

City of Maple Ridge

SPECIAL COUNCIL WORKSHOP AGENDA

November 16, 2021

9:00 a.m.

PLEASE NOTE THE CHANGE IN START TIME

Virtual Online Meeting including Council Chambers

The purpose of the Council Workshop is to review and discuss policies and other items of interest to Council. Although resolutions may be passed at this meeting, the intent is to make a consensus decision to send an item to Council for debate and vote or refer the item back to staff for more information or clarification. The meeting is live streamed and recorded by the City of Maple Ridge.

**REMINDER: Committee of the Whole – November 16, 2021 at 1:30 p.m.
Public Hearing – November 16, 2021 at 7:00 p.m.**

1. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

2. UNFINISHED AND NEW BUSINESS

2.1 Building Permit Function Review

Report and presentation by Allan Neilson, Neilson Strategies Inc.

3. NOTICE OF CLOSED COUNCIL MEETING

The meeting will be closed to the public pursuant to Sections 90 (1) and 90 (2) of the *Community Charter* as the subject matter being considered relates to the following:

Section 90(1)(a) Personal information about an identifiable individual who holds a position as an agent of the municipality.

Section 90(1)(c) Labour relations or employee negotiations.

Section 90(1)(i) The receipt of advice that is subject to solicitor-client privilege, including communications necessary for that purpose.

Section 90(1)(j) Information that is prohibited or information that if it were presented in a document would be prohibited from disclosure under Section 21 of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.

Any other matter that may be brought before the Council that meets the requirements for a meeting closed to the public pursuant to Sections 90 (1) and 90 (2) of the *Community Charter or Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*.


4. ADJOURNMENT

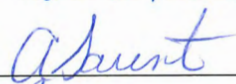
APPROVED BY:

DATE:

PREPARED BY


DATE:


Nov 10, 2021


Nov. 10, 2021

CHECKED BY

DATE:


Nov. 12, 2021



CITY OF MAPLE RIDGE BUILDING PERMIT FUNCTION REVIEW REPORT

This *Report* has been prepared by Neilson Strategies Inc. for the City of Maple Ridge. The document is presented for discussion with, and for the sole use of, the City. No representations of any kind are made by the consultants to any party with whom the consultant does not have a contract.



Neilson Strategies Inc.
106-460 Doyle Avenue, Kelowna, BC, V1Y 0C2
neilsonstrategies.ca

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Property owners in the City of Maple Ridge who wish to construct a new building, alter or improve an existing building, change the use or occupancy of a building, demolish a structure, install a swimming pool, build a major deck or retaining wall, add a garage, or undertake some other type of construction must first apply for and obtain a City building permit. Applications are processed, proposed projects are reviewed, building permits are issued, and building construction is inspected through the City's building permit function.

The building permit function is managed by the City's Building Department within the Planning and Development Services Division. Through the function, managers and staff in the Department work to protect the safety of persons who occupy, use and gather in buildings by ensuring that all structures, on both public and private lands, are constructed in accordance with technical standards set out in provincial codes, and process requirements outlined in municipal regulations. In performing this work, managers and staff are expected to conduct the necessary reviews, issue the required permits and perform the range of scheduled inspections in a timely manner. Managers and staff are also expected to engage with permit applicants and builders in constructive and respectful ways that recognize the important role of these parties in helping to create Maple Ridge's built environment.

Strong development in Maple Ridge has resulted in a high and sustained demand for building permits. Direct and indirect impacts related to COVID-19 have exacerbated the pressures associated with high demand, as have a variety of staffing challenges. Taken together, these pressures, impacts and challenges have tested the ability of the Department, in its present form and under its current approaches to work, to consistently meet the expectations of City Council, City administration and the development community. To better understand issues facing the Department, the nature of concerns expressed by Council and industry, and the various opportunities available for change, the City commissioned an independent review of the building permit function. Neilson Strategies Inc., a BC-based local government consultancy, was selected as the consultant to conduct the review.

BUILDING PERMIT FUNCTION REVIEW

Objectives

Reviews of building permit functions in different cities are typically driven by certain common objectives — the desire to reduce permit processing times is a key example. Each place also, however, has some objectives that may be unique to the specific municipality and the circumstances at play. Early in the current study process the consultant met with Council, the Chief Administrative Officer and the General Manager of Planning and Development Services to understand Maple Ridge's objectives for the review. The following points were highlighted:



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- *Provide Excellent Customer Service* — Homeowners, business owners, builders, developers, professionals and organizations who deal with City on building permits are customers of the City. As customers, they deserve to be treated with respect, assisted in their efforts to understand and comply with requirements, served in a timely fashion, apprised of the progress of their applications, and protected from arbitrary or unfair actions. The City has made a commitment to excellent customer service — or, as noted at the bottom of every City email, to service that is "fair, friendly, [and] helpful". The desire to assess and, where necessary, improve the Building Department's ability to consistently deliver on this commitment was identified as an important objective of the review.
- *Develop a Culture of Collaboration* — The Building Department and the development industry play different roles and have different responsibilities in the development process. Both parties, however, share a common interest in creating a built environment characterized by quality, innovation, access and affordability. The review represented an opportunity to assess the department's current culture, and to promote change where required to achieve greater collaboration.
- *Position for Future Growth and Investment* — In the coming years, Maple Ridge is expected to remain one of the fastest growing municipalities in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia and Canada. The City's Building Department, as part of the larger Planning and Development Services Division, will need to play a significant role in attracting and facilitating the types of growth and investment that Maple Ridge needs to achieve its long-term vision as a vibrant and sustainable community. The review was driven, in part, by a desire to identify changes required to help the Department develop the capacity, depth and culture needed to succeed in this role.
- *Promote Innovation* — Building Departments across Canada have developed a variety of innovations designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their building permit functions. The desire to identify innovations that are either new to Maple Ridge, or that build on the success of existing innovations in the Department, was an important objective of the review.
- *Reduce Permit Processing Times* — As noted earlier, most reviews of building permit functions strive to reduce the time required to review permit applications, issue permits, and complete inspections. Maple Ridge's review shares this objective.
- *Provide Certainty* — Applicants who work through building permit functions place significant importance on certainty — that is, on knowing what to expect at different points in an approval process, and on being able to receive and rely on estimated processing times that are reasonable given the nature of projects being proposed. For many applicants, the need for



certainty in the building permit process trumps the desire for speed.

- *Ensure Accountability* — Customer service, collaboration and certainty are enhanced when mechanisms are in place to hold the Department and the City accountable for actions taken or not taken. The desire to develop mechanisms to strengthen accountability was identified as a major objective of the review.

Consultant's Approach

The consultant's approach to conducting the review relied heavily on interviews with individuals and groups from the development community in Maple Ridge, including professionals and developers who are active across the broader Metro Vancouver region. Interviews with managers and staff in Maple Ridge's Building Department were also undertaken. In all, the consultant interviewed:

- approximately 25 builders, developers, architects, engineers, consultants and others from Maple Ridge's development industry, including some who are based and active in other parts of Metro Vancouver
- a focus groups convened by the Urban Development Institute and Homebuilders' Association of Vancouver
- representatives of public sector organizations that require building permits to renovate facilities and construct buildings
- every member of the Maple Ridge Building Department, including the Chief Building Official, Managers, Building Officials, the Site Grading Technologist, and all Development Service Technicians¹
- managers from other departments in the City that interact with the Building Department through the broader development approval process, or in the course of ongoing operations
- managers from a short-list of other municipalities in the Lower Mainland and in other high-growth parts of British Columbia
- staff from the Municipal Insurance Association of British Columbia

Taken together, the interviews helped to identify a range of issues and perspectives concerning Maple Ridge's building permit function and the Building Department. Interviewees also provided a number of ideas aimed at improving the function, strengthening relations between the Department and industry, and addressing related issues.

In addition to the interviews, the consultant researched the City's permit process, *Building Bylaw*, guidance and information documents produced by the Department, costs and revenues associated with the function, all information on staffing numbers and qualifications, and a range of other materials. The consultant liaised regularly over the course of the project with the General Manager of Planning and Development Services, and met on a number of occasions with the Chief

¹ A number of individuals were interviewed more than once.



Administrative Officer. Finally, the consultant met three times with Council to identify concerns and objectives, review progress and present the *DRAFT Report*.

REPORT

This report presents the consultant's findings on, and recommended changes to, the City's building permit function. The report begins by profiling the City's function as it exists today, including the function's legislative basis, staffing model, general application review process, revenues and costs, value and number of permits, and other items. Issues in need of attention are then introduced and explained under four categories:

- the process through which permit applications are received and reviewed, and permits are issued
- the level, experience and structure of staffing resources dedicated to the function
- the City's use of technology in the function
- the Building Department's interactions and relationship with the development industry

Recommended changes for the City to consider in order to address the issues are presented in the report's final chapter.

Over the course of the review, care was taken to examine all aspects of the City's building permit function. Early in the assignment, however, the need to give extra attention to the Department's interactions and relationship with the development industry became evident. The issues under this topic, and recommendations to address them, are an important focus of the report.

ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

As a final opening comment, the importance of the building permit function to the City's economic and community development needs to be highlighted. A building permit function that is well-organized, effective in meeting its mandate, collaborative and solution-oriented, and efficient in processing building permit applications will help to attract investment to the City, which, in turn, will help to further develop the local economy and help the City achieve its economic development goals. Such a function will also help to reduce the costs incurred by applicants to obtain their building permits, which, in turn, will aid efforts to enhance housing affordability and build a diverse community.

Put simply, the building permit function at the City is a significant service with the potential to support the City's economic and community development efforts. The *Building Permit Function Review* was commissioned to help the function realize this potential.



CHAPTER 2

CURRENT BUILDING PERMIT FUNCTION

This chapter profiles the City of Maple Ridge's building permit function as it exists today. The function's purpose and legislative framework are addressed first. The Building Department is then reviewed, including information on staffing, permit applications and timelines, costs and revenues, and the Department's efforts to inform and educate applicants. The process that staff in the Department follow to issue building permits is also outlined.

This chapter, it should be emphasized, outlines the function in its current form. Issues with the function, and recommended changes for the City to consider, are presented in subsequent chapters.

PURPOSE OF THE FUNCTION

Property owners in the City of Maple Ridge who wish to construct a new building, alter or improve an existing building, change use or occupancy, demolish a structure, or undertake some other type of construction must first apply for and obtain a City building permit. Applications are processed, proposed projects are reviewed, and building permits are issued, through the City's building permit function.

The function exists, first and foremost, to protect the safety of persons who occupy, use and gather in buildings by ensuring that all structures, on both public and private lands, meet the minimum construction standards set out in the *BC Building Code*, *BC Plumbing Code* and related documents.² The function exists, as well, to protect the community's land use planning goals as expressed primarily in the City's *Zoning Bylaw, No. 7600-2019*. All applications for building permits are reviewed through the permit function to ensure compliance with the construction standards in the codes and the land use regulations in the zoning bylaw.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The legislative framework for the building permit function consists of provincial statutes and codes, and municipal bylaws. The key pieces of legislation are identified as follows:

- *Building Act* — The *Building Act* is the provincial statute that regulates building and construction across the province.³ The *Act* identifies the

² In Maple Ridge, the list of related documents includes *BC Electrical Code* and the *Canadian Standards Association (CSA) B149 Natural Gas and Propane Installation Codes*. Maple Ridge is one of five municipalities in British Columbia with the authority, delegated by the province, to issue electrical and gas permits. An additional three municipalities have authority related to gas permits only; three others have authority for electrical permits.

³ The *Act* applies in all parts of BC with the exception of the City of Vancouver, federal lands and First Nation reserves.



province as the sole authority to set the technical requirements for the construction, alteration, repair and demolition of buildings. The *Act* also sets out the qualifications required for persons who wish to serve as building officials. Building officials are the plan checkers and building inspectors with the qualifications necessary to review building plans and monitor construction for compliance to technical building requirements. Under the *Act*, building officials may be qualified to Level I, Level II or Level III. Each successive level requires a higher degree of expertise and a greater amount of work experience, and allows an individual to review and monitor increasingly complex buildings.⁴

The *Building Act* sets out a provision on "alternative solutions" to allow applicants to propose innovative, alternative ways to meet *Building Code* requirements. Local governments decide whether to approve proposed alternative solutions that come forward.

- *British Columbia Building Code* — The *BC Building Code* is the provincial building regulation created pursuant to the *Building Act*. The *Code* sets out the technical requirements that apply to the construction of all types of new buildings in BC, including residential, commercial, institutional and industrial structures. *Code* requirements apply, as well, to alterations and additions made to existing buildings, and to propose changes to the use of buildings.

The requirements in the *Building Code* address concerns related to health and safety, and to fire and structural protection. Needs and goals related to accessibility, as well as energy and water efficiency, are also addressed in the *Code*. Builders comply with the *Building Code* by following the requirements as prescribed in the *Code* or by proposing alternative solutions that achieve the same outcome.

