City of Wilmington, North Carolina

Development Review Process:

Stakeholder and Employee Survey Results

April 2012

The Novak Consulting Group

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Overview

The following report summarizes responses received for the City of Wilmington's Development Review Process survey of stakeholders and employees. The surveys were administered by The Novak Consulting Group to inform the study of the City's development review process. In the survey, stakeholders and employees were asked to provide their views on the development review process and provide input on possible improvements to enhance its effectiveness.

The surveys were administered using a web-based survey tool, Survey Monkey™. A copy of each survey instrument is attached to this report. The surveys were conducted from February 8 to February 17, 2012.

Stakeholders

Based on the responses received, the City's development review stakeholders have generally positive opinions of the level of customer service received by City staff. Respondents provided mixed comments regarding the current development review and TRC processes. While there was general agreement regarding individual aspects of the TRC process, there was little agreement regarding the overall helpfulness of the TRC for each new project that is approved by the City.

Respondents' comments regarding the current development review process also indicated a lack of consensus within the stakeholder group as a whole. When the responses were broken down by the type of project submitted in the last year, there was significant variation in opinions. For example, while there were generally positive comments from those who had a major site plan reviewed in the last year, there were significantly fewer positive comments from those who had a minor site plan reviewed in the last year.

Employees

Based on the survey results, respondents have generally positive opinions of the organization's development review process as a whole and communication and teamwork within the City's development review process. Based on the responses received, respondents' overall opinions of the TRC process were generally positive. The results suggest that the respondents deem the TRC process to be beneficial for the City and the applicant. However, respondents' opinions were somewhat less confident regarding appropriateness of staff in attendance at TRC, the quality of comments provided, and meeting length.

When employee responses were broken down by time in the development review process, it was interesting to note that longer-term employees, those with more than five years in the development review process, felt the process as a whole was functioning better than those with fewer than five years of experience in the process. This trend was reversed when asked about the TRC process in the City. Those with less than five years of service in the development review process in the City felt the TRC process was functioning well, while those with more than five years of service in the TRC process felt it was not functioning as well.

Stakeholder Survey: Demographics

The stakeholder survey was emailed to 90 stakeholders of the development review process, as identified by the City. Fifty-two stakeholders responded to some or all portions of the survey. Of that amount, 38 fully completed responses were received. The total number of fully completed responses received indicates a response rate of approximately 42%, which is above average. A 30.0% response rate for online surveys is considered average.

The following tables detail the number of responses received by survey question, as well as demographic characteristics of all respondents.

The table below lists the number of responses received for each question included in the stakeholder survey.

Table 1: Responses by Survey Question

Question	Number of Responses
In the past year, what types of projects have you submitted through the City's development review process? Select all that apply.	52
What was your role in the process? Select all that apply.	52
From Project Submittal to Project Release, what was the length of time for your project's review? If you have submitted more than one project, please indicate the average/typical length of time.	43
Did the length of the review process meet your expectations?	43
If no, what could have been done differently to meet your expectations?	34
Did your project require review by the City's Technical Review Committee (TRC)?	41
If yes, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the TRC.	36
Are there other areas of the development review process that would have been helpful to discuss during the TRC meeting?	15
Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's development review process.	40
Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's level of customer service.	40

Question	Number of Responses
What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?	27
What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?	33
If you could improve one aspect of the development review process, what would it be?	32
Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?	24

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on the type of projects each stakeholder submitted in the last year. Stakeholders could select more than one response, allowing for the percentage totals to be greater than 100%.

Table 2: Respondents' Type of Project Submitted

Type of Project	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Major Site Plan	27	51.9%
Minor Site Plan	34	65.4%
Major Subdivision	8	15.4%
Minor Subdivision	13	25%
Special Use Permit	12	23.1%
Conditional District Rezoning	11	21.2%
General (Straight) Rezoning	10	19.2%
Other	5	9.6%

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on respondents' role in the development process with the City.

Table 3: Respondents' Role in the Process

Role	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Owner	9	17.3%
Developer	14	26.9%
Engineer	17	32.7%
Surveyor	6	11.5%
Real Estate Professional	6	11.5%
Attorney	2	3.8%
Architect	4	7.7%
Builder	3	5.8%
Other	6	11.5%

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on length of time from project submittal to project release.

Table 4: Length of Time from Project Submittal to Project Release

Length	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Less than one month	3	7%
One to two months	1	2.3%
Two to three months	5	11.6%
Three to four months	11	25.6%
Four to five months	6	14%
Five to six months	3	7%
More than six months	14	32.6%

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on respondents' time expectation of the review process.

Table 5: Length of Review Process Met Expectations

Met Expectations?	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Yes	5	11.6%
No	38	88.4%

Stakeholder Survey: All Results

The following section summarizes all responses received for the survey's three rating scale questions. Respondents' opinions regarding the TRC, the City's current development review process, and the City's customer service are all presented under the relevant subheadings below. A summary of responses received for the six open-ended questions presented in the survey is also included.

The Technical Review Committee

Responses indicated the majority of projects required review by the TRC, as detailed in the table below.

Table 6: Technical Review Committee Required for Project

TRC Required?	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Yes	36	87.8%
No	5	12.2%

The table below shows the respondents' opinions regarding the TRC meeting and process. While there was general agreement on individual components of the TRC process, (length of time, quality/relevance of comments, and appropriateness of comments), there was general disagreement regarding the beneficial nature of the TRC process for projects in the City.

Table 7: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Technical Review Committee

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do Not Know
The length of time from application to TRC meeting date was appropriate.	13.89%	**52.78%**	19.44%	13.89%	0.00%
The comments provided to me at the TRC meeting were of high quality.	0.00%	**50.00%**	38.89%	11.11%	0.00%
The comments provided to me at the TRC meeting were relevant.	2.78%	**63.89%**	22.22%	8.33%	2.78%
Appropriate staff members from each discipline were present at my TRC meeting.	16.67%	**63.89%**	8.33%	8.33%	2.78%
The length of the TRC meeting was appropriate.	8.33%	**77.78%**	5.56%	2.78%	5.56%
The TRC process was beneficial for the completion of my project.	8.33%	36.11%	**41.67%**	8.33%	2.78%

These results suggest that there may be room to assess the TRC process, as 50% of respondents either "Mostly Disagreed" or "Strongly Disagreed" with the final statement, "The TRC process was beneficial for the completion of my project."

Current Development Review Process

Responses indicated varied opinions of the current development review process, as shown in the table below.

Table 8: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Current Development Review Process

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	**Mostly Agree**	**Mostly Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Do Not Know**
Engaging in the City's development review process resulted in a higher quality project.	5.00%	20.00%	**47.50%**	20.00%	7.50%
The City's process for development review compares favorably with other jurisdictions.	2.50%	20.00%	25.00%	**37.50%**	15.00%
Current development regulations hinder development in the City.	**57.50%**	27.50%	12.50%	2.50%	0.00%
Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination are positive aspects of the development review process in the City.	5.00%	**35.00%**	27.50%	30.00%	2.50%
The fees charged by the City are reasonable.	7.50%	**62.50%**	12.50%	5.00%	12.50%
The application submittal process worked well.	5.00%	**52.50%**	25.00%	15.00%	2.50%
The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted.	30.00%	**57.50%**	5.00%	2.50%	5.00%

Only 25% of respondents indicated agreement with statement that the City's process for development review compares favorably with other jurisdictions. These results suggest that it would be helpful to compare the development review process in Wilmington against other comparable cities. In addition, 85% of respondents think current regulations are hindering development in the City.

Customer Service

Overall, stakeholders demonstrated very favorable opinions of the customer service demonstrated by development review staff, as shown in the table below.

