

I. CUSTOMER PERCEPTIONS

A. BACKGROUND

In today's environment, governmental performance is measured by customer satisfaction. In order to determine City performance, we used several techniques including six customer focus groups.

The intent of this customer input was to elicit views and opinions on positive and negative aspects of activities and to seek ideas for change that will improve and enhance the process. However, as would be expected, the focus was on perceived problems.

In considering the results, the reader must bear in mind that, unlike documents and statistics, the views expressed by individuals are subjective and may reflect personal biases. Nonetheless, these views are at least as important as objective material because it is these people, with their feelings and prejudices, which work with or are often affected by City activities. A second important consideration is that in analyzing the material, it may not be as important to determine whether a particular response is "correct" as it is to simply accept a response or try to determine why customers feel the way they do. Tom Peters, the noted management consultant, has said that in relation to customer service, "perception is everything." In other words, perception is reality to the person holding the perception.

It should be noted that the purpose of this chapter is to report on the customer input so that the reader of the report can view the comments as customer perceptions without our editing. These comments are not the conclusions of the consultants. The customer comments are taken as one form of input to be merged by input of others and our own judgment. Our specific response is in the form of the various recommendations included in this report.

B. DEVELOPMENT SERVICES FOCUS GROUPS

Six customer focus groups, each meeting for two hours, were held on Feb 21 and 22 at the San Antonio Botanical Garden. Thirty-four people attended the focus groups as listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Focus Group Representation

Focus Group Representation	Number of Attendees
Greater Chambers of Commerce Northside Chamber Hispanic Chamber	2
ABC and Associated General Contractors (AGC) San Antonio Chapters	4
San Antonio Real Estate Council (SAREC)	8
Greater San Antonio Builders Association (GSABA)	5
Professional Engineers in Private Practice (PEPP) San Antonio Chapter	13
American Institute of Architects (AIA) San Antonio Chapter	2

The facilitator for the group was Zucker Systems’ President, Paul Zucker. No City staff members were present. Participants were guaranteed full confidentiality. Issues discussed and paraphrased comments are described below.

Overview

Many feel that development permitting is not a broken system but some improvements would be helpful. The biggest issues for these groups are: inconsistency, tree preservation law, phone service, and lost items. These issues combined with other pertinent issues are described below and listed in alphabetical order. In some cases the groups had specific recommendations. In others they described an issue, leaving the recommendation to others or the study.

Checklist

There was mixed review concerning the 30-page checklist. Some felt it should be replaced with one page. Some felt it should be eliminated. Others felt it was okay.

Suggestion: the checklist needs to be separated so that plan check can be divided between plan types, example, beauty shops, etc., rather than one generic checklist.

City Attorney

Two of the City attorneys are a problem for development activities. They have an “us against them” attitude.

City - County Functions

There was an agreement that the City would conduct subdivision review in the ETJ area. However, both the City and the County are reviewing which is a duplication. Additionally, the requirements may be in conflict such as K values or vertical curve requirements. Some feel the County is out of control. Developers are paying double. The current process violates the Interlocal Agreement.

City and County meet every Thursday afternoon to review issues. County tells customers they don't trust City staff (DSD). County feels that they should be the authority on the UDC. Customers wonder why this is so since it was the City that approved the UDC. Customers believe this situation is going to get worse. Some feel the City should be out of the ETJ.

Suggestion: The City and County should agree to have only one review for subdivisions in the ETJ area.

CPS, Bear Metropolitan Water, SAWS

Concern is that sometimes Bexar Metropolitan Water, City Public Service (CPS) (gas, electricity), and San Antonio Water System (SAWS) inspectors will inspect differently than DSD plan check; occurs with fire, sidewalks, and also traffic.

Six agencies review projects but none have control.

CPS, SAWS attend meetings but they do not want to interact to work together, they want to stay separate.

SAWS is slowest department to review anything. Customers do not understand because former DSD city manager is currently acting director. Customer said there was an incident where SAWS legal department told DSD "We don't have to tell you." SAWS does not notify that their part of the review is done or posted on Fast Track.