- *British Columbia Plumbing Code* — The *BC Plumbing Code* sets out technical requirements related to the design and installation of new plumbing systems, and to the extension, alteration, renewal and repair of existing systems.⁵ The requirements are designed to protect health, but also to prevent water and sewer system damage.
- *British Columbia Fire Code* — The *Fire Code* sets out the minimum building design, construction and use requirements designed to address fire safety needs, and to protect persons in new and existing buildings from fire hazards. The *Fire Code* is developed by the province's Building Safety

⁴ Changes to the *Building Act* affecting the qualification of building officials took effect at the end of February, 2021. The changes, which have important implications for all municipalities, are explained later in the text.

⁵ The *Plumbing Code* forms one part of the *Building Code*, but is typically presented as a separate stand-alone document.



Standards Branch, which is the same agency responsible for developing and updating the other codes. The *Fire Code*, however, is issued as a regulation under the *Fire Services Act*.

- *Community Charter* — The *Community Charter* is the provincial statute that provides authority to, and governs the activities of, municipalities in British Columbia. Section 8(3)(l) of the *Charter* gives municipal councils in British Columbia the specific authority, exercised by bylaw, to regulate, prohibit and impose requirements in relation to buildings and structures.⁶
- *City of Maple Ridge Building Bylaw No. 6925 (2012)* — The City's *Building Bylaw* is the bylaw through which Maple Ridge Council exercises its authority to regulate the design, construction and occupancy of new buildings and structures, and the alteration, demolition, relocation and use of existing buildings and structures. The same bylaw regulates the installation, alteration or repair of plumbing, electrical work and equipment, and gas piping, fittings and appliances.

The *Building Bylaw* sets out the requirement to apply for and obtain a building permit prior to beginning construction of a new building in Maple Ridge, or alteration of an existing building. In addition, the *Bylaw* outlines:

- the types of permits that may be required, which in Maple Ridge include building permits, gas permits, electrical permits, plumbing permits, occupancy permits and sprinkler permits
- the conditions under which permits are issued, including the responsibility of owners who receive permits to ensure compliance of their building projects with the *Building Code*, the *Building Bylaw* and other safety-related enactments
- the role and powers of the City's Chief Building Official, and of the building officials that are appointed by the Chief Building Official
- requirements that relate specifically to applications for complex buildings, as well as requirements for applications related to simple buildings⁷
- the City's reliance on assurances from registered professionals that the building design and plans in an application for permit comply with the *Building Code*

⁶ The *Charter* does not require municipalities to regulate buildings and structures. In British Columbia, however, every municipal council, including Council in Maple Ridge, has chosen to use the authority available under the *Charter* for this purpose. Most if not all municipalities in Canada exercise the same regulatory authority.

⁷ Complex buildings include multi-family residential buildings above a certain size, along with most commercial, industrial and institutional buildings. Complex buildings are regulated under Part 3 of the *Building Code*. Simple buildings are single family residences and small non-residential buildings. They are regulated under Part 9 of the *Code*.



- responsibilities placed on the owner
- the authority of building officials to monitor site field reviews undertaken on complex buildings over the course of construction
- the authority of building officials to conduct inspections of standard buildings over the course of construction
- the requirement to obtain an occupancy permit prior to occupying a building, or part of a building as the case may be
- the authority of the Chief Building Official to issue a provisional occupancy permit
- penalties and enforcement
- permit and other requirements related to the plumbing, gas and electrical works
- a variety of other items

Maple Ridge's *Building Bylaw*, similar to that of several other municipalities, is modelled after a 2002 core building bylaw created by the Municipal Insurance Association of BC (MIABC) to help municipalities manage risk and limit their exposure to liability related to the regulation of construction. MIABC's core bylaw provides municipalities the ability, where deemed prudent, to place the onus of ensuring compliance with *Building Code* requirements for complex buildings on the coordinating registered professional listed on the application.

MAPLE RIDGE BUILDING DEPARTMENT

Maple Ridge's building permit function is administered by the Building Department within the City's Planning and Development Services Division. Figure 2.1 on the following page presents an organization chart for the Department. As illustrated in the chart, the Department is divided into three sections:

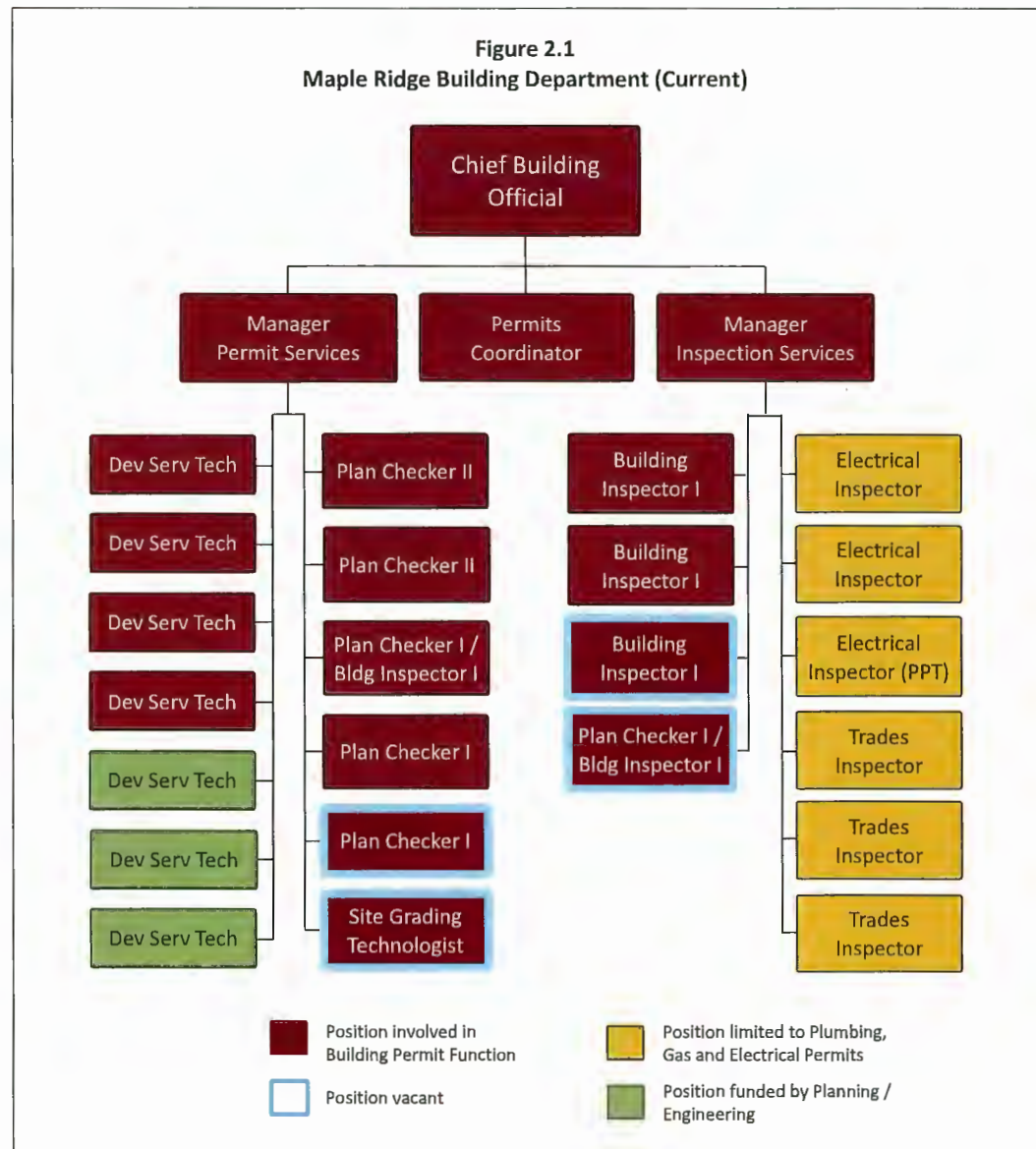
- *Permit Services* — The Permit Services section is headed by a Manager who is responsible for four (4) full-time Plan Checkers and one (1) half-time Plan Checker. These staff members, who are qualified building officials, review and make decisions on all building permit application packages that are submitted to the Department.

The section also includes a Site Grading Technologist and four (4) Development Service Technicians. The Technicians interface with the public at the front of the Building Department, and through inquiry emails and telephone calls. There are seven (7) Technicians in total, including the four (4) assigned to the Building Department, one (1) assigned to the Planning Department, and one (2) assigned to Development Engineering. All seven (7) work as a single team and are expected to address enquiries related to the functions of all three departments.

- *Inspection Services* — This section is headed by a Manager who oversees



Figure 2.1
Maple Ridge Building Department (Current)



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four (3) full-time Building Inspectors and one (1) half-time Building Inspector.⁸

- *Permits Coordinator* — This position was added to the Department in 2015, but only recently revised and filled. It exists to conduct preliminary reviews on building permit applications that are taken in by the Development Service Technicians.

The Building Department staff receives limited clerical/administrative support from

⁸ This position is shown in the Permit Services section.



staff assigned to the broader Planning and Development Services Division. No clerical/administrative resources are dedicated to the Department.

INFORMATION TO APPLICANTS

The review of building permit applications to ensure compliance with the *BC Building Code*, *BC Electrical Code*, *CSA B.149 Code* and other important documents is a highly technical function in local government. An important role for the Building Department is to ensure that applicants and potential applicants understand the submission requirements and permit process, are made aware of changes to the various codes, and are informed about other building-related matters relevant to the Department. To help fulfil this role, the Department provides a range of information items on the City's website. A list of such materials includes:

- thirty-one (31) frequently asked questions (FAQs) to help readers understand why permits are required, the meaning of key terms (e.g., covenant), and what to expect in the application process
- all application forms
- a set of technical bulletins on construction matters, code changes and Maple Ridge's permit requirements
- detailed checklists to assist applicants in compiling information items required for applications
- forty (40) written guides to help applicants understand requirements related to different types of permits and occupancy types, and the construction of specific types of buildings
- a section explaining the *BC Energy Step Code*⁹
- up-to-date fee schedules for all types of permits
- statistical and information reports on issued building permits
- information on the types of inspections required by the Department, with email links to request inspections
- an *Online Building Permit Application Guide* to help applicants prepare permit applications¹⁰
- a link to the City's *Building Bylaw*

BUILDING PERMIT PROCESS

Figure 2.2 presents a simplified chart of Maple Ridge's general building permit application review process that applies to all types of building permits issued by the City. For the purpose of presentation the process has been divided into four phases:

- *Application Phase* — In this first phase, the applicant submits the building permit application form and list of necessary attachments (based on type of

⁹ The *Energy Step Code* is a five-step performance standard designed to ensure that new structures are increasingly more energy efficient. The *Step Code* requirements are embedded in the *BC Building Code*.

¹⁰ Application forms may be obtained online; however, completed applications must be submitted in person at City Hall for all building permits.



project) to the Development Service Technicians at the front counter of the Building Department. In March, 2020, at the outset of the pandemic, the City introduced an electronic permit submission function to allow applications for simple permits, complete with file attachments, to be submitted electronically.¹¹ The function, however, has not been effective. When City Hall was closed during for COVID, applications were collected from applicants by staff at an entrance to City Hall. Now that the Hall is open again, all applications must be submitted in person to Development Service Technicians.

The Development Service Technicians review the submitted applications to ensure that the required attachments and forms are included. Applications that are deemed to be complete are received by the technicians and entered manually into the City's AMANDA file management system. Payment for the permit is provided by the applicant at this phase online.

- *Preliminary Review Phase* — Applications are sent for preliminary review to the Permits Coordinator to ensure completeness, and to identify any obvious and significant problems. In cases where applications are incomplete or problematic, the Plan Checker emails the applicant with a list of information and/or changes required. In cases where the packages are complete, the Plan Checker identifies in the AMANDA file — where necessary — the internal referrals required.

