

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Executive Summary

As directed by Council Resolution 20150402-014 on April 2, 2015, the Development Services Department (DSD) has consulted with the various City of Austin departments that directly participate in the plan review processes (Site Plan, Subdivision, Commercial and Residential Plan Review) related to land development and construction. The multi-department strategies outlined within this plan will provide the City Council with a summary of specific efforts that have been used to date as well as additional actions that will be taken in order to eliminate the current backlog. Departments represented in this response include Development Services, Health and Human Services, Austin Transportation, Austin Water Utility, Austin Fire, Office of Real Estate Services, and Law.

Due to the varying procedures for processing their applicable reviews, you will find that departments have different timetables for completing their reviews. Additionally, each department has a varying degree of backlog. With regard to defining *backlog*, the term is used to denote reviews that have exceeded the maximum number of days for the review to be completed, as published by a department's policies.

The backlog of reviews is an issue that continues to percolate with the increased volume of Austin's development activity. The backlog cannot be solved with existing staffing, and the approach to mitigating the backlog has been to use overtime and temporary staffing. A long-term approach to eliminating backlog and maintain zero backlog will be presented in the DSD response for implementing recommendations from the Zucker and Associates assessment.

The use of third-party plan review services to reduce the backlog is an option. However, this option was determined infeasible for a short-term approach. The time required for training third-parties on the Land Development Code (LDC) and the contract development and procurement process for onboarding third-parties would detract from the time to reduce the backlog. Third-party plan reviews will be considered as a long-term option for processing reviews; however, this option will not be considered until the current backlog issue is resolved.

Additionally, online service options for customers, including electronic plan review and online permit applications, are under development. And, acceptance of online payments is being tested. Once fully implemented, the new options will improve customer service and operational efficiency. Additionally, Austin Water Utility and the Law Department will integrate their review process into the AMANDA database, which is the City's review, permitting, and inspection database used to track all customer transactions. By joining AMANDA, the status of transactions for the two departments can be viewed immediately by City staff and customers.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Development Services Department

Division: Commercial Review

Contact: Carl Wren, Assistant Director, 512-974-7254

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

Development Services Department (DSD) personnel review design submittals for commercial construction permits to ensure safe building elements (e.g. exits, fire resistance, energy conservation), electrical systems (e.g. lighting, power distribution), mechanical systems (e.g. refrigeration, air conditioning), and plumbing systems (e.g. potable water piping, waste water piping).

Turnaround Time:

There are some exceptions, but the basic turnaround times are 21 calendar days for new construction and seven (7) calendar days for remodel construction.

Backlog:

- The current backlog is approximately three (3) weeks.
- The backlog is anticipated to be remedied within 90 days, provided funding for overtime and temporary staff is available.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Hire three (3) temporary plan review staff.
- Institute a work schedule that includes five (5) hours per week of mandatory overtime for permanent staff.
- Implement a one-day a week assignment for plan review that will be on a rotating basis. Each plan review employee will be available four (4) days a week for preliminary plan review meetings and walk-in customers but will have one day a week when they will concentrate on plan review.
- Change internal review process to encourage “approval” with comments and plan markups for minor corrections to help reduce the need for multiple update submittals.

Notes:

- Maintaining turnaround times will be difficult without the addition of new, permanent positions, which have been submitted as part of the FY 2015/2016 budget request.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Development Services Department

Division: Residential Review

Contact: Carl Wren, Assistant Director, 512-974-7254

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

Development Services Department (DSD) personnel coordinate reviews by other City departments related to fire safety, utility design, drainage issues, and tree impacts. DSD personnel perform primary review of submittals for residential construction permits to ensure compliance with zoning issues and for safety of building features (e.g. framing, exiting, smoke alarms, energy conservation, visitability), electrical systems (e.g. lighting, power distribution), mechanical systems (e.g. air conditioning), and plumbing systems (e.g. potable water piping, waste water piping).

Turnaround Time:

There are some exceptions, but the basic turnaround times are seven (7) calendar days for new construction and two (2) calendar days for remodel construction.

Backlog:

- The current backlog is approximately three (3) weeks.
- The backlog is anticipated to be remedied within 90 days, provided funding for overtime and temporary staff is available.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Hire two (2) temporary plan review staff and possibly more additional temporary staff.
- Institute a work schedule that includes five (5) hours per week of mandatory overtime for permanent staff.
- Change internal review process to encourage “approval” with comments and plan markups for minor corrections to help reduce the need for multiple update submittals.

