

Appendix A – Red Tape Red Carpet (RTRC) Feedback from Customer Segments and Staff

Over the last year, new engagement was undertaken with the business community to understand where we are now with red tape in the city, what issues they face in doing business in Burlington and how we can make it easier for them to start, locate and grow in Burlington. Five focus groups were held based on the key industries of business that interact with the City of Burlington and Burlington Economic Development. Feedback from each of these groups is summarized below and available in detail in Appendix A:

Industrial, Commercial, and Institutional (ICI) Realtors

ICI Realtors support businesses through their land and location needs. They work with businesses to buy or lease a new facility in Burlington and highlighted the following areas during the feedback session:

- **Frustration and Delays in Site Plan Approval and Permit Processes:** Experiencing long wait times and a slowing down of the site plan application process. The delay is having a significant impact on their ability to attract investment and revenue.
- **Lack of Continuity and Staff Turnover:** Dealing with a large number of staff members, and the challenge of maintaining consistent information. The high turnover rate adds to this challenge and is often perceived as a never-ending cycle of new comments for their clients.
- **Difficulty in Contacting City Staff:** Frustration over the inability to reach city staff and how email communication is not always effective. They emphasized the need for more direct communication, and leaving voicemails and sending emails is causing delays in the development process.
- **Need for a More Cohesive Approach and Stronger Connections:** Need for a more cohesive approach and stronger connections between the city and other agencies. They feel that a more collaborative approach between developers and the City would increase accountability and progress.
- **Importance of Feedback and Communication:** Appreciate the efforts of the Economic Development team to seek feedback and provide helpful responses to inquiries. They believe there should be more opportunities for open communication, such as debriefings following applications approved by the City, to ensure actions and learnings are included in process improvements moving forward.
- **Desire for Realistic Timing Guarantees and Process Improvements:** Want guarantees on realistic timing, which would help them plan accordingly for tenant and business timelines to enter locations. They believe improvements in time frames can be achieved through lean and six sigma methodologies and by allowing applicants to log in remotely and see where files are in the process.

- **Reputational Concerns and Negative Perception of Burlington's Brand:** Feel that the slow turnaround times have damaged Burlington's reputation and are costing the city potential revenue as businesses are no longer willing to look at Burlington sites.
- **Need for Faster Turnaround Times to Attract Investment and Revenue:** Emphasized that time to market is essential for this group, and the city needs to improve its speed and efficiency in the development process. The cost of delays is significant, and developers are more willing to pay a premium to get a permit done quicker. There is also a gap in information needed that is legislated for response times e.g., zoning needed for due diligence to purchase a site.

Overall, the feedback suggests that realtors want a more efficient and cohesive development process in Burlington that can provide faster turnaround times and improve the city's reputation.

Industrial Commercial and Institutional (ICI) Landowners and Developers

ICI landowners and developers provide sites for new businesses to expand and locate to Burlington. They either develop speculatively (in advance of having a tenant) or develop a property for a specific business. They can develop a property as part of a long-term lease agreement or sell it to a business.

- **Delays, unclear processes, and lack of communication:** Expressed frustration with the length of time it takes to get projects approved, the lack of clarity around the application process, and the difficulty of getting timely responses from staff. The need for a more efficient process and greater transparency and the frustration of having to escalate to get responses. Developers also mentioned a bottleneck in site engineering, as well as concerns about "nitpicky" comments that do not trust the professional credentials of submissions and poor communication around resolving issues.
- **Need for greater empathy, transparency, and relationship-building:** Need for a more empathetic and transparent approach to working with developers, and the importance of building relationships with staff. It was suggested that staff need more institutional memory (knowledge and information management), and a more consistent and accountable approach to dealing with customers.
- **Desire for more timely and efficient processes:** Concerns about the time it takes to get projects approved, and the negative impact this has on tenants and end-users. The need for a more streamlined process, and that other cities are more efficient and consistent were discussed. Lack of institutional memory was cited an issue, especially due to turnover in staff, they are having to repeat their story multiple times over the development process.
- **Focus on culture and customer service:** Importance of developing a culture focused on customer service and ensuring the role of the planner as a single point of contact for applicants.

Residential Developers and Landowners

This group was primarily composed of large-scale residential developers with projects that would have a higher economic impact. Developers in this group had both a sale and a long-term leasing business model.

