



MEMORANDUM

To: The Honorable President and Members of the Baltimore City Council
c/o Natawna Austin, Executive Secretary

From: Alice Kennedy, Housing Commissioner

Date: March 7, 2023

Re: City Council Resolution 22-0140R Informational Hearing - Permit Reforms

The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) has reviewed City Council Resolution 22-0140R for the purpose of inviting representatives from the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Office of the City Administrator, the Baltimore City Fire Department, Office of the Fire Marshal, and other relevant parties to provide information on reforms to the Department of Housing and Community Development's permit process.

The Department of Housing and Community Development is pleased to participate in an Informational Hearing to discuss the current permit process and to provide information on plans underway for improvement.

Background

DHCD currently employs 18 staff members that work on permits and plans review. They processed over 40,000 permits in calendar year 2022. They work diligently across agencies to get through reviews in a timely manner. The length between application and final approval depends greatly on the nature of the permit and the scope of work. There are several steps in the permitting process including application review, processing, approval, payment and inspections.

The permitting software that we are currently using is about 15 years old and resembles a "hub and spoke model," whereby, DHCD serves as the center hub and routinely makes referrals to 6 agencies that are the spokes - DOP, DOT, DPW, Fire, BMZA and Health. DHCD works collaboratively with applicants and these partner agencies to ensure permits receive the appropriate Zoning, Site Plan and Preliminary Code Review, prior to the issuance of a permit. Some challenges identified by internal stakeholders are that the current software is outdated, complex and inadequate for timely communication between agencies.

For many applicants, depending on the nature of the permit, the processing duration can be same day or between 24 and 48 Hours. However, more complex permits can take much longer and are subject to a variety of factors that often fall outside of DHCD's control - such as subsequent partner agency review. Additionally, many applications are delayed because applicants have failed to provide the correct or required information or have difficulties navigating the online permits system.

It is important to note that during the COVID pandemic DHCD successfully transitioned to an online system for all its permits, 100% of applications are filed and processed online. Our “One-Stop Shop Permit Center” reopened on August 16, 2021 and some customers still prefer to come in person and work with our office service staff.

DHCD acknowledges that there are challenges that are hindering the effective processing of permits in person and online. The current system has functionality issues with voids in account user management and intermittent loss of critical tools such as message tools which create issues or errors. Customers complain about difficulties navigating and finding information on the application portal, which limits online applications for permits. Some users encounter delayed or lack of response to inquiries from agency stakeholders, including timely processing, approval of plans and scheduling inspections.

Conclusion

DHCD is committed to improving the permitting process and creating a system that will provide user-friendly workflow with ease of access for homeowners, community development organizations, developers and all those seeking permits in the City of Baltimore. Engagement with users of the system is integral to this work, and creating a new system that provides equitable access and ease of use. DHCD is committed to improving the permitting process by engaging the public to survey current permitting barriers and including the public in testing as a new system is built to ensure the system is easy to use. DHCD has completed our first survey that was sent to over 20,000 users, and we received over 900 responses, and we are currently analyzing those responses. DHCD also completed the first of many stakeholder focus group sessions and will continue to engage stakeholders and the public as we advance this work. In addition to new software, DHCD is exploring systems changes such as creation of a centralized call center to manage phone traffic. Our overarching goal is to ensure a system that will provide equitable, user-friendly workflow with ease of accessibility. A cloud based permitting software system will enable better collaboration among multiple agencies, expedite approvals and improve customer satisfaction.

Over the last 9 months DHCD has begun to explore what would be required of a new permitting software system with agency partners that manage permits based on workflow review to better understand user experience for both customers and staff. This process is estimated to extend another 12 months and is aided by the Mayor’s \$3,000,000 commitment of ARPA funds. The process also includes updating the existing integrated code enforcement system (CHIP), and newly integrating with the Board of Municipal Zoning and Appeals (BMZA).

The graphic below provides information on timeline for this process, and we are currently on track to complete vendor selection in Spring 2023.

