



# City of Lawrence

PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES

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March 4, 2009

Bobbie Flory, Executive Director  
Lawrence Home Builders Association  
P.O. Box 3490  
Lawrence, KS 66046

Dear Bobbie:

Thank you for your July 10, 2008 letter identifying specific issues of concern regarding the operations of the Building Safety Division of Planning and Development Services to improve services in that division. Since receiving your letter we have been working on addressing the issues and reviewing various options for improving our processes. I know that Barry Walthall and Margene Swarts attend monthly meetings with you and other LHBA Board members in an effort to answer questions and exchange information regarding building construction in the community and I find this to be a valuable exchange of ideas.

Your recommendations were well received, as we value the input of all of our customers. You noted seven suggestions in your letter. The suggestions and the department's collective responses are detailed below. Responses are provided to keep the discussion on topics going and are not necessarily meant to be absolute verdicts on your recommendations.

*1. Improve the ability to communicate with inspectors. It is not unusual for an inspector's voice mailbox to be "full" and unavailable. Having cell phone numbers for each inspector would improve service by allowing questions to be answered more timely.*

Inspectors regularly check and return calls and emails as timely as possible. We recognize that there may be times when a voice mailbox will be full due to the inspector being in the field and unable to return phone calls. After consideration, it is our opinion that releasing inspector cell phone numbers to the public at large is not the optimum use of this communication tool for the inspectors. Inspectors' vehicles are in the process of being equipped with laptop computers. This will allow improved



documentation of inspection results and will also be the preferred avenue of inspector communication with contractors. This form of communication allows staff to respond as they are able, and with greater accuracy and detail. For instance, code questions can be researched prior to responding, resulting in quality responses and less need for call backs. We understand that not all contractors will have readily available internet access by which to email. In this case, inspectors will make every attempt to return phone calls at their earliest convenience.

*2. Reduce bureaucracy in the process. There is more paperwork required without a measurable gain. For example, requiring the mechanical calculations at the time of building permit application is premature, time consuming, and offers no improvement to the home.*

At this time the division and department continues to require the minimum documentation necessary to meet code requirements and regulations to issue building permits. We continue our efforts to fine tune and streamline the process but it must be acknowledged that proper planning is the key to well built construction. Good plans are necessary and our responsibility is to ensure that the plans are adequate to facilitate accurate plan review and subsequent construction.

Your example of the mechanical calculations was a specific code amendment and it was determined that such calculations are of most value at the time of building permit application.

*3. Building permit "turn around time" must be reduced.*

Building permit "turn around time" is directly connected with the receipt of complete building permit applications. When complete applications are received, there is typically little issue with completing the review within the five day target for residential applications. Since receiving your letter of July 2008, personnel adjustments have been made to increase plan review staff and efficiencies related to the plan review process have been implemented. DS has consistently met or has come very close to meeting our goal of reviewing residential permits within five days of receiving a complete application and has made progress in meeting our 15 day goal of reviewing commercial applications. For the five month period, September, 2008 through January, 2009, 142 of 148 residential applications, 96%, were reviewed within five days; and 93 permits of 148 residential applications, 63%, were issued within five days. As mentioned above, we continue to monitor the process and streamline where possible. We appreciate that the LHBA understands that submitting complete permit applications is most helpful in ensuring appropriate turn around times.

The tables below highlight our recent success in nearing or meeting our service level goals related to building permit turn around time.

<b>Commercial Permits September 2008 to January 2009</b>				
	<b>No. of permits issued</b>	<b>No. Issued within 15 days</b>	<b>No. Reviewed within 15 days</b>	<b>% Reviewed within 15 days</b>
September	8	5	6	75.00%
October	27	9	13	48.15%
November	15	10	13	86.67%
December	9	6	9	100.00%
January	3	1	3	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>71%</b>

<b>Residential Permits September 2008 to January 2009</b>				
	<b>No. of permits issued</b>	<b>No. Issued within 5 days</b>	<b>No. Reviewed within 5 days</b>	<b>% Reviewed within 5 days</b>
September	54	38	52	96.30%
October	29	20	29	100.00%
November	27	16	27	100.00%
December	22	13	18	85.71%
January	16	6	16	100.00%
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>96%</b>

*4. Builders would like to access information about their permits by a PIN number assigned to them in addition to the specific PIN number already assigned to each permit. Perhaps contractor license numbers can be the identifying number recognized by the system since everyone who pulls a permit has one.*

I appreciate this creative recommendation. Barry Walthall has researched this idea with Information Services and has discovered that a new feature is available that will allow contractors to set up their own master accounts to view and manage multiple permits. This will provide contractors access to all of the permits assigned to them at one time, thus eliminating the need to log in to each permit separately. We will provide more information about this feature as we work to implement it.

