Memorandum

To: The Honorable Donald Schoenheider, Mayor
From: Lee Brown, FAICP – President, Teska Associates
       Michael Blue, FAICP – Principal, Teska Associates
Date: April 13, 2017

RE: **Plan Review and Building Permit Assessment – Draft Findings Report**

An assessment of the City of Lake Forest building permit and inspection process is being conducted to understand system operations, customer use of the process, and whether adjustments to current procedures to enhance the service merit consideration. Most of the analysis has been completed. This draft report describes findings from the assessment and preliminary recommendations for the City to consider enhancing current systems.

Assessment Tasks

This assessment involved an in-depth review of procedures and a wide-ranging collection and consideration of stakeholder perspectives related to the Lake Forest building permit and inspection process. Both aspects proved to be useful in understanding the way permits are reviewed and issued, as well as what permit processes are seen by customers as working well or needing improvement. No one piece of data or set of discussions drove this evaluation, rather the entire process painted a picture of how plan review and permitting functions for Lake Forest. The evaluation included:

- Review of development process related ordinances, materials distributed to the public, information from the City's website, permit forms, and associated materials.
- Review of data maintained by the City regarding number of issued permits, review time, counter visits, and inspections.
- Interviews with all Community Development Department staff.
- Focus group meeting with thirty-one local realtors.
- Interviews with local stakeholders regarding the overall permitting process.
  - Past and current Building Review Board (BRB) / Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) members
  - Elected officials
  - Permit process customers
- An invitation from Mayor Schoenheider was extended to more than 150 architects, builders, contractors, tradesmen, real estate professionals and property owners who had recently completed a project in Lake Forest respond to a survey or contact us directly.
- The online survey asked questions regarding experience and satisfaction with the permitting and inspection process (50 responses received).
- A separate assessment of the permitting processes in twenty-five local and national comparable communities, with follow-up interviews.

Primary Findings

Findings of this evaluation are presented in five areas:

1. Technical Assessment
2. Perceptions About the Process
3. Public Review Before BRB and HPC
4. Survey Findings
5. Recommendations

This assessment finds that:

- **Fundamental practices of good departmental operations are in place to a high degree.**
- **Ample and open communications between staff and applicants supports an effective permit process. Opportunities to expand this outreach exist and should be considered by the City.**
- **Department staff are professional and well skilled.**
- **Breaking out plan reviews by permit type (standard, Fast Track and Over the Counter) helps customers by matching anticipated review times to scale of work.**
- **Lake Forest's review of new residential development and additions is uncommon among its peers and comparable communities. It sets a very high expectation for community character and development quality, reflected in its standards and procedures.**
- **The Building Review Board process supports high standards for community character, but can be a source of frustration for applicants and for neighbors in the review process. Relocating BRB (and HPC) meetings to a conference room in the Municipal Services Building is strongly recommended so those meetings can be more effectively conducted in a workshop format.**

Technical Assessment

Fundamental Practices: A first step in assessing building permit and inspection processes is to determine whether an organization and its systems apply sound fundamental practices. While these concepts may seem straightforward or even obvious, the fact is they are not adequately applied in every permitting system and it is necessary to confirm that they are in place. Based on review of the permit and inspection process in Lake Forest, these base systems are in place and working effectively:

- *Sound Internal Communications*: Community Development staff work closely together (both in terms of team work and proximity). Staff sharing has been established with the Fire Department, which greatly enhances internal staff coordination (especially for commercial developments) and is a benefit to customers. Interactions with City engineering and Public Works staff occur regularly.

- *Comfortable Work Environment*: The Municipal Services building affords a work environment with practical work spaces, comfortable lighting, opportunities for privacy, collective interaction, proximate filing resources, and attractive and functional spaces to meet with applicants and the community. The Department projects a friendly, calm, professional and respectful atmosphere that moderates what can otherwise be a difficult and stressful point of contact between a city and its residents. Further, each of the staff members projects a positive attitude about the Department and Lake Forest. Staff members reported a strong level of respect and support from elected and appointed leadership that is devoid of politicization of the development and permit review processes.

