Raleigh Permits

Innovation Team

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In August 2023, leaders in the Planning and Development department established an Innovation Team to evaluate our development review process. Diverse staff members from all divisions comprise the Innovation Team. They were responsible for identifying challenges in the residential and commercial development review processes. The team used human-centered design principles to generate ideas to improve efficiency, strengthen effectiveness, and enhance the customer experience. This report outlines the team's findings and recommendations.

Analysis and Findings

In partnership with the Office of Strategy and Innovation, the team utilized three evaluation methods:

- **Journey mapping for both visual and analytical insights.**

- **Surveys to gather data-driven perspectives.**

- **Focus groups to get in-depth qualitative feedback, for a thorough understanding.**

Express Review

Site Plan Review

The team used **journey mapping** to evaluate processes and created detailed maps. These included **Express Review**, **Residential Review**, **Site Plan Review (SPR)**, and **Change of Use**. This process identified challenges in each area and helped the team develop targeted improvements. The team also assessed problem framing, specified issues within each area, and prioritized problems. Through a series of "how might we" statements, the team generated solutions and created an inventory of potential remedies.

Change of Use

2024

Residential Review

*The team used journey mapping to evaluate processes and created detailed maps. These included **Express Review**, **Residential Review**, **Site Plan Review** (SPR), and **Change of Use**.*

The Innovation Team conducted three surveys: Express, General Customer, and Employee. Both the Express and General Customer survey utilized social media and stakeholder meetings. Staff participated in the Employee survey online and through departmental meetings. This approach ensured diverse perspectives from customers and internal staff.

The Innovation Team conducted three surveys:

1. *Express*
2. *General Customer*
3. *Employee*

The Express survey had 43 participants who identified challenges and preferences. They expressed concern about extended pandemic-related turnaround times. They recommended a return to 1-2 business days for Express reviews. They also identified issues working with staff. This included staff preparedness, communication, and difficulty reaching staff outside of scheduled meeting times. These challenges change client-staff interactions in negative ways. Participants noted a shortage of review slots and insufficient staffing in Express. They wanted to restart preliminary reviews for certain project types, such as Subdivisions, Administrative Site Review, and Recorded Maps. These results highlight areas for attention and improvement within the Express process. Needed improvements include shortening timelines, improving staff communication, and expanding services.

43
participants identified challenges and preferences

69
staff members completed the Employee survey

Sixty-nine staff members from Planning and Development and matrix review staff completed the Employee survey. The survey used a Likert scale (ranked responses) to assess the quality of service in different areas. The intake process received mixed reviews, suggesting room for improvement. The Final Review and Field Revisions processes had positive feedback but also areas for enhancement. The survey showed challenges in areas including Change of Use, Site Plan Review, Administrative Site Review, and Site Tier Verification.

The survey revealed common themes. Examples include poorly documented processes, customers relying too heavily on staff, and the complexity of process steps.

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Open-ended questions in the survey highlighted key areas that need improvement. These areas include:

