



Washington State Auditor's Office

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Local Government Performance Center Snohomish County Planning and Development Services Department

Background

Our involvement with Snohomish County began with a request from County Executive Dave Somers, who wanted to learn more about continuous improvement and how it could be applied to the STEP initiative, which stands for Service, Technology, and Excellence Program.

To support the STEP initiative, we collaborated and began leadership development for officials and senior staff county-wide. We taught coaching for continuous improvement concepts and gave leaders tools to use this methodology in their work groups.

While working with County leadership, we began another collaborative effort with the Planning and Development Services (PDS) Department.



Jennine Griffo (far left) facilitates PDS staff

Process improvement series focused on review delays, inconsistency

The Local Government Performance Center then deployed the State Auditor's Office Continuous Improvement Coordinator, Jennine Griffo. She, together with other Local Government Performance Center staff, facilitated the process improvement series, which focused on final plat review for Snohomish County's Planning and Development Services (PDS) Department, between March and June of 2016.

After preliminary subdivision and construction approval, an applicant must submit a



Snohomish County

"The biggest challenges in the STEP initiative are the same any time you look to improve a process--you have to allow for the fact that people take their process very personally, and the challenge is to remove the person[ality] from the process. It's not about [that] you are doing something wrong, it's about [that] this process has a broken link, and we want to repair it."

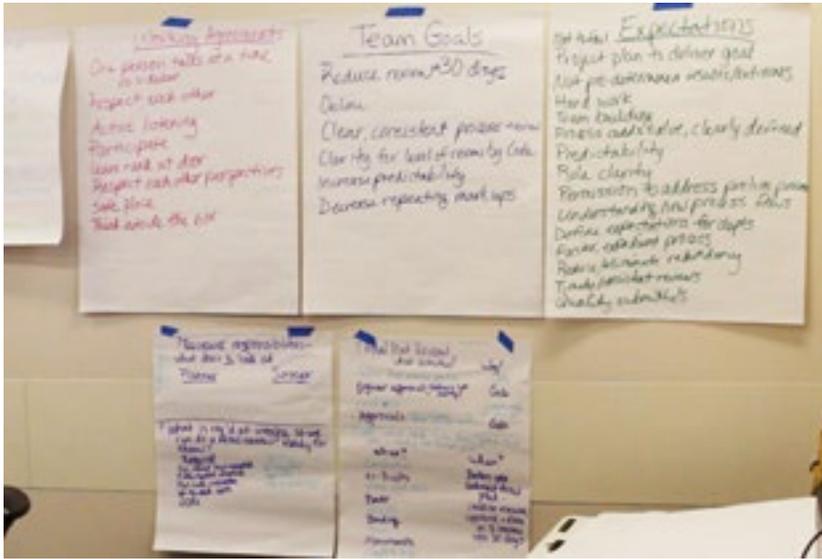
Renee Richards, Associate Planner

final plat, or map, for review and approval. The final plat shows the final surveyed layout of the land division, including all lots, tracts, easements and rights-of-way. PDS staff are responsible to receive and review final plat applications for consistency, revisions, decisions, and conformance to requirements.

PDS leadership targeted delay and inconsistency with the final plat review process for process improvement. Customers were unclear about required information required to submit a successful application. Time to process applications also exceeded code limits. And because the process included many different departments, County employees were often confused about individual department responsibilities, resulting in redundant reviews.

Team mapped current process and suggested changes over six sessions

The process improvement team, which comprised members of the PDS Department, the Assessor's Office, County Council staff, and the Public Works Department committed to six, four-hour process improvement sessions. Each



session was scheduled two weeks apart, with work assigned to the team during the interim. These sessions focused on mapping the current state of the final plat process, documenting process and cycle time, mapping a future state and identifying relevant process changes. The team also outlined action steps to create and sustain a culture of change — an effort that the Local Government Performance Center will continue to support.