- *Availability of Staff to Applicants* (good customer service): Surveys and stakeholder discussions indicate that all Department staff are very much available for any question at all stages of the permitting process. Many described staff as essentially "just a phone call away". With very rare exceptions, applicants reported very timely responses to their inquiries.

- *Single Set of Plan Review Comments*: Applicants receive a unified, joint response of technical plan reviews from the various disciplines – as compiled by the City staff. This supports a smooth plan review process and greater clarity for applications.

- *Categories of Permit Types*: That the City allows for Fast Track and Over the Counter Permits serves applicants with smaller projects and keeps those applications from getting unnecessarily delayed in the process. It presents a proportional application of resources to each level of application complexity, and therefore, a consistently high level of service over the whole spectrum of permit applications.

- *Sound Record Keeping*: The Department maintains records on permits and properties and, to the benefit of the community, often has usable background (such as a plats) available for by residents. To improve records management, the City is embarking on an electronic records management program.

- *Staff Training*: Department staff have the opportunity to secure training pertinent to their work.

- *Permit Process Information*: Explanatory materials are available to customers regarding permits, procedures, and standards.

- *Use of Technology*: Permit process materials are available on the City website. The Department is working to expand its application of technology by evaluating electronic plan review submissions and is preparing to participate in a City-wide computer system update that will include new permitting software.

- *Predictable Plan Review Times*: The Department has established target turnaround times for plan reviews. Different timeframes are applicable based on permit complexity (fifteen business days for standard permits, five days for Fast Track permits, and over the counter permits that can be issued in one visit to the Department).

- *Shared Goals:* The Department publishes its Mission and Vision statements in the Budget document, clearly articulating the goals of managing growth and change, preserving the distinct character of the community, strong property values and quality of life, and the responsibility to guide applicants through the development review process necessary to achieve these goals.

Review Timing: Perhaps the most often scrutinized aspect of issuing building permits is the time required for submitted plans to be approved and permits issued. A survey of comparable communities conducted for this project indicates that targets of three to four weeks for a first response are common. Two week turnaround was noted in limited instances, as was difficulty in meeting that time frame. Those surveyed indicated various success in meeting the turnaround target – some noting the target was "generally" met. The few that set a percentage indicated meeting their target 70 to 80 percent of the time.

As for Lake Forest, evaluation of Department customer survey responses and stakeholder discussions indicate the planned turnaround of 15 business days for standard permits and five days for Fast Track permits is generally considered appropriate, but that faster turnaround is always desirable. Data from approximately two years of permit tracking show that standard permits are issued within the 15 business day target 71 percent of the time and within 20 business days 86 percent of the time. Fast Track permits are issued within five days 88 percent of the time and within 10 days 98 percent of the time. For permits requiring engineering review, which is conducted by an outside consulting firm, it was noted that project complexity can diminish the probability of meeting the 15 day target.

The 15-day turnaround target is consistent with those of surveyed communities for standard permits. Most communities did not indicate a specifically defined Fast Track permit, but noted that smaller permits are generally reviewed faster than the target time. In addition, most communities did have a form of over the counter permit. The Fast Track category in Lake Forest is beneficial to applicants in that it provides a "right-sized" review of smaller project plans.

Communications: Stakeholders interviewed indicated that all Community Development staff are available for questions and insights throughout the process; the City gets strong marks from stakeholders for that availability. In fact, those interviewed (stakeholders and Department staff) noted that a meeting between staff and the applicant (and/or their designer or contractor) is key to a successful plan review and construction project. It informs applicants of the best way to approach possible design and code challenges, and informs the City of potentially unique plan review questions that may arise. The benefit of early and clear communications with staff, and the ready availability of CD staff, from the Director on down, were among the most positive and most commonly made observations during the assessment. This point was made most strongly by architects and others as relates to larger projects, and isn't as relevant to smaller (fast track or over the counter) projects – although, anecdotally there were comments that even those doing smaller projects were welcome to and do meet with staff.

