

OFPA Report

Fairfax County Land Development Services

Evaluating the Restaurant Permitting Process

October 2026



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Evaluating the Restaurant Permitting Process Study

Report Issued:

October 2026

Objective

To evaluate the timeliness, efficiency, and overall experience of the permitting process for restaurants opening in Fairfax County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fairfax County is home to more than 2,500 food establishments, and the County has issued an average of 280 new food establishment permits annually in recent years. Because opening a restaurant in Fairfax County often requires multiple permits, reviews, and inspections across agencies such as Land Development Services, the Health Department and the Office of the Fire Marshal, the permitting process can have a significant impact on how quickly a restaurant can open and the costs it incurs along the way. Amplifying this impact is the fact that across the Commonwealth of Virginia, nine out of 10 restaurants are small businesses.

Permitting challenges are not unique to Fairfax County. Jurisdictions across the country are working to address the complexity of commercial permitting and to find ways and tools to make the processes work better for businesses trying to open. Our review found that while the County has made improvements to the permitting process over the years and provides some resources for applicants, there is an opportunity to improve the process for restaurants looking to open in Fairfax County. Restaurant owners report concerns about lengthy and unpredictable timelines and difficulty navigating the process. For the restaurants we tested, the median time to open was 315 days for new establishments and 110 days for changes in ownership. Even when agencies meet their review-time goals, the cumulative process can take a significant amount of time (although not all of that time is within the County's control).

The County should build on the improvements already underway by making the process more predictable and easier to navigate. OFPA offers three recommendations to 1) improve the guidance and support for restaurants, 2) address some workflow challenges, and 3) address concerns around the lengthy permitting process. Management agreed with the responses and has offered cross-agency solutions to address the issues.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Home to more than 2,500 restaurants, Fairfax County has a substantial and growing restaurant industry. Improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the permitting process can reduce the financial strain on restaurant owners and support the County's economic vitality.

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Background

Fairfax County is home to over 2,500 restaurants – more than any other jurisdiction in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This number continues to grow, with an average of 280 new restaurant health permits issued annually in recent years in the County. Opening a new restaurant (or food establishment, more broadly) often requires multiple permits and approvals across various County departments, including Health, Zoning, Building, and Fire. Delays in permitting can create financial strain for business owners and discourage investment and hinder economic development in the County. These impacts are particularly important given the restaurant industry’s significant contribution to the broader economy. In Virginia, restaurants generate \$1.74 back into the state economy for every dollar invested in the industry (National Restaurant Association, 2026). Furthermore, [nine out of 10](#) restaurants in Virginia are small businesses (National Restaurant Association, 2026). An efficient and predictable permitting process can help reduce unnecessary costs for businesses while supporting the continued growth and economic contributions of the restaurant industry. The Office of Financial and Program Audit (OFPA) proposed this study to evaluate the timeliness, efficiency, and overall experience of the permitting process for new restaurants in Fairfax County. The Board of Supervisors approved this study in FY26.

Connection to the Countywide Strategic Plan



OFPA reviewed the Fairfax Countywide Strategic Plan (Revised June 2025) to consider the connection of restaurant permitting to the 10 community outcomes that the Board of Supervisors has identified as priority areas for the County. Four outcome areas relate to restaurant permitting.

- **Economic Opportunity:** by fostering a thriving food service sector that strengthens local economies,
- **Healthy Communities:** by ensuring food safety through Health Department inspections and public health standards,
- **Effective and Efficient Government:** by streamlining county permitting processes that help food establishments open efficiently, and
- **Housing and Neighborhood Livability:** by supporting local restaurants that bring communities together and provide dining options that make neighborhoods feel more welcoming.

Summary of Work Performed

The OFPA team conducted a review of restaurant permitting to assess the timeliness, effectiveness and efficiency of the process. This work included analyzing the Planning and Land Use System (PLUS) data and developing a sample of restaurants for deeper review. We examined county website resources and instructions available to restaurant applicants to evaluate resource availability.

To gain insight into the customer experience around permitting, we interviewed restaurant owners and managers as well as County reviewers, inspectors, and other staff involved in permitting.

In addition, we examined practices used in other jurisdictions and considered recognized leading practices that could inform improvements. OFPA also reviewed associated fees to understand their impact on applicants and overall process accessibility.

Scope of Review

Our review examined the permitting process for restaurants that received Fairfax County Health Department food establishment permits between July 1, 2023, and August 3, 2026, focusing specifically on full-service restaurants, carry-out restaurants, bakeries, breweries/wineries, and fast-food establishments, while intentionally excluding other establishment types such as grocery stores, school cafeterias, and hospitals. We examined both new establishments as well as changes of ownership, which still require a new food permit. We also looked at food establishments that were in the process of a building renovation or a new build and had not yet received their food establishment permit. We examined the process from the start of permitting (for a renovation or new build) through a restaurant's opening.

Due to timeframe limitations, we focused on the permitting process after any required zoning and site plan submissions and approvals, as most new restaurants in the County do not go through those steps. Additionally, the study's timeframe did not allow for in-depth reviews of customer service survey responses, the process for restaurants undergoing a change of ownership, or the extent of identified workflow challenges within PLUS.

Restaurant Permitting Process, Systems and Resources

Restaurant Permitting Process

ZONING

Opening a restaurant in Fairfax County begins (and the permitting process effectively starts) once an owner identifies a suitable site (such as a parcel of land or an existing structure). Fairfax County's zoning rules determine where different restaurant types (restaurants, carryout establishments, drive-through restaurants, and entertainment-oriented venues) can operate. Owners can consult the County's zoning district analyzer or speak with the Zoning Permits Section in the Department of Planning and Development (DPD) to learn whether the use is permitted by right or the County will require a special permit or exception.

