

A photograph of the Austin skyline at sunset. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue. Several skyscrapers are visible, including the tall, blue, cylindrical tower of the Frost Tower on the left. The buildings are illuminated by the warm, golden light of the setting sun, creating a strong contrast with the blue sky. In the foreground, a bridge with a railing is visible, and a large crowd of people is gathered on it, looking towards the city. The overall scene is a panoramic view of the city's urban landscape.

City of Austin site plan review

Summary Briefing for Austin City Council Work Session

August 29, 2023

Austin has transformed in the 21st century

2002



2020



The City of Austin assessed its site plan review process

18

process maps developed

20+

customer organizations engaged in 3 workshops to identify challenges and initiatives

1,470+

review steps across 29 formal review processes

178

customers provided feedback through customer experience survey

18

internal and external-facing technology platforms identified

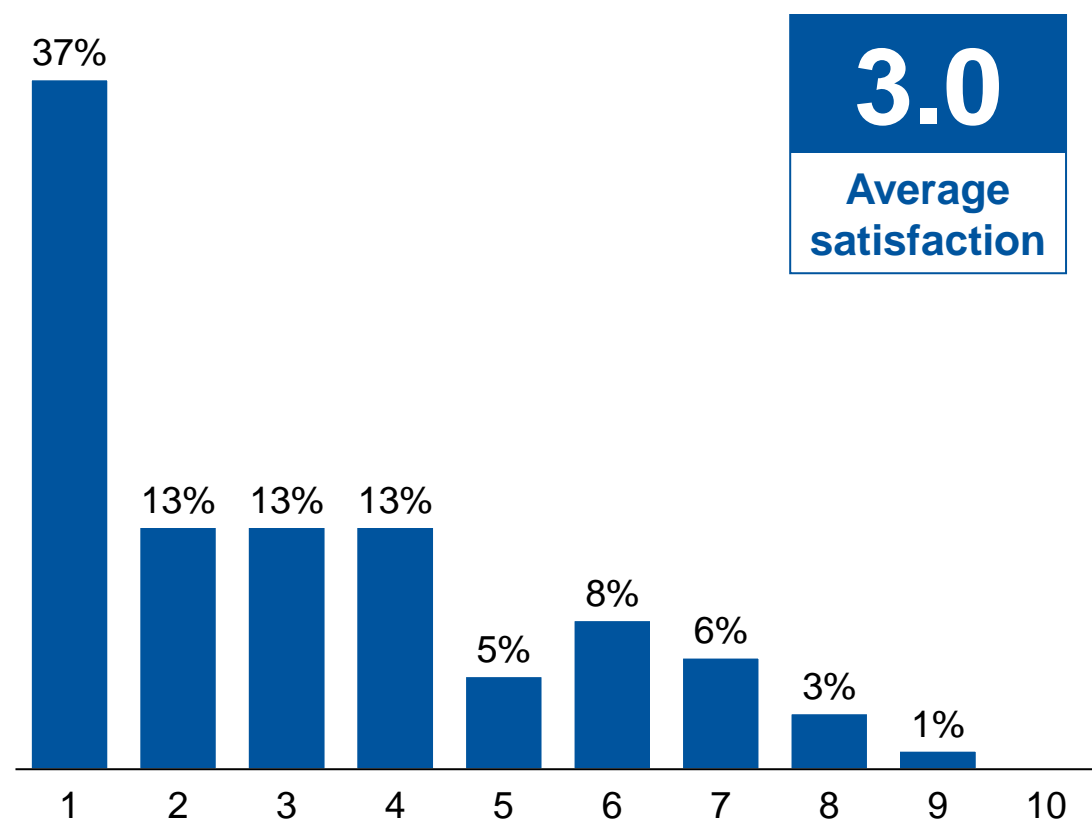
150+

City of Austin staff engaged through interviews, surveys, and workshops

Customer satisfaction with the site plan review process is low

Overall satisfaction scores by rating (1 to 10)¹

% of respondents, N = 178



81%

of applicants surveyed reported submitting 3+ times to resolve formal review comments

78%

of applicants surveyed reported taking longer than one year to receive a permit

Source: DSD customer survey results (May 2023)