- **Efficient and Transparent Processes:** Emphasized the need for efficient and transparent processes, especially with technology. Clearer communications needed on the recent changes to prebuilding process and how this will impact application processing.
- **Improving Communication:** Concern about the lack of communication between the City and developers, which leads to delays and inefficiencies. They suggested that communication between staff and developers should be more direct and in person, while emphasizing the importance of being able to get ahold of City staff.
- **Capacity Building:** There was consensus among the participants that the City needs to work on building the capacity of its staff to handle the increasing workload.
- **Rewarding Efficiency:** Participants suggested that the City should reward staff who are efficient in their work and empower them to make decisions. They suggested evaluating the time it takes to process an application or how the staff person works with the developer.
- **Culture Shift:** Need for a culture shift within the City towards becoming more solutions-focused and enabling. They suggested that developers often get a bad reputation with taxpayers and suggested that the City needs to show taxpayers that developers are important. At the same time, there is a feeling from the developers that the City needs to trust and accept that their submissions are made by professionals who know what they are doing.
- **Learning from Other Municipalities:** Learning from other municipalities, such as Markham and Hamilton, which have successful e-plan systems.
- **Partnering with developers and other agencies:** Need to help communicate the value that residential developers bring to the city and proactively work with them to vision for intensification areas including technical barriers to achieving housing goals like servicing and transportation management.
- **Difficulty in Contacting City Staff:** Frustration over the inability to reach city staff and how email communication is not always effective. They emphasized the need for more direct communication and having the ability to meet with someone to review plans and resolve issues in person.
- **Lack of Flexibility:** While it is acknowledged that the zoning and parking regulations in intensification areas are out of date, they don't see flexibility in how they are applied by staff in line with market demands/realities.

Overall, the discussion focused on the need for efficient and transparent processes, better communication, capacity building, rewarding efficiency, culture shift, and learning from other municipalities. They suggested several solutions to address these issues, such as the development of online tools, direct communication between staff and developers, and a focus on staff capacity building and culture shift.

Existing Businesses (Non-Development)

Existing businesses range from main street business, such as restaurants and retailers to manufacturers and larger office-based employers with up to 1,000 employees. Small businesses buying and leasing new commercial properties face significant barriers to understanding the complexity of processes and finding the right resources to support them through regulatory processes. Larger businesses in the manufacturing and office sectors will typically buy or lease a new building once every 20-30 years. They expect that hiring professional consultants and planning professionals to manage the process will make it straightforward, timely and predictable.

- **Communication and responsiveness:** Expressed frustration with the slow and unresponsive communication from the City and consultants during the development process. They suggested the need for a single point of contact and a more streamlined process.
- **Zoning and Regulations:** Frustration with the zoning and regulatory process in Burlington, citing lack of transparency and flexibility, creating delays and financial loss for businesses.
- **Need for a streamlined and clear process:** Single point of contact, to help small businesses navigate the complex development process in Burlington.
- **Desire for change and improvement:** There was a clear desire for change and improvement in the development process with frustration expressed with the current system and the need for a more customer-focused and solution-oriented approach.
- **Importance of early intervention and communication:** The attendees stressed the importance of early intervention and communication in the development process, with a need for clear and transparent communication from the City and consultants. They identified the need to understand the process at the beginning, to give the business a one-on-one meeting, and to present the business with a clear pathway and early interventions to make sure that things go smoothly.

Overall, the key themes from the discussion were the need for clear communication, a streamlined process, and a customer-focused approach to development in Burlington. They also encouraged the City to recognize the different levels of support that different types of business need who may be less familiar with the development process.

City of Burlington Staff

The session with staff was proactively looking at solutions, including having an ambassador/champion for business files, concurrent processing of site plan and building permit applications, a culture shift to problem-solving and enabling development, proactive communications with businesses, prioritization of business files, and power for Economic Developer/Business Ambassador role to meet timelines to

support the retention and attraction of business. In addition, the following key themes emerged:

- The complexity, scope and pace of legislative changes are difficult to manage.
- Staffing retention and recruitment challenges impacting ability to process files in addition to gaps emerging in information management and handover of files.
- Positive belief that the Streamline Development Approval Fund (SDAF) and new process changes will make significant improvements.
- Culture change to put customers first and focus on solutions is happening, but need clear direction to empower staff to problem solve becoming enablers not enforcers.
- Communication challenges, including lack of clarity on timelines and difficulty in getting a hold of other staff.
- Process and policy challenges, including outdated zoning by-laws and inconsistencies, backlog in committee of adjustment, and interpretation variations.
- Reputation and perception challenges, including the perception that Burlington is not development friendly and lags in technology adoption and e-reviews/submissions.
- Lack of clarity in how files should be prioritized and mixed messaging on what items should go to the top of the pile with the need for clear and consistent criteria for prioritization.