

Purpose & Background

On November 1, 2022, the City of Vancouver held an in-person Q & A information session related to permitting and licencing for small businesses. Key staff fielding questions included Andrea Law, General Manager of Development, Building and Licensing, Corrie Okell, Director of Permitting Services, and Sarah Hicks, Chief License Inspector. This document provides summary of the questions from the audience and the responses from City staff.

Q&A Summary

Audience Question: In the past, there has been a lot of frustration with permitting staff saying “yes” to something and the building staff saying “no”. Has the organizational structure changed to address this issue? Is the General Manager position now consolidated?

Staff response: Approximately two years ago, we reorganized and now the General Manager (Andrea Law) oversees building and permitting. We still have a Chief Building Official overseeing inspections and policy teams that we engage with as well. There are also two very different regulatory frameworks with separate zoning and building bylaws. To help people identify possible issues upfront, we created the Commercial Renovation Centre (CRC) in 2017.

Audience Question: We had this exact issue in Railtown with a conflict between permitting and building. Our project proposed creative manufacturing, which is a supported policy in the zoning, but building bylaw did not recognize creative manufacturing as a category, so did not treat it as such which created a blockage.

Staff response: The Commercial Renovation Centre is designed for those looking to open a business in Vancouver and understanding the information upfront before signing a lease or submitting an application. [We have a website dedicated to the centre.](#) Through [311 we have a web form](#) that triages the inquiries to the applicable staff to help you.

Audience Question: Patio permitting was great during COVID. How is this going to play out in the future with inclement weather requiring heating etc.?

Staff response: There is future work that needs to be done to provide weather protection while meeting safety standards and meeting the needs for outdoor space. Businesses have the opportunity to look at permanent patios currently. There are also opportunities for awnings. For the seasonal patios, you can shift 50% of your indoor capacity to outside.

Audience Follow-up: What about issues with neighbourhood plans where sidewalks are not wide enough but they could be in future? Is this is being considered?

Staff response: There was a report to Council that will need to be confirmed by the new Council to continue this work.

Audience Follow-up: We had very good feedback from the tourist side and it was very popular.

Staff response: We agree that the addition of patios has been very popular. It's also important to point out the patio seating can be on either public or private property which means that it is managed by two

different departments. We are trying to better align the requirements of the different departments.

Audience Question: Special events permits in the parks, Parks Board has told us we can no longer use the grass/space we have used every year since 1986. How do we address this issue?

Staff response: We are not familiar with the Park Board review criteria. We need to take this offline. Please follow up.

Audience Question: Submitting plans for change of use from microfiche was rejected as not original?

Staff response: Microfiche is not the original drawings just a copy. Probably needs to have the changes shown on the drawings i.e. of the scope of work. Not to scale can also be an issue for drawings from microfiche. We can follow up with you on the specifics.

Audience Question: Back in February, we learned that our project required electrical upgrades. BC Hydro finally provided drawings in October. They said each of the three designers who were responsible went on vacation consecutively. They have now passed it on to the City. The City has not given us a timeline. The work will only take 3 weeks. This is an issue as we now have a tenant waiting for the space and the unit has been vacant for 1.5 years.

Staff response: We have heard about these delays with BC Hydro. We can follow-up with the team on where the drawing is in the process. We need to work with Hydro on our processes.

Audience Follow-up: I have heard it goes through 40 different hands.

Staff response: For a house yes, but not for an electrical job.

Audience Follow-up: Certain businesses in West Broadway BIA are spending weeks waiting for a plumbing permit that takes 3 minutes to be inspected.

Audience Follow-up: The wait wastes time and money. The time to do the permits takes significantly longer than the actual work. You must be aware of how bad the problem is?

Staff response: Some requests appear simple but are not. We are working on quick wins, such as sending it straight to inspector (like a field review). Looking to expand this solution. We are not here to stop work. Our focus with the previous Council was streamlining low density housing. We are now looking at commercial applications and looking for direction from the incoming Council.

Audience Question: New mayor proposes using third-party sign-off and City checking at inspections. This would front-load the risk on the engineers and architects as the inspection would be the review.