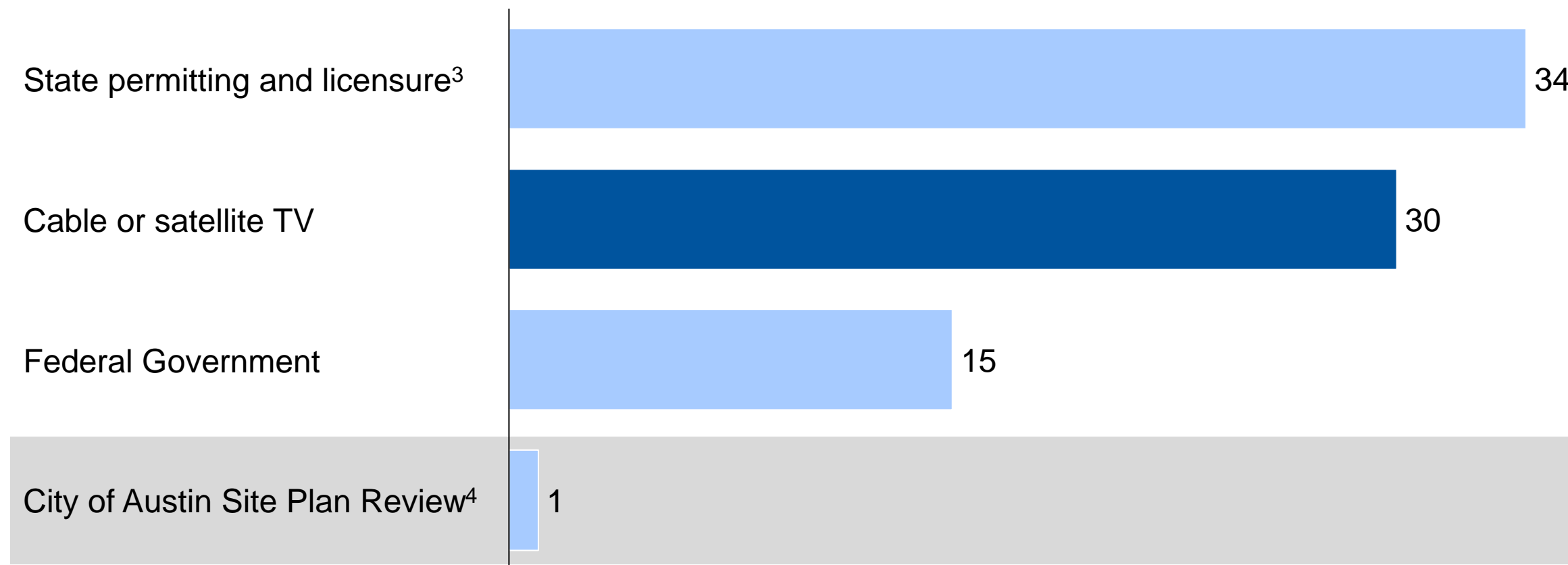
1. Q: Thinking about all your experiences, overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your experience applying for and/or receiving a site development permit?

Customer satisfaction lags compared to benchmarks

Customer satisfaction scores for select public and private sector benchmarks¹

% of respondents who are satisfied², N = 78,587 for national survey

■ Government ■ Private sector



1. Source: [State of States Survey, 2022](#)

2. % of respondents selecting a 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10 of the individual services

3. Average scoring across sporting licenses, vehicle services, professional licenses, business registration, and economic development permits

4. Source: DSD customer survey results (May 2023); N=178

The City administers an inherently complicated and evolving code

Code is large and complicated, but comparable to other cities

- **~1,800 regulations¹** from the Land Development Code (Title 25 and 30 of the City's Code of Ordinances)
 - Ranks **3rd** out of top 6 Texas cities in number of regulations²
- **8 technical criteria manuals** interpret and specify requirements established in the Land Development Code
- **12 building technical codes** to reference for review

Code amendments are common

- Since 2009 (the last 15 years):
 - **269 amendments** have been **initiated** (~18 per year)
 - **163 amendments** have been **adopted** (~11 per year)