Structure of series helped the team understand and examine the issue

The work assigned to process improvement team members as a part of the special, six-session workshop series allowed the team to mull difficult questions in great detail between the series meetings. The two-week breaks between sessions gave the team time to carefully consider the complex problems that plagued the final plat process. As a result, they were better able to understand the overall final plat process and the areas of delay. The outcome of this work along with recommended process changes were shared at an “open house” meeting, in which customers and workers from other County departments could respond to these recommendations. To continue the process improvements made during the series, the team developed an action plan to maintain momentum, support changes, and track and communicate progress to sponsors.

Team had three concrete objectives for the final plat review process

The overall goal of the project was to make the final plat process consistent and predictable. The project objectives included:

“The part of the STEP process that’s critical is empowering every employee to suggest better ways of doing business. It can be as simple as asking, ‘why do we do this at all?’ to how to [better] apply technology. Every employee that we’ve got has talents, ideas, information, and knowledge that can be applied to [STEP]...we want to actually reward that behavior, and make it very clear to all the other employees that this is something we promote.” Dave Somers, Snohomish County Executive

1. Reduce review times from 60 to 30 days for Council decision within the state mandated guidelines of 30 days from submittal, including notice and consent agenda.
2. Provide clarity and consistency for the final plat review process.
3. Provide clarity for level of review and what is required by County code.

Customer feedback, time estimates and action planning were key to effort

Direct customer feedback provided an outside perspective. The team included a customer going through the final plat process; his participation helped to keep the effort focused on the customer's perspective, a fundamental element of continuous process improvement. Furthermore, part of one of the six process improvement sessions featured a roundtable for customers to respond directly to the team about their experiences with the final plat process.

In addition to the customer feedback, the work assigned in the two-week breaks between sessions provided key time estimates for the process and cycle time involved in the final plat process. In turn, these estimates helped the team track delays and target system improvements. This was a crucial step in designing the system improvements.

Finally, the process improvement team committed to action planning for implementation, targeting areas of improvement and communicating with sponsors as well as wider external audiences. Team leaders use the work plans (an element of the action plan) to track assignments and deadlines to maintain momentum for implementing process improvements.

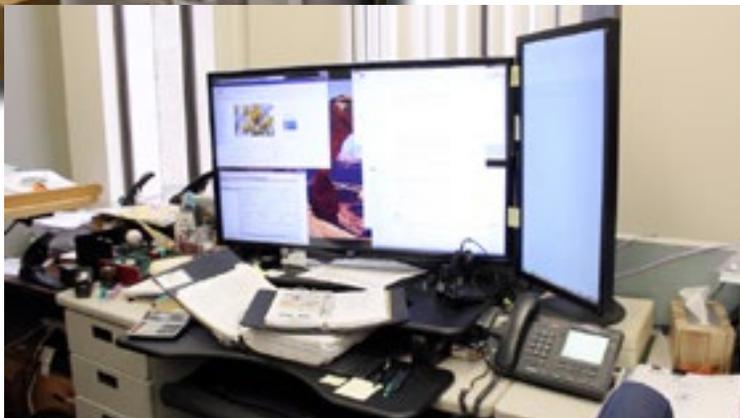
The team has shifted to an electronic review process

The team has implemented and tested changes to electronically accept and route final plats for review. The Information Technology Department in Snohomish County is helping develop the electronic submission application, which will assist the team in meeting its process improvement goals. Moving from a paper-based system to an online application submission process represents a huge improvement for customers who interact with Snohomish County PDS, reducing delays, and eliminating redundant reviews and conflicting comments.



Before

After



Interested in assistance or other continuous improvement resources?

Please contact the Local Government Performance Center either by phone at (360)725-5621 or by email at performance@sao.wa.gov to learn more about our resources and how we can be of service to your organization.



To learn more about the Lean Academy, visit: www.sao.wa.gov/local/Pages/LGPC.aspx