

King County Auditor's Office

KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

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King County Permitting Needs Customer-Focused Approach and Reliable Data to Drive Improvement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Permitting Division in the Department of Local Services does not use a consistent approach to measure outcomes and drive process improvement, reducing predictability and efficiency for customers. Staff are aware of some operational issues and customer pain points. Although permit review timelines are likely aligned with Washington state requirements, data limitations and inconsistent tracking practices make it difficult to know whether reported timelines are complete, accurate, and reflect the full customer experience across all permitting stages. This limits the division's ability to provide clear, customer-focused services. Permitting does not have a formal, coordinated process to identify and document business requirements for an information technology system replacement, creating risk that expensive technology investments will not address current operational problems and will overlook customer experience. We make recommendations to better understand customer and staff informational needs, provide greater procedural consistency and clarity, and develop an effective information technology strategy.



Acknowledgment

The Permitting Division (Permitting) of the Department of Local Services has made a number of positive changes in the last several years to improve permit processing and enhance customer service. Permitting has expanded the amount of in-person support it provides permit applicants at its Renton location to four days a week, with technical staff available one day a week. It has also created a number of FAQ videos to help describe different permit review steps for customers. Additionally, in May 2026, Permitting launched a permit timeline tracking tool that provides visibility for customers about average processing times for certain review phases.

During the time of this audit, Permitting indicates that it has undergone a reduction in staff and is proposing eliminating positions equal to almost 15 percent of its current full-time equivalent count. Additionally, the division is undergoing leadership changes and indicates that it has implemented periodic data reviews to identify inaccuracies and reduce weaknesses in the current system. We would like to acknowledge these positive steps and the cooperation we received from the Permitting staff throughout our audit.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

What We Found

While available information suggests the Permitting Division (Permitting) is likely meeting state permit review timeline requirements for most permits, data reliability and system limitations make it difficult to fully assess its compliance and calculate overall permitting timelines. Fragmented systems and unreliable data also limit Permitting's ability to effectively manage operations and improve customer service. Permitting does not have a formal, coordinated process to identify and document business requirements for a permitting information technology system replacement, creating risk that expensive technology investments will not address current operational problems and will ignore customer experience.

Although permitting is a highly visible public-facing service, the division has not established a complete customer service strategy to understand and respond to applicant needs. As a result, Permitting lacks reliable information about applicant experience and states that insufficient resources have limited its ability to identify and address pain points in the permitting process. Both permit applicants and Permitting staff reported frustrations navigating the process, pointing out opportunities to improve communication, guidance, and service delivery. These issues may reduce process efficiency, discourage participation in the permitting process, and increase the risk that development occurs without required permits

What We Recommend

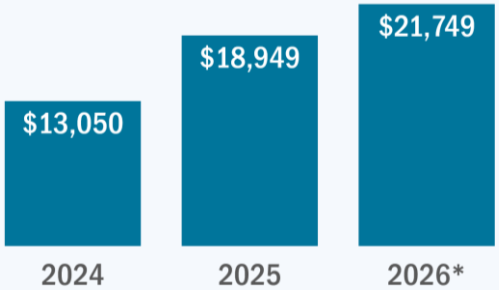
We recommend Permitting establish a customer-centered approach to service delivery by defining customer service goals, performance measures, and processes for gathering and using customer feedback. We also recommend Permitting define and document its business needs before selecting or implementing a new permitting system and improve customer-facing information and guidance for navigating the permitting process. Without these changes, Permitting risks letting inefficiencies and customer dissatisfaction persist.

Why This Audit Is Important

Efficient permit processing is central in regional efforts addressing housing supply, affordability, and economic development. King County Permitting is one of the primary points of contact between King County and the public, making its operations highly visible and impactful. When permitting processes are inconsistent, unclear, or slow, they delay timelines, leading to increased costs for developers and homeowners. Lengthy or unpredictable permit timelines discourage smaller developers and community-based builders from participating in the diversity of housing options.

Permit fees have increased by nearly 67 percent since 2024. As permit fees rise, it becomes of even greater importance for Permitting to ensure customers receive efficient, transparent, and high-quality service in return for what they pay.

Permit fees have increased since 2024.



*Includes a new $126 screening fee.

Note: Graphic represents permit application review fees for a new 3,600-square-foot single family home.

Source: King County Permitting; King County Auditor's Office review of permit fee increases



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Section 1: Permits Q&A

SECTION SUMMARY

The Department of Local Services Permitting Division (Permitting) administers a complex permitting process involving multiple permit types, regulatory requirements, parallel permitting review processes, and participating agencies. The division reviews and issues permits for development and other regulated activities throughout unincorporated King County. This section provides background on Permitting's responsibilities, funding, review timelines, and the factors that shape how the division reviews and issues permits.

When is a permit required?

Permits are often required when a person constructs or alters structures (buildings) or makes property changes. New buildings or changes to existing buildings can require a building permit. In addition, installing or replacing major mechanical systems like fireplaces or furnaces can require a mechanical permit. Property changes like grading or filling can require a land use permit. And some activities require a special event or temporary use permit. King County reviews and issues permits for development and other regulated activities for unincorporated King County.

Permit requirements commonly overlap. For example, constructing a new home includes land use permit requirements (where the home can be built on a property and how large the home can be), along with building permit requirements (the home's size and code requirements for systems like plumbing and electrical services), and mechanical permit requirements. Because meeting these requirements requires advance review and approval, permits are required before work begins.

What defines permit requirements?

Permit requirements are set in King County Code, Washington state law, and sometimes federal regulations. The Permitting Division performs permit review and approval for unincorporated King County. What specific requirements apply (regulations and policies) inherently depend on the type and location of the project, its environmental conditions, and the project's potential impacts.

A key element of land use requirements is "critical areas." Critical areas are environmental factors that apply to properties and define their permit requirements. For example, a property near a wetland or stream faces regulations protecting these ecosystems; a property on a steep slope has requirements that apply to prevent landslides. Critical areas often require evaluations by biologists, geologists, or other experts relative to the project's location and circumstances.

Are all King County permit requirements approved by the Permitting Division?

No. Permitting is not the only county function responsible for reviewing and approving different permit requirements. For example, Public Health – Seattle & King County approves septic systems and swimming pools, while the Water and Land Resources Division of the Department of Natural Resources and Parks approves elements for some critical areas and floodplains. The Facilities Management Division under the Department of Executive Services also issues Road Right-of-Way Construction permits. These reviews and approvals can directly relate to Permitting's requirements; for example, the permit process for a new home with a septic system requires the applicant to first obtain approval for that system from Public Health.

Are there required timelines for permit processing and review?

Senate Bill 5290 (SB5290) passed by the Washington State Legislature in 2023 requires local governments to meet permit review timelines for specific types of projects or face possible penalties. The timelines apply to permit applications started on or after January 1, 2025. The timelines allow local governments 65, 100, or 170 days to review and approve the project's permits. The extended deadlines are for projects that require public notice or hearing examiner review. Changes to King

County Code in late 2024 incorporated these timelines into county permitting processes.

How is the Permitting Division's work funded?

Permitting's work is paid for by fees charged based on the permit. This means Permitting depends on permit applications and reviews for its funding, and the resources available to do the work is affected by changes in permit application volumes. Permitting staff told us that its fee-for-service model limits the customer service and data improvements they can undertake and that any new initiative in these or other areas would necessarily translate into increased permit fees for customers.

How much does the Permitting Division charge for different permits?

Permitting charges a variety of fees throughout the application process, and fees vary by permit type. Review and inspection fees will vary depending on what type of permit is being issued. For example, Permitting reported that the 2026 cost of permit application reviews for building a new 3,600-square-foot home would cost $21,749, which includes a new additional screening fee. Starting in 2026, Permitting added a new screening fee of $126 for all applicants. A full list of fees can be found on the King County Permitting website.



Section 2: Fragmented Systems and Unreliable Data Limit Ability to Improve Customer Service

SECTION SUMMARY

Available information suggests the Permitting Division is likely meeting state permit review timelines. However, fragmented information systems and unreliable data limit Permitting's ability to fully understand its performance and improve customer experiences. Data limitations prevent Permitting from comprehensively monitoring permit processing, identifying operational inefficiencies, and evaluating applicants' experiences throughout the permitting process. In addition, Permitting has not followed important information technology (IT) planning practices that would help ensure a replacement permitting system addresses operational and customer needs, increasing the risk that Permitting's significant investments in technology will not resolve the existing problems. Together, these weaknesses reduce Permitting's ability to oversee operations, make informed decisions, and improve service delivery.

Data issues limit permit timeliness analysis

Available data suggests that Permitting is likely meeting state timeline requirements for most permits. However, fragmented information systems and unreliable data limit its ability to accurately measure performance. Starting January 1, 2025, state law required King County to process applications within specific timelines or potentially be responsible for financial penalties for noncompliance.[1] State law also set the compliance threshold for the timelines to half of permit applications for jurisdictions that adopt three permit streamlining measures in order to avoid paying penalties. In response, Permitting implemented three measures to streamline processing timelines and implemented changes intended to improve its ability to track and manage permit review timelines. Permitting acquired a new data system, Avolve ProjectDox (APD), to track permit review "clock time" — the amount of time an application spends in the review process, excluding periods when the applicant is responding to requests for additional information — as

[1] Timeline requirements range from 65, 100, and 170 days depending on the type of permit application and review factors.

required by state law.[2] Prior to implementing APD, Permitting did not have a data system to track permit review milestones and clock time.

We analyzed Permitting's available data and found problems with data quality and completeness. This means that Permitting's data cannot produce results that we can confidently report. That said, using very conservative modeling scenarios of the available data — and because state law requires Permitting meet compliance for only half of permit applications in order to avoid paying penalties — we can state that Permitting is likely meeting the timeline requirements set in state law for most permits. The following findings explain the data limitations that reduce the reliability of reported permit performance.

Fragmented IT systems limit reliability of resulting data

Fragmented permit IT systems reduce data reliability and require manual reconciliation. Permitting currently relies on multiple systems to manage permit review timelines and application status information, as shown in exhibit A. During the audit, we worked to identify, interpret, reconcile, and connect permit data needed to conduct clock-time analysis for about 2,200 permit records. This effort required engaging with five different Permitting staff and illustrated the complexity and inefficiency of working with multiple systems. Despite introducing the APD system to track permit review clock times, Permitting did not transition all its permit projects into that system and still tracks some permits separately using two Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. We observed instances where Permitting staff entered hard-coded values in place of formulas within spreadsheet permit trackers, increasing the risk of inaccurate calculations and inconsistent reporting.

> *"We have multiple permitting systems, and they do not integrate together; everything has to be manually uploaded and updated so there is a lot of room for errors, which occur frequently."*
>
> —King County Permitting Staff

Government agencies should maintain information systems that enable them to monitor compliance with applicable laws and policies and support transparent reporting and accountability. When systems do not connect or communicate with each other efficiently, it increases the risk of inaccuracy, contributes to inefficiencies, and makes oversight difficult.

[2] Recent amendments to RCW 36.70b.070 will likely require King County to revise how it calculates permit review clock time. As a result, reported review times may increase because activities previously excluded from the state review timeline may now need to be included.

EXHIBIT A: Permitting manages review timeline data across multiple systems.



MyBuilding Permit

Public-facing application portal used by applicants



Avovle ProjectDOx (APD)

Tracks projects subject to state permit review clock requirements



Accela

System of record for permit applications that pass initial intake



Microsoft Excel Trackers

Used to separately track subsets of permit applications not managed within APD

Source: King County Auditor's Office

Incomplete data limits monitoring

Permitting does not capture all the data needed to comprehensively monitor its permit review performance and compliance, potentially understating processing time. While Permitting tracks certain milestones, it does not consistently capture timestamps for all stages of the permit review process. As a result, Permitting cannot fully measure processing times or produce complete reports on permit performance. Instead, Permitting assumes certain review activities occur concurrently, creating a risk that reported review times understate actual processing time. This also limits both Permitting and our ability to evaluate permit review activities across the entire permitting life cycle.

Limited documentation contributes to reliability concerns

Permitting lacks documented, constant definitions of data fields and data elements mapped across its permit tracking systems, reducing data consistency and reliability. Staff we spoke with did not consistently understand or agree on the meaning of certain data fields, terminology, or how to interpret specific permit milestones for analysis purposes. In some instances, we received different answers to the same data questions depending on the staff consulted. In addition, key data fields associated with permit status and completion do not consistently represent the same process milestones across permit types. These data quality issues stem in part from Permitting not clearly defining, documenting, and standardizing what data staff should record and how to interpret key permit milestones. According to Permitting, complexity in IT systems and processes contribute to these data quality issues. Lastly, because Permitting lacks documented and standardized definitions for data fields

and elements, and data mapping between systems, staff must rely on their individual knowledge to reconcile data, increasing the risk of inconsistent reporting and errors.

Recommendation 1

The Permitting Division should document definitions for the data elements and data fields in its information technology systems and ensure staff use them consistently across systems.

Staff and customers pointed to data systems as a barrier

Permitting staff and customers consistently identified the permitting data system as a barrier to efficient operations and effective permit management.

> *"[Data systems] are trash duct taped together."*
>
> —King County Permitting Staff

In a survey we conducted of Permitting staff, 21 of 32 respondents confirmed that Permitting's software is not easy to use or efficient, and nearly half of respondents said that permit data is not accurate or reliable.[3] Permitting leadership acknowledged the limitations of their current data systems, saying that, for example, they were focused on timeline requirements not the customer experience when acquiring APD. In our other survey of permit customers — both prior and current applicants — respondents echoed similar frustrations, pointing out that data systems were one of the biggest barriers in navigating the permitting process. For example, customers must upload documents in two different systems, duplicating efforts and raising frustration.

> *"[The most challenging part is] formatting submission documents that would be accepted into the Byzantine technology King County has chosen to utilize.*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

Though Permitting acknowledges issues exist, it has not yet developed a list of these issues or a strategy for resolving them.

[3] Although 36 individuals took our staff survey, not all individuals answered every question. We calculated percentages using the number of individuals who responded to the relevant question.

No formal documentation of IT system requirements

Widespread concerns about data systems could be addressed by a new IT system procurement; however, Permitting has not yet engaged experts in acquiring IT systems nor followed best practices for system acquisition. This means that expensive IT investments by Permitting may not address current operational problems or improve customer experiences. In its 2026–27 budget, the King County Council authorized Permitting to collect a 3.5 percent surcharge on permit applicants to fund a replacement IT system.[4] As of June 2026, Permitting has collected about $290,000 in this IT replacement fund. Permitting leadership has conducted interviews with software vendors to understand the capabilities of currently available systems and staff have provided feedback following vendor demonstrations. However, Permitting has not yet followed system procurement best practices. For example, it has not developed a cost estimate, defined system requirements, or completed a formal needs assessment to determine the capabilities required of a new system. In addition, Permitting has not identified customer experience requirements or documented how it will incorporate customer needs into system selection and implementation despite widespread concerns from both customers and staff. Instead, Permitting met with vendors without first documenting and prioritizing its data requirements, despite King County Information Technology (KCIT) recommending that agencies identify and prioritize data needs before engaging vendors. KCIT can provide guidance and support to agencies acquiring new data systems and strongly recommends that agencies use these resources, but Permitting is not currently working with staff from KCIT regarding a new IT system though they have worked with KCIT on other projects such as piloting artificial intelligence usage.

[4] Ordinance 20021

Previous IT procurement did not address customer needs

In acquiring the APD IT system to support compliance with state requirements, Permitting acknowledged it was focused on timeline requirements and not the customer experience. As a result, Permitting has invested in technology that does not address current operational challenges or improve the customer's experience.

