

## **IX. CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS**

In today's environment, governmental performance is measured by customer satisfaction. In order to determine the Development Services performance, we used several techniques consisting of interviews with the Mayor and City Council members, three customer focus groups, and a mail survey to applicants.

The intent of this customer input was to elicit views and opinions on positive and negative aspects of activities and to seek ideas for change that will improve and enhance Development Services. However, as would be expected, the focus was on perceived problems.

In considering the results, the reader must bear in mind that, unlike documents and statistics, the views expressed by individuals are subjective and may reflect personal biases. Nonetheless, these views are at least as important as objective material because it is these people, with their feelings and prejudices that work with or are often affected by City activities. A second important consideration is that in analyzing the material, it may not be as important to determine whether a particular response is "correct" as it is to simply accept a response or try to determine why customers feel the way they do. Tom Peters, the noted management consultant, has said that in relation to customer service, "Perception is everything." In other words, perception is reality to the person holding the perception.

It should be noted that the purpose of this chapter is to report on the customer input so that the reader of the report can view the comments as customer perceptions without our editing. These comments are not the conclusions of the consultants. Using our methodology as described in Figure 1 and Section B of Chapter II, the customer comments are taken as one form of input to be merged by input of others and our own judgment. Our specific response is in the form of the various recommendations included in this report.

### **A. MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL**

We met the Mayor and six City Council members in individual confidential meetings in order to gain a perspective on the governmental direction for the City and the Development Services functions. There was not unanimous opinion on all topics but a few points of interest follow. Topics are arranged alphabetically.

#### **Comprehensive Plan**

The Comprehensive Plan is "beautiful" and in two years there will be a major up-date to the Plan. The Plan relates to the Growth Management Act which calls for infill and higher densities that many citizens do not want. These issues need to be addressed as part of the update process. Additionally, the Plan and Zoning Ordinance need to be

together. Citizens have not been adequately engaged. The Shoreline Plan did engage lots of citizens and was a success.

The Neighborhood Plans are part of the Comprehensive Plan and some of the 15 plans are out of date. It takes two years to revise a Neighborhood Plan, which is too long. Given the lack of resources to update all the plans, a way to do less costly plans or even eliminate them needs to be found.

## **Design Review**

Design Review is good.

## **Downtown**

This area has been studied too much – time to move on.

## **Economic Development**

Three years ago the Council changed and is more open to economic development. Totem Lake is one of 25 designated centers in four counties and is seen as a key development area that can accommodate more height and density. Needed will be infrastructure improvements, solving flooding issues and big zoning changes.

## **Organization**

Many communities have merged the development related functions, particularly Planning and Building and some include Public Works. The problem is that no one is accountable to all the issues. A few specific issues included

- **Building**  
Maybe Building should be a separate department.
- **Fire**  
Some feel Fire should be separated from Building. Fire Prevention is not as prominent as it should be.
- **Planning**  
Some feel Planning is excellent, others say no and feels they play gotcha games. Planning was not well rated in the citywide survey. Some feel it may be top heavy. The Director is highly esteemed.
- **Public Works**  
Public Works is seen as excellent. Helps applicants get to yes. However, some feel they don't know how to handle big projects.

## **Processes**

Various comments related to the process included:

- **Arborist**  
The Contract Arborist was a problem but it has been changed.
- **Best Practices**  
the City should strive to meet Best Practices
- **Complaints**  
Council hears lots of complaints but it is hard to pin down. Some say City is easy to work with, others say City is difficult to work with. Developers who work all over the region say Kirkland is fine. Complaints may be from the one-time-users.
- **Customers**  
Some feel process is unfriendly and is too much about what you can't do. Staff needs to understand they are in the customer service business. Before the recession the staff were the biggest hand holders in the region, but this has changed.
- **Electronic Plans**  
These have been helpful and developers like the on-line permitting.
- **Predictability**  
There is a lack of predictability and consistency in the process.
- **Timelines**  
Some see as slow, others okay as related to other communities.

## **Staff**

The City is lucky to have many long-term staff, some of whom live in the City. Staff is paid well. Some see the need for more staffing but others feel staff is more than adequate. The use of part time staff and consultants is viewed favorably.

## **Zoning**

The Zoning Code is out of date and needs to be easier and simpler. Redmond totally re-wrote their Zoning Code but Kirkland does not have that kind of money. There are conflicts between Zoning and the Comprehensive Plan and they need to match. Staff needs to get ahead of the curve.

## **B. FOCUS GROUP – APPLICANTS**

Sixteen people who had been applicants in the City’s development and permitting process met in two groups on October 30 and 31 in Heritage Hall for two hours. The meeting was held in confidence and no staff members were present. The groups included architects, builders, designers, engineers, developers, homebuilders, land developers, landscape architects, and planners. Focus group comments are included below. Topics are arranged in alphabetical order.

