right of the chart. The County should have most or all of the functions co-located for customer service. The use of a Permit Manager, as explained below, will provide a single point of contact for customers in resolving permitting difficulties. The County should, as planned and previously discussed in this report, have a single permit technology platform (the specific solution is yet to be determined). The County should hold executive management and line staff accountable for meeting cycle time metrics, using reports from the permitting system to document and track these metrics.

Improved Customer Service

**Silo Based
Services**



**Co-Located
Services**



**Integrated and
Seamless
Services**

Multiple Locations and Permitting	Key Department Adjacencies	Reorganization with Separate Discipline Counters	One-Stop and Expanded Coordination	Service-Based and Project Oriented Processing
Several physical customer stops	Less physical service locations	Multiple disciplines under a single General Manager	Most or all departments co-located for the customer	Management accountability and monitoring of system performance
Multiple permits issued by multiple departments with no clear entry point into the process	Some outlying bureaus and departments not integrated with the permitting center.	Multiple counters by discipline (e.g., Building, Planning, Fire, Watershed, etc.)	Use of permit technicians and permit manager as single point of contact for the customer	Critical staff in one place for walk-in customers
Customer on their own to solve interdepartmental disputes and manage the process	Improved coordination and communication	Improved coordination and problem solving	Improved coordination on individual applications, but still sequential handoffs	Seamless project processing using a parallel / concurrent process
	Fragmented technology tools	More common technology tools	Common technology tools (e.g., single permitting system)	Single point of contact with issue resolution authority
				Assigned project team members
				Performance measurement program for accountability

The following section outlines the key remaining functions that should be addressed to move toward a more integrated permitting process.

(1) The County Should Implement a Permit Technician Position to Enhance Service to the Public.

The plan review function, both in terms of comments issued and time for receiving comments, was by far the most significant concern (though not a major issue) expressed among all individuals interviewed from the construction industry. Many, if not most, of the architects and design professionals indicated during private discussions that they ended up agreeing with the code interpretations of staff and the changes required, however, the delay in receiving initial comments impacted their overall perception of the timeliness of the process.

The first area of change that must be implemented within the process is a change in the intake process and procedures for permit applications. The front counter staff, those individuals that directly interface with the public on an on-going basis, have a significant impact on the performance levels of the County. At the present time, the individuals responsible for the intake function have limited code and process knowledge to assist the applicant at the counter.

DeKalb County should implement a permit technician approach at the front counter. While the County currently utilizes this title for intake personnel, they are not performing the permit technician duties common in the permitting industry. The Permit Technician position should require the appropriate ICC Permit Tech certification. This is a very common approach – if not prevailing practice – for Building operations based upon the project teams experience on a national basis.

The permit technician would be responsible for not only first line interaction with the applicants but to review submitted plans for completeness. The permit technician should notify the applicant immediately if the application is incomplete and the application should not be accepted. When deeming an application complete, the permit technician is noting whether all required information is present in the application packet not whether the information is accurate. For example, the permit technician would ensure that all required calculations are present but not review the calculation for accuracy.

It is estimated that each of the permit technician positions would have a financial cost of approximately \$40,000 to \$50,000 inclusive of all salary and benefit costs. This would be offset if the County were to transition some of the current intake positions to this function. With this change in place, there is not the same level of need for administrative support on the front counter or for processing / intake of applications. This recommendation is one of the higher priority recommendations that can be immediately implemented to impact service provision. The ability to identify early in the process applications that are not complete saves time for both the plan reviewers (from reviewing incomplete plans) and the applicants (who can revise and resubmit plans before the initial round of review). Additionally, it provides a much greater level of customer service to applicants.

While it will be a change for the County to reject incomplete applications, if appropriately implemented with extensive public education and the provision of detailed checklists regarding submission requirements, the quality of applications being reviewed will increase over time. Based upon the project team's experience with other

communities that utilize a permit technician approach, the County should also note a decrease in the number of reviews conducted as items that previously would have been noted as incomplete on the first plan review cycle, should be significantly reduced.

Recommendation: The County should implement a true permit technician position that required ICC certification, in lieu of the existing permit technician position. These positions will be responsible for working the permit counter to assist the public, review applications as received, determine completeness, and assist applicants with understanding of the permitting process.

(2) The County Should Implement a Permit Manager Position.

In reviewing the organizational structure and staffing allocations for the Development Services Division, related to building permitting, a need was identified related to the oversight and administration of the Division. A significant amount of time is currently being spent by the Chief Building Official handling customer service issues, internal processing issues, and staff supervision. An additional mid-level managerial position, titled Permit Manager, is required within the Division to enable the Chief Building Official to focus on the higher-level technical and managerial duties of the position.

The Permit Manager position would be allocated responsibility for the daily oversight and administration of the permit operation, including primary responsibility for staff supervision, work oversight and evaluation of personnel, and similar administrative and processing duties. This position could also be assigned responsibility for oversight of the Business Licensing operation to ensure a seamless integration with the permitting process. This position should be assigned full responsibility for managing the permitting process, including those processes that go outside of the Planning & Sustainability Department, and ensuring that staff are meeting adopted performance

metrics for application processing.

Recommendation: *An additional managerial position titled Permit Manager should be added to the organizational structure of the Department to provide support within the division.*

(3) The County Should Continue to Centralize the Permitting Functions into a Consolidated Permit Center.

Prior to the start of this engagement, the County had already begun centralizing many of the permitting functions into the Planning & Sustainability Department – specifically within the Permit Center. The key remaining functions that should be, at a minimum collocated, and ultimately integrated into the overall consolidated permit center within the Planning & Sustainability Department are outlined in the following table:

Function	Description	Action Required
Business Licensing	The business licensing function has already been identified by the County as a function they are moving into the consolidated permitting center. Moving this function into the Permit Center will enable greater integration with the permit processes, a consistent focus on service consistent with that to be implemented in the Permit Center.	Placement with the Planning & Sustainability Department. The business licensing unit can be placed either as a stand alone unit reporting to the Chief Building Official, or with reporting relationship to the Permit Manager.
Water/Sewer Plan Reviewer	The County is in the process of implementing a dedicated water/sewer plan reviewer position within the Permit Center. This position will be responsible for handling all sewer reviews, fee calculations and coordination of FOG reviews.	This position should be integrated into the organizational structure similar to the other plan review functions. The development of the job description for this position should be one of the next priorities to be undertaken to ensure scope of duties is adequately defined.

Function	Description	Action Required
Fire Inspections	Considerable discussion and review has been undertaken regarding the Fire Inspectors – specifically related to how they should integrate into the permit process in Planning & Sustainability. At a minimum, they must be colocated with all other inspectors, and ideally responsible only for Fire Inspections related to the permitting process. Other ancillary or fire safety / fire prevention inspections should be undertaken by other Fire inspection staff. Typically, these positions are sworn positions but examples exist of civilianized fire inspection positions that report directly to the Chief Building Official. Longer-term this approach would be appropriate for DeKalb County – especially if the full consolidated permit center approach is undertaken. However, in the near term, implementation of this approach may have the unintended consequence of placing all new and inexperienced employees performing Fire Inspections. This could be negative for the service provided – especially since Fire Inspections is one of the areas of large discontent from customers.	Place within the Planning & Sustainability Department dedicated fire inspector positions that are fully integrated into the permitting processes and organizational structure.

While the majority of the consolidation to achieve a fully integrated permitting center has already been undertaken, with the transfer of the Fire Plan Reviewers and the Land Development unit – these additional functional consolidations will further implement consolidation of the permitting functions. With the significant investments of time and financial resources that the County is planning to undertake to change the customer service philosophy and improve technology, having all critical plan review functions under a single managerial approach and culture will increase the likelihood of success.

Inspectors who are currently providing services related to inspections for water/sewer, land development and environmental compliance (erosion and sediment

control) could also be considered for consolidation. The full integration of all inspectors into a single unit would provide a consistency of approach that will benefit the permitting process. Additionally, a single inspections unit would enable a common approach to customer service, training (of inspectors) and the ability to further cross-train inspectors that is difficult (if not impossible) to accomplish when the positions are spread across multiple departments. When implemented, the County should consider an organizational structure that provides a single Inspection Manager that oversees scheduling, managing, evaluating and training all inspectors. This position should report to the Permit Manager position already being implemented. The relocation of these inspectors to a consolidated inspections unit will require some additional implementation planning regarding how the positions are funded and the establishment of inspection fees at a level sufficient to cover the work performed.

Recommendation: As already planned by the County, the project team concurs with the plan to move business licensing into the Planning & Sustainability Department.

Recommendation: The County should pursue the integration of Fire Inspectors into the consolidated Permit Center structure.

Recommendation: The Water/Sewer Plan Reviewer position already identified by the County should be implemented as soon as possible. This will incorporate a critical plan review function into the centralized permitting center.

Recommendation: The inspectors currently performing inspections related to permitting activities (development construction and environmental compliance) should be fully integrated into the Development Services Division. As this change is implemented the County should implement a consolidated Inspections Unit with Development Services to ensure a consistent approach, performance standards and training program – as well as to implement additional cross-training of inspections staff.

- (4) With the Implementation of the Permit Technician Position, the County Should Consolidate the Cashiering Function into a Dedicated Position.

With the change in the role of the permitting technician position and the duties performed, an opportunity arises to segregate the cashiering function from the intake function and increase efficiency of the process. As noted in the process review, there are a several areas of improvement that should be undertaken to improve the cashiering function (improved technology being a major one). However, with the new duties allocated to the Permit Technician position, the cashiering function should be established as a separate position that only handles the collection of fees following intake by the Permit Technician. The project team has estimated that the County should plan for two positions to ensure that no backup in the process is achieved by segregating out these duties. However, over time if the other issues related to payments are resolved, the staffing should be revisited to determine if it is still appropriate. This position will also provide opportunities for existing permit technicians who do not desire, or are not able, to achieve the required ICC certifications a position to transition to when the new Permit Technician requirements are implemented.

Recommendation: The cashiering function should be established as a stand-alone position at the point in time that the enhanced permit technician position is implemented.

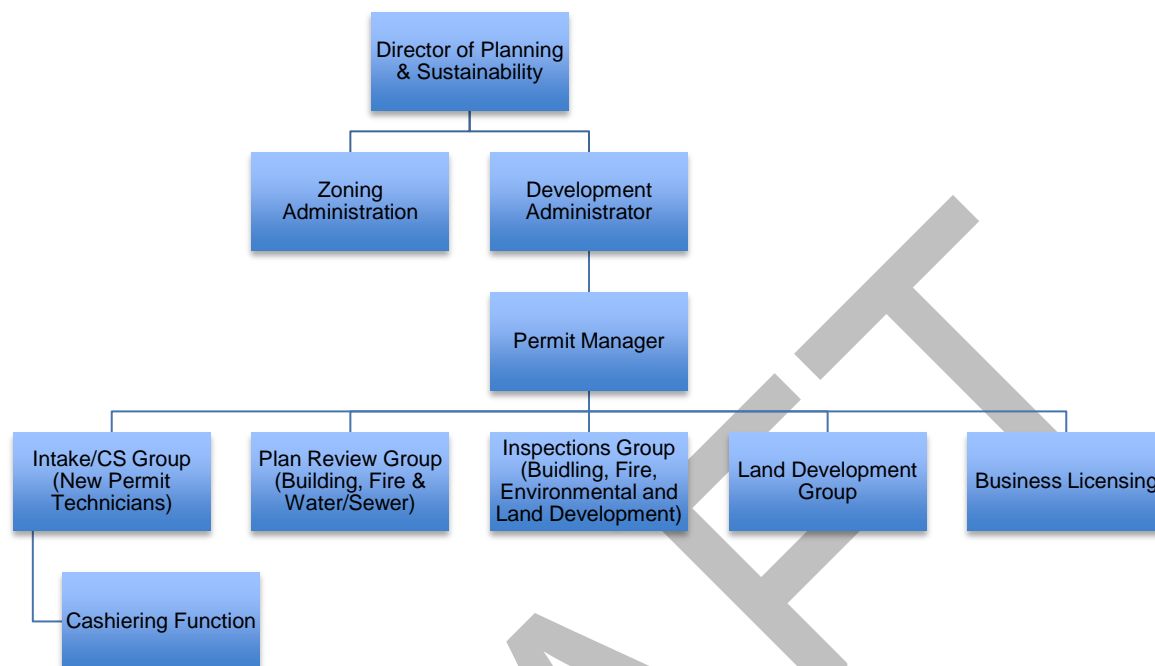
(5) The Overall Organizational Structure Should be Modified to Improve the Permitting and Licensing Functions.

The current organizational structure for permitting and business licenses functions are represented in the following table which shows the current and proposed allocation of the various units.

Function	Current Location	Reports To	Proposed Location
Zoning Administration	Zoning	Zoning Administrator	Development Services Division (current zoning reviews only). All direct planning functions (and the determination of zoning policy) stay reporting to Zoning Administrator.
Building Permit Intake	Building Division	Development Administrator	No change.
Plan Review Group	Building Division	Development Administrator	No change.
Building Inspectors	Building Division	Development Administrator	No change.
Land Development	Building Division	Development Administrator	No change.
Backflow	Watershed	Watershed	No change in organizational structure.
FOG	Watershed	Watershed	No change in organizational structure
Environmental Compliance	Public Works	Development Services	Move to Development Services.
Development Construction Inspectors	Public Works	Development Services	Move to Development Services.
Business Licensing	Finance	Deputy Director of Finance	Building Division reporting to Development Administrator
Fire Plan Review	Fire	Fire Marshal	Development Administrator
Fire Inspectors	Fire	Fire Marshal	Locate with other Inspectors – maintain reporting relationship to Fire Marshal

These changes will result in the following functional organizational chart for the permitting functions under the responsibility of the Development Administrator as shown below (this chart also incorporates the staffing changes previously discussed):

PROPOSED ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DIVISION



The only functions remaining separate from the Development Administrator under this approach are those functions that are principally related to Watershed activities, and direct control of Fire Inspectors. This approach for a consolidated organizational structure is consistent with that seen in many other communities, especially those placing a high focus on permitting service to applicants. As shown, the Permit Manager becomes a significantly critical position within the permitting process having oversight of all core permitting functions. This will enable a consistent culture and approach to service delivery, the implementation of specific performance standards for each unit, and the ability to resolve inter-unit conflicts.

One alternative that may be considered during implementation is to have Business Licensing functions report directly to the Development Administrator position rather than the Permit Manager. If span of control becomes an issue this may need to

be implemented in that manner. However, having them report to the Permit Manager provides a more cohesive oversight of the entire permitting function.

