



DEPARTMENT OF SAFETY AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

# PLAN REVIEW PILOT REPORT

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## SUMMARY

Secretary-designee Dawn B. Crim directed the Department of Safety and Professional Services Division of Industry Services to evaluate its plan review process and identify opportunities for improved customer service. This initial evaluation identified three key needs: a more strategic alignment of human resources, more consistent communications and constituent expectations, and faster, more predictable service.

The division piloted several changes to existing processes. Once those changes were determined to be effective, leadership quickly moved to make those permanent. The pilot project resulted in significant improvements in all three areas. Together, these changes yield a process that is more efficient, more consistent, and faster for customers. This is good for the department, good for customers and good for Wisconsin.

DSPS has developed a three-phase approach to implement multi-faced changes to better position the agency to efficiently execute its plan review function.

**Phase One-** Create a new functional approach to reducing plan review processing time by strategically using resources and staff available.

**Phase Two-** Directing code councils to consider establishing review thresholds based on potential public risk exposure rather than building size to determine which projects would be subject to agency review and approval.

**Phase Three-** Pursuing potential legislative changes that would afford the department greater flexibility in how it establishes fees and policies related to plan review.

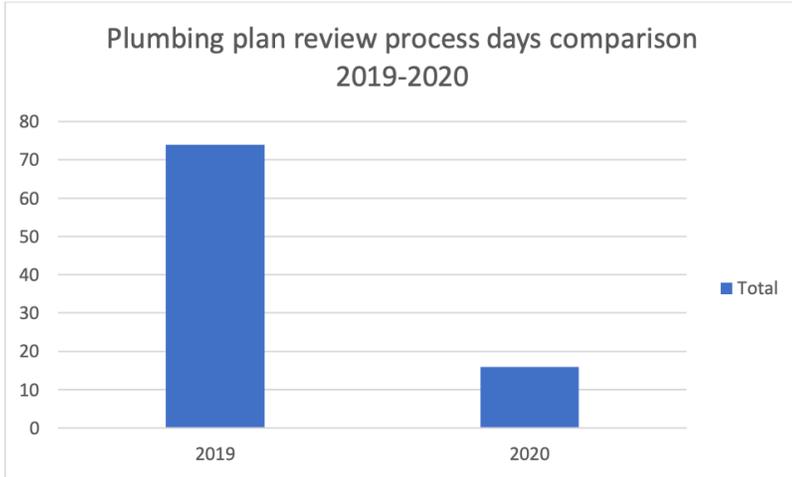
Phase one ran in the first and second quarters of 2020. The Division of Industry Services team used a Lean Six Sigma method to define the problem, measure process performance, analyze the process to identify root causes of delay and inefficiency, improve the process by eliminating identified problems, and establish controls to enable the team to identify future problems as they emerge and to remedy them immediately.



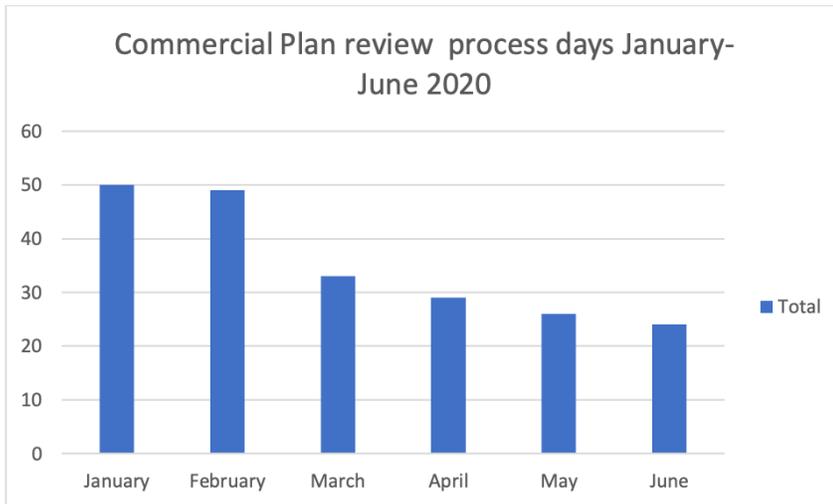
# PHASE ONE OF PLAN REVIEW PROCESS

Phase One identified several problem areas, which were remedied. This led to significant improvements and findings, including the following:

- **Process time for plumbing plan reviews is down 73% (average turn-around time is 3 weeks).**



- **Process time for commercial plan reviews is down 40% (average turn-around time is at 5 weeks for plans submitted to be completed).**



- **Plan submission is shifting to 100% electronic (the goal), as electronic plan submission is far more efficient and cost effective for customers and the state.**
  - **Certain areas, such as fire suppression, require additional staffing and resources to handle plan volume.**
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# BACKGROUND