Notes:

- The delinquent turnaround times for residential project plan reviews are at least partially associated with the complexity of the “McMansion” provisions within the Land Development Code (LDC) and the routine appeals of staff decisions associated with these types of reviews. As such, the department will recommend changes to the LDC that will simplify the McMansion provisions and will extend the turnaround times for these types of reviews to ensure that there is sufficient time to perform a thorough review.
- Maintaining turnaround times will be difficult without the addition of new, permanent positions, which have been submitted as part of the FY 2015/2016 budget request.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Development Services Department

Division: Land Use Review

Contact: George Adams, Assistant Director, 512-974-2146

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

The Land Use Review (LUR) Division serves as the point of coordination for submittal, distribution, and review of site development permits and subdivision plats. LUR distributes plans to numerous other city departments for review of these applications.

Turnaround Time:

There are some exceptions, but the basic turnaround times are 28 calendar days for initial site plan and subdivision plat submittal and 14 calendar days for update submittals.

Backlog:

- LUR staff has approximately 90% on-time review of site plan and subdivision plats. The current backlog is primarily associated with collaborative department partner reviews. The backlog varies depending on the specific department partner review.
- The backlog is anticipated to be remedied within 90 to 120 days, provided funding for overtime and temporary staff is available.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Hire three (3) temporary staff to support residential tree review and inspection.
- Implement overtime for permanent staff as needed.
- Enhance the Completeness Check Guidelines for site and subdivision applications to provide clarity and consistency in the completeness check process.
- Ensure all external partner departments are integrated into the AMANDA system to ensure consistent review times and allow the capture of accurate data and metrics on all review processes.

Notes:

- Maintaining turnaround times will be difficult without the addition of new, permanent positions, which have been submitted as part of the FY 2015/2016 budget request.

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Health and Human Services Department

Division: Environmental Health Services Division

Contact: David Lopez, EHSD Chief Environmental Health Officer, 512-978-0303

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

The Health and Human Services Department (HHSD) reviews plans for new and proposed remodels of food establishments and public/semi-public (non-single family residential) swimming pool and spa facilities. HHSD conducts Certificate of Occupancy inspections in the field, while also serving a high volume of walk-in and telephone customers. The HHSD review is the first plan review step in the City of Austin's commercial development plan review/approval process.

Turnaround Time:

The HHSD performance standard is 10 business days.

Backlog:

- The backlog has been eliminated and the turnaround is currently within 10 business days.
- Plan review staff worked overtime on three (3) consecutive Saturdays during April to bring the pending plan reviews current.
- Staff worked a total of 64 overtime hours.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Provide additional room/area with plan review surfaces/tables for existing HHSD plan reviewers to conduct multiple plan reviews simultaneously.
- Provide overtime work hours for permanent staff of at least 16 hours per month.
- One (1) additional permanent staff would yield adequate coverage to ensure plan review turnaround times are achieved and customer service is maintained for walk-ins/phone/email communications.

Notes:

- The HHSD plan review workspace is inadequately sized such that typically only one plan reviewer can conduct plan reviews at any given time.
- Demand for HHSD plan reviews and a Certificate of Occupancy inspection continues to increase.

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Austin Transportation Department

Division: Traffic Engineering and Arterial Management

Contact: Gordon Derr, Assistant Director, 512-974-7228

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

The Austin Transportation Department (ATD) reviews development applications and variances in accordance with the City's Transportation Criteria Manual (TCM) and Land Development Code. ATD's Traffic Engineering and Arterial Management Divisions are typically consulted by the Development Services Department (DSD) to review and approve proposed variances from the TCM; define the scope and review Traffic Impact Analysis (TIA); and use their expertise in traffic operations. ATD's review process is facilitated by weekly meetings between the two departments to review active cases. Depending on the complexity of the development application, most issues can be resolved during these meetings or within the following two (2) weeks. TIA's typically require up to two (2) months of review based on their complexity and availability of staff time.

Turnaround Time:

Typical turnaround times are 28 calendar days for initial TIA submittal and 14 calendar days for update submittals. Review time can increase to 56 calendar days based on TIA complexity.

Backlog:

- The current backlog is approximately eight (8) weeks.
- The backlog is anticipated to be remedied within 90 days.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Continue recent hiring of six (6) engineers.
- Bolster partnership with DSD and formalize review duties with a Memorandum of Understanding between ATD and DSD.