DRAFT

APPENDIX A: CUSTOMER AND STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK AND INPUT SUMMARY

The Matrix Consulting Group conducted a survey of individuals who have used the DeKalb County permitting process and interacted with County staff in order to gain an understanding of their experiences and perceptions, and to give them an opportunity to suggest improvements to the process. The survey results below are based on 128 responses received. All responses were provided with assurance of confidentiality.

1. SURVEY OVERVIEW

The survey consisted of 4 sections. The first section asked respondents to provide some demographic data for the purposes of filtering responses. They provided their role in interactions with the permitting process, how frequently they deal with the process, when their last experience with the process was, and which divisions or groups they deal with during the process.

The second section contained 28 statements, to which respondents were asked to select one of the following responses: “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neutral,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” For purposes of discussion, responses of “strongly agree” and “agree” are grouped together in some tables, as are responses of “strongly disagree” and “disagree”. These statements are intended to provide a better understanding of the perceptions and attitudes of the permitting process’ users regarding specific parts of their experience.

In the third section, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which 12 different groups and divisions within the permitting process met their expectations for

service delivery. For each division, they selected “significantly below expectations”, “below expectations”, “meets expectations”, “exceeds expectations”, or “significantly exceeds expectations”. These ratings are intended to gauge users’ degree of satisfaction with specific groups of employees within the permitting process.

In the fourth section, users were given the opportunity to respond in their own words to 4 open-ended prompts and compare the difficulty of DeKalb County’s permitting process with that of other counties in which they have worked. The open-ended prompts were designed to gather user opinions on the Division’s strengths and weaknesses, and to give them an avenue for suggesting improvements.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC IDENTIFIERS

While all responses were kept confidential, respondents were asked to provide four pieces of information about themselves in order to make trends and correlations visible in their responses. The questions asked and a summary of responses are listed below:

- **“What is your role in interacting with DeKalb County related to development review and permitting?”**

Role in Interactions with DeKalb County Development Review and Permitting	
Role	Percentage of Respondents
Architect	3.2%
Business Owner	19.7%
Developer	6.3%
General Contractor	12.6%
Subcontractor	3.2%
Engineer	3.9%
Homeowner	31.5%
Other	19.7%

- **“How frequently do you interact with the DeKalb County business licensing and permitting process?”**

Frequency of Interactions with DeKalb County Business Licensing and Permitting	
Frequency	Percentage of Respondents
Twice a year or less	50%
Occasionally (several times a year)	30.7%
Frequently (several times per month)	19.4%

- “How recent was your last interaction with the DeKalb County business licensing and permitting process?”

Date of last Interaction with DeKalb County Business Licensing and Permitting	
Date of Last Interaction	Percentage of Respondents
Less than six months ago	56.9%
Six months to a year ago	12.2%
More than a year ago	30.9%

- “During the last year, please indicate which departments/divisions you have had contact with.”

Departments/Divisions Contacted Within the Last Year	
Department/Division	Percentage of Respondents
Planning & Sustainability	70.0%
GIS	20.0%
FIRE	38.1%
Watershed Management	45.7%
Business Licenses	41.9%

3. MULTIPLE CHOICE STATEMENTS

The following sections describe users’ responses to the multiple-choice statements from the second section of the survey, regarding their perceptions and attitudes about various aspects of the County’s community development and permitting process. In general, respondents tended to disagree with the statements in this section, demonstrating general dissatisfaction with their experience.

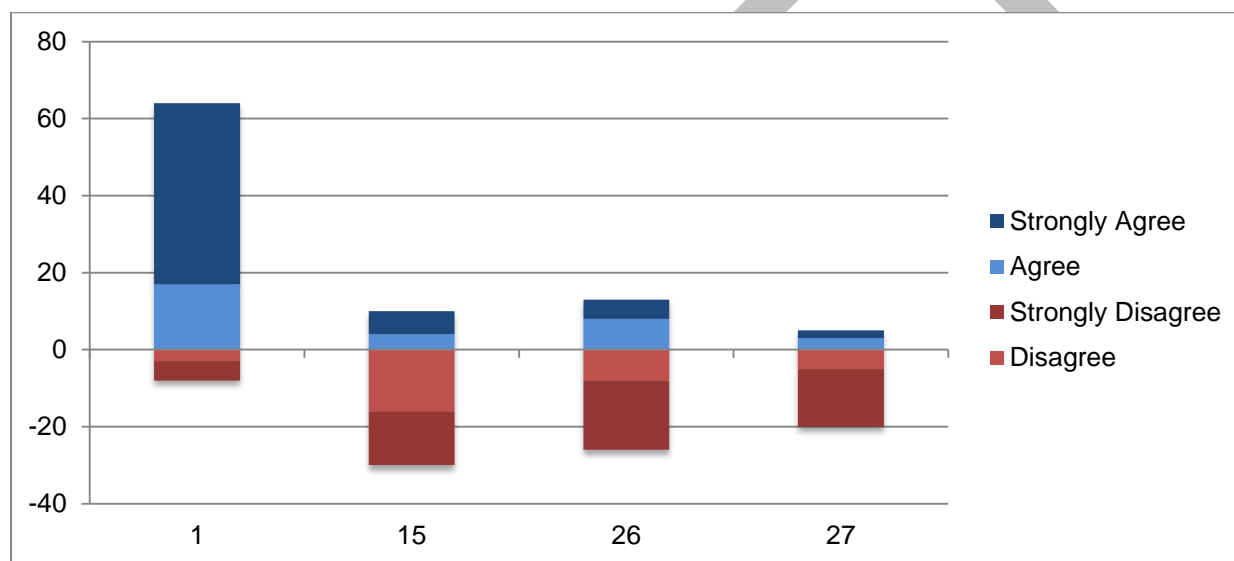
(1) Simplicity of Regulations and Processes

The following table contains users’ responses to statements about the simplicity of regulations and processes in the DeKalb County process.

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N/A

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
1. Permitting processes in DeKalb County are unnecessarily complex or difficult for the applicant.	76.2%	3.6%	9.5%	10.7%
15. The land development and zoning regulations of the County did not pose and more difficulty than surrounding municipalities/counties for the approval of my application.	12.3%	17.3%	37.0%	33.3%
26. The business license process is easy to understand.	16.3%	12.5%	32.5%	38.8%
27. The County does not require additional reviews or information for granting a business license that exceed other communities in the area.	6.3%	21.3%	25.0%	47.5%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



Please note the following points:

- **Statement #1:** *“Permitting processes in DeKalb County are unnecessarily complex or difficult for the applicant.”* This is the only statement that is phrased negatively, meaning that the high number of agreeing responses are actually users dissatisfied with the level of unnecessary complexity in the County’s permitting process.
- **Statement #15:** *“The land development and zoning regulations of the County did not pose and more difficulty than surrounding municipalities/counties for the approval of my application.”* Respondents whose last contact with the County was long ago, and whose contact had only been with one or two departments, tended to disagree with this statement; more recent and multi-departmental experiences garnered slightly more positive responses. Many comments claimed that the County is not business-friendly, and is the most difficult county in the Metro area to work with.

- **Statement #26:** *“The business license process is easy to understand.”* In addition to general disagreement, 73% of responding business owners disagreed with this statement. Comments noted that the process is unnecessarily difficult, involved going to multiple floors/windows, and might be much better if it were automated.
- **Statement #27:** *“The County does not require additional reviews or information for granting a business license that exceed other communities in the area”* Many users skipped this statement, but those who responded made it clear that they disagree. 73% of business owners again took issue with this statement, and the comments provided illustrate users’ opinions that the business license process contains onerous requirements above and beyond what other counties require.

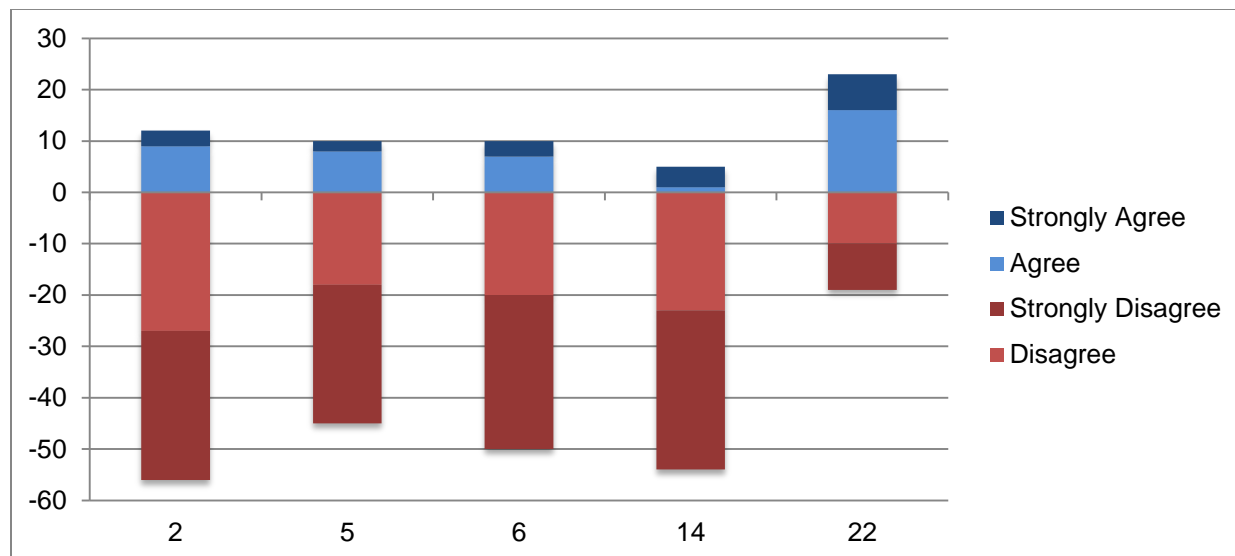
There is a clearly negative sentiment among users regarding the simplicity (or lack thereof) of the County’s regulations and processes. Users made it clear that their experience could have been much easier if the regulations for land development review had been of similar complexity to neighboring counties, or if the business license process had been streamlined.

(2) Clear Communication

The following table contains users’ responses to statements about the communication they received throughout the course of their interaction with the County and the ease with which they were able to find relevant information.

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N/A
2. It is clear to me who I should go to in DeKalb County when I have a question about the interpretation of a condition or code.	14.0%	8.1%	65.1%	12.8%
5. When changes to my application were needed, staff clearly communicated the rationale and need for change to me.	11.9%	10.7%	53.6%	23.8%
6. Staff clearly communicated to me the time required to process the various aspects of my application.	12.0%	8.4%	60.2%	19.3%
14. I found it easy to get information about the status of my application once it was submitted.	6.0%	9.6%	65.1%	19.3%
22. The process for getting and scheduling an inspection was clear to me.	29.1%	15.2%	24.1%	31.6%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



Please note the following points:

- **Statement #2:** *“It is clear to me who I should go to in DeKalb County when I have a question about the interpretation of a condition or code.”* This statement clearly received strong disagreement, and the sentiment remained regardless of the frequency of respondent’s interactions with the County. Comments were plentiful, and expressed users’ frustrations at being referred from employee to employee, receiving multiple interpretations of the same code from different staff, and finding little assistance in determining who to speak to.
- **Statement #5:** *“When changes to my application were needed, staff clearly communicated the rationale and need for change to me.”* The disagreement with this statement was consistent across roles and frequencies of contact. Comments to this statement reveal a litany of problems for users: difficulty getting employees to call them back, or reaching them in the first place, ineffective and inconsistent communication from staff, and lack of explanation for red-lined prints.
- **Statement #6:** *“Staff clearly communicated to me the time required to process the various aspects of my application.”* The disagreement with this statement was consistent across roles and frequency of contact. Comments include complaints that the time required for processing is twice what was promised, that the same time frame is cited regardless of the project type, and that times for processing are themselves irrelevant given the disorganized nature of the process and staff’s inability to accurately predict them.

- **Statement #14:** *“I found it easy to get information about the status of my application once it was submitted.”* This statement met consistent disagreement across roles and frequency of contact. The comments provided by users outlined their opinions that the online portal is limited and confusing, that it is difficult to contact staff by phone, that an accurate time estimate for completion cannot be obtained, and that the entire process lacks transparency.
- **Statement #22:** *“The process for getting and scheduling an inspection was clear to me.”* This statement stood alone as the only one on the topic of communication to receive more agreeing responses than disagreeing ones. Users who contact the county more frequently were slightly more likely to agree with this statement. The comments established that the process is difficult, but clearly outlined, and that the IVR system is in dire need of improvement.

Respondents made their opinions clear about the level of communication received from the County during the course of their applications. Contacting and getting information from staff was an area of weakness, with those statements receiving strongly negative responses. The process of getting inspections itself fared better, although users expressed their wishes for improvement to the clarity of communication related to that process as well.

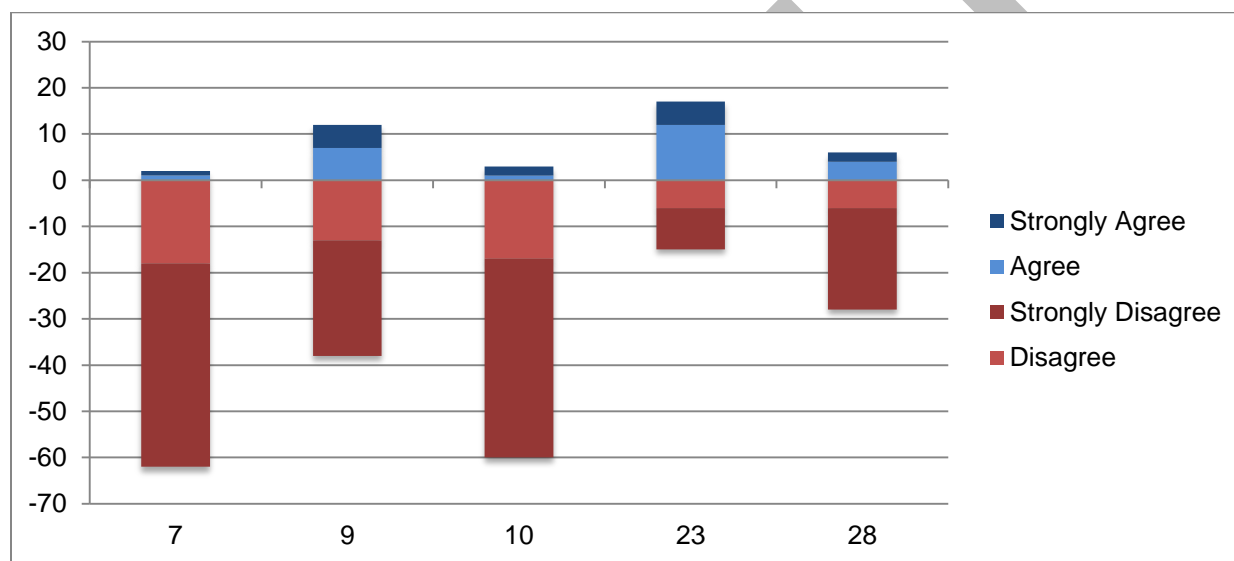
(3) Operational Effectiveness

The following table contains users’ responses to statements about the efficiency and accuracy with which their application was processed by the County.