There is no way to get an appeal to fight a verdict because customers could get a bad wrap and have inspectors come out again. For example, SAWS approved tankless water heaters and had a rebate for customers using these; when the inspector came out, he said there was not enough hot water and so he did not approve.

CPS, SAWS are part of the City so why don't they and the city work together; CPS is very slow, sometimes they will only talk with customers after customers call them.

Suggestion: Need to bring control of the six subdivision review agencies under one agency. Let DSD do a review of CPS, SAWS, etc. performance so they understand that they need to be part of the team.

Contracts

Concern that although the city has requirements for including Small, Woman owned, minority business contracts, the City provides exceptions for some City agencies; example for VIA Metropolitan Transit.

Customer Perceptions

The attitudes of staff is an issue. For example:

- DSD staff view the community as the opposition; there needs to be a cooperative environment. DSD staff is very territorial; however it is getting better especially with inspectors.
- DSD staff at the top have good attitudes but the lower level staff is where problems are. They have black or white attitudes.
- Telephone calls and emails are not returned.

There is a need to continue with a customer oversight group as improvements take place. The Secret Shopper idea is seen as a good approach.

However, participation in focus groups, secret shoppers, and employees completing questionnaires is low because participants feel there will be no change in the process(es), and because of fear of retribution and loss of confidentiality.

The Blue Print newsletter was good and should be continued.

There is some change in attitudes being led by the City Manager and the DSD Director.

Fire

There are a number of problems with fire inspections including:

- Building approves the plans but fire inspectors turn them down.
- Fire Inspectors make changes at the last minute at the end of the project.
- Fire Inspectors don't come when they say they will.
- There is inconsistency in interpreting plans.
- There is inconsistency amongst fire inspectors.
- There is a shortage of fire inspectors.
- Badged fire inspectors have an elitist attitude.
- Two firemen retired last month, one is leaving, and there is a shortage now. The fireman who passes with the lowest score gets to perform inspections.

Customers feel the process should not work this way because the fireman may be disgruntled.

- Fire is rotating firemen every 2 years to do inspections.
- There is a lack of accountability with the current shortage of fire inspectors.
- What will happen when many schools open. Focus group members feel the process takes a long time and with the upcoming bond issues with new schools, DSD staff need to be ready.
- The fire department does not appear to be conducting yearly inspections.
- Inspectors will make requirements not consistent with the plans without checking with the plan checkers.

Suggestion: If inspectors see the need for changes from the approved plans, they need to go back to discuss it with the plan checkers.

Suggestion: Have professional non-badged plan checkers and inspectors in fire.

Inspections

DSD is very territorial. However teamwork is getting better especially with inspectors. The County does not have inspections like the City.

Some specific issues include:

- DSD was going to hire more planners and inspectors however many openings remain.
- If inspectors are rotated midway through a project, DSD should keep the same inspector until the end of a project for consistency. This works in most areas except for fire inspections.
- Bexar Met, CPS, SAWS inspectors will sometimes inspect differently than plan check. This also occurs with fire, sidewalks, and traffic.
- Plan check and inspections are inconsistent.
- It would be good to have combination inspectors for residential.
- One customer said its plan approved. However, during inspection, the inspector said tree ordinance was not followed. These types of situations arise from people changing their minds and changing the rules.
- Every inspector has a cell phone. Inspectors should call if they will be late. This was real bad years ago, better now by 50%. Customers are unsure if inspectors know they can call the customer; this may be a training issue.

Suggestion: If inspectors will be rotated mid way through process, keep inspector until the end for consistency.

Suggestion: There needs to be a formal process for challenging an inspector.

Land Development

Customers said construction plans, platting plans, development plans are red-marked and provided to them, customers revise and return them, DSD red-mark the plans again, return them to the customer, and then six months later, customers will receive a major red-mark plan. During this process reviewers change so there is a problem; there is no consistency or accountability.

Customers said DSD does not give customers enough information and often customers have already made changes on their plats. Reviews are often incomplete.

There is a problem getting everything done on plats and bonding is taking forever. Some plats require up to six reviews. The case manager for a plat is given a number of one to five, indicating the staff to work on their plat. Some developers won't work with certain numbers who are problems.