> *"The new software was a pain. Links were broken; instructions were inadequate. Was the most horrible permit application I have had in over 40 yrs [sic] of doing them."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

This is particularly concerning given that APD — the system acquired to support compliance with state permit review timelines — still does not provide all information needed to efficiently conduct clock-time analysis. It appears that Permitting selected a technology system that does not fully support its key needs.

Without clearly defining operational and compliance needs and conducting a coordinated implementation strategy, Permitting risks again acquiring a system that does not adequately support compliance tracking or review operations. Best practice emphasizes that business requirements should drive technology solutions rather than selecting solutions before clearly defining operational needs. KCIT provides guidance to King County agencies acquiring a new data system. Its guidance includes defining clear business goals and business limitations (see appendix 2).

Peer counties documented system requirements for IT procurement

Peer counties said that they had a difficult time making their technology work well; one described addressing issues through structured efforts to identify systems requirements that incorporated staff feedback and customer needs. For example, Kitsap County developed a comprehensive inventory of customer and business needs as a part of its request for proposals for a new permitting system (see exhibit B). Kitsap County officials reported using a collaborative process that engaged staff in identifying priorities and functional requirements. This approach may better position Kitsap County to procure a system that supports staff workflows, customer needs, and key business processes.

EXHIBIT B: Kitsap County conducted a comprehensive needs assessment to include in its requests for proposal for a replacement permitting data system.

Scalable licensing for future growth	Cost Considerations
Transparent pricing model (licensing, hosting, support)	Cost Considerations
A training environment to test new configurations, etc	Data & Integration
Integrated document management (upload, versioning, access control)	Data & Integration
Parcel tag migration.	Data & Integration
Parent/child parcel connection	Data & Integration
Support for third-party payment processing	Data & Integration
Ability to add Excel spread sheets into an info request	Data & Integration
Ability to display parcel data, zoning, and overlays within the permit record	Data & Integration
Connection to Code Publishing service	Data & Integration
Connection to other jurisdictions/junior districts/state level departments.	Data & Integration
GIS integration with county mapping systems	Data & Integration
Integration with state or federal systems if applicable	Data & Integration
Location-based permit validation and routing	Data & Integration
Inspector workload capacity connection to HR software (workday)	Data & Integration
Ability to automate scheduling of recurring inspections	Functional Requirement
Ability to designate multiple primary contacts	Functional Requirement
Ability to establish an inspection hierarchy that prevents certain inspections being scheduled prior to approval of a preceding inspection	Functional Requirement
Internal messaging or comment threads on permit records	User Experience
Notifications to applicant (cancelled, approved, disapproved, etc.)	User Experience
Real-time metrics for performance tracking (e.g., permit turnaround time, inspection volume)	User Experience
Role-based access and dashboards for staff, supervisors, and administrators	User Experience
SMS Text Communication in addition to email.	User Experience
Ease of use for multiple devices throughout the day	User Experience
Dictation of notes while inspecting	User Experience
Clear path for applicants to choose the correct permit type for their project	User Experience
Ability for customers to view status of their project	User Experience
Ability for customers to keep track of which revisions are needed to move forward with the project	User Experience
Ability for customers to receive email/portal notifications about status changes	User Experience
Mobile-friendly access to the site	User Experience
Real-time estimated review times	User Experience
Ability for customers to edit information themselves during set times of the process	User Experience
Only documents of specific file type/format accepted (PDF only)	User Experience
Ability for customers to preview applications without having to create an application	User Experience
Ability for customer to withdraw permit themselves	User Experience
Ability for customer to submit refund request	User Experience
Ability for customer to submit extension/reactivation request themselves	User Experience

Detailed list shows thorough consideration of user needs, process, and experience.

Source: Kitsap County Department of Community Development annotated by the King County Auditor's Office

Recommendation 2

The Permitting Division should work with King County Information Technology to ensure that information technology system acquisition best practices, including documentation of business processes, user needs, and functional requirements, are incorporated into any future information technology system procurement.



Section 3: Focus on Customer Experience is Needed

SECTION SUMMARY

King County's permit process is not customer centered, resulting in inefficiencies and dissatisfaction for both applicants and staff, potentially reducing participation in the permitting process and increasing unpermitted development. The King County Executive has prioritized goals of expanding housing and delivering more transparent, efficient, and accountable government, underscoring the importance of customer service. However, Permitting does not center its customer experience around the permit application and review process. As a result, Permitting lacks reliable insight into the experience of its customers and has limited ability to identify and address pain points in the permitting process. Both customers and Permitting staff reported frustrations navigating the process, indicating opportunities to improve communication, guidance, and service delivery. These issues may reduce process efficiency, discourage participation in the permitting process, and increase the risk that development occurs without required permits. We recommend a systematic approach to understanding, evaluating, and responding to permit applicant needs, as well as setting and measuring Permitting's performance against its customer service goals.

Understanding customer experience is central to Permitting's effectiveness

Providing high-quality customer service is critical to an effective permitting process. Delivering excellent customer service requires a multi-faceted strategy. High-performing permitting agencies focus on understanding customer needs and designing their permit application and review processes around those needs. While Permitting has recently taken steps to improve customer experience, it lacks several elements of a customer-focused service model. Specifically, this section examines whether the division has:

- mapped the customer journey[5] to identify pain points, bottlenecks, and opportunities to improve customer experience
- established clear customer service goals and performance measures
- equipped staff with guidance, training, and tools needed to deliver excellent customer service

[5] A customer journey consists of the entirety of steps a customer takes through their engagement with a service. A customer journey map is a visual representation of those steps from the customer perspective.

- collected and used customer feedback to improve services
- provided customers with accessible, user-centered information through its website.

These elements combine into an intentional customer experience strategy that is responsive to customer needs, reduces unnecessary delay and expense, and increases efficiency. In the rest of this section, we identify gaps in customer service elements, the negative impacts, and make recommendations to address them.

Customers dissatisfied with Permitting's process

King County permit applicants expressed overall dissatisfaction with King County's permitting process. We surveyed almost 2,900 King County permit applicants and received 370 responses (about a 12.7 percent response rate). Survey respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the current permitting process and highlighted specific barriers they experienced as they worked to complete permit applications. For example, 73 percent of respondents found initiating the permit process to be somewhat or extremely difficult, and 58 percent said the information needed to begin the application process was not easy to find. Customer responses and their comments — included throughout this section and in appendix 1 — indicate general dissatisfaction with King County's permit process.[6]

> *"Not all items are asked for as part of the initial submission. Additional items are asked for one at a time, dragging out the process. Ask for everything you want in the first place."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

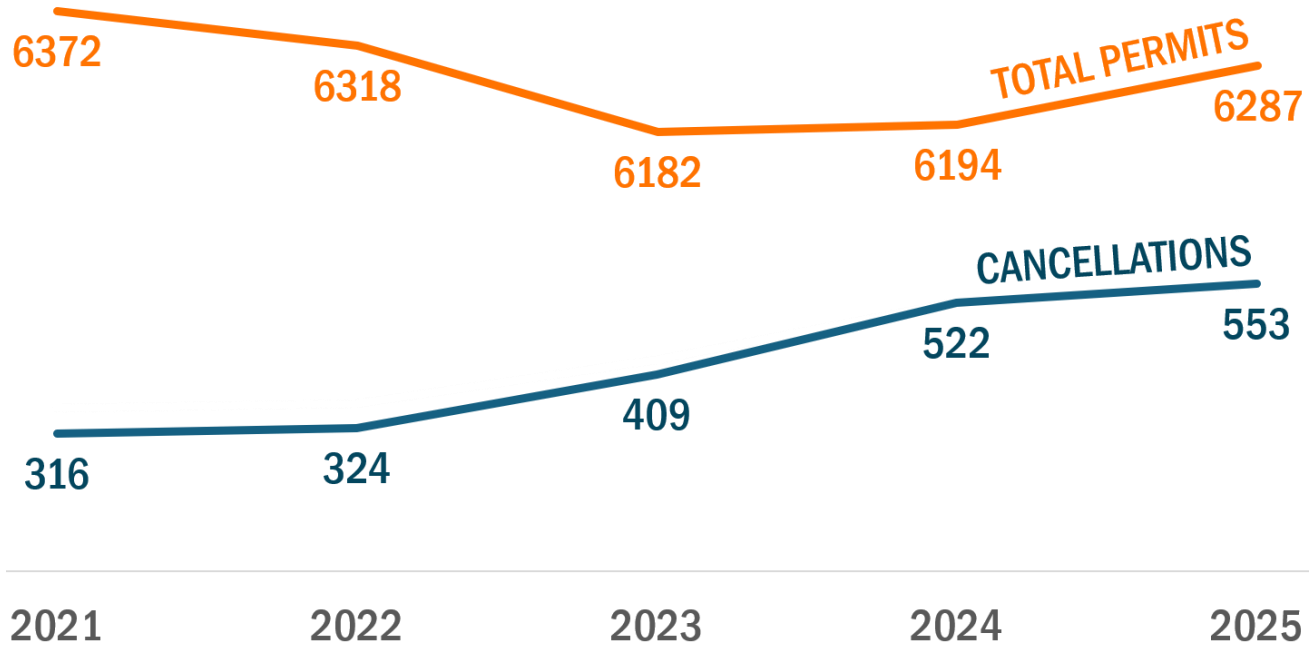
[6] Summaries of the survey questions and responses are provided in appendix 1. Note that the survey methodology focused on identifying potential areas for improvement, not a comprehensive measure of customer satisfaction. Ongoing customer feedback methods (as discussed in this section) could include questions measuring positive customer experience.

Low customer satisfaction could create environmental and safety risks

Applicant frustration with the permitting process could lead to lower participation, in turn creating environmental and safety risks and reducing funding for the Permitting Division. Although permits are a legal requirement, compliance depends on applicants engaging in the process. If the process is arduous, residents may decide to run the risk of completing the project without Permitting's review. This, in turn, can create environmental and safety risks, and increase the code enforcement workload. Non-participation also directly impacts Permitting's fee-for-service based funding model. Of concern, the rate of canceled and abandoned King County permit applications reported to us by Permitting increased by 75 percent since 2021, while the fee for obtaining permits increased by almost 70 percent since 2024. Low customer satisfaction may also result in people voluntarily choosing not to do projects, which may run counter to the County Executive's goal of building more housing.

> *"The more permitting costs in time, frustration, and money, the less likely people are to apply. The goal should be to regulate, not to find or create roadblocks."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

EXHIBIT C: Permitting data shows cancellations increasing despite relatively stable permit volumes since 2021.



Source: King County Auditor's Office visualization of Permitting Division Accela system data

Mapping processes from the customer perspective help reveal barriers

Permitting has not mapped out how applicants move through the permitting process, limiting its awareness of informational gaps, workflow barriers, and causes of applicant and staff confusion. As customers, permit applicants must navigate complex technical requirements, provide extensive documentation, and coordinate with multiple reviewers. Different permit types have different application pathways, review requirements, and IT systems. At the same time, applicants can incur large financial costs for consultant work supporting the permit, in addition to the cost of the permit itself. They rely on the Permitting Division for clear guidance and predictable processes to minimize the risks of unnecessary additional costs or delays. Customers report that they are frustrated when information is unclear, instructions are inconsistent, and requirements feel arbitrary and unpredictable.

Mapping the customer journey is an essential customer experience best practice to identify and address roadblocks. Customer journey mapping involves visually diagramming the exact steps and touchpoints that the customer must go through to reach their intended outcome. For Permitting, this means diagramming each action that an applicant must take through the entire permit application and review process. Customer journey mapping provides multiple benefits: it gives a visual framework for understanding applicants' needs through each step of the process, revealing their informational needs and expectations; it helps expose bottlenecks and pain points for applicants and staff, providing focus areas for future improvement; it also links the different types of interactions applicants have throughout the permit process — the website, IT systems, and staff communications. Because Permitting does not have a customer journey map it is more difficult for it to identify, understand, and resolve the drivers of applicant dissatisfaction and frustration.

Survey comments indicated frustration with elements of Permitting's processes

Applicants indicated they were frustrated with permitting process roadblocks. Issues we heard mentioned elements of the permitting process. For example:

- Customers needing flood reviews can be required to provide additional information after critical areas consultant work is completed, meaning applicants must re-hire the consultants at additional cost.
- Customers reported that they had difficulty uploading materials and coordinating reviews using the APD user interface.

> *"King County needs to rethink and revamp the full process. It is not customer friendly and very frustrating."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

The last example illustrates the value of mapping the entire permit application and review process from the applicant perspective. Permitting introduced APD to track SB5290 timelines, meaning that a consistent source of customer frustration is the direct result of Permitting's implementation of permit review timelines (SB5290 timelines and data system challenges are discussed in more detail in section 2.) Developing and implementing solutions better informed by applicant needs through customer journey maps could help avoid introducing new sources of frustration.

Recommendation 3

To identify applicant barriers to efficiently obtaining permits, the Permitting Division should create a customer journey map detailing each point of applicant interaction with the division and each action that an applicant must take through the entire permit application and review process. The Permitting Division should use this map, in combination with Recommendations 4 through 9, to make processes and tools more efficient and effective.

Permitting lacks customer service goals, measures

Despite serving as a highly visible customer-facing service of King County, Permitting has not set customer service goals, strategies, or performance measures, limiting its ability to understand, measure, and improve customer experiences. Permitting has not defined how it intends to support its customers or what outcomes it seeks to achieve. It has not identified and documented customer service principles that support its work or specific strategies to accomplish them. Establishing goals, strategies, and performance measures are management practices that help drive continuous improvement. For example, the Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) notes the importance of written mission statements that emphasize the value of customer service, supported by regular staff training and discussion. Regional jurisdictions like the City of Bellevue publicly commit to exceptional customer service and their efforts are supported by customer feedback

and performance measures.[7] Without clearly defined goals and performance measures, Permitting cannot evaluate how well it is serving customers, prioritizing improvements, or holding itself accountable to service delivery standards.[8]

Recommendation 4

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and publish customer service goals that communicate its intent to provide high-quality customer service and its methods for doing so.

Recommendation 5

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and monitor customer service performance measures.

Staff do not receive formal customer service training

Permitting does not provide a formal customer service training program or document customer service performance measures, increasing the risk of inconsistent customer interactions, missed opportunities to assist applicants, and lower customer satisfaction. The King County customer service promise strives to make every experience with King County a positive one. This means residents should experience responsiveness and respect when interacting with the County. Additionally, the County Executive has emphasized building for affordability as a key priority, specifically including accelerating permitting timelines. MRSC also states that management should provide customer service training to staff who work with the public on a regular basis.

Permitting does not provide consistent customer service training for its staff. This could contribute to inconsistent service delivery, reduced public trust, inefficient communication with applicants, and permitting processes that customers perceive as difficult, adversarial, or unclear.

[7] "City Manager's Office: Mission and Core Values." City of Bellevue, WA. https://bellevuewa.gov/city-government/departments/city-managers-office/mission-core-values. By comparison, King County's Customer Service Promise is focused on customer questions. Customer Service - King County, Washington

[8] See *Goal Planning: Key Elements of a Performance Management Framework* and *Foundational Elements of Department Management: Essential Tools and Audit Criteria*. These Auditor's Office technical papers identify key elements of goal-driven management practices.

Recommendation 6

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a plan to provide staff with guidance, job tools, and training to consistently deliver customer-centered service.