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N/A
7. The County consistently meets its goals for permit turnaround times.	2.4%	3.6%	74.7%	19.3%
9. After I submitted my application, the initial review and analysis of my application was complete and accurate, and future problems did not surface that should have been caught during the initial review.	14.6%	15.9%	46.3%	23.2%

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
10. The number of calendar days taken to review and approve my application was acceptable. I did not have to wait an unreasonable amount of time for review of my application and plans.	3.6%	3.6%	72.3%	20.5%
23. When I called to schedule an inspection before the end of the day, an inspection was scheduled for the following day.	21.5%	21.5%	19.0%	38.0%
28. The timeframe for County review and approval of business license applications is acceptable.	7.5%	17.5%	35.0%	40.0%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



Please note the following points:

- **Statement #7:** *“The County consistently meets its goals for permit turnaround times.”* This statement was met with only 2 agreeing responses, and more than 40 who strongly disagreed. The comments reinforce these opinions, citing long turnaround times, time spent running between floors, understaffed departments, and general slowness that makes it impossible for the County to meet its goals.
- **Statement #9:** *“After I submitted my application, the initial review and analysis of my application was complete and accurate, and future problems did not surface that should have been caught during the initial review.”* While opinions were generally dissatisfied, half of the users who dealt solely with Fire provided neutral or positive responses. In general, however, the comments make it clear that costly and time-consuming issues routinely surface after the initial review.
- **Statement #10:** *“The number of calendar days taken to review and approve my application was acceptable. I did not have to wait an unreasonable amount of*

time for review of my application and plans.” Similar to statement #7, users left no doubt about how they felt regarding this statement. This statement also received as many comments as any other multiple-choice statement in the survey, all of them reiterating the slowness, inefficiency, and understaffed nature of the application review process.

- **Statement #23:** *“When I called to schedule an inspection before the end of the day, an inspection was scheduled for the following day.”* This statement received more agreement than disagreement, and opinions were consistent across roles and frequency of contact. The comments confirmed that inspections are scheduled for the following day, but made it clear that scheduling an inspection is no guarantee of getting one; some comments stated that inspectors do not always arrive when an inspection is scheduled.
- **Statement #28:** *“The timeframe for County review and approval of business license applications is acceptable.”* Opinions were strongly negative on this statement, although more users remained neutral toward this statement than others in the section. Sentiments remained steady across roles and frequency of contact. Comments were few, but clarified that the timeframe is too long, or is not advertised in the first place.

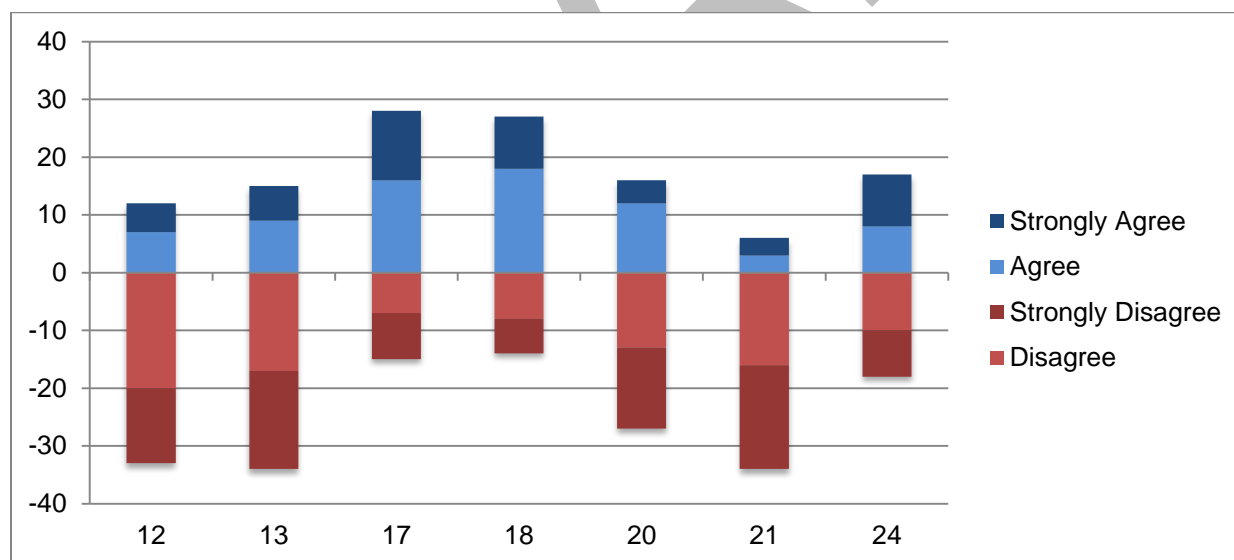
Users expressed general discontentment with the operational effectiveness of the County’s application processing, with only the automated scheduling system receiving hesitant approval. The statements regarding the timeframes for application review were met with especially strong disagreement, as the time required for review is a primary source of concern and frustration among applicants. Additionally, users hope to see more effective initial reviews in order to prevent the expenditure of time and resources resulting from future issues arising.

(4) Staff Performance

The following table contains users’ responses to statements about the quality of the staff they worked with during their contact with the County, particularly the level of knowledge and effective code interpretation rendered by staff.

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N/A
12. The staff were practical in applying the County's land development and building code regulations to my application and plans.	14.5%	20.5%	39.8%	25.3%
13. Staff were knowledgeable and made few mistakes in reviewing my application.	18.5%	17.3%	42.0%	22.2%
17. Inspectors were knowledgeable about the code they were enforcing.	34.6%	13.6%	18.5%	33.3%
18. Inspectors made few mistakes in conducting site inspections.	33.3%	18.5%	17.3%	30.9%
20. Inspectors are consistent in their interpretation of code requirements.	20.0%	15.0%	33.8%	31.3%
21. There are rarely conflicts in interpretation of building codes between plan review staff and building inspectors.	7.5%	16.3%	42.5%	33.8%
24. Inspectors did not ask for requirements that exceed or were beyond code.	21.3%	22.5%	22.5%	33.8%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



Please note the following points:

- Statement #12:** *"The staff were practical in applying the County's land development and building code regulations to my application and plans."* This statement received string disagreement, particularly from users who dealt with the Planning & Sustainability division. The comments cite a number of difficulties, including a focus that is regulatory rather than solution-based, confusion between different inspectors, and an inability to explain ordinances in layman's terms.

- **Statement #13:** *“Staff were knowledgeable and made few mistakes in reviewing my application.”* Most users disagreed with this statement, and the sentiment held across roles and frequency of contact. The comments supported the lack of agreement, describing discrepancies of interpretation and inadequate numbers of staff.
- **Statements #17-18:** Respondents provided approximately twice as much agreement as disagreement to these 2 statements regarding the competence of inspectors on site inspection and enforcing codes. Contractors and homeowners in particular were pleased with the inspectors’ work. The comments presented some concerns, such as inconsistency from inspector to inspector.
- **Statement #20:** *“Inspectors are consistent in their interpretation of code requirements.”* While this statement met mostly with disagreement, more than half of the customers who dealt only with Planning & Sustainability agreed with the statement. There were only 2 comments, one citing discrepancies between plan reviewers and inspectors, the other saying inspectors are professional.
- **Statement #21:** *“There are rarely conflicts in interpretation of building codes between plan review staff and building inspectors.”* This statement received more disagreeing responses than any other in the section, and the opinion was the same regardless of role or frequency of contact. The comments supported the lack of agreement, claiming multiple instances of discrepancies or failures to catch violations early in the review process.
- **Statement #24:** *“Inspectors did not ask for requirements that exceed or were beyond code.”* Opinions were split on this statement, but contractors tended to agree with this statement, while developers and business owners trended toward disagreement. Only 2 comments were received, saying that inspectors ask for excess requirements frequently, and that it sometimes happens during Fire inspection.

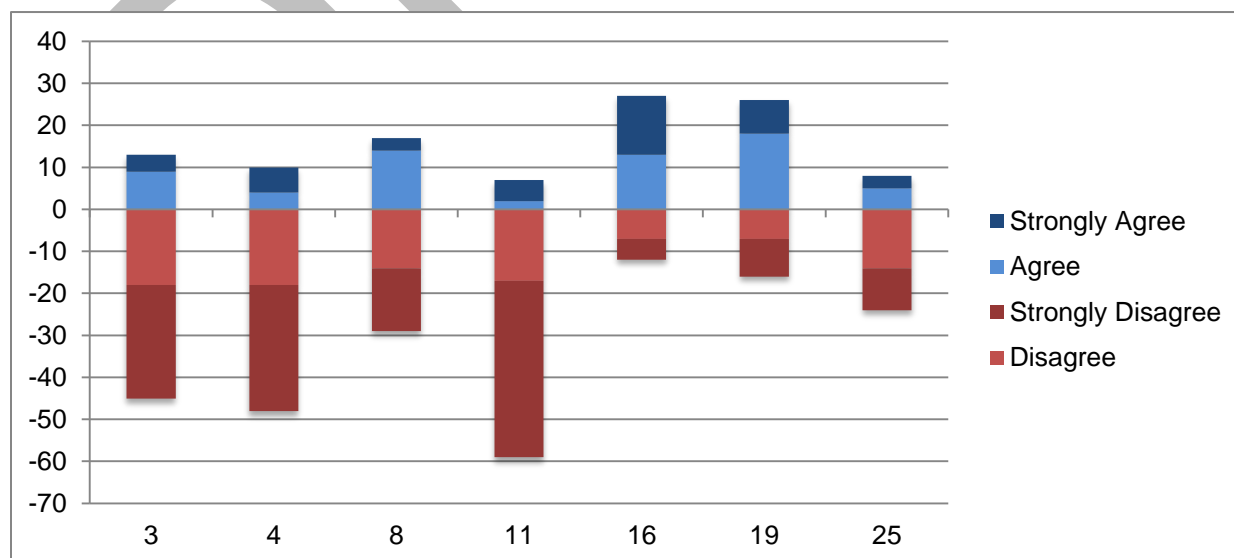
Opinions seem to be divided on the County’s staff. While responses trended toward disagreement in general, respondents gave inspectors high marks for being knowledgeable and accurate in code application. Most of the dissatisfaction seems to spring from discrepancies in interpretation and enforcement among staff and a by-the-book, unhelpful focus as illustrated by the responses to statement #21 and comments on other statements.

(5) Customer Service

The following table contains users' responses to statements about the customer service they received during their contact with the County.

Simplicity of Regulations and Processes				
Statement	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N/A
3. Staff deal with me using a positive approach of "here's how to get your application approved" rather than a punitive approach of "you can't do it that way".	15.3%	15.3%	52.9%	16.5%
4. County departments (planning & zoning, building, GIS, etc.) worked cooperatively and effectively together in reviewing my application.	12.0%	9.6%	57.8%	20.5%
8. I found counter staff to be responsive and helpful when I submitted my application.	20.5%	19.3%	34.9%	25.3%
11. Staff were readily accessible by phone or in person when I needed help or an explanation regarding my application.	8.4%	3.6%	71.1%	16.9%
16. Inspectors (Building, Fire, FOG) were courteous when conducting inspections.	32.9%	19.5%	14.6%	32.9%
19. When inspectors found problems during their inspection, they were thorough and clear in explaining what needed to be done to fix the problem and get approval.	32.5%	16.3%	20.0%	31.3%
25. Inspectors were easily accessible when I needed assistance in resolving problems.	10.0%	23.8%	30.0%	36.3%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



Please note the following points:

- **Statement #3:** *“Staff deal with me using a positive approach of “here’s how to get your application approved” rather than a punitive approach of ‘you can’t do it that way’.”* Most respondents disagreed with this statement, and the opinion was the same across roles and frequency of contact. The comments received note that while some staff are helpful, many of them are difficult to work with, lack creativity, or seem too busy to help find a solution.
- **Statement #4:** *“County departments (planning & zoning, building, GIS, etc.) worked cooperatively and effectively together in reviewing my application.”* This statement received mostly disagreeing responses, from different roles and frequencies of contact. Comments strongly disagreed with the statement, saying that cooperation is almost nonexistent between departments, that applicants are frequently shuffled between floors.
- **Statement #8:** *“I found counter staff to be responsive and helpful when I submitted my application.”* There was more disagreement than agreement with this statement, but responses were fairly evenly distributed. Among engineers, agreement was 75%. Many comments complained about the long waiting times before they were able to see one of the counter staff, the apparent disregard for applicants’ time, and the inconsistency in staff’s attitude.
- **Statement #11:** *“Staff were readily accessible by phone or in person when I needed help or an explanation regarding my application.”* This statement received strong negative feedback across the board, with disagreement outnumbering agreement nearly 6 to 1. Multiple comments stated that users have been unable to reach a live person, unable to leave a message or email because the voicemail or inboxes have been full, and unable to elicit a response from staff.
- **Statement #16:** *“Inspectors (Building, Fire, FOG) were courteous when conducting inspections.”* While many respondents remained neutral, this statement received twice as much agreement as disagreement. Contractors and homeowners especially expressed satisfaction in this area. The comments mostly supported this sentiment, with many users noting that inspectors are courteous. Others mentioned that inspectors’ attitudes can be inconsistent, or that they may be courteous, but not always knowledgeable or on time.
- **Statement #19:** *“When inspectors found problems during their inspection, they were thorough and clear in explaining what needed to be done to fix the problem and get approval.”* This statement received more agreement than disagreement, an opinion trend that held across roles and frequency of contact. Comments were a different story, with many users stating that inspectors are not solution-oriented, but are intent on the regulatory aspect of their work.

- **Statement #25:** “Inspectors were easily accessible when I needed assistance in resolving problems.” Mostly disagreement was received for this statement, with developers in particular offering no agreement. The comments were mixed, however, with some saying that they have never had any problems reaching inspectors, and others saying that they are highly inaccessible.

Users made it clear that the current level of customer service in the County is not satisfactory. Inter-departmental cooperation, the accessibility of staff, and the degree to which staff seek solutions were all points of contention among respondents, while the helpfulness of staff once they were accessed received a better response, and the County’s inspectors were reviewed mostly positively. Based on the responses to this section, users take issue with the difficulty in getting an audience with staff and the complexity of the review/inspection process, rather than with employees themselves.

