



# CITY OF HOUSTON

City Council

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To: Mayor John Whitmire

Subject: Houston Permitting Center  
Survey Results

CC: HPW COO Randy Macchi  
Interim HPW Director Richard Smith  
Interim HPC Director Rudy Moreno

From: Sallie Alcorn  
Houston City Council Member, At-Large 5

Date: August 1, 2024

Mayor Whitmire,

Since elected, I have been keenly interested in streamlining processes at the Houston Permitting Center (HPC). During my first term, I actively participated in monthly permit advisory committee meetings and worked with HPC staff and industry stakeholders to implement recommendations including updating checklists, improving community efforts and outreach, expanding live chat services, and adding third-party contractors to help reduce application backlog. Additionally, HPC updated both the iPermits and ProjectDox systems and appropriated \$15 million for the HouPermits modernization project. Even with these positive changes, challenges still exist.

To assist with HPC's ongoing Alvarez and Marsal engagement at HPC, I launched an online survey and sent it to approximately 270 HPC users. I began assembling this list of HPC customers when I hosted a permitting panel breakfast in 2022. I then added to this list people who contacted my office requesting assistance with their specific permitting issues and complaints. The list is comprised of real estate professionals, contractors, builders, architects, engineers, and home and business owners. The survey was also provided to the Greater Houston Builders Association, American Council of Engineering Companies, Houston Real Estate Council, and Associated General Contractors Houston Chapter. These organizations distributed it to their respective memberships.

There were three simple questions on the survey: in your opinion, what's working at HPC, what's not, and what are your suggestions for improvement?

The survey closed at 5 P.M. on Wednesday, July 31, 2024, with 85 responses. I have summarized key themes and have also attached the responses in full. I hope the comments will provide some good insight for HPC and the Alvarez and Marsal consultants.

## **Strengths**

- Communication levels are improving – calls and emails are being returned
- Responsive and helpful staff in Building Code Enforcement
- Office of City Engineer review times are improving



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- Interactions with inspectors are also improving
- Easy to electronically submit, upload and download documents, and track project submittals online
- Preliminary reviews are helpful
- Improvements to ProjectDox and HPC website
- Several recognitions of specific valuable employees

## Weaknesses

- Slow review times and multiple reviews with new comments each time - delays due to waiting for other departments (e.g., Traffic, Forestry)
  - Rejections due to minute issues still lead to long review times
  - Still receiving additional comments not related to life safety
- Inconsistent application of codes and ordinances by both reviewers and field inspectors
  - Departments sometimes contradict each other – varying interpretations
  - Assignment of drawings being routed to non-applicable departments
- Poor communication: difficulty reaching reviewers, unclear expectations, comments not reflecting submitted plans
  - Plan reviewers no longer providing contact information
  - Inefficient communication between departments/disciplines
- Unnecessary requirements: rejection for minor issues, requests for irrelevant information, excessive documentation for small projects
  - Small and large projects take the same amount of time
- Difficult to work with some disciplines/departments: Flood, Storm, Traffic, Planning, Forestry, Fire
- Staffing changes, understaffing, and inexperienced staffing

## Suggestions

- Simplify codes, ordinances, and policies: focus on life-safety issues and reduce unnecessary burdens
  - Reconsider review process to allow a resubmittal without having to wait on other departments
  - Establish a maximum timeline for review so that customers/clients can plan appropriately
  - Consider use of AI
  - Bring back permit committee for policy review
- Overall communications and availability
  - Institute single point-of-contact per project
  - Continue improving response times to emails and phone calls
  - Consider one-stop review or in-person/video meetings with project teams pre-and/or during submittal process
  - Designate phone office hours with plan reviewers



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- Create a booking system for these appointments
- Streamline review process for small projects like simple bath and kitchen projects
- Meet with key stakeholders on an annual basis
- Improve inter-departmental communication and coordination
  - Better align departments, plan reviewers, and inspectors
  - Update clear checklists and upfront communication of requirements
  - Suggest a roadmap for applicants showing all the possible departments each project may need to be reviewed
- Train (in-house and third-party) reviewers consistently and hold them accountable for efficiency and accuracy
  - Reviewer should be able to change their comments quickly if it is determined that the answer is already included in the drawings
  - Reviewer comments resolved in person, on the phone, or in video meetings, should be marked correct in the subsequent review
  - Provide a customer service survey following permit approval/purchase
- Increase transparency: improve permit status tracking and require reviewer contact information
  - Create ability to sign up for notification emails when permit status is updated
- Staffing
  - Retention and recruitment – hire additional staff
  - Create a workflow pattern that supports each reviewer – some do better in the early morning hours, and some do more in the afternoon – allow people to set up their own workflow and it will empower them to work more efficiently
- Raise permitting fees and offer expedited reviews for an additional fee
- Continue with upgrading/modernizing permitting systems
- Consider outsourcing plan reviews to qualified firms
- Look to other cities for best practices

Overall, the feedback suggests HPC needs a more efficient, timely, transparent, and user-friendly permitting process.

Thanks for your consideration. I hope this information is helpful.

Sallie Alcorn  
Houston City Council Member, At-Large 5