

XVII. CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS

A. OVERVIEW

In today's environment, governmental performance is measured by customer satisfaction. In order to determine the Planning and Development Review Department's performance, we used several techniques consisting of 16 customer focus groups, and an email 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 the Department or Division. 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 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.

B. STAKEHOLDERS

As per the RFP and contract an approach to a Stakeholder process was approved by the City. The goal was to gather input from stakeholders of perceptions, experiences and satisfaction with the Planning and Development Review Department functions.

During the months of August, September, and October we met with 16 groups either in focus groups or open public meetings. These included 2 Chamber groups, 9 industry related groups, 4 meetings with many groups of neighborhoods, and one special interest group. The groups are listed in Table 84.

Table 84
Stakeholder Groups

American Institute of Architects – Austin Chapter
Austin Board of Realtors
Austin Neighborhood Council
Contractor Associations
Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce
Greater Austin Contractors & Engineers Association
Home Builders Association of Greater Austin
Minority Ethnic Chambers of Commerce
National Association of Remodeling Industry
Neighborhood Groups – South
Neighborhood Groups - Central
Neighborhood Groups – North
PDRD 2013 Stakeholder Group
Real Estate Council of Austin
Special Interest Groups
Specialty Contractors Associations

The detail about these groups and their comments are shown in Appendix E. For ease of review, we have consolidated all of the comments by topic in Appendix I.

C. CUSTOMER SURVEYS

An email survey was used in this study to obtain applicant customer input. The survey was emailed to 2,101 applicants for development approvals or permits. Some surveys were returned with bad addresses (186) so 1,950 surveys actually went to applicants. Three hundred nineteen surveys were returned for a return rate of 16.4%. This is within our normal return rate of 15 to 25 %.

Detailed tallies from survey respondents are shown in Appendix D with specific comments shown in Appendix F. Many questions 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. The percentages shown in the analysis below indicate the percent of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the question statement. The “Not Applicable” category was excluded from this calculation.

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. Negative percentages higher than 15% but below 25% are areas that should be examined for possible customer service concerns. Negative percentages of 25% or higher indicate areas needing early attention since roughly one third or more of the customers have concerns about service.

We note that the negative responses we received in this survey are the worst we have seen in our national studies including many Texas communities.

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 high numbers of 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. 142 of the 310 respondents provided suggestions which we used as part of our analysis.

458. Recommendation: The Planning and Development Review Department, other departments included in the survey, and Boards and Commissions should review the customer questionnaire and determine areas where they can be responsive to customer concerns.

Overview of Survey

The survey resulted in a good cross section of customers as shown in Figure 43 and 197. Also, 74% of the respondents are frequent users of the development review and

plan reviewing process (Question 3) and 89% of the applications were ultimately approved (Question 41).