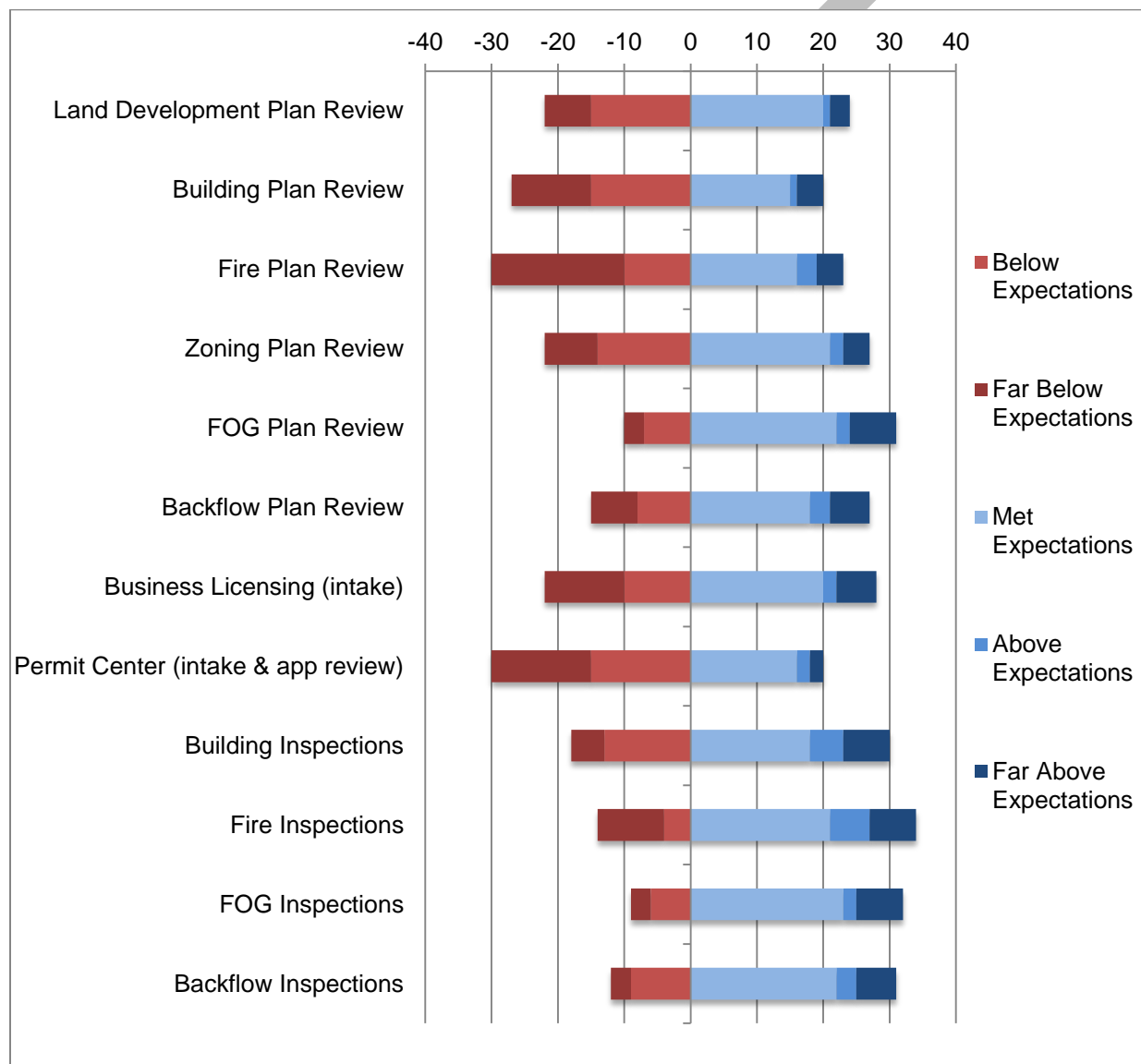
4. SATISFACTION WITH SERVICES

The following sections describe users’ responses to the multiple-choice statements from the third section of the survey, regarding their satisfaction with twelve departments and divisions involved in the County’s development review, permitting, and licensing process. The number of responses was lower for this section than the previous one, possibly because many respondents only have experience with a handful of offices involved in the County permitting process. The table below contains users’ ratings of their satisfaction with each department/division.

Satisfaction With County Divisions/Departments in the Permitting Process					
Department/Division	Far Below Expectations	Below Expectations	Met Expectations	Above Expectations	Far Above Expectations
Land Development Plan Review	15.2%	32.6%	43.5%	2.2%	6.5%
Building Plan Review	25.5%	31.9%	31.9%	2.1%	8.5%
Fire Plan Review	37.7%	18.9%	30.2%	5.7%	7.6%
Zoning Plan Review	16.3%	28.6%	42.9%	4.1%	8.2%
FOG Plan Review	7.3%	17.1%	53.7%	4.9%	17.1%
Backflow Plan Review	16.7%	19.1%	42.9%	7.1%	14.3%
Business Licensing (intake)	24.0%	20.0%	40.0%	4.0%	12.0%

Satisfaction With County Divisions/Departments in the Permitting Process					
Permit Center (intake and application review)	30.0%	30.0%	32.0%	4.0%	12.0%
Building Inspections	10.4%	27.1%	37.5%	10.4%	14.6%
Fire Inspections	20.8%	8.3%	43.8%	12.5%	14.6%
FOG Inspections	7.3%	14.6%	56.1%	4.9%	17.1%
Backflow Inspections	7.0%	20.9%	51.2%	7.0%	14.0%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of satisfied (blue) and unsatisfied (red) ratings for each department/division.



Please note the following points:

- **Land Development Review** received mixed reactions, with most users saying they met or were slightly below expectations. The most negative responses came

from users who had dealt with every department. The comments stated that this process is too time-consuming, lacks a sense of communication between staff, and that requirements imposed by staff are too stringent while not always matching those required in the field.

- **Building Plan Review** received slightly more dissatisfied responses than satisfied ones, with particular negativity coming from users who deal with staff on a more frequent basis. The comments touch repeatedly on the long amount of time required to get plans reviewed, mentioning an apparent staff shortage and difficulty in getting staff to respond to messages.
- **Fire Plan Review** was, along with the Permit Center, the division furthest below expectations. The dissatisfaction was most intense among frequent users, while infrequent users actually reviewed the division positively. The comments cited unreasonably long timeframes for processing and difficulty eliciting communication from staff as the primary sources of frustration.
- **Zoning Plan Review** received mixed responses, with slightly more users saying their expectations were met or exceeded than not met. Again, infrequent users of the permitting process were more satisfied than frequent users. The comments stated that this division operates inconsistently and slowly, and that staff can be discourteous.
- **FOG Plan Review and Inspections** were the two most positively reviewed divisions on the survey. For both of them, 3 times as many users felt their expectations were met or exceeded as not met. The comments did, however, point out that some users felt there was a level of inconsistency in the review process and unnecessary rigidity in both the review and inspection division.
- **Backflow Plan Review and Inspections** were close behind the FOG group with a strong majority of satisfaction from respondents. The comments on these functions were few, with some questioning whether there is any follow-up on conditional approvals, and another challenging inspectors' authority to request the applicant to make changes on their property beyond what was approved on the plans.
- **Business Licensing (Intake)** received mixed reviews, slightly on the positive side. Contractors expressed generally high levels of satisfaction, while business owners themselves were less pleased with their experience. In the comments, users expressed frustration about slow customer service, time wasted as a result of poor staff communication, and difficulty getting employees to respond to their mail or messages.
- **Permit Center (Intake & App Review)** received, along with Fire Plan Review, the most dissatisfied responses of any division. The frustration was especially pronounced among users who deal with County staff on a frequent basis, and

among developers and contractors. Multiple comments described waiting times of several hours for even simple permit drop-offs and a customer service experience that lacked communication and courtesy.

- **Building Inspections** received more satisfied than unsatisfied responses. Architects and contractors in particular felt that the division met or exceeded their expectations. The comments section brought up complaints of inconsistent interpretations and requirements between different inspectors, poor documentation and follow-up, and an automated scheduling system that is difficult to use.
- **Fire Inspections** received a strong majority of satisfied responses. Among those who claimed to have dealt directly with the Fire Department, however, reviews were less complimentary. In the comments, users said that inspectors are punitive rather than cooperative, and do not always document everything that needs fixing. They also mentioned difficulty scheduling inspections and getting a Certificate of Completion when inspections are done.

Users provided a detailed look at their experiences and opinions of the various departments and divisions involved in the permitting process. FOG and Backflow stood out as the groups currently meeting and exceeding expectations, while plan review in the other departments was a source of malcontent for the majority of respondents. Long wait times for both speaking to staff and getting applications processed, poor communication between applicants and staff, and poor communication between departments were consistent themes for those expressing their frustration.

5. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS.

The following sections summarize users' responses to the open-ended questions in the final section of the survey.

(1) What does the County currently do well (current strengths) in the business licensing and permitting process?

There were 42 responses to this prompt. Many users simply took this question as an opportunity to say that they felt there was little the County is doing correctly. Among those who provided constructive comments, the following responses were gathered:

- Competent, courteous inspectors (3 responses)
- Staff explanation of the permitting process (3 responses)
- Friendly and courteous staff (2 responses)
- Clear comments on post-submittal building plan review (2 responses)
- Permits can be picked up easily when they are complete (2 responses)
- Timely renewal reminders
- Accessible building
- Some knowledgeable staff
- Alcohol licensing
- Strong zoning review division
- Walk-in permits have been a good change
- Business licensing
- The commitment to improving the permitting process is a good step
- The 3rd floor runs well

Users listed a number of strengths, although the same strength was rarely listed more than once, and several of those mentioned were repeatedly identified as weaknesses in comments at other points in the survey. Regardless, the demeanor of employees, both at the office and in the field, gathered multiple positive comments, as did the quality of work produced at the end of the plan review process.

(2) Are there any steps or requirements that you feel could be streamlined or eliminated? If so, explain.

There were 39 responses to this prompt. The following responses were gathered from respondents:

- As much of the system as possible should be automated and information posted online for efficiency and transparency (5 responses)
- Multiple departments should be in one place or in one meeting in order to foster communication (4 responses)
- Better explanation and improved timeline for business licenses (4 responses)
- Consolidate functions so 1 or 2 people touch a project over the course of its review (2 responses)
- Encourage appointments to decrease wait times at intake (2 responses)
- Add resources to plan review in order to speed up review time (2 responses)
- Applicants should not have to submit building plans when renting a building for an approved use without any changes (2 responses)
- Improved communication between business licenses and waste
- Expand the one-day permit program
- Streamline the land disturbance permitting process

- Prioritize plan review by the size of the job so that small projects do not have to wait for unreasonable lengths of time
- Eliminate the need for a second plan resubmittal, and have engineers meet with departments separately to address concerns
- Allow the contractors and architects to deal directly with the FMO instead of having a special process for the DCSD
- Owners should not have to pay to correct mistakes that result from staff errors

Users provided a number of suggestions for areas that could be streamlined or eliminated. Foremost among them was a desire to see the permitting process automated, with information posted online to allow greater user accessibility. Just as popular was the concept of consolidating departments and processes to promote cooperation and reduce miscommunication/discrepancies between staff. Additional comments expressed a desire for faster intake and plan review times, and improvements to the business license process.

(3) What do you feel are the three most important changes that could be made to the business licensing/permitting process to improve service levels?

There were 44 responses to this prompt, with many offering 2 or 3 changes. The following responses were received more than once from respondents:

- Increased staff competency and accountability (14 responses)
- Improved customer service (11 responses)
- Answer voice mails (9 responses)
- Accessible, functional, up-to-date website (9 responses)
- Better front-end or online explanations of the process to customers (8 responses)
- Faster plan review and permit processing times (8 responses)
- Automate as much of the process as possible (7 responses)
- Increased number of staff (6 responses)
- Decreased wait times at intake points (5 responses)
- Standardized code interpretations and requirements (4 responses)
- Improved departmental leadership (3 responses)
- Improved inter-departmental communication (3 responses)
- Waived requirement of building permit for as-is business licenses (3 responses)
- Remove the current review panel (2 responses)
- Consolidate functions of the process to encourage collaboration (2 responses)
- Prioritize plan review by size and conduct them concurrently, rather than sequentially by order received (2 responses)

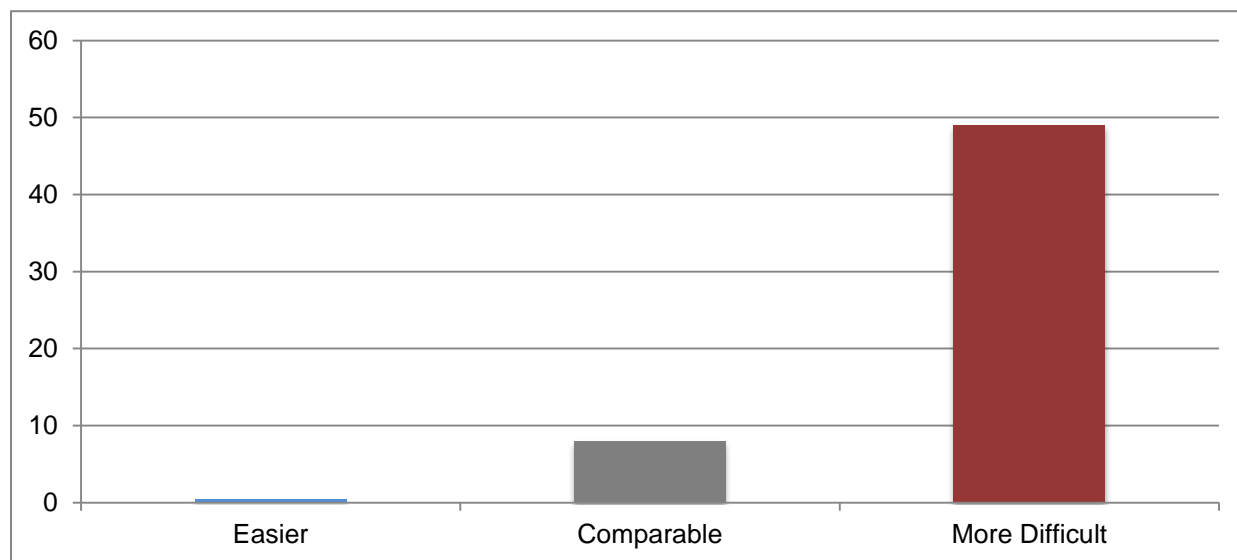
Respondents provided a number of agreeing suggestions for making improvements in the County's development review and permitting process, particularly when it comes to dealing with staff and getting answers to their questions. Staff improvements, whether by training, increased accountability, or hiring, composed 40 of the responses received. Automation and improved online functions were another repeated suggestion. These responses suggest that users feel frustrated at their inability to understand the system, and want to improve the customer experience either by finding staffing solutions that can provide answers or by removing the need for as many staff as possible through online front-end explanation or automation of the process.