Improving service requires both gathering and incorporating staff and customer feedback

Permitting does not have formal mechanisms to systematically gather and analyze customer feedback. Delivering quality-driven services includes getting to know customers and understanding their needs. Customer experience best practices include collecting customer feedback and connecting it with customer journey maps, discussed above, to address customer needs. The King County Customer Experience Measurement Guide provides a framework for agencies to identify and define their customer engagement touchpoints, explaining that "most organizations conduct some kind of customer research to gather information about their customers," provide resources and examples of best practices to help agencies improve customer feedback processes, and establish key customer service metrics. For example, examining the root causes of the dissatisfaction expressed in the customer survey and the increasing ratio of permit cancellations illustrates Permitting's need for customer engagement and feedback. However, Permitting does not currently solicit customer feedback that would help them identify common causes or recurring barriers that may discourage applicants from completing the permitting process. As a result, the Permits Division is unsure why cancellations have increased though some efforts to collect better data are in process. Without better information, Permitting may miss opportunities to identify and address specific causes in process inefficiencies, communication gaps, or unclear requirements. Permit cancellations are just one example in which customer experience feedback could provide insight into process issues.

Recommendation 7

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement customer feedback processes that solicit input from customers on their experiences, needs, and barriers. Customer feedback processes should be consistent with the direction in the King County Customer Experience Management Guide and include feedback on key touchpoints and outcomes identified in the customer journey map in Recommendation 3 and the goals, methods, and performance measures in Recommendations 4 and 5.

King County guidance encourages implementing customer experience best practices

Permitting is missing a structured, division-wide continuous improvement framework, such as Plan-Do-Check-Adjust (PDCA). This type of framework would set expectations and accountability for operational performance. While staff identified operational barriers — including complicated code requirements, inconsistent processes, and inefficiencies in permit workflows — survey results and interviews indicated that Permitting may not be systematically addressing barriers and concerns that staff raise to leadership (see appendix 2). Staff reported opportunities to provide input, but they stated that they do not consistently believe leadership responds to or implements their feedback. This limits Permitting's ability to translate operational knowledge into organizational learning and process improvement. PDCA and continuous improvement guidance emphasizes that organizations should systematically collect and evaluate performance information, incorporate stakeholder feedback, determine and implement changes, monitor whether they are effective, and use the results to drive ongoing operational improvements. Without a formal approach to continuous process improvement, Permitting may have difficulty identifying the root causes of operational weaknesses, evaluate whether implemented changes improve outcomes, or systematically respond to customer and staff concerns.

Recommendation 8

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a process to gather, review, analyze, and respond to the performance measures in Recommendation 5, the customer feedback in Recommendation 7, and staff feedback to continuously improve its processes and customer-centered service delivery.

Permitting website is poorly designed and may not meet customer needs

Limited customer guidance and confusing information on the Permitting website make it difficult for applicants to understand requirements and successfully navigate the permitting process. Among the respondents to the customer survey, 85 percent said they went to the King County Permitting website for information on the permit application process, and 59 percent said it was not easy to find the information needed to begin the application process.[9] Customers stated that the website is cumbersome, with unclear, hard to find, inconsistent, or out-of-date information. Permitting staff also stated that the website is lacking, noting that accurate, up-to-date information and guidance is buried and sometimes unavailable.

> *"After turning in a permit application, it was VERY difficult to figure out what next steps were, who to submit the application to, and upon review, what exactly they needed from me in addition to the permit because there is no guidance on what kind of projects need which kind of plans."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

Permitting's website is the primary source for permit information, so it is essential that the user experience (UX) [10] for the website aligns with the process needs of the customer, meeting the requirements of applicants in guiding them through the permit process. However, throughout the website, key elements are inconsistent with UX best practices. For example, web page structures are confusing, featuring nested and complex content relationships, difficult terminology, and a lack of clear labeling; the website does not use plain language that presents concepts simply and directly for easily understood directions throughout the process, so customers lack control in getting the information they need; there are few visual maps of permitting steps or interactive checklists that walk users through the

> *"No one was able to give direction on what is needed. The staff is not knowledgeable, and the online information is not direct. This is the reason we have a housing crisis in Washington state."*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

[9] Although 370 individuals took our customer survey, not all individuals answered every question. We calculated percentages using the number of individuals who responded to the relevant question.

[10] User experience (UX) is "the overall experience a customer or user has when interacting with a product, system or service. User experience design focuses on elements like navigation, visual design, performance and user interface. The goal of the UX design process is to ensure that users can easily achieve their objectives without frustration." See https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/user-experience.

permitting process or its key elements, and, where Permitting does provide tools, they are inconsistent with one another.

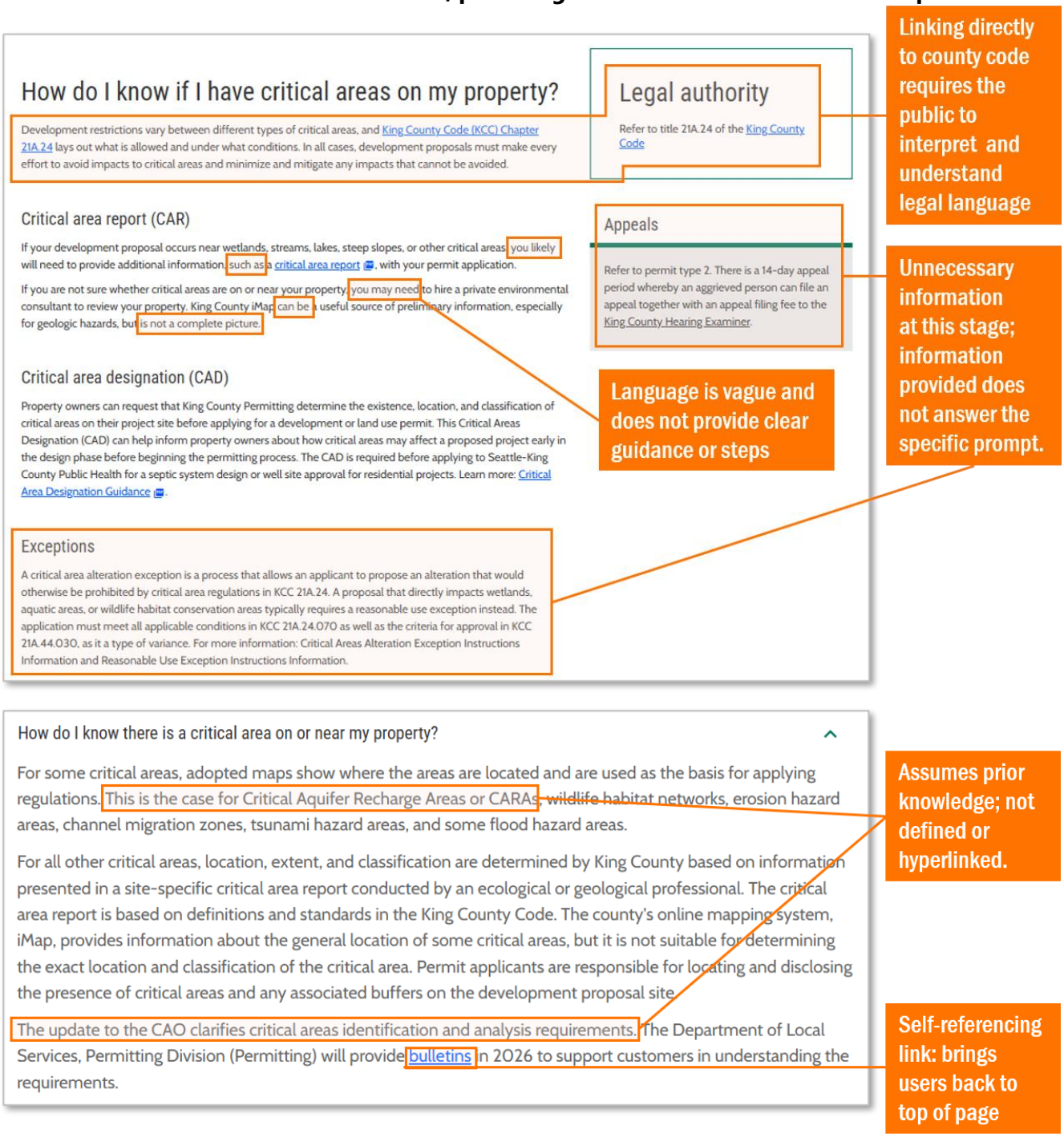
> *"Information videos provided were out of date or did not cover the correct information"*
>
> —King County Permitting Customer

Although staff are generally aware of the website's weaknesses, staff may not understand UX best practices. For example, when asked about applicant guidance, one staff member pointed to a series of user videos intended to provide basic information about key elements of the permitting process. Unfortunately, Permitting presents the videos without any supporting information, meaning that a customer must watch the videos to learn about their content, rather than watch them to help them understand concepts already provided on the relevant web page. This means that what could be an innovative and helpful aid for permit applicants may be a missed opportunity. In comparison, best practice is to give customers clear navigational guidance to get to the specific level of information they need.

Permitting website provides different answers to the same question about critical areas

Permitting's website provides customers inconsistent information. For example, a portion of the website addressing critical areas provides two different answers to a nearly identical question (see exhibit D). This means that rather than directly telling potential applicants of critical areas requirements at the beginning of their customer journey, applicants must navigate through multiple pages of technical text to learn about them.

EXHIBIT D: Examples from different portions of the Critical Areas section of the Permitting Division's website with unclear direction, providing different answers to the same question.

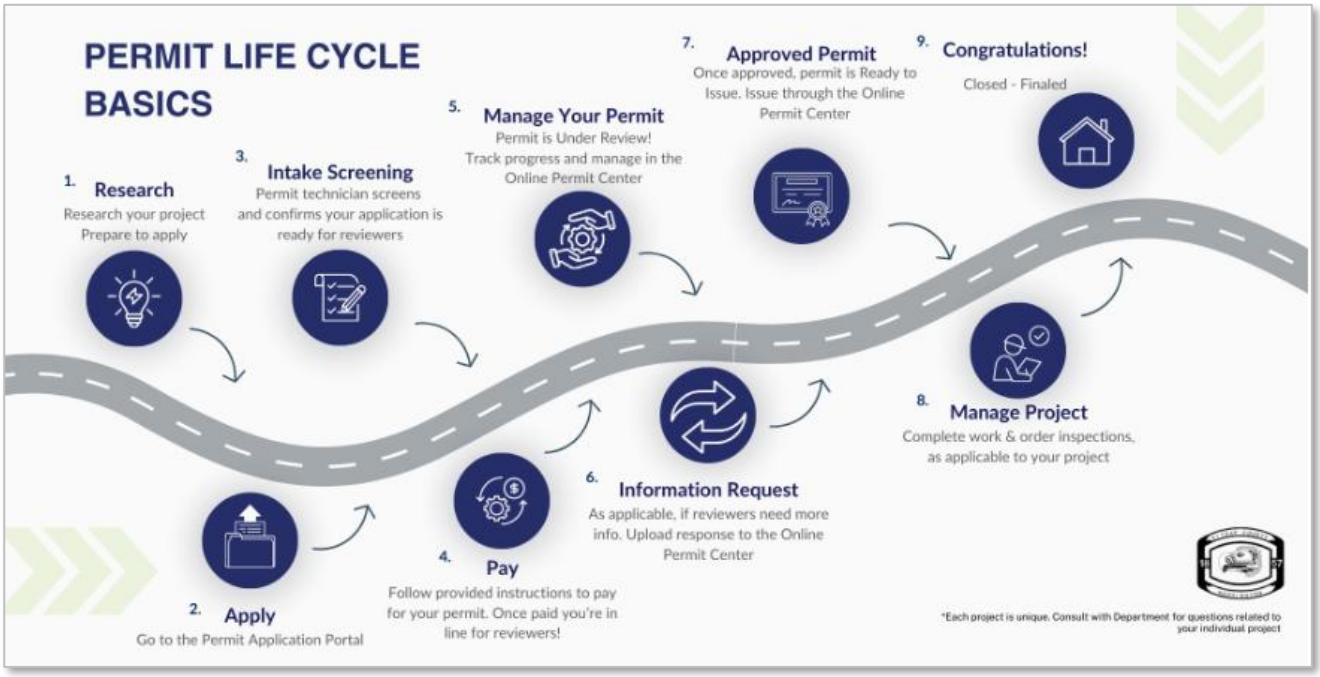


Source: Screenshots of "How do I know if I have critical areas on my property?" and an FAQ section from "Critical Areas — Overview and related permits," July 2026, https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/local-services/certificates-permits-licenses/permits/permits-inspections-codes-buildings-land-use/permit-forms-application-materials/land-use/critical-areas

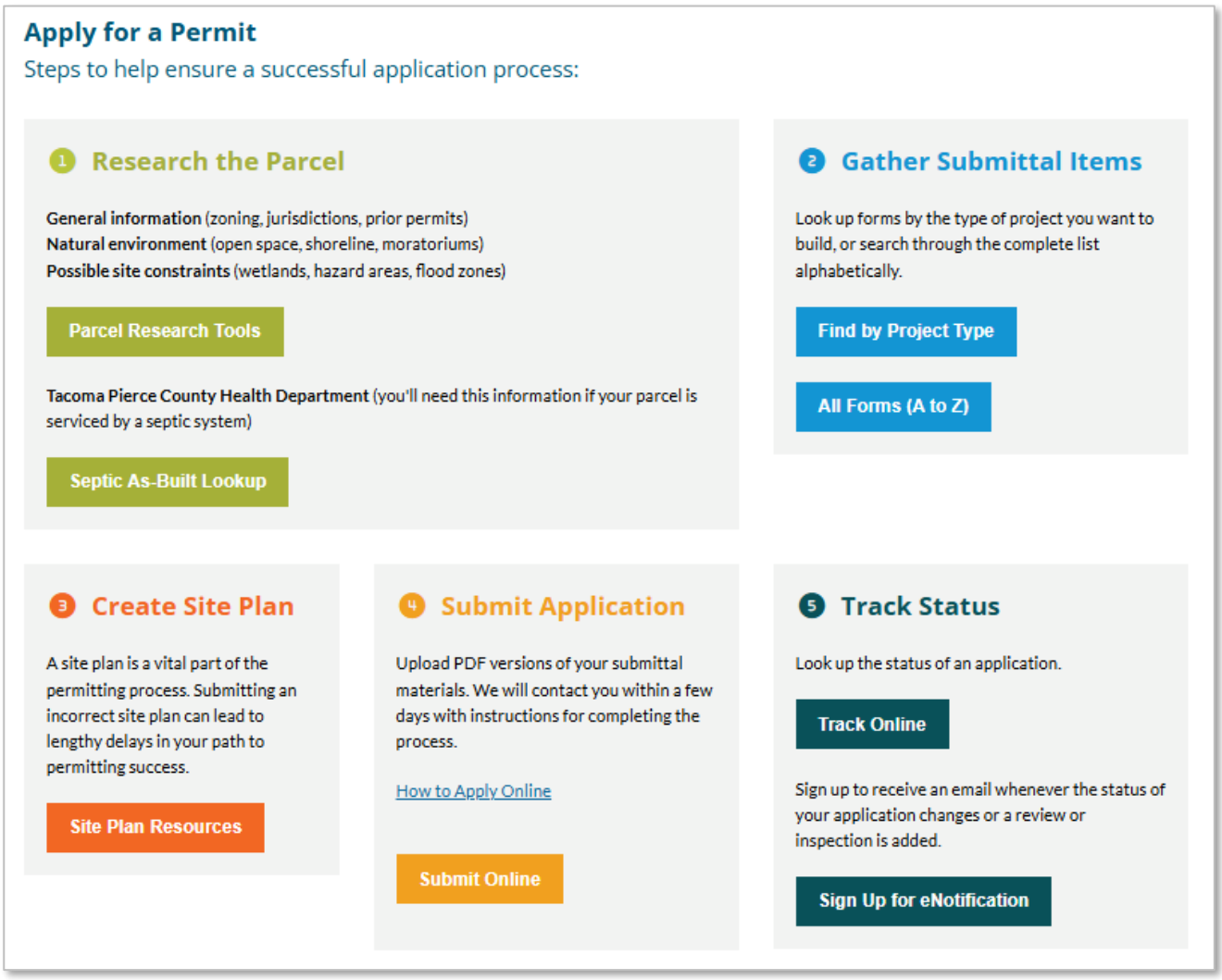
Peer counties use websites to provide key information to applicants

Peer counties use their websites to provide clear and focused information to customers, facilitating the permit review process for applicants. In comparison to King County, some peer county permitting websites give focused, task-oriented information up front, guiding applicants through permitting processes, potential requirements, and how they relate to their property's particular circumstances. This approach incorporates UX best practices, increasingly "nesting" more detailed information where needed. Permitting staff pointed to other county websites as easier to use than King County's and noted that the usability problems with the County's website present barriers for staff work too. Providing applicants with focused task-oriented information up front while increasing the level of technical information provided is both consistent with UX best practice and increases efficiency for permit review because it supports staff needs. Exhibit E, below, provides examples from the permitting landing pages for Kitsap County and Pierce County. Both include visual references, breaking down the permit application and review process into major component steps and provide links for each.