A challenging aspect of development review and permitting is predicting when a permit will be ready for issuance. Plans are reviewed in the order in which they are received; some can require input from multiple review points, and can be waiting on additional information from applicants or others. For this reason, it is typically impossible to give a date certain when the permit will be issued. Staff indicated that during busy times they will inform applicants that issuance may be closer to or even beyond the target date due to plan review volumes – in the interest of good communication, this is a sound practice. Nevertheless, stakeholders and survey respondents indicated a desire for more information about permit status.

Availability of Department staff for questions on permit issuance status must be seen as a double-edged sword. Taking the time to update applicants provides high quality customer service, but also takes staff from the work of reviewing and issuing permits. This is an ongoing balancing act in all permit and inspection work, but is exaggerated where staff resources are lean.

Bulk Calculation: The calculation of "bulk" was raised several times during focus group and stakeholder discussions. The standard was generally understood as the way in which lot size limits house size. However, calculating the standard was noted by some as being detailed, complex, and hard to understand and apply. In addition, the question was raised by some as to why this standard did not suffice in regulating home construction – essentially asking why the BRB process was required if a bulk standard was met. In fact, the City uses the term "bulk" in two ways: As a measure of actual building volume, and as a measure of perceived building volume. The bulk standard relates to the actual building volume, while the BRB evaluates how the building will be perceived in the context of its siting and surroundings.

Website: The City website has information related to the permit and inspection process, but requires a bit of persistent digging into the site to find the relevant information. The website is a valuable resource, but is not perceived by many users as intuitively organized. A user with a good sense of what they were looking for will do better with the site and find: permit applications, submittal checklists, and workbooks for building scale and urban design guidelines. Limited background information is provided on the overall permit process or details on process elements, such as the BRB. The requirement for BRB review of single family homes is not clearly noted, but should be, as this requirement is not common in other communities.

The website provides limited prioritization of permit related information. For example, the Building Scale Workbook and City of Lake Forest Design Guidelines are significant permit process tools in the City but are not highlighted as such. Likewise, checklists for plan submittal can be found on the site, but they are not highlighted as valuable tools to be used in the process (as they were noted to be by stakeholders and survey respondents). In short, these valuable information sources seem to be located on the website to be found once directed there by a staff member, not for someone at home, after hours, seeking to learn how the process works – or in the case of designers, contractors, and realtors, being able to show their clients how the process works.

The survey conducted for this assessment shows that seven percent of respondents considered the website a primary source of information on the process; 56 percent noted that Community Development Staff was their main information source. This is consistent with the customer service approach of staff and challenges of information retrieval from the website. While an important tool, no website will completely absorb customer service requests, especially in a service oriented community such as Lake Forest.

In comparison to other communities' building permit website pages, our experience generally and research related to this assignment shows that the information level and customer interface for Lake Forest is typical of most. However, some sites are organized such that a specific section is prominently identified for all aspects of construction. If appropriately designed, this approach can be a useful hub for permit and development related information. Even so, most sites follow the structure of permit information being found through the related departments or a "I want to..." link – which, ultimately leads users to the same information or location as the department based information.

Staffing: The assessment is not a manpower study, it does not consider the number of staff positions in comparison to other comparable communities, primarily because the duties and responsibilities assigned to the staff vary so widely between communities. The assessment focuses, instead, on the product and the perception of the process by consumers of the Department's work.

The loss of two and one-half positions within the Community Development department as a result of the past economic downturn was noted several times in stakeholder discussions. The change was described as understandable due to the drop in development activity. However, given that the economy has improved and development activity with it, there were questions from stakeholders as to whether adding back the staff member could help meet demands on the Department.

Despite the loss of positions, the staff has been able to cover the four significant areas of responsibilities they have been assigned without reducing the quality of the product or decay in the work environment. Those four responsibilities: plan review, site/building inspections, technical support for the Council and review bodies, and communications with applicants and public, have significantly inelastic elements that are tied more to the number of homes and businesses in the community and only partially tied to economic cycles. The potential technology improvements discussed elsewhere in this assessment do not substitute for staff capacity, particularly in the case of a customer-focused service environment like Lake Forest. Technology improvements are likely to benefit the quality, speed and management of project files and project reviews, but are not likely to have an impact on the need for staff resources to serve the inelastic demand for inspections, staff reports and communications with the public.