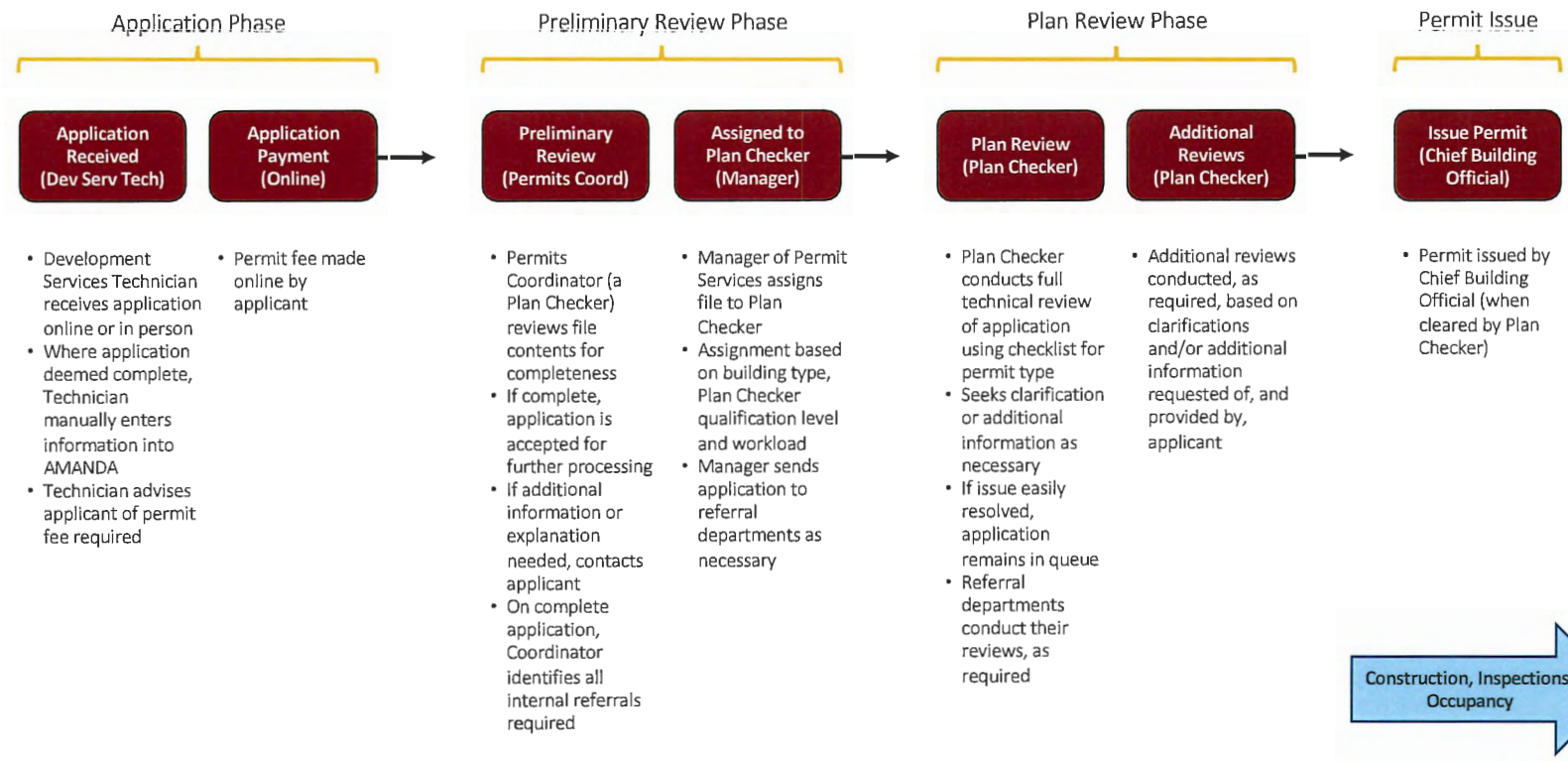
Complete applications are forwarded to the Manager of Permit Services who assigns them to individual Plan Checkers depending on qualification levels. The Manager also sends the applications to the internal referral departments where required.

- *Plan Review Phase* — The detailed technical review of the application by the Plan Checker occurs at this phase of the process. In some cases, details in the package will need to be discussed with the applicant; in other cases, additional items may be required. Discussions and clarifications with applicants occur as necessary. In complex cases, Plan Checker may undertake a number of reviews.
- *Permit Issue Phase* — The building permit is issued and paid for to end the building permit application review process. Construction and inspections begin after the permit has been issued. An occupancy permit is issued following final inspection.

¹¹ Applications for electrical, gas and plumbing permits may also be submitted online (email).



Figure 2.2
General Building Permit Application Review Process
City of Maple Ridge





TECHNOLOGY

The Building Department, along with the entire Planning and Development Division, uses the AMANDA software platform to manage permit application files. AMANDA is designed to allow the Department to manage the flow of files through the various permit processing phases, including the sending of referrals to other departments in the Preliminary Review Phase.

The current version of AMANDA used by the City does not allow applicants to submit online applications directly into the system. As a consequence, applications received by the Department must be manually entered into AMANDA by Development Services Technicians. The current software version also does not allow applicants to monitor the progress of applications that are moving through the review process. Applicants are forced to either wait to be contacted by the City, or to make email or telephone enquiries to Technicians and/or Plan Checkers.

The City is in the process of transitioning from the current version of AMANDA to a new file management platform.¹² The new platform will take considerable effort on the part of the Department to implement; however, once operational, the software should address many of the inefficiencies and shortcomings of the current version.

REVENUES AND EXPENSES

Municipalities in high-growth areas typically recover — indeed, are expected to recover — the full cost of their building permit functions, net of corporate overhead, from building permit fees. Figure 2.3 shows the revenues earned by and expenses incurred by Maple Ridge's Building Department for full years starting 2017, and for the first seven months of the current fiscal year (2021). All costs other than corporate overhead charges are included.¹³ The numbers show that revenues earned by the Department consistently exceed the Department's direct costs, most of which are related to staffing. Other points to note from Figure 2.3 are as follows:

- The revenues earned by the City specifically from building permits (including plumbing and occupancy permits) exceed the labour and other costs incurred to provide the building permit function.
- Revenues related specifically to electrical and gas permits exceed the direct costs incurred to provide those permits. This point is important since the City has chosen to take responsibility for these permits — permits that in the vast majority of municipalities in British Columbia are the responsibility of the provincial government (exercised through Technical Safety BC).

¹² The City is in the process of assessing optional platforms. The preferred platform will be selected and implemented in the near term.

¹³ Corporate overhead charges include costs related to the functions provided by the City's Finance Division, Corporate Services Division and all other centralized groups that are in place to support line departments, including the Building Department. Overhead also includes all building and equipment charges.



**Figure 2.3
Revenues and Expenses (2017-2021)
Building Department**

CATEGORY	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
Revenues					
Building Permits**	2,079,520	2,000,906	2,101,460	2,349,734	1,697,429
Building Permits (Admin Fee)	17,475	14,198	18,508	23,648	11,385
Electrical & Gas Permits	729,174	769,532	799,512	737,079	506,747
Other Revenues	6,350	3,500	6,150	10,670	18,064
Total Revenues	2,832,520	2,788,135	2,925,629	3,121,130	2,233,625
Expenses					
Labour - Building Permit Function***	1,246,332	1,311,371	1,477,848	1,570,136	1,021,292
Labour - Electrical & Gas	634,485	526,653	557,688	594,854	370,614
Memberships	5,820	5,113	10,035	4,208	2,058
Vehicle Charges	80,349	87,307	97,477	95,328	55,573
Training	1,244	468	5,803	10,099	1,856
Other Expenses	82,821	103,659	71,860	76,517	48,039
Total Expenses	2,051,052	2,034,572	2,220,711	2,351,141	1,499,432
NET REVENUE	781,468	753,563	704,918	769,989	734,193

* To July 31, 2021

** Includes revenues from Building Permits and all other permit types, other than Electrical & Gas Permits

*** Labour totals include all salaries, overtime and benefits (i.e., are "fully loaded")

Overtime figures for the Department were reviewed by the consultant; they are not shown separately in Figure 2.3, however, simply because the totals are not significant. In 2020, overtime amounted to \$82,000.00 for the Department as a whole. In the first seven months of 2021, overtime was \$61,000.00. Neither of these amounts is significant in absolute terms, or as a percentage of total labour.

VALUES AND TOTAL PERMIT NUMBERS

Figure 2.4 presents data on the construction value of all building permit categories issued by the Building Department over the full four-year period from 2017 to 2020. Data are also provided for the first seven months of 2021. Figure 2.5 shows the permit value data graphically with the 2021 totals for each permit category annualized to project totals for the full 2021 fiscal year. The two figures together show that Maple Ridge has experienced relative stability in construction values over the past five years. With the possible exception of 2018, there have been no significant dips or spikes in values over the time period shown.



Figure 2.4
Maple Ridge Building Permit Values and Numbers*
2017 – 2021 (YTD)

PERMIT CATEGORIES	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*
Residential					
Single Family New**	80,486,000	73,111,969	72,038,580	84,328,981	53,543,880
Single Family Alteration	15,206,000	9,897,879	12,774,774	13,194,591	7,416,212
Multi Family New	163,734,000	41,184,494	77,320,763	86,820,000	48,187,000
Multi Family Alteration	760,000	733,000	465,600	1,106,952	238,056
Total Residential Value	260,186,000	124,927,342	162,599,717	185,450,524	109,385,148
Commercial					
New Commercial	15,994,000	2,000,000	3,411,900	125,000	-
Tenant Improvements	6,367,000	5,360,332	10,118,880	7,227,323	3,575,250
Total Commercial Value	22,361,000	7,360,332	13,530,780	7,352,323	3,575,250
Industrial					
New Industrial	3,837,000	9,154,190	7,158,700	65,952,200	1,390,000
Industrial Alterations	180,000	467,000	1,561,000	1,248,500	510,090
Total Industrial Value	4,017,000	9,621,190	8,719,700	67,200,700	1,900,090
Institutional					
New Institutional	4,390,000	10,455,000	26,557,650	1,487,000	-
Institutional Alterations	402,000	7,000,085	3,637,000	1,894,051	7,024,134
Total Institutional Value	4,792,000	17,455,085	30,194,650	3,381,051	7,024,134
TOTAL VALUE OF PERMITS	\$ 291,356,000	\$159,363,949	\$ 215,044,847	\$ 263,384,598	\$ 121,884,622
TOTAL NUMBER OF PERMITS	4,756	4,897	4,374	4,721	2,826

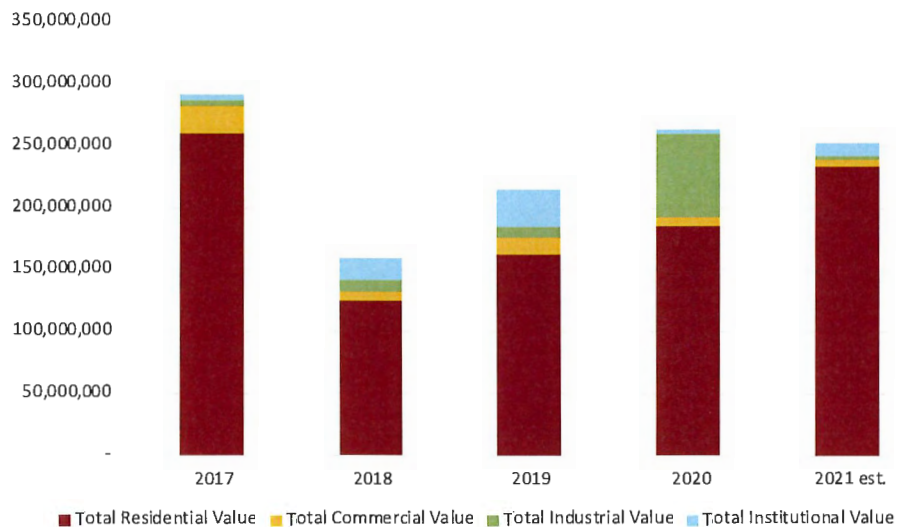
* Permit numbers for all categories are combined

** To July 31, 2021

*** Includes single-unit dwellings and two-unit dwellings



Figure 2.5
Maple Ridge Building Permit Values
2017 – 2021

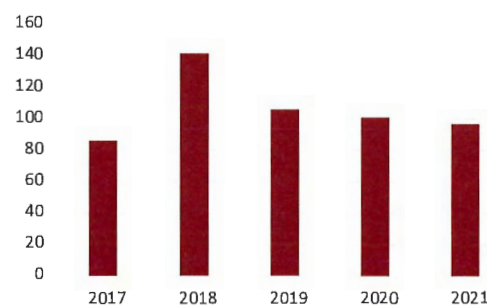


* Data for 2021 are annualized to show the projected full-year amounts

APPLICATION PROCESSING TIMES

The City was able to pull data from the AMANDA software system to give an indication of changes to permit processing times in recent years. The data sets are not complete in all cases; key years are missing. The different sets do, however, provide some useful information to consider.

Figure 2.6
Average Processing Time (Days)
Single Family Residential (New)



The data are presented in Figures 2.6, 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9. Each figure shows the average number of days between the intake of a building permit application and the issuance of the permit. The following points comment on the figures:

- The processing times recorded for new single family and townhouse building permits have remained relatively stable since 2017, with the exception of a significant spike in 2018 (for single family). In all years, the average times required for these permit types permits in Maple Ridge are higher than



those in some cities of similar size and growth rates (e.g., Nanaimo, Kelowna, Township of Langley), but comparable to others in the Metro Vancouver region.

- Average time data for apartment building permits are scant. Those data that are available suggest that average turn-around times are significant. Included in these times, however, are parts of the review process over which the Building Department does not have direct control — namely, the time required by internal referral departments to review applications and provide comments to Building.¹⁴
- Tenant improvement permit times appear to be relatively stable and not unreasonable. Ideas discussed in subsequent chapters may help, however, to bring them lower.