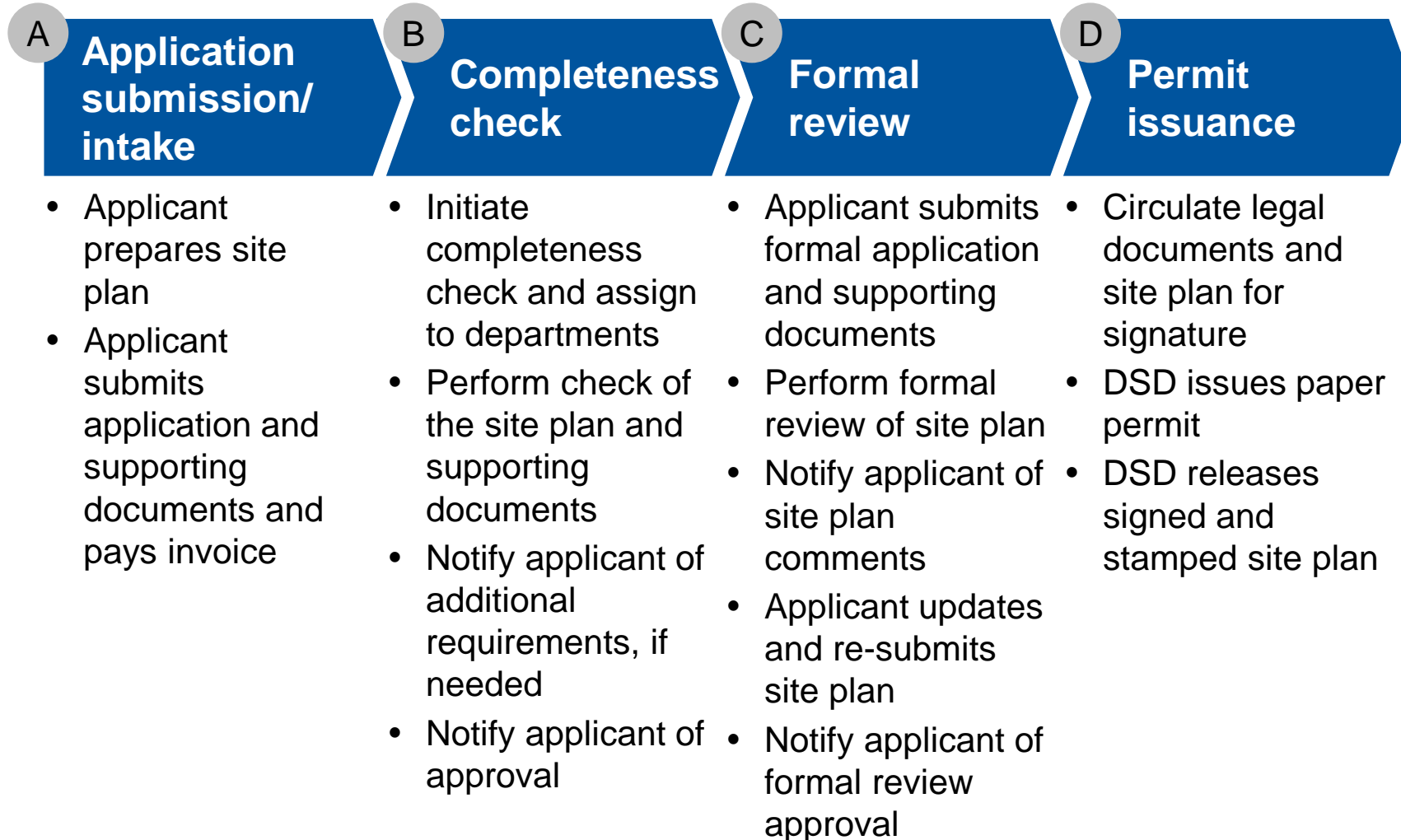
Source: Discussions and interviews with DSD and partner departments (Apr-Jun 2023)

Source: <https://www.austintexas.gov/page/codes-and-regulations>

1. Sections as defined by the City's Code of Ordinances (e.g., 25-1-1)

2. With respect to comparable content and level of granularity, given different code format, structure, and content; estimated 2022 population according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](https://www.census.gov)