Lost Items

Plans and checklists are often lost when provided to stormwater or platting. Customers have to resubmit half of what they originally submit.

Performance Measures

The performance measures being given to the community are not accurate and show better timelines than the community is experiencing. One problem is the use of averages, which can be misleading. Another issue is how the various clocks that start and stop are being used. All the agencies need to have separate clocks that also relate to an overall clock. Plan Review is still a problem. Customers want to know the truth.

The Hansen system is being utilized incorrectly; gives a false impression because if process stops because of a tree issue or because of a storm water issue, time stops and Hansen report shows only three days into project.

Permit Process

Permit process needs to be restructured. Issues include:

- The customer did not know the DSD point of contact (POC) was no longer employed at DSD. The customer sent emails, left voice mails, and then found out the POC was no longer working there. No one followed through with the customers.

- There a large number of unsophisticated general contractors and contractors so they most likely will not read emails concerning permits and inspections. They may not look at the permit process on the DSD website.
- Customer said staff attend meetings; however, staff does not remember anything from the meetings and they won't stand behind agreements.
- Focus group members didn't know about the appeal boards.

One improvement made in the last 18 months is the Fast Track Middle Stud permit. It was a great idea because customers sat with DSD staff and discussed it.

Suggestion: Meeting minutes should be taken and passed to attendees or posting on website. Another option would be to record meeting on tape.

Suggestion: If a DSD staff member is on vacation, DSD should appoint another staff member to help out customer otherwise process is on hold longer.

One customer suggested that the landscaping, tree ordinance and Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) staff should all work together. Another suggestion was that the Historic Commission (HDRC) that preserves historic buildings be moved to DSD.

Plan Check

The groups had a variety of issues and suggestions in relation to plan check including:

- There is a problem with plan certification. Other cities accept professional stamps on plans and DSD does not. Acceptance could reduce plan review time.
- DSD has a “Narrow wall bracing” law that states a building must sustain for 2 seconds a 110-mile/hour wind. This bad way to brace houses was driven by politics and now plans are being backed up. DSD is imposing the same laws as laws for builders on coastal cities. The type of wood used has been in the codebook for a long time; but it is now being more scrutinized because of lawsuits. As of Aug 2006 P&Z is enforcing this law. Before this bracing requirement, things were working well.

Suggestion: Remove this law from DSD processes.

- City frame reviewers are rejecting plans when a line on the plans is not long enough and to scale. This is very picky.

Suggestion: Approve the plans since the line still represents what it should.

- Small changes on the second cycle still require plan changes.

Suggestion: Most 2nd cycle findings are small changes and could be done through email or a meeting. If this occurs, design team could be involved and could get the process done quicker.

- Residential staff had many reviewers and commercial staff only had two. DSD currently combined both staffs however residential staffs needs get up to speed and to be trained on commercial work.
- Plan check was under one manager now it is under two. The two different teams should be under the same manager.
- There is supposed to be an Ombudsman however they do not know who it is.

Suggestion: Customers said they would attend plan check seminars if they were held. They think planners and inspectors should have cross training.

Suggestion: There should be more sit-downs with the applicants. If a designer's seal is involved, the designer must be considered as the primary contact.

Suggestion: You should be able to email small plans to DSD.

- There are some national chains building multiple projects.

Suggestion: Have standard plans for repeat projects.

- A few plan checkers will send emails when plans are approved or denied, other don't.

Suggestion: Send emails when plans are approved or denied.

Plan Check - After Hours Option

There are 10, 20 and 30-day reviews with no charge. If a customer selects an after hours plan check option, there is a charge; however, the plan sits for about four days before anything is done. Customers feel that the after hours program is for DSD staff to make additional money.

Customer's view is "time is money." Customers will pay premium to have DSD service. After-hours plan check service is a good idea and pay extra for the service; however, it is not working as well as customers thought it would.

Planning and Zoning Commission

Staff waste time because at Planning and Zoning meetings all staff will be there for 8 hours (trees, traffic, etc) and no one really talks. There is zero input from

commissioners into the DSD budget. The Commission has to use kitchen timers for people to speak. No one takes the lead to request timer, clock, or better meeting room.