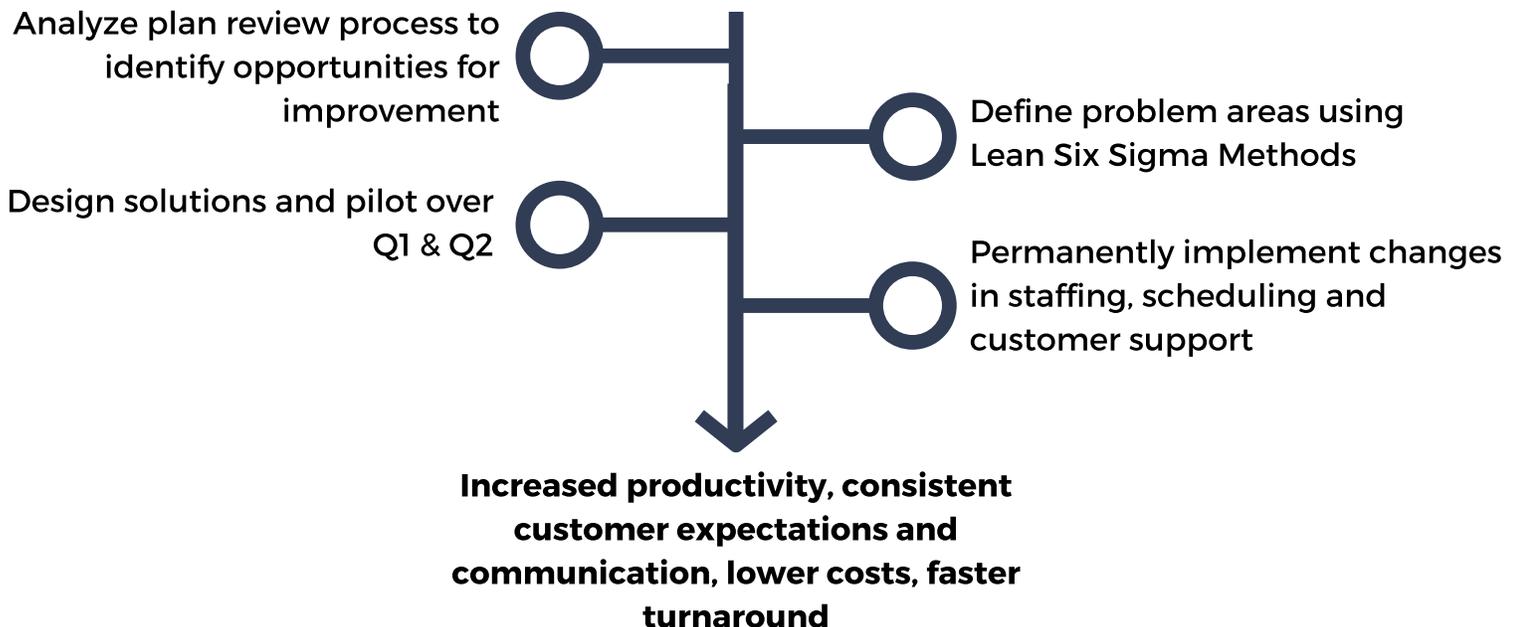
The Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services is responsible for enforcing the commercial building code. To execute that responsibility, the department oversees the review and approval of building plans. Some of that work is done within the agency, and the balance is completed by municipal partners who are delegated the authority to provide these services.

The department's internal processes had been in place for more than a decade, during which time the agency had experienced significant staff reduction. Over the course of ten years, DSPS lost a third of its total employee base.

Soon after Secretary-designee Crim was appointed to lead the agency in January of 2019, she assessed operations division by division. She also met with partners in legislature and other stakeholders to identify constituent interests and perceptions of DSPS. During these meetings and afterwards, some legislators and customers expressed concern over the length of time it took the department to schedule and review construction plans. Secretary-designee Crim has made addressing this concern a priority during her leadership of the agency.

## PLAN REVIEW PILOT PROJECT

Secretary-designee Crim acknowledged the concerns about the turn-around time for plan reviews and saw an opportunity. The agency was in the middle of a sweeping technology conversion, which had been in development for many years, to replace multiple client-facing platforms with a single platform for all customers. The Division of Industry Services, which housed the plan review function, was set to transition to the new platform. The new platform would necessitate training and, possibly, some process adjustments. Secretary-designee Crim determined it would be the best timing for a complete evaluation of the plan review process so that any changes could be integrated directly into the technology transition. This analysis also identified opportunities to better align staff with the work and to improve communications and level expectations with customers and other constituents.



