

# Blueprint *of* Change

2015 - 2017



**Development** CITY OF AUSTIN  
SERVICES DEPARTMENT



PLAN..... 4

BUDGET..... 6

LAYING THE  
FOUNDATION.... 8

FRAMING THE  
DEPARTMENT... 12

FINAL  
INSPECTION.... 26

In 2015, *Forbes* ranked Austin the second fastest growing city in America, and in the years following this ranking the city continued to grow at an annual growth rate of 2.8%. This growth rate presented many challenges for the Development Services Department (DSD), specifically how it would respond to increased development and construction activity.

A study of the department's policies, processes and culture by an independent consultant in 2015 identified 462 recommendations for improving the department's business model. For two years, DSD employees worked diligently to address the recommendations in the study.

This publication showcases the journey of DSD from its inception to the completion of its ambitious two-year Action Plan, which became its “**Blueprint of Change.**”





# PLAN

## Zucker Report

In 2014, the City of Austin contracted with an independent consultant, Zucker Systems<sup>1</sup>, to provide a comprehensive review of the City's Planning and Development Review Department (PDRD). The impetus for this review was frequent criticism of the Department and increased public pressure for service improvements. Criticism included a slow permitting process, long wait times for plan reviews, and complicated, confusing, inconsistent, and inefficient procedures. PDRD employees also expressed frustrations, citing a continual backlog of cases, mistrust in the process and inadequate training on the department's processes and rules. The lack of attention to these areas created detrimental effects on employee performance and morale.

## A New Direction

In March 2015, then City Manager Marc Ott, released a memo<sup>2</sup> announcing his decision to reorganize PDRD's departmental functions into two individual departments to "allow for a more efficient distribution of the workload and an enhanced focus on necessary process improvements." The newly created departments were Planning and Zoning Department (PAZ), whose main focus would be zoning case management, long range planning and a rewrite of the land development code, and the Development Services Department (DSD) would focus on plan reviews, permits, and inspections.

## The Action Plan

In July 2015, in accordance with a City Council directive to provide a response to the recommendations contained in the Zucker

Report (Resolution No. 20150402-014)<sup>3</sup>, the newly formed departments presented a joint plan<sup>4</sup> to implement a two-year Action Plan to address the agreed-upon recommendations.

The Action Plan<sup>5</sup> consisted of approximately 200 short- and long-term actionable items, a timeline for completion, the work group responsible for implementation, and the financial considerations necessary to implement the recommendations. Employee input and engagement was fundamental to its successful implementation.

For greater transparency and accountability to the public, progress with the Action Plan was updated quarterly and posted on the department's website and the City of Austin's data portal throughout its two-year duration until its sunset on September 30, 2017.





24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and other service delivery related initiatives. DSD's non full-time employee funding requests were almost entirely approved.

The department also requested 51 full-time positions and associated costs for operational and support functions. The request was supported by the Development Forecast, an economic analysis provided by Capital Market Research<sup>6</sup>, which predicted continued growth in Austin's development market. During budget adoption, the City Council postponed approval of these positions pending additional information, and out of concern for the impact of increased development fees on homeowners. The department will bring the request forward again in the FY2018-19 budget.

amounts were adjusted to reflect the true cost of service delivery, eliminating the need for development activity to be subsidized by taxpayer dollars. Additionally, the basis for calculating some fees changed; fees that were previously based on project valuation changed to square footage, which aligns with the true cost of service. The study also produced a Cost Recovery Fee Calculator, an automated tool that can be used to ensure full cost recovery in future years as costs and activities change.