Table 9: Respondents' Opinions Regarding Customer Service

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do Not Know
The review process was easy to understand.	15.00%	**40.00%**	35.00%	10.00%	0.00%
Review comments were received timely from staff.	0.00%	35.00%	**40.00%**	25.00%	0.00%
The staff reviews were thorough.	7.50%	**57.50%**	20.00%	15.00%	0.00%
The information provided by staff was accurate.	2.50%	**65.00%**	17.50%	15.00%	0.00%
Staff were responsive to questions and comments.	10.00%	**45.00%**	35.00%	10.00%	0.00%
Staff were accessible.	5.00%	**57.50%**	22.50%	15.00%	0.00%
Staff were knowledgeable.	7.50%	**62.50%**	20.00%	7.50%	2.50%
Staff were professional.	20.00%	**62.50%**	15.00%	2.50%	0.00%
The applications, checklists, and other related materials were clear.	7.50%	**55.00%**	27.50%	10.00%	0.00%
The public information was easily accessible (maps, applications, agendas, etc).	7.50%	**57.50%**	22.50%	12.50%	0.00%

These results suggest that while there is always room for improvement, in general stakeholders appreciate the staff and the level of customer service they provide. However, 65% of respondents indicated review comments were not received in a timely manner, indicating at least one area in need of improvement.

Open-Ended Response Questions

The following section provides a summary of the common and repeated responses received for the six open-ended questions presented in the survey. A full listing of all open-ended responses is included in this report in Appendix 2.

If the length of the development review process did not meet your expectations, what could have been done differently?

- Staff accountability and standards need to have some flexibility to allow for unique circumstances
- The process should be shorter
- Do not see the need for the Planning Commission to review Special Use Permits
- The entire development review process needs to be organized and streamlined
- Applicants need to take some responsibility for turning in a quality application and plans

- The staff's attitude and motivation could be improved
- Frequently there are multiple rounds of comments after the fact
- The TRC process needs to be streamlined
- The level of environmental regulation in the City should be reduced

Are there other areas of the development review process that would have been helpful to discuss during the TRC meeting?

- Often the same generic comments are provided on the TRC review
- The staff needs to be more flexible and willing to work with the applicant
- There needs to be a consistent, well laid-out TRC process
- Discuss the turnaround times after the TRC responses initially go to individual departments
- The Cape Fear Public Utility Authority needs to be more a part of the process
- There needs to be one individual who is allowed to make decisions

What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?

- It is good having all the appropriate staff and departments involved in the process
- The current level of environmental protection is good
- The system is fair
- The information and checklists provided by the City are good
- The ProTrak system
- Individual staff members
- The TRC meetings are helpful because everyone is in one room and can comment on the plans

What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?

- No accountability among staff
- Departmental coordination and cooperation is lacking
- Better access to forms, schedules, and other materials on the website
- The staff are not given the authority to make compromises or look at a plan's unique characteristics and make a judgment call
- ProTrak is not user-friendly
- There is no point-person to help navigate the process
- The process takes too long
- The process needs to be streamlined
- The structure of the TRC process is not working
- Excessive or inflexible regulations and how they are interpreted by staff
- Often there are multiple, different sets of comments, after you have already addressed all comments
- The answers given by staff can conflict or overlap with other departments or staff

If you could improve one aspect of the development review process, what would it be?

- Increase staff accountability
- Eliminate conflicts between the Code and Technical Standards
- Increase coordination
- Increase cooperation between Planning and Engineering

- Provide only one set of comments, not multiple sets
- The attitude of the staff could be more proactive and helpful
- There needs to be a project manager for larger projects to guide the project through the process
- Reduce the level of regulations in the City
- Eliminate the Planning Commission review of Special Use Permits
- Staff could use more practical experience
- Relax water quality requirements
- Streamline the TRC process
- There needs to be a set amount of time for review and response from the City
- Hire a private firm to do all development review permitting in the City

Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?
- Combine the TRC with the Subdivision Review Board
- There needs to be greater knowledge of the Code and consistency enforcing it
- Decrease regulations
- There needs to be more flexibility when there are unique circumstances on a site
- ProTrak needs to be eliminated
- There needs to be more electronic filing of plans
- There needs to be a decision-maker directing the process from the top
- The process takes too long
- Often the decisions made by staff follow the strict interpretation of the Code, but lack common sense

Stakeholder Survey: Results by Type of Project

The following section summarizes all responses received for the three rating scale-based questions presented in the survey, organized by the type of project in the development review process. The three tables below give a broad overview of all responses received for rating scale questions, organized by response category (i.e., the TRC; The Current Development Review Process; and Customer Service).

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to statements relating to the TRC process.

Table 10: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Technical Review Committee, By Type of Project

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Major Site Plan	**Minor Site Plan**	**Major Subdivision**	**Minor Subdivision**	**Special Use Permit**
The length of time from application to TRC meeting date was appropriate.	70.9% (17)	65.4% (17)	100% (6)	62.5% (5)	90% (9)
The comments provided to me at the TRC meeting were of high quality.	58.3% (14)	46.2% (12)	83.3% (5)	37.5% (3)	60% (6)
The comments provided to me at the TRC meeting were relevant.	79.2% (19)	65.4% (17	83.3% (5)	62.5% (5)	90% (9)
Appropriate staff members from each discipline were present at my TRC meeting.	87.5% (21)	80.7% (21)	100% (6)	87.5% (7)	100% (10)
The length of the TRC meeting was appropriate.	95.8% (23)	84.6% (22)	100% (6)	87.5% (7)	80% (8)
The TRC process was beneficial for the completion of my project.	58.3% (14)	36% (9)	50% (3)	37.5% (3)	70% (7)

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to questions regarding the current development review process in the City.

Table 11: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Current Development Review Process, By Type of Project

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Major Site Plan	Minor Site Plan	Major Subdivision	Minor Subdivision	Special Use Permit
Engaging in the City's development review process resulted in a higher quality project.	33.3% (8)	20.6% (6)	50% (3)	11.1% (1)	40% (4)
The City's process for development review compares favorably with other jurisdictions.	29.2% (7)	20.7% (6)	50% (3)	22.2% (2)	30% (3)
Current development regulations hinder development in the City.	83.3% (20)	82.7% (24)	83.3% (5)	100% (9)	60% (6)
Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination are positive aspects of the development review process in the City.	45.9% (11)	37.9% (11)	66.7% (4)	55.5% (5)	40% (4)
The fees charged by the City are reasonable.	75% (18)	79.3% (23)	83.3% (5)	77.8% (7)	70% (7)
The application submittal process worked well.	58.3% (14)	62% (18)	66.7% (4)	55.6% (5)	70% (7)
The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted.	91.6% (22)	89.6% (26)	83.3% (5)	77.8 (7)	100% (10)

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to questions regarding customer service in the City.

Table 12: Respondents' Opinions Regarding Customer Service, By Type of Project

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Major Site Plan	Minor Site Plan	Major Subdivision	Minor Subdivision	Special Use Permit
The review process was easy to understand.	62.5% (15)	55.2% (16)	83.3% (5)	44.4% (4)	70% (7)
Review comments were received timely from staff.	33.3% (8)	31% (9)	66.7% (4)	33.3% (3)	40% (4)
The staff reviews were thorough.	62.5% (15)	65.5% (19)	83.3% (5)	66.7% (6)	70% (7)
The information provided by staff was accurate.	71.9% (17)	62% (18)	66.7% (4)	66.7% (6)	90% (9)
Staff were responsive to questions and comments.	54.1% (13)	51.7% (15)	83.3% (5)	55.5% (5)	60% (6)
Staff were accessible.	62.5% (15)	65.5% (19)	83.3% (5)	77.8% (7)	60% (6)
Staff were knowledgeable.	62.5% (15)	69% (20)	66.7% (4)	55.6% (5)	80% (8)
Staff were professional.	75% (18)	86.2% (25)	83.3% (5)	88.9% (8)	80% (8)
The applications, checklists, and other related materials were clear.	66.7% (16)	62% (18)	83.3% (5)	66.7% (6)	70% (7)
The public information was easily accessible (maps, applications, agendas, etc).	70.8% (17)	55.2% (16)	83.3% (5)	77.8% (7)	60% (6)

Employee Survey: Demographics

The employee survey was emailed to 21 employees currently involved in the City's development review process. Fifteen employees responded to some or all portions of the survey. Of that amount, 14 fully completed responses were received. The total number of fully completed responses received indicates a response rate of approximately 67%, which is above average. A 30.0% response rate for online surveys is considered average. The following tables detail the number of responses received by survey question, as well as demographic characteristics of all respondents.

The table below lists the number of responses received for each question included in the survey.