(4) In comparison with other counties or municipalities with which you have had contact in the last year, how would you rate DeKalb County's processes?

The following table summarizes responses to this question:

Comparison of DeKalb County's Processes to Other Counties and Municipalities			
	Easier	About the Same	More Difficult
In comparison with other counties or municipalities with which you have had contact in the last year, how would you rate DeKalb County's processes?	0.0%	14.0%	86.0%

The following graph provides a visual representation of users' responses to this question:



As demonstrated, the vast majority of users find DeKalb County's system to be more difficult than other counties.

(5) If there are any other comments you would like to share with the project team, please share them here.

There were 26 responses to this question. While many of them repeated sentiments common throughout the survey, the unique responses are listed below:

- There seem to be inter-departmental conflicts that slow down the process for applicants.
- Gwinnett County would be a good model to follow.
- Staff should be cross-trained.
- The County should re-instate monthly educational customer workshops to educate the public and improve inter-departmental coordination.

6. STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS

The project team also conducted three focus groups with stakeholders who have previously interacted with the County's permitting process to solicit additional feedback. These sessions were conducted in a free-form manner allowing participants to share

specific concerns or issues that they had experienced with the County in obtaining permits during their prior interactions. The results of these session are summarized below with key concerns or issues raised noted.

(1) Key Issues Raised During Focus Group Sessions.

The key concerns or issues raised during these session included:

- Business license impossible for tenants.
- Tenants are put in an endless cycle – can't get a license because no CO on the property; no explanation of how to get a CO. Told there never was a CO on the property. Tenant gave up and moved out.
- As a landlord, very hard to get people to come here, it is too much work.
- No one available to answer the phone.
- Permitting is the last thing I do. Questions like occupancy classification, etc. They won't provide feedback or input regarding how they will interpret the code. Hard to get access to interpretation during the design process. Needs to be an interpretation has to be something you can take to the bank.
- Lack of access to staff is extremely expensive.
- 4 – 5 months to get approval. Very few comments. Lost the drawings. 8,000 square foot renovation.
- Records management – plans get lost. Found on someone's desk; she was on vacation for 10 days. No record of where the document went.
- You must use an expeditor to get through the process. I can't afford to sit for 5 hours. I don't have time.
- Comments: some comments very detailed citing codes, etc.
- Asked for a huge amount of detail regarding details on penetrations through rated walls.
- 4-6 weeks to get through a commercial house. Topo was off. Sent their own surveyors to compare elevations.
- Comments don't match what is on the site plan. Comments don't match what is there. Have to wait until it says approved/not approved. Hard to get comments.
- Go through the process and gets stopped for another reason. Don't get all your zoning questions and concerns up-front.
- Completely unpredictable regarding how long permitting process will take. Can be any amount of time. Goes into a black hole.
- Process is unpredictable. "I wonder if I can find my drawings somewhere in the building."
- Staff customer service approach is significantly lacking.
- Call four times, no one ever calls back. Called the building department, punched extension of someone who was not involved in the project. No access to staff. A lot of extra work.
- Staff feel tremendously over-worked.
- Not clear what is required to be submitted.

- Parking is a problem, etc. Feeding the meter. Not customer friendly building.
- Key word: we are customers here. I'm paying for this service. I'm bringing revenue into the county. We are not treated as customers. All we want to do is what we are supposed to do.
- Inconsistent interpretation. The definition of what is an enclosed porch is not consistently applied.
- Lose a design element: it is easier to give in than to fight it.
- People on the 5th floor go out of their way to help. We got an a
- Lack of consistency across jurisdictions. DeKalb should be where you WANT to go, not the opposite.
- Inconsistency on inspectors. It is a huge issue. Based on which inspector is going to be assigned to you. Field corrections are very expensive.
- Consistency of how inspectors interpret code and consistency that inspector agrees with plan reviewer.
- Inspectors within 24 hours. We call directly.
- Inadequate training of inspectors. They are not getting training.
- Business license – reaction by tenants is “you’ve got to be kidding me”
- They don’t have their act together (communication/language)
- We give them (our tenants) our own handouts. If you say the wrong word when applying for a license you are ruined. Tell tenants to say one owner, one business, don’t explain anything, don’t make it complicated.
- For business license, have been forced to submit scale drawings, wet stamped from original architect. It has nothing to do with the occupant or new business. Very expensive.
- CO is held hostage.
- Any renovation opens a Pandora’s box of sign offs – had to get septic sign off on a project that had nothing to do with septic. Route sheets make no sense but determine everything.
- Biggest problem in DeKalb is communication. You get stuck in limbo. Lost plan sets, people on vacation leave plans on their desks.
- 2nd inspection often identifies new issues. They should not get a 2nd bite at the apple.

(2) Key Solutions Suggested By Participants in the Focus Groups.

The following are key recommendations that the participants raised to address identified issues during the focus groups.

- Clearly define requirements.
- Establish plan review timeframes and targets. Let me know how long it will take.
- Increase communication among staff.
- Instill a sense of “customer service” and “urgency” within the staff.
- Need more assistant in interpreting the codes at the conceptual and design phases. Perhaps a meeting, even if it required a fee, would enable applicants to get the clear direction from staff on what is feasible.

- Submittal requirements need to be clearer.
- Greater consistency among inspectors.
- Provide options for expedited review.
- Greater use of technology – existing use doesn't appear to make staff work easier.
- Need a better permit center. Insufficient space to review plans with staff, overcrowded, and parking is extremely inconvenient.

DRAFT

APPENDIX B: EMPLOYEE SURVEY AND SWOT ANALYSIS SESSIONS SUMMARY

The Matrix Consulting Group conducted a survey of employees involved in the DeKalb County Permitting Process in order to gauge employee's sentiments on a variety of issues within the process. Surveys were distributed to all employees involved in the process. Of the 97 surveys that were distributed, 44 were received for a response rate of 45.4%.

1. SURVEY OVERVIEW

The survey consisted of 2 primary sections. The first section contained 39 positively-phrased statements to which respondents were asked to select one of the following responses: "strongly agree," "agree," "neutral," "disagree," and "strongly disagree." For purposes of discussion, responses of "strongly agree" and "agree" are grouped together in some tables, as are responses of "strongly disagree" and "disagree". The statements in this section of the survey were designed to provide a better understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions of employees involved in the permitting process, with respect to the following key areas:

- **Operational Efficiency & Consistency:** Employees responded to statements about the consistent and efficient application of the permitting process' policies and procedures.
- **Operational Coordination & Effectiveness:** Employees responded to statements about the level of streamlining and cooperation in the permitting process.
- **Customer Service & Accessibility:** Employees responded to statements about the quality of customer service and the level of transparency available to applicants during the permitting process.

- **Employee Empowerment:** Employees responded to statements about the level of autonomy and empowerment they have in the permitting process.
- **Employee Attitudes:** Employees responded to statements about the level of commitment, morale, and communication among employees involved in the permitting process.
- **Management:** Employees responded to statements about the managerial oversight of the permitting process.
- **Technology & Equipment:** Employees responded to statements about the technology and equipment available for utilization in the permitting process.
- **Training & Professional Growth:** Employees responded to statements about the quality of training and professional development opportunities available to them.

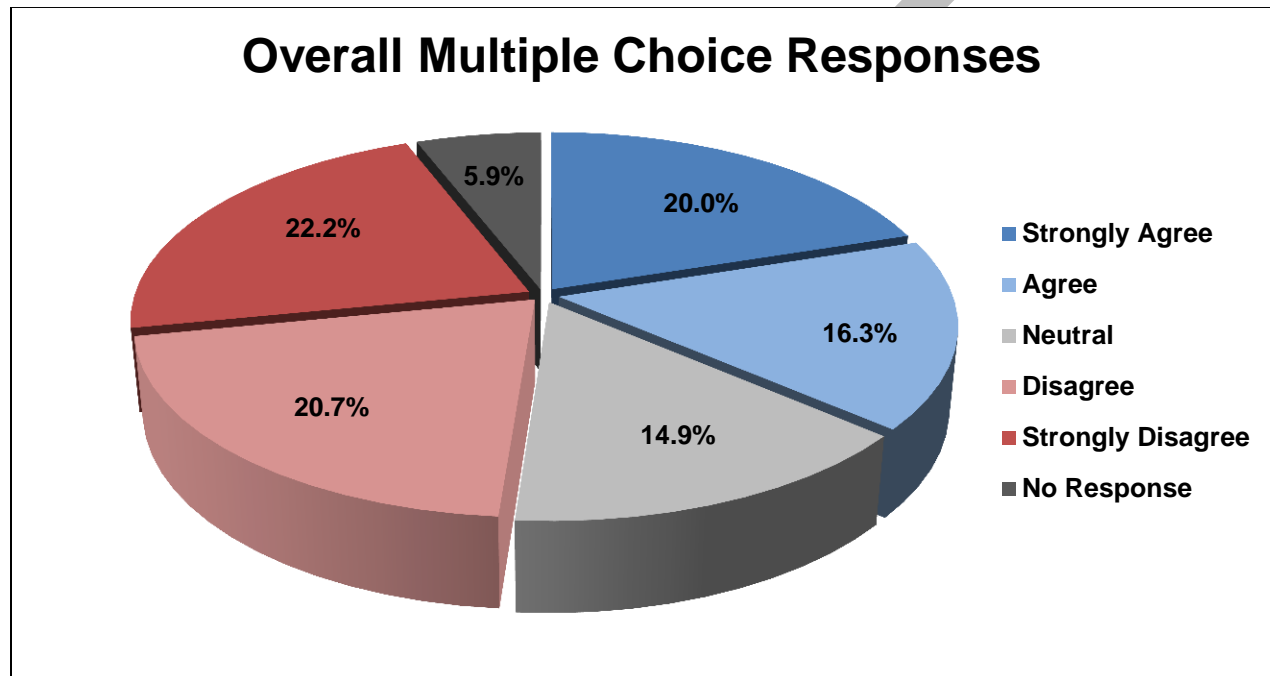
In the second section, respondents were given the opportunity to respond in their own words to 6 open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were designed to gauge employee opinions on the permitting process' strengths and give them an avenue for suggesting improvements. While the survey was confidential, respondents were asked in the beginning to indicate their division and their current responsibility. The tables below present the number of respondents by division and responsibility.

Division	No. of Respondents	% of Total Responses
Planning & Sustainability	20	46.5%
Watershed Management	9	20.9%
Business Licenses	6	14.0%
GIS Division	4	9.3%
Fire	4	9.3%
Declined to Indicate	1	2.3%
Total	44	100%

Current Responsibility	No. of Respondents	% of Total Responses
Administrative/Clerical	11	26.2%
Inspector	14	33.3%
Managerial/Supervisory	7	16.7%
Plan Reviewer	10	23.8%
Declined to Indicate	2	4.5%
Total	44	100%

2. GENERAL FINDINGS

In reviewing the results of the employee survey, we first examine the pattern of responses for the entire group versus individual responses. The following chart summarizes the overall distribution of responses to the various statements made by the employees taking the survey.



As illustrated in the chart, responses were highly divided, with slightly more disagreement than agreement. Responses also trended toward extremes, with employees more frequently opting for strong agreement or disagreement than a neutral response.

Responses to individual statements, and to statements in particular topical categories, varied from the overall average. Some statements received strong majorities of positive sentiments, while others elicited primarily negative responses from employees. Employees' written responses to open-ended questions provided additional detail to the opinions expressed in their multiple choice responses.

3. MULTIPLE CHOICE STATEMENTS

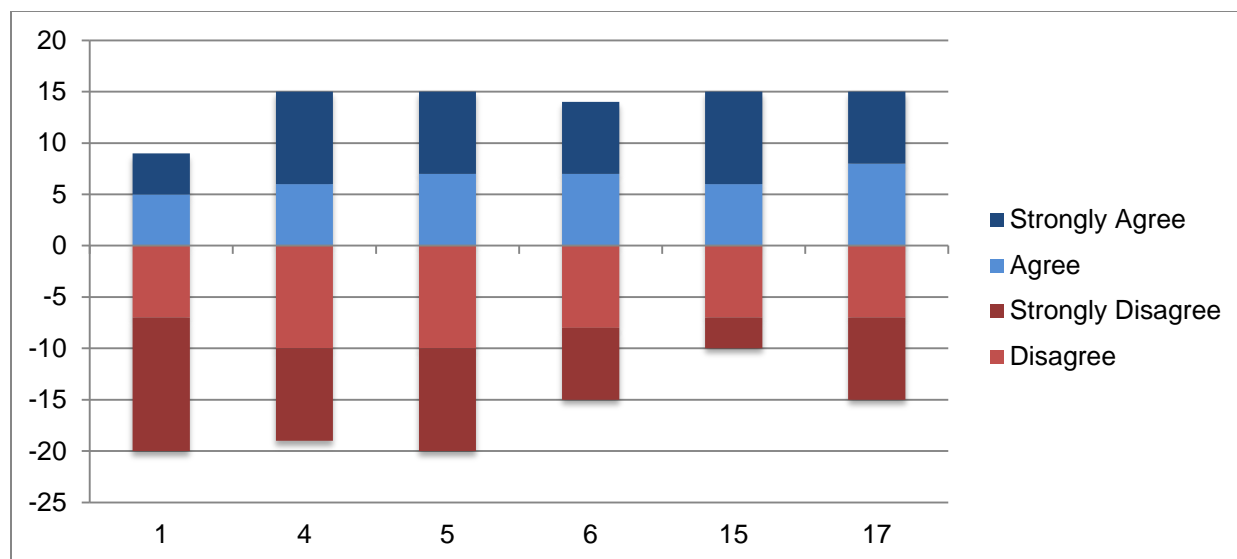
The following sections describe employees' responses to statements from the first section of the survey, regarding the previously mentioned key areas.

(1) Operational Efficiency & Consistency

The following table contains employees' responses to statements about the operational efficiency and policies/procedures of the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
1. Business licensing and permitting processes in the County are not unnecessarily burdensome or complex.	24.3%	16.2%	54.1%	5.4%
4. My department/division has an effective records and document management system.	40.5%	8.1%	51.4%	2.7%
5. My department/division has clear, well-documented policies and procedures to guide my involvement in the permitting process.	40.5%	2.7%	54.1%	2.7%
6. Permit review, and the interpretation of codes and ordinances involved in permit review, is undertaken in a consistent manner by staff.	37.8%	10.8%	40.5%	10.8%
15. DeKalb County's land development and zoning codes do not present unreasonable or unnecessary obstacles to development.	40.5%	10.8%	27.0%	21.6%
17. Decisions regarding interpretation are generally made consistently in my department/division, with little variance from applicant to applicant.	40.5%	16.2%	40.5%	2.7%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #1: “Business licensing and permitting processes in the County are not unnecessarily burdensome or complex.” The only divisions to express agreement with this statement were Planning & Sustainability and Watershed Management. It also failed to receive any agreeing responses from employees in administrative/clerical roles.
- Statement #6: “Permit review, and the interpretation of codes and ordinances involved in permit review, is undertaken in a consistent manner by staff.” No Business Licensing employees agreed with this statement, and there was marked disagreement by employees in administrative/clerical roles.
- Statement #15: “DeKalb County’s land development and zoning codes do not present unreasonable or unnecessary obstacles to development.” Several respondents opted to skip this statement. More than 75% of the strongly agreeing responses to this statement came from employees in Planning & Sustainability.
- Statement #17: “Decisions regarding interpretation are generally made consistently in my department/division, with little variance from applicant to applicant.” More than 80% of employees in managerial roles agreed with this statement.