EXHIBIT E: Examples of Kitsap County and Pierce County landing pages showing major steps in permit process, with links to supporting information and guidance for each step.



Source: Screenshot of Kitsap County Department of Community Development Permit Services website, July 2026, https://www.kitsap.gov/dcd/Pages/permit.aspx



Source: Screenshot of Pierce County Department of Planning and Public Works Development Center website, July 2026, https://www.piercecountywa.gov/903/Development-Center

User experience focus could improve customer experience

Leading practices recommend development of a UX design strategy that incorporates key customer experience information to reduce user frustrations. UX best practices start with user research and usability testing because UX design is informed by how customers move through a process. For this reason, user journey maps and customer feedback processes are necessary starting points for improving customer experiences. Well-designed websites aid customers throughout each step

of the process with simple, easily understood guidance built on established UX design strategies.[11]

Recommendation 9

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a website improvement plan incorporating user experience leading practices. The plan should include, at a minimum:

a) a defined and documented user experience design strategy that aligns with leading practices outlined in the report
b) a comparative review of peer jurisdictions' permitting websites to identify effective user experience design elements for consideration in the design
c) alignment with the customer journey map developed in Recommendation 3
d) customer feedback on website usability and user experience consistent with the feedback processes in Recommendation 7
e) consistency with the continuous improvement process in Recommendation 8.

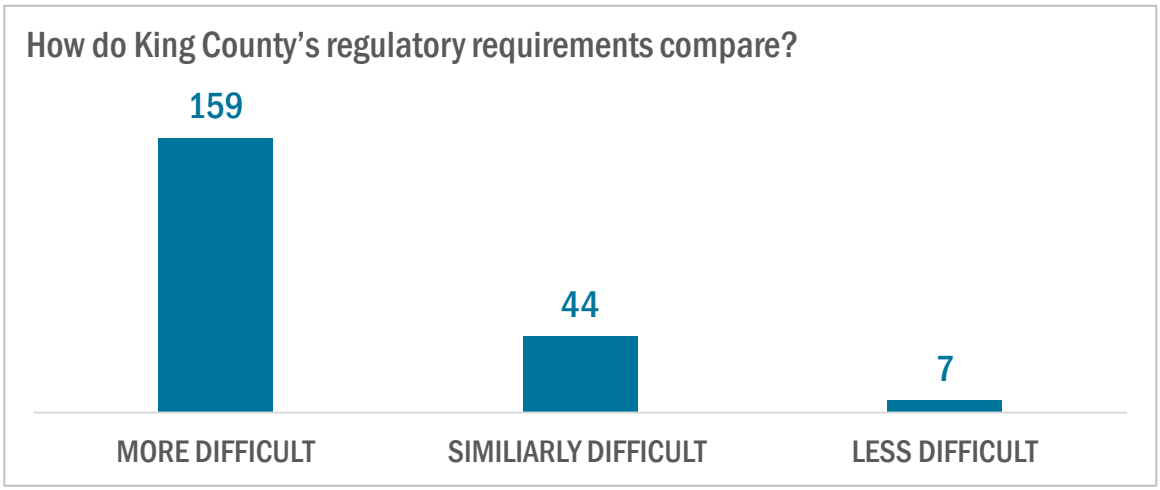
CONCLUSION

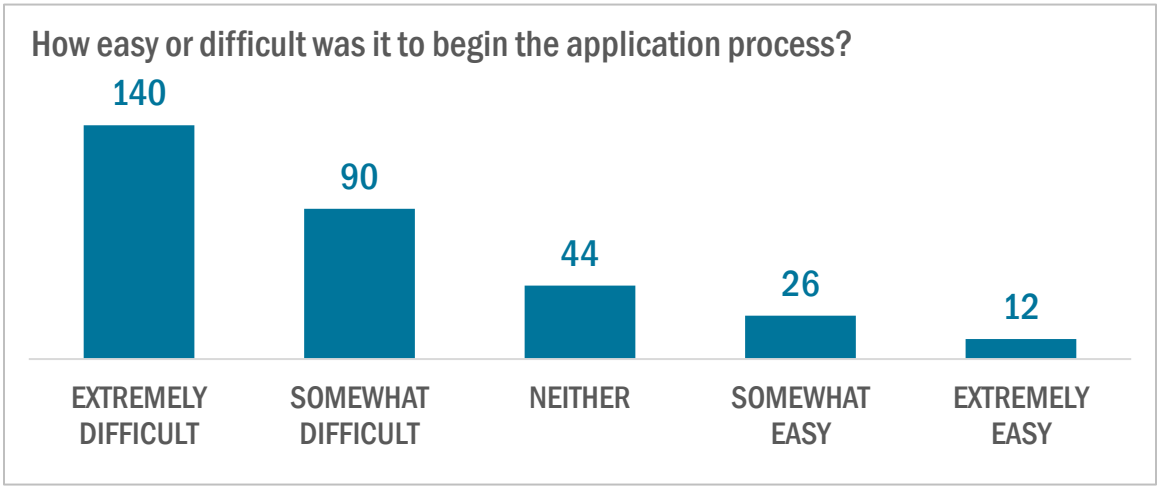
King County can better achieve its housing goals with a permitting system that customers can navigate efficiently and confidently. While many permitting decisions are inherently complex, customers should be able to understand the process, know what is expected of them, and receive timely, consistent service. By implementing the recommendations in this report, the Permitting Division can strengthen customer service, improve operational effectiveness, and increase transparency. These improvements will help the division better support residents, businesses, and King County's long-term housing and growth objectives.

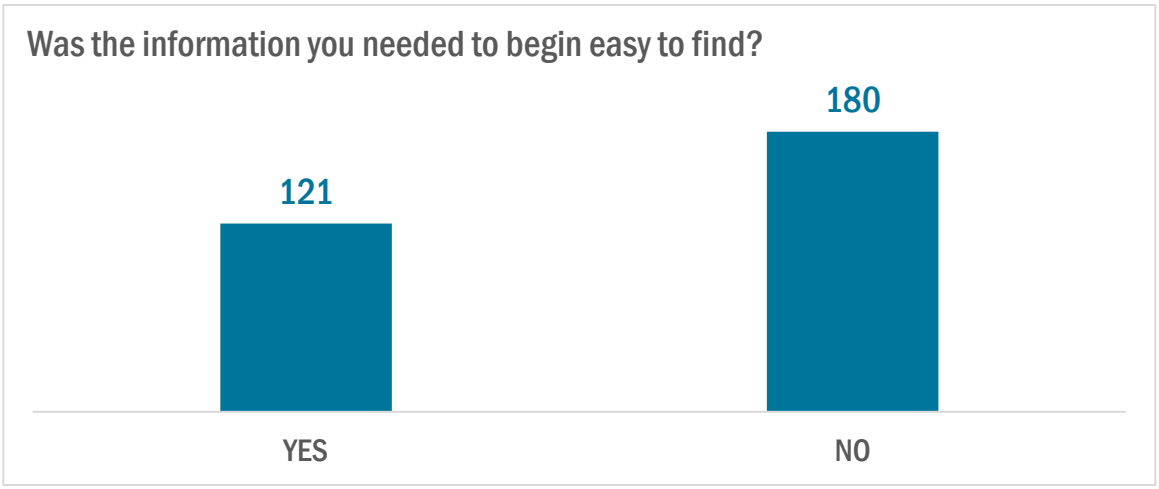
[11] Sources of user experience criteria we reviewed include internal guidance from the National Institute of Standards and Technology, Yale University, IBM, and other sources.

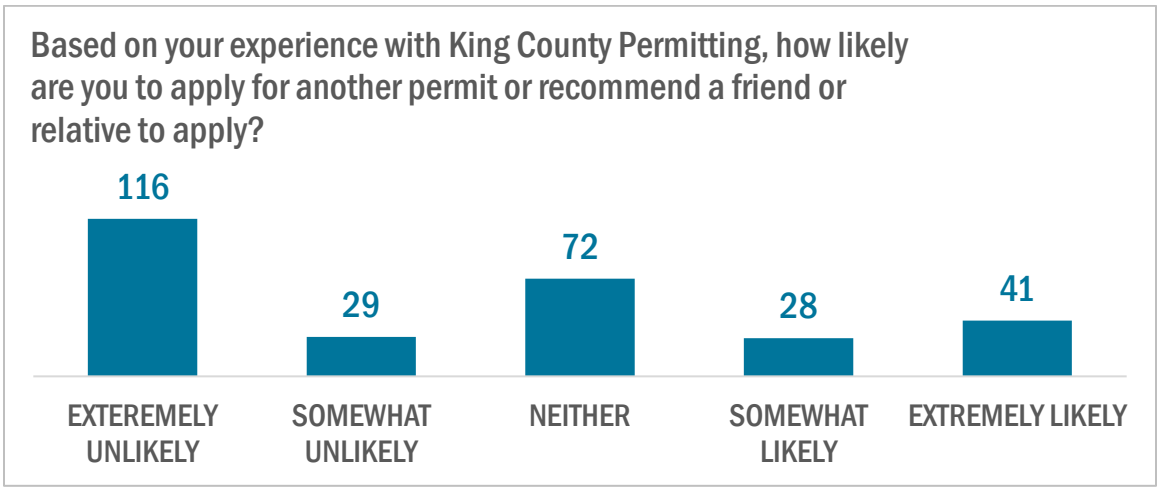
Appendix 1: Applicant Survey Responses and Materials

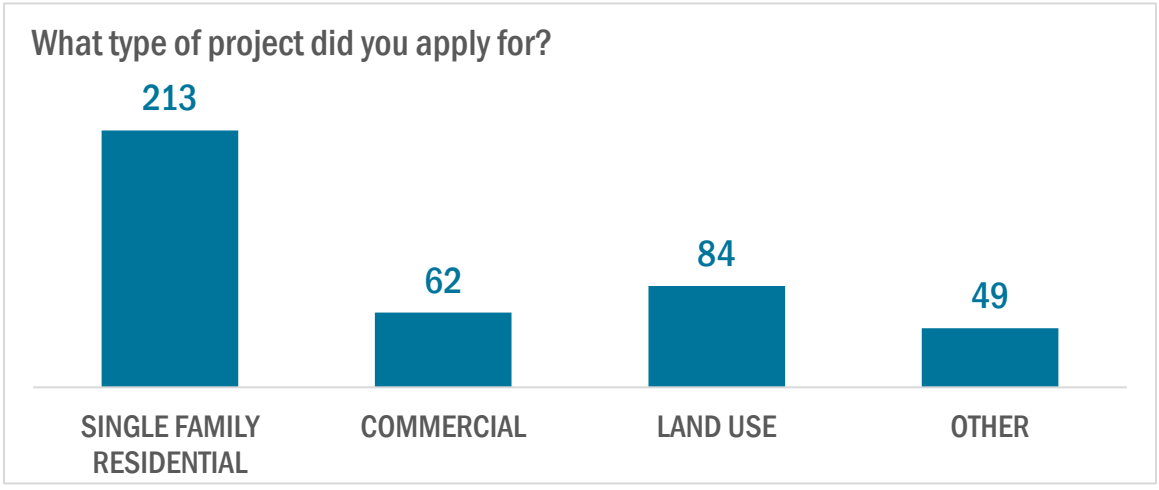
The audit team conducted a survey of permit applicants. We distributed the survey to almost 2,900 King County permit applicants and received 370 responses (about a 12.7 percent response rate). Comments included in the survey responses are included throughout the report and summaries of the survey materials and responses are included below.



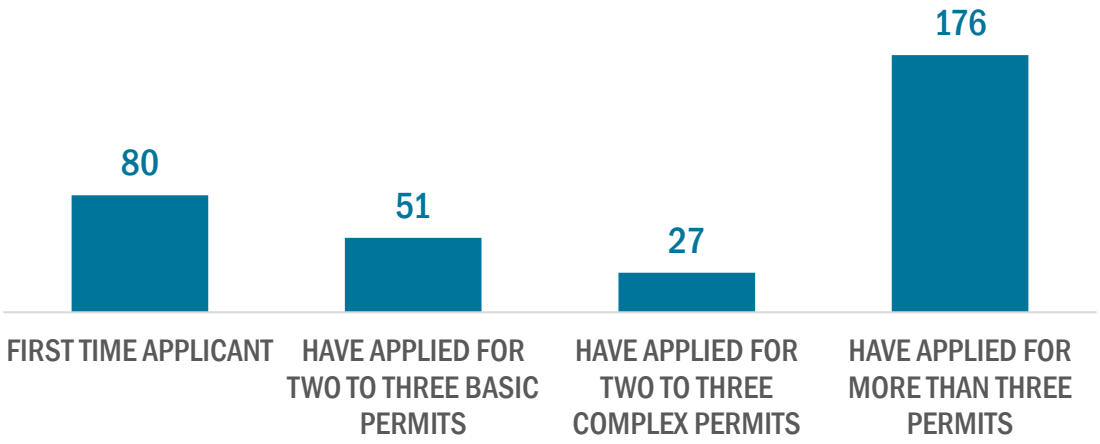



Was the information you needed to begin easy to find?
121
180
YES
NO

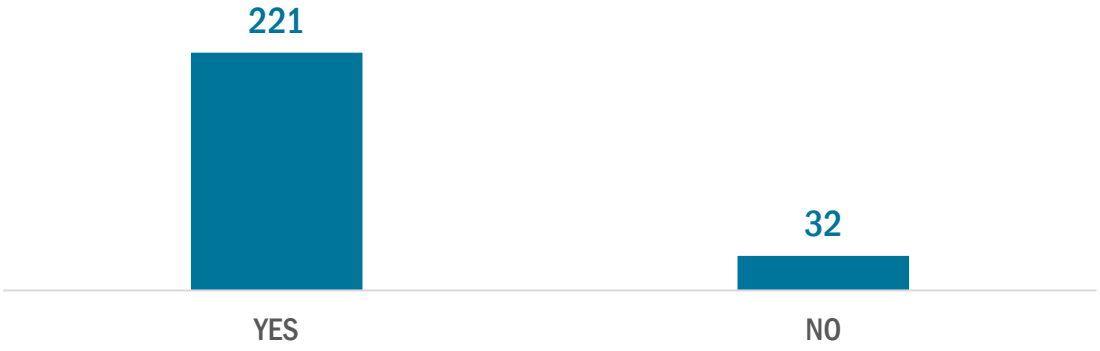

Based on your experience with King County Permitting, how likely are you to apply for another permit or recommend a friend or relative to apply?
116
29
72
28
41
EXTEREMELY UNLIKELY
SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY
NEITHER
SOMEWHAT LIKELY
EXTREMELY LIKELY


What type of project did you apply for?
213
62
84
49
SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENTIAL
COMMERCIAL
LAND USE
OTHER

How much experience do you have with the permit application process?

