

Finding and Recommendations to Improve County Land Use Processes



August 2025

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes key findings and recommendations aimed at improving the land use decision-making process in Anne Arundel County.

Improving the land use decision-making process has many benefits:

- making it easier to plan and zone for growth and change,
- reducing the cost of new development,
- reducing staff time and workload, and
- encouraging private developers to build projects that advance goals for meeting the ongoing housing crisis.

Key areas of findings and recommendations include:

- **Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDUs):** Issues identified include the calculation of tenant changes in existing commercial buildings, the timing of water/sewer allocations, and the need to update outdated flow factors. Recommendations include developing a process to inform prospective businesses about EDU requirements earlier in the building permit review process, allowing applicants to request a courtesy review of EDU worksheets earlier, and reviewing the results of a flow factor study expected by the end of 2025.
- **Development Review Process:** Concerns include the burdensome nature and length of the current review process. Recommendations involve streamlining the preliminary plan review process, potentially by revising sketch plan requirements to focus on basic site details, and reallocating positions in the Department of Inspections & Permits (I&P) to provide additional development plan reviewers.
- **Department of Public Works (DPW) Involvement:** A key concern is that DPW, despite being the infrastructure owner, is not a formal reviewer and its involvement can lengthen the process and create uncertainty. A recommendation is to create a new DPW coordinator position to manage utility components of reviews and track progress.
- **Tenant Permits Processing Timelines:** Delays are correlated with staffing levels and incomplete submissions. The report highlights the successful reinstatement of an "EZ Tenant Permit Process" for same-day review of small interior tenant permits. Recommendations include continued support for I&P staffing and further exploration of using third-party engineering support.
- **Redline Process:** Anne Arundel County lacks an abbreviated review and approval process for minor revisions to previously approved development plans, unlike other counties. The recommendation is to explore establishing a shortened review process for such revisions.
- **Review Process and Timeframes by Other Local Agencies:** The Fire Marshal, County Health Department, and Clerk of the Court Recordation Office also impact permit and development application processes. Recommendations include establishing separate groups to review concerns with the Fire Marshal's requirements and the Health Department's review times, and working with the Circuit Court to shorten plat recordation times.

- **Cultural Shift:** While progress has been made in communication and collaboration, further improvement in the institutional culture of land use agencies is needed. Recommendations the department heads meeting to reinforce a culture of public service and collaborative problem-solving, and identifying soft skill training needs for agency teams.

Scope/Charge

Based on feedback County Executive Steuart Pittman received from individuals within the business and development community regarding the permit and development review processes, the County Executive convened an internal workgroup to solicit feedback regarding concerns with burdensome and inefficient land use processes. A number of changes were made in the first term, such as new leadership in each of the land use agencies, process improvements, plan updates, and regular meetings with industry professionals - all of which have yielded significant improvements in process review times and transparency.

In response to ongoing feedback, the Deputy Chief Administrative Officer and the CEO and COO of the Anne Arundel Economic Development Corporation (EDC) held a series of meetings with development industry representatives including land use attorneys, engineers, developers, and shopping center operators to discuss outstanding concerns and opportunities for further efficiencies. Additionally, experienced staff from the Office of Planning & Zoning (OPZ), the Department of Public Works (DPW), and the Department of Inspections & Permits (I&P) were asked for their input into process changes that could enhance efficiency. The resulting report consolidates the feedback and recommendations gathered through these stakeholder discussions and internal reviews, with the goal of identifying meaningful opportunities for process improvement and greater efficiency.

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

This report contains findings and recommendations in seven (7) key areas:

- Equivalent Dwelling Unit Calculation and Process
- Development Review Process
- DPW's Involvement in the Review Process
- Tenant Permits Processing Timelines
- Redline Process
- Review Process and Timeframes by Other Local Agencies
- Culture of Planning and Zoning

Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDUs)

The workgroup also discussed the cost of EDUs as well as the process for determining the appropriate rate to charge depending on the proposed development. EDUs are charges that reimburse the County for building the infrastructure necessary to provide water and sewer capacity. An EDU is a unit of measure (typically 250 gallons of water per day) for determining water and sewer usage. The County's system of charging Capital Connection Fees for water and for sewer service is based on one EDU. Three separate issues were identified: how to calculate tenant changes in existing commercial buildings, the timing of the process to allocate and reserve units of needed water or sewer service for a proposed development in the development review process, and the need to update outdated flow factors.