Notes:

- ATD is developing strategies to improve the quality and efficiency of TIA review by staff.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Austin Water Utility

Division: Utility Development Services (UDS)

Contact: Bart Jennings, AWU Business Strategy Manager, 512-972-0118

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

Austin Water Utility (AWU) assists in the resolution of problems and utility conflicts identified during construction of water and wastewater infrastructure. AWU provides the following services:

- 1) Water and Wastewater Capacity Reviews for proposed development;
- 2) Service Extension Requests for extension of City water and wastewater infrastructure for utility service; and
- 3) Engineering Plan Reviews for construction plans (including related easements) for water and wastewater infrastructure such as:
 - Capital Improvement Program projects;
 - Sites and subdivisions;
 - Site plan plumbing; and
 - Residential and commercial tap connections

Turnaround Time:

Water and Wastewater Capacity Reviews:

- The goal is to complete 100% of reviews within a 10-day requirement.

Service Extension Requests (SERs):

- For SERs, turnaround times can range from one to six months. The review time varies depending on the type, complexity and location of the project, and/or completeness and sufficiency of the submittal package.
- The goal is to obtain a 21-day average or less of an SER application waiting for technical review.
- The goal is to obtain a 120-day average or less to complete administratively approved SERs.

Engineering Plan (Pipeline Engineering) Reviews:

- The goal is to complete 100% of initial reviews within a 28-day requirement.
- The goal is to complete 100% of each subsequent review within a 14-day requirement.

Tap Plan Reviews:

- The goal is to complete 100% of reviews within a 28-day requirement.
- The goal is to complete 100% of each subsequent review within a 14-day requirement.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Austin Water Utility

Division: Utility Development Services (UDS)

Contact: Bart Jennings, AWU Business Strategy Manager, 512-972-0118

Backlog:

- The backlog for SERs, Engineering Plan Reviews, and Tap Plan Reviews (as described below) is anticipated to be significantly decreased within 180 days.

Water and Wastewater Capacity Reviews:

- There is no backlog in these reviews, and the performance goals are being met.

Service Extension Requests (SERs):

- Six (6) SERs are in the queue to be reviewed (down from 54 in October 2014).
- It takes an average of 155 days of AWU staff time to complete administratively approved SERs (according to data from the past 12 months). It is expected that the average time will decrease by the end of a 90-day period. Currently, SERs are not tracked in AMANDA.

Engineering Plan (Pipeline Engineering) Reviews:

- 53% of initial reviews are completed within a 28-day requirement (according to data from October 1, 2014 through April 15, 2015). This calculation is from the date that staff receives a capacity report and not the date the development application was received. Currently, the initial reviews are not tracked in AMANDA.
- 25% of subsequent reviews are completed within a 14-day requirement (according to data from October 1, 2014 through April 15, 2015). This calculation is from the date that staff receives a capacity report and not the date the development application was received. Currently, the subsequent reviews are not tracked in AMANDA.

Tap Plan Reviews:

- 32% of initial reviews are completed within a 28-day requirement (according to data from October 1, 2014 through April 15, 2015). Currently, the initial reviews are not tracked in AMANDA.
- 49% of subsequent reviews are completed within a 14-day requirement (according to data from October 1, 2014 through April 15, 2015). Currently, the subsequent reviews are not tracked in AMANDA.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Austin Water Utility

Division: Utility Development Services (UDS)

Contact: Bart Jennings, AWU Business Strategy Manager, 512-972-0118

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- In addition to the steps outlined below, AWU will provide ongoing training to the development community regarding the items to be included within each submittal to meet Austin Water submittal requirements.
- Integrate the AWU review into the AMANDA system.

Service Extension Requests (SERs):

- Transferred one (1) FTE to the SER workgroup for performing SER technical reviews in August 2014.
- Created a triage system for SERs thereby reducing the time to review “simple” SERs.
- Streamlined the process for decision-making and transferred administrative SER application tasks from engineers to other UDS staff.

