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David Fuller
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TO: Eileen Donoghue, City Manager *EMD*
FROM: R. Eric Slagle, Director of Development Services
DATE: January 23, 2020

RE: Motion by C. Conway - Req. City Mgr. Meet With Appropriate Departments To Explore The Feasibility Of Developing A Plan That Will Help To Mitigate And Expedite The Building Permit Process.

Motion by C. Nuon - Req. City Mgr. Provide Update Regarding Review Of Inspection And Enforcement Procedures Within Development Services To Determine If Better Efficiency Can Be Achieved Through Transfer Of Data Via Tablets Or Other Electronic Means With The Aim Of Improving Turnaround Time Without Adding Personnel.

This memorandum addresses the requests from Councilor Conway and Councilor Nuon regarding the expediting of the building permit and inspection process in the City. We are taking significant steps to continue to improve our efficiency and customer service.

Mobile Tablets

- Working with MIS to finish converting all permit and code enforcement activity and records into the MUNIS system by the end of calendar year 2020. Currently in the process of creating and updating both Sanitary Code and Building Code violations in MUNIS to allow greater tracking and accountability.
- We are committed to a significant technology upgrade with our inspectors, looking at the introduction of tablets for scheduled inspections. This would eliminate the duplicate data entry in the office and the field.
- MIS is actively working with the outside vendor for our data management system, which runs the permit, inspection, and code enforcement module for Development Services. The vendor currently supports a mobile platform which allows for field inspections to be conducted remotely. They are working to provide greater access to our City systems which could potentially provide greater functionality for more inspector field work. At the same time, we are looking at our internal processes to make sure that they are optimized for the use of mobile technology. It is important to be able to provide this access while maintaining the security for those crucial systems.
- We currently have a Building Inspector testing the functionality of an I-Pad with an attached keyboard to perform field inspections. We will use the remainder of FY2020 to perform field tests and work out the processes needed to make the tablets fully functional. In FY2021, assuming funding is available, we would roll out the tablets to all of the inspectors.

- We are working to identify and/or plan for funding for the 16-19 devices Development Services staff would need for mobile inspections. To purchase the I-Pads we are currently testing, with the keyboard and other attachments (hardened case, hand grip, etc.), the price would be \$1,400 - \$1,800 each. At that rate, the initial capital outlay for the devices would be \$25,000 - \$35,000. Remote cellular access, which would be required for functionality, would cost \$50 per device per month, for a total of \$11,000 - \$12,000 annually, plus \$2,000 - \$3,000 per year for maintenance, repair and replacement. We will be working with the CFO to identify sources of funding for the purchase price of the devices, potentially a capital request, and will request the annual costs be included in the department budget in FY2021.

Other Items Going Forward

- Working with MIS, proceeding with the project to make online permitting available for permitting in calendar year 2020. At this time we are working on finalizing the online documentation and anticipate rolling out a pilot program for online permits before the end of FY20. Assuming the pilot is successful, we should see a full roll-out in FY21. Online permitting will increase efficiency by allowing contractors to enter permit applications from home, and digitally upload their supporting documents. This will enable our clerks to focus on reviewing the entered data, rather than having to do data entry themselves, limit the time with multiple customers at the counter, and reduce delays in permit processing due to missing documents.
- Development Services has made significant progress in the digitizing of all of our paper property files, working closely with MIS, with the goal of making those files available to the public online. This will make our department function more efficiently by reducing the number of public records and research requests we receive, while increasing the transparency of the department functions to the public.
- In the spring of 2020, Development Services will be putting forward a Customer Service training module for the entire staff of the department, all of whom have significant customer interactions. This is an important step to reiterate to all staff the importance of customer service as a critical part of our jobs representing the City, both in the office and in the field. We believe this is a crucial part of maintaining the excellent customer service we provide to the public.
- Since early 2018, the City has replaced the Building Commissioner, Senior Building Inspector, Senior Health Inspector, three (3) Local Building Inspectors, Electrical Inspector, and has hired a new on-call Electrical Inspector and on-call Plumbing/Gas/Sheetmetal Inspector. Although Development Services experienced this significant staff turnover in the last 20 months, all positions have been filled with talented and effective staff, and progress continues toward achieving transformative improvement in the way the City of Lowell delivers these services. Any gaps in customer service that resulted during this transition period should be mitigated by the department inspectors now being at full staff.

As always, we endeavor for our process to be as efficient and transparent as possible for the homeowners, contractors, and developers that work with the City, while maintaining full compliance with the State Building, Sanitary and Fire Codes, and local Zoning Ordinance. We work very closely with the Lowell Fire Department, the City Engineer's Office, the Transportation Engineer, and other City offices get permits reviewed and approved as soon as possible. Importantly, this work could not be accomplished without close collaboration with CIO Miran Fernandez and his team at MIS. As the Council can see based on the lists above, the smooth integration of technology solutions into the code enforcement, permitting and inspection processes enables us to strive for much greater efficiencies.

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