

Faster permitting and better retrofit projects

Construction permitting requirements are designed to keep people safe but can be difficult for applicants to navigate. Complex projects — such as deep retrofits of multi-unit residential buildings — can be even more challenging, often resulting in delays and frustration for everyone involved.

Best practice

Local governments can provide enhanced support for major, significant, complex, and sometimes atypical projects by assigning a client liaison to work with the permit applicant. This improves certainty and predictability for project outcomes and timelines.

Intervention

The City of Edmonton's Client Liaison Unit came about through an industry-city collaboration that identified inefficiencies in the permitting of innovative or complex building projects. When a project is flagged for the program, the client liaison assembles a team to steward it through the planning and development process. The client liaison becomes the point of contact for applicants and the primary advisor for external stakeholders and internal staff.

Currently, Edmonton's liaison service is available for commercial, industrial or large-scale residential infill projects with construction scheduled in the near term. Project eligibility is based on expected complexity or potential contribution to municipal goals:

- **Complexity:** Project complexity may be due to political or public interest, servicing and infrastructure challenges, or design and construction details.
- **Location:** The project must be in a location that supports the City's vision for growth. This could include areas identified for priority development or as part of integrated land planning policies (e.g. densifying near transit hubs).

- **Economic or social impact:** The project will create jobs, increase tax revenues or include outcomes of built form that are valuable for the city.

The Sundance Housing Co-op Deep Energy Retrofit project was invited to participate in the client liaison program because it is a non-typical project with innovative construction, namely prefabricated exterior wall panels. Although the program is not explicitly targeted at retrofits or energy efficiency projects, the Sundance Co-op fits the criteria because it is complex; it also demonstrates an innovative approach to retrofitting the building envelope while tenants remain in place, which could help transform the retrofit market. Modernization and acceleration of the retrofit market would in turn help Edmonton meet its 2050 carbon pollution reduction targets.



"We're changing our perspective from regulator of permit applicants to client service: How can the City be helpful?"

— Juan Monterrosa,
City of Edmonton Building
Department



The Sundance Housing Co-op Deep Energy Retrofit project features innovative construction such as prefabricated exterior wall panels (left). Participating in the client liaison program provided clarity on the permitting process and the required approvals. (First completed retrofit unit, right)

Results

The Client Liaison Unit has opened clear lines of communication between the City and industry. As the first project of this type in Edmonton, the Sundance Co-op retrofit would likely have seen delayed approvals and impacted delivery timelines under traditional permitting processes. Participating in the client liaison program provided clarity on the permitting process and the required approvals, and the contractor commended the building department for valuable contributions toward the project outcomes. Both the City and the contractor emphasized the importance of building trust between industry and the city through open, committed collaboration.

Recommendations

By implementing a client liaison program, local governments can triage complex projects or projects with broad community benefits and assign them to a department liaison. The liaison becomes the project point person and provides enhanced support by:

- Holding scoping meetings with project proponents and relevant city staff to preemptively resolve

potential issues, identify opportunities for project improvements and establish jointly agreed-upon timelines

- Assigning appropriate in-house experts to collaborate with the applicant on complex or unique project challenges, from problem identification to solution implementation
- Monitoring the entire approval process using a project management approach
- Working with city staff on providing clear, concise and timely communication
- Resolving conflict or confusion between various stakeholders including city staff, applicants and reviewing agencies

While Edmonton's Client Liaison Unit is geared toward new construction, and many energy retrofits would not meet the stated criteria, the program has benefitted the Sundance project and could help accelerate existing building retrofits. Including explicit criteria for energy and carbon reductions could further enhance the program's role in decarbonizing both new and existing buildings.



Madi Kennedy
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