Best Management Practices Assessment for Development Services

REDMOND, WASHINGTON

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1.   Introduction

This best management practices assessment represents an important step to report on initial key findings and opportunities related to the development review, permitting, and inspection processes for the City of Redmond.

In order to assess operational strengths and improvement opportunities, the project team utilized a set of best management practices outlining effective operational practices against which to evaluate the various operations and processes of the development process in the City of Redmond.

Collectively the best practices consist of:

•   Statements of "best practices" or "recommended practices" or performance targets derived from national professional service organizations (such as American Planning Association, International Code Council, etc.).

•   Statements of "best or prevailing practices" based on the study team's experience in evaluating high-performing development review operations.

•   Identification of whether the particular unit meets these performance targets.

The diagnostic assessment is one of several tools that will be used to identify opportunities for reform. Following completion of this analysis, it will be used along with information obtained from stakeholder surveys and workshops, feedback from the City, and data analysis by the project team to develop a final set of recommendations.

It should be acknowledged that the City is currently in the process of reviewing EnerGov and some issues identified with the system are already being discussed and addressed.

2.   Key Strengths

Although the diagnostic assessment is designed to identify improvement opportunities, it is also an opportunity to identify existing strengths of the current processes. Some of the key strengths of the City's development review process include:

•   A Development Services Center (public counter) where applicants can get direct information regarding application and permitting requirements.

- Redmond E-Permitting System (REPS) is in place that allows for online application and permit submittals, online inspection requests, payment of invoices, and a search of permit records across review disciplines.

- Customer meeting areas and work desks are available outside the development services primary counter with a visible monitor that shows the current queue of customers.

- The City utilizes specialized staff to lead reviews in their areas of expertise and conduct technical plan review.

- Staff from key operational areas are located within the primary City Hall building and provides an opportunity for efficient customer service and communications.

These are just some few examples of strengths of the current operations and where the City is currently meeting best practices.

3.   Key Opportunities for Improvement

The comparison of the City's current approach to best management practices also identified some improvement opportunities. Notable issues include:

- Not all application and permit types are available in the REPS system and require applicants to submit in-person with a paper submittal. Some types are listed on REPS but do not work, requiring the applicant to start over in the submittal process.

- The internal permitting software system, EnerGov, requires staff to do a lot of manual steps rather than automatic workflows. Applications and permits for the same property are not automatically linked together in the system.

- The Development Services Center is only open to the public Monday through Thursday, between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., limiting a customer's opportunity to submit required in-person paper submittals.

- There is lack of clarification for applicants on who serves as the project manager of an application or permit, which requires applicants to search out answers on the status of permits and applications.

- A top challenge indicated by staff was the lack of onboarding and training to ensure employees' highest chance of being successful with their job responsibilities. This lack of understanding also contributes to staff having an unclear understanding of theirs and other's role in the development process.

The above items are not in alignment with best practices and indicate challenges that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and operations related to development review, permitting, and inspection activities. The project team will expand on these and other issues in subsequent analysis and in the draft and final reports.

4.   Diagnostic Assessment

This section provides an initial overall assessment of current operations and processes and identifies initial opportunities for organizational and operational improvements. The assessment is presented in a checklist format. The checklist identifies whether current practices do or do not meet the target.

The issues identified in this review will be analyzed further by the project team, leading to the development of the draft report. This analysis will primarily focus on the development review operations of the Planning & Community Development Department (including building, planning and engineering disciplines a part of the Development Services Division), the Public Works Department (including the Environmental & Utilities Division and Traffic Operations Engineering & Safety Division), and the Fire Department (Fire Prevention Division) within the City of Redmond.

This diagnostic assessment of best practices is broken down into the major subsections of: Management and Administration; Customer Information and Interaction; Processes; and Technology Utilization.

Best Practice / Operational Target	Meets Target	Does Not Meet Target	Improvement Opportunity / Notes
Management and Administration			
1. The City has goals, objectives, and performance measures for development review activities and are made available to the public		✔	There are no identified goals, objectives, or performance measures for development review activities. However, with the implementation of SB5290, some performance goals will be required, or the City will have to return a portion of the review fees.