1) Tenant changes in existing buildings: EDUs are calculated by County staff based on the proposed use. In buildings where there is a change in use between tenants, this can require a recalculation of EDUs that is not typically done until the building permit is ready to be issued. Prior to issuance of a building permit, all fees must be paid. Several businesses have reported that when the new use represented an intensification of use, they were required to purchase EDUs upon receiving a building permit. Private sector representatives perceive this as a “change in policy” and suggest that historically, changes in use have not triggered a recalculation of EDUs. Small business tenants bear the greatest impact when new fees are assessed at the time of building permit issuance, as each EDU can cost over \$11,000. Property owners pass the cost onto the tenant since the calculation is tied to the use. Often, a lease has already been signed and the user has limited recourse but to absorb the fee. However, the additional capacity is owned by the property owner and may be a benefit for future tenants.

DPW suggests that the only process changes have been related to the shift from manual permit issuance to automated processing with the new permitting platform, Accela. Historically, I&P determined whether EDU’s should be recalculated due to an intensification of use. Through the Accela system, DPW has a more active role in those determinations and reviews all building permits for intensification of use. EDU allocations are calculated by DPW based on the current use of each property. The risk of not properly assessing EDUs based on the actual use is a water and wastewater system that is insufficient to support the capacity needs.

EDC and DPW have been collaborating to create public notices about EDU requirements that I&P can transmit earlier in the permitting process to raise awareness sooner- before leases are signed. However, the cost can still be untenable for a small business that is simply fitting out an existing space.

Recommendation: Develop a process to inform prospective businesses of EDU requirements earlier in the building permit review process. Early awareness allows tenants to select sites with adequate capacity and/or negotiate lease terms that consider these fees.

2) Timing of water/sewer allocations: Industry representatives raised concerns that water/sewer allocations occur near the Final Plan stage. DPW review occurs late in the process, which may become an outstanding unknown. Allocations are tied to later plan stages to ensure sufficient plan details needed for Adequate Public Facilities (APF) vesting. Staff acknowledged the concern and instituted a process improvement in 2024 whereby the applicant can obtain a courtesy review from DPW of their EDU worksheet earlier in the review process. Furthermore, digitized interoffice transmittal is expected to provide time savings.

Recommendation: Continue to allow applicants to request a courtesy review of the EDU worksheet earlier in the development process and publicize this process.

3) Flow Factors: Both the industry representatives and DPW agreed that the County's water/sewer flow factors should be updated and expanded to include different housing types, new business types or consumer changes in water use. DPW is currently conducting a flow factor study that will address the different categories in use today. In addition to evaluating current flow data for various uses, DPW will be evaluating how the County measures flow factors (i.e. square footage rather than seats, etc.). Phase 1 of this study is expected to be completed by the end of 2025 and the results will be used to make recommendations for changes to the existing flow factors.

Recommendation: Review results of the flow factor study and develop policy proposals for implementation of new flow factors, if and where appropriate.

Development Review Process

A model development review process should offer ample opportunity for as-of-right development while also providing the means to approve discretionary actions aligned with Countywide goals for housing, economic development, resiliency, and targeted growth as articulated within Plan 2040¹. The County's standard review process includes a three-step approach prior to an application receiving approval to move to permitting: Subdivision (standard process): Sketch Plan application, Final Plan application, and Permit applications - Grading and/or Building along with any required trade permits.

For subdivisions, a development application will start with a Sketch Plan application review, per the requirements of Article 17-3-201. The Sketch Plan process is used to evaluate the feasibility of proposed development based on existing conditions and County Code requirements. Adequate Public Facilities (APF) may be tested and vested at this stage, but it is not required. Once the Sketch is approved, an application for the Final Plan will proceed for review of compliance with Article 17-3-301. The Final Plan will include testing for APF if it has not already occurred. Once the Final Plan subdivision is complete, an applicant may proceed to permitting.