If zoning uncertainties exist, owners can meet with DPD. Staff review the proposed restaurant concept, site characteristics, any existing conditions

on the land, and whether the County requires a Special Exception, Rezoning, or Proffered Condition Amendment. If the County requires a zoning application, owners must hire a licensed civil engineer to prepare required materials. Owners submit all zoning applications through PLUS (the County's central integrated online platform, see **PLUS – The County's Online Permitting Platform** on page 5) and pay applicable fees. In special exception cases (e.g., drive-through uses), the County requires public hearings with the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. Rezoning and Proffered Condition Amendment applications follow similar procedures and may also involve negotiation of new conditions.

Once the zoning path is clear, the permitting process transitions into the site-related and building plan stages. Site plans, required for new buildings, demonstrate how land disturbance, grading, stormwater management, and infrastructure changes will comply with county regulations. For new construction or expansions, which disturb 2,500 sq. ft. or more, the County usually requires a full site plan. Smaller expansions or conversions may qualify for a Minor Site Plan. Restaurant owners must hire Virginia-licensed professionals (such as civil engineers, architects, and surveyors) to prepare the formal site plans required for submission to Fairfax County.

SITE

Applicants submit site plans electronically in PLUS, and multiple agencies, including Land Development Services (LDS), the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES), the Fairfax County Health Department, the Office of the Fire Marshal and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), review the applications and site plans. Agency reviewers identify non-compliance issues and provide comments to owners for correction. Owners submit revisions, and the plans cycle through review until the County approves the site plan and issues a corresponding land disturbance permit. Converting an existing restaurant space (already zoned and built for food service) is typically the fastest route to opening a new restaurant.

Addition/Alteration Commercial (ALT-C Permit):

A commercial Addition/Alteration permit is required when you're modifying an existing non-residential structure.

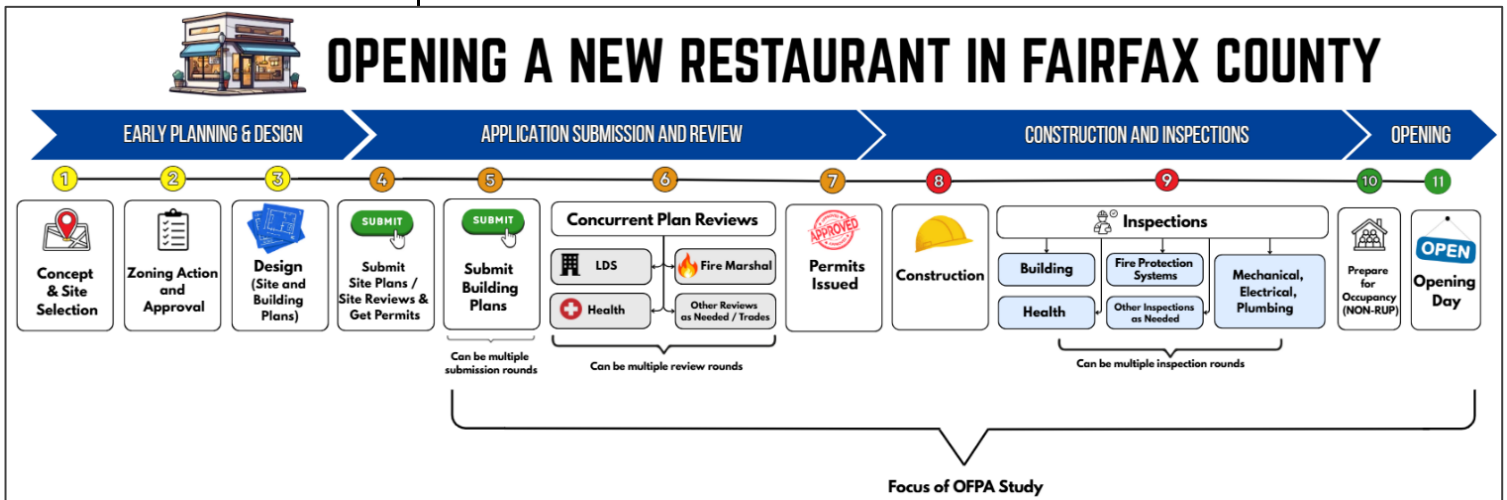
Commercial New (BLD-C Permit):

A commercial New Building permit is required when building a new commercial building or new, detached structure.

BUILDING

Owners (or their representatives) may submit building plans in PLUS concurrently with site plans or afterward. Building plans for new construction or alteration/addition must detail structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, and life safety systems. LDS, the Health Department, the Office of the Fire Marshal, and Zoning review building plans concurrently and focus their reviews on ensuring that the plans comply with all relevant state and local codes. Fairfax County requires restaurants to comply with the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) and the Statewide Fire Prevention Code (SFPC) as well as county regulations (e.g., ordinances, the Public Facilities Manual, PFM). Health review ensures compliance with state health codes and operational requirements. County agencies issue

comments and owners submit revisions until building plans receive approval. Owners may begin work after the County approves the required plans and corresponding permit for construction. Owners must also submit applications for trade permits (mechanical, electrical, plumbing and fire protection systems). As with building plan reviews, County agencies issue comments and owners submit revisions until the County approves the trade applications and issues the permits.



Note: This graphic provides a general visual overview of the steps involved in opening a restaurant that must submit building plans. Steps 1-4 are shown with less detail since they were not a focus of the study.