Figure 2.7
Average Processing Time (Days)
Townhouse Residential (New)

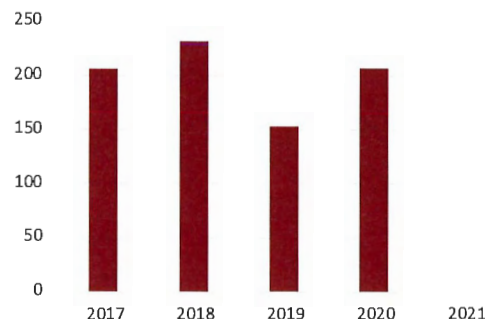


Figure 2.8
Average Processing Time (Days)
Apartment Residential (New)

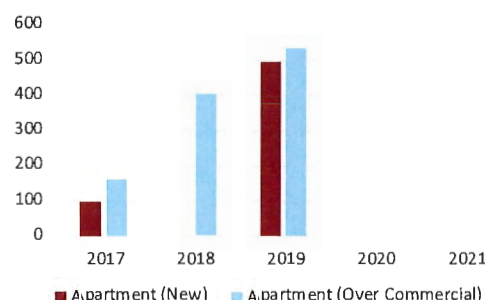
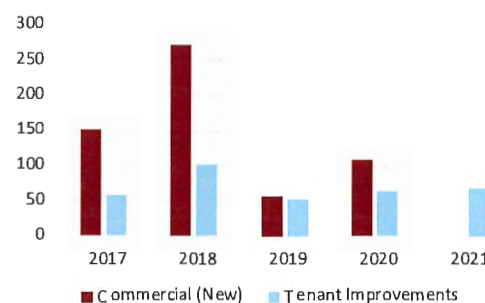


Figure 2.9
Average Processing Time (Days)
Commercial and Tenant Improvements



¹⁴ Internal referral processes are to be reviewed as part of a broader Development Services Review.



CHAPTER 3

ISSUES TO CONSIDER

As noted in the introduction to the report, a range of builders, professionals, developers and others who rely on the Building Department for building permits were interviewed for the study. All staff from the Department were also interviewed — some more than once — and data, materials and other information on the building permit function were reviewed. Based on the interviews and review of materials, the consultant identified a set of issues that the City may wish to consider in its efforts to meet the objectives set out for the assignment. The issues outlined in this chapter of the report.

The issues are presented under the following categories:

- the process through which permit applications are received and reviewed, and permits are issued
- the level, experience and structure of staffing resources dedicated to the function
- the City's use of technology in the function
- the Building Department's interactions and relationship with the development industry

The issues set out in this chapter do not represent the definitive list of concerns raised by stakeholders and staff. The chapter does, however, present the points that, in the consultant's judgement, are the most important for the City to address. Some of the issues are unique to Maple Ridge; others are common across local government.

NATURE OF REVIEWS

Reviews of municipal functions are, by their very nature, critiques that set out to identify issues to address and problems to fix. Such reviews do not tend to focus on the positive attributes and accomplishments that exist in almost every department, or on challenges encountered that may be beyond the control of staff and decision-makers. It can be useful prior to examining the issues to highlight some of these attributes, accomplishments and challenges. Consider the following examples from Maple Ridge's Building Department:

- *Development Services Technicians* — Development Services Technicians are hired by the Planning Department, Building Department and Engineering Department to receive permit applications and review them for completeness, prepare permit files for review, answer inquiries, explain requirements, maintain records and provide administrative support. The position is not new to Maple Ridge — indeed, Development Services Technicians were introduced several years ago in 2003.



The Technicians sit together at the Customer Service Centre in City Hall. Until recently, however, they worked only for their home departments, and only on permits and matters related to their departments. In mid-2020, the City introduced an initiative to cross-train the Development Services Technicians so that they can work across departments and provide more seamless and responsive customer service. The initiative has faced some hurdles and is not yet fully implemented (see later). It represents an important improvement, however, that should be acknowledged.

- *COVID-19* — Staff in Maple Ridge's Building Department were particularly hard hit by COVID-19, both on a personal level and an organizational level. Team members were called upon on several occasions to cover one another's workload, triage files, work remotely at a distance from their colleagues and workplace, and develop work-arounds and protocols to receive and process applications. All of these changes were made by staff in an environment characterized by significant stress and significant concern for the health and safety of their teammates, their families and themselves. All staff in the section deserve recognition for their efforts to adjust.
- *Tight Labour Market* — Every local government in British Columbia has experienced, and continues to experience, difficulty in recruiting qualified building officials to process applications and conduct inspections. Recent changes to building official qualification requirements introduced by the province in the *Building Act* have only exacerbated an already tight labour market. Maple Ridge's Building Department has introduced certain initiatives in an effort to compensate for hiring challenges. One such initiative — a local government best practice — has focused on cross-training, where possible, individual Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors to work in either position.
- *Homeowner Applicants* — Individual homeowners who seek to build their own new homes (as Owner Builders authorized by BC Housing), or alter their existing residential structures, represent an important group of building permit applicants. The City regularly receives positive feedback from individual homeowner applicants for the assistance provided by Building Department staff at different points in the process.

These examples of challenges faced and initiatives undertaken by staff in the Building Department speak to underlying strengths on which the Department as a whole can build going forward.

APPLICATION REVIEW PROCESS

Incomplete Applications

A building permit function cannot be expected to run smoothly if applications for building permits are submitted without the required plans, documents, assurances or other elements that that Plan Checkers need to review prior to issuing building



permits. For this reason, it is a standard practice across jurisdictions for local governments to require all applicants for building permits to submit complete application packages. It is also standard practice for local governments to either reject incomplete applications outright, or to put incomplete applications on hold pending the submission of missing elements.

Incomplete applications are surprisingly common across municipalities including in Maple Ridge. The problem arises for a number of reasons — consider the following three:

- *Numerous Requirements* — The range of plans, analyses, documents and other pieces of information that must be obtained and included with building permit applications is considerable, particularly applications for commercial and other complex buildings. The continual growth in *Building Code* standards and complexity over time only adds to the list of attachments required.¹⁵

Maple Ridge's Building Department has created application checklists for all of its building permit types in an effort to help applicants develop complete packages. The checklists may reduce the number of incomplete submissions and are appreciated by applicants. The checklists do not, however, eliminate the problem altogether.

- *Numerous Professionals to Coordinate* — Applications for all complex buildings and some simple buildings require plans, drawings, analyses and other items from architects and engineers to be included in the submission packages.¹⁶ The project's designated coordinating registered professional (CRP) is responsible for coordinating all design work of the other professionals to ensure that the design substantially complies with the *Building Code* and other safety-related enactments.¹⁷ It can be difficult in some jurisdictions for CRPs to schedule and coordinate all professionals' work on a file in a timely fashion.
- *Time Pressures* — In high-growth centres such as Maple Ridge, builders, developers and professionals are under significant pressure to meet timelines imposed on them by owners and/or market conditions. Timeline pressures have only increased under COVID-19 as developers strive to produce housing units to meet both current demand and anticipated, post-pandemic demand.

¹⁵ An example of a new program introduced by the province and adopted by Maple Ridge (and most other municipalities) is the *BC Energy Step Code*.

¹⁶ Architects and Engineers hired to produce materials for application packages are referred to as registered professionals in the *Building Code* and Maple Ridge's *Building Bylaw*.

¹⁷ Other enactments include the *Architects Act*. The coordinating registered professional is also responsible for coordinating all field reviews that are conducted by the registered professionals during construction.



Regardless of the reasons behind them, incomplete applications submitted to the City serve only to slow down the application review process for all applicants, including those who have taken the time and effort to submit high quality, complete packages. All applications that are submitted are checked initially by the Department's Development Services Technicians in an effort to catch packages that are obviously incomplete. In non-COVID times, Technicians can reject these packages at the counter before they enter the system, and return them directly to the individuals making the submissions. During COVID, however, the Technicians have had to accept all applications delivered to the City and review them for completeness without the applicant present. Technicians have then had to contact applicants with incomplete packages, identify and explain the deficiency, and arrange for the package to be collected.

Development Services Technicians cannot be expected to catch all incomplete packages that are submitted to the City, particularly building permit applications for complex buildings. In some cases, applications that are accepted by the Technicians will be identified as incomplete only when passed to the Permits Coordinator (a Plan Checker), and only after the Technicians have created files for the applications in AMANDA. At this point in the process, the Permits Coordinator must contact the applicants to outline the missing pieces, and either hold the applications pending the submission of new material, or return the applications.

All of these steps taken by the Development Services Technicians and the Permits Coordinator take time that could be spent attending to complete files. It is the applicants of these complete files that are disadvantaged when incomplete applications enter the system.

Single Application Stream

Building permit applications submitted to the Building Department are received in a single application stream, irrespective of the type of building being proposed. Following preliminary review by the Permits Coordinator to ensure completeness, application files are assigned by the Manager of Permit Services to Plan Checkers based on the type of project, Plan Checker qualifications and workload.

Several of the permit applications submitted to the City are for simple, low-risk residential alterations and building projects, such as:

- exterior decks
- interior renovations (other than secondary suites)
- swimming pools
- certain landscaping works
- garages and carports
- solar panels
- finished basements
- sheds and other accessory buildings (other than carriage houses)
- restoration projects



Applications for most or all of these types of simple permits can be processed relatively quickly, provided that Plan Checkers are made available for the task. In Maple Ridge and some other municipalities — Abbotsford, Surrey, Langley Township and Chilliwack are examples — Plan Checkers reserve a small number of hours each week to process simple, low-risk applications and issue permits. Larger Part 9 projects and complex, Part 3 applications that are under review or waiting to be reviewed get set aside during these hours to allow the Department to move as many simple applications as possible through the system.

Maple Ridge's practice of expediting the review of low-risk applications is a workload management initiative that is not advertised to applicants as a "fast track" stream to which they can apply. Maple Ridge also does not assign a specific staff member — or members — solely to work on the simplest and lowest-risk files. Instead, the City's program involves and impacts all (or most) Plan Checkers in the Department.

Some municipalities in high-growth parts of the province and outside of British Columbia have created, have assigned dedicated staff to, and have publicized separate fast track streams for the simplest and lowest-risk permit applications. A fast track program in place at the City of Kelowna stands out for its success. One building official, physically situated in the City's one-window service centre, interacts with applicants, confirms the eligibility of applications for fast track treatment, and reviews all fast tracked applications. The building official, who works solely on fast track files, issues the required building permits within 48 hours of applications being submitted.

Applicants for simple permits who are able to make use of municipalities' fast track streams benefit from the attention given to their applications. Applicants who are required to use the regular processing streams also benefit from the fast tracks, however, simply because the initiatives reduce the overall volume of applications that would otherwise be moving through the single standard queue. In some instances, the reduction in volume is significant. Municipalities such as Kelowna, Penticton and — more recently — Nanaimo that direct low-risk residential applications to fast tracks reduce the overall volume of residential permits that would otherwise be processed through a single stream by up to 50%. When these files are taken out of the general streams, the Plan Checkers who work in those streams do not have to set aside files at set times of the week to deal with simple items. These Plan Checkers are, instead, able to maintain focus on getting the general-stream applications through the system in as timely a way as possible.

Pre-Application Meetings

Municipal planning departments in many cities routinely hold meetings with developers, prior to the submission of formal applications, to discuss proposed complex projects for which development approval will be sought. These pre-application meetings are opportunities for municipal staff from key departments



involved in the review of developments to hear from developers, their consultants and their professionals about the projects being envisioned. The meetings are also opportunities for the municipal staff to identify and flag potential concerns or needs that may arise during the review process.

Pre-application meetings involve staff from a variety of departments depending on the proposal being discussed. In most cases, staff from development planning and development engineering will be present at the very least. A staff representative from the building department is often present as well, in order to identify structural design and *Building Code* items that will be important at the building permit stage of the broader development approval process.

Maple Ridge's Planning Department hosts pre-application meetings for proposed complex projects in Maple Ridge. Staff from the Building Department are reportedly invited to these meetings but are not able to attend with any consistency because of time pressures. Building Department participation in these meetings could help to set out the City's expectations, ask and answer questions, and address concerns early in the overall process. Participation could also serve to develop and/or strengthen relationships between the Department and the development community. The lack of consistent attendance represents a lost opportunity.

Number of Technical Reviews

Phase three of the application review process (see Figure 2.2) is the Plan Review Phase during which the Plan Checker assigned to the file reviews the application package for compliance to the *Building Code*. On complex projects it is not uncommon at this phase for Plan Checkers in to identify building design elements that do not, or that may not, comply with specific standards in the *Code*. In these cases, it is both appropriate and expected for the Plan Checker to outline all concerns in writing to the coordinating registered professional and to ask for corrections or additional information. This practice is common across municipalities, and is an important part of the development process.

In cases of complex applications involving a range of registered professionals and/or building designs that may be new to the assigned Plan Checker, a third review to seek further clarification and ensure compliance may be important and/or necessary. Additional reviews beyond this number, however, are less common, particularly in cases in which registered professionals with considerable experience and recognized expertise are involved.