Engineering Plan (Pipeline Engineering) Reviews

- Transferred Engineering Plan Review functions in the Water Resource Management Program Area to AWU’s UDS division on April 7, 2015.
- Transferred work associated with the design standard, standard detail, standard product list, specification, and rule development reviews to other divisions so that the focus of the workgroup in UDS is on completing Engineering Plan Reviews.
- Will reclassify one upcoming vacant position in July 2015 to permanently provide additional resources to Engineering Plan Reviews.
- Continue to utilize other AWU engineering staff on a temporary part-time basis to perform Engineering Plan Reviews.
- Continue to utilize overtime to perform Engineering Plan Reviews.
- Will assess permanent resource needs during a 180-day assessment period.

Tap Plan Reviews

- Continue to utilize additional AWU staff on a temporary part-time basis to perform Tap Plan Reviews.
- Continue to utilize overtime to perform Tap Plan Reviews.
- Will assess permanent resource needs during a 180-day assessment period.

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Austin Fire Department

Division: Engineering Plans Review Section

Contact: Chris Swenson, Division Chief, 512-974-0266

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

The Austin Fire Department (AFD) Engineering Plans Review Section reviews site plans, fire protection system plans, residential plans, and building plans. The section supports the Development Assistance Center (DAC), meets with and advises customers and AFD inspectors, and assists with technical inspections.

Turnaround Time:

The standard review turnaround time is 21 calendar days for new construction projects and seven (7) calendar days for remodel construction projects. The review time may vary depending on the type and complexity of the plans.

Backlog:

- The current backlog is approximately four (4) weeks.
- The backlog is anticipated to be remedied within 160 days.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Reassign a Fire Specialist from Operations to assist with plan review.
- Place all plans where AFD is the final sign-off at the front of the work queue.
- Continue to utilize overtime at an average of 200+ hours per month.
- Continue recruitment to fill a vacant Consultant Engineer position.
- Hire two temporary Engineering Associates.
- Commence recruitment for an anticipated Engineer position vacancy due to announced retirement.

Notes:

- AFD is requesting two (2) additional Engineering Associate positions as part of the FY 2015/2016 Budget as a solution to meeting the service level requirements and reducing over-time given the increasing workload.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Office of Real Estate Services

Division: Land Management Section

Contact: Eric Hammack, Property Agent Supervisor, 512-974-7079

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

As of April 2014, the Office of Real Estate Services (ORES) administers the license agreement process, which was previously administered by the Austin Transportation Department. A license agreement authorizes the encroachment of public right-of-way and public easements by private improvements. A license agreement covers a wide array of use including sidewalk cafes, tower cranes, commercial site plans, and residential properties. The license agreement process is governed under Chapter 14-11 of the City Code.

Turnaround Time:

License agreement applications are distributed for City department and utility review within 48 hours of receipt. Process cycle times vary according to proposed project.

Backlog:

- ORES implemented its License Agreement Backlog Reduction Program in April of 2014. License Agreements are now drafted and sent to applicants for execution within five (5) business days of application approval, and the total count of open applications has been reduced by approximately 40%.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- In 2015, ORES is focusing on a standardization of best practices and on developing a process amendment to better assist residential applicants. As such, ORES will do the following during 2015:
 - Prepare a recommendation for Council to amend Chapter 14-11 so that easement encroachments by residential improvements may be accommodated by an easement modification rather than a License Agreement. If approved, this action will reduce the financial and regulatory burden on private citizens and will further reduce the existing count of open applications by approximately 20%.
 - Continue program development for integration of the license agreement application process into the AMANDA system, which will streamline the review process and reduce the process cycle time.
- Continue to work with the Development Services Department to ensure that commercial projects that are subject to both license agreement and site plan requirements benefit from interdepartmental process alignment.

City of Austin Department Strategies to Mitigate Development-Related Plan Review Backlog

Law Department

Division: Land Use and Real Estate Division

Contact: Deborah Thomas, Division Chief, 512-974-2172

Role in the Development-Related Plan Review:

The Law Department drafts and reviews legal documents that are required to be submitted by applicants in the development permitting process. Documents include easements, restrictive covenants, unified development agreements and other documents used to ensure compliance with the City Code or permitting conditions.

Turnaround Time:

The Law Department will meet the turnaround times identified below.

Backlog:

- There is no backlog in the Law Department review of legal documents.

Actionable Steps to Mitigate Backlog:

- Integrate the Law Department review into the AMANDA system.
- Establish defined review times as follows:
 - Applicants using on-line template documents will receive initial review comments within five (5) business days and update comments within three (3) business days.
 - Applicants not using template documents will receive initial review comments within 20 business days and update comments within 15 business days.