Perception About of the Process

Use and understanding of the permit and inspection process for any community is part fact, part perception. Applicants (especially residents and business owners) may only apply for permits once or twice during their time in Lake Forest. Their perception of the process will be influenced by what they hear from others. Even those familiar with the process may be influenced by one experience they had or heard stories about. These perceptions are not indicators in and of themselves of the strength or weaknesses of Lake Forest's permit process operations. Yet, they influence permit applicants and potential applicants and, hence, are considered in its assessment. The comments and responses from real estate professionals consistently reflected anecdotal evidence and perceptions built on what they had heard from colleagues or observed from attending a BRB or HPC meeting. These often negative perceptions influence potential home-buyers, and appear to be an influential voice in the community. As such, enhanced information and understanding of the review standards and review process, made available through a cooperative effort of realtors and brokers, may be a valuable investment in setting appropriate expectations.

Reliance on Staff: The overwhelming consensus of this assessment has been respect and appreciation of Community Development staff. That staff is polite and knowledgeable are among the most positive survey responses; this finding also is reflected in stakeholder interviews. But, this must be seen in a context beyond their professionalism and patience with customers. The Lake Forest permitting process can be complex (for example the bulk calculation), unusual (requiring design review of single-family homes), and lengthy (when commission or board approval is required). This construct drives customers to the support provided by those who know the system best, Department Staff. As noted earlier, this accommodates good customer service, but reduces the time available for conducting plan review and other tasks. The balance point between staff availability to customers and work load capacity will be part of the City deliberations in considering recommendations for system enhancement.

The Lake Forest Standard: The architectural integrity and strong character of Lake Forest is fundamentally recognized, appreciated, and embraced by the community. It comes from the City's history and the expectations of its residents. Preservation of that character is incorporated into the functions of BRB and HPC. Stakeholders interviewed for this assessment noted that there is value added to individual projects and the community as a whole from those review bodies. In addition, there was acknowledgment that the processes (more for BRB than HPC) can be viewed as long, intrusive, and challenging.

In part, this comes from the complexity of projects in Lake Forest, and affects both permitting and board and commission review. Residential architecture is personal, many new homes and additions are large, and unique elements are likely to be part of a project. Likewise, commercial projects are significant and designed and built to high quality standards (as seen with the hospital and office park construction). In some instances, both residential and commercial work involves historic structures. In these ways, the high standard of construction in the City becomes a factor in the amount of review time, code interpretation, and construction time experienced by applicants – making the process more complex than might be seen in other communities. Again, the process is a balancing act of how best to maintain the desired community character of Lake Forest.

Frequent Flyers: Occasionally heard through the assessment was the notion that there are preferred or even recommended architects and contractors in Lake Forest; that these professionals had a track record of success with the permit review process. While not preferred in the sense that they are recommended by the City, stakeholder interviews made clear that there are certainly designers and builders who regularly work in Lake Forest and have, over time, come to understand navigating the permit process.

However, the interviews (some with those who are well practiced in the permit process) indicated a correlation of a high degree of success and satisfaction with an approach that included early and clear communications with the City staff regarding code applications and commission expectations. Over time some professionals have come to recognize the importance of both. They communicate with staff early in the process and acknowledge board and commission roles. They come to understand the perspective of BRB and HPC and incorporate those expectations rather than push against them. This approach can be more difficult for those less familiar with the process (particularly out of town architects and builders), but again reflects the identified benefit of early and consistent communications in the process, and potentially the benefits of clear and accessible guides and references for unfamiliar applicants.

Public Review Before BRB and HPC

The Public Forum

As with much public engagement, the forum influences the message. Planning, community development and economic development have always been an act of balancing public and private interests and property rights. Lake Forest has recognized the direct relation between the compatibility of new and expanded homes and their context on individual and collective property values and quality of life. By incorporating the public review of petitions by the BRB or HPC, the process gives a strong voice to the public interests. The BRB and HPC meetings must remain open and accessible public meetings, but the forum and format before a presiding body in the City Council Chambers, and repeatedly broadcast on cable TV and available on the City's website, heightens the "courtroom" or adversarial atmosphere, and may diminish the facility to arbitrate satisfactory resolution of issues.