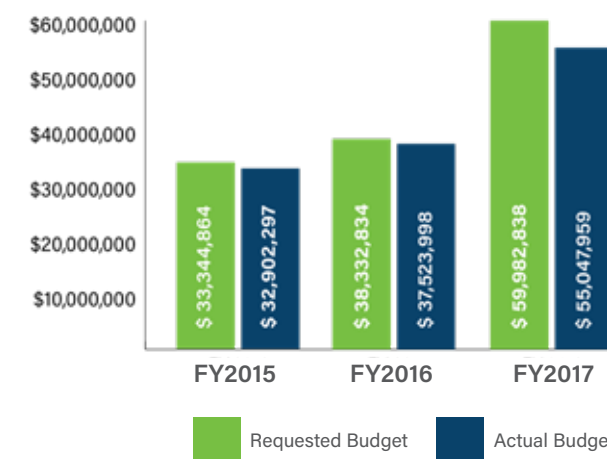
### Savings to the General Fund

Under the full cost of service model, the annual budget allocation to DSD has been reduced to cover only those items that should be funded by the General Fund. This new approach has been also used to shift cost recovery to development fees rather than using the Drainage Utility Fee (DUF) as a funding source. Development fees are a volatile revenue stream. A next step of converting DSD to an Enterprise Fund department will allow for a sufficient reserve to be built up over time to be used as a financial safeguard in the event of an economic downturn.

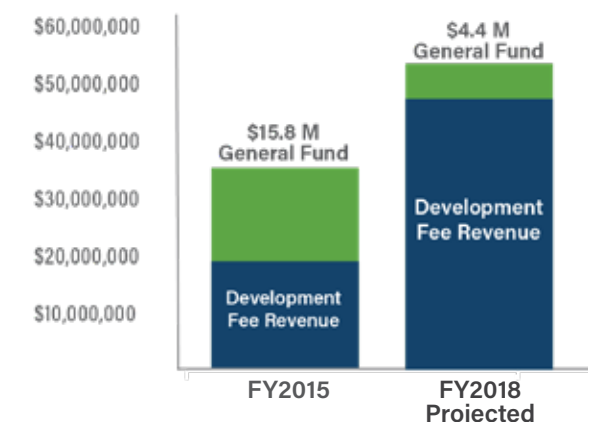
### Cost of Service Fee Study and Fee Calculator

In FY2016-17, Matrix Consulting Group, an independent firm that provides analytical services to local and state governments, was hired to conduct a full cost of service fee study for DSD. As a result of the study, all fee

### Budget Requests vs. Actual Budget



### Reduced Reliance on General Fund



## BUDGET

### Budget Constraints

To begin addressing the recommendations in the Action Plan, DSD staff resources were needed. In Fiscal Year (FY)2015-16 and FY2016-17, the Austin City Council approved the department's request for the addition of a total of 64 new Full-Time Employees (FTEs) to the department. An additional \$1.2M of funding was added for training, overtime, temporary employees, third party contractors, market adjustments and additional office space.

In FY2017-18, DSD requested \$8.3M of funding to increase training funds for employees, increase third-party contracts, implement a revised land development code, replace long-term rental vehicles, collaborate with 3-1-1 to answer the DSD main phone line





# LAYING *the* FOUNDATION

## Purpose and Value Statements

In December 2015, DSD's Management Team worked together to create a Purpose and Values Statement that connected the department to the larger city-wide **P.R.I.D.E.** values (**P**ublic Service and Engagement, **R**esponsibility and Accountability, **I**nnovation and Sustainability, **D**iversity & Inclusion, **E**thics and Integrity).

### DSD Purpose:

"We care about our community, our environment and the vibrancy of Austin."

### DSD Values:

Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, Quality

The DSD Purpose and Values statements would set the tone and expectations for the department, and communicate the department's commitment to customer service. Each employee was given a framed poster of the department's purpose and values statements to display in their work space to serve as a reminder of DSD's commitment to building a customer-focused environment.

## Creating the DSD Brand

To successfully promote the department's Purpose and Values to customers and stakeholders, a new brand identity was created through a series of employee engagement exercises. The brand was incorporated into uniform shirts for field employees, forms, all written communications, hats, t-shirts, pens, and business cards. Employees began to see the benefits of their collaborative work.