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2. There is a clear point of accountability (either an individual or a team) for ensuring that the process is efficient and predictable and to address issues as they arise.	✔	✔	There are some points of accountability within the Development Services Division, Fire Prevention, and the Public Works Department, but managers may lack the time, resources, and support needed to ensure employees are improving process efficiency and addressing issues as they arise. There is a lack of clear responsibility for the entire development review process.
3. Department managers and City Management routinely review performance (speed, efficiency) of the development review processes.	✔		There is a standardized weekly report that is produced and reviewed at the weekly manager's meeting. Each manager uses this report differently in holding their staff accountable and prioritizing tasks. Opportunity exists to ensure all staff are aware of performance expectations.
4. Managers and staff have access to clear and accurate reports showing current workload, timelines, and other measures of performance.	✔	✔	EnerGov has the capability of creating reports, but only some managers are trained in creating them or how to utilize reports. Therefore, reporting is inconsistent and does not cover all review disciplines. Standardized reports should be created and monitored by management.

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5. The City has access to adequate resources to conduct complete and timely reviews covering all disciplines.	✔	✔	From initial data review, it appears the building permit review process is abiding by state required timelines. Planning/zoning entitlements exceed timelines. There isn't sufficient tracking of Public Works reviews to determine timeliness. Staffing vacancies, or frequent onboarding of new staff, are cited by current employees as an impediment to timely completion of reviews. A lack of staff's understanding of procedures and gaps in EnerGov's capabilities are creating challenges to complete timely reviews.
6. The City projects future workload, revenue, and staffing needs based upon "in-progress" projects and completion progress.		✔	Staff predict future workload informally, but the City has no mechanism for evaluating the number of staff hours and future revenue based on current application volume or status.
7. The City regularly conducts a cost of service analysis to update the costs of providing development review services and update the fees.	✔		The City updated their fee schedule in 2024.
8. The City has backup plans in place in the event of absence or departure of key staff.		✔	The City has no consistent succession planning and/or training across review disciplines. The outdated SOPs lead to significant challenges when staff are missing or depart.
9. The City has additional resources that it can deploy in cases of unusually heavy-workload periods or high-priority projects.		✔	Consultants are available for land use, civil and structural engineering services. There are no additional resources in place for heavy-workload scenarios.

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10. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and are in-line with staff job titles and job descriptions.	✔	✔	Job descriptions are in place for all current positions, but there is a lack of understanding regarding roles and responsibilities in the development review process Staff indicated concerns about the departure of more senior level staff and the need for junior level staff to cover their workload that may be above their pay and skill level.
Customer Education & Outreach			
11. Customer satisfaction with each phase of the development process is monitored.		✔	The City works with an independent research organization to conduct annual community surveys. Ratings are obtained about city services and functions, including the development review processes. There is an opportunity for survey results to help departments and divisions understand customers' top needs and complaints. Also, there is an opportunity to create a specific development review survey for recent customers.
12. The City provides easy-to-understand and attractive guides to the planning, building permit, and inspections process.		✔	The City does not have guides or handbooks to help applicants and community members better understand the development review processes. Information is rather shared in a combination of several different webpages or individual PDF documents. Some unique requirements like watershed and aquifer area development are surprises to applicants.

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13. The City web site includes a virtual "one stop shop" that provides an overview of all permitting requirements and links to permitting requirements by department or division.	✔	✔	There is a central landing page on the City's website for the Development Services Center. From this location, there are links to the REPS application customer portal. However, there is a lot of segregated information also from this landing page that is quite complex to search through and find relevant information. There is not a comprehensive overview on the City's website regarding the entire development process.
14. All development staff are available at a single easy to access location.	✔	✔	Different review disciplines are represented at the City's Development Services Center offices within City Hall. The center's public counter is open M-Th 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Public Works disciplines do not have front-line staff at the counter. Public works staff are also not co-located with the Development Services Center section of the building
15. Procedures are in place for staff on how and when to respond to questions from the public.	✔	✔	The Planning Manager has some procedures in place on how to respond to customers. However, the procedures are not consistent across all review disciplines.