Applicants opening a food establishment also apply for the Food Establishment Permit by submitting required plans and documents through PLUS and paying applicable fees.

Owners must plan for inspections throughout construction; every permit requires inspections before occupancy. For example, fire-related permits, such as alarms and sprinklers, require separate inspections. Once all construction-related inspections including those for plumbing, mechanical, electrical, and fire protection systems are completed/passed, the owner must schedule a pre-occupancy inspection with the Office of the Fire Marshal, when required, as well as the Health Department. After the establishment has passed a Health Department pre-occupancy inspection, Health issues the restaurant a food establishment permit. The owner will then apply for a Nonresidential Use Permit (Non-RUP), which must be obtained before opening to the public.

INSPECTIONS

Owners must register for the Fairfax County Food and Beverage Tax prior to opening for business and the County's Business, Professional, and Occupational License (BPOL) within 75 days of starting business operations.

With the addition of PLUS, Fairfax County decommissioned 25-30 older systems.

Restaurants serving alcohol must obtain a local mixed beverage license from the Commonwealth of Virginia.

PLUS – The County’s Online Permitting Platform

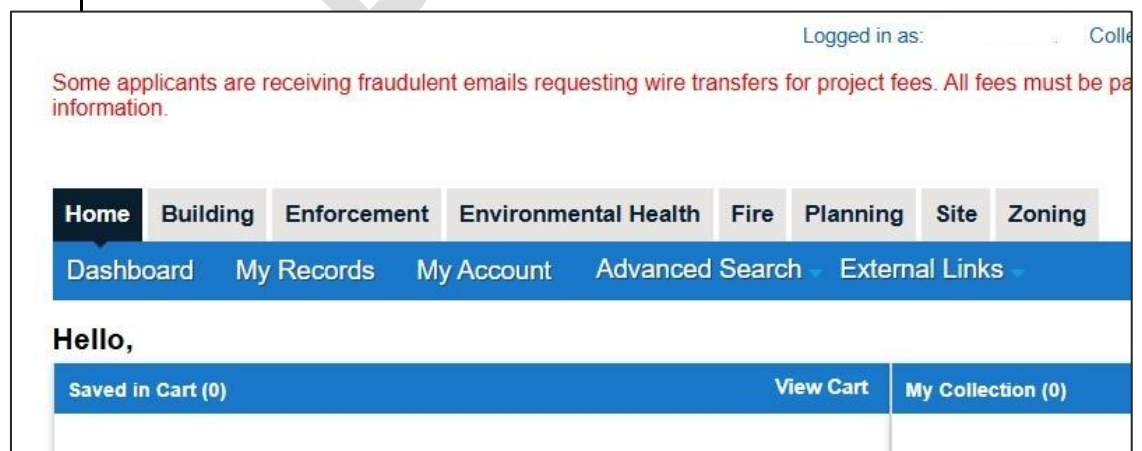
PLUS, formally known as the Planning and Land Use System, is Fairfax County’s central integrated online platform. PLUS is a configurable, commercially available software platform developed by Accela, Inc. It consists of several systems, including ePermit Hub (plan review application), CityGov (inspection application), and Virginia Interactive (payment portal). More than [900](#) other government agencies use Accela.

The County implemented the first release of PLUS in October 2020, and the most recent release (Release 4) launched in October 2022. PLUS eliminated a number of older systems such as FIDO and PAWS and integrated the County’s permitting process into one system. Importantly, it allowed the County to introduce concurrent reviews, helping the review process to proceed more efficiently.

Restaurant owners (or their representatives) use PLUS to submit permit applications, pay fees, monitor status and receive electronic notifications for zoning, building, environmental health and other land development permits. DPD, LDS, the Office of the Fire Marshal and Health Department all use PLUS to review applications, issue permits, send notifications, and schedule inspections.

PLUS has several different sections, or modules, as seen in the screenshot below. The modules represent different areas with separate record types and data. Most restaurant applicants utilize Environmental Health, Building, and Fire modules, though depending on their plans, they may need to utilize the Planning, Site or Zoning modules.

PLUS Applicant Home Page



Using PLUS starts with the owner (or their representatives) creating an account and choosing the correct application type. The PLUS portal includes guidance tools to help applicants identify the correct submission path, but the County encourages applicants to review requirements carefully before filing.

Applicants must format and submit plans, drawings, and supporting materials according to the County's digital submission requirements. The County performs a preliminary quality assurance review and returns non-compliant or incomplete submissions to applicants for revision before the plan review process begins.

As stated above, many projects involve multiple reviews and approvals from different agencies such as Zoning, Land Development Services, the Health Department, and Office of the Fire Marshal, who provide comments on plan reviews through PLUS. Applicants can see in PLUS which department is reviewing their submission at any time.

A key component of navigating the system is understanding the review cycle structure. Fairfax County typically reviews applications in rounds. After the initial submission, reviewers provide comments in PLUS for the applicant. Applicants then revise their plans to address the comments and resubmit the plans through PLUS. Depending on the quality of the initial submission and the complexity of the project, several review cycles may be required before reviewers grant approval. Being thorough during the initial submission and including all required documents and code-compliant plans can reduce the number of review rounds and shorten the overall timeline.

After the County approves the application, the permit is issued through PLUS. Owners can begin construction and request the required inspections at the appropriate stages (however, not all agencies use PLUS for inspection scheduling). Inspectors record inspection results digitally, creating a continuous record of compliance for the project. This integration ensures that applicants, contractors, and County officials have access to consistent project information throughout the life cycle of the project. Finally, the County issues occupancy permits in PLUS.