Table 13: Responses by Survey Question

Question	Number of Responses
How long have you worked for the City?	15
How many years have you been involved with the City's development review process?	15
Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding communication and teamwork.	15
Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's current development review process.	15
Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the Technical Review Committee (TRC).	15
What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?	13
What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?	14
Do you have any suggestions to improve the efficiency or reduce the turn-around time of the current process?	12
Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?	12

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on respondents' length of employment with the City of Wilmington.

Table 14: Respondents' Length of Employment with the City of Wilmington

Length of Employment	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Less than 1 year	0	0
1-2 years	1	6.6%
2-5 years	3	20%
5-10 years	6	40%
10+ years	5	33.3%
TOTAL	**15**	**100%**

The table below lists the number and percentage of responses received based on respondents' length of employment working in the development review process in the City of Wilmington.

Table 15: Respondents' Length of Employment Working in the Development Review Process

Length of Employment	Number of Responses	Percent of Total Responses
Less than 1 year	0	0
1-2 years	1	6.6%
2-5 years	6	40%
5-10 years	4	26.7%
10+ years	4	26.7%
TOTAL	**15**	**100%**

Employee Survey: All Results

The following section summarizes all the responses received for the three rating scale questions presented in the survey. Respondents' opinions regarding communication and teamwork, the City's current development review process, and the City's TRC are all presented under the relevant subheadings below. A summary of responses received for the four open-ended questions presented in the survey is also included.

Communication and Teamwork

Responses indicated generally positive opinions of communication and teamwork for those within the development review process, as shown in the table below.

Table 16: Respondents' Opinions Regarding Communication and Teamwork

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do Not Know
Communication among the staff involved in the development review process is effective.	13.33%	**73.33%**	13.33%	0.00%	0.00%
My supervisor encourages me to improve work processes.	**73.33%**	26.67%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
There is strong teamwork among those involved in the development review process.	26.67%	**53.33%**	13.33%	6.67%	0.00%
The staff involved in the development review process effectively anticipates issues or potential problems.	26.67%	**40.00%**	20.00%	0.00%	13.33%
The workload for development review staff is appropriate.	0.00%	**53.33%**	20.00%	20.00%	6.67%

These results suggest that there may be room to further assess the workload of development review staff, as 40% of respondents either "Mostly Disagreed" or "Strongly Disagreed" to the final statement, "The workload for development review staff is appropriate." While workload may be an issue, it is also clear that staff feel encouraged to improve work processes, as a full 100% of respondents indicated either "Mostly Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to that statement.

Current Development Review Process

Responses indicated generally positive opinions of the current development review process, as shown in the table below.

Table 17: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Current Development Review Process

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	**Mostly Agree**	**Mostly Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**	**Do Not Know**
Engaging in the City's development review process results in a higher quality project.	40.00%	**60.00%**	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
The current project review process is efficient.	0.00%	**53.33%**	33.33%	6.67%	6.67%
The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted.	0.00%	**66.67%**	20.00%	6.67%	6.67%
The application submittal process works well.	0.00%	**53.33%**	33.33%	6.67%	6.67%
The permit tracking system is well suited for use in the City.	6.67%	**46.67%**	26.67%	20.00%	0.00%
Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination are positive aspects of the development review process in the City.	26.67%	**60.00%**	6.67%	0.00%	6.67%

These results suggest that there is room to examine the project tracking system (ProTrak) and ensure it is well suited for its function in the City since 40% of respondents answered "Mostly Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree." In addition, it is worth noting that over 85% of respondents indicated either "Mostly Agree" or "Strongly Agree" that inter-governmental cooperation is a positive aspect of the development review process.

The Technical Review Committee

Overall, employees demonstrated favorable opinions of the TRC process and TRC meetings, as shown in the table below.

Table 18: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Technical Review Committee

Question	Respondent Opinions				
	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Mostly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Do Not Know
The TRC meetings are beneficial for the City.	**53.33%**	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	6.67%
The TRC meetings are beneficial for the applicant.	**53.33%**	40.00%	0.00%	0.00%	6.67%
Appropriate staff members from each discipline regularly attend TRC meetings.	33.33%	**40.00%**	20.00%	0.00%	6.67%
Comments provided to the applicant at the meeting are of high quality.	33.33%	**53.33%**	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%
The length of the meeting is appropriate.	26.67%	**60.00%**	0.00%	0.00%	13.33%

The results suggest that the respondents' opinions are that the TRC process is beneficial for the City and the applicant. However, in the details of the process (the appropriate staff in attendance, high quality comments, and meeting length) respondents' opinions were less confident.

Open-Ended Response Questions

The following section provides a summary of the common and repeated responses received for the four open-ended questions presented in the survey. A full listing of all open-ended responses is included in this report in Appendix 4.

What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?
- The City requires complete and thorough plan submissions
- The ProTrak system
- Comments on plans are returned quickly to the applicant
- The development review staff are experienced
- The TRC meetings provide comprehensive comments to the applicant

What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?
- The Land Development Code and Technical Standards need to be revised
- Cooperation between departments is lacking
- Consistent plan comments between departments is lacking
- The entire process needs to flow better
- There are multiple rounds of comments given to the applicant
- There are no weaknesses in the current development review process

- The quality of the plans submitted is too low
- ProTrak is not being fully utilized
- ProTrak does not track what needs to be tracked
- Staff workload could be too high
- Not all necessary parties participate in TRC meetings
- Applicants go around the process when they don't like the answers they get from TRC meetings

Do you have any suggestions to improve the efficiency or reduce the turn-around time of the current process?

- Ensure staff are accessible to applicants (via phone, email, or by appointment) prior to submittal for questions and clarifications
- Ensure applicants address all TRC comments before resubmitting plans
- Clarify conflicts between the Land Development Code and the Technical Standards
- Develop a Comprehensive Plan for the City of Wilmington
- Create incentives for applicants to submit quality plans
- Improve the quality of plans submitted by applicants
- Ensure applicant resubmits within a specified timeframe
- Include Engineering Construction Inspectors as part of the plan review process
- ProTrak needs to be more complete and easy to use
- Rework the TRC process to eliminate conflicts between departments

Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?

- Ensure staff are on the same page about conflicts between the Land Development Code and the Technical Standards
- Expand the role of the Concept Plan Review to make sure the City is heard early in the process
- Include New Hanover County Inspections in the TRC process
- Educate applicants regarding the submittal requirements
- The City frequently gets very poor quality submittals from applicants
- Applicants frequently go outside of the development review process and appeal to elected leaders when they don't like the answers they receive
- ProTrak needs to be more user friendly
- Large projects need a single "go-to" person to help them through the process
- The TRC process has helped streamline the review process
- The TRC process needs to be reevaluated; we are requiring too much detail in plans at this point

Employee Survey: Results by Tenure

The following section summarizes all responses received for the three rating scale questions presented in the survey, organized by the length of time the employee has worked in the development review process. The three tables below give a broad overview of all responses received for rating scale questions, organized by response category (i.e., Communication and Teamwork; the Current Development Review Process; and the TRC).

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to statements relating to communication and teamwork in the development review process.

Table 19: Respondents' Opinions Regarding Communication and Teamwork, By Tenure

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Less Than a Year	**1-2 Years**	**2-5 Years**	**5-10 Years**	**10+ Years**
Communication among the staff involved in the development review process is effective.	0	100% (1)	83.3% (5)	100% (4)	75% (3)
My supervisor encourages me to improve work processes.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	100% (4)
There is strong teamwork among those involved in the development review process.	0	100% (1)	66.7% (4)	75% (3)	100% (4)
The staff involved in the development review process effectively anticipates issues or potential problems.	0	100% (1)	50% (3)	75% (3)	75% (3)
The workload for development review staff is appropriate.	0	0	50% (3)	50% (2)	75% (3)

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to questions regarding the current development review process in the City.