Based on the interviews conducted for this assignment, as well as on the examination of specific City files, successive reviews of complex applications followed by successive demands for clarification, changes or additional information appear to have become an increasingly common occurrence in the building permit function in Maple Ridge. In a strict sense, the decision to undertake additional reviews and to make these demands is the prerogative of the building official who is charged with ensuring compliance to the *Code*, and on whose judgement the City



relies. When successive reviews are undertaken to find new issues and/or to demand additional changes or submissions, however, it is incumbent on leaders at the City to question the judgement being exercised and seek explanation. Except in cases involving egregious ineptness on the part of applicants, successive reviews and demands on registered professionals are onerous, unnecessary and difficult to defend.

Reliance on Professionals

The practice of undertaking numerous, successive file reviews on individual, complex applications suggests a reluctance on the part of building officials to rely on registered professionals to produce *Code*-compliant building designs. This reluctance is not entirely unique to staff in Maple Ridge, but does appear to be particularly strong at the City.

The regulatory framework for building construction in British Columbia requires property owners who wish to construct or alter complex, Part 3 buildings to make use of a coordinating registered professional and subject-specific registered professionals in the development of designs, plans and technical documents required to support building permit applications. The coordinating and registered professionals are architects and engineers, accredited and held accountable by self-governing professional societies that are:

- responsible for ensuring their members are fully-qualified to practice in their chosen fields
- empowered and required by statute to protect the public interest

The *Building Code* contains a Schedule B form that requires each registered professional who is assigned to an application to give assurance that the design of the specific, identified components of the plans and supporting documents prepared by the professional in support of the application "substantially comply with the British Columbia Building Code and other applicable enactments respecting safety..."¹⁸ A signed copy of Schedule B is included in the complete application package for a municipal building permit, along with a signed copy of another schedule — Schedule A — from the coordinating registered professional.

Maple Ridge's *Building Bylaw* is similar to that of several other municipalities in identifying the important role of registered professionals and the need for the *Building Code*'s schedules. Arguably, the bylaw, coupled with the requirements set out in the schedules, gives Maple Ridge and other municipalities the ability to place the onus of ensuring compliance with *Building Code* requirements on the professionals involved. This argument is put forward by many in the development community, both in Maple Ridge and elsewhere, to call on building officials to undertake less involved reviews of application packages, and to rely to a greater degree than at present on registered professionals. Building officials in Maple Ridge

¹⁸ *British Columbia Building Code (2018)*, Schedule B.



understand this argument and accept that the *Building Bylaw* is designed to transfer risk and responsibility to the professionals, and protect the City from liability. The same officials, however, echo concerns raised by building officials in most municipalities who note that:

- there are examples of building permit applications with designs that do not comply with safety-related *Building Code* requirements, despite the assurances of the registered professionals
- municipalities are expected by their communities to ensure that structures built pursuant to issued building permits are safe for their occupants and the surrounding neighbourhoods
- the principle of joint and several liability means that the local governments cannot transfer all risk and liability to the building owner and registered professionals in the event of design deficiencies that arise during or post-construction; local governments should, therefore, remain directly involved in plan checking in order to catch errors

For these reasons and others, building departments in British Columbia municipalities are loath to reduce their level of application review and rely solely, or even significantly, on the assurances of registered professionals, even in cases where bylaws have been written specifically to enable greater reliance.

Maple Ridge's Building Department appears particularly resistant to the work, opinions and assurances of registered professionals assigned to applications. The Department's concerns do not appear to be focused on a single application, the work of an individual professional, or the efforts of a group of professionals involved in a particular file. It appears to be the case, instead, that the Department feels unable to accept that architects and engineers, despite their professional and legal responsibilities, are capable of producing designs that are both innovative and in compliance with the health and safety standards of the *Building Code*.

This prevailing view towards registered professionals points to larger issues concerning the Department's understanding of its own role in the development process, as well as the role played by industry. These issues are addressed later in this chapter, as well as in the recommendations outlined in Chapter 4.

Number of Inspections

The City's *Building Bylaw* requires a building permit applicant for a simple (Part 9) project applicant to request, obtain and pass building inspections at key stages of the construction process. The *Bylaw* also empowers the City's building officials to attend a construction site for a complex project to monitor the field reviews that are being undertaken by the registered professionals. Maple Ridge's *Building Bylaw* is similar to those of many other municipalities in these respects.



Section 22.5 of the *Bylaw* identifies the specific points of construction at which projects that are the subject of building permit applications must receive inspections.¹⁹ A total of nine (9) points is identified, which means that there are nine (9) inspections required. This number is high compared to some (but not all) municipalities — Surrey, Abbotsford and Kelowna, for example, require seven (7) inspections.

The scheduling and performance of every site visit requires at least a part construction at a building site to stop temporarily. All stoppages cause delays in the overall construction process, even in cases where visits are performed efficiently. To varying degrees, every visit also creates added uncertainty.

During the interviews conducted for this assignment, a concern arose regarding the possible practice of building officials to undertake inspections or require field reviews for which clear authority does not exist in the *Building Bylaw*. Where authority does not exist, such practices cannot occur.

BUILDING DEPARTMENT STAFFING

Number of Building Officials

Figure 2.1 in the previous chapter presented the total staffing complement of the Building Department as it exists today. In terms of full-time equivalents (FTEs), the Department consists of:²⁰

- the Chief Building Official (1.0 FTE), who serves as the Director of the Department
- two Managers (2.0 FTE) reporting to the Chief Building Official, including one Manager of Permit Services who oversees all Plan Checkers and Development Service Technicians, and one Manager of Inspection Services in charge of the Building Inspectors, Electrical Inspectors and Trades Inspectors
- one Permits Coordinator (1.0 FTE) who reports to the Chief Building Official, and who reviews all building permit applications for completeness
- a total of five Plan Checkers (5.0 FTE) and four Building Inspectors (4.0 FTE)
- two full-time and one part-time Electrical Inspectors (2.5 FTE)
- three Trades Inspectors (3.0 FTE) responsible for plumbing and gas permits
- one Site Grading Technologist (1.0 FTE)
- seven Development Service Technicians (7.0 FTE) who receive applications and answer inquiries for the Building, Planning and Engineering Departments

Parental leaves-of-absence, medical leaves-of-absence and resignations over the past few years have left the Department short of its full staffing complement since before COVID-19. Pandemic-related leaves reduced the number of available staff

¹⁹ In the case of complex buildings, the points are those at which building officials may require notification in order to be onsite to monitor field reviews. Attendance on site at complex projects is the prerogative of the building officials.

²⁰ 1.0 FTE is equivalent to one full-time employee.



further, and left the Department unable to manage its workload in a timely manner. At the time of writing, the Department has regained some of its staffing strength; however, there are still four vacant positions (4.0 FTE) in the ranks, including one Plan Checker, one Building Inspector, and one position that covers both roles.²¹

At full strength, the 5.0 FTE Plan Checkers and 4.0 FTE Building Inspectors are responsible for processing approximately \$252 million in construction value.²² As noted, however, the Department has not been at full strength for some time. Whether or not this number of Building Officials (9.0 FTE) is sufficient for this volume of work depends on a number of factors, including:

- the degree to which all positions are filled
- the level of support provided to Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors by Development Services Technicians, the Permits Coordinator and the Managers
- the number of cross-trained Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors, available to perform each other's role in response to workload fluctuations
- the qualifications of building officials, and their corresponding ability to work on complex, Part 3 building permit applications
- the information technology in place to expedite the permit review process

Efforts to address all of these points will help to bolster the efficiency of building officials in the Department, and will make it easier for the Department as a whole to meet its workload demands. Such efforts may also limit (though not eliminate) the need for new positions to be added.

➤ **Other Municipalities**

Comparisons of building official numbers across jurisdictions are inherently problematic since no two municipalities are exactly alike, and because permit construction values in individual municipalities can change significantly year to year. It is also the case that not all municipalities follow the same naming conventions for positions, and thus may inadvertently report inaccurate staffing numbers. Despite these challenges, cities often wish to understand where they sit relative to other similar-sized places.

Figure 3.1 compares Maple Ridge's building official numbers to those in five other high-growth municipalities with comparable construction values. Maple Ridge's full complement of nine building officials (9.0 FTE), including vacant positions, is shown; the City's actual current staffing of six (6.0 FTE), net of vacancies, is also shown. The comparison suggests that at its current strength of 6.0 FTE, the total construction value per building official in Maple Ridge considerably exceeds the median and average values for both 2020 and 2021 in

²¹ The fourth vacancy is the Site Grading Technologist position.

²² \$252 million is the annualized, estimated 2021 total building permit construction value in Maple Ridge, and is slightly less than the total 2020 value.



Figure 3.1
Permit Construction Value per Building Official
(2020 and 2021)

Municipality	Building Officials*	2020		2021 (est.)**	
		Total Permit Value (\$ million)	Permit Value (\$ million)/Staff	Total Permit Value (\$ million)	Permit Value (\$ million)/Staff
Maple Ridge (vacancies)	6	263.4	43.9	252.7	42.1
Maple Ridge (no vacancies)	9	263.4	29.3	252.7	28.1
City of Chilliwack	8	299.7	37.5	368.0	46.0
City of Nanaimo	12	243.1	20.3	309.9	25.8
District of Saanich***	8	295.9	37.0	324.9	40.6
City of West Kelowna	7	120.3	17.2	228.0	32.6
City of Kamloops	8	395.0	49.4	192.5	24.1
		Median	37.0	Median	32.6
		Average	32.3	Average	33.8

* Includes all Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors

** Permit values have been annualized to estimate 2021 totals

*** Saanich has nine (9.0 FTE) Building Official positions below manager rank; one (1.0 FTE) is vacant

the comparison group. At its authorized strength of 9.0 FTE, Maple Ridge's value per building official falls short on both metrics.

Building Official Qualifications

The qualifications required of building officials are set out in the *Building Act* for all Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors in British Columbia. In February, 2021, changes to the *Act* came into effect to require building officials involved in the review and/or inspection of complex, Part 3 buildings to hold Level III qualification through the Building Officials Association of British Columbia (BOABC).²³ Level II building officials under the *Act* can make decisions on townhouses, low-rise apartments and smaller commercial projects, but cannot review complex, Part 3 buildings. The scope of review for Level I officials — the lowest level of qualification — is limited to single family dwellings and other Part 9 files.

In response to concerns voiced by local governments on the shortage of Level III officials in the province, the provincial government and BOABC created a "Building Official In-Training" (BOIT) program. Under the terms of this program, building officials who are qualified at Level I can be classified as a Level II trainee. At the end of an 18-month (maximum) training period, the Level II trainee must write and pass a Level II exam in order to become fully qualified as a Level II official. During the training period, however, the Level II trainee is able to work at the same level, with the same scope of work, as a full Level II official. The BOIT program also has a Level

²³ There are three BOABC qualification levels; Level III is the highest.



III trainee class for Level II officials who wish or need to review complex Part 3 projects. The training period for Level III trainees is up to 24 months.

In Maple Ridge at present, the Department has four Level III building officials (4.0 FTE) below the rank of Manager.²⁴ Two (2.0 FTE) of these officials serve as Plan Checkers; the other two (2.0 FTE) are Building Inspectors. The Department has one Level II building official (1.0 FTE) who serves as a Building Inspector, and one Level I building official (1.0 FTE) who works as a Plan Checker. The three vacant positions (3.0 FTE) are being advertised to attract Level I building officials — officials with higher qualifications are in considerable demand and difficult to attract.

Under the BOIT program, the one existing Level II official (1.0 FTE) can qualify as a Level III trainee and take on Part 3 building files with guidance from more senior staff in the Department. The one existing Level I official (1.0 FTE) can qualify as a Level II trainee, as can any new Level I officials who may be hired to fill the vacant positions. Any recruits who are not yet qualified at Level I may qualify as Level I trainee and work on simple applications.

As Maple Ridge continues to grow, the Building Department can expect to receive higher numbers of complex, Part 3 building permit applications. The need for more experienced building officials with Level III qualifications is evident now in the City, and will become more so in the years ahead. Efforts to ensure that all building officials at lower qualification levels are moving into the BOIT program will be important, as will efforts to attract (where possible) experienced, qualified members.

Cross-Training of Building Officials

A building official may be assigned to work as a Plan Checker and focus on the plan checking role; alternatively, an official may be assigned to work as a Building Inspector in the field. Both positions, however, are building officials and are able, under the *Building Act* to work in either or both roles.

Municipalities structure their Building Departments to separate the plan checking and inspection roles, and to assign staff to positions in each. Increasingly, however, municipalities expect their building officials to be able to work in both roles, and to take on tasks in either role in response to workload fluctuations. Thus, during periods of lower construction activity, building officials who work primarily as Building Inspectors may be used to help Plan Checkers with their reviews of permit applications. Similarly, during periods of intense construction activity or in slower application periods, building officials who work primarily as Plan Checkers may be used to conduct inspections in the field.