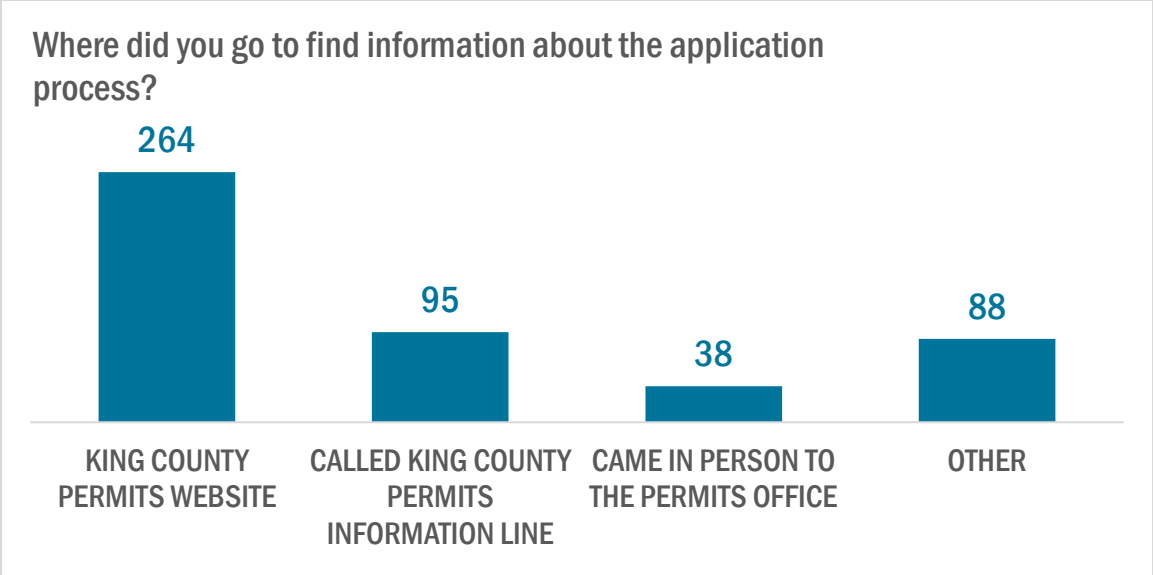


Have you gone through the permit process in other Washington cities or counties?



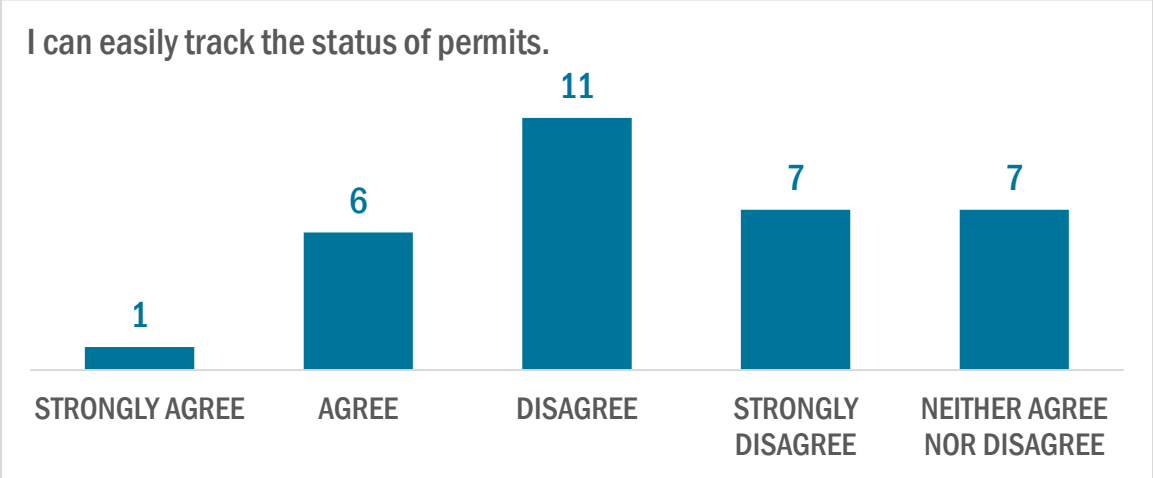
Did you obtain your permit or is your permit still in process?

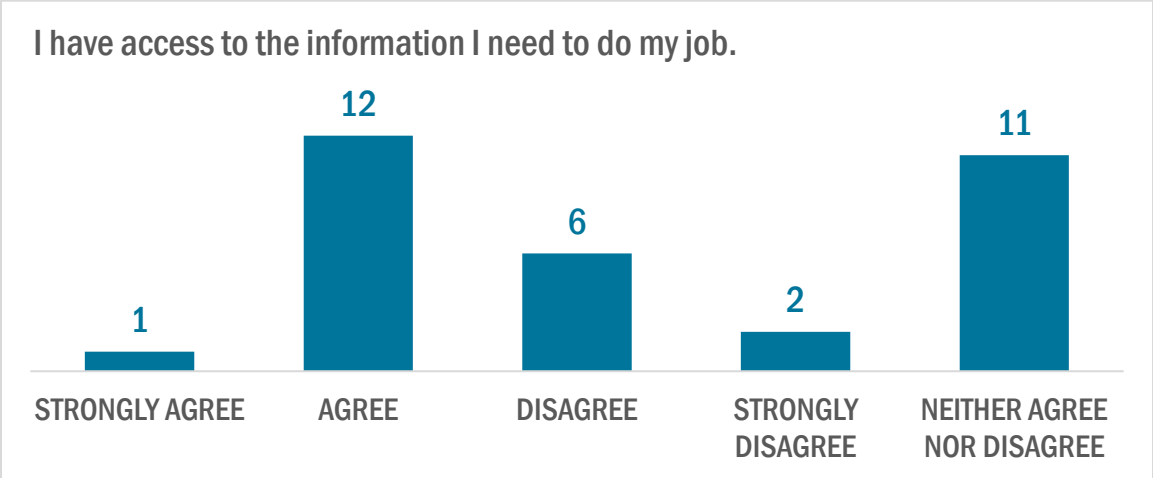



Where did you go to find information about the application process?
264
95
38
88
KING COUNTY PERMITS WEBSITE
CALLED KING COUNTY PERMITS INFORMATION LINE
CAME IN PERSON TO THE PERMITS OFFICE
OTHER

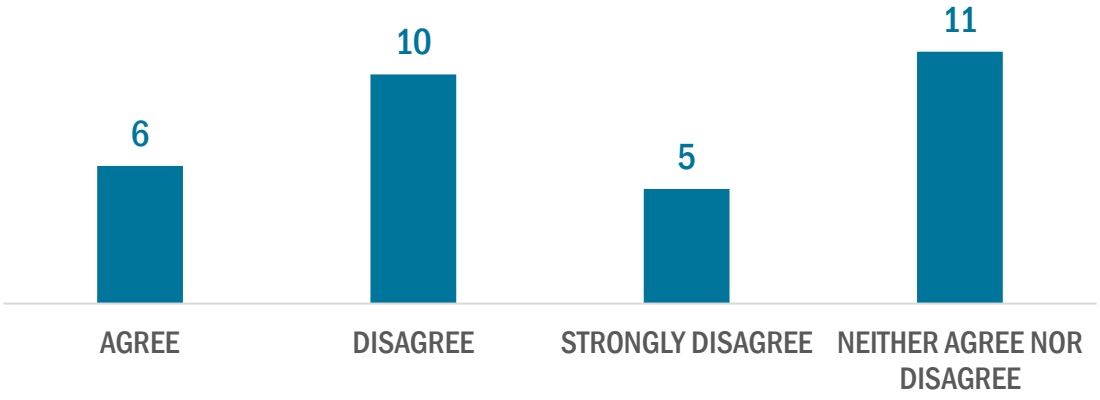
Appendix 2: Permitting Staff Survey Responses and Materials

We distributed an informational survey to Permitting staff. We received 36 responses. Comments included in the survey responses are included in the report and aggregate responses follow.

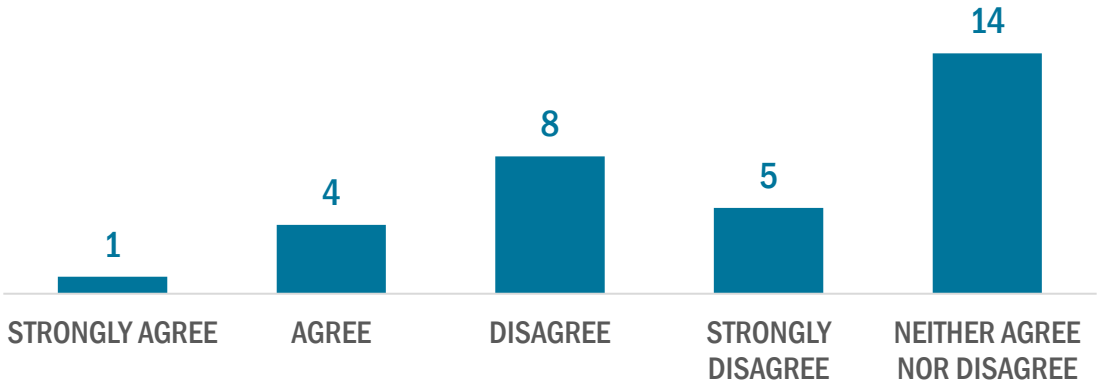




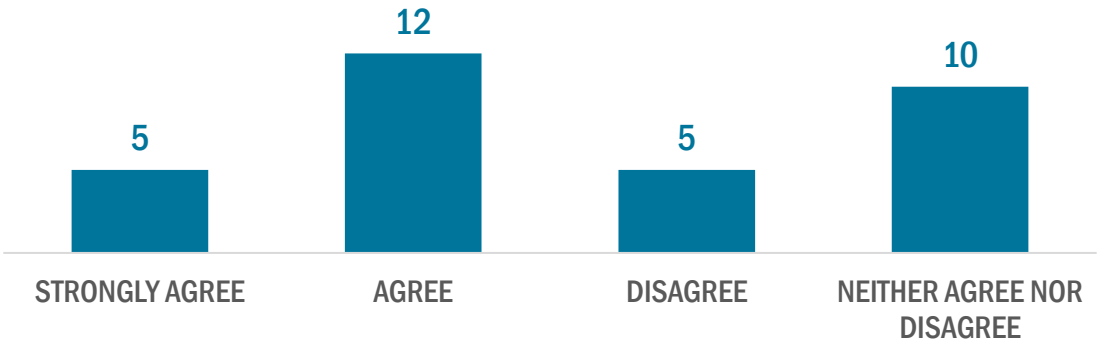
Data in our systems is accurate and reliable.

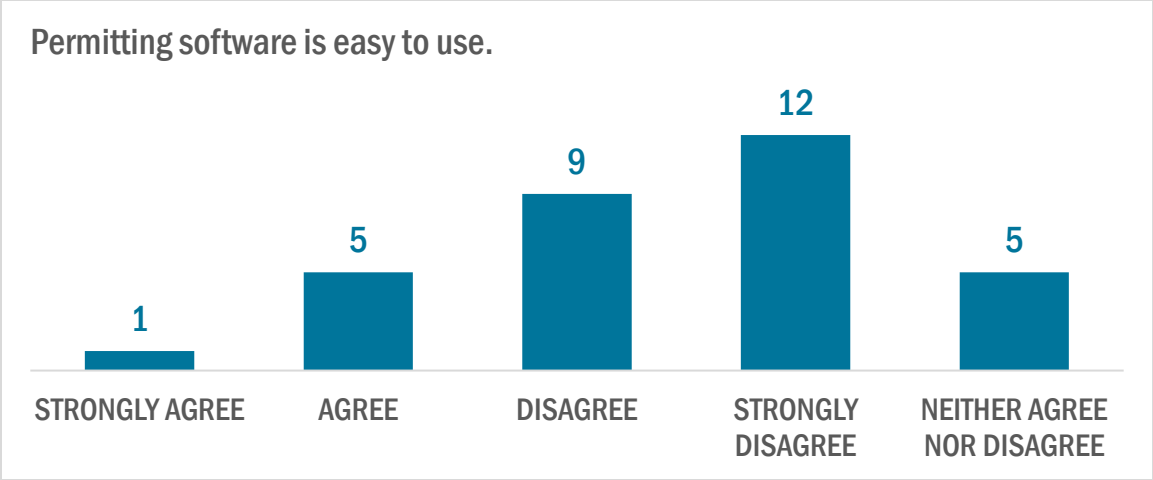


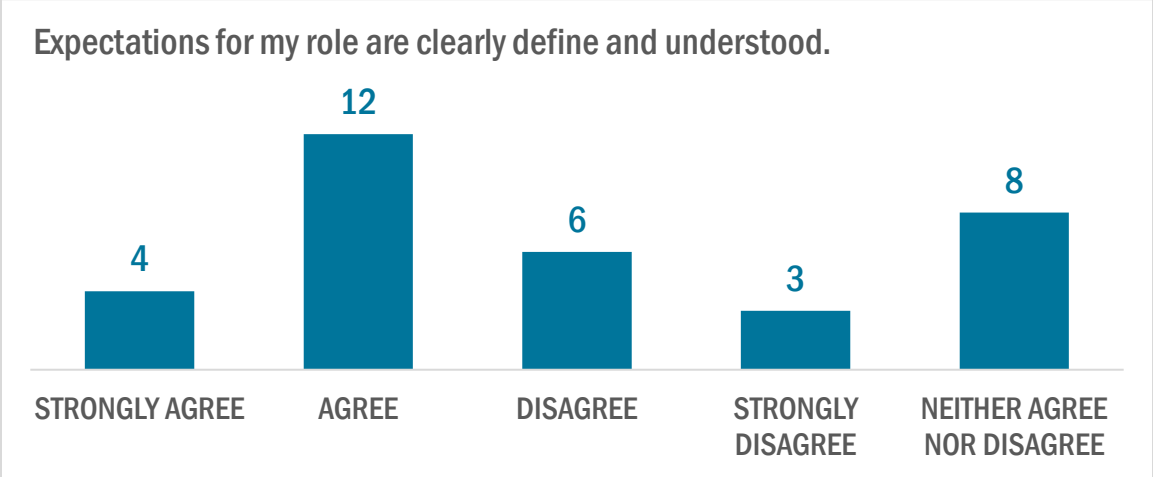
Reporting tools provide useful insights for decision-making.