The City's site plan review process is complex



Insights

- **~1,470** total steps
- Labor required for formal review cycle is equivalent to **~20 FTEs¹ for one week**; average of 5 review cycles per application²
- **~750 regulation items** (e.g., manuals, codes)³ interpreted, including **~50 items⁴** that often require departments to review in coordination

Source: Site plan review document analysis (May-Jun 2023)












1. Average of hours across steps; ~785 average labor hours

2. Data from DSD, Amanda data as of 5/15/2023

3. Based on analysis of 29 site plan review documents; review documents not applicable for the Law and Communications & Technology Management departments

4. Excluding high-level code references such as "COA, UPC"

Eleven departments and 250+ staff are involved in the review process

Department	# of specialties / disciplines ¹	# of personnel ²	Dept. weekly time spent ³
 DSD	6	53	~1,395 hours
 Water	8	34	~755 hours
 Public Works & Transportation	3	56	~700 hours
 Energy	12	51	~545 hours
 Watershed protection	3	25	~315 hours
 Fire	1	16	~130 hours
 Communications & Technology	2	8	~120 hours
 Parks & Recreation	1	5	~80 hours
 Law	2	4	~75 hours
 Planning	2	4	~40 hours
 Housing	1	2	~15 hours

Insights

- Individual involvement varies from 5%-100%; **staff self-report an average ~40% of time** spent on the site plan process
- **~4,150 hours per week** involved in site plan process

Source: Discussions and interviews with DSD and partner departments (Apr–Jun 2023)

1. Specialties / disciplines are sub-groups of a department; not all departments have specialties

2. As of 6/26/23; personnel who are involved 5%+ of the time within the site plan permitting process (e.g., reviewing applications, meeting with customers, leading teams)

3. Sum of all personnel involvement for each department

City staff do not share a common view of their “primary customer”

Word cloud¹ based upon responses to “who do you see as your primary customer?”²

N = 28 participants



Source: DSD + Partner Departments workshop (6/01/23)

1. Word cloud: The larger the word, the more frequently it appeared in responses

2. Question: “Who do you see as your primary customer when you approach your work in the site plan review process?”

The City's operational excellence capabilities could be improved

Highlights of site plan review staff survey on operational excellence practices

Scores ranging 1 (low) to 4 (high), N = 154 staff¹

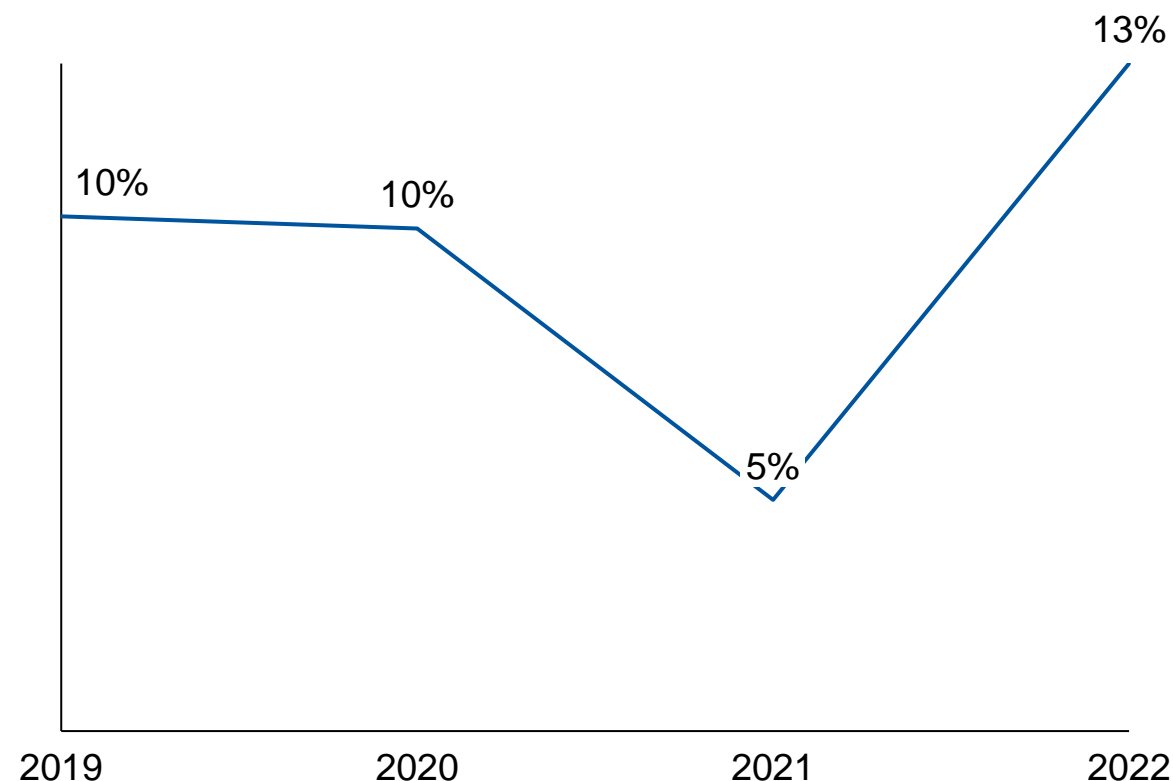
Element	Description	Average ¹
Purpose and strategy	Staff see customer feedback / insights and adjust work accordingly	2.54
Principles and behaviors	Leaders have regular calendarized visits to work areas and provide support	3.23
Management system	We have the time and resources to pursue continuous improvement, including implementing solutions after root cause problem solving	2.61
Operating procedures	Staff are trained in and routinely apply a standard root cause problem solving technique	2.01
Technology	We use iterative approaches to pivot quickly when adapting strategies, objectives, and key results	1.95