## Developing a Culture of Customer Service

Shifting to a customer-focused culture has been an ongoing process, and requires active participation from the entire staff. In 2016, all DSD employees were required to attend the citywide "Customer Service with P.R.I.D.E." training. That same year, voluntary participation was encouraged for the innovative "Amy's Total Customer Service Experience" program. This program was designed to empower employees and teams with the necessary skills to handle their customers' needs. **Over one-third of the DSD workforce** participated in this program.

Other changes included the integration of three new customer service expectations into every DSD employee's Success Strategy Performance Review (SSPR): Customer Service Standards<sup>7</sup>, Ethical Expectations<sup>8</sup> and Respect in the Workplace<sup>9</sup>.





DSD also instituted over 30 standard operating procedures (SOPs) to further clarify and define the department’s practices and foundations. The SOPs require compliance by all employees thereby standardizing each customer’s experience.



Improved Communications

Improving communications with external customers and stakeholders began with the department’s website, an essential tool for disseminating information. An improved website with a customer service focus and a shortened web address, *DevelopmentATX.com*, made the website easier to use and find.

Using a mix of traditional and new media, the department designed marketing collateral, created ad campaigns, and provided outreach to educate homeowners, contractors and the Austin community about services provided by the department. In 2016, the department created a brochure<sup>10</sup> describing departmental

programs and services, and designed a budget-conscious social media and bilingual radio campaign branded “*Building a Better Austin*” that included voices of department staff.

The campaign also included digital ads to educate homeowners about permitting requirements for home improvements and renovations. The campaign won a *National Association of Government Communicators Award*.

The Department also launched a quarterly external newsletter, *Building Connections*<sup>11</sup>, to communicate new programs and services to its 5,000 registered customers and stakeholders, and supplemented its online communications by meeting with professional customers and organizations.

To improve communications with employees located in three different buildings, the department launched a monthly employee newsletter<sup>12</sup>. The newsletter features articles from the department director and other pertinent information such as City



Council actions; new programs, services and operating procedures; new employee introductions; employee recognitions; and departmental events.

Collaborative Partnerships

The department partnered with other City of Austin departments to identify potential new process changes and efficiency modeling for upcoming projects.

- **Economic Development Department -** Launched SmartStart<sup>13</sup>, a digital solution to assist small businesses with their development and permit related questions.
- **Economic Development Department, Music and Entertainment Division -** Collaborated with music industry stakeholders to consider methods for streamlining permitting processes, including the development of an alternative sound permit notification process to reduce permit costs for music venues.

- **Austin Code -** Identified efficiencies and cost savings associated with the enforcement of unpermitted construction activity and expired permits violations.
- **City of Austin, Office of Innovation Fellows Program** (Hack for Change) - Developed a web tool, PermittingATX.com, for common residential projects (sheds, interior remodels, and decks). The online tool<sup>14</sup> explains residential review and permitting requirements by providing the customer a self-navigating guide through each step of the process.







# FRAMING *the* DEPARTMENT

## Pillars of Success

With a foundation in place that defines the department's guiding purpose, the values embodied by employees, and a customer-centered and collaborative culture, the department began framing six (6) pillars that would guide the department's success. Each pillar consists of specific performance goals with measurable metrics, both quantitative and qualitative. While some of these goals could be assessed monthly, others were assessed annually through the Customer Satisfaction Poll. From 2015 to 2017, the department provided quarterly updates to the City Council on the progress of each pillar.

## 6 Pillars of Success

1. Reduce Wait Time
2. Improve Quality Reviews
3. Coordinate Reviews with Partner Departments
4. Invest in Employees
5. Improve Customer Service
6. Enhance Technology





**Remote Queueing**

Reducing customer wait time has been a main focus and was identified as one of the major redesign opportunities for the department.

