



Inspectional Services Department paper presented to the Basic City Services Working Group

INTRODUCTION

The Inspectional Services Department (ISD) is comprised of five regulatory divisions and exists to administer and enforce local building construction, repair, and maintenance regulations as defined by the state building code as well as enforce local zoning regulations. Its focus is on commercial and industrial buildings, housing, health sanitation, and safety regulations.

However, to make ISD as effective and efficient as possible, we must create a culture of service and problem solving that seeks to protect life and safety, the very purpose of the regulations and, therefore, ISD itself.

Today, ISD has a few bright spots, most of which are outstanding staff members. Most of the systems in place need adjustment to

Photo: Kit Pyne



perform as they should. There are various ways to move toward this goal and we have outlined some of those here.

THE PROCESS

This team was asked to review the overall experience of various constituencies that interact with ISD. In general terms, they are residents and homeowners, contractors, developers, and architects.

While each of these groups engage with ISD differently, their overall experience is typically one of frustration, a sense of inefficiency, and the general impression that employees are unhappy.

Mayor Martin J. Walsh's pledge to bring access, accountability, collaboration, and transparency to city government is especially applicable to ISD. Our team has developed some recommendations for the mayor, all of which address one or more of those goals.

The members of the ISD Working Group have appreciated this unique opportunity to take a fresh look at ISD, as well as the experiences of the people who work there and those it serves.

We hope the observations and recommendations contained in this document will begin a dialog that seeks to identify what is and isn't working at ISD. Our intention is to continuously improve the delivery of services and enforcement of standards that protect the life and safety of the people of Boston.

THE RECOMMENDATIONS

FOCUS 1: NAVIGATING ISD

When visitors enter 1010 Massachusetts Avenue, the building that houses ISD, the first person they encounter is a security guard. The confusion only grows from there as most people need to go past Counter 1 and start at Counter 2. This intimidating and counterintuitive experience at the entrance to the department continues throughout their visit.

This experience is mirrored in visits to the website, where there is plenty of excellent information, but no easy way to find it, and no contact person identified who can answer questions.

KEEP

The ISD Website: The ISD website has a great deal of helpful information, but needs to be improved to be more user friendly. There is also a bank of computers located at the agency allowing visitors to look up information or apply online. These computers are helpful and should be retained.

IMPLEMENT

Way finder: ISD should implement a “Wayfinder” system similar to that in a hospital, with color-coded lines on the floor to help people find the correct locations to address their particular concerns, such as “residential short-form (non-structural) permits” or “plan review,” etc.

Computer Monitors: We propose the installation of computer monitors throughout the public areas of the office. Members of the public will be able to scroll through pertinent information about fees, required documents, etc. We suggest the office assign a “facilitator” or “navigator” to approach people who seem unsure of where to go and to ask them, “How can I help you?” At least one such facilitator should be stationed near the bank of computers to assist visitors in navigating the online process. One of the monitors should scroll a short “orientation/welcome video” to familiarize visitors with the various divisions of the department.

Signage: Improve signage throughout the department to reduce confusion.

DREAM

Reorganize and redesign the website, adding

translation capability and graphics to help reduce language and literacy barriers, and reorganize the information to make it easier to find. Improve the online application process, adding a “live chat” option for visitors requiring assistance. Implement a process for securing permits in “satellite” locations, such as Little City Halls or public libraries.

FOCUS 2: PERMITTING PROCESSES

Current permit application, review, and approval processes are opaque and convoluted. Oftentimes, there are differing interpretations of the building code that, although they may be minor, trigger a secondary lengthy process at the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA).

Homeowners who seek simple, non-structural permits for residential properties interact with ISD less often and may need more support than a developer whose regular duties include ISD transactions. However, as Boston seeks to secure more new business development, it is reasonable to expect that unfamiliarity and potential language barriers will become increasingly challenging.