- Simplifying submission and review processes
- Enhancing customer service and support
- Improving staff responsiveness and training
- Balancing workload with capacity
- Emphasizing clear communication and documentation
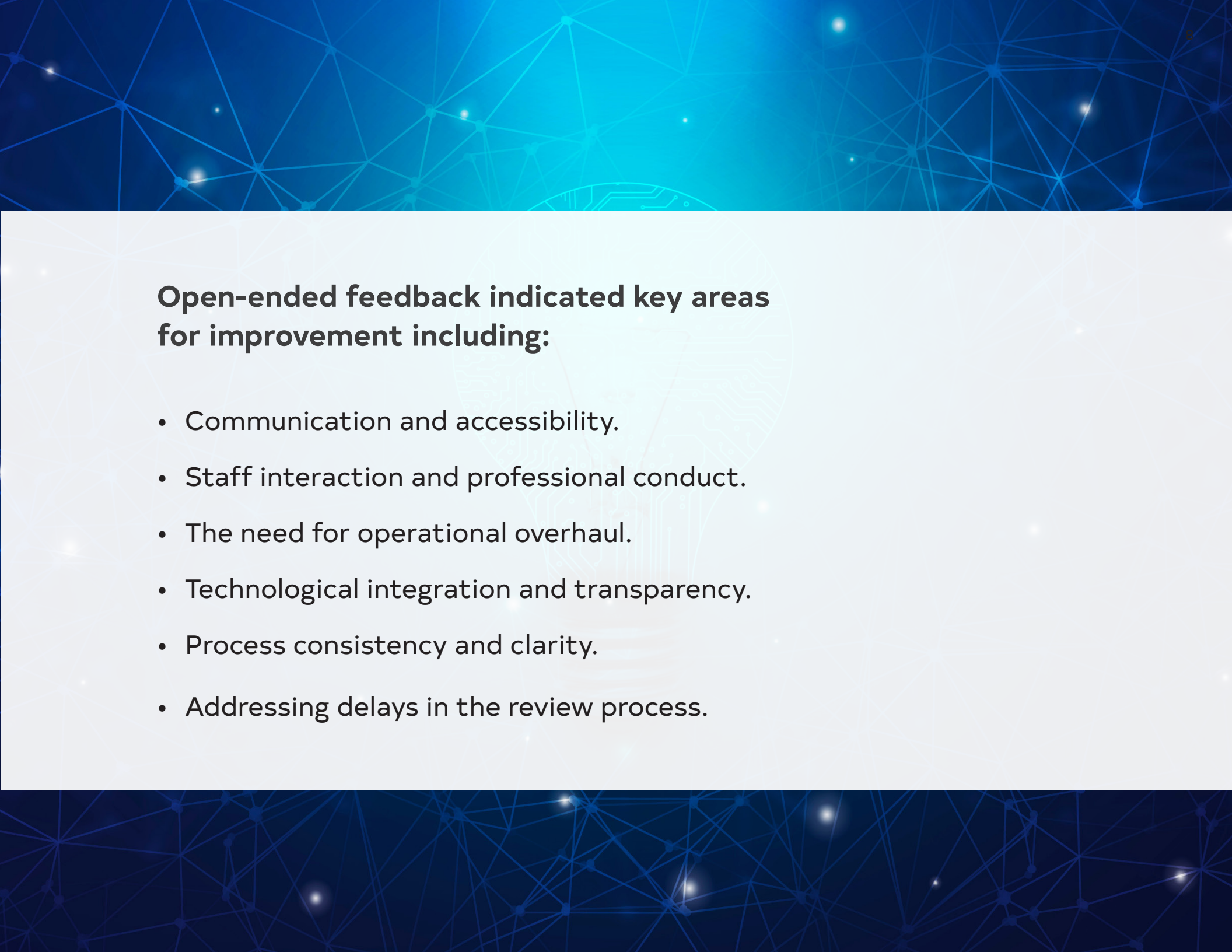- Increasing the use of automation and technology

Employee survey participants shared specific suggestions for improvement. These include developing easier submission portals, more relevant checklists, and automating processes and technology. Improvements are also needed in customer support, staff training, workload balance, and clear communication.

The General Customer survey also identified areas of concern experienced in various processes. The survey utilized a Likert scale format receiving 321 participants. It gathered insights into customer preferences regarding the application process, plan review, final review, and inspections.

Participants favored online methods for completing applications. However, feedback highlighted challenges with the Permit Portal. Ease of use and difficulties navigating the city's website were among them. Survey participants disagreed that the plan review process met their expectations. They stated concerns about the timeliness of re-submittal and initial reviews, and the communication and responsiveness from staff. Participants generally agreed that the inspections process met their expectations.

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Open-ended feedback indicated key areas for improvement including:

- Communication and accessibility.

- Staff interaction and professional conduct.

- The need for operational overhaul.

- Technological integration and transparency.

- Process consistency and clarity.

- Addressing delays in the review process.

Over a three-week period, the innovation Team also conducted 14 focus groups. The results provided valuable feedback from 40 customers and 52 employees. Participants evaluated eight potential solutions and engaged in two activities to express their preferences. Staff exhibited a clear preference for:

- **Interactive Diagrams**
- **Project Coordinators**
- **How-to Videos**

Interactive diagrams ranked the highest solution. They would address common questions, provide customized guidance, and reduce confusion for homeowners. The Project Coordinator concept offered clients more help during the development process, but some staff expressed concern about the practicality and costs. In contrast, customers' top choices included:

- **15-Minute Bookings with a Reviewer**
- **Interactive Review Technology**
- **Live Virtual Intake**
- **Review Expediter**

The customers favored 15-Minute Bookings with a Reviewer as their primary choice. This emphasized real-time communication to reduce waiting times and enhance customer service. Interactive Review Technology gained significance in the second activity. Customers foresee benefits in reviewing plan comments and promoting consistency among reviewers. A Review Expediter also ranked high. These results show a desire for expedited reviews, reduced wait times, and timely project completion.