Building Review Board: As noted in the City Code, the purpose of the BRB is:

The Building Review Board is responsible for evaluating and making recommendations regarding new construction, demolitions, additions and alterations to existing buildings and signage for the purpose of ensuring that the character of the community, the high standards for development, the quality of life and property values are maintained. The Building Review Board provides a forum for public input and deliberation with a focus on architectural design, building massing, landscaping and overall site design in relation to the individual site and the neighborhood as a whole. Lake Forest City Code: 150.147 (B) (2)

This description, like the introductory statement read at the start of the Board's meetings, is an apt explanation of the BRB process. It highlights the role this body serves in the City and the expectations it addresses. As noted, there is general consensus among those who participated in the process that the BRB serves its intended role and supports community expectations for development. It was also noted through the assessment process that the quality of BRB review and reviewers is improved over past practices. Some pointed to the fact that the interview and vetting process required to sit on the BRB (and other commissions) has added value to the processes. It was also noted that the review process is very much facilitated by the depth and quality of information provided by staff (and in the staff report) on each case.

There is a general sense among those interviewed that the end result of the BRB process is a better building than would have been the case without the process. Board members noted, anecdotally, of applicants expressing appreciation that the Board raised ideas that had not been otherwise considered, and which resulted in them being pleased with the ultimate result. Yet, these positive results are not reflective in the comments of other stakeholders, particularly real estate professionals and building contractors who are most sensitive to the timing of the process.

Even though the BRB and HPC, combined, review approximately two percent (2%) of all permits issued by City of Lake Forest, the BRB was the most often noted downside of the Lake Forest building permit process in this assessment. By nature of its function, this is not surprising. The process lengthens authorization time to begin construction, often requires changes to initial architectural design, and the final result of the process is unpredictable to applicants and their designers.

Given these conflicting perspectives, there is merit to further understand what may create (or add to) consternation over the BRB:

1. While it is generally understood that new construction and major additions require BRB review, it was not clear to many applicants what types of permit or construction requests require BRB considerations. Further, some interviewed indicated that they anticipated BRB was a required step, but that upon meeting with staff were able to make adjustments that eliminated the requirement. That such adjustments can be made is logical, but those interviewed could not articulate the distinction. This perceived lack of predictability of what work requires BRB approval adds to confusion about its utility.

2. Standards for BRB approval are not clear to applicants. The City Code and Residential Design Guidelines spell out desirable design elements in detail. However, they do not establish priorities or a focused and uniform set of standards upon which projects will be evaluated. The worksheet at the rear of the Guidelines provides perhaps the best focus on expectations of the designs. In general, the emphasis is on new construction being in context with the surrounding area and overall community. That said, a number of comments through this assessment note that when BRB is not working as well as possible, the review focuses too closely on small design elements or gives the sense that the Board members are redesigning the house. Further issues are that involvement of neighbors extends beyond expressing concerns over impacts on their properties to adding their design preferences to the subject property. While not the intent of the process or the members, any design review process can result in such practices.

3. The BRB step in the approval process comes prior to issuance of a building permit, but from the perspective of the applicant occurs months (perhaps a year or more) after they have begun the process of developing their new home. To come to the BRB stage after becoming vested in a design or configuration of a home can create frustration for the applicant; this points to the need for wide education about the process to residents, designers, contractors, and realtors.

Historic Preservation Commission: The role of historic preservation is, on its face, more apparent to those that go through the process. They are generally likely to know their current or future home is historic (or in a historic district) and that such a designation comes with limitations. In some cases, those who own such homes embrace the concept of living in a historic structure and the obligations it brings. This is borne out by the online survey. While the number of persons responding to the survey that had been through the HPC was relatively small, they were most likely to respond positively regarding aspects of the approval process. Two aspects of the HPC process raised questions:

1. The HPC does not review plans for historic structures outside of the City's historic districts unless the structures are designated as Local Landmarks. This was a bit of an incongruity to some, who noted that a historic structure should be reviewed by the HPC (rather than BRB).