Figure 43
Types of Development Respondents Have Applied For

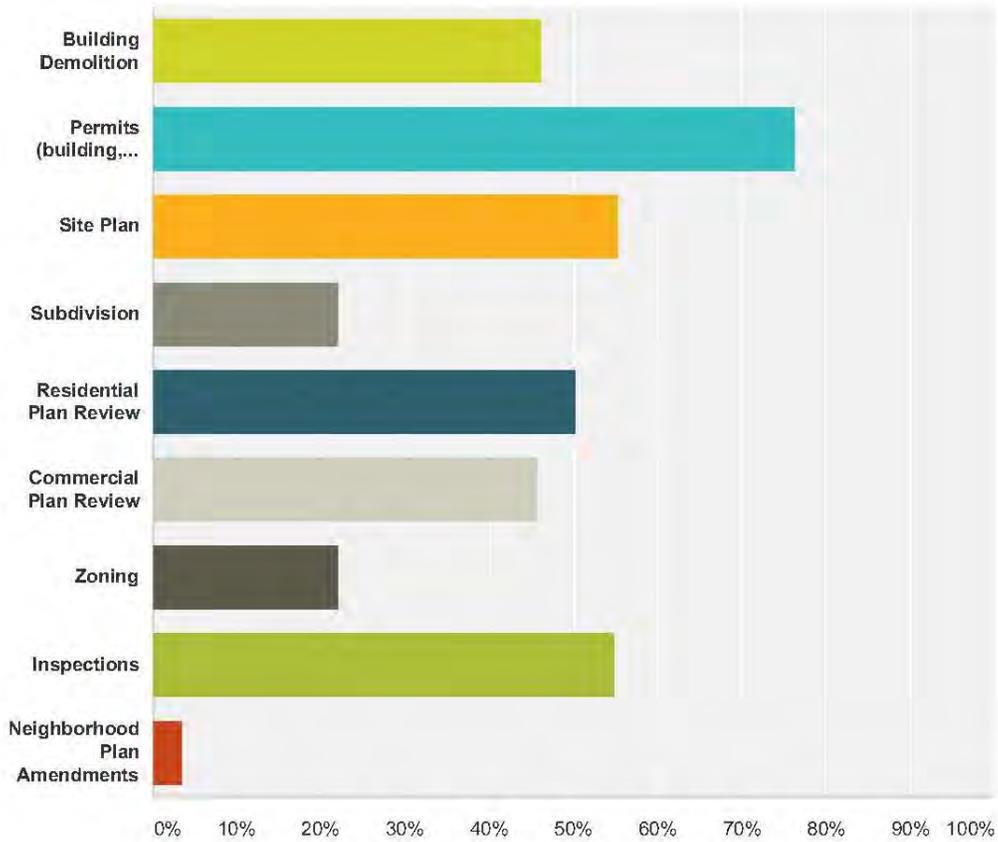
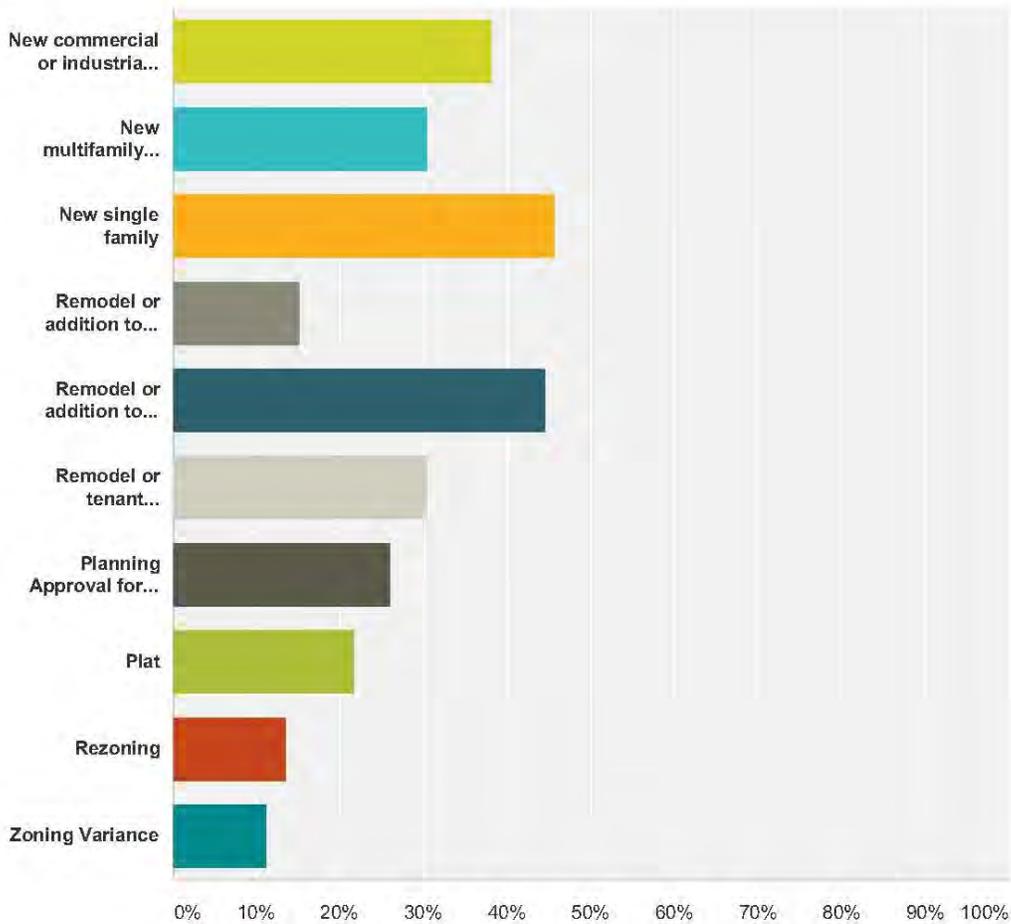


Figure 44
Type of Permit



Boards and Commissions

Thirty eight percent of the respondents were not clear is a Board or Commission was required for their application, Q 25. The percent who felt a specific organization was useful or not useful is shown in Table 85.

Table 85
Board and Commissions Were Useful

Board or Commission	Were Useful	Were Not Useful
Q 26. Board of Adjustment	10%	27%
Q 27. Building & Fire Code Board of Appeals	2%	11%
Q 28. Design Commission	6%	23%

Board or Commission	Were Useful	Were Not Useful
Q 29. Environmental Board	8%	26%
Q 30. Historic Landmark Commission	21%	25%
Q 31. Land Development Code Advisory Group	6%	20%
Q. 32. Mechanical Plumbing and Solar Board	5%	10%
Q 33. Planning Commission	17 %	23%
Q 34. Residential Design and Compatibility Commission	7%	29%
Q 35. Sign Review Board	5%	8%
Q 36. Zoning and Platting Commission	19%	15%

City Council

Question 40 asked if the City Council treated me fairly and were courteous. Of the respondents, 26% agreed but 10% disagreed.

Coordination Between Functions and Other Departments

Question 42 asked if there were coordination problems between any two divisions or functions. Coordination appears to be a major problem and all involved departments and PDRD Divisions should review the detailed comments included in this Question. Functions with the highest coordination issues are shown in Table 86. These same functions show up with major issues in other parts of this report as well.