Staff response: We have 400 employees trained to due regulatory review. There is opportunity with industry but architects do not usually want this work or they do not have the workload capacity. As a result, we get designers who may not know the regulations and we need to keep on top of their submissions. We are working very hard on automating permits to reduce the amount of staff time required.

Audience Question: What type of permits go through automated permitting?

Staff response: Mechanical, gas, and plumbing to start with. We are looking to add more to this and we are trialing and expanding. We are reviewing the low-density housing changes for impact and lessons. With renovations and tenant improvements, we are looking at what are the efficiencies and risks with industry assisting.

Audience Follow-up: Is there any alignment with industry with the automation?

Staff response: Not at this time. Electronic plan submissions will be 99% in effect for the end of this year. This will cut down on review time.

Audience Question: The system should be able to show the different professionals' input so plan checker time is not wasted. I.e. rely on the professionals to review.

Staff response: 1.5 years ago, we had a company come and look at our process for sprinklers and removing some of the checking from the plan reviewers. Often we have submissions that meet the sprinkler guidelines but don't meet the building code.

Audience Follow-up: Consider penalizing those who keep making mistakes as an incentive to provide better review applications.

Staff response: With our electronic plans submission, it already processes faster for those that meet the requirements. We do regulate our professions who do not comply with our regulations. Mistakes can be Vancouver code specific mistakes, but there is a program for repeat offenders.

Audience Follow-up: Pre-submission assistance is already available and very effective.

Audience Follow-up: How do we do that?

Staff response: Through the [commercial renovation centre](#).

Audience Question: Business licence triggered a "change of use" for us, but we have no renovations. The owner's plans and the City's plans are not up-to-date.

Staff response: Previous work without permits is probably the issue. You do not need to hire an architect. A drafting student could do drawings. A change of use under the zoning is what triggered the requirement.

Audience Follow-up: We want to do this the right way.

Staff response: We recommend reaching out to the [Commercial Renovation Centre](#).

Audience Question: I have had this issue before with a tenant leaving a place in terrible condition. I was told that a hand drawn sketch was not enough without an engineer sign-off. City eventually allowed it.

Staff response: We are trying to bring more consistency to the process. Especially with commercial renovations which are some of the most complicated in the City of Vancouver.

Audience Question: I have bakery in a commissary kitchen and want to move into a space that is a grocery store and share the space. The real estate agent can't say yes or no. What are the guidelines? How do I start? Is this possible?

Staff response: We do have models for shared space. Start with the zoning. Does the zoning allow this? You can book an appointment with permitting customer service. 311 also works as an option to contact us. We can follow up

Audience Question: One of our projects took 13 weeks even though we hired a permit expeditor to get it to 7-8 weeks.

Staff response: Scope of work effects this timeline as complexity adds to time.

Audience Follow-up: Is there anything on our end to get it through faster?

Staff response: We talked to [BOMA](#) about how they could get applications through faster. Complete applications are the fastest processed.

Audience Follow-up: Review prior to submitting, is that the right approach?

Staff response: Frequent applicants maybe do not need it, but even if your business model might be the same the buildings can all be different.

Audience Question: If you have a retail store, and you want to find a space, it would be best to find a space that already allows the same use. How can we help our members find the correct space for the shortest permitting process?

Staff response: This was the premise for the [Commercial Renovation Centre](#). We wanted to let people check what they would need for different spaces. A big issue is people leasing space before checking to see if the intended use is permitted, or the level of complexity to renovate a space. There is also competition for good spaces. Due diligence is key to finding the right space. Do not sign a lease until you know the space can be used for your intended business model. We do have business licence data on the City's website. If you go from retail to retail the process should be faster.

Audience Follow-up: It is key to work with a good commercial real estate agent. Other agents may say go ahead.

Audience Follow-up: There is an option for conditional leases pending City approval.

Audience Follow-up: Should warn members about realtors who do not know what they are doing in the commercial space.

Staff response: As there is no separate licence for residential and commercial real estate agents, you can have agents with little or no experience handling commercial leases. Tenants reach out to the City all the time. [311](#) or online submission form.

Audience Question: What if a realtor says you need a change of use? I want to know more about this. If it is a low impact change of use is this faster?