2. There are a number of homes in the City's historic districts that are not historic or are considered "not-contributing" to the character of the district. Changes to those structures require HPC consideration, but are reviewed to the same considerations as a historic structure.

Survey Findings

Two surveys were conducted as part of this assessment to establish a broader understanding of permit review processes in other communities and how the Lake Forest process is perceived by users.

Comparable Communities: The survey of comparable communities included those that Lake Forest has previously benchmarked itself against and are of comparable size. In addition, we identified a number of Chicago area communities with similarities to Lake Forest. Survey questions were developed to allow ease of response (to encourage people to reply) and focused on basic aspects of plan review and permit issuance (this surveying and direct interviewing continues in anticipation of further information for the final report). In addition, we visited the websites of each community to evaluate the ease of finding information about their permitting processes and the completeness of that information. Preliminary findings of the survey are:

- Most responding communities offer a meeting with staff for the applicant prior to initiating the plan review, but those meetings are not mandatory.
- Time for plan review till issuance of permit varies, but most aim to complete the review within 3 to 4 weeks. For those providing detailed information, their targets for completing plan reviews were reached between 70 and 80 of the time.
- Most communities offer an over the counter permit for simple projects, but it is not clear that they provide an equivalent to the City's Fast Track permit option.
- Websites provided background and forms related to the permit process, but few provide the information in a single, specifically designated portion of the site.
- Few communities require architectural review of single family homes.

Customer Survey: A survey of Community Development customers that had been through the permitting process in the last two years was offered online. Contact was made by email with a letter of invitation from the mayor included. The survey was not intended as a definitive element of this assessment, and with a total of 50 responses cannot be considered at all statistically significant. That those involved with larger projects were more likely to respond to the survey, and results echo that perspective. However, the survey provided indication of relative differences in perspectives on the permit process. Also, the survey input informed the overall assessment and allowed more in depth discussions with stakeholders.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked the extent which they agreed with a series of statements regarding the plan review and permit process. Those responses are summarized below:

Highest Level of Agreement
- Would like to be able to check the status of permits on line
- Community Development Staff know the process
- Community Development Staff are polite
- Community Development Staff know the code
- Overall experience as positive
- Plan review response was timely
- Checklists of required Information helped

Moderate Level of Agreement
- Would like to be able to schedule inspections on line
- Would like to be able to submit plans electronically
- Community Development problem solved issues
- Getting started was straightforward
- City code regulations were understandable
- Plan review time was satisfactory

Lowest Level of Agreement
- Phone inspection schedule system was helpful
- Permit fees were reasonable

Recommendations

Based on the input of stakeholders, customers and City Staff, as well as assessment of current permit and inspection procedures, the following recommendations to enhance the plan review process are provided for consideration by the City. They are grouped into categories related to: 1) expanding on existing **communication** with customers, 2) use of **technology**, 3) the **Building Review Board**, and 4) I**mmediate** and **Intermediate** recommendations

Facilitating Efficient Communication

The great amount and ease of access to Community Development staff available to permit applicants is a key aspect of this service in Lake Forest, and much appreciated by customers. These personal interactions facilitate the permit process and enhance the quality of service. While phone calls and counter discussions are not the most time efficient manner in which to convey information, limiting this access is not suggested here. Rather, expanding existing sources and adding outlets for commonly requested information can be used to relieve the need for some one on one contact:

Classes: Community Development staff currently provide educational sessions to contractors and others about code requirements. This outreach has value in terms of expanding customers' understanding of the process and related codes, but also makes clear that the City should be seen as a partner in design and construction work. Sessions can focus on specific aspects of the process (such as the review bodies) and can help with contractor awareness when new model codes and local amendments are adopted. In addition, sessions can be geared to specific groups like do-it-yourselfers, realtors, or those living in historic homes. Workshops such as these might also be consolidated into an event based program or series of sessions in the form of a "Citizens Community Development Academy" (as done by other City departments).