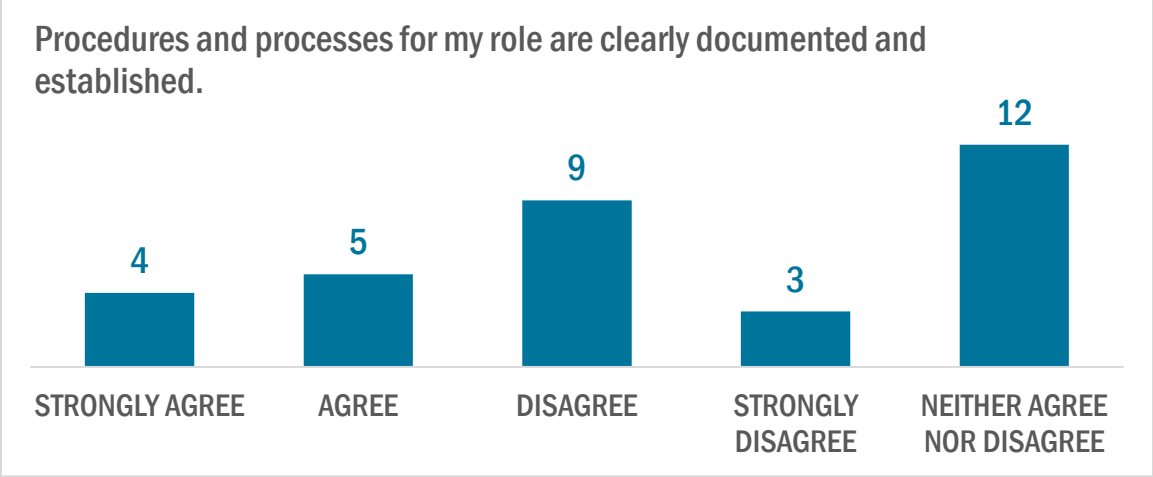


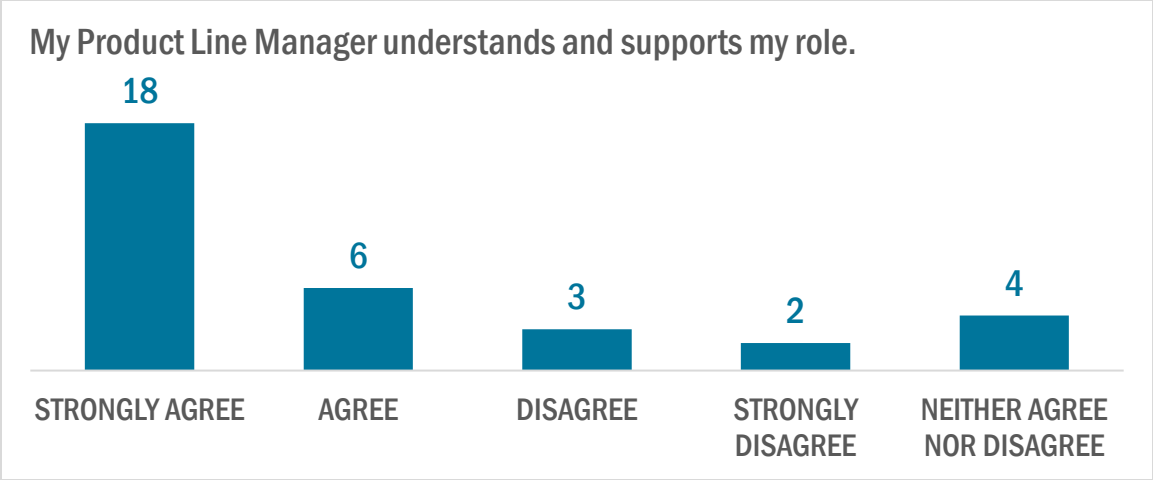
I have had the opportunity to provide input on my data needs and challenges.

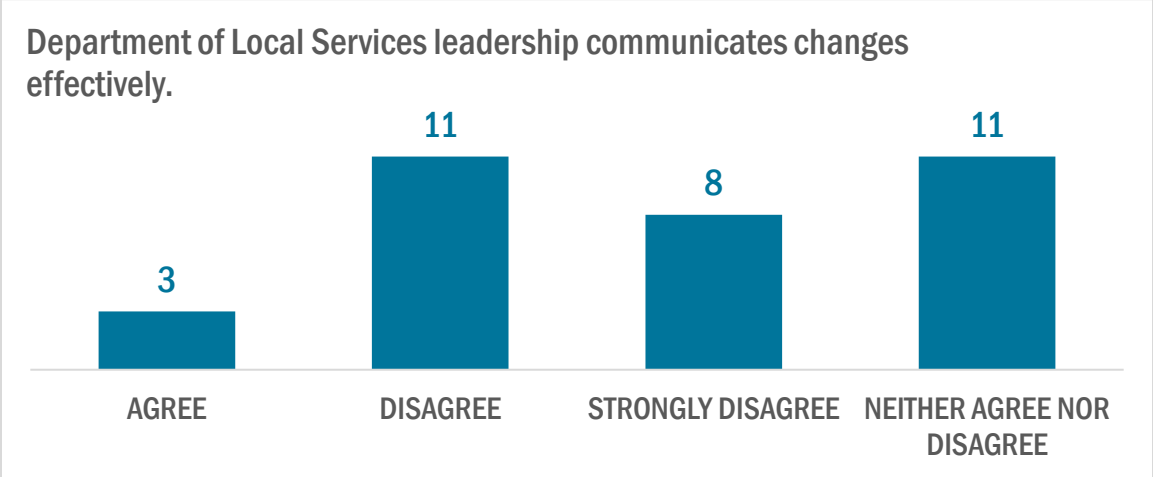


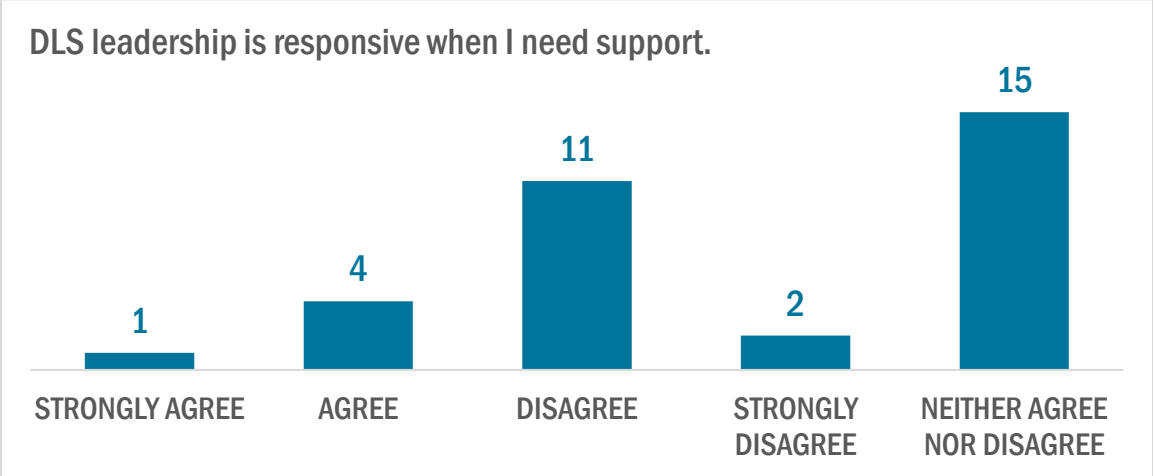

Permitting software is easy to use.
1
5
9
12
5
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

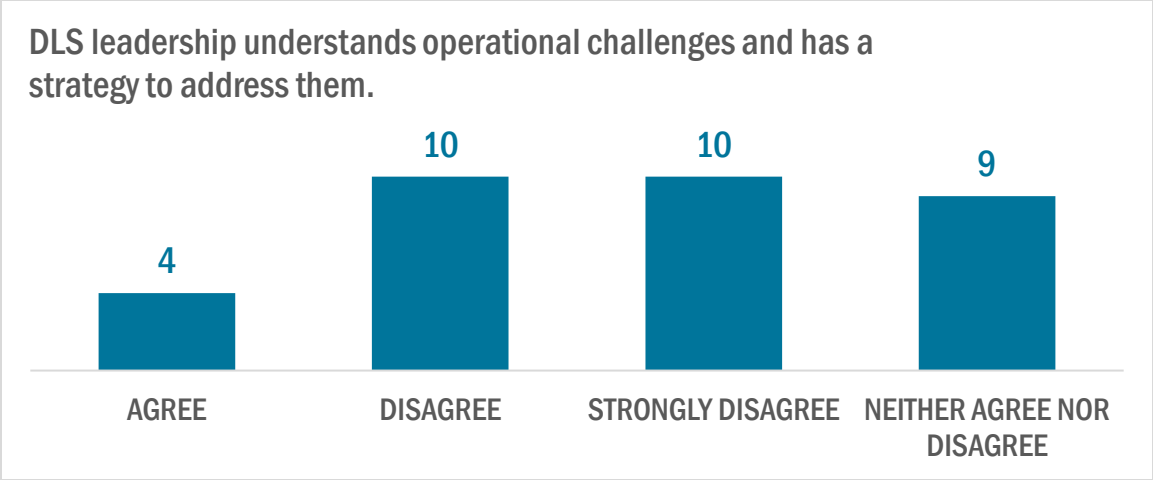

Expectations for my role are clearly define and understood.
4
12
6
3
8
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

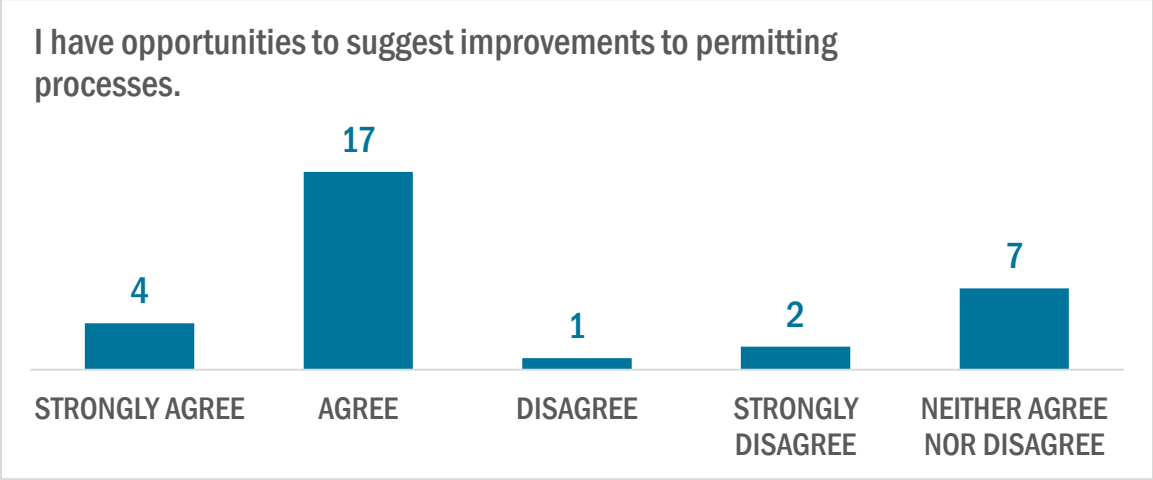

Procedures and processes for my role are clearly documented and established.
4
5
9
3
12
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

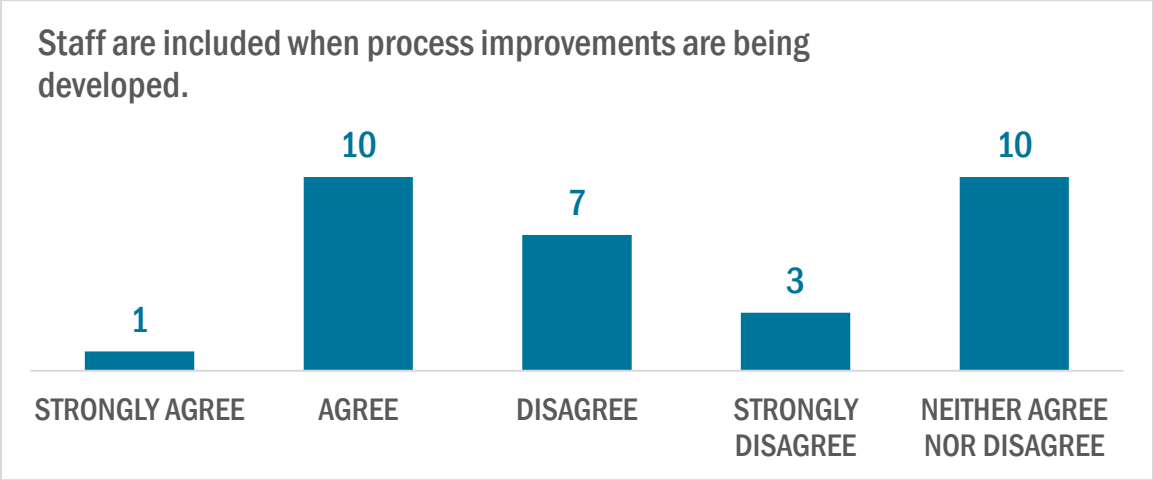

My Product Line Manager understands and supports my role.
18
6
3
2
4
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

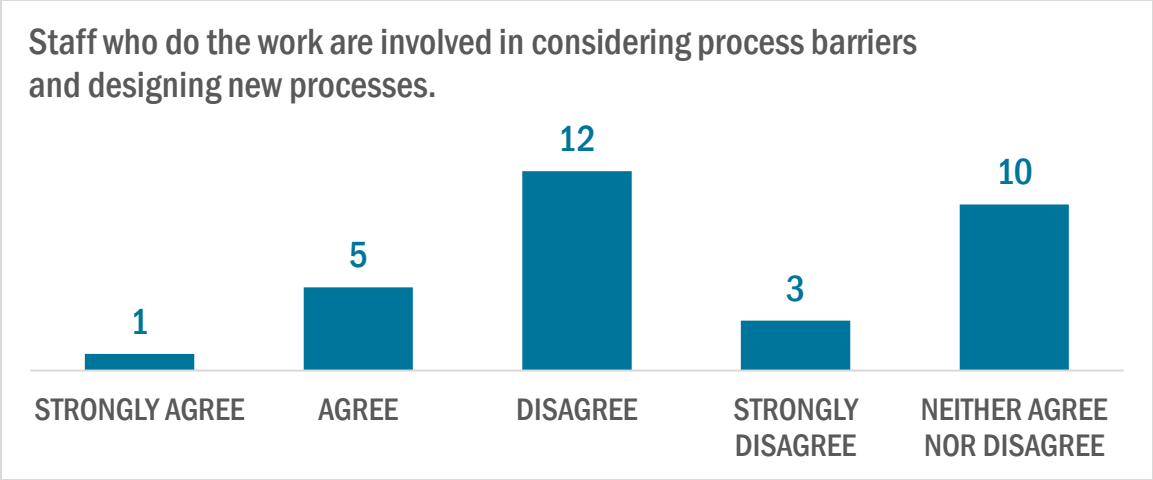

Department of Local Services leadership communicates changes effectively.
3
11
8
11
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