Once an application is submitted (with one exception being a short-form, non-structural permit that is usually granted the same day), there is no way to check on its status pending a decision. In cases where more than one agency

“touches” a project, such as Water and Sewer, the Health Division, Fire Department, et al., the applicant may not know how to secure or to sequence the requests for signoff, and has no way of knowing at which agency their application is currently “under review.” The difficulty of the process has created an incentive for workarounds. It can be easier and less costly for people to risk working without a permit than to submit to the process. The risk to life and safety this situation poses is of utmost concern, and the revenues never collected in permitting fees exacerbate enforcement difficulty by further limiting the city’s financial resources.

The process takes entirely too long, months in many cases, which loses the developers and the City of Boston money in the form of lost tax revenue, delays, and increased costs. Inordinate delays only serve to further incentivize the avoidance of the permitting system altogether.

KEEP

Fast Track program: Identify exceptionally effective staff and involve them in discussions about changes to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of processes.

IMPLEMENT

Checklists and Video Tutorials: Create simple guides for one- and two-family homes and small business (as defined by the Building Code) Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), with meetings to be held on Saturday mornings. Checklists exist on the ISD website for various types of projects. These lists lay out the documentation needed and are very helpful, but difficult to find. Improvements to the website should separate various types of permits and list documents and fees required to submit an

application. We must display the lists in a place that is easily found by a newcomer, since that is who will need to rely on them most.

Develop brief video tutorials for various types of permits, run them on a loop on ISD monitors, and post them to the website and on social media. Institute a “pre-screening” process to flag issues early, so that applicants have a better sense at the front end of the process of what to expect and how to address early concerns. Create an internal board to review code interpretation disputes to avoid triggering the ZBA process where possible. In cases where a variance is clearly needed or a dispute cannot be resolved at the agency level, the ZBA remains an available remedy.

DREAM

Tracking Software: Identify, secure, and implement a software solution to be used across all permitting agencies to process and track permit applications, including site plans and other supporting documents. With processes tracked from start to finish, timelines can be better estimated and planned for, useful data can be collected to evaluate performance, and customers can have some sense of the status of their applications.

FOCUS 3: MORALE/STAFF SATISFACTION

Morale at ISD has been historically and infamously low. Moreover, the computer system they have (Hansen) is used by



only a fraction of the staff and at varying levels of proficiency. The software itself does not track dates well, which is a critical element of any tracking software. Fiefdoms and an uneven culture require a significant shift in the way staff members are assigned, trained, and empowered.

KEEP

Human Resources: There are many dedicated and knowledgeable people working at the department and they represent its most valuable resource. We recommend inviting existing staff to participate in exercises designed to improve operations at ISD even as the Walsh administration begins to implement its goals and objectives.

IMPLEMENT

Training: A personnel training system that includes updates to regulations and codes as well as best practices and customer service training. Provide opportunities for cross training, both in the classroom and on-the-job to improve knowledge and relationships within the agency, creating skills redundancy within the department and ultimately, a better customer and staff experience. Small changes, like improvements to signage and asking staff to begin conversations by asking how they can help will begin to establish a culture of solution-seeking and service. The goal is to change the atmosphere of ISD to one that treats residents and businesses as customers to be courteously served and treats staff as knowledgeable and professional. Seek staff input on a regular basis and be open to constructive criticism.. It is especially crucial to get feedback from the staff most directly affected by changes in operations. Assign personnel to tasks or roles

based upon qualifications and personal areas of interest wherever possible. Identify and enforce minimum qualifications for jobs that impact life and safety.

DREAM

Implementation of a universal permitting/tracking system will facilitate communication and coordination among all permitting agencies to improve performance, deliver customer satisfaction, and reduce frustration among staff. A good system will also measure performance in meaningful ways, relying on positive outcomes rather than on apparent “busyness” to achieve benchmarks.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

- 1) Public art should be included in the development of all major projects.
- 2) Promoting public awareness of current health issues, environmental, programs available.
- 3) Review the Rental Re-inspection program to be sure its goals are correct and achievable. The review should be done with diverse set of stakeholders, including the tenant groups, community developers, and public health advocates.
- 4) Implement interdepartmental marketing of programs and procedures.
- 5) Organize the entire review process (throughout the city) to focus on customer satisfaction and public safety.