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Secretary-designee Crim directed a thorough analysis of the current plan review process. This analysis identified some practices that could be refined. These include the following:

- **Incomplete plan submission:** The department was accepting and scheduling plans that were not ready to be reviewed. Prior to the process overhaul, less than 30% of scheduled plans were actually complete upon submission. That meant that staff spent scheduled plan review time on back-and-forth communication with customers to obtain necessary materials. This was not an efficient use of plan review time and it delayed the actual plan review. It also distorted the perceived efficiency of the department and staff, leading to unwarranted criticism.
- **Dual-scheduling model contributing to delays:** The department was allowing customers to schedule plans out into the future while other customers would schedule first-available slots. This created logjams at certain points in the calendar and left other plan-review time empty. This dual process originated when the agency had a larger staff and less customer demand, so it could offer tailored services and schedule differently for different customers. As staffing grew leaner and customer demand changed, this approach became increasingly difficult for the department to sustain and contributed to inefficiencies.
- **Multiple bookings:** Customers had learned to reserve multiple plan review slots as insurance in case they missed their own internal deadlines. Instead of having to cancel and get back in the queue, they could have another appointment on the books just a couple weeks out. They did not always cancel unused slots with notice, or at all, and this wasted valuable plan review time.
- **Priority plan review:** In response to demand for faster turn-around times, the department had used an expedited process, reliant on overtime, for customers willing to pay a premium on top of their usual fees. These expedited projects often exceeded allowable overtime and caused additional delays in the regular schedule.



# PILOTED SOLUTIONS

The pilot project began in January 2020 and ran through June. The Division of Industry Services team modified the plan review intake, scheduling and review process to better leverage human resources, improve communications and level expectations and reduce customer wait times. These piloted changes included the following:

## **Better leverage human resources:**

- Plan intake staff assumed greater responsibility for initial plan assessment and determination of readiness for review. This enabled plan review staff to focus on reviewing and approving plans rather than back-and-forth communication with clients to assemble complete plans ready for review.
- Inspection staff, also within the Division of Industry Services, were trained to complete reviews for simpler plans. This enabled plan review staff to handle more complex projects and gave the division greater flexibility in prioritizing and allocating staff.
- Projects were assigned based on both expertise and growth opportunity in order to expand the capability and flexibility of existing staff.
- The team used historical data to identify signs and predict upcoming periods of increased demand. They also set targets that triggered enhancing staff with limited term employees (LTEs) or redeploying inspection staff to plan review functions.

## **Improve communications and level expectations:**

- The department enhanced and promoted check-list tools for customers to help them submit all necessary materials on time in advance of scheduled review dates.
- Outdated tools were replaced with new systems to eliminate miscommunication about wait times.
- The move away from priority plan review (the opportunity to pay an extra fee to have a plan reviewed immediately) stabilized the schedule and staff workloads. It also ensures that, moving forward, expectations are clear and consistent for all customers, regardless of project size or ability to pay extra fees.



## **Reduced customer wait times:**

- Plans that remained incomplete ten days prior to scheduled review were removed from the calendar and complete plans were slotted into available review windows.
  - Duplicate bookings were automatically removed from the calendar, which gave a clearer picture of true staff capacity and availability.
  - Staff support to train customers on electronic filing enhanced transition to new customer-service platform, which allowed for advance payment and faster scheduling.
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# CONCLUSIONS

**The piloted staffing and process changes yielded significant overall improvements for the division and will be maintained.** These improvements include:

- **Improved efficiency:** The process changes enable the agency to use more available plan review hours actively reviewing plans instead of communicating with customers to obtain necessary materials. This is a more effective use of resources.
- **Better workforce development:** Our new model allows us to better invest in staff skill development and cross-functional training, making our workforce more flexible and better able to respond to shifting demand for plan review services.
- **Better controls:** Our new process includes forecasting thresholds that enable us to predict increases or decreases in demand that would trigger any staff reallocation or need for overtime. This means fewer surprises despite schedule fluctuations due to seasonal patterns or other events, such as COVID-19 disruptions.
- **Consistent expectations:** Elimination of flawed systems resulted in more consistent outcomes and ability to ensure service within six weeks.
- **Greater equity:** Greater staff flexibility and improved consistency allowed the agency to move away from priority review, which previously favored customers able to pay a premium for faster service.
- **Reduced cost:** Moving away from priority review also cut cost, as priority review was supported by increasing weekly availability through overtime spending.

With significant gains realized, the department will also continue with the second and third phases evaluating review thresholds and pursuing greater flexibility through legislative changes of the project.

Secretary-designee Crim already called on the Commercial Building Code Council and the Plumbing Code Advisory Committee to evaluate plan-review thresholds. Current Commercial Building Code thresholds are based primarily on size and plumbing code thresholds are based primarily on fixture number. New risk-based guidelines could vary depending on building type, use, occupancy and the project's eventual public risk exposure. She also continues conversations with lawmakers to pursue statutory changes that would afford the department greater flexibility.

Finally, the pilot project identified some areas that need further adjustment to process and staffing. Specifically, the team identified fire suppression plan review as an area that would benefit from additional staffing, and the division has already retooled and shifted an existing position vacancy to meet that need. The department has also worked with some municipalities to conduct additional fire suppression plan review. **As the resources of the department and the needs of our customers change, we will continue working to improve our processes to ensure safety while maximizing the benefits to the citizens of Wisconsin.**

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**"The mission of the Department of Safety and Professional Services is to promote economic growth and stability while protecting the citizens of Wisconsin as designated by statute."**