Video: Brief videos are a common tool to share information and instruction. Videos related to permit and inspection requirements could be produced and shared with the community via cable and the website. Video capture of the above described Community Development Academy classes can facilitate repeat viewing overtime for new residents and contractors.

The Dialogue: Continue to provide information to the community in The Dialogue (such as the article last year about "*The Other Public Safety Department*"). Future articles might highlight unique and interesting projects (such as the hospital renovation) that can help readers understand the Department's role in the City. Newsletter articles also can highlight work of the BRB, HPC, PC, and ZBA to give residents insight into the role those groups play in maintaining Lake Forest's community character.

Technology

New Resource Planning System: Lake Forest has initiated the process of acquiring a new city-wide, Electronic Data Management System, and an integrated Enterprise Resource Planning system. A module for permit and inspections will be part of that program. This presents an opportunity to expand customer service and staff management of the process. While a great number of functionalities will be considered in that evaluation, this assessment process (and our experience with other systems) highlights several items to be considered as desirable for the new system:

- *Online plan review tracking* to allow applicants to check status of their permit application in the plan review process. It may be possible to include a current average review period.
- *Inspection scheduling* available either on line or through a phone system.

- *Electronic plan submittal* should be accommodated if the City's current experiment with that functionality proves it to be useful.
- *Credit card payments* to be facilitated.
- *Mobile devices* for inspectors are already a part of the current process and should continue. Devices should provide system access comparable to when at work station and continue to include capacity for information like current City codes.
- Preparation of *plan review letters* should be facilitated by operations such as digital plan markups/notes, pull down menus for commonly used review comments and ease in compiling comments from multiple review points.
- An *internal review tracking dashboard* for staff that indicates status of all plan reviews, highlighting those that are close to review schedule targets.
- A *unified record indictor* for all properties in the City to link the permit process to other City functions and better share information – particularly if there is a circumstance that might require holding off on issuance of a permit.
- *Customizable reports* are necessary to allow staff to compile and present to the City Council locally definable information (rather than only report formats built into the system).
- A *fee estimator function* for applicants to determine permit costs prior to plan submittal.
- *A time clock hold* should be available to pause plan review time while waiting for information from an applicant. This automated function would provide an accurate accounting of whether plan reviews are conducted within the 5 or 15 day target.
- *Over the Counter permit* applications and payment should be accommodated.

Website: This tool can be expanded to provide additional background about the permit process as well as specific information. Items like simple flow charts depicting review processes (particularly as they may include commission approval) can help those new to the process know better what to expect. In addition, assistance with more complex functions can be accomplished on the webs site; for example, incorporating items such as a residential bulk calculator or permit fee estimator may be of use.

In general, the website should help users understand the process. The current portion of the website that includes, "*Here are some tips to help ensure your project go smoothly*" is a fine example of straightforward, sound set of insights to be shared. Similar sections for commonly asked questions about topics can be beneficial. In particular, the website should be seen as most useful to those not familiar with procedures, such as residents with do-it-yourself projects. In that regard, highlighting Over the Counter and Fast Track permit processes is suggested.

A unified portion of the website can be dedicated to all aspects of construction, permits, inspections, and commissions. Users would reach this area from a prominent link on the website home page (and those of development related departments). This development focused section of the website could then break down into the types of projects conducted (residential or commercial) and then again into more detail based on common construction actions – renovation, new construction, site improvements etc. The overarching theme is that the site is built around the types of construction projects users undertake, rather than solely on City Departments.

A "Frequently Asked Questions" section for the website page would be useful for applicants (again, similar to the current t*ips to keep a project moving* section). This website construct is common and users know to look to these sections as a good place to start. If available, similar "how to apply" or "what to expect" videos or PowerPoints could be posted here.