To minimize customer wait time a digital queueing solution, Qless, was implemented to improve tracking of customer wait time. The new system allows customers to remotely sign-up for service or sign-up at kiosks located at all customer counters throughout the department. The system tracks a customer’s position in line and communicates the customer’s status to them via text messages. Customer seating areas include a digital monitor that displays approximate wait times for customers in the queue.

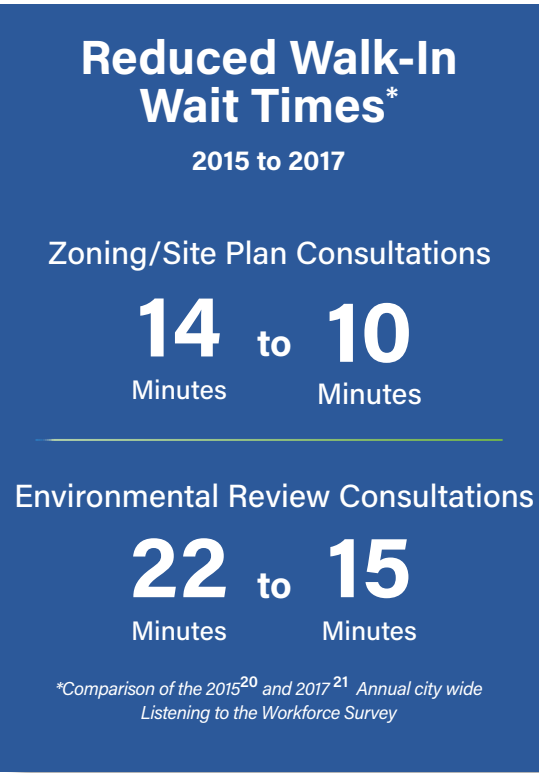
**Development Assistance Center (DAC) Consultations**

To reduce walk-in customer wait times and improve its level of customer service, the DAC implemented a Supplemental Coverage Procedure to request additional assistance

from different work groups during peak times and high customer volume. The procedure resulted in a decrease in customer wait times and an increase in customer satisfaction related to wait times in the DAC.

**Answer Rate for Call Center**

In 2014, the department’s primary phone line received over 300 phone calls a day, and only 56% of those calls were answered by a receptionist. To improve service levels, two (2) new full-time positions were added in the FY2014-15 budget and an additional full-time position was added in the FY2015-16 budget. The new staff positions were added to attain the new performance goal of 75% calls answered by a receptionist. The department worked diligently to meet performance goals, however, a better approach was to utilize the City’s existing 3-1-1 service to answer calls. DSD will enter into a partnership with 3-1-1, the City’s 365/24/7 Information and call center, with service scheduled to launch in the Fall of 2018. A 100% answer rate can be achieved through this partnership.



**Land Use Review Application Intake**

Customers were experiencing delays scheduling appointments. In the FY2015-16 budget the City Council approved an additional staff member to assist with intake and setting appointments. Additionally, staff developed a shared appointment calendar for team members to schedule and view available customer appointment times, and added a direct phone line dedicated for appointments. These changes decreased wait time from 5-7 days to 1-2 days.

**Commercial and Residential Plan Review**

A redesigned Volume Builder Program reduced the department’s review time from 1-2 weeks to 1-2 days, and total turnaround time decreased from 2-3 weeks to 1 week or less.

In early 2017, DSD launched Expedited Building Plan Review. This service provides for an accelerated building plan review and permit process by holding a single review session with a team of plan reviewers for a slightly higher fee. Since its launch, the team has approved over 60% of commercial applications during the initial review, versus a 25% approval in traditional reviews.

**Success Metrics**

DSD’s commitment to transparency resulted in the monthly publication of the Success Metrics report<sup>15</sup>, which contains quantitative metrics of key performance indicators for a variety of wait times. Presented in a one-page infographic with charts and icons, it allows management and employees to easily view their progress and celebrate successes. The material is posted for public viewing on the DSD website, and is distributed in the monthly employee newsletter. Transparency of the department’s progress is integral to fostering trust with the Austin community.







