



Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Title: Deputy Town Jurisdiction: Town of Leesburg,
Manager Virginia

Name: _____

Title: _____

Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator / Primary Contact

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Town of Leesburg, Virginia Land Development Process Improvements

A Broken System. For years, the Town of Leesburg's land development process suffered from a reputation as being overly complicated, lengthy and unpredictable. Applicants complained that staff comments on submitted plans were difficult to decipher and comments from different Town departments were often in conflict. For their part, staff expressed frustration with a system that seemed to reward applicants who worked outside the established review process to get their projects approved. The situation reached crisis when the owner of an incoming business announced that he was cancelling the project due to the length of the overall approval process.

Diagnosing the Problem. Town staff responded swiftly, identifying key problem areas and outlining proposed changes. Major issues that emerged included:

- ♦ The review process was disjointed. Staff from multiple departments were independently reviewing applications and submitting comments directly to the applicants. Applicants did not have a single point of contact who could answer all questions about the status of their application.
- ♦ Multiple database programs were in use by the different departments for tracking the same applications. There was no single source for complete and accurate information about the status of applications.
- ♦ Town staff did not feel "ownership" of the development projects. The perception was that they saw their job as reviewing sets of plans, not as approving projects.
- ♦ A communication gap existed between the project owners and the staff. Most often, staff worked directly with an applicant's consulting engineer and the actual project owner received information from their consultant, not Town staff.

However, the chief complaint from applicants was the length of the overall approval process. Most often, their proposed solution was quicker turn-around of application submissions by Town staff. A careful analysis of the process revealed that the focus on review deadlines was misplaced. The key to reducing the approval timeline, Town staff proposed, lay not in reducing review time of each submission, but in reducing the total number of submissions. Under the existing system, the average number of submissions for each application was more than five. The goal of the new review process: three or fewer.

A Whole New System. Rather than “tweaking” the existing system, the Town completely reorganized the entire land development process. The reorganization began in December 2007, with a commitment to completing it within six months. Furthermore, the reorganization involved no new funding or positions. In order to help break down the internal barriers between departments, every staff member involved with the land development process, from department directors to administrative assistants, was assigned to a committee charged with implementing one of the three major steps in the reorganization.

Creation of a new Department of Plan Review. The new department pulled the staff responsible for reviewing site plans from the Department of Engineering & Public Works and the Department of Planning, Zoning & Development into a single department. The new department is organized into two review teams, each comprised of a mix of planners and engineers. In order to provide applicants with a single point of contact for their applications, one of the two team leads is designated as Project Manager for each application. The Project Managers are responsible for coordinating the submission of referral comments, scheduling meetings with applicants, and responding to applicant inquiries.

Land Management Information System (LMIS) Implementation. The need for a comprehensive, town-wide application tracking database program, eliminating the duplicate systems currently in place, was one of the highest priorities. The Town opted to use Loudoun County's Land Management Information System (LMIS) for several reasons. First, because the Town of Leesburg is a subjurisdiction of Loudoun County, the information technology systems of the two organizations are already linked. LMIS integrates the County's real estate assessment data, GIS layers, and permit information, all essential elements for the land development process. Secondly, LMIS was already being used by some Town staff. Having in-house experience with the system greatly reduced the timeframe for implementation and training. Finally, LMIS was available immediately and it was free.

Creation of a Central Plan Intake Division. Central Plan Intake (CPI) standardized the acceptance process for all types of land development applications (Rezoning, Special Exception, Site Plan, Subdivision, etc.) and permits. CPI staff ensures that each application is complete before acceptance, logs the information about each application properly into LMIS and routes applications to the Project Managers for assignment of reviewers. Central Plan Intake also serves as the keeper of the LMIS data entry standards and the main liaison with Loudoun County for any issues, needed changes or upgrades to LMIS.

Emphasis on Communication. A hallmark of the Town's new land development process is improved communications, internal and external, throughout the process.

Direct Communication with Project Owners. The Town no longer assumes that project owners are getting information from their consulting engineers on the status of their applications. Notices of submission receipt and copies of comment letters are sent directly to the project owners. In addition, project owners are invited to attend all meetings about their

applications. In fact, if an application's third submission involves more than minor corrections, the project owner is required to attend the next meeting with staff to discuss the comments.

Consolidated Comments. Referral comments from all departments are now consolidated into a single document and any conflicts between departments are resolved before the comment letter is sent to the applicant. For second submissions, the comment letter tracks previous comments, creating a "paper trail" for both staff and the applicant. Additionally, staff make greater distinctions between required and suggested changes to plans, reducing confusion by applicants on minimum approval standards.

Meetings, Meetings, Meetings. Recognizing that written comments can be misinterpreted, the process now includes multiple face-to-face meetings with applicants and staff. Meetings occur prior to first submission, after the comment letter has been received and prior to the second submission. The goal of each meeting is to reach agreement on how applicants will address comments and to resolve issues on the spot.

Process Transparency. As the Town staff worked on improving the land development process, it became apparent that the lack of publicly available information was another major issue that the Town needed to address. By making information about the status of applications available to everyone involved in the process – staff, applicants, elected officials and the general public – the entire development process would become more transparent.

In order to create this transparency, Town staff enhanced an existing report, the monthly Development Activity Report. The report tracks development projects through each step of the entire development process: rezoning or special exception (if needed), site plan, construction, and issuance of occupancy permit. The projects are color-coded according to status and contains maps that identify the location of each project and its status, providing an

“at a glance” snapshot of commercial development projects in the pipeline. The report is distributed internally to senior staff, the Town Council and the Economic Development Commission. In addition, the report is posted as a PDF on the Town’s website.

Signs of Success. Leesburg Town staff met the state goal of reorganizing the entire land development process by July 2008, using only existing funding and existing positions. The overall goal of the redesigned land development process was clearer, shorter and predictable application approval timelines. Of the site plan applications submitted since July 2008, 100% have been approved in three or fewer submissions – up from 70% for applications submitted prior to then. However, metrics alone do not fully measure success. The biggest problem that the Town faced was its reputation in the development community. The true success will only be achieved when the Town is known for its excellent land development process. Comments from applicants on a recent customer service survey about the new process provide some indicators that the Town’s reputation is improving:

- ♦ “The individuals I have dealt with have been nothing less than professional, competent and constructive in each and every meeting.”
- ♦ “Staff members have shown a strong commitment to working with the applicant.”
- ♦ “It was impressive to see the staff coordinate together and then speak with one common voice and vision.”

Conclusion. When faced with the failure of its land development process, the Town of Leesburg staff challenged themselves to create a better system, one that is responsive to the customers’ needs. Staff broke down internal barriers, looked at the process as a whole rather than their individual pieces and focused on the end result: new development that contributes to the distinctive and authentic sense of place that defines the Town.