For site development, the first step is the Preliminary Plan, which is similar to the Sketch Plan although no land is being subdivided. The Preliminary Plan requirements are stated in Article 17-4-201. Once the Preliminary Plan is approved, an application for the Site Development Plan will proceed for review of compliance with Article 17-4-202. The Site Development Plan will include testing for APF if it has not already occurred with the

¹ In [Plan 2040, Goal BE1](#) states, "Align development regulations and review practices with Plan2040, that recognizes the importance of the County's environmental features; limitations on infrastructure; and the desire to focus development, redevelopment and revitalization in the Targeted Development, Redevelopment and Revitalization Policy Areas; enhance quality of life; and protect and enhance neighborhoods." Policy Policy BE1.4 further expands on this by recommending collaboration "in County, City and regional planning activities to enhance coordination and implementation of land use, environment, conservation, infrastructure, economic development and community facility policies, programs, and projects." The performance measure for both this goal and policy is "status of reforms to development review procedures."

Preliminary Plan. Once the Site Development Plan is approved, the applicant may proceed to permitting.

An oft-repeated concern was the burdensome nature of the review process and how it ends up costing the developer more, which gets passed onto the consumer. The current process takes too long, is adversarial (at times), is expensive to navigate, and discourages applicants from coming forward with new ideas. It was noted that the Preliminary Plan and Sketch Plan steps were supposed to be conceptual but over time the administrative checklist has become more detailed. One of the suggested recommendations was to review Sketch Requirements and Checklist to “allow Sketch Plans to be Sketch Plans” (or “Preliminary Plans to be Preliminary Plans”) so that issues that are appropriate for later stages of an approval process are not unnecessarily forced into review at the first step.

This balance will both help to ensure the smooth functioning of housing and commercial markets as the County evolves and promote actions that help meet the County’s various needs and preferences, including public benefits. The workgroup agreed with the need for a process to review proposed developments against code driven requirements; but expressed concern that the current process is not focused on continuous improvement such as improved efficiency, more predictability in terms of timing and outcomes to applicants and the public; increased flexibility to respond to economic conditions and market forces; balanced countywide priorities with neighborhood concerns; and early identification of both the benefits and costs of proposed actions.

County staff also share some of the same frustrations as noted above. Both County staff and developers are in agreement that the current process can be improved. Convening an internal workgroup to flesh out staff’s ideas is a logical next step - one that aligns with Plan2040’s policy recommendations. Ultimately, an approach that allows the first stage to efficiently give the developer a sense of what portion of the site can be used without drawn-out back-and-forths, give County staff the assurance that resources are protected, and allow the final two phases to be more focused on addressing details of the site development. Critically, this process would still conform with MDE requirements and eliminate a redundant step, thus saving both developer and staff time and resources. This is something that needs to be further discussed to determine the pros/cons (including exploring if this revamped process adds uncertainty due to critical details being delayed), and the needed legislative changes.

This streamlined process should be able to occur with relatively minimal financial investment on the part of the developer, and would likely mirror pro forma analyses that developers do early in the land purchase process. Shifting APF vesting also helps unload the front end work currently required by developers, and yet creates the urgency to work towards a shared agreement, in order to get to the second - vesting - phase.² Once that has been determined, the developer moves to the Final Plan Phase, where

² The downside is that vesting is shifted further and will require more engineering at that later stage; but initial reaction from the building industry is that those expenses would be offset by the elimination of an entire step.

APF can be vested, along with the bulk of the plan development and investment. After review by County staff, the developer then moves to the Final Plan stage.

The workgroup also noted that additional reviewers in I&P could speed the review timelines. Shorter review timelines make the entire development review process more efficient. Currently, there is one senior engineer reviewer in I&P, five engineer III positions and two engineer II positions that can review development plans processed through OPZ.