### **Appeals**

There should be a fee for appeals. If staff originally supported the application, they should also do so on the appeal to the Hearing Examiner.

### **Building**

Some staff are arbitrary and when pressed simply say, “because I can.”. Slowness in issuing building permits is the number one issue in Kirkland. Applicants should have a choice to contract out.

MyBuildingPermit.com seems to work well in other communities but not in Kirkland.

### **Conditions**

In Redmond if staff misses something they will let it pass. In Kirkland, new items keep getting added until the very end.

### **Coordination**

It is not clear if Planning or Building take responsibility to pull things together.

### **Density**

The Planners have supported higher densities but the community often does not.

### **Design Review Board**

Some feel the Board adds little value.

### **Developers**

There needs to be separation and different processes for developers and Mom and Pop’s.

### **Duncan Milloy**

This contract consultant to the City of Kirkland is very helpful in solving problems.

## **Expedited Process**

Kirkland doesn't really have an expedited process. Some say you can expedite residential but not commercial.

## **Fees**

If timelines were shorter and reviews consistent, many developers would be willing to pay more fees.

## **Forms**

Many of the forms are confusing.

## **Height of Buildings**

The current rules may leave a house in a hole, which has an undesirable visual effect and may cause drainage problems. It would be nice to have some leeway and common sense in the rules but most think it would be impossible to change the rules.

## **Land Surface Modification Permits (grading permits)**

These may be approved but don't seem to carry over to the Building Permit.

## **Neighbors**

Most developers meet with the neighbors before they apply.

## **Other Communities**

Some said Redmond is the best, others said it is awful. The same was true for Bellevue. It seems to depend on whom the planner is you talk to. Kirkland is better than King and Snohomish counties, Seattle, and Bellevue.

## **Planning**

There is too much kicking the can down the road when they see an issue. Planning is highly dependent on which staff you get. Applicants will avoid some staff if possible. Unlike Public Works, planners slow things down and create problems. Some of the functions are comfortable in blaming Planning for problems. However, many feel that the Planning Department is broken.

## **Pre-Submittal**

Public Works provided notes but others do not. The usefulness of this meeting depends on which staff attends. What happens at the pre-submittal often does not carry through to the rest of the process.

## **Process**

The group meeting used in Kirkland is good.

## **Progressive Review**

This works well for Building but not as well in Public Works.

## **Public Works**

Public Works in Kirkland is great. They use common sense and are pragmatic. Transportation can be difficult.

Bonding can be a bit punitive. The construction standards document is okay.

## **Short Plats**

These get bogged down and take too long for approval.

## **Timelines**

Timelines are too long. Buildings may take six to nine months. The stated five weeks for a single-family house never happens. Staff doesn't look at plans until the end of week five. In Kirkland, if one person says no, everything stops.

## **Trees**

A major issue in Kirkland has been the way trees are handled. The Arborist has been very biased and can stop everything. Public Works has had to give in to Planning. Suggestions included:

- Have mitigation measure when a tree needs to be removed, i.e. fees or planting additional trees.
- Have solar access and home gardens as part of the tree analysis.
- Talk to the development industry about any changes in policy. The industry was not involved in the recent Urban Forestry study.
- If you do short plat or building permit the two tree rule does not apply but it should.

## **Website**

The website is confusing and you should be able to fill out the forms on the website.

## **Zoning/Comprehensive Plan**

There is confusion regarding which takes precedence. However, it now appears to most that Zoning normally takes precedence over the Plan.

The Zoning Code needs to be streamlined and simplified. It is very difficult for single-family houses. Parts of the Code are in conflict with City objectives.

## **C. FOCUS GROUPS – CITIZENS**

Seven citizens who represented a variety of Kirkland neighborhood associations met on October 30<sup>th</sup>. for two hours at the Houghton Room in City Hall. The meeting was held in confidence and no staff members were present. Focus group comments are included below. Topics are arranged in alphabetical order.

### **The Future**

Some feel that Kirkland will need to change as it becomes a larger City requiring a different mind-set. There are three distinct districts of downtown, Totem Lake, and Kirkland Park and Ride. Issues include:

- How to get from park and ride to Totem Lake.
- The City's overall goals are not clear.
- Some citizens want more input on decisions but many realize citizens mostly get involved when there is a specific project.
- There is a need for better infrastructure, particularly for traffic.
- There was no traffic study done for the Houghton area.