Insights

- Respondents were **more critical** on **root cause problem solving** and iterative approaches to **pivot quickly with technology**
- Respondents rated more highly **leaders regularly visiting** work areas and providing support

Staff turnover affects performance

Annual attrition rate of all DSD staff¹, 2019-2022



~1.8 year

average tenure at DSD in current role for site-plan-related staff²

1-1.5 year

average learning curve for reviewers³



Consistent turnover of reviewers and delayed reviews makes the site plan process as a whole very difficult — Applicant

Source: <https://data.austintexas.gov/>, Data from DSD, Amanda data as of 5/15/2023

1. Annual attrition represents the department overall, not just for site plan involvement; note: attrition rate excludes employee transfers between city departments

2. Represents all 53 DSD staff members identified who allocate a minimum of 5% of their time specifically to the site plan process

3. Interviews with DSD and partner departments

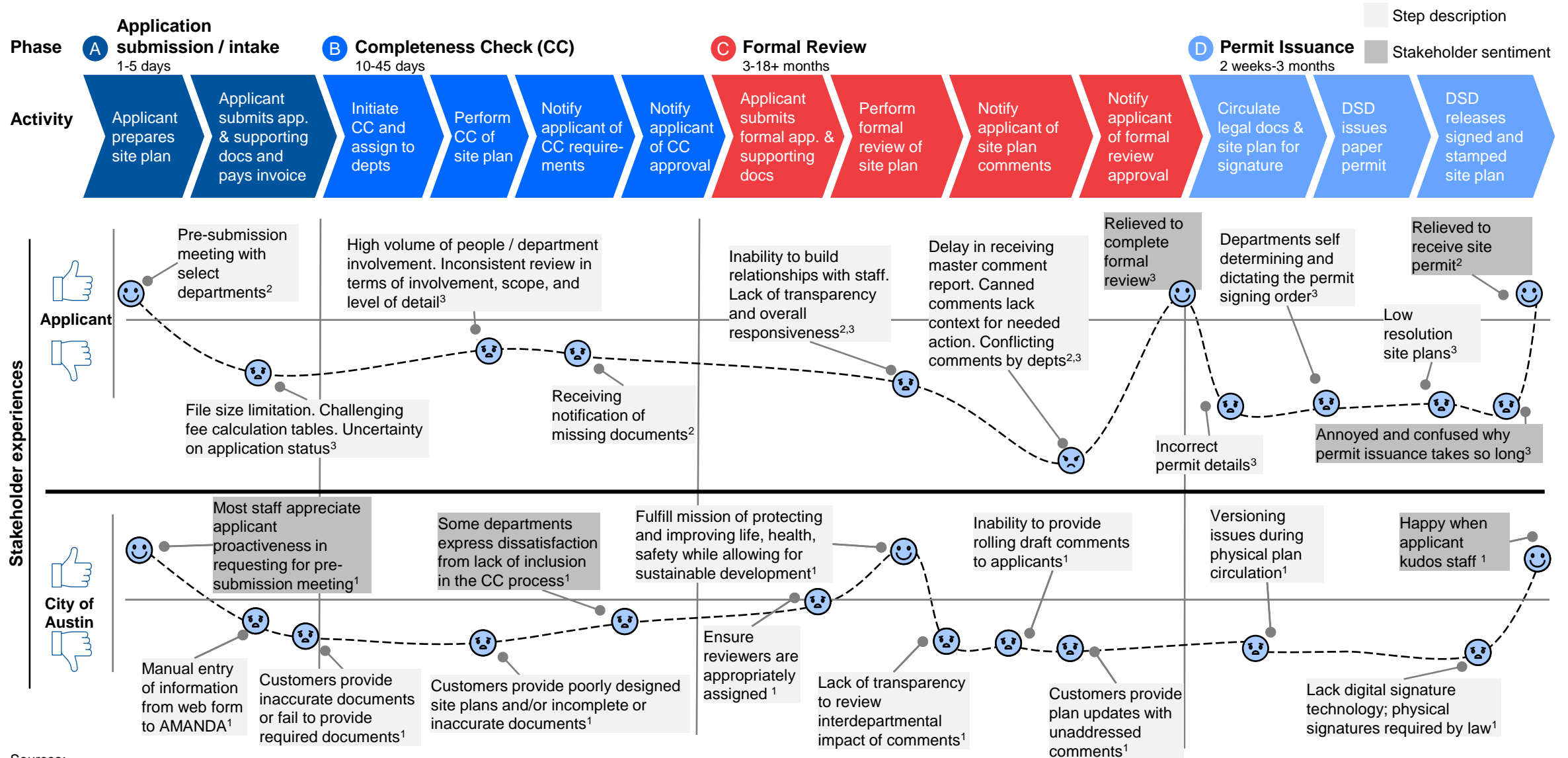
Multiple IT platforms with limited integration support the review process

IT platform / tool	Description	# of departments utilizing platform / tool
Amanda	Internal process management tool	10
Bluebeam	Site plan review / markup tool	5
Enterprise GIS	Geographic information system	5
File maker	Fee calculation software	1
Formstack	Workplace productivity tool	1
Freshdesk	Ticketing / communication system	1
Knack	Intra-department plan review platform	1
MicroStrategy	Data visualization tool	3
MS Outlook	Email platform for customer communication	All
MS Teams	Workplace communication platform	All
MS Word	Text editing program	All
Network drives	File storage	3
PowerBI	Data visualization tool	3