Permitting Resources for Restaurant Applicants

Fairfax County provides a range of resources to help applicants navigate the permitting process. Land Development Services (LDS) offers the [PLUS Permit Library](#), which includes more than 60 step-by-step guides covering application requirements, required documents, review procedures, and other permitting topics. LDS also provides over 120 instructional videos on PLUS (including key videos in 8 languages) and publishes technical updates

through its [Letters to the Industry](#). The Office of the Fire Marshal also provides a PLUS Permit Library, and the Health Department provides guidance on food-establishment requirements. Overall, County agencies provide a substantial amount of guidance on their websites; however, the information is dispersed across multiple department websites and exists within numerous subpages, requiring extensive drilling down to locate key details.

A coordinated start-to-finish workflow does not exist to guide prospective restaurant owners through the full process. The County's restaurant guide "[Opening a Restaurant in Fairfax County](#)" (published in April 2022) likely was intended to address that gap, but while it is posted on the Health Department's website as "Updated!," it pre-dates the implementation of PLUS and is outdated and no longer reflects the current process. One example, the guide provides a phone number for the "Fairfax County Concierge on Opening a Restaurant"; however, when we called the number, a recording stated that it was a non-working County number, and the call was automatically disconnected.

The County's published [LDS metrics](#) provide estimated turnaround times for individual LDS tasks, but they do not give applicants a sense of how long the full permitting process may take. The metrics outline target timeframes for specific actions, such as reviewing resubmissions and scheduling inspections, but they do not provide the average number of resubmissions or inspections. The Office of the Fire Marshal presents nine different metrics on their [website](#), including engineering plan review metrics, fire and sprinkler metrics and acceptance testing metrics. However, these metrics lack a consistent look and feel, and no accompanying explanations are provided to help the public – and especially restaurant owners – interpret how they relate to expected or actual processing times. Per conversations with the Office of the Fire Marshal, they are collaborating with LDS to develop comparable metrics that also will include project estimations. The Health Department does not publish metrics on the County's website.

Applicants can also obtain assistance through the [Permitting and Customer Support Center](#), which provides in-person, virtual, phone, and email assistance with PLUS, applications, inspections, permit status, zoning and code questions, and payments. Engineer of the Day and Planner of the Day services associated with the Center provide additional technical assistance. LDS staff also offer an online form to request a Pre / Post Building and Site Submission Conference.

The [Department of Economic Initiatives](#) (DEI) also provides small businesses with technical assistance, training, and connections to outside support organizations through their [CORE](#) program, while the County's [Economic Development Authority](#) works to bring large companies,

international firms, and high-growth industries to Fairfax County, helping them locate office space, enter the U.S. market, connect to venture capital, and navigate regulatory processes.

In addition to County resources, many applicants also rely on external resources for guidance to navigate the permitting process. Those resources may include architects, engineers, land use consultants, or other professionals to prepare applications, plans and coordinate with the County.

Additional Resources for Targeted or Expedited Support

Fairfax County offers several programs that may help eligible applicants navigate or accelerate the permitting process. [Tenant Support Services \(TSS\)](#), a pilot launched in April 2026, provides small-business tenants with a single point of contact, early zoning and code guidance, coordinated assistance, and expedited building permit review for eligible projects. So far, 25 businesses have requested participation, with 23 deemed eligible, including one café. However, most restaurants that require a commercial kitchen hood typically fall under additional regulatory requirements, such as Health Department permitting and enhanced fire code review, that extend beyond the support TSS currently provides. The [Project Management Program](#) provides targeted or long-term assistance to help applicants navigate complex projects and resolve permitting issues.

For applicants seeking faster plan review, the [Expedited Building Plan Review](#) (Peer Review) Program allows applicants—including restaurant projects—to use County-certified private-sector reviewers. The County prioritizes plans submitted by certified reviewers, with review times generally targeted at approximately half of standard review times. Applicants pay the peer reviewer directly. [Fast Track Build Plan Review](#) is available for certain non-complex commercial projects but generally excludes restaurants with commercial kitchens.

Permit expeditors are private professionals who may assist with applications, agency coordination, and resubmissions but have no official affiliation with the County, and applicants pay permit expeditors directly.

Overall, the County provides numerous resources and assistance options, but they vary in applicability to restaurants, are not centrally located, are largely not industry specific (such as the Restaurant Industry) and do not provide a single source of guidance covering the full, multi-agency restaurant permitting process.

Data Analysis

OFPA obtained PLUS data from LDS, the Office of the Fire Marshal, and the Health Department. We obtained this data to explore the timeliness and

efficiency of the permitting process for food establishments. PLUS records permit applications in separate modules, including Building, Environmental Health, and Fire. Although applicants submit multiple permit applications through PLUS for one process (such as opening a restaurant), the system does not provide a universal identifier linking records across modules. As a result, data from Health, LDS and the Office of the Fire Marshal for the same restaurant may appear under different business names or address formats in the different modules. Connecting records across agencies required significant manual review.

Restaurant Permitting Analysis

As of July 2026, Fairfax County had approximately **3,183** operating food establishments. About **2,500** are included in the four categories OFPA included in our analysis: full-service restaurants, carry-out establishments, bakeries, and fast-food establishments (See [Appendix 3](#) for a list of all categories). Since the beginning of FY24, the Health Department has issued **841 food establishment permits** for these types of businesses (about **280 per year**). (See [Appendix 6](#) for permits issued in each district since FY24.) These permits include both new establishments (40%) and changes in ownership (60%). In that same time period, approximately 390 food establishments (out of 841) required a building permit for renovations (ALT-C) or a new build (BLD-C), the vast majority of which were ALT-Cs.