²⁴ The Chief Building Official and Managers are all qualified as Level III building officials.



Maple Ridge currently has two building official positions below the rank of Manager that perform both plan checking and inspection roles. The City may wish to explore expanding its cross-training efforts to increase the flexibility of its workforce.

Development Services Technicians

As noted earlier, Development Services Technicians are hired by the Planning, Building and Engineering Departments to receive permit applications, conduct cursory reviews of applications for completeness, create permit files for each application, answer inquiries, explain requirements, maintain records and, where possible, provide administrative support. There are seven Technician positions (7.0 FTE) at the City, including:

- four attached to and funded by the Building Department
- two attached to and funded by Engineering
- one attached to and funding by Planning

The Development Services Technicians have always be located together at in the Customer Service Centre on the main floor of City Hall. Until recently, however, each Technician worked only for the position's home department. In June, 2020, the City introduced a customer service initiative to cross-train the Development Services Technicians to enable them — indeed, to require them — to work across all three departments. The new model is designed to allow applicants with questions or submissions for building permits, planning approvals and engineering permits to go to the next available Technician, irrespective of that Technician's home department.

Shortly after being introduced, it was determined that the team of seven Development Services Technicians would report to the Manager of Permit Services in the Building Department. The Manager began working with Human Resources staff to develop a cross-training program to meet the goals of the initiative and the needs of the City and its customers. COVID-related limitations on staff, however, coupled with COVID-related absences, resulted in the training program being put on hold. It remains on hold today.

The Development Services Technicians customer service initiative represents a best practice that has the potential to significantly enhance customer service at the City, as well as the level of engagement and work satisfaction for employees in the role. It also has the potential to streamline the building permit review process, provided that Technicians are adequately trained to identify, at the time of intake, applications that are clearly incomplete. To realize its full potential, however, the initiative will need to be managed carefully. Staff who fill the Technician positions will need to learn and become comfortable with new processes and information that have until now been the responsibility of colleagues attached to other departments. Considerable support and attention will be needed on the part of the Manager responsible. Given the Manager of Permit Service's existing responsibilities related to plan checking, the City may wish to consider having the Development Services Technicians report to a different management position.



Administrative Support

Questions on staffing levels in building permit function reviews tend to focus on building officials and, to a lesser degree, positions such as Development Services Technicians that have important and direct roles in the permit application review process. One category of staff that is often overlooked is that of administrative, or clerical, staff.

Maple Ridge's Building Department does not have any administrative support staff in place today. Payroll data show that in recent years the Department was able to access a relatively small portion of two Clerk II positions — a total, the data suggest, of less than 0.5 FTE. Today, however, administrative support tasks in the Department fall to the Development Services Technicians. The Technicians are exceedingly busy answering inquiries, preparing application files for reviews by Plan Checkers, and attending to other matters in the Customer Service Centre. It is questionable that they have the capacity to provide much clerical assistance.

The City may wish to consider providing one Clerk II (1.0 FTE) to the Building Department to assist in providing administrative support.

TECHNOLOGY

Earlier in 2021, the City of Maple Ridge was successful in its application to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs for significant grant funding under the Local Government Development Approvals Program. The funding that has been awarded will enable the City to review its broader, full development approvals process which includes the Planning and Engineering Departments. The funding will also, however, allow the City to advance information technology (IT) initiatives aimed at streamlining the development approvals, making them more customer-friendly, improving transparency and increasing accountability.

The City's IT Department understands the need and the opportunities for improved digital application file management of various types of permit applications, including those for building permits. The Department is preparing now to proceed the selection, acquisition and development of a new file management software platform. This new platform should make it possible for:

- applicants to submit building permit applications — simple applications at first, but ultimately all applications — digitally through an online application portal
- staff to share application files more easily and seamlessly than at present
- customers to monitor the progress of files as they move through the review process
- staff to review building plans and other digitally-submitted documents on-screen
- Inspectors to access permit information through their handheld devices in the field



- the development and online posting of dashboards to track and display the Department's progress against various metrics on an ongoing basis

The online portal feature will be particularly helpful in expediting permit reviews. Applicants will be able — indeed, may ultimately be required — to enter all information directly into platform file, thereby eliminating the need to rely on Development Services Technicians to create system files using information provided in hard-copy applications, or in emailed PDFs. This change will help to free-up Technicians to spend more time interacting directly with customers and attending to other parts of their roles. The change will also help to reduce the number of incomplete applications that enter the permit review process, since only complete applications would be accepted by the system. Some of the time spent today by Development Services Technicians, the Permits Coordinator and the Plan Checkers wrestling with incomplete applicants will be available for applications that have been properly developed.

The ability of applicants to monitor the progress of their applications will also have a positive impact on the process. The very introduction of the feature will address a significant concern on the part of many applicants interviewed for this review that the current system lacks transparency and accountability. The feature should also help to reduce the significant volume of phone calls and emails made to Development Services Technicians and building officials by applicants who seek information on the status of their submissions.

In all, the initiatives that are planned by the IT Department, and that the recently-awarded grant should make possible to pursue, should help to reduce permit timelines, free-up staff to attend to other tasks, and improve transparency in the system.

Preparing for Platform Upgrade

Success with a new software platform will require an up-front investment of time and energy on the part of Building Department management to help incorporate the application forms and requirements, along with the detailed steps of the application review process, into the software platform. Staff from IT, it is expected, will lead the transition; however, staff will need to active participation on the subject-matter experts. The City may need to consider assigning one of its Managers to this task.

INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIP WITH INDUSTRY

Customer Service

The Department regularly receives accolades and thanks for the assistance it provides to homeowners and small builders who seek building permits for simple, Part 9 projects, including small renovation projects and single family homes. Letters to the City from some of these applicants highlight the patience shown by staff, the helpful communications and explanations, and the overall positive experience of the writers. The letters suggest that the Department clearly understands the importance of excellent customer service and is capable of providing it.



Unfortunately, a number of examples of poor customer service have come to light in the Department's dealings with developers, builders, professional architects, professional engineers, code consultants and others involved in building permit applications for complex, Part 3 projects. Several concerns were presented to the consultant in many interviews involving a broad range of individuals, and a variety of building projects. Concerns highlighted specific behaviours and actions that can only be characterized as unprofessional, uncivil, disrespectful and belittling to others, hostile and threatening. The most egregious examples of such behaviour appear to be limited to a small number of staff in the Department. It is the entire Department, however, that is damaged when such indefensible behaviour occurs, and is allowed to occur. Indeed, it is the entire City and its reputation as a place to invest and do business that suffers.

It needs to be emphasized that excellent customer service does not require the Building Department, its role as regulator, to accept without scrutiny or objection all plans, designs, assurances and applications that are submitted to the City through the building permit function. It is both acceptable and expected that the City will diligently undertake its reviews and raise concerns in discussion with applicants. Concerns must be raised, however, in a civil manner that respects others and invites discussion on possible solutions.

Partnership

In the context of the building permit function, excellent customer service is rooted in a departmental culture that values respect, empathy, fairness, civility, communication, a genuine desire to help, and a solution-oriented mindset. Excellent service also requires a genuine willingness to collaborate with others in the pursuit of shared objectives.

Maple Ridge's Building Department, like its counterparts in other municipalities, performs an important regulatory role in ensuring that all new construction, and all alterations to existing structures, proceeds in compliance with the *Building Code*. All staff in the Department need to understand this role and its significance to public health and safety. Staff must also, however, recognize that the Department serves as a facilitator to help industry in its efforts to build quality projects that enhance and meet the needs of the community.

Industry depends on the Department to regulate in a timely fashion, and to work with applicants to facilitate solutions and provide pathways for development to occur. The City depends on industry to bring forward complete applications for innovative, affordable and high quality projects that meet the standards of the *Code*. The development process runs most smoothly when both parties view themselves and each other as partners in building the community. True partnership requires both parties to engage with one another regularly, learn about each other's pressures and challenges, and collectively develop solutions to problems that arise. In past years, the Building Department hosted forums to bring together City staff, builders and members of the development community to understand the City's



processes and expectations, discuss challenges facing industry, and build relationships. Unfortunately, these forums ended well before COVID-19. There is a Maple Ridge Municipal Liaison Committee involving representatives of the City's broader Planning and Development Services Division, the Urban Development Institute, and the Homebuilders' Association of Vancouver. The City's building permit function, however, is not a key focus of this committee's activities.

Without increased engagement the parties cannot develop the trust and understanding that are needed to truly view themselves as partners in the building process. Indeed, a lack of regular engagement and collaboration can lead to mistrust on the part of both parties, a lack of confidence in each other's abilities, and suspicion with respect to the other's motives. It is clear from the interviews conducted with industry members and staff that mistrust, a lack of confidence in one another, and suspicion are prevalent today.

For engagement to occur and for it to be meaningful, senior staff in the Building Department must expand their understanding of the Department's role beyond that of regulator. Staff must embrace the notion that the Department, in addition to being a regulator, exists to work with the development industry in creating a built environment in Maple Ridge that is innovative, safe, attractive, and supportive of the community's goals. Put differently, staff must embrace the ethos advertised in the signature line of the Chief Building Official's emails: "Building our Community Together".

Accountability

In the consultant's view, damage to the reputation of the Building Department as a fair, solution-oriented public service agency has occurred as a result of the incidents of behaviour noted earlier. Damage to the City's reputation as a place to build and invest has also occurred.²⁵ Going forward, it will be important for the City and the Department to put in place safeguards and mechanisms to prevent the possibility of any further incidents from occurring, and to re-build confidence in the Department. Safeguards and mechanisms to consider are presented in Chapter 4 of the report, but may include:

- the development of a *Maple Ridge Building Official Code of Conduct*
- the creation of a Joint Building Permit Working Group, comprised of department and industry representatives, to repair and advance the City's relationship with the development community
- a facilitated planning session to help the Department explore and articulate its vision (i.e., what it needs to be) and purpose (i.e., why it exists, and what it does), and to understand the City's expectations of the Department

²⁵ It should be emphasized that any such damage is attributed specifically to the Building Department. No comments were made to the consultant concerning behaviours or organizational culture in other departments at the City, or in the City organization as a whole.



- a survey of applicants, conducted by an independent third party, that can be used to gauge customer service, identify concerns and address situations before they become problematic
- a Maple Ridge Building Department Annual Report booklet that reports on the Department's performance using a range of metrics, including permit numbers and values and processing times, but also including metrics aimed at assessing customer service and the Department's culture

These types of mechanisms and others are designed to address the need for accountability as it relates to how applicants, professionals, builders and others — collectively, customers of the City — are treated by staff in the Department.

Changes introduced to address other issues would also help to bolster accountability. The introduction of a new software platform, for example, would enable customers to monitor the movement of their applications through the system, identify where applications may be paused, and seek explanations. The new platform would also provide dashboard information to customers and the general public to show the Department's performance against a series of indicators, including processing times.



CHAPTER 4

RECOMMENDED CHANGES

This review of Maple Ridge's building permit function set out to identify, through consultation and research, specific issues that the City may wish to consider in its efforts to address a variety of concerns, and to position the Building Department for success going forward. Chapter 3 of the report presented a range of issues under four categories:

- the process through which permit applications are received and reviewed, and permits are issued
- the level, experience and structure of staffing resources in the function
- the City's use of technology in the function
- the Building Department's interactions and relationship with the development industry

This chapter — Chapter 4 — presents a package of recommendations that are intended to address the issues.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

Before introducing the recommended changes it is useful to summarize the issues that the changes are intended to address. Figure 4.1 presents the summary using the four issue categories.

Figure 4.1
Summary of Issues

Application Review Process	Building Department
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Incomplete Applications– Single Application Stream– Pre-Application Meetings– Number of Technical Reviews– Reliance on Professionals– Number of Inspections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Number of Building Officials– Building Official Qualifications– Cross-Training of Building Officials– Development Services Technicians– Administrative Support
Technology	Interactions & Relationship with Industry
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Preparing for AMANDA 7.0	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Customer Service– Partnership– Accountability

OBJECTIVES TO ACHIEVE

It is also helpful, before turning to the recommendations, to recall the objectives identified for the review during discussion with Council and senior management.



These objectives, adapted from the list in Chapter 1, are as follows:

- *Provide Excellent Customer Service* — The City has made a commitment to excellent customer service — or, as noted at the bottom of every City email, to service that is "fair, friendly, [and] helpful". The desire to assess and where necessary improve the Building Department's ability to consistently deliver on this commitment was identified as an important objective of the review.
- *Develop a Culture of Collaboration* — The Building Department and the development industry share a common interest in creating a built environment characterized by safety, quality, innovation, access and affordability. Changes to achieve greater collaboration are needed.
- *Position for Future Growth and Investment* — The Building Department needs to play a significant role in attracting and facilitating the types of growth and investment that Maple Ridge needs to achieve its long-term vision as a vibrant and sustainable community. The review was driven, in part, by a desire to identify changes required to help the Department develop the capacity, depth and culture needed to succeed in this role.
- *Promote Innovation* — Building Departments across Canada have developed a variety of innovations designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their building permit functions. The desire to identify innovations that are either new to Maple Ridge, or that build on the success of existing innovations in the Department, was an important objective of the review.
- *Reduce Permit Processing Times* — The City seeks to reduce the time required to review permit applications, issue permits, and complete inspections.
- *Provide Certainty* — Applicants who work through building permit functions place significant importance on certainty.
- *Ensure Accountability* — The desire to develop mechanisms to strengthen accountability was identified as an objective of the review.