Staff response: Zoning is the starting point, but you also have check for changes in occupancy which may require changes to the building. There is no one size fits all. Age of building, existing use, there are a lot of variables that can have an impact. Council recently approved regulatory amendments that make the change between the following uses possible, without the need for a change of use permit: General Office, Retail Store, Health Care Office, Barber Shop or Beauty Salon, and Beauty and Wellness Centre. ([related report here](#))

Audience Follow-up: If someone is taking out lease, can they ask for a timeline for the change of use permit process?

Staff response: If it is a comparable use, it will be faster. We can't tell you how long it will take until we see the proposal. We need to see what is triggered under the bylaw.

Audience Question: The West End is all restaurants these days. If the City of Vancouver allows another business in these spaces we need to allow some diversity. Is there anyway to get more diversity in the businesses?

Staff response: What neighbourhoods want to see is market-based. We provide tools to BIAs, property owners and other stakeholders to help them to think about neighbourhood retail mix and business attraction strategies.. The City's annual [Storefronts Report](#) provides information on the retail mix for each BIA. (*individual BIA profiles will be published in December*)

Audience Follow-up: Also, some areas might actually want to have a concentration of certain business types e.g. art galleries.

Audience Question: What do you mean by "don't sign a lease until you know you can do your plan"?

Staff response: This means check that the regulations allow you to do this before signing.

Audience Question: Outright uses vs conditional uses, how do I know if my business activity is going be allowed as a conditional use.

Staff response: Outright uses are the intended uses of a zone. Conditional uses are looked at on a case by case basis and may require neighbourhood notification. There is no way to know if it will be accepted until it is reviewed. Could also have building code issues.

Audience Question: Why did the City of Vancouver not allow the shipping container patios?

Staff response: Not sure. We would need to follow up to answer.

Audience Question: How do we get expedited building permits?

Staff response: It depends on each application. We do expedite when council provides direction. Everything is urgent.

Audience Question: Are there any new areas of licencing upcoming?

Staff response: It is usually businesses that bring us the new ideas. We are looking at restaurants becoming liquor primary in the evening. More business are looking for industrial and manufacturing spaces for new technology. We have received a lot of questions around this.

Audience Follow-up: Work from Home. Is that changing?

Staff response: Planning department is looking at how and where we can address Home-based businesses.

Audience Follow-up: We may start seeing people doing more work-live set-ups. Ground level retail and living in the back.

Staff response: We do have home-based business licences for contractors using homes for office but doing work elsewhere. We are always looking at emerging businesses. The shared space conversation comes up a lot. We have been looking into flexibility in industrial spaces but there are lots of challenges with building code. E.g., childcare next to a distillery.

Audience Question: Is the City being more proactive with the BIAs as both the regulator and BIA promotion? Bringing businesses in so that the advocacy and regulation can avoid butting heads.

Staff response: We are looking at reimagining the Help Centre when reopening, such as having all departments represented together. Another idea is having a tenant improvement day focusing on TI. We are looking to offer services at different times and days to be more accessible. Going to the neighbourhoods is important too. We are open to attending BIA meetings in the neighbourhood.

Audience Question: Ideas for improving wait times: could the City expand scope of field reviews?

Staff response: Yes. We are looking at what work is repeatable. It also depends on the inspectors comfort, training, and ability.

Audience Follow-up: If an inspector does not feel comfortable are we cancelled and wait?

Staff response: we are working on this initiative to expand the scope for field review to be more consistent and targeted.

Audience Question: Are the five interchangeable uses citywide?

Staff response: they are for commercial areas, e.g. C-2.

Audience Question: thank you for explaining the complexity of the process.

Staff response: we are focused on the customer journey and improving that journey. We are acutely aware of how complex.

Audience Question: Re: communication, there should be an up-to-date contact info.

Staff response: This is changing. With e-plan you will be notified who your contact is. You will get a number and a contact assigned with estimate review time. We know previously there was no initial

update after submission.

Audience Question: When is E-Plan being implemented?

Staff response: End of the year.. A single contact point is part of the digital experience and you will be able to track where your application is by logging in.

Audience Follow-up: how will the updates be communicated?

Staff response: We will be sharing our updates once everything is ready.