Table 20: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Current Development Review Process, By Time in the Development Review Process

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Less Than a Year	1-2 Years	2-5 Years	5-10 Years	10+ Years
Engaging in the City's development review process results in a higher quality project.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	100% (4)
The current project review process is efficient.	0	100% (1)	50% (3)	50% (2)	50% (2)
The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted.	0	100% (1)	50% (3)	75% (3)	75% (3)
The application submittal process works well.	0	0	33.3% (2)	75% (3)	75% (3)
The permit tracking system is well suited for use in the City.	0	0	33.3% (2)	75% (3)	75% (3)
Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination are positive aspects of the development review process in the City.	0	100% (1)	83.3% (5)	75% (2)	100% (4)

The table below displays the percentage of positive opinions (defined as a "Strongly Agree" or "Mostly Agree" response) shared in response to questions regarding the TRC process and meetings in the City.

Table 21: Respondents' Opinions Regarding the Technical Review Committee, By Tenure

	"Strongly Agree" and "Mostly Agree" Responses as Percent of Total Responses				
	Less Than a Year	1-2 Years	2-5 Years	5-10 Years	10+ Years
The TRC meetings are beneficial for the City.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	75% (3)
The TRC meetings are beneficial for the applicant.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	75% (3)
Appropriate staff members from each discipline regularly attend TRC meetings.	0	100% (1)	66.6% (4)	100% (4)	50% (2)
Comments provided to the applicant at the meeting are of high quality.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	50% (2)
The length of the meeting is appropriate.	0	100% (1)	100% (6)	100% (4)	50% (2)

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Survey Instrument

The City of Wilmington has retained The Novak Consulting Group to assess the development review process in the City, as well as identify opportunities for increased efficiency in the process. As part of this effort, The Novak Consulting Group developed this survey to gather input and suggestions from stakeholders of the City's Development Services Department. Your ideas regarding possible improvements in City operations will be very valuable. We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey and share your thoughts with us.

All responses are confidential. Results will be tabulated and summarized by The Novak Consulting Group.

1. In the past year, what types of projects have you submitted through the City's development review process? (Select all that apply)
   - Major Site Plan
   - Minor Site Plan
   - Major Subdivision
   - Minor Subdivision
   - Special Use Permit
   - Conditional District Rezoning
   - General (Straight) Rezoning
   - Other

2. What was your role in the process? (Select all that apply)
   - Owner
   - Developer
   - Engineer
   - Surveyor
   - Real Estate Professional
   - Attorney
   - Architect
   - Builder
   - Other

3. From the Project Submittal to Project Release, what was the length of time for your project's review? If you have submitted more than one project, please indicate the average/typical length of time.
   - Less than one month
   - One to two months
   - Two to three months
   - Three to four months
   - Four to five months
   - Five to six months
   - More than six months

4. Did the Length of the review process meet your expectations?
   - Yes
   - No

5. (Open Ended) If no, what could have been done differently to meet your expectations?

6. Did your project require review by the City's Technical Review Committee (TRC)?
   - Yes
   - No

7. If yes, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the TRC: (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)
   - The length of time from application to TRC meeting date was appropriate
   - The comments provided to me at the TRC meeting were of high quality
   - The comments provided to me at your meeting were relevant
   - Appropriate staff members from each discipline were present at my TRC meeting
   - The length of the TRC meeting was appropriate
   - The TRC process was beneficial for the completion of my project

8. (Open Ended) Are there other areas of the development review process that would have been helpful to discuss during the TRC meeting?

9. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's development review process: (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)
   - Engaging in the city's development review process resulted in a higher quality project
   - The City's process for development review compares favorably with other jurisdictions
   - Current development regulations hinder development in the City
   - Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination are positive aspects of the development review process in the City
   - The fees charged by the City are reasonable
   - The application submittal process worked well
   - The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted

10. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's level of customer service: (Strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree)
    - The review process was easy to understand
    - Review comments were received timely from staff
    - The review staff were thorough
    - The information provided by staff was accurate
    - The staff were responsive to questions and comments
    - The staff were accessibility
    - The staff were knowledgeable
    - The staff were professional

- The applications, checklists and other related materials were clear
- The public information was easily accessibility (maps, applications, agendas, etc)

11. (Open Ended) What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?

12. (Open Ended) What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?

13. (Open Ended) If you could improve one aspect off the development review process, what would it be?

14. (Open Ended) Are there any other thoughts or comments on the City's development review process that you would like to share?

Appendix 2: Stakeholder Open Ended Responses

5. If no, what could have been done differently to meet your expectations?
City Planners need to have more accountability.
I would like to see a shorter process. I don't really see the need for Planning Commission review of Special Use Permits.
The length of the review process and expectation is a direct result of the process. One would expect and desire things to move faster which is contingent upon the applicant doing his homework, a good job and submitting a complete package for review.
Better coordination of review process.
Although it is nice to have one submittal to Development Services, it becomes a hassle to get comments back without contacting the various departments directly and then submitting revised plans directly. There seems to be a disconnect once plans are initially submitted.
Time lags between various levels of review and scheduled meetings (i.e. submittal, review, submittal to planning commission, submittal to City Council, second reading was requested but certainly not necessary nor beneficial
The plan coordinator could have done a much better job getting comments pulled together and provided in a package. There seemed to be no attempt to meet the review deadline that was anticipated, particularly by Engineering and Urban Forestry. Additionally, new comments would surface after multiple reviews which had major impacts on the site.
Some departments provide generic comments for TRC that are not very specific. Then they review the plans in greater detail later. It would be helpful to flush out more review comments in keeping with how detailed the plan submittal is prior to TRC
A more timely response process on the city's part.
They should move more quickly. It's not that difficult and the process seems to over complicate matters.
Review times took too long
A project should not have to go through so many rounds of comments. All comments should be made at one time and addressed, not strung out over months.
Quicker
Have some leeway on rules or get rid of a lot of them.
Staff cooperation
City does not need to police permits issued by others. They should just review for their code compliance.
It depends on the type of submittal, but generally they still get bogged down in detail dev plan review by the individual staff members
The process seems to become bogged down when there are items that must be approved by Engineering and then brought back to Planning for approval. Each agency works independently with no comprehensive oversight. In some cases, the Engineering ruling cannot be overturned even by the Council. Additionally, the beginning process is somewhat odd in that a plan is submitted for TRC review and review comments are only available at the TRC meeting. This gives the applicant no time for preparation. It would be more sensible for a plan to progress through a staff review process allowing issues to be addressed before a comprehensive TRC.
It's almost as if the City was making it as difficult as possible to get approval; mandating stuff be done that seemed a little over the top. "Paralysis by Analysis" was the term we kept coming back to. In this economy the City should be making it as easy as possible for businesses to undertake the approval

and permitting process. There is a contingent of real estate brokers and builder/developers who say they loath working with the City of Wilmington.
Exception to regulation, no review required
More willingness of the staff to consider commonsense approach to problems rather than just what is in black and white.
More teamwork from city staff. Less back and forth. Staff tend to live in their own silo and "kick it back" to another department. Staff become responsive on the back end of process, but less so on front end. Need single point of contact for project.
1.There were several times when comments were made or questions were asked which could have been answered by simply looking through the plans.   2.The storm water review and approval took an outrageous amount of time. 3. Compared to other municipalities, there seems to be no rhyme or reason with the methods that Wilmington operates. Though a TRC is in place, it is often hit or miss on who get which plans. I still have no idea when I am supposed to submit which plan to whom, and there is little to no coordination between the City, the County reviewers and CFPUA. 4. The reviews seem to be piecemeal... on subsequent submittals after the initial submittal, additional items are commented on which could have been addressed the first time around. 5. The reviewers are very difficult to contact. Sometimes it takes multiple attempts to be able to speak with them. 6. It seems that Wilmington is looking to find reason not to approve plans rather that ways to improve the plans.
When plans are submitted after addressing TRC comments there needs to be a time limit for additional staff review. For example 2 weeks . Review comments if previous TRC comments are address should be limited to a total of no more than 3 reviews. As Mayor Saffo has said," the staff should get one bite of the apple" on their first review and if those first comments are addressed there should not be additional TRC comments, which can greatly extend the review process. I think if the review process on the Tracking system the city goes over 90 days then there should be a flag raised and the question asked by head of planning and engineering why the process has gone over 90 days to review.
Staff is too busy on special projects to be responsive.
I believe the review process is too long. The Planners and Building code staff should be more versed in the process and more verse in interpreting code to be able to make a decision. The staff project manage should have the ability to make a well-rounded business decision. Not to hold up the process for inept to interpret the ordinance.
More thorough review first submittal. Willingness to make a decision
Reduce the number of review personnel, uninformed reviewers do not take the time to determine the issues and respond accordingly
They continue to add items after they send you away to redraw your plans. You have to spend money to get through the first step before they ever let you know that you have ten more steps ahead....and maybe more.
There are so many individuals included in the reviews. Much of the time people are not commenting at the same time and therefore causing us multiple submittals or causing us to wait for that last person to review and comment before submitting. Many times you address the list of comments and submit back to get another list that was not included in the first review. As a whole I feel the City of Wilmington reviewers do not realize they are employed to help evolve the plans, not simply quote a section of the ordinance and send us out the door to come back another day. There is a strong sense that the City reviewers feel they are good and development crowd are evil.
Quicker review and comments
It depends on the reviewer. A certain reviewer can really drag on a project and nit-pick over every little thing.   A complete review of the project should be done, then submitted to us (engineers) for