Smartsheet	Task management tool	2

Insights

Technology **does not meet all desired future-state capabilities** (e.g., digital signature, CRM integration, digital completeness check, digital formal review)

In sum, the process is challenging for both City staff and their customers



Sources:

1. Discussions and interviews with DSD and partner departments (Apr-Jun 2023)

2. DSD customer survey results (May 2023)

3. Customer workshops (5/12, 5/16, and 6/13/23)

Summary challenges heard from applicants and City staff

Applicants' challenges with process

- Unclear requirements
- Opaque process
- Uncertain on who has lead
- Loss of institutional knowledge
- Delays in comments
- Inconsistent process and guidance
- “Wet” signature requirements

City of Austin Staff's challenges with process

- Inconsistent submission quality
- Manual and inconsistent data entry
- Unclear roles and responsibilities
- Staff turnover
- Comments batched at end of review
- Different interpretations and processes
- “Wet” signature requirements

Site plan delays increase development costs

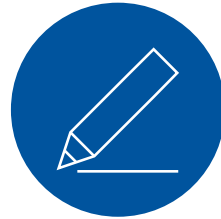
Illustrative scenarios for monthly carrying costs of example projects



Single family residential redevelopment¹

~\$9,700 carrying cost per month

7% of applications in 2022



Greenfield development²

~\$37,000 carrying cost per month

38% of applications in 2022



Multi-family residential redevelopment³

~\$546,000 carrying cost per month

3% of applications in 2022

Insights

- Carrying costs depend on scale and scope of development/redevelopment project
- Each month delay in the site plan review process adds to total project carrying costs, and, therefore, contributes to overall development costs

