

Inspections Department Community Conversation
Wednesday, January 14, 2015

What kind of community to make business successful:

Want a city that runs like a business, like we have to, accountable to customers, deliver service on time, at cost, no back and forth with requirements, additional permits required along the way.

Streamlined, up front process. Equal process for everyone. When called the city for inspections for permit pricing it was one coast and they bid at that amount, but another bidder received lower quotes stating they were given a deal by the Inspections Department.

Timeliness, consistent application of rules and regulations, responsiveness, and concept of decision process and what is appeals process. Especially when it's one person's judgment when other professionals (architects, contractors, etc.) are saying it isn't true. What are other municipalities' best practices.

This city tends to be a roadblock and needs to "get out of the way"(my words) to allow people to move forward and do business here. Discourage development. Need to build relationships. Need a one stop shop where people who want to build here can get what they need, permits, licenses, to move forward. Process is a nightmare. Commission and people want to move forward but being held back by process, no one wants to develop and do business here.

We need an appeals process that is listened to and fair.

We are investing our time and money, we expect fast decisions, fair and consistent, fair appeals process. . Expect answers that do not change. Enhance and encourage relationships.

Want a feeling of welcome-ness a developer has choices and they will go where feel welcome, invited, and a good place to do business. There should be a feeling of partnership with the city—the relationship should be proactive.

Want costs that are controlled or affordable as a result of better interaction between the city and contractors.

A city that wants to build things.

Investors do not want to look at houses in the city, they will choose outside townships because the process is easier (no vacant/abandoned regulations). 449 Cap SW City mandated roof and city is \$9900 and no one wants to buy it. Create a community where people want to invest.

There are worse agencies in the US to work with, but there are issues here in BC that need to be addressed. Have houses on vac/abandoned list and feels process needs to be streamlined. Feels he has followed the process but then later on had issues. There is a gap between rental

process and vacant/abandoned. Needs to have links (guidelines) at City Hall to run through all issues with a property.

Gestapo type tactics, threatening letters, walking into home without approval; want process and staff to be professional, respectful, and friendly. This makes people afraid to invest in the City.

Should be a partnership not adversarial, not working against each other. Need Collaborative Conversations.

Applaud contractors that are trying to work this out, some people have issues with access to housing and they would need contractors to fix housing - ADA issues. Cost containment an issue, city should review fees to ensure they are not burdening low income or disabled demographics. Looking at this at the State level at MSHDA. This impacts all residents.

Realtors been trying to work with City (Commissioners) on vacant abandoned since 2011. Issues with inspections, comes down to safety inspections and eliminating trigger for when it needs to be registered (utility shut off, ie), losing occupancy permit when vacant after a certain point. Taxes become uncapped at this point which then reduces opportunity for resale. Compare apples to apples, the process needs to be revamped. Willing to work with the city and can get info from national association. Ordinance needs to be friendlier to realtors, contractors, and those that want to buy the homes. A city that avails itself to best practices and national standards.

1999 came to city for commercial development, after it was done, the group involved said BC was the best place to invest and do development because people in Battle Creek were interested and concerned; don't know what happened to change that perception. They've done work in GR, etc. At that time, there were interested people in the progress and growth of the city. Most of these people are now gone. Now there is perception (if not more) that no one cares. Can't get people interested in projects. Every city has their rules they need to follow, but should come down to safety issues. Don't know where the perception that Battle Creek is difficult has come from. Need to convince the development community that is no longer the case. Would not take a lot to convince everyone Battle Creek is looking for people to invest in BC. Feels it is now easier in Kzoo to develop/invest as they are an easier place to do business.

Need to convince the development community that Battle Creek is development friendly.

Concerns:

City needs to understand all the talent in the room. City needs to understand that there is a lot of talent in the city to develop. A lot of people (business owners, contractors) didn't want to come to this event because they worried about retaliation if they were to challenge the city.

Stated some contractors have experienced retaliation when challenge inspectors. Feel they are taking a risk being here, want to know how things are going to change. Feel there may be more potential more roadblocks to current and future projects.

Involved with a group of stores in MI and Indiana, owner came for drawings and said the city required plans that he had never been asked for before, kept asking for additional requirements which other municipalities do not ask for. He felt that they were asked for unnecessary plans and feels that there is a problem with fee structures. Put him on defensive, worried about future issues; needed to change out fixtures which increased s.f. of store and would have required permit up to 5k just to change out fixtures. They decided to not come to BC. There are issues with the fee structure and interpretation of the development.