PILLAR #2  
**IMPROVE  
QUALITY  
REVIEWS**

**Customer Feedback**

In 2016, DSD contracted with ETC Institute, a market research firm, to develop and conduct an annual customer satisfaction poll to objectively assess customer satisfaction with DSD services (Plan Reviews, Inspections, Service Center, Development Assistance Center, and online tools). The first two polls were conducted in October 2016<sup>16</sup> and 2017<sup>17</sup>, and are planned to continue each fall. Results from these polls provide valuable insight and feedback for new process improvements and gauge customer satisfaction.

Additionally, the Service Center, Building Inspections, and Land Use Review divisions voluntarily instituted paper exit surveys<sup>18</sup> specific to their work groups to gauge customer satisfaction. This feedback allows managers to make adjustments as necessary.

**Highlights from the  
Annual Customer Satisfaction Polls**

	2016	2017
<b>Plan Reviews &amp; Inspections</b>		
Codes and policies are applied by staff in a fair and practical manner	38%	40%
Staff anticipates obstacles and provides options when they were available	31%	36%
Requirements/comments applied are reasonable and justified	35%	38%
Inspectors rarely find errors in the field that should have been caught during the review process	39%	36%
<b>Coordinated Reviews w/12 Departments</b>		
Customer understands the department processes	65%	60%
Customer understands the department structure and role of external review departments	29%	37%
<b>Customer Service</b>		
The staff provide excellent customer service	40%	43%
Services are completed by the date promised	39%	38%
Staff is easily accessible	35%	38%
<b>Additional Questions</b>		
Customer treated fairly by staff	64%	68%
Technical competence of staff	53%	53%
Time the process takes to complete	41%	43%
How easy the process is to complete	41%	42%
Staff is responsive to customer needs	52%	55%
Staff anticipates obstacles and provides options when available	47%	50%
Standards are applied consistently by staff	48%	52%
How easy it is to contact staff	42%	43%

Exceeded 2016 Benchmark

Below 2016 Benchmark

Same as 2016 Benchmark





### Coalition Agreements with Partner Departments

The development process can require input and approval from up to 15 other City departments (Austin Code, Austin Energy, Austin Fire, Austin Public Health, Austin Transportation, Austin Water, Aviation, Communications and Technology Management, Law, Neighborhood Housing and Community Development, Parks and Recreation, Planning and Zoning, Public Works, Real Estate Services, and Watershed Protection) as well as Travis County, a County agency.

Historically, each City department applied their own timelines for their reviews and

inspections, which contributed to increasing complexities and inconsistencies, overall delays and a plan review backlog. The Zucker Report called for additional analysis of partnering City departments<sup>19</sup>. In 2015, then City Manager Marc Ott, asked all departments involved in the development process to coordinate their efforts and share in the responsibility to reduce the plan review backlog. In response, DSD created Coalition Agreements with each partnering department. The Agreements identified actions to be taken to reduce wait times and to improve coordinated reviews for each contributing department. As of July 2018, three (3) Coalition Agreements need to be executed.



Tenets within these agreements include:

- 90% on-time performance standard
- Annual analysis of performance standards and resources needed to meet performance standards
- Requirement to participate in electronic plan review
- Co-location of development related review staff

DSD also published percentage of reviews completed on time by partner departments in the Success Metrics. According to the 2017 Annual Customer Satisfaction Poll, there was an 8% increase of customers understanding the role of partner departments in the development process.