To streamline processing, I&P leadership has realigned some staff to facilitate reviews for development applications involving stormwater management, roads, utilities and other associated infrastructure.

Updating the Development Plan checklists to be less cumbersome and more clear made the process for development submittal and review more efficient. OPZ updated the checklists for Preliminary Plans, Site Development Plans, Sketch and Final Plan and posted the new documents on their [webpage](#). Continuing to review these guidance documents and communicate that the documents are available and updated should be included in a communications campaign. Feedback should be sought from industry professionals as the new forms are used.

Recommendation: Realign existing staff to facilitate reviews for development applications involving stormwater management, roads, utilities, and other associated infrastructure.

Recommendation: Seek feedback from the development community on the updated submission checklists and communicate these changes broadly.

Recommendation: Staff should continue to develop a streamlined process for appropriate development that would allow initial preliminary plan review and shift the timing of APF vesting.

DPW's Involvement in the Review Process

A concern frequently raised is that DPW, as the owner of the infrastructure, is not a formal reviewer but still is closely involved in the review process as Engineering, Utility Finance, and Utility Operations are called to evaluate at OPZ and I&P's discretion. As a result, DPW is often tasked with reviewing plans and submitting comments, at the discretion of OPZ and/or I&P, with no time requirements. This extra review can lengthen the entire process and creates uncertainty within the development community regarding who the ultimate decision maker is. This problem is compounded by the fact that DPW does not have dedicated reviewers - unlike OPZ and I&P.

This is a frustration shared by staff, as well. In an effort to address it, in 2024 DPW and I&P initiated biweekly coordination meetings with staff to include Engineering Administrators, Engineer Managers, Program Administrators, and others that needed to review and comment on utility-related developer projects from a planning, design and construction perspective and based on the level of complexity.

This collaboration allows staff from applicable departments to discuss any projects/reviews that require further discussion of requirements, standards, or clarifications of comments for sewer studies, subdivisions, etc. It also provides an opportunity to ensure that project milestones/deadlines are met with the end result a reduction in review time and conflicting comments. In addition to specific projects, the meeting serves as a forum to bring up and address workflows, processes, policies, and procedures, etc, that need to be clarified, created, updated, or revised. This enhanced coordination has been extremely beneficial to County staff and customers on various items such as master meter agreements, public works agreement cost estimates, connections permits, design manual updates and clarifications needed, inconsistencies between departments, and outdated policies or procedures.

Recommendation: Create a new DPW coordinator position, whose primary responsibility would be to coordinate all utility components of the review specific to DPW, tracking DPW progress, and working directly with I&P. Since a number of changes are in process and new ones may be forthcoming, it would be beneficial to assess the effectiveness of those process improvements while also utilizing a contractual position for a trial period.

Tenant Permits Processing Timelines

Concerns related to tenant permits typically fall into two main categories 1) an applicant's lack of understanding about the process and 2) the length of processing time by County staff. While some issues around process awareness can be attributed to private sector turnover, additional FAQ-type documents in layman terms should be developed to help new managers and small businesses navigate the processes efficiently.

Processing time delays appear to be directly correlated to staffing levels. In fall 2023, 60% of I&P intake positions were vacant resulting in an average turnaround rate of 8.4 days from permit submission to initial processing. As of July 15, 2025, 78% of intake positions are filled. Additionally, I&P's data reveals that approximately 50% of permit submissions do not meet basic requirements (i.e. not to scale, not labeled properly, lack dimensions, etc.) and cannot be accepted. Industry representatives requested reinstatement of the former "walk up Wednesday" process, which provided same-day permit review if certain criteria are met. Another option may be to develop a program to review tenant permit requests (for 7,500 sf or less) by appointment in one day.

Recommendation: I&P should continue to look at ways to reduce the time to review and approve permits that meet basic requirements.

The use of outside contractors is an additional measure employed to manage workload and processing volume. Outside, third-party contractors can be used to handle periods of high-volume or specialized projects. They offer a scalable workforce solution, based on need allowing for efficient resource utilization. This option is also beneficial to the department when engineers are in high demand and are offered lucrative salary packages in the private sector in a competitive market.