*5. We strongly support the contractor licensing program. However, there continues to be many small issues that have not been addressed. For example, licenses are not consistently mailed out and contractors are unsure of their status, continuing education dates are not promoted adequately, continuing education enrollment is confusing, and*

*requests for additional documentation from contractors is not always conveyed until a contractor inquires about their license approval.*

We appreciate the support for the contractor licensing program. DS staff is fully aware of the difficulties that were encountered in 2007 with contractor renewal. In preparation for 2008 renewals, staff worked with Johnson County Contractors Licensing to improve continuing education notification and enrollment. Outreach and education was provided to contractors regarding the process, staff implemented the use of post cards for notification regarding incomplete applications, and the process for verification of information was streamlined. Research indicates that roughly 12% of the renewals (150 of 1300 approximate) were returned needing additional information. Anecdotal information from contractors indicates that the process for 2008 was much improved. Staff will continue efforts to provide information as needed and license contractors in a timely manner. We are already beginning planning for next year's renewal process and welcome constructive comments concerning this past year's process.

*6. Scheduling inspections is not adequate in some instances. Builders would still like the option to speak to inspection staff when scheduling an inspection because there may be a question or special concern to mention.*

From our perspective, scheduling inspections is a separate issue from conferring with inspectors regarding a question or special concern. In an effort to reduce travel time and make more efficient use of inspectors' time, we have moved to the use of combination inspectors. Therefore, inspections are no longer keyed to individual inspectors and visiting with a particular inspector about an inspection prior to scheduling may not be the optimum solution for the contractor. Contractors are encouraged to email inspectors regarding code questions or issues. Also, the inspection hot line can be utilized to alert the appropriate inspector to check a hot line message related to the scheduled inspection. I believe this suggestion should receive continued discussion to see if other opportunities exist to address the matter – contractor training on using the hot line, for example.

*7. It is important that the inspection staff has a solid understanding of the building codes they are enforcing. Our qualified building staff lacks a "working" knowledge of the code. Consulting on a regular basis with other jurisdictions that have been enforcing the I-Codes for a longer period of time might be helpful rather than relying on independent judgments.*

We can all appreciate that the I-Codes are new to the city. All DS building inspection and plan review staff receive regular code education, both in-house and from outside sources. All of the inspection staff hold multiple code certifications and attend Johnson County Contractors Licensing education classes, as well as complete other continuing education opportunities. DS staff belongs to the Heart of America Chapter of ICC, the Johnson County Building Officials Association, and the International Association of

Electrical Inspectors. Staff interacts frequently with their counterparts in other inspection agencies and has offered their services to other communities after local disasters such as tornadoes, floods, etc. Additionally, three inspectors are registered for a program called the "Residential Inspection Institute" this spring in Kansas City, MO. This program is designed to provide education on effective and efficient residential building, mechanical, plumbing and electrical inspections in accordance with the 2006 International Residential Code. This is not only an opportunity for excellent training, but will also provide exposure to national experts as well as other area inspection agencies on an inspector level. We believe this program has great potential for our staff in improving consistency of inspections, as well as increasing the knowledge you speak about.

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to the LHBA concerns and I hope this begins to address your highest priority suggestions for improvement. DS staff is committed to continuing a good relationship with the LHBA, as well as providing a quality product and excellent customer service in plan review and inspection services. I look forward to discussing these issues with you at one of our upcoming monthly meetings.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott McCullough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Scott" being more prominent than the last name "McCullough".

Scott McCullough  
Director

cc: Margene Swarts  
Barry Walthall  
David Corliss