### Partner Departments

- Austin Code
- Austin Energy
- Austin Fire
- Austin Public Health
- Austin Transportation
- Austin Water
- Aviation
- Communications and Technology Management
- Law
- Neighborhood Housing and Community Development
- Parks and Recreation
- Planning and Zoning
- Public Works
- Real Estate Services
- Watershed Protection

*\*Statistics Provided on the Annual Customer Satisfaction Polls*





PILLAR #4

## INVEST *in* EMPLOYEES



## Employee Feedback\*

**+ 21%**

Increase in employee satisfaction

**+ 19%**

Increase in employee training and professional development

**+ 7%**

Increase in employees who indicated that they understood how their performance contributed to department goals

\*Comparison of the 2015<sup>20</sup> and 2017<sup>21</sup> Annual city wide Listening to the Workforce Survey

To reduce the backlog of work that contributed to low employee morale and high staff turnover, new full-time and temporary staff positions were added in all areas, and third-party contractors were utilized to fill in as needed. Where feasible, job descriptions were updated with market pay salary reviews, and a new career ladder for the Plans Examiner Family within the Building Plan Review division was created, encouraging employees to obtain relevant certifications to progress in their profession.

A strong focus was placed on providing DSD employees with the tools, training, and professional certifications that would empower and inspire employees to provide superior customer service. The DSD Human Resources team implemented the Journey Employee Development Program offering 28 course titles, which included technical training on computer software, critical thinking, managing stress in the workplace, making decisions, managing time effectively, and resolving conflict.







### Effective Customer Service

The most marked improvement in customer service delivery involved the remodeling of the Permit Center and other customer waiting areas. DSD has served approximately 500 customers a day at its headquarters at One Texas Center (OTC). Customers visit OTC offices for permits for construction, remodels and repairs, to pay fees and to schedule inspections.

The first floor Permit Center, one of the most visited service areas, contained limited seating that regularly forced customers to stand in an adjoining hallway while waiting for service. In 2015, the department remodeled the Permit Center creating an open and contemporary waiting area with adequate seating capacity. Walls in the employee work areas were replaced with glass windows to provide a visual connection between customers and employees. Other customer amenities included the addition of a coffee bar, charging stations, public

workstations, and new digital monitors that display information about the department and its services. As a final touch, the Permit Center was rebranded as the "Service Center."

The lobby of OTC lacked directional signage, and an outdated building directory created frustration for first-time visitors. In 2016, DSD installed new lobby wayfinding signs and a new digital directory. These changes allowed visitors to quickly and easily find their way through One Texas Center.

To continue these improvements across the department, other customer service areas were also reconfigured by expanding seating capacity. With the installation of digital monitors, DSD created an ongoing opportunity to educate and inform customers about department services.

These department efforts were recognized in the 2017 Annual Customer Satisfaction Poll which reflected that seven (7) out of ten (10) work groups saw significant increases in customer satisfaction as compared to previous years. The results are likely attributed to a shift toward a customer-centric culture.

### Staff is Easily Accessible for Assistance

The performance area that received considerable improvement in the Customer Satisfaction Poll was the customer's ability to access DSD staff when assistance was needed. In 2017, the customer satisfaction for this metric increased in seven (7) out of ten (10) service areas. The department attributes this success to increased staffing levels, staff training, issuing cell phones to field inspectors to increase communication with customers, publishing staff phone directories on the DSD website, establishing performance goals, and the department's emphasis on customers.

## Services are Completed by the Date Promised

These service areas improved their level of customer satisfaction in the 2017 Customer Service Poll compared to the 2016 Poll



Commercial Plan Review  
**+ 12%\***



Tree Inspections  
**+ 5%\***



Residential Plan Review  
**+ 1%\***

\*Comparison of the 2016<sup>16</sup> and 2017<sup>17</sup> Annual Customer Satisfaction Polls





## PILLAR #6 TECHNOLOGY



Enhanced technology tools and processes have played a critical role in improving the service level to customers. In 2015, the department lagged behind other municipalities across the nation in technology upgrades, where manual processes still dominated many facets of the department's business. With a goal of increased efficiency, transparency, reduced wait time, and expanded use of technology, the department has delivered a broad set of technology services to improve the development and permitting process.