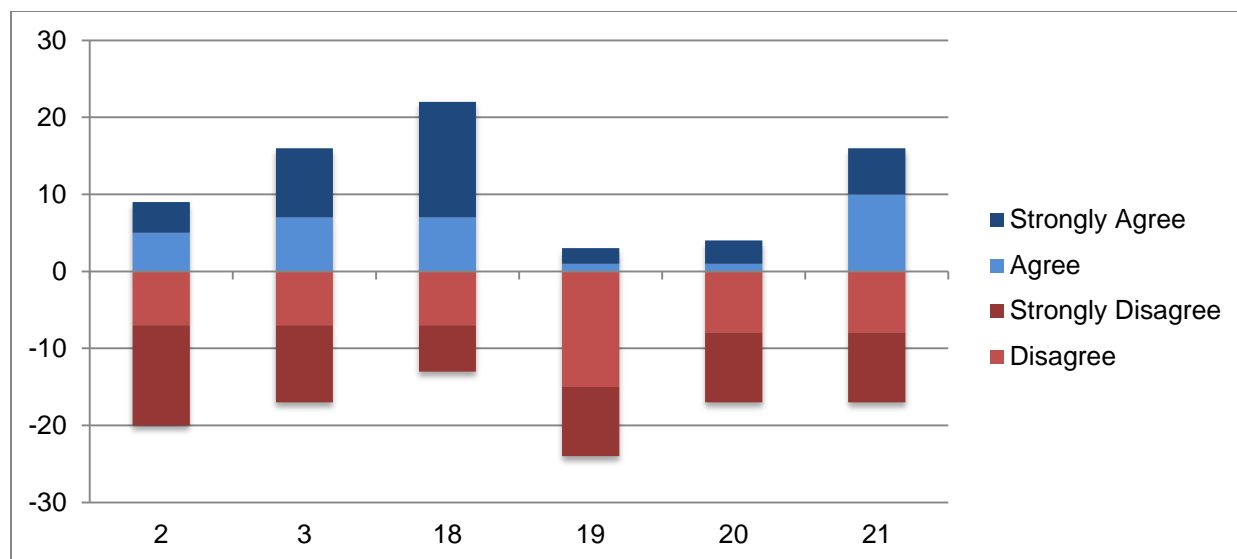
As the chart above demonstrates, employees have widely varying opinions about the efficiency and consistency of the permitting process. Strong opinions abounded in this section, and few neutral responses were gathered. Those who disagreed with the statement mentioned that the technology involved was difficult to learn and redundant, and that the number of steps and requirements involved in the process made it difficult to direct applicants.

(2) Operational Coordination & Effectiveness

The following table contains employees' responses to statements about the degree of streamlining and coordination in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
2. I am able to consistently meet the department/division's goals for plan review and permitting timelines.	40.5%	13.5%	18.9%	27.0%
3. My department/division is effectively managed as it relates to the permitting process.	43.2%	8.1%	45.9%	2.7%
18. My department/division is well run in terms of the services it delivers.	59.5%	5.4%	35.1%	0.0%
19. The permitting process in DeKalb County is efficient and well run.	8.1%	18.9%	64.9%	8.1%
20. The business licensing process in DeKalb County is efficient and well run.	10.8%	27.0%	45.9%	16.2%
21. There is good coordination between my department/division and other department/divisions that are involved in the permitting process.	43.2%	8.1%	45.9%	2.7%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #2: “I am able to consistently meet the department/division’s goals for plan review and permitting timelines.” More respondents skipped this statement than any other multiple-choice statement, and over half of them were Planning & Sustainability employees. Despite overall disagreement with this statement, two-thirds of Watershed Management employees agreed with it, and more than half of them agreed strongly. Additionally, more than half of inspectors (in all departments) agreed with this statement.
- Statement #3: “My department/division is effectively managed as it relates to the permitting process.” There was no agreement with this statement among Business Licensing employees.
- Statement #21: “There is good coordination between my department/division and other department/divisions that are involved in the permitting process.” No employees in Business Licensing agreed with this statement, and two-thirds of administrative/clerical positions disagreed.

As indicated above, opinions varied widely on statements in this category, with strong opinions handily outnumbering neutral responses. Those who disagreed said that they felt understaffed, and that several policies and procedures are unclear to them.

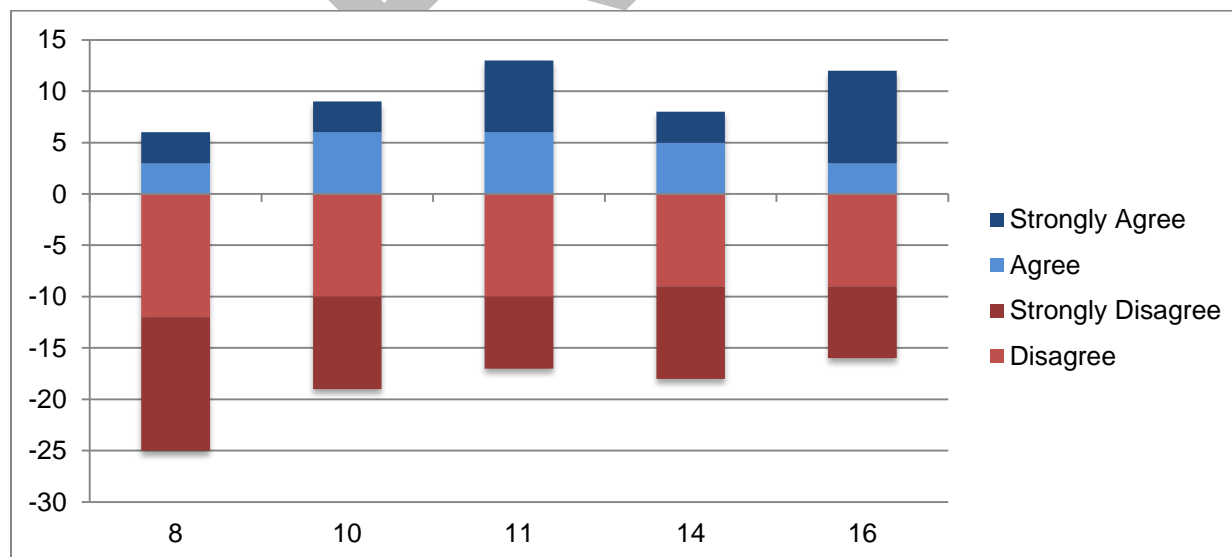
In statement #19, the general sentiment is clearly displayed that the DeKalb County permitting process is not efficient and well run.

(3) Customer Service & Accessibility

The following table contains employees' responses to statements about the level of transparency and customer services in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
8. DeKalb County makes it easy for applicants of the general public to obtain complete, accurate information about all aspects of the business licensing and permitting process.	16.7%	8.3%	69.4%	5.6%
10. DeKalb County's permitting procedures ensure that applicants are informed of all application standards and requirements early in the process.	25.0%	19.4%	52.8%	2.8%
11. Applicants have easy access to staff from various departments/divisions involved in the permitting process to obtain information about their application and approval requirements.	35.1%	16.2%	45.9%	2.7%
14. Applications submitted by applicants are usually complete and adequate to allow prompt and complete action by staff.	21.6%	16.2%	48.6%	13.5%
16. Customer service is a clear and driving force for the business licensing and permitting program.	32.4%	24.3%	43.2%	0.0%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #10: “DeKalb County’s permitting procedures ensure that applicants are informed of all application standards and requirements early in the process.” Neither Business Licensing nor Fire employees offered a positive response to this statement.
- Statement #14: “Applications submitted by applicants are usually complete and adequate to allow prompt and complete action by staff.” All Fire employees disagreed with this statement, as did more than 85% of respondents in administrative/clerical positions.

Opinions about statements in this category were strong, with both positive and negative responses outweighing neutral ones. As evident in the chart above, responses trended toward the disagreeing end of the spectrum. Those who disagreed stated that applicants are often misinformed about what they need to complete their application, fail to read all of the information available to them, and that public accessibility would be improved if the various locations that applicants must visit were not located on three separate floors.

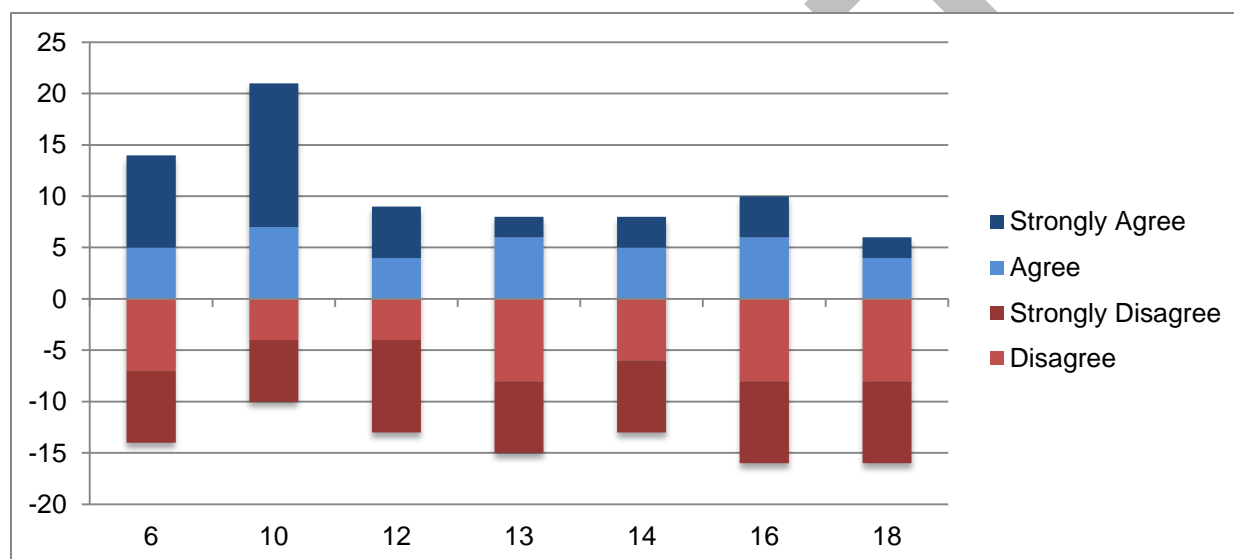
(4) Employee Empowerment

The following table contains employees’ responses to statements about the level of autonomy and empowerment afforded to employees involved in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
6. Permit review, and the interpretation of codes and ordinances involved in permit review, is undertaken in a consistent manner by staff.	42.4%	15.2%	42.4%	0.0%
10. DeKalb County’s permitting procedures ensure that applicants are informed of all application standards and requirements early in the process.	63.6%	6.1%	30.3%	0.0%
12. I receive sufficient ongoing training in the technical skills required to perform my function in the permitting process.	27.3%	30.3%	39.4%	3.0%

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
13. We have a strong emphasis on training.	24.2%	27.3%	45.5%	3.0%
14. Applications submitted by applicants are usually complete and adequate to allow prompt and complete action by staff.	24.2%	33.3%	39.4%	3.0%
16. Customer service is a clear and driving force for the business licensing and permitting process.	30.3%	21.2%	48.5%	0.0%
18. My department is well run in terms of the services it delivers.	18.2%	27.3%	48.5%	6.1%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #6: "Permit review, and the interpretation of codes and ordinances involved in permit review, is undertaken in a consistent manner by staff." There was only one agreeing response to this statement from the Watershed Management employees, and none from the Business Licensing group.
- Statement #10: "DeKalb County's permitting procedures ensure that applicants are informed of all application standards and requirements early in the process." While responses were positive in general, those from the Planning & Sustainability group were particularly so, with more than 80% agreeing.
- Statement #12: "I receive sufficient ongoing training in the technical skills required to perform my function in the permitting process." No agreeing

responses to this statement were gathered from the Watershed Management or Business Licensing employees.

- Statement #14: “Applications submitted by applicants are usually complete and adequate to allow prompt and complete action by staff.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from Business Licensing employees.
- Statement #16: “Customer service is a clear and driving force for the business licensing and permitting process.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from Watershed Management employees.
- Statement #18: “My department is well-run in terms of the services it delivers.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from Watershed Management, Business Licensing, or GIS Division employees.

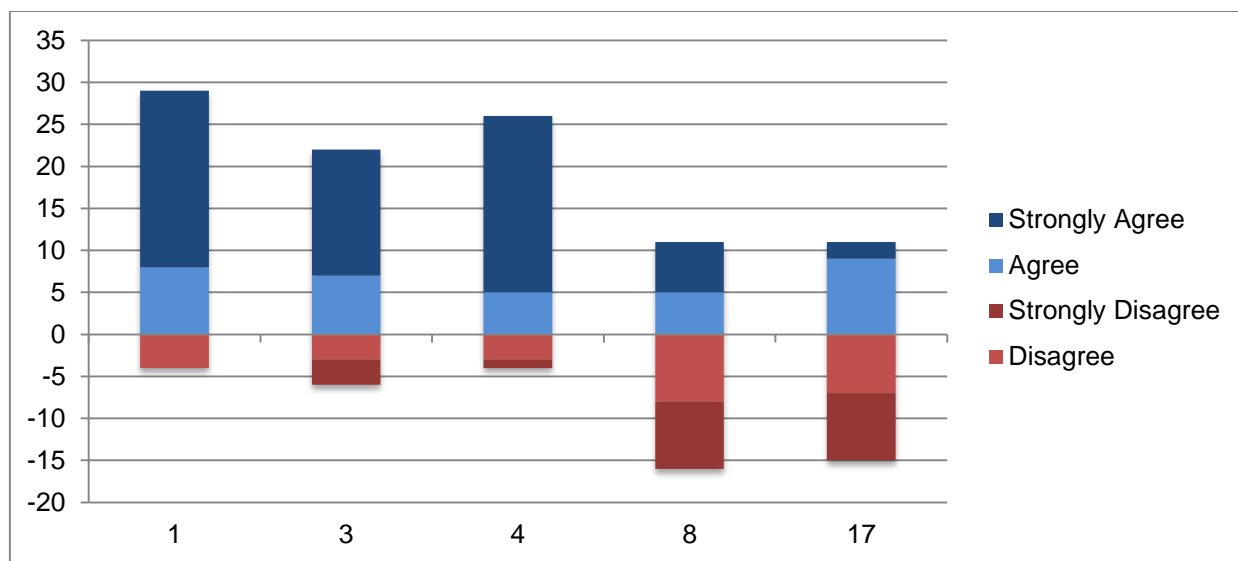
Sentiments were varied on statements in this section, but more neutral responses could be found among some of them. Those who disagreed said little about their response.