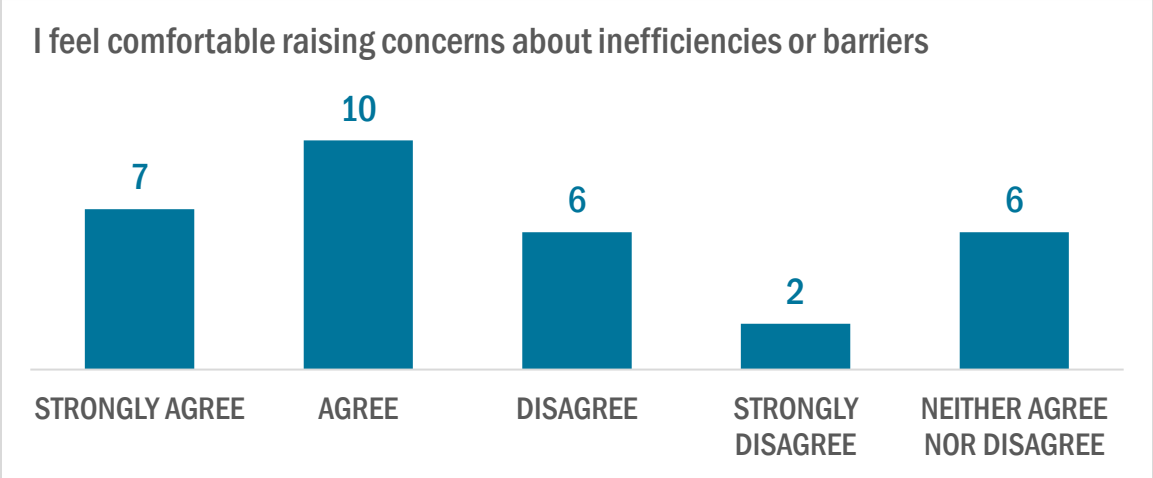

DLS leadership is responsive when I need support.
1
4
11
2
15
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

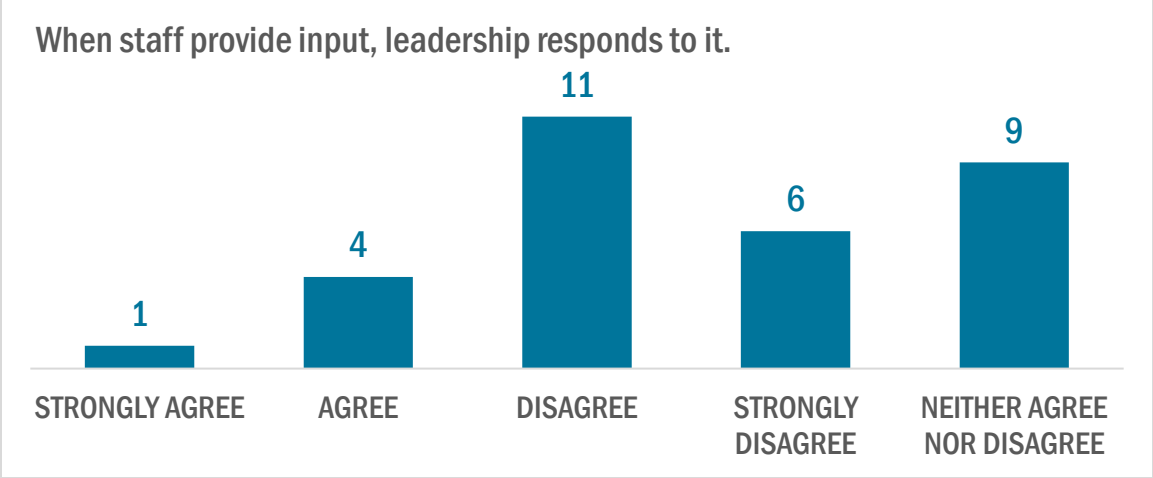

DLS leadership understands operational challenges and has a strategy to address them.
4
10
10
9
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

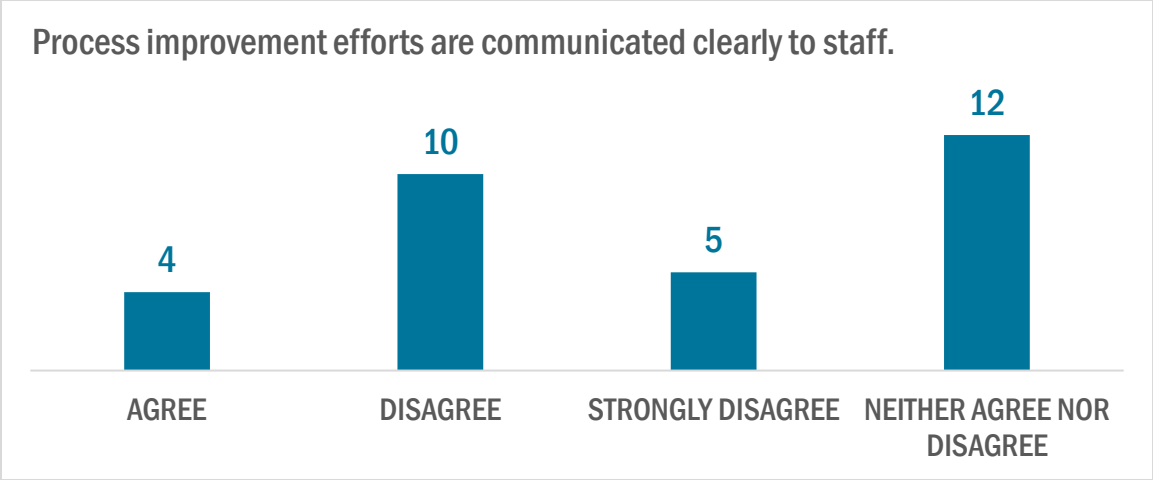

I have opportunities to suggest improvements to permitting processes.
4
17
1
2
7
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

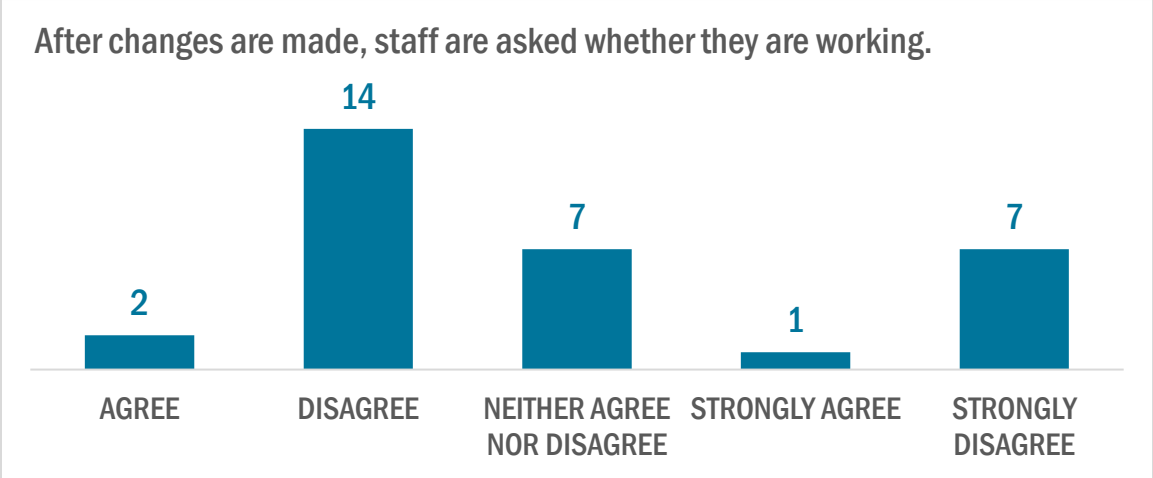

Staff are included when process improvements are being developed.
1
10
7
3
10
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

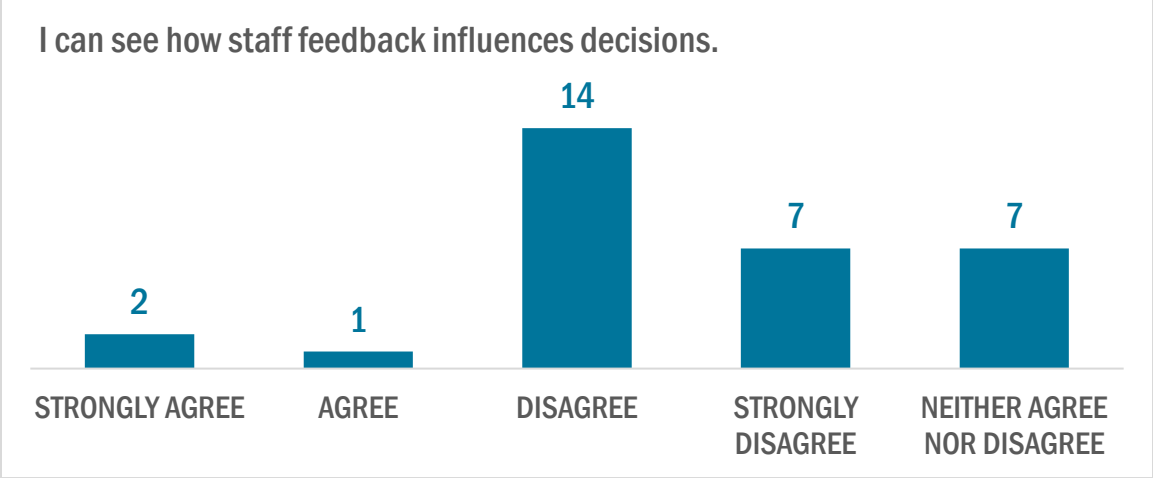

Staff who do the work are involved in considering process barriers and designing new processes.
1
5
12
3
10
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

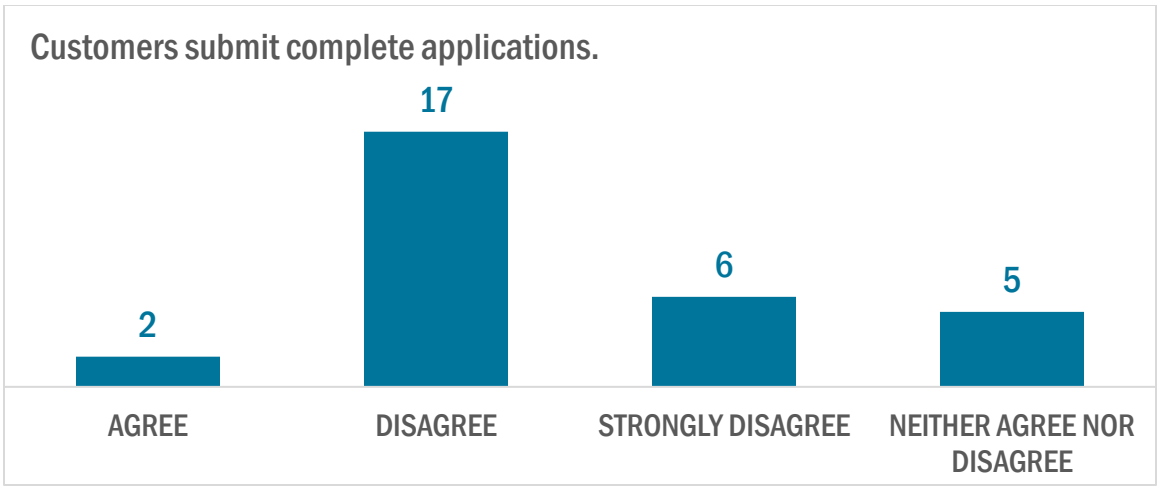

I feel comfortable raising concerns about inefficiencies or barriers
7
10
6
2
6
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

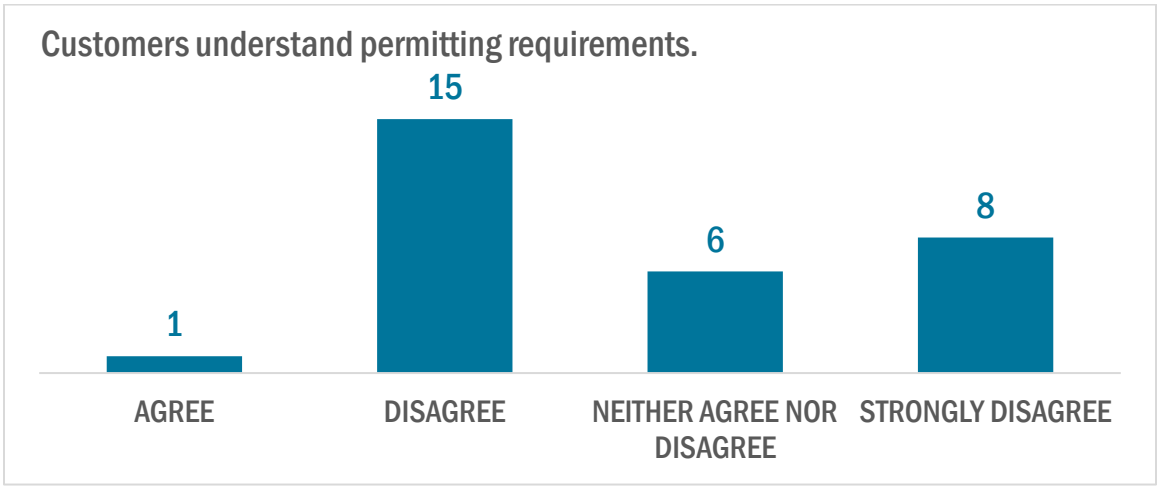

When staff provide input, leadership responds to it.
1
4
11
6
9
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

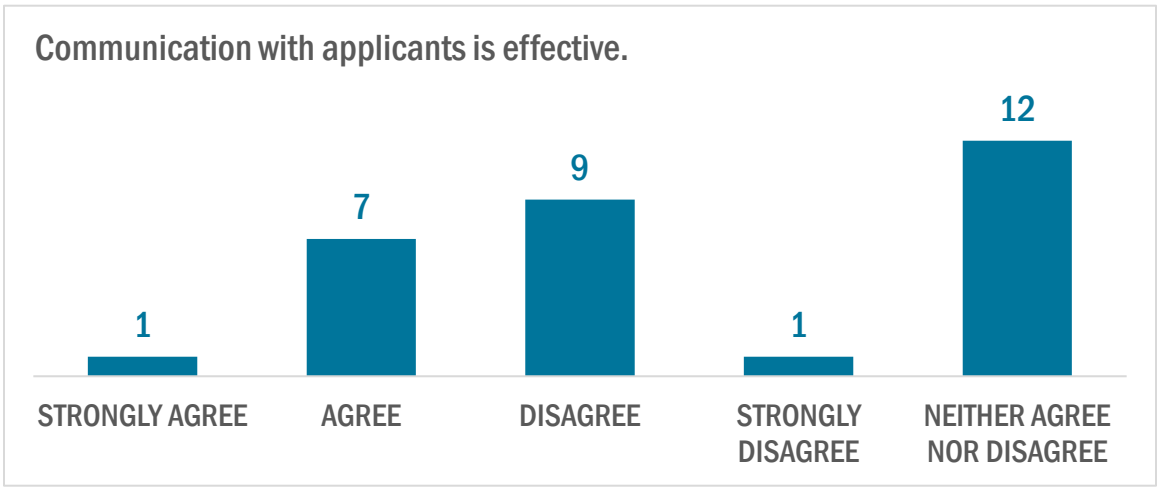

Process improvement efforts are communicated clearly to staff.
4
10
5
12
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE

