

Question/ Comment:

It appears residential environmental inspections are up 119%. It's 10,000 plus inspections. Has the increase in inspections led to any notable positive outcomes? Is data available for the number of passes versus fails?

Response:

The increase in inspections is a result of a combination of improved data entry and the filling of existing vacancies that at some points exceeded 50% of the staffing in that service area. The team's ability to have a more robust presence at active building sites across the city is a process improvement. We do not have pass/ fail data readily available for this inspection type at this time.

Question/ Comment:

In an effort to reduce friction and redundancy in the field, have inspections leadership given any thought to having the residential inspector also inspect tree fencing, mulch and clearing those?

Response:

Building inspectors and environmental inspectors each have their own areas of expertise with building inspectors focusing on compliance with building electrical, mechanical and plumbing regulations and environmental inspectors focusing on compliance with tree protections, erosion and sedimentation requirements and related regulations. At this time, inspections for each area will remain specialized.

Question/ Comment:

How did we arrive at the decision to use PDox versus BlueBeam for the volume builder program?

Response:

Bluebeam and ProjectDox have different functions. Bluebeam is a reader; it's going to allow functions like editing and commenting. ProjectDox manages the workflow of the development process. They are two different things that work in conjunction with one another. Use of PDox for the volume builder program is currently in the exploratory phase.

Question/ Comment:

Not a question, but a serious concern. Many of you were not here during the previous switchover to Amanda and do not know the stress that put on the customer. I recall it taking upwards of eight hours to have a single permit issued and four hours to do a submission to residential commercial. This lasted months. Are you going to prevent this issue?

Response:

We are aware of the issues that were encountered when the initial transition took place and are will every effort as we move forward to mitigate those type of risks. The system we will use is a brand-new system and will hopefully be more efficient. We are doing everything we can to prevent that from happening again. The City's Communication and Technology Management Department is managing the procurement and roll-out.

Question/ Comment:

The Wildland Urban Interface Code (WUI) increases the cost of development by quite a bit. Who is in charge of it? Is it the fire department or the development department? How does the criteria manual tie to this? There are certain state laws which are tied to it, like floodplains are tied to the FEMA maps. You just cannot go and create a floodplain of your own. So, have you conferred or checked with the state laws before creating this set of rules?

Response:

Additional Information (provided by Austin Fire):

The Austin Fire Department Fire Marshal’s office is responsible for enforcing the International Wildland Urban Interface Code with strong support from City Council. As found in Exhibit A of Ordinance 20200409-040, the WUI boundaries are set as areas within 150 feet of 40 acres or more to 1.5 miles of 750 acres or more. The WUI interface map was derived from information provided by Texas A&M Forestry Council and approved by City of Austin City Council. For additional information, please email us at wuicodeinfo@austintexas.gov.

Question/ Comment:

When is the 2023 National Electrical Code (NEC) going into effect and when will the amendments for that code cycle be available?

The way the language reads, it sounds like they will be enforcing the 2023 NEC on anything that does not already have a permit by September 1st. Historically, Austin has taken the tact where anything submitted for review prior to the adoption date is not required to comply. That was the crux of my question.

Response:

The State will adopt the NEC on September 1, 2023. We are almost ready to go to Council for the public hearing portion. The changes we are proposing are’ very minor changes in verbiage from the 2020 code amendment.

If a project is permitted on or after September 1st, or if the application was submitted on or after September 1st or beyond, it would be under the 2023 NEC.

Question/ Comment:

Is there any plan to bring back permit activation or residential review services in person?

Response:

Not at this time. While this is still under discussion, we are concerned with the Service Center being able to balance the workload associated with current volume when combined with the addition of in-person services. We continue to evaluate available options.

Question/ Comment:

What does the new tree permit solve for? Can you give an example of when this would be used.

Response:

Properties in violation may not be able to provide the required documentation for the standard review process but are still required to obtain a permit. This new process allows Review to know that the property was in violation and speeds up the review process.

Additional information: Please note that this is not technically a new permit type. This is a new category option that applicants can choose when working in the AB+C Portal.

Question/ Comment:

With regard to the new tree permit process, if staff could speak a little bit to why a new permit type was created and kind of give us an example of a situation that it would solve, that can't currently be solved through the TORA process. I guess I was a little confused by the written answer.

Is that a precursor to a residential review or is that just a standalone for that particular issue?

Response:

There are multiple instances when we respond to a complaint where a tree has been removed by definition that is not associated with an active building permit or site plan permit. Code requires a permit for removal of a tree. To make it easier for an applicant to remedy a violation, an additional option was added to simplify the documentation requirements and speed up the compliance process.

This is not a precursor to a residential review; it is typically a standalone to address a violation.

Additional information: Please note that this is not technically a new permit type. This is a new category option that applicants can choose when working in the AB+C Portal.

Question/ Comment:

Since Austin has been in a housing shortage for quite some time. Why are single family homes considered a reasonable use and Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's) are not considered a reasonable use? What is unreasonable about an ADU?

I hope we're not comparing ADU's to swimming pools. Housing is an essential thing for people. Swimming pools are not.

Response:

Reasonable use has always been established on a review-by-review basis. Swimming pools, ADU's, and situations such as those are reviewed individually each time they come in. If you have a single-family home on the site, we will review your ADU as a secondary use. Up to this point, ADU's are not a guaranteed use on a single-family lot to meet the tree section of the code. Swimming pools are not being compared to ADU's, the respondent was only comparing different uses

Question/ Comment:

Is there a document I can utilize for my customers when they're designing the project in relation to trees? Municode is not very user friendly when trying to find this information.

What I'm looking for is similar to a booklet or a pamphlet similar to the resources available for Subchapter F that can be sent to customers to understand tree requirements.

