

DSPS: Overhauls Plan Review Process, Expediting Turnaround Time, Improving Efficiency, Leveling Customer Expectations

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MADISON, Wis. – After an intensive two-quarter study and pilot, the Department of Safety and Professional Services has revamped its plan review process, a key step in most building projects. The new process not only shortens customer wait times but also realigns staff for greater efficiency, flexibility, and growth. The changes additionally promote greater equity among customers and level expectations of constituents.

Earlier today the department released a report detailing the changes and gains for customers, other stakeholders, and the public. DSPS Secretary-designee Dawn Crim said it was a comprehensive undertaking that involved every part of the process and the entire plan review staff.

“We looked at everything and explored anything that could help us leverage staff more effectively and efficiently, serve our customers more equitably, and do our jobs not only faster but better,” Crim said. “The changes we have implemented are good for Wisconsin.”

The department used a Lean Six Sigma approach to identify barriers, redesign systems, build in forecasting thresholds, and replace legacy tools. The department improved plan review turnaround times across the board and upwards of 70% in some areas. For example, commercial building plans are being reviewed and

returned in five weeks. The department is turning around plumbing plans even faster. Those are taking three weeks.

Soon after joining Gov. Tony Evers' administration, Secretary-designee Crim identified plan review as an area for improvement. Industry stakeholders and legislative partners had expressed interest in improving the process that had, for many years, not met their expectations. The change in administration presented an opportunity to review and enhance a service integral to the construction industry.

"Dawn has done exactly what we needed her to do—she took a process that had been broken for years, and she fixed it. Her leadership has resulted in better use and development of staff resources, clearer and more consistent expectations, greater equity among customers, and faster service—all without compromising quality or safety," Gov. Evers said. "Right now, we need leaders who keep an eye on safety and who care about the people of our state, and Dawn does."

Gov. Evers also noted that Secretary-designee Crim has maintained nearly all the agency's functions, particularly those related to construction, throughout the COVID pandemic that ravaged the economy.

This internal process redesign is the first of a three-phased approach to improve the plan review process and better serve customers. Secretary-designee Crim already launched the second phase in February when she directed related code councils and committees to review the thresholds that identify which projects are subject to agency review. Current Commercial Building Code thresholds are based primarily on size and plumbing code thresholds are based primarily on fixture number. New risk-based thresholds could vary depending on building type, use, and occupancy. The third phase involves advocating for legislation that would afford the department greater flexibility in how it executes certain responsibilities codified in statute.

"This is a win for our agency, but our work is not done," Crim said. "We have made great progress with the resources at our disposal, and we identified more improvements that could be made with additional resources. I look forward to continued collaboration with my colleagues in the legislature and industry on this and other important agency efforts."

Urban League of Greater Madison CEO & President Ruben L. Anthony, Jr., commends Secretary Crim for her ability to transform a process that has been beleaguered by budget cuts and criticism for years.

“We are very lucky in this state to have the Leadership of Secretary-designee Dawn Crim at DSPS,” Anthony said. “Those of us who know her well know that she is a community builder and that she is customer-focused and she has improved relationships. Dawn is a visionary who has moved this Department in a direction that has raised the bar for the community and the industries that depend on the department to be diligent, expeditious and fair.”

In addition to plan review, the Department of Safety and Professional Services issues more than 240 unique licenses, administers dozens of boards and councils that regulate professions, enforces state building codes, runs the state fire prevention program, and maintains the award-winning Wisconsin Enhanced Prescription Drug Monitoring Program, which is a key tool in the multi-faceted public health campaign to stem excessive opioid prescribing. A fee-based agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services is self-sustaining and receives no general fund tax dollars for its day-to-day operations. With five offices and 250 employees throughout Wisconsin, DSPS collaborates with constituents and stakeholders across a wide range of industries to promote safety and advance the economy.