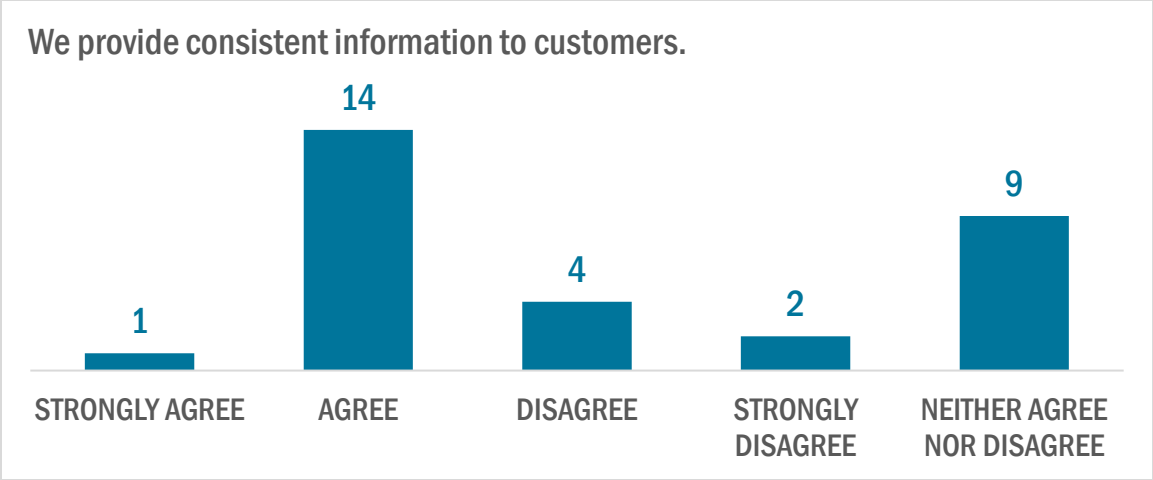

After changes are made, staff are asked whether they are working.
2
14
7
1
7
AGREE
DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE
STRONGLY AGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE


I can see how staff feedback influences decisions.
2
1
14
7
7
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE


Customers submit complete applications.
2
17
6
5
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE


Customers understand permitting requirements.
1
15
6
8
AGREE
DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE


Communication with applicants is effective.
1
7
9
1
12
STRONGLY AGREE
AGREE
DISAGREE
STRONGLY DISAGREE
NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE


We provide consistent information to customers.
1
14
4
2
9
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Appendix 3: King County Information Technology Requirements for Acquiring a New Information Technology System

King County Information Technology's list of primary responsibilities for a project sponsor (King County agency) acquiring a new data system include the following:

- Define the business goals, business context, and business limitations
- Become the primary change champion throughout the organization
- Support communications to team members and beneficiaries
- Become a link between other related efforts/projects impacting your goal
- Empower teams through delegation to make appropriate levels of decisions
- Understand the importance of dedicated resources and able to bring them onboard
- Be an accessible and approachable escalation point for decisions when risk/issues come up
- Encourage successes throughout the project and celebrate the team through recognition
- Support project management best practices
- Participate in regular meetings with the project manager
- Remove roadblocks

Appendix 4: Executive Response

King County | Office of the Executive

Executive Girmay Zahilay
Chinook Building, CNK-EX-0800
401 Fifth Avenue, Suite 800
Seattle, WA 98104-2391

October 5, 2026

Kymber Waltmunson
King County Auditor
Room 1033
King County Courthouse

Dear Ms. Waltmunson:

Thank you for providing the Permitting Audit Report for executive review. We appreciate the Auditor's Office's thorough analysis and the thoughtful recommendations aimed at strengthening service delivery, operational consistency, and accountability within King County's permitting systems.

The Executive Office concurs with all recommendations outlined in the report. We are committed to ensuring that the DLS Permitting Division implements each item according to the timelines submitted in the accompanying response materials. These actions align with the County's broader goals of improving customer experience, modernizing internal processes, and advancing equitable access to services for residents and businesses across King County.

The recommendations will support continued improvement and reinforce our commitment to transparency, responsiveness, and effective stewardship of public resources. The Executive Office and Department will monitor implementation to ensure progress continues as planned.

If further clarification or discussion is needed regarding any component of this response, please feel free to reach out.

Thank you again for your rigorous work and partnership in strengthening county operations.

Sincerely,

Hyeok Kim
Chief Operating Officer, King County Executive's Office
On behalf of King County Executive Girmay Zahilay

Recommendation 1

The Permitting Division should document definitions for the data elements and data fields in its information technology systems and ensure staff use them consistently across systems.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2026

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT This work is currently in process and updates to information technology systems are on track to be completed as part of standard workflows by the end of 2026.

Recommendation 2

The Permitting Division should work with King County Information Technology to ensure that information technology system acquisition best practices, including documentation of business processes, user needs, and functional requirements, are incorporated into any future information technology system procurement.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT The Permitting Division continues to collaborate closely with King County Information Technology (KCIT) to assess future system needs, applying a pragmatic and budget conscious approach that aligns with available technology fee revenue. Although this collaboration has been less formal than traditional procurement pathways, it has enabled steady progress without incurring significant IT staffing costs before adequate project funding is secured. Leadership from the Director's Office, the Permitting Division, and KCIT remain actively engaged in identifying business needs, defining system requirements, and planning long-term technology improvements to support the eventual replacement of our current permitting system. As additional resources become available, we will further document and formalize these processes to ensure alignment with county best practices while continuing to maximize limited funding and staff capacity.

In addition, Permitting Division and DLS leadership have partnered with KCIT through the full review process required for the pilot use of an AI tool in Permitting. This formal evaluation includes detailed analysis, documentation, and an assessment of user needs, and resulted in approval from the County Chief Innovation Officer, Deputy CIO, and County CIO.

Finally, the DLS Permitting Division currently has an initiative in the semifinal round of the King County AI Investment Fund competition, reflecting ongoing innovation efforts supported through strong collaboration with KCIT.

Recommendation 3

To identify applicant barriers to efficiently obtaining permits, the Permitting Division should create a customer journey map detailing each point of applicant interaction with the division and each action that an applicant must take through the entire permit application and review process. The Permitting Division should use this map, in combination with Recommendations 4 through 9, to make processes and tools more efficient and effective.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 6/30/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT Based on feedback from Council, Community, the Audit, Permitting Advisory Panel and an internal desire to evolve the customer experience, DLS has hired a Customer Service Liaison, tasked with reimagining the customer journey map. This role will work with newly hired Permitting Director in the charting out customer experience, staff standards in customer service, measures of customer service, re-imagining the web presence and in person experience. This work will continue and work closely with any recommendations or conversations that happen with the Permitting Advisory Panel.

Recommendation 4

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and publish customer service goals that communicate its intent to provide high-quality customer service and its methods for doing so.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 06/30/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT Customer service goals and efforts are focus areas for the new Division Director. Efforts are anticipated in the following spaces in FY27: in person customer experience, online customer experience, staff engagement experience, and staff efficiency. Each of these are intended on increasing the customer experience in all engagements – from learning about what permits are needed for projects

Recommendation 5

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and monitor customer service performance measures.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT Permitting is actively working on obtaining metrics associated with our customer relations management system, to monitor at the monthly business review, additionally more work in this area is part of the 2027 planning to align with the department goals.

Recommendation 6

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a plan to provide staff with guidance, job tools, and training to consistently deliver customer-centered service.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 6/30/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT The new permitting philosophy and training guidance will be established by the new Division Director and rolled out to division staff by the end of the year.

Recommendation 7

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement customer feedback processes that solicit input from customers on their experiences, needs, and barriers. Customer feedback processes should be consistent with the direction in the King County Customer Experience Management Guide and include feedback on key touchpoints and outcomes identified in the customer journey map in Recommendation 3 and the goals, methods, and performance measures in Recommendations 4 and 5.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT Permitting will evaluate and refine its customer feedback processes to better align with our future vision for customer-centered service delivery. This work will focus on ensuring that feedback mechanisms capture meaningful input related to customer experiences, needs, and barriers, including key touchpoints identified in the customer journey. As capacity allows, we will incorporate applicable elements of the King County Customer Experience Management Guide and integrate feedback data into our ongoing process-improvement efforts. While we must balance this work with existing staffing and resource limitations, we remain committed to strengthening our feedback systems in practical, sustainable ways that improve both transparency and customer outcomes.

Recommendation 8

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a process to gather, review, analyze, and respond to the performance measures in Recommendation 5, the customer feedback in Recommendation 7, and staff feedback to continuously improve its processes and customer-centered service delivery.

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Permitting

COMMENT Permitting leadership and staff regularly evaluate data collected throughout the permitting process, along with customer feedback, to update procedures, strengthen service delivery, and identify needs for future technology improvements. This ongoing review allows the Division to make informed adjustments that enhance both customer and staff experiences. As new tools and systems come online, we will incorporate their data into a formalized process for analysis, documentation, and continuous improvement aligned with the recommendations.

Recommendation 9

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a website improvement plan incorporating user experience leading practices. The plan should include, at a minimum:

- **a) a defined and documented user experience design strategy that aligns with leading practices outlined in the report**
- **b) a comparative review of peer jurisdictions' permitting websites to identify effective user experience design elements for consideration in the design**
- **c) alignment with the customer journey map developed in Recommendation 3**
- **d) customer feedback on website usability and user experience consistent with the feedback processes in Recommendation 7**
- **e) consistency with the continuous improvement process in Recommendation 8.**

AGENCY RESPONSE

CONCURRENCE **CONCUR**

IMPLEMENTATION DATE 12/31/2027

RESPONSIBLE AGENCY Directors Office & Permitting

COMMENT Staffing dedicated to customer service and web improvements has recently been approved by the Council and hired to support the Permitting Division. These resources are already reviewing website data and identifying opportunities to enhance usability. In addition, a new customer service staff member will begin on October 1, further strengthening our capacity to improve public-facing information and support. Together, these investments position the Division to develop, document, and implement a comprehensive website improvement plan grounded in user-experience best practices. We look forward to innovating and improving the overall permitting customer experience.



Appendix 5: Statement of Compliance, Scope, Objective, & Methodology

Statement of Compliance with Government Auditing Standards

Auditors conducted this engagement in accordance with Generally Accepted Government Auditing Standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Scope of Work on Internal Controls

We assessed the extent to which internal controls related to operations, reporting, and compliance, relative to the control environment, risk assessment, information and communication, and monitoring activities for the Permitting Division. Section 2 of this report focuses on gaps identified in control activities, information quality, and issues and deficiencies regarding the Permitting Division's information technology. Section 3 focuses on gaps identified in information and communication quality, both internally and externally, and Permitting's practices in evaluating issues and remediating deficiencies in permit review procedures and applicant guidance.

Scope

This audit will evaluate the Permitting Division's management of permit applications, including compliance with King County Code and changed requirements in RCW 36.70B since January 1, 2025. The evaluation will include the management of "legacy" permit applications, those submitted prior to the new state law going into effect.

Objectives

1. Is the Permitting Division complying with the permit processing and review timelines required under RCW 36.70B, and are they processing permits not subject to the law efficiently?
2. How well does the Permitting Division engage in continuous improvement?
3. To what extent is the Permitting Division adequately planning for the acquisition of a new permitting data system to ensure it addresses identified data management challenges?

Methodology

We conducted an analysis of permit review times to assess the extent to which King County processes permits within applicable state law timeframes. Because no single data source contained all information necessary to reliably calculate permit review times, we constructed an analytical dataset integrating information from four sources: two information technology systems — Accela and Avolve ProjectDox (APD) — and two Microsoft Excel-based datasets maintained by the Permitting Division. We combined information from the four data sources to develop a permit-level dataset containing the dates and other information necessary to estimate review timeframes. Because the sources contained overlapping and sometimes inconsistent information, records could not be combined without first identifying common fields, standardizing values and date formats, reconciling duplicate and conflicting records, and determining which sources should be relied upon when information differed.

The analysis required substantial data validation, reconciliation, and cleaning before permit review timeframes could be calculated. Our methodology consisted of three phases: (1) constructing an integrated permit-level dataset, (2) assessing and improving the reliability of the source data, and (3) calculating permit review timeframes using conversative assumptions designed to avoid overstating county compliance. Because the accuracy of the clock-time analysis depended on the underlying permit data, we assessed the reliability of the information used in the analysis. This included evaluating the completeness and consistency of key fields, comparing information across data sources, identifying duplicate and missing records, and testing whether key dates followed expected chronological sequences. Our assessment identified significant limitations in the available data. We performed data cleaning and reconciliation where the underlying information provided a reasonable basis for doing so. However, we did not infer or replace information when available evidence was insufficient to determine correct values. Additionally, available data does not provide precise clock-time measures and assumptions had to be made regarding the sequence of review periods to calculate county clock-time. Consequently, although the resulting dataset was adequate for conducting a limited analytical assessment, we determined that the data were not sufficiently reliable to make precise or definitive assertions about King County's compliance rate. Section 2 describes data challenges and limitations in detail and makes recommendations to address issues in the future.

As part of the audit fieldwork, we conducted group interviews with multiple staff groups in the Permitting Division and distributed an informational survey. We conducted another survey of permit applicants, including contacts whose applications were accepted by Permitting since January 1, 2025. The survey was distributed to almost 2,900 King County permit applicants and received 370 responses (about a 12.7 percent response rate). Comments included in the survey responses are highlighted and included throughout the report; and summaries of the survey materials and responses are included in appendix 1. We also held informational interviews with peers in Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap, and Cowlitz counties, and

reviewed permits websites in those counties along with those of Clark and Spokane counties. In addition, we also reviewed a volume of material regarding customer service leading practices, including user experience website design.



Appendix 6: List of Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Permitting Division should document definitions for the data elements and data fields in its information technology systems and ensure staff use them consistently across systems.

Recommendation 2

The Permitting Division should work with King County Information Technology to ensure that information technology system acquisition best practices, including documentation of business processes, user needs, and functional requirements, are incorporated into any future information technology system procurement.

Recommendation 3

To identify applicant barriers to efficiently obtaining permits, the Permitting Division should create a customer journey map detailing each point of applicant interaction with the division and each action that an applicant must take through the entire permit application and review process. The Permitting Division should use this map, in combination with Recommendations 4 through 9, to make processes and tools more efficient and effective.

Recommendation 4

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and publish customer service goals that communicate its intent to provide high-quality customer service and its methods for doing so.

Recommendation 5

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and monitor customer service performance measures.

Recommendation 6

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a plan to provide staff with guidance, job tools, and training to consistently deliver customer-centered service.

Recommendation 7

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement customer feedback processes that solicit input from customers on their experiences, needs, and barriers. Customer feedback processes should be consistent with the direction in the King County Customer Experience Management Guide and include feedback on key touchpoints and outcomes identified in the customer journey map in Recommendation 3 and the goals, methods, and performance measures in Recommendations 4 and 5.

Recommendation 8

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a process to gather, review, analyze, and respond to the performance measures in Recommendation 5, the customer feedback in Recommendation 7, and staff feedback to continuously improve its processes and customer-centered service delivery.

Recommendation 9

The Permitting Division should develop, document, and implement a website improvement plan incorporating user experience leading practices. The plan should include, at a minimum:

a) a defined and documented user experience design strategy that aligns with leading practices outlined in the report

b) a comparative review of peer jurisdictions' permitting websites to identify effective user experience design elements for consideration in the design

c) alignment with the customer journey map developed in Recommendation 3

d) customer feedback on website usability and user experience consistent with the feedback processes in Recommendation 7

e) consistency with the continuous improvement process in Recommendation 8.



Advancing Performance & Accountability

KYMBER WALTMUNSON, KING COUNTY AUDITOR

MISSION Improve government performance, accountability, and transparency by providing impactful, independent analyses.

VALUES INDEPENDENCE • CREDIBILITY • IMPACT

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ABOUT US The King County Auditor's Office was created by charter in 1969 as an independent agency within the legislative branch of county government. The office conducts oversight of county government through independent audits, capital projects oversight, and other studies. The results of this work are presented to the Metropolitan King County Council and are communicated to the King County Executive and the public. The King County Auditor's Office performs its work in accordance with Government Auditing Standards.

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