Response:

On our website, we have a residential review checklist as well as a 3 or 4 templates that were developed in conjunction with a local architect in town. They clarify what are considered impacts and show how to calculate things like the 50% impact area to remain natural calculations. It shows examples of tree preservation, and examples of how to keep things like utilities and other disturbances outside of the critical root zone. Those might be helpful.

Question/ Comment:

After the legislature finishes its work and the governor makes the decisions about what he's going to veto and what he's going to sign, is there going to be a stakeholder update meeting to go over what those changes are, that impact Austin?

Response:

We have not yet determined exactly what that's going to look like, but we will take that under advisement.

Question/ Comment:

Very good changes for housing. Will other issues such as Compatibility still apply to a project of 4 units and under, if 4 units is approved as site plan exempt?

Response:

This issue will be addressed as the amendment moves through the public process, beginning with the Codes & Ordinances Joint Committee in June and Council in July.

Question/ Comment:

With the high numbers of code amendments under discussion. Will updating AMANDA and training staff on a new system be a distraction from that ongoing work? Especially considering current staff shortages.

Response:

AMANDA updates and training are both critical to successfully administering the development process. DSD will work closely with partner departments to strike a balance between training and administration. While staff resources do overlap somewhat, I don't anticipate AMANDA or training efforts to detract from work on code amendments.

Question/ Comment:

Do we have access to comments library?

Response:

Our comment libraries are not currently publicly accessible but do largely mirror our checklists which are available on our website.
Plan Review checklists can be found at this website under "commercial building plan review" and "residential building plan review" respectively
<https://www.austintexas.gov/department/forms-applications>

Question/ Comment:

Will the revision fees in Expedited be more than the regular revision fee?

Response:

The fees depend upon which route, Standard Review or Expedited, the applicant chooses. Although Expedited will review all these revisions, those submitted via the Standard Intake process pay Standard revision fees and are reviewed via a Standard review process. Revisions submitted via Expedited's intake group pay Expedited fees and receive Expedited's enhanced review, which includes a pre-requisite review by all reviewers and, if needed, a review meeting.

Question/ Comment:

Issue with Volume Builder (VB) & Wildland Urban Interface Code (WUI). Once plans are approved for that phase under VB, WUI shouldn't be allowed to reject already approved plans. It significantly delays and defeats the VB purpose of the 5-day turnaround. Recently hollow posts started being called out on plan reviews causing permit delays. This would be caught in the field at inspection. No need to interfere with permitting. Very frustrating for Volume Builders.

In addition, Fire doesn't start reviewing until the End due date, thus turning the 5 days into more like 10.

Response:

It would be helpful to receive specific examples so we can further discuss with our colleagues at AFD. Please email jennifer.verhulst@austintexas.gov or Mayra Rivera at mayra.rivera@austintexas.gov.

Additional Information (provided by Austin Fire):

Participation in the Volume Builder Program does not exempt plans from receiving a WUI review during the 5-day review window. The WUI review that occurs at VB Master plan is to ensure the provisions of the WUI code are included in the plan set. The individual VB reviews are to ensure that the appropriate provisions are linked to the corresponding property. Rejections are due to incorrect WUI class being applied, missing submittal requirements, or missing or incorrect WUI requirements called out. Corrections to exterior column drawings or notes may be submitted with each permit application or you may request to revise the Master plans on file through DSD.

While Austin Fire Department's (AFD) workflow does not generally start reviewing plans towards the end of the review cycle, AFD metrics show that a majority of plans are reviewed by the due date and a few within 1 business day of the end of the review cycle. If there are plans that are returned more than 5 days past the projected end date, please provide a list of those plans so these can be further investigated.

For additional information, please email us at wuicodeinfo@austintexas.gov

Question/ Comment:

Can we access the presentation from today's tree lunch and learn meeting?

Response:

Yes, we will send all participants a PDF of the presentation at the end of the day today.

Question/ Comment:

For the Service Center, I do not like the new process to request an activation of a permit. What was done in less than two hours using the CHAT, is now taking two days.

Response:

The main reason for moving this function from chat to the webform is due to the checks that need to be completed before activating a permit. The time required to perform those checks was not adequate in chat resulting in many issues later in the process. The transition from chat to the webform was an effort to make it better for customers and staff and reduce the number of issues later that need to be corrected.

Question/ Comment:

One more issue for the Service Center, when using the webform to request activation of permits, the process is not efficient and to get to the page to submit is kind of hidden and a pain to access. Can you investigate this?

Response:

The Service Center webpage is in the process of being re-designed and improved to guide the user through the process to better capture the request. Upon completion, these improvements should mean fewer misrouted ticket submittals and improved processing time. These changes are being made with the customer in mind to guide the customer through the ticket submittal process. Within the next 30 days an updated page will be unveiled. We hope some of these concerns will be alleviated.

Question/ Comment:

One last one for the Service Center, have you streamlined the activation of sites with multiple permits that need to be activated? The last time I had to activate permits for an apartment complex (30 pmts) I had to submit a webform for each one. There should be an easy button the customer can utilize. Thank you for listening to me.

Response:

Currently, we require one ticket submittal to activate a single permit. That includes activations for apartment buildings. We recognize that this is not an efficient way to handle this process so we are discussing options as to how we might facilitate these types of requests and manage all other requests that are submitted and process both in a timely manner.

Question/ Comment:

I would like to see metrics tracked average time for Final Approval of Commercial Building Permits from filing Site Exemption to Final Approval.

Response:

We will pull that information and provide it in our follow-up Q&A document.

Additional information: Upon closer review, this information is not readily available. One of the critical initiatives referenced included a commitment to working with stakeholders to develop a set of performance measures that reflect the customer experience. Stakeholders will be further engaged as we work to complete the scoping of that project. We will evaluate this suggestion at that time.