Of the food establishment permits issued since the beginning of FY24, **99** have since closed.

OFPA sought to use the population of 841 food establishments to examine how long it takes to open a restaurant starting with the food establishment application or building permit (whichever was submitted first by the applicant) through opening day, what contributes to the duration, and what the impact is on the food establishments. However, as noted above, PLUS records cannot be easily linked across the agencies' modules, so OFPA could not reliably reconstruct the complete permitting timeline for all 841 food establishments. As a result, we selected a non-statistical sample of 34 food establishments for detailed analysis. The sample included both new establishments and changes in ownership, as well as restaurants that did and did not require renovations (ALT-C building applications). New builds (BLD-C applications) for food establishments are less common in Fairfax County, and there were no BLD-C applications in the sample of 34 food establishments. See [Appendix 1 - Data Integration and Sampling Methodology](#).

It is important to note that the analysis measures the period after the applicant begins interacting with the County (as shown in the graphic on page 4). It does not include time spent selecting a location, designing the project, securing financing, or other activities that occur before an applicant begins the application process in PLUS. In addition, restaurants do not

necessarily enter the permitting process at the same point or follow the same sequence of steps.

We sought to answer three questions in our analysis:

1. *How long does it take to open a restaurant in Fairfax County?*
2. *What drives the length of the permitting time frames?*
3. *What is the impact on restaurants and other food establishments?*

1. How long does it take to open a restaurant in Fairfax County?

Opening a restaurant typically requires multiple applications to and approvals from several County agencies. For the restaurants in OFPA's sample, the process generally involved a combination of applications, reviews and inspections from LDS, the Health Department, and the Office of the Fire Marshal.

OFPA calculated the overall duration for each restaurant in our sample to calculate the time from the start of the first record in PLUS (related to the restaurant's plans to open) to the last identifiable record associated with the restaurant prior to opening. Based on the sample, the median time was 315 days, or approximately **10.5 months**, for new establishments. For changes in ownership, the median was 110 days, or approximately **3.7 months**.

Duration (in Calendar Days) to Open a Restaurant (in PLUS)

Application Type	Number of Samples	Median Days	Median Months	Minimum Days	Maximum Days
Change of Ownership	18	110	3.7	12	342
New Establishment	16	315	10.5	50	679
Total	34				

Note: OFPA used median duration (calendar days) because processing times vary widely across restaurants, often due to differences in project scope and complexity. Median is less influenced by outliers than average.

These figures represent the total permitting period captured in PLUS (across multiple applications needed to open a restaurant) and should not be interpreted as the total time to open a restaurant (such as time by the applicant to design plans or select a site). Furthermore, because they are median values drawn from a non-statistical sample, they provide a general indication of typical permitting process timelines.

2. What drives the length of the permitting time frames?

The overall time frames above reflect the processing time of multiple applications, reviews, corrections, resubmissions, construction and inspections, and the duration is driven by both the County and the food establishment. The number and type of steps vary depending on the complexity of the project and the quality of the application and submissions.

In this section, we review permitting durations by record type, with particular attention to the permitting process duration associated with Commercial Addition/Alteration (ALT-C) records. We also examine rounds of review and inspections, and when possible, the time in the County's control compared to the applicant's control, to better understand possible drivers behind the timelines.

Record Types and Duration

In the 34 restaurants sampled, OFPA identified 15 different types of records used in the permitting process (See [Appendix 2 – Record/Application Types for Sampled Restaurants](#)). In PLUS, record types correspond to the applications an applicant submits. For example, a Food Establishment Application submitted in PLUS is considered a unique/distinct record type. Not every restaurant required every record type. Most restaurants (20 of 34) in our sample had 1-4 unique record types, while the remaining restaurants were split between 5-8 unique record types (7 of 34 restaurants) and 9-12 unique record types (7 of 34 restaurants).

The table below provides the record (application) types with the median time to complete each record type ranging from **1 day to 288 days**, illustrating the wide variation in the time to complete for the different types of records. The record with the longest median time is the ALT-C, or Commercial Addition/Alteration record, with a median of 288 days (which usually closes after the final inspection). The time reflects the total duration the record remained in process and includes periods when it was with the County and the applicant; it does not distinguish how long the record spent with each party.