Had a buyer for movie facility, waiting to close last Friday, buyer backed out because of lack of trust in the inspections dept. Permit needed to replace seating that was very costly (\$.43/sq. ft for new seating). Lack of trust, unfriendly. Same project, has development elsewhere, and couldn't believe what people are told - change of carpet, seats, etc. require permit. 1million to renovate the theater, submitted plans, and were told they needed even more permits. Inspections has never done anything to me but has seen it done to others.

Unreasonable things coming out of the inspections department. Lost \$1M sale due to issues downtown.

A follow up request regarding minor changes led to a \$1000(ish) permit fee.

Interpretation of code is problematic and often costly to developers.

No new housing being built, areas of concern, people can't make a living if things don't progress. It's not just inspections department but they are a part of it. Need new neighborhoods, new houses to draw people in. Can't make any money in many areas of the city.

This forum is way overdue, thank you. The fact that all these people are here (should be a red flag) (that there is a problem) shows it is an important issue. Had many meetings and nothing accomplished. Step backwards in last five years. Need someone in charge of the department that has qualifications, experience for building and trades. Unqualified people running the department, putting bad policies in place. Need the right people and the right information to make decisions.

Need someone with development experience managing inspections.

Arbitrary what point go between homestead and non-homestead, and arbitrary when you develop at what point you are taxed for the improvements. Need to allow developers to be taxed at vacant land level until the structure becomes owner occupied. There is a new state law on this: new (inventory) homes taxed at rate for three years until project is sold

We have neighborhoods that are going down. We aren't having new development in Post or Urbandale.

State construction code has appeals process listed right in it for local construction - board of appeals then can appeal to the state. Construction code required buildings in existence to continue as long as changes are minimal. The city isn't communicating this information. A lot of areas where there isn't clear information from the city going out to folks. Need to interface housing codes and state construction codes.

Representative from Disability Network: Some building owners feel their old buildings are grandfathered in, and they do not need to make modifications, but there is no grandfathering in to the ADA. Might be ok from a code standpoint, but not ADA. The inspectors need to inform people that they are also obligated to adhere to not only state codes, but also federal.

Quit going to City Hall, been at least 6 years, because the front line staff was rude and unfriendly and unhelpful. Had an attitude. Too much on the inspectors, they do a good job and try to do the best.

Wished there was an agenda for the meeting and let the homebuilders be a part of that. Asked for one for future meetings, and include home builders association.

We certainly appreciate the need for both code and code enforcement, and realize that lack of enforcement can negatively affect our industry. We generally work very well with officials from other jurisdictions. Our experience with both the permitting and inspections process in Battle Creek has largely been an entirely different experience, ranging from unhelpful to obstructive, seemingly attempting to convey the message that Battle Creek does not want either development or non resident contractors in the city.

Officials sometimes seem intent on making the process as difficult as possible rather than working together to see how a project can be furthered. This can be in the form of antagonistic attitude, unusual code interpretations, requiring changes on a final inspection when the work was already present on the rough in inspection at which time it would have been much easier to make the correction, or requirements that seem to be made just to make the process more difficult.

Paying \$100.00 for a permit to replace our water heater. (I recall the City raising their fees 3-4 years ago to generate new revenue.) After heater installation by a local, reputable plumbing company, I waited two weeks for the inspector to come and check the work. I finally called City Hall and was told no follow up with the homeowner is done, but if I wanted an inspection someone would come. I asked for the inspection since we had paid \$100 I needed to know if the installation was done properly. A gentleman came with his tablet; checked and annotated the tablet that all was okay. That was it. Not much for our money! \$100.00 really? Our church

bldg is very old and needed renovation and repair. The inspector was right on top of us on a regular basis. Our interactions became adversarial; he was inconsistent with info; rigid; lacked follow through; implied threats. Too many details to recount.