The Building Review Board

As noted in this report, the BRB provides valuable input to maintain the character of Lake Forest. Yet, the very nature of the Board's process makes it is a lightning rod for frustration with the permit process. The bottom line is that this part of the process cannot be made completely predictable, limited to just one meeting, or be perceived as entirely objective – it is not, nor is it meant to be a black and white set of decisions. However, there are several considerations for enhancing the process:

Revise Meeting Structure: Relocating the BRB meetings from the Council Chambers to a conference room at the Municipal Services Building is most strongly recommended as a needed step to enhance the BRB meeting structure and overall process. The BRB meetings must remain open and accessible to the public, but the removal of the "court room" setting will accommodate a more workshop like atmosphere. While that is generally the tenor of the meetings, the formal setting of a televised meeting in the Council Chambers is not conducive to that objective. It may take several meetings to fine tune the exact format of the new approach, but indications from this assessment are that the change will be worthwhile. In the spirit of workshops, wider use of preapplication meetings should be considered. This would allow those with a pending application to bring conceptual plans before the BRB prior to delving into design details; potentially helping to save time and expense in the construction project.

Continue to Clarify Triggers for BRB Review: The design standards considered for permit review items are enumerated in the City Code and Residential Design Guidelines. These are evaluated by Department staff and the BRB in determining approval of submitted plans. Whether design plans for a permit request are addressed at the staff level or considered by BRB is a function of project scale and the extent to which the design adequately reflects the design standards. It is clear that new homes, demolitions, significant or highly visible additions, items that do not meet the standards and variance requests are heard by the BRB. Yet there is flexibility in this determination. The scale and visibility of a project is considered on a case by case basis, and may or may not require BRB consideration based on staff evaluation. This approach to the determination has functioned well. However, there may be value to clarifying the threshold for which of these matters elevates the review to the Board level, so that designers can have a sense of that trigger prior to consulting with staff. This might be accomplished by identifying past cases that are good examples of what did and didn't meet the threshold, and incorporate those with photos and descriptions into the Design Guidelines. In addition, the Design Guidelines could be reviewed to identify which of them are priorities when a project is considered, and highlight those for applicants.

Expand Understanding of Board's Role: Just as the opening statement at the BRB hearings is used to inform those at the meetings of the Board's role and procedures, more information about the value of the commission should reach the greater community. As noted earlier, this might take the form of articles in The Dialogue, workshops with stakeholder groups, or training sessions with designers and engineers. Given that a relatively limited number of permit applications even reach the BRB, community understanding of the Board appears to be based as much on legend as fact; leading to misunderstandings about the value and extent of the review.

Immediate and Intermediate Recommendations:

Regarding next steps, work can be considered in terms of policy questions to be considered and procedural improvements to be prioritized from the recommendations above.

Practice and Procedural Changes:

- ***Relocate BRB and HPC***. A workshop format is best for these groups and the change is strongly recommended. Developing the precise format that works best may take some time.
- ***Coordinate with City–wide technology updates***. The planned Electronic Data Management System and an integrated Enterprise Resource Planning system present opportunities for service enhancement.
- ***Revise Website***. Development / Construction related aspects of the website should be consolidated to a single area, organized to reflect user needs (rather than department structure) and highlight most used and useful information
- ***Prepare Additional Public Information.*** The suggested public materials should be considered and expanded upon to reflect those outreach formats found most effective in Lake Forest

Policy Questions for City Council Consideration:

- ***The City of Lake Forest has long recognized its own uniqueness, history, and architectural heritage. These values are thoughtfully balanced with the importance of supporting public and private investment in homes and neighborhoods. The BRB, the HPC and the design review process have been the means of implementing a public policy that encourages those community objectives. Does the community still consider the design review conducted by the BRB and the HPC to be the most effective manner in which to achieve these goals?***
  - An affirmative response to this question overtly reaffirms the importance of the two bodies in regard to community history, character, property value and quality of life. Further, it can establish an even stronger expectation (both among its residents and of those outside the city) about how the architectural evaluations play a role in making living and investing in Lake Forest exceptional.
- ***Going forward, what should be the role of BRB and HPC in maintaining Lake Forest's desired community character?***
  - Should there be a change of scope for these two bodies? Should architecturally significant buildings, whether inside a "district" or not be reviewed by HPC? Should non-contributing buildings be reviewed by BRB?
  - Should City Staff have greater responsibility over design review, reducing the number or nature of items that are reviewed by BRB or HPC? Should BRB or HPC have the role of "appeals from staff determination"?