In FY 26, I&P was approved through the budget process to increase their spending on third party engineering support to almost \$425,000 which will facilitate review turnaround times. The contractual positions have helped meet code mandated timelines for development projects that are processed through OPZ. Additionally, they bridge the gap when vacancies exist or staff are out of the office and provide an opportunity to have a dedicated person that can turnaround project reviews "faster" for high priority projects. I&P plans to continue using the contractual help in the upcoming fiscal year and will review the need moving forward as demand dictates

Recommendation: Use of third-party engineering support is a common practice used by public sector agencies to manage periods of heavy volume, while keeping overhead and on-going personnel costs down. This workforce solution should continue to be used as I&P monitors its effectiveness. It is important to communicate the actions that have been taken, the benefits of this approach and the processing efficiencies it provides. It is also important to ensure an adequate quality control process to ensure that review comments provided by temporary contractual engineers is substantiated and does not lead to additional confusion in the future.

Redline Process

Anne Arundel County does not have an abbreviated review and approval process for proposals to amend a previously approved development plan. Other counties, such as Howard and Baltimore, offer a condensed (2-3 week) review process for minor revisions to active development plans as an alternative to the entire site development process. Anne Arundel currently grants permission to expand structures up to 4000 SF without a site plan and for larger expansions, offers the modification process to condense the review process. However, modifications adhere to the typical 45-day review cycle, require certain criteria to be met, and submission of a site development plan. Therefore, they differ from the automatic nature of abbreviated programs in other jurisdictions.

Recommendation: Staff should continue to streamline the process for appropriate development that allows for initial preliminary plan review and shifts the timing of APF vesting. Staff should determine the practicality of piloting this approach specifically for affordable and workforce housing.

Review Process and Timeframes by Other Local Agencies

The permit and development application process is also impacted by multiple agencies outside of I&P and OPZ. Three agencies - the Fire Marshal Office, the County Health Department, and the Clerk of the Court Recordation Office - control elements of review for specific types of applications and are discussed below.

- 1) Fire Marshal:** Development industry representatives indicated that the Fire Marshal's requirements can change and they are not aware until after a project is designed and engineered. However, during the subsequent inspection process, the Fire Marshal Office may identify other issues later in the process. These

changes can have costly implications for design and efficiency of the layout (i.e. alley width). While these requirements are essential for safety, they also can be costly. It would be helpful to better understand how Anne Arundel's fire regulations compare with other jurisdictions and NFPA- National Fire Protection Association Code.

Recommendation: A separate group should be established to include the Fire Marshal Office, I&P, and the development community to review these concerns and identify solutions.

- 2) **Plat Recordation Delays:** Since COVID, plat recordation times have extended by at least two weeks due to the process of recording plats at the Circuit Court. Prior to COVID, plats could be walked to the courthouse and recorded within days. This process is now taking a couple weeks to receive reference numbers. The delay is likely due to courthouse personnel availability due to remote work and the fact the court system has not adopted electronic signatures.

Recommendation: Staff should work with the Circuit Court Administrator, the Clerk of the Court, and appropriate court staff to determine what improvements can be made to shorten the recordation time.

- 3) **Health Department:** A repeated concern is the length of time it takes for the Health Department to review food based business permits and the ability to receive responses to inquiries requesting further information. Based on data compiled from 10/1/23 to 3/31/24, on average the Health Department requires two review cycles and takes 14.7 business days to review plans. Businesses frequently submit incomplete plans or do not understand the requirements for their specific type of business. Checklists for food based businesses are available online but frequently businesses do not use this information prior to submitting a permit, requiring lengthy comment letters. The County also has a Spanish speaking Environmental Health Specialist who is available to assist businesses. Additional information for food based businesses has already been made available on the I&P website, but more communication could help address the concern.

Recommendation: A separate group should work with the Health Department, I&P, and appropriate representatives from the impacted business community to identify next steps to improving the quality of submittals and the Health Department review time. The Administration and EDC could facilitate a meeting with leadership - similar to the discussion with land use agencies and share industry concerns.