The analysis revealed notable disparities between staff and customer preferences. These differences underscore the importance of considering diverse stakeholders. Considering both will help improve the development review process.

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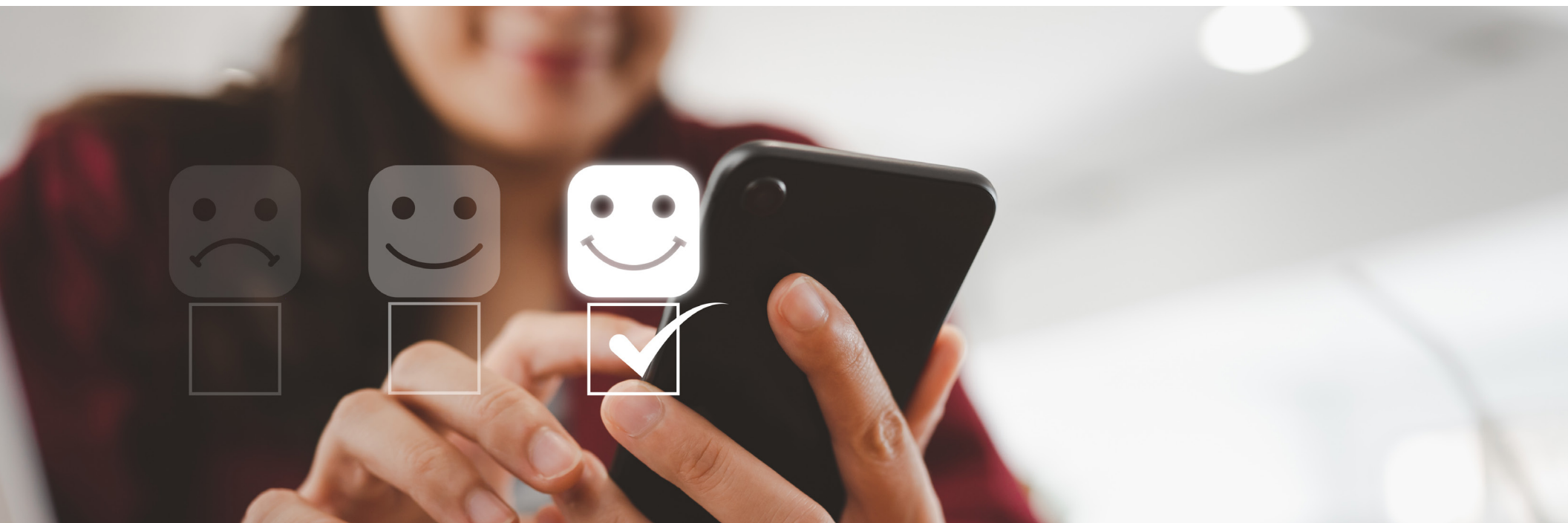
Recommendations and Next Steps

The Innovation Team's findings will be funneled into a concise action plan, integrating big-picture goals with the steps necessary to achieve them. The Innovation Team **Action Plan** lays forth the value proposition of each goal and identifies mission critical paths to balance quick wins with a foundation to achieve larger and more complex goals. It considers dependencies, establishing a clear sequence and assigning responsibilities for accountability. This plan initiates immediate improvements, incremental changes, and long-term transformation.

Overall, the action plan will describe a course of action to refine and redefine the land development and permit application processes. This involves improving application processes, submission quality, and streamlining review and development processes. Continuous improvement is pursued through stakeholder feedback, while right-sizing plan review benchmarking and better communication channels ensures faster, more accurate reviews. Emphasizing comprehensive training and communication strategies supports staff empowerment and support, contributing to greater customer service.

Conclusion

The Innovation team conducted an evaluation of the development review process using the human-centered design principles of journey mapping, surveys, and focus groups. The team identified key challenges, including unclear guidance, complex requirements, and demand overload. Surveys and focus groups provided diverse stakeholder perspectives, highlighting critical areas for improvement. A balanced implementation approach can address differences in preferences between customers and staff. The insights and recommendations presented pave the way for targeted enhancements. This fosters a more efficient, customer-centric, and collaborative development review process.

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