RECOMMENDED CHANGES

The section presents and explains the set of recommended changes for the City to consider in an effort to address the issues raised, and to achieve the objectives set out. The full list of recommendations is as follows:

- THAT the City develop and make available additional guidance documents, and host sessions with builders, aimed at helping building permit applicants prepare and submit complete applications.



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- THAT the City develop and implement a Fast Track Program to process applications for targeted, low-risk residential (Part 9) projects.
- THAT the City assign an existing Plan Checker I position (1.0 FTE) to the Fast Track Program to process permit applications and interact with applicants.
- THAT the City develop and implement a mechanism designed to investigate the need for further, successive technical reviews on complex, Part 3 permit applications that have already undergone three technical reviews.
- THAT the City reduce the number of inspections identified in section 22.5 of the *City of Maple Ridge Building Bylaw No. 6925 (2012)* from nine (9) to seven (7).
- THAT the City create a new Senior Building Official position (1.0 FTE), and recruit for the position an experienced Level III building official who is cross-trained and able to perform plan checking and building inspection roles.
- THAT the City continue to promote the Building Official In Training program of the Building Officials Association of British Columbia, and ensure that all Level I building officials are enrolled in the Level II trainee class, and all Level II building officials are enrolled in the Level III trainee class.
- THAT the City work to cross-train as many building officials as possible in order to enable the Department to better manage changes in workload.
- THAT the City create a Customer Service Manager to manage the Development Services Technicians, develop customer service improvements, and work with the Chief Building Official to address customer service issues that arise.
- THAT the City create a Clerk II position in the Building Department to provide administrative support.
- THAT the City structure the Building Department in accordance with the proposed structure set out in Figure 4.2.
- THAT the City engage industry in the establishment of a Joint Building Permit Working Group with a mandate to:
 - develop initiatives aimed at strengthening relationships between the City's building officials and members of the development community
 - address issues and concerns raised by either party related to the City's building permit function



- develop and implement new initiatives aimed at achieving the objectives set out for the *Building Permit Function Review*, as well as other objectives jointly identified by the parties

- THAT the City engage building officials in the Building Department in the development of a *Maple Ridge Building Officials Code of Conduct*.
- THAT the City hold a facilitated planning session with Building Department staff to help the Department articulate its vision and purpose, and to understand the City's expectations of the Department.
- THAT the City conduct a regular survey, using the services of an independent third party, of building permit applicants to gauge customer service, identify concerns to address, and to evaluate efforts taken by the Department to improve applicants' customer experience.
- THAT the City prepare and publish a *Maple Ridge Building Department Annual Report* booklet to report publicly on the Department's performance as measured against a range of metrics, including permit numbers, permit values and permit processing times, but also metrics aimed at assessing the Department's level of customer service provided to different categories of applicants.
- THAT, beginning 2023, the City host an annual *Development Roundtable* for members of the development community, City Council, senior managers, Building Department management and others to review progress reported in the *Annual Report*, to hear and understand concerns of industry and the City, and to identify further changes and initiatives to consider.

Each of the recommendations is explained separately in the remainder of the chapter. All of the recommendations, it should be noted, may need to be refined slightly during the development of an implementation plan to ensure success.

ADDITIONAL APPLICATION GUIDANCE

As noted in Chapter 2 of the report, the Building Department publishes and makes available a variety of information documents aimed at helping prospective and potential applicants understand the City's application requirements, the building permit review process, and the building permit application forms. A number of checklists are included in the set of documents to provide further assistance, as is a user-friendly, *Online Building Permit Application Guide*. The City may wish to consider adding some user-friendly YouTube videos, specifically to assist permit applicants with simple, Part 9 projects. Cities such as Nanaimo and Surrey that make use of these videos have found them to be useful in helping applicants to produce complete applications.



Maple Ridge should also consider hosting a session with builders focused on the preparation of complete applications. The session could be offered as a stand-alone event or as one part of a broader forum, and could target specific builders or a general audience.

Recommendations targeting the organization, training and work of the Development Services Technicians (see later) should help considerably in catching incomplete applications before they enter the review process. The efforts of the Department's recently-filled Permits Coordinator position should also help, as should the placement at the Customer Service Counter of a new Plan Checker I position dedicated to simple permit fast-track program (see later).

Finally, the planned introduction of a new application file management platform should provide considerable help to the City in its efforts to keep incomplete applications out of the permit review process. Applications that are incomplete will be automatically prevented from entering the system.

FAST TRACK PROGRAM

The City should consider creating a simple permit fast track program to provide for the expedited processing of applications for simple, low-risk residential (Part 9) projects. Eligible submissions in this program would be processed, and permits would be issued, within a target time period of no more than five days (i.e., one week).

Eligibility criteria would be developed by the Chief Building Official and staff, for review and comment by a Joint Building Permit Working Group comprised of Building Department and industry representatives. The criteria would be specific to Maple Ridge, but could borrow from established fast track programs in Penticton, Kelowna, Coquitlam, Toronto and others, including — most recently — the program created in Nanaimo. In these other places, programs to expedite the processing of simple permits target projects such as:²⁶

- exterior decks and porches
- solar panels
- interior renovations
- accessory buildings other than carriage houses
- garages and carports
- landscaping works
- swimming pools

It is anticipated, based on the experiences of other municipalities, that a significant portion of residential permit applications submitted to the City could be eligible for entry to the fast track program. The program would benefit eligible applicants who would receive their permits in a short period of time. The program would also

²⁶ All of the programs also accommodate applications for fire, flood and structural repairs.



benefit, however, applicants in the standard process streams by removing minor permit applications from those streams.

DEDICATED FAST TRACK POSITION (PLAN CHECKER I)

To maximize the efficacy of the Fast Track stream, the City should consider dedicating an existing Plan Checker I position to the program. As in Kelowna, the Plan Checker would be physically located front of office, near the Customer Service Counter, to interact directly with applicants who seek entry to the program, and to conduct the application reviews. In this location, the Plan Checker would also be available to answer building permit questions referred by DSTs, and provide guidance to the DSTs on technical matters as required.

MECHANISM TO INVESTIGATE NEED FOR SUCCESSIVE REVIEWS

It is normal for complex, Part 3 building permit applications to require more than one review during the technical review phase of the building permit process. It is not normal for such applications to require four, five, six, or seven reviews. Each of these applications is developed under the guidance of a coordinating registered professional with input from, and with assurances provided by, a team of registered professionals. At a certain point, the decision by a building official to undertake successive reviews and demand additional changes should trigger an alarm at the City. In such cases, either the application is seriously flawed, or the building official is not being reasonable.

Given the concerns raised in this report around customer service, the City should consider creating a mechanism to break impasses that occur on files. The mechanism would consist of three stages, as follows:

- *Chief Building Official* — Any complex, Part 3 application that, in the view of the assigned Plan Checker and Manager of Permit Services, required a fourth letter to the applicant identifying additional items to address, would be paused prior to providing the letter and referred to the Chief Building Official for examination. Based on the results of the examination, the Chief Building Official would determine the need for the fourth letter and advise the Plan Checker and Manager accordingly in writing.

If the Chief Building Official determined that a fourth letter were necessary, the assigned Plan Checker would proceed to provide the letter, complete with its list of requirements. Alternatively, if the Chief Building Official found an additional letter to be unnecessary, the Chief Building Official would issue the building permit.²⁷

- *General Manager* — Any application for which a building permit were not issued following action by the applicant to address the requirements in the

²⁷ The permit could be issued at this point with minor, specific conditions to be met, as determined by the Chief Building Official.



fourth letter would be referred to the General Manager of Planning and Development Services. After reviewing the details of the file, the General Manager could choose to either:

- accept the advice of the Chief Building Official to require additional work and/or changes, or
 - engage an independent, experienced building official or professional with expertise in *Building Code* compliance to review the file and advise the General Manager and Chief Building Official in writing on the need for further work
- *Decision* — Based on the assessment of the independent third party, the General Manager would ask the Chief Building Official to either proceed in communicating the need for additional requirements, or issue the building permit(s).

BUILDING INSPECTIONS

It was noted in the previous chapter that Maple Ridge's *Building Bylaw* identifies nine (9) different points of construction at which inspections must be undertaken on simple projects, and field reviews may be monitored on complex projects. This number is higher than that which is in place in a number of other municipalities — Surrey, Abbotsford and Kelowna were identified as three examples that identify seven (7) points of construction.

To minimize the number of work stoppages and the uncertainty associated with site visits, Maple Ridge should consider reducing the number of inspection points identified in section 22.5 of its *Bylaw* from nine (9) to seven (7). This reduction could be achieved by:

- combining construction points listed in sub-sections 22.5.5 (framing and sheathing), 22.5.6 (installation of rain screen) and 22.5.7 (installation of backing board prior to the installation of cultured stone or stucco)

SENIOR BUILDING OFFICIAL

As outlined in Chapter 3, the Building Department has an authorized strength of 9.0 FTE building officials, not including the Chief Building Official, the two Managers, and the Permits Coordinator. At full strength, the 9.0 FTE breaks down to 5.0 FTE Plan Checkers and 4.0 FTE Building Inspectors. The Department today is not operating at full strength — today there are 6.0 FTE building officials.

The City should continue its efforts to fill its vacant building official positions and bring the Department to full strength. Success in recruitment should allow the City to improve its permit processing times, particularly when recruitment is pursued in combination with the full set of changes recommended in this report. Getting the Department to full strength should also allow the two Managers to perform their



management roles, rather than continuing to perform the duties of Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors.

A staffing complement of 9.0 FTE building officials would position the City to handle its current workload. To position the Department for success in the face of stronger growth and development in the coming years, as well as a greater emphasis on complex Part 3 multi-family and mixed-use projects, the City should consider creating a new Senior Building Official (1.0 FTE) position. This new position, it is suggested, should be filled by an experienced Level III building official, cross-trained and able to perform both plan checking and building inspection duties. The position would add necessary capacity to the Department in its review of complex projects — capacity that is currently provided by the Managers and Chief Building Official, all of whom have important management roles to perform.

BUILDING OFFICIAL QUALIFICATIONS

With the assistance of the City's Human Resources Department, the Chief Building Official has been able to enrol most if not all Level I and Level II building officials in the Building Officials in Training (BOIT) program. To the extent that any existing staff or new recruits are not enrolled, further enrolment efforts should be considered.

CROSS-TRAINING OF BUILDING OFFICIALS

Cross-training of building officials is a best practice that the Department has begun to pursue. Efforts to fill existing building official vacancies, coupled with the recommended creation of the Senior Building Official position, should provide the Chief Building Official and Managers with time to cross-train all Plan Checkers and Building Inspectors (or as many as possible), and to provide to them opportunities to perform in both roles.²⁸

CUSTOMER SERVICE MANAGER

The decision to consolidate the City's Development Services Technicians into one team, and to cross-train all individual Technicians, represents an important initiative — indeed, constitutes a development services best practice. Implementation of the initiative was necessarily paused during COVID-19; however, even before its suspension the initiative had encountered some challenges.

Continued support for and commitment to the Development Services Technicians initiative is important. To ensure success, the City should consider placing the Technicians team under a new Customer Service Manager (1.0 FTE). This new position would be responsible for training, supervising and supporting the Technicians. The development of new procedures to manage the substantial volume of telephone and email inquiries would also fall to the Manager. Finally, the

²⁸ The Chief Building Official and General Manager may need to confer with Human Resources to identify any potential Collective Agreement concerns related to cross-training. Efforts to re-classify certain positions may need to be considered by City management.



Manager would be available to work with the Chief Building Official on developing customer service initiatives and programs for the Department as a whole, and for helping to manage and resolve customer service issues that arise.

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

The final recommendation related to Building Department staffing and structure calls for the addition of one Clerk II (1.0 FTE) to undertake administrative tasks that, at present, fall to the DSTs or are left unattended.