### **City Council**

The City Council is seen as responsive to citizen concerns and works hard to communicate. The City has lots of list serves. The Council and department heads go to three neighborhoods per year.

### **Notices**

The notices that go to citizens can be a bit obscure. Suggestions include:

- Getting the right words in the subject line.
- Reference access to more detailed files.
- List the neighborhood on the email
- Providing a better project description
- Once projects are underway it is hard to get data on what is going on.

### **Planners**

Some feel that planners reach out to the community but most feel they do not.

### **Public Works**

Public Works is seen as great. They try to find win win solutions.

## **Silos**

The workers are seen as being in silos and should work better together.

## **This Report**

Focus group members want to see the results from this report and effort.

## **Trees**

While trees are important, there needs to be a balanced approach.

## **D. CUSTOMER SURVEYS**

An email survey was used in this study to obtain applicant customer input. The survey was sent to 500 applicants for development approvals or permits. Forty surveys were returned for a return rate of 8.0%. This is below our normal return rate of 15 to 20% but can still provide some insight into Development Services activities.

The survey and responses to the surveys is Appendix D. Question 4 through 26 were designed so that checking a “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” category is a sign of a satisfied customer. A “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” is a sign of a dissatisfied customer.

Normally, when negative responses of “Disagree” or “Strongly Disagree” exceed 15%, the responses indicate an area of possible concern. Less than 15% normally indicates this category of question is satisfying the customers. Percentages higher than 15% but below 30% are areas that should be examined for possible customer service concerns. Negative percentages of 30% or higher indicate areas needing early attention since roughly one third or more of the customers have concerns about service.

Some believe that only customers who have problems will return a survey of this type. While it is likely that customers with problems may be more likely to return the surveys, our experience with this and dozens of similar surveys indicate that they still produce valid information. For example, we’ve worked in other communities where the negative responses seldom exceeded 15%.

It should also be noted that a survey of this type is not a scientific, statistically controlled sample. Nevertheless, when respondents express concerns, they are indications of problems that need to be addressed.

The questionnaires also asked applicants to indicate suggestions and areas for improvement. These comments are also included in Appendix D. Many of the comments were very complimentary concerning Development Services.

A summary of the responses that exceed our 15% threshold are shown in Table 28. The “Not Applicable” category was excluded from this calculation. Only nine of the

23 questions had negative responses above our 15% threshold and only two questions exceeded our 30% threshold. Three questions exceeded 15% negative for Building, five questions exceeded 15% negative for Engineering with three of these exceeding 20%, none of the questions exceeded 15% for Fire, all nine questions exceeded 15% for Planning with four exceeding 20% and two exceeding 30%.

In spite of these negative scores, these are some of the better responses that we have seen in our many studies. The biggest concern shown by this survey is with plan review turnaround times, Questions 10, 12, and 13. This corresponds with other findings discussed in other parts of this report. Planning should be particularly concerned with Question 12 with 35.7% negative and Question 13 with 34.6% negative.

**216. Recommendation:** The DCR II should hold a series of discussions related to how to best address customer timeline concerns.

**217. Recommendation:** The Planning Director should meet with the Planning staff and managers that handle development applications relating to how to best address customer timeline concerns.

**Table 28  
Responses to Customer Email Survey**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Building</b>	<b>Engineering</b>	<b>Fire</b>	<b>Planning</b>
4, I understand the City's Development Review and Plan Check processes. They are straightforward and not unnecessarily cumbersome or complex				20.7%
5, When making an application, I have generally found the City staff to be responsive and helpful				16.7%
6, Staff provides prompt feedback on incomplete submittals				24.0%
10, Plan checking turnaround time is acceptable	20.0%	20.8%		26.7%
11, Codes and policies are applied by staff in a fair and practical manner		16.7%		22.6%
12, The turnaround time for review and approval or disapproval of my applications was not any longer with Kirkland than other cities or counties where I have filed applications	22.9%	26.1%		34.5%
13, If project processing is delayed, the delay is typically justifiable. Projects are not delayed over minor issues	20.7%	28.6%		37.0%
16, The conditions of approval or plan check corrections applied to my project were reasonable and justified		16.9%		16.7%
17, The City staff was easily accessible when I needed assistance in resolving problems				15.4%

The Questionnaire also addressed the Planning Commission, City Council, and Hearing Examiner. Responses for all three were favorable. However, when asked if the input from the hearing was useful the responses turned negative. They were 79% negative for the City Council, 62.5% negative for the Planning Commission, and 75% negative for the Hearing examiner. This could be an indication that all three bodies could do a better job of explaining their actions to applicants.

**218.** *Recommendation:* The City Manager should share the results of the customer survey with the City Council, Planning Commission, and Hearing Examiner.

