

One-Stop Arlington Customer Advisory Working Group

Meeting Summary
April 24, 2018

WG member attendees: Jeff Adler, David Guillaudeu, SeJun Lee, Sean O'Malley, Kelley Rawson, Matthew Roberts, Betsy Stagg, Christopher Young

County staff attendees: Deborah Albert, Sadé Bowers, Helen Duong, Lavar Youmans

Working Group recap: Member and staff introductions. Review of the 2015 customer survey results, followed by discussion.

Discussion with members was based on the following questions:

1. What is the worst or best permitting process in Arlington? Why?
2. What are strategies and actions you use to get better service in Arlington?
3. For ePlan submission are there any times you come into the office during the process? Why? Are there services available on ePlan that you prefer the paper option? Why?
4. What are the current in person services you are most concerned about changing to an online service?
5. As we move towards an increase in digital processes and services, what should we be thinking about?

Comments/Questions from members are summarized below:

What is the worst or best permitting process in Arlington? Why?

- The online option of the permitting process in Arlington happens to be the best and worst part at the same time. It has great potential. Several aspects of the process being online has saved customer's time and energy, both are very beneficial to their overall experience. Giving the customer the option to send plans electronically has made a huge difference. However, the presence of minor problems reverses the benefit in some situations.
- The predictability of the online process is very helpful. Customers are frequently asked by their clients about the total cost and duration. They are confident that they can rely on the information provided by Arlington, for example the deadline date.
- Customers can track the review process, but if the plan is rejected they are unable to know exactly why it was rejected until the full review cycle is complete. It would be helpful to customers and their clients if they could be informed about the details of the rejection as the review process progresses. This will allow the client to be proactive about fixing the problem.
- Approvals that run through DES are difficult. With regards to plats there are only a few reviewers to approve plats. This results in a time-consuming review process. In some instance, it can take months to receive comments.
- In some situations, an additional round of comments appears at the last min. This is very frustrating, and it typically occurs with plat review from DES.
- Obtaining a final building permit fee has proven to be difficult. Once plans are approved in ePlan they are sent back so the general contractor can be added. If they do not have a general contractor at that time the permit just sits until the applicant enters that information. Once the general contractor

information is entered it is then sent back again to be processed and sometimes it takes several days before the final fee is obtained.

- A recent change in process doesn't allow the general contractors to pull the permit. This is very restrictive and inconvenient. This is unique to ePlan.
- In the current system plan reviewers, do not have the option to go back and change their comments. In a situation where the plan reviewer made a mistake and no revisions were required the applicant must re-submit for review because previous comments cannot be changed.
- In the past, reviewers in the Zoning department would wait until the very last day to complete their review. This practice is very frustrating to customers. In addition, the time spent in-person with Zoning staff is significantly longer than with other departments such as ISD. There is a very high staff turnover rate in Zoning. New Zoning staff members are more thorough and strict when reviewing, it is annoying to customers and as they get more experience under their belt they get better. The Zoning department has improved over the past couple of years.

What are strategies and actions you use to get better service in Arlington?

- Reaching out to staff member they have worked with in the past, even if they are not assigned to the project. If a staff member was very helpful previously customers are more likely to reach out to them when needed. They often ask guidance on to answer and respond to comments. Inquire general information regarding new permits. Customers will follow up with their assigned reviewer first, however, if interpretations aren't the same, they will reach out to a reviewer from the past.
- When soliciting help from reviewers not assigned the project the intent is to get as much information as possible to get the comments approved and eliminate the possibility of needing to make revisions again.
- Customers contact certain staff members to ask general questions when seeking guidance. Staff accessibility is great in Arlington. High confidence in a timely response from staff via phone and emails.
- Submission LDA permits before building permits. The strategy is to get both permits around the same time. Initial review time for LDA's takes 45 days, second review is 30 days to the date.
- For commercial projects, you apply for LDA (land disturbing activity) after CEP (civil engineering plan) is approved. Then it takes about a week for the LDA to be approved, very quick to get LDA once CEP is approved. Until the CEP is approved most applicants do not submit for building permits because there can be significant changes as part of the CEP review and approval.
- Frequent emails are sent to request the status on excavation permits that are submitted by paper. There is not an option for online status check available. Customers are not contacted even when the status is approved, therefore emails are sent to obtain a status.

For ePlan submission are there any times you come into the office during the process? Why? Are there services available on ePlan that you prefer the paper option? Why?

- When an active revision is approved, it doesn't automatically generate a permit. Customers often send someone from their organization to come down here in -person to calculate the new fees. There isn't consistency with how fees are calculated for active revisions.
- For ePlan: once all of reviewer comments are complete in the system, the reviewer needs to manually to release them to the customer. Oftentimes customers have to call the office in order for the comments to be released to generate the comment letter. Sometimes this takes a few days. It is a manual process for approval or rejection.
- Time is critical to clients. For projects that qualify as express or walk-thru, the in-person submissions are a 1 day process, versus the 2-3-day process when the application is submitted online.

What are the current in person services you are most concerned about changing to an online service?

- Permits for dumpsters, road closure for paving, etc. require someone to make multiple trips to DES to apply, pay fees, and pick up the physical permit.
- The human element during the application and review process. Concerns about losing the opportunity for staff to give customers advice to make sure the permit goes through. However, customers say not having to deal with the commute to come in to the office is a better trade off.
- Customers are concerned about the reliability of the new online system when submitting large plan sets. For example, plan sets of 400 sheets or more. Customer explained that they have learned to upload only 20-30 sheets at a time. Customers suggested we provide more guidance on these types of issues for other inexperienced with the online system.

As we move towards an increase in digital processes and services, what should we be thinking about?

- For large scale projects, the new system should correctly identify the naming of the sheets to place them in the correct discipline to follow the same naming convention that the County uses.
- The County needs to offer additional guidance for uploading sheets and naming them. Inform customers that they need to use the County's naming conventions in order can take advantage of the auto sorting if applicable.
- In approved plan sets the page orientation of the different sheets differ from sheet to sheet and it is a hassle and makes printing challenging.
- Better routing of permit applications, and publicized process flow charts.
- Currently revisions in ePlan must go back to each group to review again despite only one group rejecting. It unsatisfying to take additional time to go back to all groups as well as back to DES for a final review. It's a tedious process and it take up to 3 days to get the last sign-off on the revisions. In the new system, different ques could possibly help to alleviate this issue.