### Austin Build + Connect Online Portal

The upgrade of AMANDA, the city-wide system that manages the development and permitting process, allowed the department to implement an online portal, Austin Build + Connect (AB+C). The online portal allows customers to apply and pay for permits online.

### Electronic Plan Review

Electronic Plan Review (ePlan Review) provides online submission of residential and commercial plans for review, markup, and approval. The online review process is intended to reduce the cycle time for a plan review by providing clear and specific comments on plans from both applicants and reviewers. Using a paperless process also saves time and resources.



### Internal Dashboards

The MicroStrategy business intelligence solution was implemented in 2016 to provide staff a daily real-time snapshot of how their divisions are meeting performance measures.

## More Online Tools and Resources

DSD continues to host numerous training sessions to assist customers with the vast array of online tools available to them. These efforts have resulted in a 42%\* increase in the use of online tools since 2016 based on the 2017 Customer Satisfaction Poll. The following list is an overview of these online tools and resources and can be found at [AustinTexas.gov/DSDtools](http://AustinTexas.gov/DSDtools):

- **Online Check-in for Services** – Remote virtual check in to reduce counter wait times powered by Qless.
- **Code & Permit Tracker** – Tool to view building permits and code violations, in partnership with Austin Code. Real-time data hosted by Civic Insight.
- **Emerging Projects Map** – Map of commercial projects in planning or construction phase created by DSD.
- **Inspector Territory Map** – Tool to search for inspectors assigned to geographical areas of the City created by DSD.
- **Online Permit Applications** – Fillable pdf formats redesigned from paper applications created by DSD.
- **Property Profile Tool** – Tool to search for information, aerial images, street views, custom maps, and detailed information about a specific property created by DSD.
- **SmartStart** – Interactive web tool to assist small businesses with information and Frequently Asked Questions created by BazaarVoice.
- **Zoning Profile Tool** – Zoning information for specific properties including applicable ordinances, regulating plans and zoning overlays created by DSD.

\*Annual Customer Satisfaction Polls



# FINAL INSPECTION

BY DIRECTOR RODNEY GONZALES



By working together diligently and thoughtfully, DSD has been successful in meeting its initial goals. However, significant changes are not yet completed and are underway to ensure DSD is providing the very best services to our customers. After bringing all fees to full cost of service, DSD is financially self-sufficient. Conversion to an Enterprise Fund will allow for a reserve fund balance to be created as a financial safeguard to an economic downturn. DSD will relocate to a new building that will centralize the customer service areas into a true “one-stop” shop, a vision from the 1990’s that can be achieved through the new building.

I am proud of all the hard work by the dedicated DSD employees, as well as the community’s engagement with us, that has led to these wonderful accomplishments documented in this **Blueprint of Change**. We are looking forward to continued collaboration with the community in our mission of Building a Better and Safer Austin Together.

Rodney Gonzales  
*Director*  
*Development Services Department*

## RESOURCES

References to sources for this document can be found at this website:  
[austintexas.gov/DSD-blueprint](http://austintexas.gov/DSD-blueprint)

1. Zucker Report
2. City Manager Memo
3. City Council Resolution No. 20150402-014
4. Action Plan
5. Action Plan and Action Steps to Building a Better Austin
6. Development Forecast provided by Capital Market Research
7. Customer Service Standards SSPR
8. Ethical Expectations SSPR
9. Respect in the Workplace SSPR
10. DSD Services Brochure
11. Building Connections Newsletter
12. Monthly Employee Newsletter
13. SmartStart
14. Innovation Fellows Permitting Process Online Tool
15. Success Metrics
16. FY2016 Customer Satisfaction Poll
17. FY2017 Customer Satisfaction Poll
18. Exit Survey Sample
19. Zucker Analysis of Partner Departments
20. Listening to the Workforce Survey 2015
21. Listening to the Workforce Survey 2017



We help our customers  
navigate the development  
process by being  
knowledgeable, accessible,  
responsive, fair, consistent,  
flexible, creative and  
informative.



**Development**  
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