Cultural Shift

The workgroup discussed staffing and the institutional culture of the County's land use agencies. Aside from EDUs, there was a lot of discussion around the land use agencies and their institutional culture. To be clear, the input was near universal that

there has been significant progress made by the Administration to open the lines of communication between staff and customers. Specifically, they noted that the County Executive Pittman's relatively recent departmental leadership changes, particularly the current OPZ Planning and Zoning Officer and having an County Executive staffer (DCAO of Land Use) have really signaled to the development community that the County is serious about addressing long time land use issues. Representatives of the development community further added that there has been a shift in institutional culture for the better, but they stressed that more can (and should be done). For example, several noted that under prior administrations (and County Executive Pittman's first term), the culture at OPZ was not one of collaboration but clearly oppositional to development. It is not clear that planning staff fully understand the benefit for land use agencies to be more collaborative and less defensive when working with professionals from the building industry.

Recommendation: The land use department heads should identify actions that are needed to reinforce the shift from a more conservative view of development to the urgency of the moment - and encourage their continued commitment to a culture of public service, accountability, and collaborative problem solving with the development community. In addition, the land use agency directors should identify the specific soft skill training needs for their teams to be able to embrace this new approach to working with applicants and work with Personnel to develop those trainings.

Land Use Process Improvements Recommendation Tracker - August 2025

Recommendation	Timeline
Equivalent Dwelling Units (EDUs)	
1. Develop a process to inform prospective businesses about EDU requirements earlier in the building permit review process. Continue collaboration between EDC and DPW to create public notices and transmit them earlier in the permitting process.	Fall 2025
2. Continue to allow applicants to request a courtesy review of the EDU worksheet earlier in the development process and publicize this process.	Complete - 2024
3. Review results of the flow factor study and develop policy proposals for implementation of new flow factors, if and where appropriate.	End of 2025 (Phase 1 study completion)
Development Review Process	
1. Realignment of existing staff to facilitate reviews for development applications involving stormwater management, roads, utilities, and other associated infrastructure.	Ongoing
2. Seek feedback from the development community on the updated submission checklists and communicate these changes broadly.	Ongoing
3. Staff should continue to develop a streamlined process for appropriate development that would allow initial preliminary plan review and shift the timing of APF vesting.	Fall 2025
DPW's Involvement in the Review Process	
1. Create a new DPW coordinator position, whose primary responsibility would be to coordinate all utility components of the review specific to DPW, tracking DPW progress, and working directly with I&P.	Ongoing
Tenant Permits Processing Timelines	
1. I&P should continue to look at ways to reduce the time to review and approve permits that meet basic requirements.	Ongoing
2. Use of third-party engineering support should continue to be used as I&P monitors its effectiveness.	Ongoing
Redline Process	
1. Staff should continue to streamline the process for appropriate development that allows for initial preliminary plan review and shifts the timing of APF vesting. Staff should determine the practicality of piloting this approach specifically for affordable and workforce housing.	Ongoing
Review Process and Timeframes by Other Local Agencies	

1. A separate group should be established to include the Fire Marshal Office, I&P, and the development community to review concerns with Fire Marshal comments and identify solutions.	Fall 2025
2. Staff should work with the Circuit Court Administrator, the Clerk of the Court, and appropriate court staff to determine what improvements can be made to shorten the recordation time.	Fall 2025
3. A separate group should work with the Health Department, I&P, and appropriate representatives from the impacted business community to identify next steps to improving the quality of submittals and the Health Department review time. The Administration and EDC could facilitate a meeting with leadership - similar to the discussion with land use agencies and share industry concerns.	Fall 2025
Cultural Shift	
1. The land use department heads should identify actions that are needed to reinforce the shift from a more conservative view of development to the urgency of the moment - and encourage their continued commitment to a culture of public service, accountability, and collaborative problem solving with the development community.	Fall 2025
2. The land use agency directors should identify the specific soft skill training needs for their teams to be able to embrace this new approach to working with applicants and work with Personnel to develop those trainings.	Fall 2025