Things to do differently:

Feels this meeting is meant to only placate people, and feels like with past meetings, the city will just go back to status quo. Frustrated with permit process, asked questions, contractor that didn't even want to bid on project due to city policies. They said I needed to bring it up to current code. Had a few issues with bricks on home (1857) and city condemned it and said she lost certificate of occupancy because of it, even though she bought it occupied and she took possession right away. There are people not wanting to come because of fear or retribution. Inspectors are rude and not friendly or helpful, have terrible attitudes and are difficult to work with. There are instances when Inspectors demand going into houses not giving the owners a choice to enter. Require plans up front before inspectors will even talk to you. Those are costly and then plans require changes. The SUP process is not streamlined, took 5 months for the Planning Commission to get a quorum to vote on her project, then had to wait for it to go the city commission. Then Assessing hit them at approval of SUP for commercial rate even though it wasn't even commercial yet. . The department is only as good as the boots in the field dealing with people.

Had to come through NPC which took a while, had to go through PC, and then had to go to City Commission for approval for use.

Processes need to be streamlined. Most everyone in the room agreed.

Sometimes it feels like implementation of codes happens along the way during construction, not during plan review. Need more thorough plan review, causes change orders, increase costs, and frustrations. Need proactive communication and written communication especially when different interpretation.

Process for appeals in BC exists, but not conducive for construction because of timeliness, waiting for board to meeting takes time and holds up construction and occupancy. Advises owners to have inspector show you in the code where it is required.

Want Code Compliance to stop treating investors like they are criminals. Think they all should be fired.

What would make a difference, what would change look like?

Clearly outlined plan showing what changes would be, desired outcomes, next steps and goals. No agenda for this meeting and didn't know who was facilitating which doesn't lend for confidence in this plan.

This this group needs to be brought back together to outline findings and outline potential changes. Don't put in paper, online, need to meet again. Want to meet with just contractors about inspections, not code.

Interpretation seems to rule with no opportunity for dispute. Consistent, clear process, accessible.

Look at all notes today and find answers in the conversations, hope something happens this time. Would like to reconvene group to continue conversation. Need to know the issues before putting plans in place. Susan is doing a good job, can't blame inspectors when they are following laws and rules.

Want clear outline where they can look online what the permit process is and can follow along.

Need to educate, inspectors have to follow the rules, need to educate property owners on what to look for when buying homes so they know what to look for. Can't put the blame on Inspectors when something isn't right and needs to be corrected. Feels separate meetings with different groups for specific issues (relators, builders, property owners, commercial contractors, etc.) Inspectors need more training in building codes, more education for residents and contractors. Should be able to walk out of the Inspections office with a list of what is needed and an explanation of what / why / how; more education from the City. Agenda would have been nice but glad to see how the meeting ended up.

People should be able to come in and talk to someone about permits needed and potential issues with being told a plan is first required. Provide a list of all permits needed for projects.

Code Compliance need to be separate from Inspections department.

Performance evaluation for inspectors and other employees within that department should also include community input. Has many years of incorrect interpretation of the codes and would like to provide that.

The state does have a process for local building departments. The city can ask Bureau of Construction Codes for an internal review (State Performance Evaluation). Attempts to strengthen the policies, not regulatory. There can also be a private petition to the State to request the local review due to complaints. Strongly encourage city to voluntarily request the State conduct the Performance Evaluation.

Business owner perspective, didn't hear about it except by word of mouth, don't know how the word got out about this meeting. There are many change orders on developments.

In 2008 the code changed, up to 25K fine if someone was found building without a license. How can you have Trade Inspectors inspect when they do not have a trade license for that specific trade? How can code compliance go into a house to find violations when they are not trained to do so? They then have the right to condemn a house. Concern with building inspections being done by someone without a license or education. Need to be licensed and educated, then only allowed to inspect what you are licensed for.

Final inspection is a waste of time for pools because inspector wants to see safety latches on fences or alarms on doors/windows (for pools) but he (contractor) doesn't have access. Need to change the laws to require automatic covers that act as barrier. Indiana does this. Anyone can get through a door or over a fence. If you want to be a leader in Michigan, need to follow the national code.

Feels breaking into 5 smaller groups (commercial contractors, residential contractors, realtors, developers and homeowners, etc.) would be helpful because can be more targeted. Understands this is a process and it won't happen overnight. Doesn't care if inspectors are there or not, that may be helpful to have them here. Would like to have Inspectors present to hear exactly what is being said.

Need to communicate that change will happen and how it will happen. Need a clearly outlined plan and to communicate that plan. Recommend that you seek input from customers when doing the inspectors performance evaluation. Would like a guarantee that change will happen, no one trusts that anything will change.