comment. Once this has been done, no more than 3 reviews should be done. If it takes more than 3 reviews, the reviewer needs to study the UDO (Unified Development Ordinance) more.   Commenting on the same item, over and over. An example would be, since the review process takes so long, they can comment on something like the required landscaping in the beginning, then 5 months later comment on the same item after we've changed it the way they requested in the first place. This has become problematic. No commenting should be allowed after the review process is finished and approved. If we happen to send them a copy of a change that has taken place in the field, they feel it is acceptable to comment on a totally separate item. This is unacceptable. We do not have the time or money to keep changing things, because then we have to send the changes to other agencies. Which starts a domino effect of everything on our plans.   Meeting in between on certain items would be a huge help. We have had a few projects "die" because of certain requirements in the UDO that can be read into differently. This does not help our economy. Don't we want growth?

Get rid of the "touchy-feely" environmental extras that not quantifiable. You can't measure the benefit, but the increased costs can uneconomical.

Planners have a good checklist but it seems like we are always waiting on a 3rd party to respond, especially from the engineers who are more concerned with their needs and less concerned with what looks appropriate or common sense.

8. Are there other areas of the development review process that would have been helpful to discuss during the TRC meeting?
Would like to discuss the TRC process during my interview.
The comments are always the same cookie cutter comments whether they apply or not. It doesn't seem like plans are being reviewed prior to the meeting, so it should not take two weeks to get on the schedule unless there is a backlog.
There needs to be more flexibility and authority given to TRC members to adapt to specific special conditions that arise from each development
NCDOT did not attend TRC and subsequently demanded changes to the Planning Commission and Council approved Special Use Permit site plan, leading staff to delay the modified version as it did not conform exactly to the Council approved plan
Parking meter removal policy and parking space removal policy.
Turnaround times after responses to the TRC "team" review goes to individual reviewers for final sign-off
Need to find a way to get CFPUA energized and part of the process. They are passive and only respond to exact questions asked, and don't volunteer information - very frustrating.
The City never provided us with an opportunity to meet with them. Referring back to my previous comments, there seems to be no actual process that the City follows with their reviews. I've submitted plans through the TRC process, yet have not gotten an opportunity to meet with the TRC. They seem to do things differently than they say they will.
It would be helpful to have an outline check list for construction release provided as part of the TRC process for construction plan review. Outline could address early release for contractor to begin tree protection and possibly early release for grading to help speed up the construction process. Please look at how this process is working now. This is very important!
Project manager decision making/processing
Some TRC members submit canned answers because they haven't even looked at the plans yet. The TRC review procedure that the developer is purchasing should be 100% complete, including exact review comments for each particular project.

It would be helpful to get a full list of what they want on the first visit. Also, they employ no creative thinking to help you resolve issues and they are totally inflexible. They site "The Code" as their defense, but they are the people who wrote the code. They should be able to help us resolve issues, but they delight in turning projects away.

Not all projects should need TRC, but if you are going to put all the professionals in the room along with an owner who is allowed to make decisions, then give the staff permission to "make a decision" too, while we are all sitting at the table. The "I don't know if we can do that" and "we'll have to get back to you" crap is a time suck. If you aren't allowed to approve the plans "right then and there" then please don't bother showing up.

11. What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?
Review is professional and fair.
The accessibility of the staff
Good staff
Staff is professional, responsive, and firm but fair. Helpful in guiding you through the process.
Helpful staff in most cases
A central point to obtain the city requirements for development.
There are an adequate number of staff for the current work load.
Professional people are handling it.
Having all agencies involved.
Staff is accessible
The ProTrak system.
Fairly straightforward Code & general willingness of the staff to work through the process
Very detailed to the point of unreasonableness
There are some stars. Ron is good. Rob Gordon is good. Getting all disciplines together in a room is mostly helpful - as long as they all come and participate.
I believe that the City has good intentions with the way their codes are structured, and the City wants and expects a 'nice-looking' end product. However, the process leaves something to be desired.
Opportunity to sit at the table with staff and have the benefit of their comments.
Environmental Protection.
They are quite successful in stopping development in the City of Wilmington.
I guess the deadlines on the calendars.
The departments heads.
The checklist.
For the most part, you have smart, talented professionals.

12. What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?
No accountability.
There are some areas that could be streamlined and there needs to be better access to forms, schedules and other materials on the City web site.
How the TRC process is structured
Need better interdepartmental coordination
To many regulations and to many opinions interpreting the regulations.
Staffs hands are tied to too many stringent regulations with apparently little or no authority to interpret or respond to special or unique conditions that occur in every type of proposed development

No accountability for completing reviews on time. Involving Brian Capo in any form or project review and approval hinders the project. He is completely unprofessional and interprets the code/ordinance to his liking.
The comments are often overlapping between departments. Some departments don't review thoroughly enough the first time. Some comments are derived from departments they should not be commenting on
Takes too long due unknown reasons in the comment and response process.
There are staff members who are not required and should not be on staff. For example, why do we have a city arborist?
Process takes too long
Review time is excessive. Staff tends to re-review a project several times, finding different comments each time instead of doing one thorough review. Comments sometimes overlap in areas and staff do not always agree on interpretation of the codes.
The process is hindered by to many rules and regulations.
That all agencies do not always interact.
When some individuals on staff oppose a proposed development, roadblocks, delays and complications are created, rather than simply gathering the facts and letting the process proceed
The length of time it takes for Release of Construction plan sets.
Slow review turnaround & "cover-your-butt" mentality of some reviewers to not adapt logical solutions that may not be quite spot-on to the regulation verbiage
No compromise. The code's way or no way.
Apathy. There are many in the process that are not energized about the projects or proactive with comments. There is too much back and forth. Developers complain about consistency. The ordinance is complex compared with other jurisdictions. Staff frequently says "let us get back to you" and then has to go to the attorney for an interpretation. Projects get caught in the "churn" of review, and have to go back through every department with every resubmittal - you can fix one problem, but another department finds something new. At the end of the process, when you hear that comments are in, there seems to be a week delay waiting for signatures, printing copies, getting them stamped, etc.
Timeliness, coordination
The Tracking system the city is now using. I think it would be easier if the staff would simple send their TRC comments in the for of an e-mail then the current tracking system format. When staff adds a comment to the tracking system and you receive notice, you must go down the comments to see if there is anything new. Chance to miss someone's comment.
Takes too long
Too many levels of review. Need to have one staff member who can take review comments to the applicant for consideration. Staff review comments are treated as "take it or leave it". No business acumen associated with comments.
Far, far too long. Staff seemingly unwilling or unable to make decisions, require endless submittals.
It's too complicated. I am all for strict regulations. However, I totally object to overly complicated and overly complex regulations. There are too many "if/thens" and there are too many overlapping regulations that are time consuming to design to meet.
A general culture of "no" Any interpretation goes straight to legal   No clear leadership. No flexibility Controlled by engineering decisions not planning or common sense
Inflexibility, incomplete thoughts, ridiculous amounts off required detail that does not have any bearing on the project and poor communications skills.
The review process is too lengthy and stringent. TRC review comments are for the most part full review comments. However once you resubmit plans based upon TRC comments, staff reviews the

plans again and generates a 2nd round of comments. In most cases, the 2nd round of comments are longer and more descriptive than the TRC comments. Staff should only be given one opportunity to give full design comments. Not two!