Duration (in Calendar Days) by Record Type

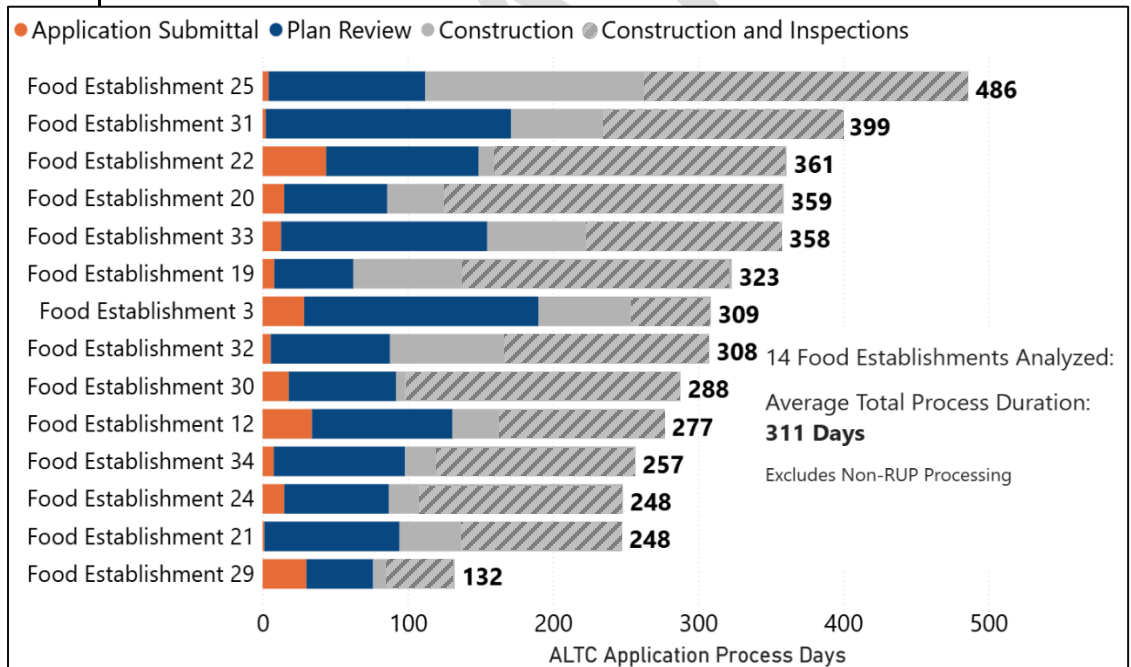
Index	Record Type	Median Days to Complete Record	Minimum Days	Maximum Days
1	Alternative Fire Extinguishing Systems	5	1	61
2	Building Permit Amendment	1	1	1
3	Certificate of Occupancy (Non-RUP)	7	1	75
4	Commercial Addition/Alteration	288	114	662
5	Commercial Electrical	107	50	246
6	Commercial Mechanical	107	14	471
7	Commercial Plumbing	125	12	438
8	Critical Structures Revision	17	14	20
9	Fire Alarm	111	17	127
10	Fire Plan Review Amendment	3	2	10
11	Food Establishment Application	134	6	677
12	Food Establishment Renovation or Change of Equipme	12	12	12
13	Occupancy Inspection	11	1	192
14	Sprinkler System or Standpipe System	123	21	204

Note: *Occupancy Inspection record type refers to the pre-occupancy inspection conducted by the Office of the Fire Marshal.*

Since the ALT-C record had the longest median days and maximum days, OFPA further explored the restaurants in our sample with ALT-C records. We assigned generic names to these restaurants to protect their identities.

The table below shows the 14 food establishments in our sample with ALT-C records and illustrates the duration of each of four phases of the ALT-C application: Application Submittal, Plan Review, Construction and Construction/Inspection. The Construction phase spans from the completion of plan review to the completion of the first regulated milestone requiring an inspection, which varies based on the approved scope of work. Once the inspection is passed, the applicant proceeds with the Construction/Inspection phase because additional inspections occur as construction progresses until project completion. Among the four phases, *Construction/Inspection* had the longest average duration at **148 days** (47% of all phase time), followed by *Plan Review* at **98 days** (31% of all phase time), *Construction* at **50 days**, and *Application Submittal* at **16 days**. This indicates that most of the elapsed time for the 14 food establishments occurred during the Plan Review and Construction/Inspection phases.

Permitting Process Duration (in Calendar Days) for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records

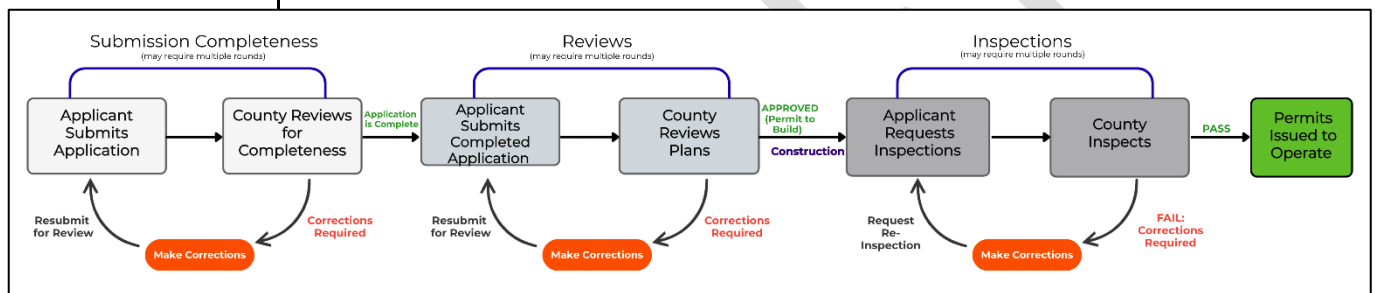


Note: 15 of 34 food establishments sampled had 17 Commercial Addition/Alteration (ALT-C) records. We excluded 3 ALT-C records because they were for demolition-only work (2 records) or stud-only work (1 record), resulting in 14 food establishments. OFPA used ALT-C workflow records to calculate the total days for the ALT-C Application Submittal and Plan Review phases, as well as all relevant records for each food establishment to calculate the Construction (plan review approval to first inspection) and Construction/Inspection phases. Total days exclude Certificate of Occupancy (Non-RUP) records because Non-RUP processing may overlap with other permitting activities and therefore does not represent an additional sequential phase of the process.

Applications, Plan Reviews and Inspections Overview

In addition to the multiple (and different) types of applications the County may require before opening a restaurant, the reviews and inspections for each application also varied among restaurants. During the application review process, permit technicians review applications for completeness and return incomplete applications to the applicant for correction and resubmission. During the plan review process, applicants submit plans that multiple County agencies and disciplines review, often concurrently. When reviewers determine that any portion of the plans do not meet applicable code requirements, reviewers return the plans to the applicant for correction and resubmission. This creates a cycle of **submission, review, correction, resubmission, and review** that may occur multiple times before the County approves the plans. Likewise, during inspections, the applicant may fail an inspection and need to make changes and then undergo a follow-up inspection. See graphic below:

Multiple Rounds of Submissions, Plan Reviews and Inspections



Note: Inspections happen throughout the construction phase as different stages of work are completed.

