

Opportunity statement

In an effort to foster greater economic growth and development, municipalities are encouraged to adopt pre-application development review procedures that ensure that the time to review and approve site plans and subdivision plans is not exacerbated and unnecessarily lengthened due to a less-than-optimal coordination of municipal departments and development-related review processes.

Background

Lengthy staff review processes add to the costs of projects for businesses, developers and their professional representatives. While it is the duty of staff to provide applicants appropriate reviews, the time involved needs to be properly managed to ensure that all proposals are treated fairly and there are not overly lengthy review processes.

A lack of communication between building, fire, planning and zoning departments, as well as other reviewing agencies and third party review firms, and between these departments/agencies and developers, is frequently cited as a major contributing issue.

Best practices

This paper suggests that, to be competitive, municipalities should consider developing and implementing effective and efficient internal pre-application review procedures utilizing municipal staff and Technical Review Committee processes before formal application submittal. Such processes must be fast, predictable, customer-focused, and transparent, while at the same time maintaining high quality community standards that protect the public interest. These processes also should be available to developers before formal application submittal.

In many communities, the process typically begins with an informal meeting between a developer and the municipality's Economic Development Director and/or Planning Director to review a potential concept before application. At this meeting, the developer will be made aware of the municipality's development process and be given a copy of the municipality's Developers' Handbook or similar printed handout that covers all aspects of the municipality's development process, including timelines and flowcharts showing the progression from concept to post-approval. At this meeting a developer will also receive initial feedback on the basic elements and concepts of his/her plan. The developer will also learn if his/her project will require a special exception, variance or conditional use permit.

Next, the developer would meet with municipal staff or attend an interdepartmental Technical Review Committee meeting made up of those municipal staff and third party engineering reviewers who will eventually have to sign off or otherwise approve a plan.

Sometimes called a "development issues" meeting, Technical Review Committee meetings often serve to improve communication with project developers, builders and the key staff members who will review their applications.

Ideally, these committee meetings should provide an initial "heads up" on issues and bring agreement on key issues. Regular committee meetings are encouraged to allow early technical review of complex and controversial applications. These meetings also serve to screen out incomplete applications earlier in the development review process. To minimize incomplete plans and applications, municipalities are encouraged to set very clear expectations about what the municipality requires with regard to the specificity of conceptual and site plans submitted by a developer for technical review.

Having all people in the same room at the same time allows the different agencies to review the application concurrently, identifying and communicating issues early in the process to each other and to the applicant. Regular committee meetings ensure early assessment of a proposed project and help coordinate responsibilities and project concerns among reviewing agencies.

Depending on the scope of the project, multiple Technical Review Committee meetings may be required to identify and rectify any and all hurdles before a formal application is submitted and heard by the Planning Board.

The most successful Technical Review Committees often include the following components:

- **Regular meeting times** - Depending on the volume of activity, a minimum of two meetings per month should be held.
- **Prepared members** - To facilitate an efficient process, plans should be reviewed and comments submitted and shared by staff before the committee meets with a developer.
- **No cost to developers** - To encourage communication and good working relationships, municipalities should not charge for participation in Technical Review Committee meetings.
- **Pro-active attitude** - If the project is a good one, the Technical Review Committee should endeavor to work with the developer to make the project work, not simply identify why it won't work.

Summary

If these pre-application process details are implemented, a community will be better positioned to provide greater efficiencies and quicker reviews without lowering the community's high quality development standards.

Other benefits to both municipalities and developers include:

- Reduced plan approval timelines
- Reduced administrative costs
- Increased customer/applicant satisfaction
- Increased clarity, consistency and trust – the developer has no surprises
- Better conflict management

Access Greater Manchester

An initiative of the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, the Southern New Hampshire Planning Commission and the New Hampshire Division of Economic Development, Access Greater Manchester is a regional economic development initiative whose mission is to encourage communities to look beyond individual borders, foster positive relationship building and cooperation among individual communities, promote and drive economic development initiatives for sustainability of the region, and collectively promote the region as a desirable place to “live, work, and play.”