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16. Fee schedule is published and regularly updated.	✔		Multiple fee schedules cover the development review disciplines. There is one development review fee schedule that is for land use applications. Several different fee schedules exist for fire, building, and engineering services. Fee schedules are updated annually. Opportunity exists to combine the several different fee schedules into a master fee schedule.
17. The City reaches out to the business and development community through periodic communications.	✔		The City departments involved in development review interact and provide updates to the OneRedmond group, which consists of Redmond's Chamber of Commerce, Economic and Workforce Development Enterprise, and the Community Foundation. Opportunity exists to have mid-management staff interact with this group more frequently and potentially more broadly with the development community. .
18. The City regularly obtains input from the business and development community on issues related to development review and permitting.	✔		Managers across review disciplines do attend quarterly meetings with the Masters Builders Association of King and Snohomish Counties and OneRedmond. Additionally, the City issues annual community surveys.
19. The Department uses a standardized approach such as a digital newsletter/email to keep developers apprised of changes to the standard specifications, staff, etc.	✔		The City currently provides such updates on the "Plans & Policy Documents" section of the Planning Department website. An improvement opportunity can be to allow customers to sign up for reoccurring updates through email.

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20. The City's policies/website clearly identify what applications can be approved administratively versus requiring a public hearing (quasi-judicial or legislative approval).		✔	On the Development Services Center primary webpage, there are links to land use applications, building permits, and construction/engineering permits. However, applicants are required to either read zoning code review procedures or application forms to understand if their proposal requires administrative review or a public hearing. Sections of the DSC webpage does include "how to apply" steps, but approval authority is not discussed. An application and permitting matrix would outline and clarify for applicants who is involved in the review and final decision.
21. The City provides clear and comprehensive checklists identifying all items required to be submitted for each application type.		✔	The format and design of applications and permit forms are different across the review disciplines. All are fillable PDF forms. Building permits and civil/engineering permits are specific to what is being requested. Building permits utilize very clear and descriptive checklists. The majority of land use applications utilize the same "Land Use Application" fillable form that requires applicants to select the type of application that is being requested and then a lengthy list of plan sets and materials that is required, but there is no distinction between what is and what is not required dependent of the type of request. There is great opportunity to reformat these forms and permits to be in one style, or even better, to incorporate them into the EnerGov REPS customer portal.

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22. Application forms are available on-line and can be filled out electronically.	✔	✔	Fillable PDF application forms are available for most development review processes, but they are not integrated with the REPS permitting system.
23. The City's long-term plans and land development code are available on-line.	✔		City policy and long-range planning documents are located on a separate tab from the planning webpage.
24. The City's adopted ordinance, regulations, and design standards are available and up-to-date online.	✔		The City's adopted ordinances, design standards, and zoning code are located on the website. Links can be found on the planning, development services, engineering, and public works webpages. Engineering staff also have access to the standard technical notebook for stormwater review, and the utility system standards for Utilities.
25. The City has a dedicated webpage that identifies major on-going development projects.	✔		Land use entitlements and building permits are viewable through an online map viewer that is accessible from the City's website. It appears that these are for the last two years.
26. Informational brochures for small development projects, particularly ones that are relevant to homeowners are in multiple languages.		✔	Informational brochures or publications are not available for the public. Overall, information provided on the City's website is in the English language and not available in commonly spoken languages in the community. Translations are only available for the City's zoning code.
Processes			
27. Permit technicians are certified by the International Code Council (ICC).	✔		This is required for building permit technicians within 6 months of hire.