Source: Review of public sources and expert interviews; [Open data portal](#) as of May 2023

1. Key assumptions: Property value of ~\$566k, financed with 40% debt at 7.3% interest rate; future use is multi-family residential (duplex)




2. Key assumptions: Property value of ~\$1.3MM, financed with 50% debt at 7.85% interest rate; future use is multi-family residential

3. Key assumptions: Property value of ~\$38MM, financed with 40% debt at 6.8% interest rate; future use is multi-family residential

A potential solution involves a holistic approach

Design element	From	→ To
Strategy	Siloed priorities and approaches across 11 departments...	Shared direction and “one team” mindset and approach
People	20 th -century approach under strain with turnover...	21 st -century model with compelling employee value proposition and skill building
Processes	Highly complex, manual, inconsistent, opaque, and hard to navigate...	Designed for customers and staff with consistency, transparency, and ease of use
Structure	Fragmented, siloed, and rigid...	Flexible but integrated structure

The City could build momentum across three implementation horizons

			 <div>Focus for today</div>
	Design and launch Present – Feb 2024	Build momentum Mar 2024 – Dec 2024	Scale transformation Jan 2025 →
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared vision and priorities established 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refined approach based on shared vision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heightened aspirations for shared vision of continuous improvement
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capabilities and capacity improved with continuous improvement as part new “way of working” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New “way of working” as “new normal” Core talent processes adapted to new approach including capability building, leadership development, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-established performance culture with “continuous improvement” integral to success
Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Quick wins” adopted Process improvements co-designed Performance management launched IT system requirements identified and procurement launched 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance management established New process maps and operating procedures functioning Prioritized process improvement initiatives launched IT system implementation begun 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-departmental teams operate as one New IT system implementation ongoing with updates for latest capabilities (e.g., Generative AI)
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-departmental governance structure and cadence established Roles and responsibilities codified; staff duties assessed and refined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cross-departmental policies reconciled Roles and responsibilities established and operating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Governance approach adapted to “lessons learned” in spirit of continuous improvement



Implemented



In process

“Quick wins” implementation

Internal City of Austin management

- ✓ Empower **single leader** to coordinate review process and improvement efforts
- ✓ Establish **cross-departmental leadership coordination** to drive alignment, prioritization, and delivery of improvements
- ❑ Define and track **cross-departmental KPIs**
- ❑ Train staff in **standard customer experience** expectations and techniques
- ❑ Define initial **IT requirements**

External customer experience

- ✓ Pilot Fully execute co-location benefits through in-person “**one-stop-shop**” office
- ✓ Establish **applicant feedback channel**
- ✓ Expand **paralegal capacity**
- ✓ Pilot new **pre-submission review** meeting
- ✓ Pilot new, empowered **Case Manager** role
- ❑ Publish “**what good looks like**” guidelines
- ❑ Pilot “**pizza tracker**” for status updates

Additional wins

- ✓ Realigned DSD **Site Plan Review staff and review priorities** to support City goals and objectives
- ✓ Refined several **site plan related business processes** to streamline the community experience
- ✓ Launched the **Public Projects Team** dedicated to support for CIP projects
- ✓ Developing a more robust set of **business process analytics** to understand challenges in real time
- ✓ Promoting a department **culture** with a **bias toward action**

Results

- **SMART Housing** reviews are nearly **100% on-time**, **Permanent Supportive Housing** is **100% on-time**
- **50% reduction** in days needed for initial and update reviews
- **Eliminated** DSD site plan review **backlog** for all but one discipline
- Full **one-year extensions** to site plan approvals
- Interdisciplinary roundtable for **improved communication** and **accountability**

Service-wide investments

- ✓ Completing a comprehensive overhaul of the **DSD website** to improve access and navigability
- ✓ Continued investment in **logic-based web tools** that support customers through the development process such as our recently launched “Do I Need a Permit?” wizard
- ✓ Partnering with Archistar to pilot use of **artificial intelligence** to improve the quality and compliance of submittals
- ✓ Expanding community engagement opportunities across all stakeholder groups