Reviewers lack of knowledge and willingness to make a decision without having to seek two or three other opinions!

Codes that are written generically and applied without room to massage the interpretation of them.

ProTrak. It is awful. When the comments are sent it says sent from "ProTrak" This makes it hard to search for certain comments from certain people. I would rather see what date and time they send me an email, since on multiple occasions, the reviewer has backdated their comment letter. And that's another thing. Backdating a comment letter? Ridiculous. Also, we need to have a paper trail of the comments for our files, and printing them?? I have to copy and paste it into word. Not user friendly at ALL.

Not having a point person to help you navigate the process.

These smart, talented professionals are not allowed to make decisions that may benefit the City but aren't within the overly prescriptive code.

13. If you could improve one aspect of the development review process, what would it be?
Accountability, make all comments at once, not just a comment here or there and then additional comments after the 21 days restart.
Eliminate Planning Commission review of Special Use Permits. It lengthens the process and makes it confusing.
The TRC process
Better coordination
To stop making more regulations and to start using common sense regarding the regulations in place. Lets stop looking at what other communities are doing and stick with what works for ours.
Combine all aspects of City/County/Utility Authority/DOT All four of these agencies have conflicting requirements that work against each other in many instances
There are things in the code that should be evaluated for effectiveness that only SRB can give variance for like the 500-foot rule.
Setting a fix time period for the various departments to reply to responses.
Trim the staff and only allow staff to weigh in on certain issues. There is no reason why staff should have so much say in what a private land owner does with his or her property and money.
Shorten required review times
Length of time for review. You have to wait for weeks for comments. Then after they are addressed, you wait for weeks for another round of new comments, often unrelated to the first. They need to get their acts together; do one thorough review; make reasonable, rational comments; and be done.
Make it simpler. Do away with so many rules and regulations, especially with a minor subdivision.
Once complete with TRC, to reduce the time for final review approvals by department.
The City should rely on the professional consultants to obtain all the required site development permits. The City does not need to be in the middle to police this effort. It only causes project delays.
Adapt the different processes to the level of what is trying to get accomplished. ie. too much detail, hence high cost of preparation, is required too early on in the process of approval of a project concept.
Establish a clear process that allows the interchange of comments with staff prior to a comprehensive TRC. This may allow the minor items to be addressed and provide the application the opportunity to prepare for discussions on more significant issues.

Use common sense in dealing with real life issues that aren't described in the code.
Place a project manager in charge of major projects. It if is deemed a major project, give it a shepherd who is responsible for getting it through the process, and serving as its advocate - and critic. If a developer wants to do the right thing, they should be rewarded with an improved process and faster response time. Not every project may be worth the effort. But we have got to find a way to make it faster and productive for the types of projects we encourage.
The process needs to be streamlined
The Site Inventory Map and the need for this needs to be discussed with local surveyors. Most surveyors do not seem to be aware of this requirement, however it is required by staff as part of the review process. This in my opinion is a major issue that your firm needs to look at since it is part of the application process and TRC review process. Some of the items on the check list could and should be address by staff and not requiring the tax payer or developer to pay a surveyor or someone else to do the research about historic site, archeological site etc.
Staff needs more practical experience
Shorten the process
Proactive staff - focused on getting plans approved rather than finding reasons not to.
Reduce the complexity of the regulations. I would rather have more strict regulations than more complicated ones. I understand some of the complexity of the regulations in place are due to the City modifying them from time to time to help developers do specific tasks at their specific projects. However, those project-specific assistance should be provided with an efficient variance process.
Hire a planning Director. The City Manager's office has gutted the department in order to remove anyone with knowledge or authority because it threatens control. The engineering department should be part of the planning department with the planning director having control over engineering decisions. There should be accountability in project management, and authority to make interpretations and decisions
Fire all of them and start over with a hired private firm.
Too many people within the City have to review one set of plans. Therefore in some cases you get contradicting comments within staff level. Government waste at its finest.
The staff's attitude toward the applicants.
The use of common sense in interpreting codes and applying them to differing situations on various projects.
Do a thorough review of the project. NOT, send us 3 comments, we resubmit. Send us 5 more comments, we resubmit. Send us 3 more comments, we resubmit, etc. Unacceptable. By the time the project is actually accepted into the review process, the builder is ready to break ground, so these 2 or 3 comments here and there just make it frustrating to everyone involved.
Eliminate passive infiltration requirements when a DWQ storm water permit is in place. They should be entirely optional and using them should provide economic benefits.
Engineering and Planning should be under the same roof. Staff will not get 'in trouble' for making sensible decisions on a case by case basis.

14. Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?
Generally, the process is good. However, I would like for staff to look s ways to operate more efficiently and shorten time frames. I would also suggest more use of electronic filing.
To be discussed during my individual interview
If the review process continues to become a difficult and long process, we will continue to see stagnant growth in our community. If you take away the local and/or federal government and State funded projects in NHC, you will see that there is very little private development.
Hopefully you will follow up this survey with a discussion forum or workshop about how to improve the system
I feel that something or someone needs to watch over the entire process.
There needs to be some leeway in cases of redevelopment. One small change to a site should not have to trigger bringing the entire site into compliance. Some things need to be grandfathered. The City needs to be more flexible with developers. Oftentimes unreasonable codes will kill a good project after months of review and wasted money. Projects that would bring tax revenue to the City are lost, due to the inefficiency of the current review process.
My one project did not go through because the developer died before it could get done. The 16' private access easement is a definite hindrance to development.
It would be nice to reduce the total amount of time from submittal of original submittal to construction release. Currently it takes approximately 6-months.
The City's field observations staff oftentimes interpret the plan details differently than those that were approved during design. They have too much leverage to hold a project hostage after the project has received design approval.
I applaud that the City is trying to improve the system. Some change is needed to get developers more comfortable with coming here with their projects - rather than being shy-ed away from long & arduous approval processes.
NEEDS TO BE DEREGULATED! We have a reputation around the state for being a royal pain to do business with and that is not the way it should be!
The city now requires a variance if a site is located on a street other than a through street. A non through street requires a variance based on the 500/800 foot rule. Please look into this requirement. In my opinion, if the street is a public street there is no reason to require a variance to develop the site because the site parking is over 500 or 800 feet from a through street. This is a waste of time and money in my opinion to comply with this by needing to ask for a variance.
Get out of the way of people trying to create jobs and tax base
The process cost me hundreds of thousands of dollars and resulted in missed opportunities.
Consider doing away with the Subdivision Review Board. Most of the members are TRC members or similar. TRC should be able to do all the duties of the subdivision review Board. This would be in an effort to reduce the complexity of approval process.
There is a lack of clear leadership and accountability. The culture has become negative and anti-growth. The general feeling is that a project must prove it meets the requirements rather than there being a service that wants to help find a way to make something work. The staff is generally are part of the problem not part of the solution. The first part of this survey only addresses the last 12 months. This will not be very indicative of the current situation since there has not been much design / construction activity. It also puts the entire staff in one group. Some are knowledgeable, thorough, and helpful. Others are negative, combative, and resistant to cooperation.
If the entire process is not revamped, Architects, Brokers, Developers and Engineers will all stop brining projects forward. Ironically, this seems to be the end goal of the planning department. These

people are horrible and would never make it in the private sector.
Simplify the review process!
I guess one quote to me from out of town developers has been "We will never do another project in the City of Wilmington!!"
Get rid of ProTrak
There should be less rules. There are so many rules, the staff does not even know them all.
Form based zoning. For every new regulation, remove 5 old ones. For simple projects (ie 2 unit residential in the CBD) allow a planner to decide whether TRC is appropriate.

** References to individual staff members were removed for confidentiality.

Appendix 3: Employee Survey Instrument

The City of Wilmington has retained The Novak Consulting Group to assess the development review process in the City and identify opportunities for increased efficiency. As part of this effort, The Novak Consulting Group developed this survey to gather input and suggestions from City staff involved in the development review process. Your ideas regarding possible improvements to the process will be very valuable. We appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey and share your thoughts with us.

