

Audit at a glance



Residential Permitting

JANUARY 2024

ABOUT | The Department of Community Planning and Development’s residential plan review team reviews project plans and issues permits for one- and two-unit residential properties and checks for compliance with Denver’s building and zoning codes. The reviews ensure land use, design, and construction standards are met for residential construction projects.

The city saw a large increase in permit applications during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as homeowners began remodeling their homes. Because of this, the number of plan reviews completed on time has decreased.

In the report

FINDING: A lack of manager oversight and documented processes delays review times

- The Department of Community Planning and Development’s residential plan review team does not have formal processes, adequate training, sufficient manager oversight, or reliable data to ensure it reviews residential project plans accurately and in a timely manner.

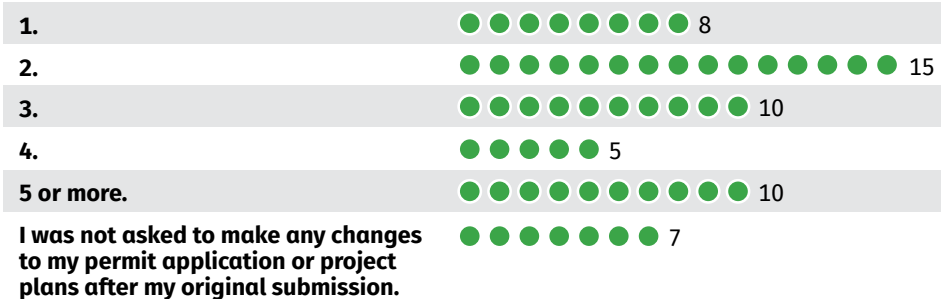
INSUFFICIENT TRAINING AND OVERSIGHT CAN NEGATIVELY AFFECT PLAN REVIEWS

- The residential plan review team did not complete its reviews on time 76% of the time in 2022 and 81% of the time in 2023. Long permit review times were a top complaint among homeowners and construction contractors we surveyed, and 30 of 55 respondents to our survey said long review times made the permit review process more difficult. Seven of 55 survey respondents said long review times increased the cost of their projects. One survey respondent said permit review delays “added over \$24,000 more to our project.”

THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT AGREED TO IMPLEMENT 17 OF OUR 20 RECOMMENDATIONS.

Number of resubmittals from survey respondents

How many times were you asked to make changes to your permit application and/or project plans after your original submission?



Source: Applicant survey responses and Auditor’s Office analysis of responses.

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- Other responses to our survey included 10 of 55 respondents who said city staff made an error when reviewing their project plans. And 25 of 55 respondents said their project required three or more resubmittals before being approved. One respondent wrote: “Staff cited issues in code that did not pertain to our project as explanation for their concerns... so conversations took longer than needed to resolve.” Another person said, “The initial reviewer approved plans that should not have been. ... We found out during the inspection process.”
- Additional plan review fees can be charged to a homeowner or construction contractor after three resubmittals — at a rate of \$125 per hour.

THERE ARE NO FORMAL OR CONSISTENT PROCESSES TO COMMUNICATE WITH HOMEOWNERS AND OTHER PERMIT REVIEW TEAMS

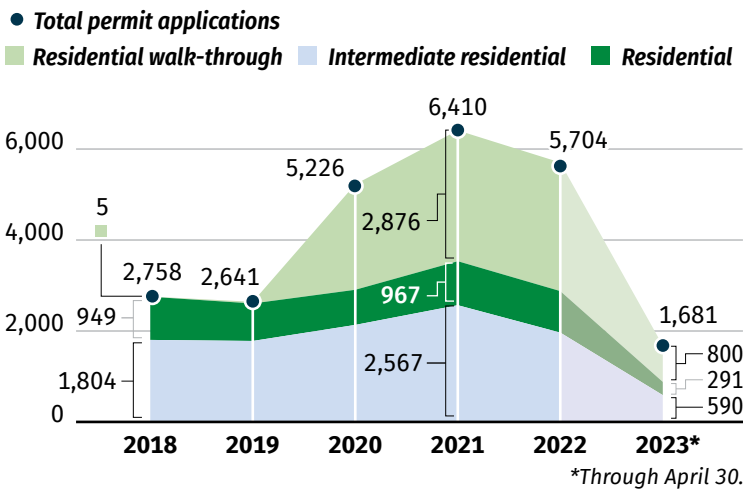
- The Department of Community Planning and Development’s residential plan review team has relied on informal processes to communicate with homeowners and construction contractors, which has caused:
 - Outdated and unclear online guidance for permit applicants.

- Inconsistent and sometimes confusing plan review comments.
- Difficulties in homeowners and construction contractors contacting department staff with questions.
- The department not using feedback from homeowners and construction contractors to improve the residential permitting process.
- Difficulties in residential plan review staff getting information from other permit review teams.

RESIDENTIAL PERMITTING DATA IS NOT SUFFICIENTLY RELIABLE

- Community Planning and Development’s residential plan review team has various dashboards to help staff manage workloads, track backlogs and team productivity, and identify areas for potential process improvements. But we identified several issues with the programming code that populates these dashboards as well as the reliability of the Accela data itself.
- In one example, we analyzed 148,685 review tasks — initial reviews, resubmittal reviews, and final reviews — for permits issued from January 2020 through April 2023. We found nearly a third — or 44,554 — were missing due dates in Accela. For those review tasks specific to the residential plan review team, again nearly a third — 20,079 out of 77,420 — were missing due dates.

Online permit application volume by type of project



Note: This figure does not show all walk-through permit applications before March 2020 because walk-through applications were primarily reviewed at the in-person permit counter before this time.

Source: Denver Auditor’s Office analysis of Community Planning and Development’s Accela data.

FINDING: The residential plan review team needs more consistent, reliable data to effectively allocate staff resources

- The residential plan review team does not have a consistent approach for assessing staffing needs, and although it makes a data-informed case about its resource needs, the team needs better data to make effective decisions. Specifically, the Department of Community Planning and Development has not conducted annual assessments on the residential plan review team’s staffing needs. Senior leaders did not make it a priority and instead decided to spread the work across many teams throughout the department.

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