DEPARTMENTAL STRUCTURE

Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 presented the Building Department's current structure. Figure 4.2, presented here, outlines a new proposed structure with the following three new positions:

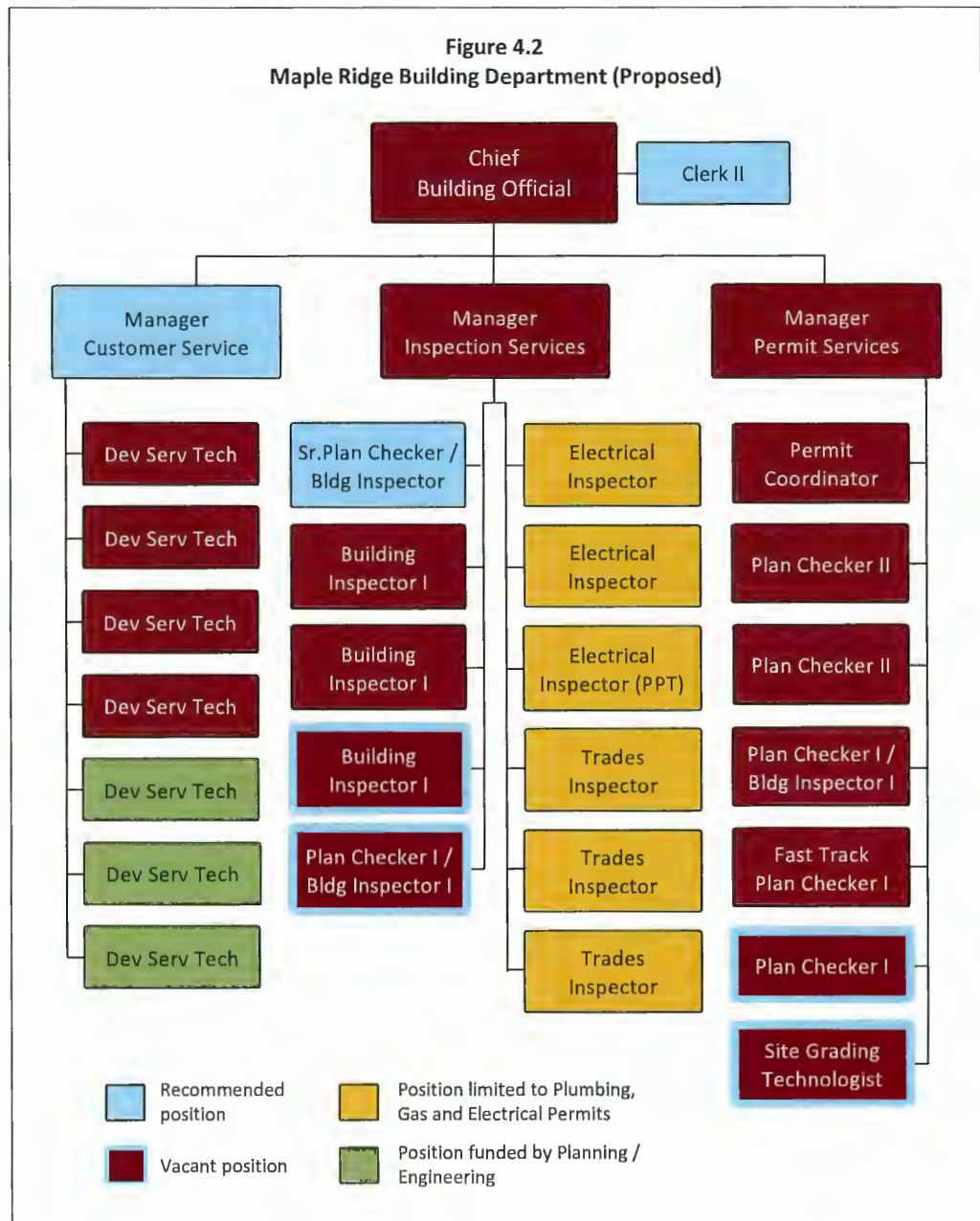
- Senior (Level III) Building Official (1.0 FTE) — presented as Senior Plan Checker/Building Inspector
- Manager of Customer Service (1.0 FTE)
- Clerk II (1.0 FTE)

Figure 4.2 also incorporates the following changes:

- one existing Plan Checker I is dedicated to the proposed Fast Track Program
- the existing Permits Coordinator is moved under the Manager of Permit Services



Figure 4.2
Maple Ridge Building Department (Proposed)



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Department Staffing Changes Not Recommended

In discussions and interviews held over the course of the assignment, suggestions were put forward to the consultant to consider ways to increase the capacity of the Department, and expedite the issuance of building permits, that did not require the creation of new staff positions at the City. One suggestion was for Maple Ridge to follow the lead of the Cities of Vancouver, Surrey, Coquitlam and — most recently — Abbotsford and adopt the Certified Professional (CP) Program.

The CP Program is jointly administered by the Engineers and Geoscientists of BC and the Architectural Institute of BC. The program exists as an alternative approval process that is designed to allow Building Officials to rely on the assurances provided by Certified Professionals when issuing permits, typically for significant, multi-phased complex building projects. To achieve CP designation, an engineer or architect must complete significant coursework and undertake ongoing training. The certification, with the specialized training behind it, is intended to give municipalities an extra level of confidence in the professionals' work, over and above the assurances required by the *Building Code*.

At the time of writing, there are only 51 CP architects and 81 CP engineers in the province — numbers that reflect both the onerous practice requirements and the small number of jurisdictions that subscribe to the program. Given these numbers and the focus of CPs on projects that, on the whole, are significantly larger than those which get built in Maple Ridge, the CP Program is not recommended by the consultant as a viable solution for the City, at least for the foreseeable future.

It is also worth highlighting the City's ability under its current *Building Bylaw* to rely more heavily — indeed, solely if it wished — on the formal assurances that are already submitted to the City on complex projects by the coordinating registered professional and the assigned registered professionals. A greater willingness on the part of City building officials to rely on these assurances would help the City and industry realize many of the advantages of the Certified Professionals Program.

A second suggestion called for the use of contract building officials to help meet workload demands. This course of action, which is followed by a number of municipalities, has some merit and may be worth pursuing in Maple Ridge, at least in the immediate term while the Department works to fill vacant positions and implement changes that result from the *Building Permit Function Review*. It may be challenging, however, for the City to find experienced contractors to work. Contract building officials, many of whom are retired local government staff, are in high demand in the current tight labour market for qualified staff, particularly for staff with Level II or Level III status.

Relying on contractors as a longer-term strategy would be problematic, even if sufficient numbers of contractors were available. One of the objectives set out for the assignment was to help further the development of the Building Department as

...continued



Department Staffing Changes Not Recommended (continued)

an innovative group with the capacity, depth and culture required to provide consistently excellent customer service in a future environment characterized by strong growth and development. This objective would, arguably, be difficult to achieve in department that relied on short-term contractors.

One final suggestion called for an increase in the use of staff overtime to help manage workload. Increased overtime would be relied on in lieu of, or in addition to, other measures such as the filling of vacancies. This suggestion is understandable, particularly given the relatively small amount of overtime charged to the Department in recent years. Increased overtime, however, is at best a short-term option to pursue. To begin with, increases in overtime work can expand to become expensive workload management measures — the experience of the City of Nanaimo highlights this point. Second, efforts to promote overtime for staff can easily lead to staff burn-out and lower productivity. The City of Chilliwack experienced these outcomes.

JOINT BUILDING PERMIT WORKING GROUP

As noted earlier in Chapter 2, the development process runs most smoothly when the City's Building Department and the development industry view themselves as partners in building the community. True partnership, however, requires both parties engage with one another regularly to learn about each other's pressures and challenges, and collectively develop solutions to problems that arise.

Engagement happens when it is planned, and is most successful when it is planned jointly by the parties involved. To facilitate joint planning, the City should consider working with industry in establishing a Joint Building Permit Working Group. Working Group would be comprised of:

- five (5) City staff members, including the General Manager of Planning and Development Services (Working Group Chair), and the Chief Building Official
- five (5) representatives of the development industry, identified by the City in consultation with the Urban Development Institute and Homebuilders' Association of Vancouver

The mandate of the Working Group would be threefold:

- *Events Calendar* — The Group would be responsible for developing a practicable calendar of joint workshops, seminars, open houses, site visits and other events designed to help building officials at the City learn about the building industry, including the challenges experienced by builders,



developers and professionals. The events would also be geared to help members of the development industry learn about the City's requirements and expectations, learn about regulatory changes coming from the province or the City, and understand the challenges and pressures facing building officials.

- *Issues and Concerns* — The Joint Working Group would act as a dispute resolution forum in which industry members and building officials could raise issues and concerns, and to find ways to resolve them.
- *Ideas Lab* — The Group would be a venue in which to bring forward ideas aimed at improving timelines and achieving the other goals set out for the *Building Permit Function Review*.

Formal terms of reference would guide the Working Group in its discussions and efforts to make change. Over time, the Group could evolve beyond the building permit function to include other City staff and industry players, and to examine the City's broader development approval processes. For the time being, however, it is suggested that the Working Group focus on the building permit function and the City's Building Department.

CODE OF CONDUCT

In response to the recent examples of damaging behaviour, and in an effort to prevent further incidents from occurring, the City should consider developing, educating staff on and publicizing a *Maple Ridge Building Officials Code of Conduct*. The *Code of Conduct* would be consistent with, complement and emphasize certain elements of the BOABC's *Code of Ethics* and with the City's own *Code of Conduct* that applies to all City staff. The *Building Officials Code of Conduct*, however, would remain a separate document, necessitated by recent events, and focused on Maple Ridge's Building Department.

Based on examples from municipalities in Ontario, Maple Ridge's *Code of Conduct* would set out principles of conduct that, taken together, would help to:²⁹

- promote appropriate standards of behaviour by building officials in the exercise of their powers and performance of their duties
- prevent practices which may constitute an abuse of power
- promote excellence in customer service
- instil confidence in the City's Building Department among various customer groups

PLANNING SESSION

The City should consider convening a half-day facilitated planning session for all staff

²⁹ See, in particular, the *Code of Conduct for Building Officials* developed by the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake.



of the Building Department, and the General Manager of Planning and Development Services. The session would provide an opportunity for staff to:

- discuss, reflect on and articulate, as a collective, the vision for the Department (i.e., what the Department needs to become)
- consider the different facets of the Department's purpose, and collectively develop a clear mission (i.e., what the Department exists to do)
- gel as a team around a set of values and objectives, including objectives related to customer service

The session would also provide an opportunity for the Chief Building Official to set out his immediate- and long-term objectives for the Department, as well as his expectations of staff. The Chief Building Official's demonstration of positive leadership will be critical in setting the tone and direction for the group going forward. The planning session would give the him the platform on which to stand and deliver.³⁰

SURVEY OF APPLICANTS

The City has an opportunity to survey, at regular intervals, building permit applicants to gauge customer service levels, identify concerns to address, evaluate the results of initiatives undertaken by the Department, and rate applicants' overall customer experience with the Department. Regular survey results, collected by an independent third party, aggregated and shared with the General Manager and Chief Building Official, would help the Department in its efforts to rebuild.³¹

ANNUAL REPORT BOOKLET

The City is required under the *Community Charter* to publish an annual report on activities undertaken by the City as a whole, and on the City's finances. The proposed *Building Department Annual Report* would be quite different. The Building Department's booklet would report on the Department's performance against a range of metrics. Several of the metrics would speak to the Department's business activities — examples of such metrics may include:

- the number of permits, broken down by permit type, processed in the year
- permit construction values, broken down by type of project
- average processing times for different permit types
- number of FTEs, and changes to the number of the course of the year

Text would accompany the data to explain anomalies, trends and changes.

³⁰ Concerns with the function notwithstanding, many members of the development industry interviewed over the course of the assignment expressed confidence in the Chief Building Official's technical expertise, deep knowledge of and connection to Maple Ridge, and ability to address the Department's challenges going forward.

³¹ It would be important for all data to be aggregated by the third party survey firm in order to adequately protect the identity of individual applicants and their projects. Assurances of confidentiality would be critical to obtaining feedback and delivering meaningful information.



Importantly, the *Annual Report* booklet would also report on the Department's performance against metrics aimed at assessing customer service levels and other findings taken from the proposed annual survey. The full report would be presented to open Council, and made available on the City's website.

The *Annual Report* booklet, it should be clarified, would make use of and work in concert with the City's new file management software platform. The new platform, as explained earlier, would track and display progress against application processing times and several other performance metrics. The information from the platform, displayed on an ongoing basis on the City's website, would be captured and presented formally to Council and the community using the booklet.

DEVELOPMENT ROUNDTABLE

Since 2013, the City of West Kelowna has hosted an annual Development Roundtable that brings together members of the development community, City Council, City managers, Development Services managers (including those from the Building Department) and other key staff to review development in the municipality over the previous twelve months, to identify and discuss trends, to look ahead to the immediate year and longer-term future, and to raise and discuss issues, concerns and ideas related to the City's planning and building functions. West Kelowna and the development community find the annual events extremely useful in terms of information exchanged, but also as a forum in which to build and strengthen relationships.

Maple Ridge should consider hosting a similar event for the City's development industry. The half-day would be hosted by the General Manager of Planning and Development Services, and would include presentations from all key departments — including Building — as well as roundtable discussions on key topics.

It is suggested that Maple Ridge consider deferring its first roundtable until later in 2023 in order to allow sufficient time for the results of this *Building Permit Function Review* to be implemented, as well as time for reviews of other development service functions to be completed.



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