All responses are confidential. Results will be tabulated and summarized by The Novak Consulting Group.

1. How long have you worked for the City?
    - Less than a year
    - 1-2 years
    - 2-5 years
    - 5-10 years
    - 10+ years

2. How many years have you been involved with the City's development review process?
    - Less than a year
    - 1-2 years
    - 2-5 years
    - 5-10 years
    - 10+ years

3. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding communication and teamwork.
    (Strongly agree, Mostly agree, Mostly disagree, Strongly disagree, Do not know)
    - Communication among the staff involved in the development review process is effective.
    - My supervisor encourages me to improve work processes.
    - There is strong teamwork among those involved in the development review process.
    - The staff involved in the development review process effectively anticipates issues or potential problems.
    - The workload for development review staff is appropriate.

4. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the City's current development review process.
    (Strongly agree, Mostly agree, Mostly disagree, Strongly disagree, Do not know)
    - Engaging in the City's development review process results in a higher quality project.
    - The current project review process is efficient.
    - The City requires fully completed applications to be submitted.
    - The application submittal process works well.
    - The permit tracking system is well suited for its use in the City.

- Inter-governmental cooperation and coordination is a positive aspect of the development review process in the City.

5. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the Technical Review Committee (TRC).
   (Strongly agree, Mostly agree, Mostly disagree, Strongly disagree, Do not know)
- The TRC meetings are beneficial for the City.
- The TRC meetings are beneficial for the applicant.
- The appropriate staff members from each discipline regularly attend TRC meetings.
- The comments provided to the applicant at the meeting are of high quality.
- The length of the meeting is appropriate.

6. (Open Ended) What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?

7. (Open Ended) What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?

8. (Open Ended) Do you have any suggestions to improve the efficiency or reduce the turn-around time of the current process?

9. (Open Ended) Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?

Appendix 4: Employee Open Ended Responses

6. What are the strengths of the current development review process in the City?
Quick turn-a-round of comments to the developer. ProTrak system.
The concept review & TRC meetings provide quick, (fairly) comprehensive comments on projects. Communication between TRC staff members prevents conflicting requirements/suggestions.
The process brings together the different disciplines in the City.
The utilization of the ProTrak system. It enables members of the TRC to view projects as they are downloaded. Comments are automatically forwarded to the developer. The process is faster in initial plan reviews and comments and make the review process more stream-lined and faster turn-around time.
Reviewers that work to collaborate with various departments to avoid conflicting comments/statement and interpretations provided to Applicants. Reviewers that understand the Applicant's point of view.
Access to staff. Fair discussion.
The staff that participates in the review process are very technically competent. Many of the TRC participants have been on the TRC for a long time and the ones that are new to it were familiar with it having come from the private sector and being involved in it that way.
Complete submittals are required. Comments provided back to owners as well as representatives. Staff make themselves available as much as possible.
The concept review plan process provides the developer an opportunity to meet with plan review staff to understand potential issues with the site prior to submitting a more complete site plan that initiates the review process. The meeting with the technical review committee within 2 weeks of plan submittal is a strength as well, as the developer/designer has an opportunity to meet with the plan review staff face-to-face to hear comments regarding the plan.   I also believe that the plan review staff is knowledgeable of the various codes and development standards. ProTrak, the on-line plan review tracking system, allows 24/7 project status access for owners, developers, or designers.
The development review process, namely the TRC meetings are generally very smooth, productive meetings. TRC members generally collaborate well and do everything within the confines of the City Code and standards of professional practice to work with applicants to streamline the review process and improve the proposed projects.
Thorough
Good communication between City departments and willing attitudes to do a good job.
TRC provides applicant with comprehensive plan comments. New project tracking system now in place available to post projects and comments. Concept plan review being used more as a plan development tool for applicants. Planning staff held to plan review turnaround time standards.

7. What are the weaknesses of the current development review process in the City?
Do not know of any
The ability to totally track a project from the submittal through construction and inspection for compliance in the ProTrak system.
Regular updates and better clarity in the code and technical standards would help eliminate confusion over requirements. It is extraordinarily difficult to change the code/tech standards. The variance process is cumbersome.
Different departments are stretched thin with staffing and prioritizing one process tends to take away from other responsibilities and may affect service to the general public. Some developers seem to think they can submit plans that don't adhere to City Code and they can be accepted by TRC members. This

may have happened in the past where TRC members interpreted the code incorrectly and allowed things to happen that shouldn't have. The Technical Standards need to be updated by "appropriate" City personnel from EACH department responsible for reviewing submittals. Sometimes SRB members make decisions that aren't necessarily communicated to TRC members until the TRC meeting.
Without having a lot of time spent in this position, I cannot express any opinions of the weaknesses in the process. In the ProTrak system, not all planners are utilizing the system. This can cause a delay in comments being received by the developer from all parties of the TRC.
The Technical Standards and Details are in need of updating. This will assist in minimizing variance requests that we process repeatedly for the same requirement and streamline the permit process.
Process can be a little confusing. A lot of moving parts, especially on larger projects.
A member of the Engineering Construction Management Section does not actively participate in the TRC development review process. This is a problem because many times problems arise during construction that could have been curtailed if someone from Construction Management had been involved with the review process from day one. ProTrak was developed to suit the needs of the planners only and didn't take into consideration the work flow or review process for other sections or divisions involved. This makes it tedious and time consuming to use. The administrative variance review process is inefficient and disjointed and often times someone who doesn't know as much about the subject matter ends up reviewing the request. Not enough emphasis is put on electronic submittals and dissemination of information via electronic formats or the internet.
Lack of input with some operational departments. No online tracking of progress. Different answers sought from different departments.
The process following the technical review committee meeting may not well defined. Once the developer/designer leaves the TRC, it may not be clear to them (particularly those new to the city) what is expected for resubmittals. There are no timelines for resubmittals. Each reviewer should be held accountable to provide comments in a timely manner. Sometimes it may be months before plans are resubmitted, which gives the impression that it takes a long time to get through the review process. I hear developers/designers complain about 11th hour comments from review staff.
1) Applicants routinely do "end-runs" around the process when they don't like the answers they get. 2) Applications come in without having addressed all the requirements and are accepted for review when they should be rejected until applications are complete. 3) Expectations of applicants are that their project should always be high priority and expedited, yet they can take as long as they want in between submittals.
Not all members participate; applicants submit incomplete applications; lag time from certain division in submitting comments; responsibility placed solely on planning division, even for things outside of our control; last minute comments are often provided; some staff members seem to want to "get" people rather than help people sometimes; applications often believe staff is out to get them and don't understand that we're bound by the code and can't be flexible where we'd like to be; applicants/agents don't respond to comments in a timely fashion; applicants blame staff when their engineers are the real hold up (not resubmitting in timely fashion); code is too complex and often archaic and does not reinforce our adopted policies; conflicts between policies and code; technical standards are generic and applied universally and much needed special considerations for our older urban areas are not permitted; too much focus on moving cars fast and not enough focus on the rest of the issues the community faces; unclear regulations (example - requiring sidewalks as part of plan review); unclear expectations from staff, code, applicants, city, developers, etc; inconsistent application of regulations by staff; reliance on 12-year memos from former staff members instead of the proper channels for regulations; unwillingness of developers to improve our built environment; unwillingness of most people to realize that changes and improvements to the built environment can improve our city on EVERY level; fondness

for lowest common denominator development on part of the development community creates conflicts...how much space do I get here??

There is a VERY difficult relationship with CFPUA as it relates to planning meetings. They have required an additional set of meetings and field meetings that drags the process down.

Field inspectors from Engineering no longer attend TRC meetings or receive plans to review. Outdated application may not capture all necessary information needed for review. Inaccurate site inventory and tree survey submittals by applicants. Resistance from designers to respond to TRC comments and revise plans accordingly or discuss requirements with TRC staff. Designers are unfamiliar with current code requirements and standards. Tendency for designers to resist and argue the adopted code and standards rather than design to them. Many designs are prepared to the lowest common denominator with little concern for quality and accuracy Tendency for there to be a slow turn-around from designers after TRC comments are received, yet a slow project approval timeframe is typically attributed to staff. Need for improvement in communication among TRC staff during the plan review process. Too little staff resources devoted to transportation plan review.

