

This memo has been created in response to potential concerns regarding “backlog” or otherwise delays that may be perceived in the Building Department regarding permit issuance.

COVID-19 caused unprecedented changes to the construction industry, many effects of which are still unseen as we continue to move forward.

In mid march, 2020, the municipality made the decision, with guidance from the Province and Health Unit, to suspend normal operations of the Municipal Office by declaring a State of Emergency. As we prepared to wander into an unknown future regarding the severity of the spread of the coronavirus, various public information packets were distributed to advise our stakeholders of what changes they would need to expect and anticipate.

On March 18th, a memo was made public from the Building Department, outlining the suspension of building permit issuance and delays in other services as the Building Department was deemed a “non-essential” service, with the exception of emergency related powers due to building collapse. The tail end of this memo, a statement regarding delays was also published:

“It is anticipated that a significant backlog will occur when services resume to normal and we appreciate your patience while we respond to service requests.”

During the months of March and April, no non-essential permit applications were technically received, although some customers attempted to make application, all applicants were advised that they would need to hold their application until such time as the provincial restrictions were lifted. One permit for a restaurant was issued, and replacement sewage systems were also issued.

On May 19th, 2020, the provincial moratorium which has been in place for over two months was finally lifted, opening the “floodgates” of permit applications. However, the processing of applications was slow because many applications were piecemealed, missing information, not conforming to applicable law requirements etc. With staff working from home, it was difficult to correspond with customers, many of whom had high expectations of service being “back to normal”.

During March-June, I, like many others in our office and greater community had additional personal obligations hoisted upon me due to the pandemic. Being the primary person of expertise in the department, the bulk of the service requests needed to be answered by me with support from other staff members and other agencies. During the course of these months, I received a plethora of praise from ratepayers and contractors during our interactions, often thanking me for the speediness of replies, or the quality of the information received.

In July, my children were able to go to a fulltime home daycare, which afforded me the opportunity (when feasible with our safety plans) to return to the office on a quasi-fulltime basis. I continued to work through the backlog of applications, handling an unusually high volume of inquiries and building permit applications (given the circumstances). I found that many people wanted to pretend that things were back to normal, but in reality, it was and is, far from normal. While the Building Department staff continue to provide a high level of service to our customers, it has been brought to my attention there are a vocal few which have raised concern with members of Council about the level of service they have received.

In many of the circumstances brought to my attention, the individuals in question were submitting incomplete applications, often missing applicable law requirements, or even basics of sufficient information on their drawings. The number of permits that have been issued this year compared to the last two years is down, although the month of August we issued 21 building permits and 10 septic permits, which is about 60% higher than average. During the course of this year, the majority of the projects we have been involved in have been homeowner driven, which has caused a significant spike in service volume. I dislike the term "hand holding", but in reality, many of our applicants look to the Building Department for advice and information, far beyond our statutory duties or abilities. Due to the fact that we cannot give advice, it often takes repeat requests for the homeowner applicant to gather the answers to their questions, as they often don't know how to ask the correct question to get the answer they desire.

I am happy to say that as of the date of this report, we are completely free of permit applications, having issued all permits that can be issued. We presently have a queue of 2 permits, both of which have been responded to with requests for additional information.

When members of Council are presented with a customer, ratepayer, contractor or other stakeholder whom are representing that they have not been receiving adequate service, it would be suggested that the Council member relay to the Customer that they should follow traditional support channels (contact the Department Manager), and if they desire the elevate their service request, then the customer should contact the CAO. Members of Council should not attempt to liaise for the customer following direction under the Council/Staff relations policy, as this can cause confusion and create liability for the member of Council. It has been unfortunate that I have received some of this information from third parties who then reach out to me to provide them with more information regarding the nature of the situation. This causes unnecessary delays and confusion regarding the service request.

At no time during the course of this pandemic has the municipality ever been in breach of our statutory obligations regarding the timelines of issuing permits or conducting inspections and we continue to strive to provide exemplary service to all.

Recommendation:

That the Building Department-2020-08 Memo, dated September 3, 2020 regarding Building Department Update be received for information.