Plan Reviews

OFPA examined the number of rounds of plan reviews for the 14 restaurants with ALT-Cs in the selected sample. We first looked at reviews for restaurants applying for permits for an interior renovation (a more complex application) and noted how many different types of reviews the County required for the ALT-C application, as well as how many resubmissions the County required (see graphic below). See [Appendix 4](#) for a list of all review types associated with the ALT-C record types in our sample of restaurants.

For the 14 ALT-C applications, OFPA calculated the number of distinct reviews required (for example, Electrical Review, Fire Marshal Review) and also the number of plan submissions (initial submission) and resubmissions (where the County had comments as a result of a review and sent the plans back to the restaurant for correction). We noted that ALT-C applications included between 6-9 types of plan reviews, depending on the project complexity and the disciplines involved. Additionally, applicants typically

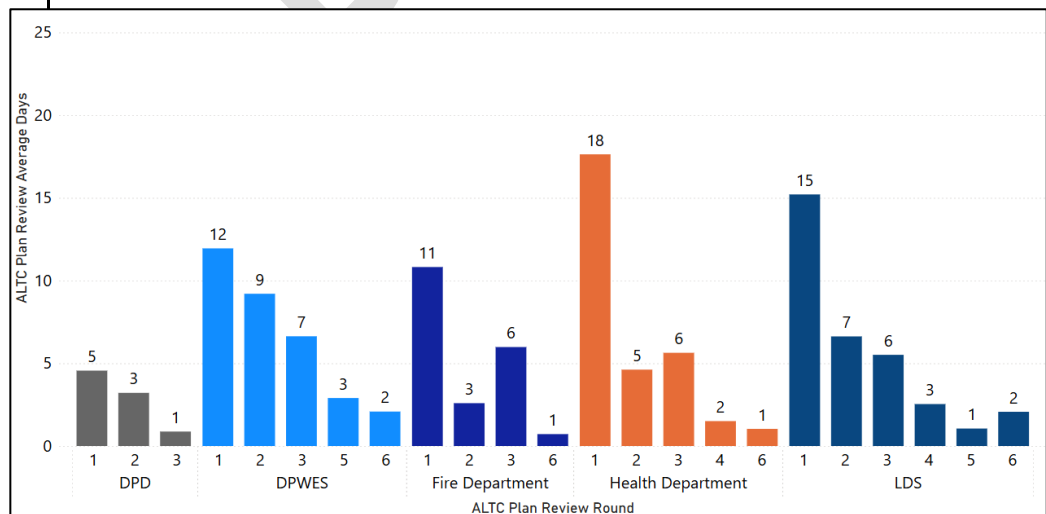
required between 2-6 submissions/resubmissions before the County approved the application and issued the ALT-C permit allowing work to begin. The total length of time for the plan reviews was between 46-169 calendar days (or 1.5 to 5.6 months).

**Reviews and Submissions/Resubmissions (in Calendar Days)
for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records**

Index	Types of Plan Reviews Performed (#)	Plan Submissions (#)	Total Plan Review Days
Food Establishment 3	8	6	161
Food Establishment 12	7	4	97
Food Establishment 19	8	3	54
Food Establishment 20	9	3	71
Food Establishment 21	8	2	93
Food Establishment 22	8	5	105
Food Establishment 24	8	3	72
Food Establishment 25	7	3	108
Food Establishment 29	6	2	46
Food Establishment 30	8	3	74
Food Establishment 31	8	4	169
Food Establishment 32	9	5	82
Food Establishment 33	8	5	142
Food Establishment 34	7	3	90

Next, OFPA compared the average number of days of each round of submissions by Agency. In our sample data, the Health Department had the highest average number of days for the first review at 18, followed by LDS at 15. Generally, first reviews take longer than subsequent reviews, but the cumulative effect of multiple rounds of reviews can have a significant impact on the overall timeline, even when agencies are meeting their individual review time metrics.

**Average Calendar Days to Review Submissions Per Round Per Agency
for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records**



In addition, we reviewed the number of different reviewers per type of review associated with an ALT-C (such as Electrical Review, Mechanical Review or Fire Marshal Review). In other words, when an applicant had to submit and resubmit multiple times, we explored whether different reviewers were assigned to look at that submission each time it was resubmitted. We examined this because some restaurants had expressed concern with different reviewers in subsequent review rounds who provided conflicting information compared to a previous reviewer's comments. For the 68 reviews associated with one or more resubmissions across our sample of 14 restaurants, the vast majority maintained the same reviewer on those multiple reviews. In the sample tested, 65 of 68 (96%) reviews were performed by the same reviewers during subsequent resubmissions of the same review type.

Inspections

OFPA also examined inspections and noted the number of inspections required for the food establishments in our sample (See [Appendix 4](#) for a list of inspections). We looked at both required minimum number of inspections (such as Health Inspection, Mechanical Inspection) compared to the total number of inspections (including failed inspections) that occurred.