8.	Do you have any suggestions to improve the efficiency or reduce the turn-around time of the current process?

TRC reviewers have other responsibilities and review plans as quickly as possible, so it is difficult to reduce how long it takes to review a submittal (without additional staff). The best way to reduce review times is to improve the quality of the submittal. Staff needs to be accessible; by email and even for impromptu meetings. If a consultant can reach out to staff and quickly get answers to questions, then the submittal quality will improve. If they cannot get answers from staff, they are forced to make assumptions to keep the project moving forward, which can lead to additional reviews if the assumptions are not correct.

A lot of the developers bring in plans that aren't even close to meeting City Standards, which are available on the internet. (Not sure how to improve this) Also, require developers to submit plans earlier for TRC than currently done and get the plans distributed more quickly throughout the different City Departments. This would allow for more thorough review before the first TRC meeting. Electronic plans may save trees, but they also take longer to review if you need to look at multiple pages for reference. This may also lead to some things not being seen in the initial review. Find a way to get developers to address all the initial comments before they submit follow-up plans. We frequently get subsequent submittals that have not addressed all of the initial comments and have no control over this.

Require the Applicant to provide written response to the review comments. With all comments loaded in ProTrak, this should not be an arduous task to complete. This would streamline re-reviews and provide written documentation for the record (historical reference) which may be of assistance should there be any questions that arise in the future.

Need to tighten up the flow chart for development review. Provide clear, step-by-step, process and stick to it. Be as predictable as possible.

I think that many of our development review staff are required to take on other tasks and responsibilities as part of their role with the City. I believe these other tasks detracts us from being able to concentrate solely on the plan review process and the projects. This has been exacerbated by the economic downturn. The City has cut resources but maintained service levels which has over-run the remaining staff with workload issues. I realize that in the slow economy there are not as many developments to review but the ones we have combined with the others tasks we've been asked to take on still creates a backlog in our workload. I'm personally at capacity now. I also fear that once the economy starts to turn around and submittals begin to increase, the City will be slow to react when it comes to hiring or adding new staff to offset the additional workload.

Online tracking of development review.
Establish expectations for plan review staff as well as for the designers/developers. Efficiency is a 2-way street. Comments can be provided to a developer/designer in a reasonable amount of time, but it may be months before plans are resubmitted, which gives the impression that the review process is long and burdensome process.
1) require complete applications before review 2) require a concept review meeting including a site visit before any plans are put to paper. 3) establish a timeline that puts turnaround time on not just the TRC, but also on the applicant such that they fall out of the queue if they do not meet their requirements. 4) establish a tiered prioritization process for applicants - applicant that has a good track record for complete submittals and rapid turnaround gets higher priority for review.
Start from scratch with a comprehensive plan, then a code that implements our vision. Retrain staff and retrain our politicians and development community.
There are redundant requirements between several braches of the city. Worse yet, there are occasional conflicts between the technical requirements of different offices that makes the process difficult for the applicants. I would like to see an effort to stream line these requirements so that they are addressed at one time and consistently. We need to iron out any conflicting provisions in the technical standards.
Establish standards for staff review time and make it consistent for all TRC members. Update the site plan application so that the initial submittal includes all information needed for a comprehensive review. Have separate applications for minor and major site plans. Clean up code and technical standards to make them current with modern practices and industry standards, as well as less ambiguous. Remove the plan review from the political arena so that regulations are applied equally and fairly to all projects. Institute some type of turn-around time standard or incentive for designers similar to that required of staff. Include engineering construction inspector(s) as a part of the plan review process. Include historic preservation planner in plan review process for all projects impacted by historic guidelines. Revise Article 8, landscaping regulations to clarify requirements, allow for greater flexibility in creative design and broaden the list of approved planting materials which is woefully outdated. Review the codes and standards to provide incentives for projects that design to higher standards. Tie project design criteria to corridor plans, small area plans, transportation plans, pedestrian plans, etc.

9.   Are there any other thoughts or comments about the City's development review process that you would like to share?
I do not like the policy that the City cannot distribute site plans prior to concept review. The earlier in the design process a reviewer can get involved and provide detailed comments, the easier it will be for the designer to make the necessary adjustments without adjusting project schedule.
Poor submittals take longer to review. Lack of response to initial comments tends to drag the process out significantly longer.
It would be nice if New Hanover County Inspections were on-board with the TRC process. The problems arise when New Hanover County allows for building permit assignments and plan reviews of projects to take place prior to TRC sign off and release for construction. Many times NHC Inspections issues a permit number for an address that is incorrect for the project. The reason for the incorrect address is that the new development is being constructed on a road that has not been given a name by the City. Now we have a building permit with the incorrect address and once the proper address is issued, all records have to be changed to accommodate the permit. It is not necessary for plans reviews to begin prior to the release of TRC. We do not approve building plans, or review building plans prior to TRC approval. This cause complaints from developers and contractors as all the other inspection trades have already signed the permit and is ready to be issued. All things in the proper time and place
The review process is a Team effort. The Team is the Developer's Designers and the Review Staff. Many

times the Designers fail to provide adequate information or response to comments and that engages an additional round of review which increases the time it takes to obtain a construction release.
Where ambiguities exist in the code the entire staff needs to be on the same page when making an interpretation. Correct/define ambiguities in needed.
I think to improve the process and truly make it efficient and user-friendly the bar needs to be set substantially higher for what the City accepts as a submittal. Countless times, a site plan is accepted as a submittal for review when it doesn't even meet the minimum site plan acceptance requirements. This laissez-faire attitude has habitualized designers to submit sub-standard plans which increase our review time significantly because of the sheer number of comments that are associated with the plan. I think this would be the first step that should be taken to improve the process. I think consistency is another area that needs improved upon. There seems to be a lack of consistency in applying the regulations which makes it confusing for not only staff but for the developers and designers. Lately, I think a unified all-inclusive web-based project tracking program needs to be implemented.
I'm concerned that the perception of the plan review process places planning staff as taking the full brunt of most complaints and delays. While the planning staff may be the gatekeeper, they are not always the hold up in the review process.
The DRAT and ProTrak processes have been successful in finding opportunities for improving the way Development review occurs. I would be surprised if many other municipalities of Wilmington's size have much better processes. It should be noted that the TRC has been impacted by staff cutbacks due to the economy and strained budget. When the economy does come back in full, as it seems to be doing, staff resources are likely to be a constraint and a strain on the review process.
Planning gets blamed for every hiccup. There's a serious lack of understanding of how our process really works. It surely is in need of improvement, but we also need to educate folks on how it works and what's really going on. We need to quit reinforcing bad behavior (developer gets mad at staff and calls mayor and instead of working through process/protocol)
I feel the process would be more efficient if there was a single "go-to person" that could be assigned for each new application. The current planners assigned do their very best to facilitate this, but there are usually some requirements outside of their scope that could be better addressed by an application specialist if this person could be well trained on all of the process requirements. Make no mistake - those currently doing this job in the planning office are doing an outstanding job with the resources available, but I feel this change would benefit all those involved. Their involvement ends when the application is approved. The person I am recommending would continue their involvement through to the end of the development.
There is a perception that TRC staff is the problem and presents obstacles to the process. Planning staff in particular has worked very hard to be more efficient and effective in providing quality review with quicker turnaround. In numerous instances, designers take weeks or even months to respond to comments. Many local designers are not up to speed with code provisions and are therefore designing to an outdated regulation. Perhaps education is the key to combating this problem. City should perhaps provide comprehensive guidelines or checklists as an aid for designers. Staff is held to a high level of accountability, yet how do project designers get held to similar standards. Tendency for designers to want to go to up line staff or elected officials when they have issues with TRC comments rather than fleshing out the issues with the TRC staff member. Recent reorganization has moved Engineering out of Development Services department and there is move to relocate them to the Coleman Center. Fear that this will result in inefficiencies, communication breakdown and inconveniences for project designers. Resources need to be devoted to the new ProTrak software to provide training for applicants, staff users (including up line staff, elected officials and outside agencies); system needs to go live for all users.