Table 86
Coordination Problems

Department or Division	Number of Comments
Austin Energy	8
Austin Water Utility	24
Fire Department	7
Legal Department	7
Plan Review and Inspection	8

459. *Recommendation:* All involved departments and PDRD Divisions should review the detailed comments included in Question 42.

Questions related to other departments are shown in Table 87. As can be seen, all the departments except for Health exceed our 25% cutoff point. These negative responses correlate with other negative comments we received about these departments.

460. *Recommendation:* All the City departments involved in the development process should review questions 18 and 19 and develop ways to address the stakeholder concerns.

Table 87
Questions Related To Other Departments

Question	Negative Percentages
Q 18. If a project is delayed, the delay is typically caused by other departments (non-PDRD) that participate in the review process?	45%
Q 19. Austin is just as fair and practical in its application of regulations as other neighboring cities or counties in the functions of:	
Austin Energy	38%
Fire Department	25%
Health Department	17%
Planning and Development	66%
Public Works	37%
Watershed Protection	49%
Water Utility	44%

Planning and Development Review Department (PDRD)

Most of the questions in the survey related to PDRD. Table 88 below indicates the questions and the percent of responses that were negative. We like to see negatives below 15%. As they get above 25% they indicate signs of concern. Five of the questions exceed our 25% negative cut off. But 13 of the question exceed 50% and more. This means that over half of PDRDs customers that completed the survey feel that PDRD is doing a very poor job. Staff was considered courteous by 68% but 70% said staff was not easily accessible when I needed assistance in resolving problems. These findings match other work underway for this study and need major attention. PDRD staff and managers should not only look at the percentages but also study in detail the specific accompanying responses. The use of an outside facilitator may be useful in conducting staff meetings and retreats to address the issues.

461. Recommendation: PDRD staff and managers should look at the negative percentages from the customer survey and also study in detail the specific accompanying responses.

Table 88
Percent Negative Responses for PDRD

Question	Percent Negative
Q 4.I understand the organizational structure of PDRD and external review departments	40%
Q 5. I understand the City's Development Review and Plan review processes	33%
Q 6. The City's Development Review and Plan review process are not unnecessarily cumbersome or complex.	82%
Q 7. When making an application, I have generally found the City intake staff to be responsive and helpful.	39%
Q. 8.Staff provides prompt feedback on incomplete submittals	53%
Q 9. In general, did PDRD staff provide good customer service.	50%
Q 10. In general, after application acceptance, PDRD staff anticipated obstacles early on and provided options where they were available.	70%
Q 11. Have you experienced a situation where your projects was delayed by a problem that should have been identified during initial review? (Question was reversed)	80%
Q 12. Review services were completed ty the date promised.	72%
Q 13. Do you know what the City's stated review times were for your application?	28% No, 72% Yes

Question	Percent Negative
Q 14. PDRD's promised delivery dates are reasonable and acceptable.	51%
Q 15. Codes and policies are applied by PDRD staff in a fair and practical manner.	60%
Q 16. The turnaround time for review and approval of disapproval of my application was not any longer in Austin than other cities or counties where I have filed applications.	73%
Q 17. If project processing is delayed, the delay is typically justifiable. Projects are not delayed over minor issues.	81%
Q 20. PDRD staff was courteous.	19% negative, 68% positive
Q 21. The conditions of approval or plan review corrections applied to my project were reasonable and justified.	53%
Q 22. PDRD staff was easily accessible when I needed assistance in resolving problems.	69%
Q 23. I found the handouts supplied by PDRD to be useful and informative in explaining the requirements I must meet.	39%
Q 24. Inspectors rarely found errors in the field during construction that should have been caught during the plan reviewing process.	40%

Website

Three Questions addressed the City's website with these results:

- 89% are aware of and utilize available City Information that is online, Q 37.
- 50% feel the website provides comprehensive and useful information for the Planning and Development process but 42% feel it does not, Q 38.
- Only 25% felt that the website was easy to navigate, 65% felt it was not, Q 39.

In other aspects of this study we received major concerns related to the quality and information on the website. The specific comments included in the questionnaire should provide useful information to improve the website. Staff involved with the website should review the three questions and the specific comments included for each question.

462. Recommendation: Staff involved with the website should review the three questions and the specific comments included for each question.

D. ANNUAL COMMUNITY SURVEY

The City of Austin conducts an annual Community Survey. The 2013 report was prepared by the ETC Institute and published November 2013. The sample size was

1,260 surveys with a confidence level of 95%. The survey compares Austin to other cities over 250,000 population and suggests that Austin rates 14% overall satisfaction than other cities with customer service rated 26% above the national average.

City investment/communication priorities that will have the most positive impact on overall satisfaction over the next year included:

- Maintenance of City streets and sidewalks (28% most importance).
- Public safety services (50% most important).
- **Planning, development review, permitting and inspection services (20% most important).**

Other items of interest included:

- 45% were dissatisfied about how well Austin is planning growth (a -9% change from 2013).
- 39% were dissatisfied about the overall quality of planning, development review, permitting and inspection services, a -7% change from 2013.
- The quality of planning, development review, permitting and inspection processes had a “higher importance/Lower satisfaction” outcome.