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28. Permit technicians review applications for completeness at time of submittal.	✔	✔	Permit technicians typically pre-screen building and engineering permits/applications before they are forwarded for review. Most screening for land use entitlements is done by the assistant planner following receipt of applications. Engineering staff review the application for completeness once they are received.
29. Plans are routed only to departments/contractors for whom the project is relevant.	✔	✔	There are established expectations on what building permit types should or should not be routed to planning or engineering. All resubmittals are only reviewed by staff that need to conduct a re-review. However, it is unclear if all staff are consistent in their approaches. Stakeholders indicated they receive comments from staff in resubmittals that did not originally provide comments.
30. Plan reviews involving outside departments are subject to clear protocols regarding the scope and timing of their reviews.	✔	✔	The timing of reviews sent to the Public Works engineering team is clear because their deadlines are included in the EnerGov flow. But PW staff see little consistency in which types of reviews are their responsibility versus the Planning engineers, how decisions will be made to reconcile issues, or how EnerGov is to be utilized.
31. Certain basic building permits are available instantly with no review requirement		✔	All projects require review at least by a permit technician to confirm accuracy of application. Online submittals through the REPS customer portal cannot be issued instantly.

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32. Expedited process is available for simple projects, such as minor interior renovations.	✔	✔	Engineering permits are reviewed on a first in-first out basis. Building offers expedited tenant improvement review based on the scope of work. Fire offers expedited review by paying staff overtime. There is no clear understanding of what types of permits allow expedited review.
33. Decision-making authority has been appropriately delegated to the staff of the Division for the approval of low exposure/low impact planning and engineering applications and permits.	✔		A number of application types are approved by planning and engineering staff.
34. Staff uses a case management approach for larger projects. The case manager has the authority to resolve review delays with other departments/divisions.	✔	✔	While there is some coordination, there is no central management of more complex project applications in engineering. Building and planning do utilize a project manager/case management approach. The type of application/permit submitted will determine what staff member serves as project manager. Authority to resolve conflicts between departments or divisions is generally clear, but not always for more complex applications.
35. Applications provide sufficient evidence / documentation for staff (or the relevant approval authority) to successfully review the submittal and make a decision.	✔	✔	Building and Fire provide clear checklists to provide documentation for staff to successfully conduct completeness checks. Staff comments and stakeholder feedback both indicate a need for better checklists and clearer customer education materials to ensure more complete applications. The thoroughness of completeness checks varies by review discipline, and this is noted in

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			discrepancy with staff's perception of a complete application. Training is likely needed for all staff to reset understanding of complete applications for all application types.
36. Preapplication meetings are held for major projects.	✔	✔	Preapplication meetings are required for more complex projects. However, standards are not in place that determine what is required of a pre-application and when it should occur.
37. Review timelines are posted on the City's website.		✔	No information on development review timelines is posted online.
38. Resubmittal review turnaround times are quicker than new applications and focus only on relevant changes to the application and/or to prior comments that were not made.		✔	Data was not provided to indicated resubmittal timelines compared to new application timelines. There are no written protocols on managing initial submittals versus resubmittals. Resubmittal workflows in EnerGov do indicate shorter review timelines. There is no consistent policy or approach regarding whether resubmittals are reviewed for all potential issues, or only based on comments and corrections from initial review. Some managers have attempted to create SOPs to address resubmittals, but with staff turnover, consistency is not achieved.

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39. Adopted review timelines are met consistently.	✔	✔	The State of Washington mandates some review timelines, which are also recognized by the City's municipal code. Data indicates building permits are being issued in a timely and consistent manner. Land use entitlement timelines are not consistent and regularly exceed mandated timelines. Engineering timelines also regularly exceed mandated timelines.
40. A formal internal Development Review Committee is responsible for coordinating the review of applications and ensuring that plans address all City requirements.	✔	✔	Most coordination of plan review occurs at the pre-application meeting or at discipline-specific meetings conducted by the lead of each review. The City has a Technical Review Committee that is only the Planning and Public Works Directors. Some administrative level applications are being considered by this committee. It appears the utilization of this committee is inconsistent and may be creating more process than required and is not necessarily ensuring that all city requirements are addressed.
41. All review comments are incorporated into a single comment letter (or plan set), reviewed for consistency and conflicting requirements, and distributed to the applicant by project manager.	✔	✔	Staff are marking up plan sets in BlueBeam, and the consolidated sets are provided to the applicant. Comments for consistency and potential conflicts occurs at the last step with the Planning Director's review. Opportunity exists to have this occur earlier in the process by the project manager.