(5) Employee Attitudes

The following table contains employees’ responses to statements about the level of commitment, morale, and communication of employees involved in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
1. I know what is expected of me at work.	87.9%	0%	12.1%	6.1%
3. The mission/purpose of our organization makes me feel my job is important.	66.7%	12.1%	18.2%	3.0%
4. My co-workers are committed to doing quality work.	78.8%	9.1%	12.1%	6.1%
8. There is good teamwork and communication between different departments/divisions.	34.4%	15.6%	50.0%	0.0%
17. There is free and open communication between all levels of employees involved in the permitting process about the work they are performing.	33.3%	15.2%	45.5%	6.1%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #8: “There is good teamwork and communication between different departments/divisions.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from the Watershed Management or Business Licensing employees.
- Statement #17: “There is free and open communication between all levels of employees involved in the permitting process about the work they are performing.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from the Business Licensing or GIS Division employees.

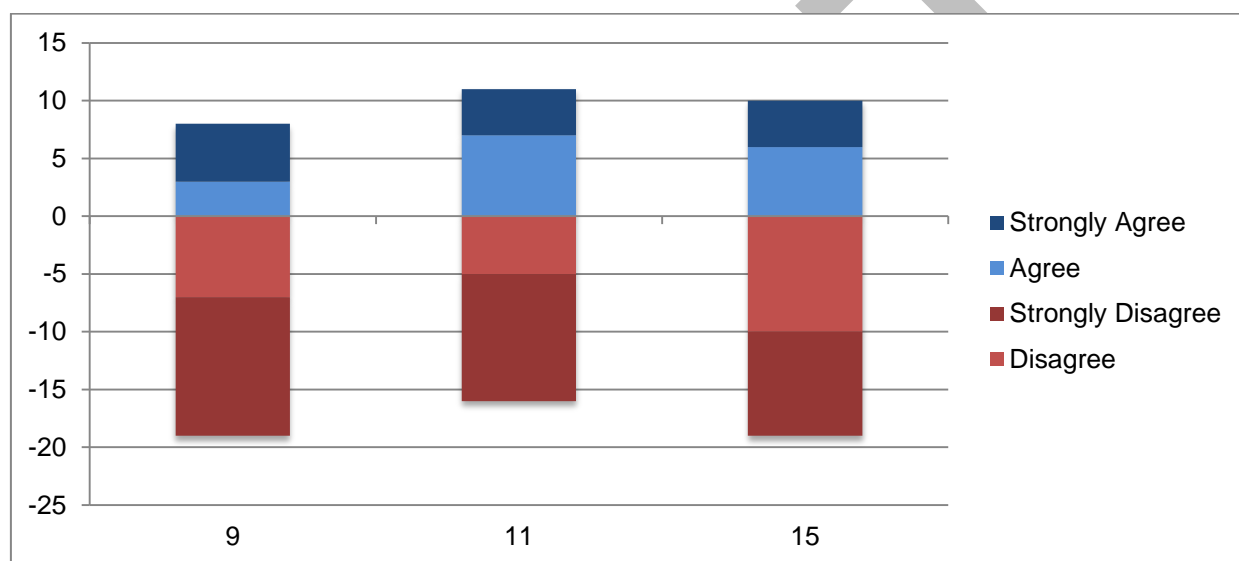
Responses to different questions varied widely in this section. Employees indicated very positive sentiments about their own and their colleagues’ attitudes, but negative opinions about the level of communication in the permitting process. Those who disagreed with statements in this section commented little about their disagreement, other than to reiterate the fact that they disagreed.

(6) Management

The following table contains employees’ responses to statements about the managerial oversight of the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
9. When mistakes are made, managers and supervisors focus on correcting mistakes in a learning approach rather than placing blame.	24.2%	18.2%	57.6%	0.0%
11. Managers/supervisors in my area are receptive to new ideas and employee suggestions for improvements in the permitting process.	33.3%	18.2%	48.5%	0.0%
15. Managers actively involve their staff in working together to solve problems.	30.3%	12.1%	57.6%	0.0%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #9: "When mistakes are made, managers and supervisors focus on correcting mistakes in a learning approach rather than placing blame." No respondents from Watershed Management, Business Licensing, or Fire provided an agreeing response to this statement, nor did any employee in a managerial/supervisory role.
- Statement #11: "Managers/supervisors in my area are receptive to new ideas and employee suggestions for improvements in the permitting process." Responses to this statement from Planning & Sustainability employees were more positive than the average. Watershed Management and Business Licensing employees gave no positive responses.

- Statement #15: “Managers actively involve their staff in working together to solve problems.” All of the responses to this statement from Business Licensing employees were disagreeing.

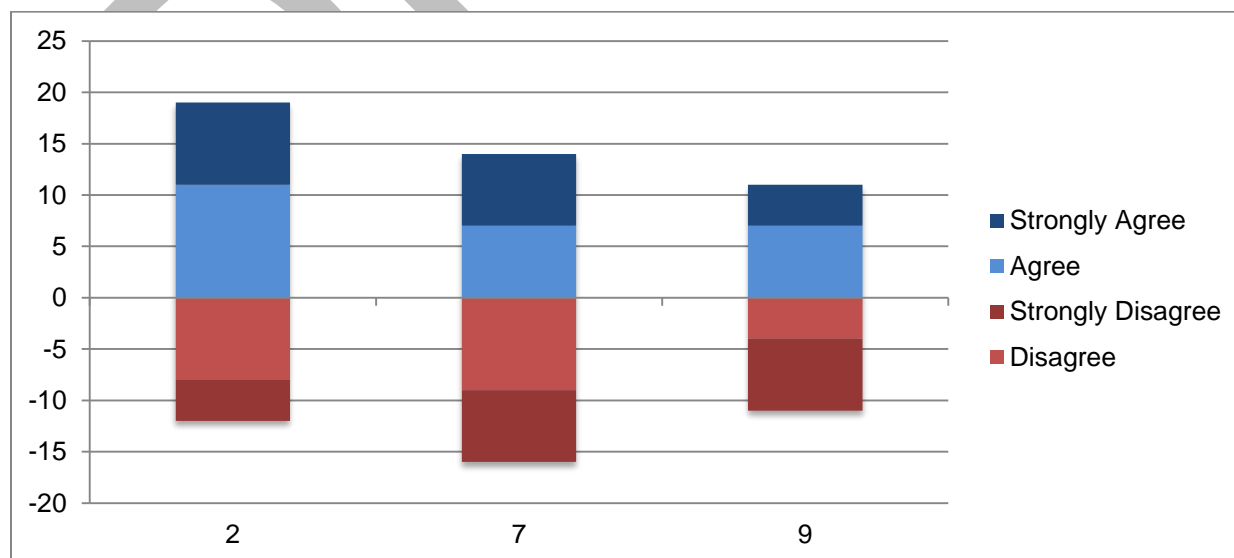
Employees’ opinions on statements in this section were divided, with strong opinions outnumbering neutral ones. The general trend was toward a negative perception of management in DeKalb. Those who disagreed with statements in this section cited unreceptive managers and a tendency to blame rather than find solutions.

(7) Technology & Equipment

The following table contains employees’ responses to statements about the technology and equipment available for utilization in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
2. I have the materials, equipment, and tools I need to do my work right.	57.6%	6.1%	36.4%	0.0%
7. I am able to effectively use information systems and technology to track the turnaround time for permits, record comments, corrections for permits and conditions of approval, and other aspects of permitting.	37.8%	8.1%	43.2%	10.8%
9. DeKalb County has a robust GIS system that I am able to effectively use on a daily basis in the accomplishment of my work.	29.7%	29.7%	29.7%	10.8%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #2: “I have the materials, equipment, and tools I need to do my work right.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received by Business Licensing employees.
- Statement #7: “I am able to effectively use information systems and technology to track the turnaround time for permits, record comments, corrections for permits and conditions of approval, and other aspects of permitting.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received by employees from Fire or the GIS Division.

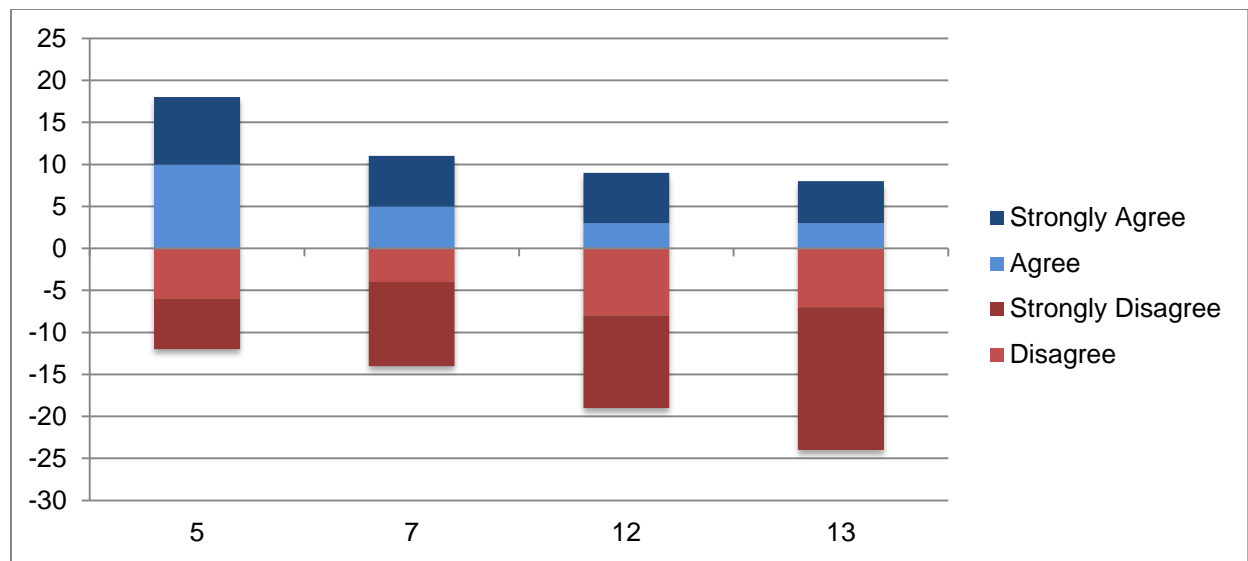
Opinions were split on statements in this section, with wide swaths of both agreement and disagreement. Statement #9 received more neutral and non-responses than many other statements, possibly because not all employees use GIS functions. Those who expressed their disagreement stated that there was no way for them to track permits throughout the process.

(8) Training & Professional Growth

The following table contains employees’ responses to statements about the quality of training and professional development available to employees involved in the permitting process.

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	N/R
5. I have opportunities to learn and grow.	54.5%	9.1%	36.4%	0.0%
7. Someone at work encourages my professional development.	33.3%	21.2%	42.4%	3.0%
12. I receive sufficient ongoing training in the technical skills required to perform my function in the permitting process.	24.3%	10.8%	51.4%	13.5%
13. We have a strong emphasis on training.	21.6%	13.5%	64.9%	0.0%

The following graph presents a visual representation of the number of agreeing (blue) and disagreeing (red) responses to each statement in this category.



For some of the statements in this section, correlations could be seen between the demographics of the respondents and their levels of agreement or disagreement.

Please note the following points:

- Statement #7: “Someone at work encourages my professional development.” 86% of Watershed Management employees disagreed with this statement, 61% of them strongly.
- Statement #13: “We have a strong emphasis on training.” No agreeing responses to this statement were received from Business Licensing employees.

Opinions were strong on these statements, with few neutral responses and large numbers of strong agreement or disagreement. Employees seem split on whether DeKalb County fosters an environment of professional growth, but trend toward disagreement when asked if there is a strong training focus. Those who disagreed with statements in this section mentioned that their training opportunities are weak, and that they do not feel they can go to their managers for professional guidance.

3. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

The following sections summarize employees’ responses to the open-ended questions in the second section of the survey. In addition to the employees who did not

respond to the survey, several employees who responded to multiple-choice statements skipped these questions. Only 59% of employees who responded answered the open-ended questions.

(1) What do you think DeKalb County does well (current strengths) in the permitting process?

Twenty-three respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Customer service (6 responses)
 - Competent staff (5 responses)
 - Focus on improvement (2 responses)
 - Adherence to policies
 - Collecting P&S permitting fees
 - Speedy plan review
 - Cooperation between departments
 - Environmental and site plan review
 - FOG, Backflow, and Land Development
 - Large number of permits with few mistakes
- As indicated in the list above, knowledgeable staff and a commitment to customer service are points of pride for DeKalb permitting employees. Additionally, one respondent lauded the county's very recognition of the need for change as a strength.

(2) What do you think DeKalb County can do to improve the quality of the applications that are submitted for development review and permitting?

Twenty-six respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Revise application forms to make them more clear (6 responses)
- Provide more complete online information about the process (4 responses)
- Implement a triage system to determine applicants' needs when they arrive to the building (4 responses)
- Set clear standards for applications and support staff when they reject those that do not meet them (3 responses)
- Provide clear forms/checklists to explain the application forms (3 responses)
- Improve training, especially for permit techs (2 responses)
- Assign each application to a staff member to oversee its path through the permitting process (2 responses)

- Obtain employee input when revising processes and forms
- Train intake staff to fill out application form
- Standardize fees and make them payable online
- Increase number of staff to accommodate workload
- Provide an online application

In many of these responses, a common theme appears to be the desire for increased communication with applicants before they submit plans, so they know what to expect, and what is expected of them. As understanding of requirements improves, the number of complete applications and the ease of processing applications will likewise improve.

(3) What can DeKalb County do to better communicate with applicants regarding the status of their permits while under review, including any comments or revisions that need to be made?

Twenty-five respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Allow online tracking of application progress (5 responses)
- Provide electronic information to applicants about their applications (3 responses)
- Answer applicants' calls and emails (3 responses)
- Provide an accurate timeline to applicants (2 responses)
- Hire more staff to accommodate increased workload (2 responses)
- Route inquiries directly to the assigned plan reviewer
- Provide clear and concise comments to plans
- Keep applicants informed of their place in the queue
- Reduce or eliminate hand-written forms
- Extend the length of round table meetings
- Ensure that employees are knowledgeable and willing to ask questions

The strongest and most consistent theme seems to be improving the use of technology to keep applicants apprised of their plans' movement through the process. Staffing levels seem to also be a consistent concern among employees.

