

MEMORANDUM

AUSTIN DEVELOPMENT SERVICES PLAN REVIEW PROCESS ESCALATION BEST PRACTICES FOR ARCHITECTS AND APPLICANTS

We have seen and appreciate on-going improvements in the plan review processes in recent years, but there will always be unique situations, mistakes, and ambiguities that require escalation. This memo provides recommendations to AIA Austin members for best practices on how to handle those issues when they arise. Austin Development Services (ADS) has reviewed and contributed to this memo through AIA Austin Advocacy's standing quarterly meetings with ADS leadership who have been genuinely working on improving the process including through AIA Austin's direct input.

WHOM TO CONTACT

1. **THERE IS MORE THAN ONE DEPARTMENT IN THE REVIEW PROCESS.** While from the applicant's perspective, we think of "the City" or "ADS" as a single entity, the reality is that those in charge of the review do not control reviewers from other city departments. Being aware of the specific departments and teams involved with an issue helps keep the resolution focused.
2. **CONTACT ONE PERSON AT A TIME.** Including multiple contacts on an escalation email creates confusion about who needs to respond or who should respond first, which more or less guarantees a slower response! In cases where it is absolutely necessary to include more than one new person in a chain, be explicit about whom you are asking for a response and who is included for reference or awareness only. But it will always be clearer to add one new level at a time.
3. **DON'T GO STRAIGHT TO THE TOP.** In the vast majority of cases, working upwards will result in reaching the right person to make a determination or decision faster. In cases where escalation continues to rise, the record created by these conversations will make for a more productive determination in the end. For issues that have broader impact than a single project or site, the strategy may be different; for those we

recommend coordinating with AIA Austin Advocacy by submitting via the [AIA Austin Advocacy Intake Form](#).

4. **ALWAYS CONTACT THE INDIVIDUAL REVIEWER OR INSPECTOR FIRST.** There may be different policies in different teams that restrict contact between cycles, issues with timeliness, etc., but getting as much information as possible on an unclear or contradictory comment
5. **CLIMB THE ORG CHART.** ADS makes their organizational chart readily available on their website and keeps it updated as much as possible. It would be wonderful if more departments would do the same! You can find the current version on the [ADS Contact Page](#) near the bottom under Quick Links. Members are sometimes concerned that using this resource might be seen as rude or cheating, but ADS leadership has confirmed that they intend it to be used in this way.
6. **WHAT TO DO WHEN THERE ARE MULTIPLE POSSIBLE PATHS.** In some cases, a reviewer may be in another department—indicated by a dashed line around them in the org chart—or may not be on the ADS org chart. In this case, the next step may be unclear and could be within ADS or within the other department. Depending on the subject matter, the authority to resolve may be in different places and may itself be ambiguous or a conflict. When in doubt, we recommend staying within ADS by escalating to the supervisor over the review team and including any concern about conflict or ambiguity in your response.
7. **WHAT DO DO WHEN THE CITY STARTS ARGUING WITH ITSELF.** Conflicting interpretations or policies do exist, so applicants can find themselves in a situation where two individuals or two departments give conflicting instructions. This is an extremely difficult position and has led to significant delays and projects ending in the past. This may merit jumping levels to an individual who is above both of the staff in conflict and/or contacting AIA Austin Advocacy.
8. **ASK WHO TO CONTACT NEXT.** It is good practice to ask who you should reach out to in case the person you are contacting ends up not being the right person to contact. When in doubt, this can also be a good question for a case manager / coordinating reviewer or for AIA Austin Advocacy to share experience between Members with similar experience.

WHEN TO CONTACT

9. **BE AWARE OF THE WHOLE TIMELINE.** It is easy to get caught up in the short-term emergency panic of deadlines, but applicants need to keep track of the internal deadlines and timings before escalating an issue. Use the “Permit Work Flow” tab on Austin Build + Connect (AB+C, sometimes also referred to as “Amanda” in reference to the city-facing interface for the same data) to monitor scheduled end dates. Interruptions to process can cause further delays, so without specific information that creates a reasonable concern that a critical deadline will be missed, do not escalate a delay until after deadlines are missed.
10. **ESCALATE WHEN DEADLINES ARE MISSED.** On the flip-side of waiting until deadlines are missed, it is appropriate to reach out and escalate immediately when the missed deadline creates a problem. Most often, reviews will have a posted deadline and the coordinating reviewer or case manager will have one full business day to compile and provide the responses. On the business day following that second milestone (the latest “scheduled end date” posted on the Permit Work Flow tab on AB+C), reach out to them. We recommend this rather than contacting the reviewers directly.
11. **HOW LONG TO WAIT BEFORE ESCALATING TO THE NEXT LEVEL.** This is a bit more subjective and will depend on the severity of the issue and the scale of the potential impacts. We recommend counting in business days, not hours.

OTHER BEST PRACTICES

12. **GET IT IN WRITING.** Email is preferable to phone calls because it creates a threaded record of the conversation. Whether or not a previous statement can be relied upon, the record is important to establish the series of events. For phone calls or meetings, we recommend immediately following up with a summary and asking for confirmation that it is accurate.
13. **IF EVERYTHING IS AN EMERGENCY, NOTHING IS.**

14. **THE GOLDEN RULE.** Do everything you can to meet deadlines, provide thorough information, and everything else you expect from City staff.

PRE-SUBMISSION INFORMATION

15. **GENERAL PROCESS QUESTIONS.** Pre-application appointments are available through the [Permitting and Development Center](#). These are particularly useful for basic process questions, but AIA members report that these are not appropriate for code questions, indication of how something would be reviewed, or specific unusual conditions and can instead be counter-productive. Nothing said in these meetings has any authority and information provided cannot be relied upon later in the process, so any recommendations or determinations should not be used as the basis for design decisions.
16. **CODE INTERPRETATIONS.** When code ambiguity arises in critical components of a design, a code interpretation may be the best option. Always check for existing interpretations first; ADS now makes these documents easily available on the [Code Interpretations](#) page. If an existing interpretation does not exist, you can request one at the bottom of the page (or ask a general questions about interpretations). Not every question should have an interpretation; interpretations should be reserved for items that are significantly impactful or that are recurring across many projects, particularly in cases where different projects are given different interpretations during reviews. If you are unsure, you can always reach out to AIA Austin Advocacy to discuss with other professionals if an issue is known among other members.
17. **USE YOUR COLLEAGUES AS A RESOURCE.** The AIA Austin Members and Committees all have experience to share. You can always reach out to AIA Austin Advocacy for connections or information, especially when the issues are related to items we have advocated for in the past or may be things we want to consider for the future. This input is one of the most important ways we can keep track of what's going on out there! Past precedents and shared experience can be very compelling and help us as a community ensure that the regulations are being applied equitably, consistently, and justly.