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42. Project review / comment letters provide reference to the review checklist and / or code reference.	✔		References to applicable codes are generally noted on the plan set/comment sections. There is some inconsistency in approach and format.
43. Plans are reviewed concurrently to avoid delays.	✔	✔	In concept, once plans are determined complete and routed, they are reviewed concurrently. Faults in this system occur when applicants are requested to make changes to their plan sets and resubmittals occur. Staff indicated that the routing of resubmittals sometimes do not involve all the original reviewers, or the reviewers that require a re-review.
44. For re-submitted plans, reviewers focus on ensuring that comments have been addressed, not issues that should have been brought up in initial review.		✔	This is not an established policy. In some cases, new issues are identified in re-submittals that were not caught initially. Also, sometimes staff reviewers aren't notified when resubmittals occur and then are put in a position where they must make a last minute review.
45. Approval authorities for planning and zoning permits are clearly stated and simple permits are approved administratively.	✔	✔	Type I and II land use permits are described as "administrative." However, Type II permits require the review of a Technical Review Committee. This requires additional review time. Also, environmental reviews have a Determination of Non-Significance (DNS) that requires the review and oversight of the upper level staff rather than a manager.

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46. Staff reports are thorough and include recommendations on actions.	✔	✔	Planning has established staff report templates to ensure consistency. Recommendations are included. However, these templates appear overly lengthy and not easy to read or understand. Opportunity exists to improve the format and template of reports. Administrative permits could perhaps not require reports, and the approvals could just be imbedded in the original application form itself.
47. Customers are given an approximate time to expect their inspector.	✔	✔	Homeowners completing their own work can request a 1-hour inspection window. Inspectors set their own route and may call ahead to inform the contractor of their estimated time of arrival.
48. Applicants can request inspections up to 5 pm on the day before; next day inspections are available for 100% of requests.	✔		For building and engineering inspections, requests must be made by 11 p.m. to be scheduled for inspections on the next business day. For fire inspections, requests must be made by 12 p.m. to be scheduled for inspections on the next business day.
49. An online inspection request system is utilized to receive inspections with linkage to the permit information system.	✔	✔	Inspections can be requested online through REPS customer portal or via phone through the City's Interactive Voice Response system (IVR) system. Staff indicated problems with permit sets being linked to the correct inspection requests. This requires the inspector to do a workaround (reassign the inspection) or requires the permit technician to adjust.

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50. Combination reviewers/inspectors are used to reduce the need for duplicate inspections at a single project.	✔	✔	The Building Inspection team includes combination and single trade inspectors. Electrical, Mechanical and Plumbing inspectors do plan review of their expertise. Building inspectors do plan review to support the building plan review team in times of heavy workloads. Development inspectors are plan reviewers as well, and sometimes among the initial group to receive plans, but this is inconsistent. In some cases, their input is overridden or misunderstood.
51. Building Inspectors conduct between 12 and 15 inspections or 8 to 10 stops per day.	✔		Inspectors have a goal of 8 stops per day, which may be more or less depending on the number of requests received.
52. The City charges a re-inspection fee to encourage builders to make sure work is complete and ready to inspect at time of inspection.	✔	✔	Reinspection fees are established on the fee schedules but are not commonly utilized across the inspection teams. This is despite the reality of some work occurring prior to inspections being requested, or inspections being requested prior to work being complete.
53. For Certificate of Occupancy Inspection all applicable inspectors complete the inspection at the same time.		✔	Coordination on trades and parent permit are done by Building. Coordination on Planning, Engineering, and Fire are difficult because in those areas staff does not timely sign off in EnerGov. The City has an opportunity to better coordinate final inspections between planning, engineering, and building.