(4) What specific changes do you think DeKalb County should implement to streamline the permitting process?

Twenty-four respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Hire more staff to accommodate increased workload (3 responses)
- Provide more training to staff (3 responses)
- Streamline Hansen to make it more user-friendly (2 responses)
- Approve applications for zoning before sending them to business licensing and other departments (2 responses)
- Provide clear timeline of permitting process to applicants
- Provide a customer liaison and access to e-permitting in the waiting room
- Allow online payments
- Charge FOG and backflow fees as surcharges on water bill
- Improve communication among plan reviewers
- Merge Watershed Management with Development Review
- Charge fees for expedited processing and re-submittals
- Empower staff with the authority to make judgment decisions
- Direct customers to the correct floor when they arrive
- Provide directions/checklist for business permits
- Require a pre-submittal meeting or a professional affidavit of compliance
- Hire a cashier for permitting application section
- Establish clear guidelines for plan reviewers to follow
- Establish an appeals process
- Provide a separate application for certificates of occupancy or tenant move-in when no alterations to property are required.
- Provide training for business licensing staff about the requirements of other departments/divisions
- Route building questions to building inspectors or plan reviewers, rather than zoning employees
- Establish parallel reviews for plans
- Do not require building review when there is no building/construction included in the application
- Reduce the number of steps/reviews required in the permitting process
- Place responsibility for compliance on the applicant/designer when possible
- Reduce or eliminate favoritism in the permitting process for certain applicants
- Determine whether to accept or reject an application and decide where it needs to go within a few days of receiving it
- Separate applications initially by “fire only” and “building and fire”
- Provide a log book in the file room

A very large number of suggestions were received, highlighted by the perceived need for increased staffing and training levels. Several other responses indicated a desire to ensure that plans are properly routed within the permitting process.

(5) Are there any permits or processes that you feel do not add sufficient value to the permitting process, and could be eliminated or combined with another permit or process?

Twenty-one respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Building reviews for applications that do not include any construction or structural changes (3 responses)
- Required surveys and/or commercial reviews for sheds, small additions, and auxiliary structures (3 responses)
- FOG, Water Meter, and Backflow inspections when no modification to water and sewer fixtures is planned (3 responses)
- Plumbing should be merged with Watershed Management
- Watershed Management should be merged with Development Review
- All physical paper and handwritten forms
- Water and sewer reviews on plans for projects in municipalities
- Permits required for replacing existing conforming signs
- Redundant steps and processes in Hansen
- Requirements established by zoning staff that are not in the zoning code

The greatest emphasis in responses to this question dealt with steps in the review process that do not apply to the request of the applicant, and which employees feel should be eliminated. Additionally, some employees indicated that consolidation of the various groups that review and inspect water and sewer-related portions of applications would be beneficial.

(6) What are the three most important changes that should be made to the permitting process to improve service levels?

Twenty-two respondents answered this questions. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Increased employee training, particularly for intake staff (8 responses)
- Clearly define processes and responsibilities (7 responses)
- Increase or reassign staff to cope with work volume (6 responses)
- Improve customer service and customer feedback at each step of the process (4 responses)
- Increase employee appreciation and compensation (4 responses)
- Improve inter-departmental communication (4 responses)

- Clear communication with applicants before submittal, possibly through a pre-submittal meeting (3 responses)
- Increase supervision of line staff and zoning employees (2 responses)
- Improve website (2 responses)
- Implement technology improvements to allow online permit tracking (2 responses)
- Allow online payments (2 responses)
- Allow online submittal of plans
- Require complete site plan packet and appropriate paperwork at submittal
- Implement triage system to direct customers and applications upon arrival
- Assign each application to a staff member to oversee its path through the permitting process
- Require staff to cite actual codes when justifying denial of a permit
- Increase accountability and transparency in the permitting process
- Revise forms available to public
- Charge more fees

A number of suggestions were received, with personnel issues such as employee training and staffing levels topping the list. Communication with customers before and during the permitting process was another priority, and technology improvements were also suggested by multiple respondents.

(7) Please share any additional comments you have for the project team.

Fourteen respondents answered this question. The following themes appeared among their responses:

- Customer service should improve, in communication before plan submittal, improvement of the IVR system, installation of a customer service kiosk, and a general focus on the end user
- The County needs to focus on continuous improvement and seriously consider recommendations it receives for improvement
- The County needs an annual review of standards, policies, and procedures
- Inter-departmental communication needs to improve, especially between zoning staff and senior planners
- Employee initiative needs to be promoted more than it currently is, and career development opportunities should be improved
- Employees who have continued to work since the layoffs should be recognized/rewarded
- Online business license renewals should be implemented

Final comments reflected employees' desire to see the County's permitting process streamlined and simplified, with a focus on customer service and satisfaction. Additionally, they hope to see lines of communication opened between employees and departments, and to see staff recognized and rewarded for their efforts.

4. EMPLOYEE SWOT MEETINGS.

In addition to the employee survey, the project team conducted three employee SWOT meetings with over 30 participants. During these meetings, we led employees involved in the permitting process through a structured brainstorming exercise, where staff provided input regarding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the permitting process in DeKalb County. The focus of this effort was to identify areas where improvements could be made to the permitting process.

The following sections outline the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats from an employee perspective that were provided by the participants.

1. STRENGTHS OF THE EXISTING PROCESS.

The following strengths of the existing permitting process as identified by staff include:

- Have single trade inspectors (Electrical, HVAC, Plumbing)
 - Important because of limited, or no, plan review
- Inspectors can perform zoning reviews in the field (structural)
- Relations with all trades – communication among employees is good
- Location – proximity to each other and having engineering plan review and inspections done by the same person
- Limited cross-training for structural and plumbing (i.e., no Combination Inspectors)
- Have been given permission to catch up on Saturdays
- Fire Inspectors are sworn personnel
- The Building Administrator is a PE
- The Building Administrator has recently purchased code books
- One-day approval process on Business License

- Move-in-as-is
 - Not requiring floor plans on small projects
- Process is specific and quantifiable criteria
- Inclusion of Backflow Inspectors in all permits gets them access. Not relying on cold calls – have a reason to be there.
- Still public employees doing the work – not contracted out, as was discussed previously
- Stability in staffing
- Openness to change – everyone has a part in making it better
- Everyone is, or can be made, accountable
- Experience and diversity
- Improvements are being made
 - Staff involvement
- Skilled staff
- Learning the entire process – how all units function together
- Reorganization – placing people in close proximity
- Started using completeness checklist
- Stakeholder meetings and input have been useful in setting vision
- Have resubmittal meetings on larger projects
- Explaining process prior to submittal
- Online services are improving
- Upgraded computers
- Having everyone use the same system is a benefit

2. WEAKNESSES OF THE EXISTING PROCESS.

The following weaknesses of the existing permitting process as identified by staff include:

- The Code is confusing to contractors
- Pre-clad and framing should be better-defined
- There are few incentives for Inspectors to find all inspectional deficiencies or to coordinate across functional lines
- Little access to resource materials, which “seems to be intentional”
- Lack of participation of Inspectors in pre-construction meetings
- There is a disconnect between contractors’ availability and the hours Inspectors work
- Lack of access to information in the field
 - No laptops
- Poor access and communication with office staff
- No information on contractors, etc., on printouts

- Lack of technical and process training
 - “Need to be ahead of the curve” and not so reactive.
 - “Construction inspection is not what it was 20 years ago”
- Consistency of inspections
 - Each Inspector does things a little differently
- Managers aren’t knowledgeable of why more training is needed, and not knowledgeable of their jobs in the field
- No backflow code (maybe a page). Need policies and procedures.
- Plumbing Inspectors aren’t involved in backflow
- Management gets territorial
 - “I’m in charge of this area”
- Customers have to stand in too many lines
- Resource allocations
 - No objective measures
- Too few plans are required for submittal – not a concurrent review process
- Inspections for backflow are all reactive
- No on-line verification of business license
 - Should eliminate the fax option
- Noisy, uncomfortable physical environment
- Forms aren’t helpful for new customers
- Requirements aren’t clear to the Customer
- No bi-lingual staff
- Do have access, but people don’t know about them or how to get them
- Inconsistent language
- Too little formal training
- No policies and procedures
- Zoning Officers are doing more than they should
 - Search old files
 - Should always be at counter
 - Clarity of roles
- Hansen system is inconsistent
 - Example – business license
 - Can get 2 or more dollar amounts due from multiple people
 - Unused pages
 - Can’t print out a license
 - Unclear how to solve problems when you have one
 - Related to access/permissions?
- Sequential review process
- Poor writing and coding of needs in Hansen
- Wait times
- Hansen doesn’t show who is responsible for review

- When customer checks on status, all they get is whether it is “approved”, “pending” or “incomplete”
- Interface of other systems with Hansen, like SAMS, CPAK (Water)
- Need daily monitoring of Inspectors’ schedules of inspections
- Access to Hansen for Watershed Inspectors
- Can’t view where an application resides in the process
 - No kiosks in lobby
 - Not educating the public
- Outdated ordinances
 - Zoning (2003)
 - Development (1999)
 - Business License
 - Sign
- Hansen system
 - Remote access is a problem for Inspectors and telecommuters
 - Import/export of data also a problem
- User reporting
 - Inability to query the system
- Staffing as related to workload is a problem in all areas
- Not all employees are utilizing Hansen
 - Not taking advantage of all the functionality of Hansen
 - Not using Hansen to communicate across functions (“Messaging” is available, but not being used)
- Training in Hansen
- No overall role definition
- Data management
- No way to understand the whole process
 - Don’t know what’s done on the different floors
 - No formal process flowcharts
- Have to get up and physically go to another floor to find help for a customer since everyone is short-staffed, and can’t always answer the phone
- Consistency of procedures
 - What do we tell the customer?

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT OF THE EXISTING PROCESS.

The following opportunities to improve the existing permitting process were identified by staff:

- Need more specificity on requirements
 - Follow State code
 - Gwinnett has separate Cos vs. all-inclusive CO

- Limited cross-trained Inspectors
- Technology
 - System
 - IVR
 - Laptops
- Expedite certain types of plans
 - Review and determine who really needs to review
- Fast-track resubmittals
 - Should not be redistributing to all disciplines (Zoning, Land Devel., Structural)
- Need completeness review
- Need clear role definition
 - What's handled in the field and what requires management involvement?
- Second floor plans review needs "Permit Manager" for triage
 - Need checklist for completeness review
- Need monthly meeting for Department heads
 - No information is currently passed around
- Need accountability of managers
- Need to change start times
- Web site says open till 5:00 pm, when they actually close at 3:00 pm
- Need customer entry in kiosk and on-line
- Use TVs in waiting area to educate
- Need improved internet presence
 - Links, resources
 - Consistent documentation, applications
- Technical support for on-line system
- Need cross-training
 - Alcohol licensing
 - Permit Technicians and Business License Clerks
 - IT/Permitting
- Change order on commercial Business License.
 - They key in the license, and if need to go to Zoning, need to be able to get a refund
- Improve acoustics in waiting area
- Need field access to Hansen
- Reduce the number of lines, or implement a decision tree
 - If sent away, get to come back at head of the line
- Link/note in Hansen backflow approval
- Need Ombudsman
- Online resources to get information
 - Get stormwater info before arriving
 - GIS

- Parking – link to map, or website. Hard to pay.
- Need new location
- Q-Matic Ordering Number
- Digital plat review
 - Development plans
- Kiosk/Business signage explaining
- Update website with hours
- Anonymous complaint process
- Determine who interprets zoning code day-to-day
- Business License Inspectors need authority to issue violation notices (currently refer these to Code Enforcement)
 - \$50 fee for being unlicensed
- Charging for backflow inspections
- Document management
- Continuous improvement
- Documentation
- Electronic submittal process
- Functional laptops in the field
 - Counter tech update
 - Internet access
- Review all permissions in Hansen and Internet access
- Get a Czar/Coordinator to oversee the process
 - “Have one person in charge”
- Align staffing with workloads
- Define process. Define activities in process and define roles
- Records management and retention

4. THREATS TO ACCOMPLISHING IMPROVEMENTS IN THE PERMITTING PROCESS.

The final area participants were asked about were the threats that would prevent the County from accomplishing the improvements in the permitting process that is being sought. Participants identified the following issues:

- Resistance to change by staff
 - “We’ve been here a long time and have been doing things the same way”
- Lack of support and clarity
- Staff are reluctant to share information for fear of becoming obsolete
- Outsourcing threat
- Funding for changes
- Stakeholder political clout

- Politicians/Management should investigate what's going on before they direct staff to do something in response to customer complaint ("Is the information I heard accurate?")
- Complaints can get personal
- Security of the building
 - Particularly in areas that take in cash
- Need to stand back and look at all statutory requirements
- Circumvention of processes
- Phone calls to management/officials
- Staff members also circumvent process and approve for other departments (e.g., Land Development could sign off for Zoning)
 - Why does the system allow improper sign-offs?
- Funding
- County not reviewing Water and Sewer
- Staffing/workload alignment
 - Study indicated that reductions were necessary
- Politicians will listen to residents, maybe not staff
- Expectation that customer satisfaction enables circumvention of the law
- Too few Permit Techs
 - Too much to do on every permit
- Too few Zoning Officers
- No separate cashiering section
 - This overloads the Permit Techs
- Too few Business License Techs
 - Need field Business License Inspectors (have 2 now, need more)
- Too little cross-training of Permit Techs and Business License Techs
- Staff compensation
- Building security – particularly in areas with cash
- Lack of training
- Don't know who to contact if Q-Matic or Hansen go down
 - No reliability in IT systems
- Inconsistent application of procedures
 - Interpretation of zoning code, etc.
- Ergonomics
- Fear of retribution
- Training of management
- Incorrect configuration of systems
- Salaries
 - People are leaving because of this
- Lack of training for Inspectors and Managers
- Lack of accountability – particularly at management level

- Training of Permit Technicians
 - Only functioning as “Intake Clerks” right now
- Lack of completeness reviews
- County won’t compensate for Comp Time or attainment of multiple certifications
- Lack of understanding by management as to what it takes to get certified/qualified to do the job
- Builders have learned to go over Inspectors’ heads to bypass the process
 - Getting approvals without proper inspections
 - Forged initials on inspections?
- Inspectors sometimes don’t know where they have jurisdiction
 - Nothing is in writing regarding jurisdictional boundaries
- “We’re set up for failure”
- Organizational structure impacts the process
- Failure to implement recommendations that would fix the problems
 - Previous study recommendations weren’t implemented
- People at the top of the organization don’t know what Inspectors do
- Management is territorial
- Potential lack of funding to implement recommendations