Customers feel Planning and Zoning (P&Z) presentations are so skewed they give misrepresentation. Customers feel they get skewed results from P&Z commission concerning trees and vested rights.

Public Works

Public work employees are moving into the DSD building even though they are still Public Works employees and not DSD employees. They should report to the DSD Director, not the Public Works Director. Public Works will receive DSD comments on the work of the group but not on individuals in the group.

Dual loyalties are a problem because it is “Me against them attitude”. They are territorial.

Stormwater reviewers are requiring more than the code.

Quality

The quality of architect plans is bad and lead to problems upwards and downwards.

The quality and quantity of staff is insufficient. There are often vacant positions, turn over in plan review and inspection, morale issues and low pay preventing hiring of good people.

Regulations

DSD staff pass out sets of regulations however they do not give customers time to absorb the regulations before they require them to be used (ex: tree ordinance); it sometimes takes two to four years for change to occur.

Regulations and ordinances keep being passed however DSD staff does not see if previous changes that have occurred are working.

Customers need time to absorb the UDC information before it goes out as requirements.

School Team

The School Team is very helpful and is getting better.

Staffing Shortage

DSD was going to hire more planners and inspectors; however, currently there are many openings. Additional staff may not be hired because of building cycle. DSD staff is hesitant to hire consultants because of job security. There is concern about senior staff leaving.

Telephones

Customers said that every inspector has a cell phone. The inspectors should call if they will be late. This was real bad years ago, but is better now by 50%. Customers are unsure if inspectors know they can call the customer; this may be a training issue.

Customer say they do not receive returned calls from voice mails left or from messages taken requesting returned calls. Customer say that one planner responded by saying they had 100 emails that day and asked which one was the customers.

Customer said no DSD staff member will give a direct phone number to them. Operator will give customer a direct line, and even if the customer leaves a message for them, or an email requesting a call, the customer does not receive a return call.

Training

New staff is inadequately trained. Land development involves due diligence and some DSD staff are inexperienced with this.

Suggestion: DSD need to train staff for appropriate job functions.

Suggestion: Customers say they think planners and inspectors should have cross training.

Tree Preservation

A developer was told by an inspector that a certain plant could not be planted because it was banned. However, DSD would not give him a list of banned plants and the plant had been shown on the approved plans.

Some feel that the tree ordinance was passed to discourage development. Customers worked with staff to try to get both sides to agree. However, tree issues are too watered down and were destined to failure. Tree preservation is failing because customers think it is less expensive to mow down trees and then pay fines.

The tree preservation ordinance was revised two months ago. The City Council was presented a power point slide presentation and then they voted; customers tried to get a copy of the presentation before it was presented to the City Council however DSD staff was working on it until the day it was presented.

The City Arborist is not certified and customers do not know the Arborist stance at anytime on any project. The arborist holds up the approval process. One project was held up for months. A plan cannot move to permits until it is approved by the Arborist.

Customers say that many of the events happening today began 10 years ago, and mostly five years ago when the UDC came out. With the new DSD building, the DSD has gotten more regulations (trees, treated water). Problem is that City Council members have short-term positions.

Unified Development Code (UDC)

Customers and DSD run into problems with activists who try to change parts of the UDC. Needed is a UDC that can be relied upon. Currently there are over 200 RIDs in the community. Customers need time to absorb the RID information before it goes out as a requirement. RIDs are on the DSD website however it is not clear when RIDs are officially out. Concerns about UDC interpretation; some issues are brought up that were not previously enforced.

Unified Development Code (UDC) interpretation needs to be done consistently.

From the time the Council approves the UDC amendments, it talks too long to codify the code – say four months. Also, changes are put in the front of the code and not codified.

Suggestion: To maintain UDC consistency, have checklists with sign offs.

Suggestions: Need public dissemination of RIDs, send them by email.

Suggestion: The UDC should be codified immediately after approval.

Website

Customer said the only training that has been available is training on how to use the DSD website. Customer said all the site does is have the customer input some information however the customers still needs to take the plans to the DSD or to a satellite office.

The UDC on the website the UDC is not the latest revision.