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		Technology	
54. Applicants can apply, pay for, and receive permits, some instantly, using an on-line portal.		✔	The way that applicants can apply, pay for, and receive permits is different across review disciplines. Engineering permits and civil site review requires applicants to fill out PDF application forms and submit to staff via email. Land use applications require applicants to fill out a fillable online form known as the Plan Review Online (PRO) to submit a request to apply online, followed by a mandatory intake meeting to be scheduled. Staff then creates a plan case, and applicants are instructed to submit application forms through the REPS customer portal. Building permits also require applicants to begin the process by filling out the PRO fillable online form, followed by submitting permit forms online (though the REPS portal is not mentioned for building permits). Building also accepts in-person application submittals, but the materials must be saved in a digital format.
55. The permit software system can calculate the appropriate plan check and permitting fees.		✔	The development fee schedules are linked in the PRO form. Standard permit fees are calculated in EnerGov automatically based on data entered by staff or the applicant. Impact and CFC fees are calculated outside of EnerGov by staff.

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56. There are department-wide, written protocols regarding file and document management.		✔	There are no department-wide protocols regarding file and document management. Current directive is to duplicate application files within the EnerGov system and the City's computer file system. Files are stored in inconsistent locations by different staff. Some managers have created SOPs that address file storage protocols, but they are only applicable to their specific division.
57. Applicants can look up status of a permit, including comments from reviewers on-line or using the software.		✔	While EnerGov and the REPS customer portal has this capability, the City is not utilizing this feature. Therefore, applicants are calling or coming to the Development Services Center to inquire about application and permit status.
58. Permit tracking software is used to manage the permit intake, review, and issuance process as well as related inspections.	✔	✔	EnerGov is used to manage the permit intake, review, and issuance processes, as well as scheduling and managing inspections. Staff indicated the system is not working as well as it should for all of these processes, sometimes creating a need for workarounds. For example, it does not link together multiple permits for the same project, so staff have to search for them individually by address and date. This may be an opportunity for additional training for staff.

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59. All plan review comments are entered into the system and available to other reviewers, permit techs, and applicants (via the front end).	✔	✔	The EnerGov system does allow staff to enter comments that are available to other reviewers. Review comments are stored inconsistently on the plan review sheets and in EnerGov. The system does not allow staff an "overlay" view to see comments from multiple rounds of reviews without toggling between them. Additionally, comments created in Bluebeam sometimes fail to appear in EnerGov and cannot be recovered.
60. The permitting system electronically routes applications to all reviewers, who can also electronically approve, disapprove, and provide comments.	✔	✔	EnerGov is used to electronically route applications to all reviewers, and all reviewers have access. However, not all reviewers are automatically included in the routing for reviews they should receive. This is a process issue rather than a software capability issue.
61. The City is moving towards a paperless system for all stages of permitting and development review.	✔	✔	The City has the goal to have a 100% paperless system in place for all development review processes. However, some of the current paperless/digital only systems in place do not utilize the REPS customer portal and EnerGov system. This requires a high reliance on PDF forms and email submittals. To achieve a truly paperless/digital submittal, further updates and implementation of the EnerGov will need to occur.

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62. The permitting system generates clear, user friendly reports on permitting activity which can be posted to the City's website.		✔	EnerGov has the capability of creating permitting activity reports, and some are created by managers for internal use. However, no reports are currently posted to the City's website.
63. Development staff has access to applicable GIS layers.	✔	✔	Some development review staff have access to applicable GIS layers, while some only have access to the data through the public GIS map/web viewers.
64. The general public can look up zoning information, flood zones, and other pertinent information using Web GIS.	✔		A GIS map/web viewer is available to the general public and includes land use actions, property permits, and city (capital improvement) projects. There is also a general property map view that allows the public to search a particular property by address, taxpayer name, or street intersection.
65. Inspectors enter inspection results and correction items in the field via tablet and have it instantly available and viewable on-line.	✔	✔	Inspectors do have tablets and phones provided to them by the City. In concept, inspectors can enter results and corrections in the field, but staff use this feature inconsistently. However, technology challenges in EnerGov sometimes prevent the building permit plan sets to load when in the field and requires work arounds by the inspectors.

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66. One software system is utilized for all permitting, inspection, and code enforcement functions in the City.	✔	✔	The City is utilizing EnerGov as the primary project management and permitting software system. However, some review disciplines are not utilizing EnerGov. Additionally, some common applications (such as utility availability certificates, and record drawings) have no workflow in EnerGov and are conducted completely outside the system.