**Number of Inspections and Re-inspections
for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records**

Index	Types of Inspections Performed (#)	Inspections and Reinspections (#)	Total Construction and Inspections Days
Food Establishment 3	17	28	119
Food Establishment 12	11	12	146
Food Establishment 19	16	31	261
Food Establishment 20	8	12	273
Food Establishment 21	17	22	153
Food Establishment 22	19	33	212
Food Establishment 24	19	22	161
Food Establishment 25	18	24	374
Food Establishment 29	3	6	56
Food Establishment 30	22	32	196
Food Establishment 31	15	21	228
Food Establishment 32	24	35	220
Food Establishment 33	15	19	203
Food Establishment 34	14	15	159

Note: Inspection types varied by project and included building, mechanical, plumbing, electrical, fire protection, and occupancy inspections, such as framing, concealment, ductwork, gas, fire alarm, sprinkler, hood suppression, and pre-occupancy/final inspections.

Inspector

Continuity: LDS, Office of the Fire Marshal and the Health Department aim to assign the same inspector across multiple rounds for the same project, while allowing flexibility to use another inspector when needed for efficiency (for example, when the assigned inspector is on leave).

For the 14 sampled restaurants, OFPA calculated the number of distinct inspections required (based on various regulated construction milestones) and also the number of inspections and re-inspections (passes and fails). We noted that the sampled restaurants had between 3-24 types of inspections, and there were 6-35 inspections/re-inspections until the County approved the construction work for each restaurant in the sample. The duration of the construction/inspection phase depends on the pace of construction and contractor readiness for each inspection. In addition, scheduling time is shared between the County and the applicant based on the County's available inspection dates and the applicant's preferred dates. The total length of time for construction and inspections was between 56-374 calendar days (or 1.9 to 12.5 months).

Similar to the reviewers, we also examined the number of distinct inspectors for the same type of inspection. For the 124 application records associated with the 14 sampled restaurants, a number of these records (such as an ALT-C) required different types of inspections. We wanted to understand how many of the same type of inspection (such as Wall Concealment Inspection on the Electrical Record) had multiple inspectors, since several restaurant owners commented on the frustrations with multiple inspectors for the same inspection. Thirteen records out of 124 (10%) were assigned different inspectors for subsequent rounds of the same inspection. For example, one Mechanical Permit Application for a single restaurant required a single inspection, but each time the inspection failed, a different inspector performed the subsequent inspection.

Time with County Compared to Time with Applicant - ALT-C Application Submittal and Plan Review

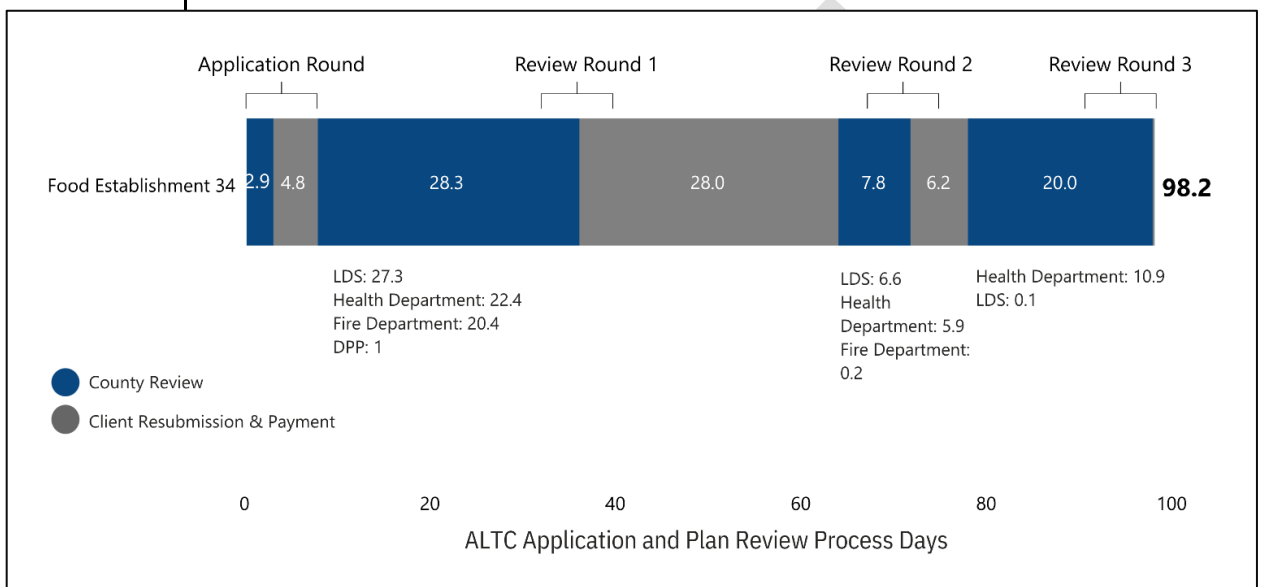
For the 14 restaurants in the sample with an associated Commercial Addition/Alteration (ALT-C) application, OFPA was able to analyze the time spent by the applicant and County during the application submittal phase and the plan review phase. We were unable to include the construction and inspection phases in this analysis because the dates recorded in PLUS do not indicate whether the durations were applicant-owned (performing construction) or county-owned (such as scheduling).

As noted above, the application submission portion of the process, similar to the review and inspection portions, may involve multiple rounds between the applicant and County before the application is considered complete and can be reviewed by the County. Permit technicians review applications for completeness and return incomplete applications to the applicant for correction and resubmission. Once the permit technician deems the

application complete, the County begins the review phase for the application.

The graphic below is for one restaurant in our sample to illustrate the back-and-forth between the applicant and the County for the application submittal and plan review phases. The visualization presents the application submissions and plan reviews (of which there were three for this restaurant) and provides the number of days associated with each activity for each party, offering a depiction of the iterative interactions.

**Timeline for Application Submittal and Plan Review –
Time with County versus Time with Applicant for Food Establishment 34**



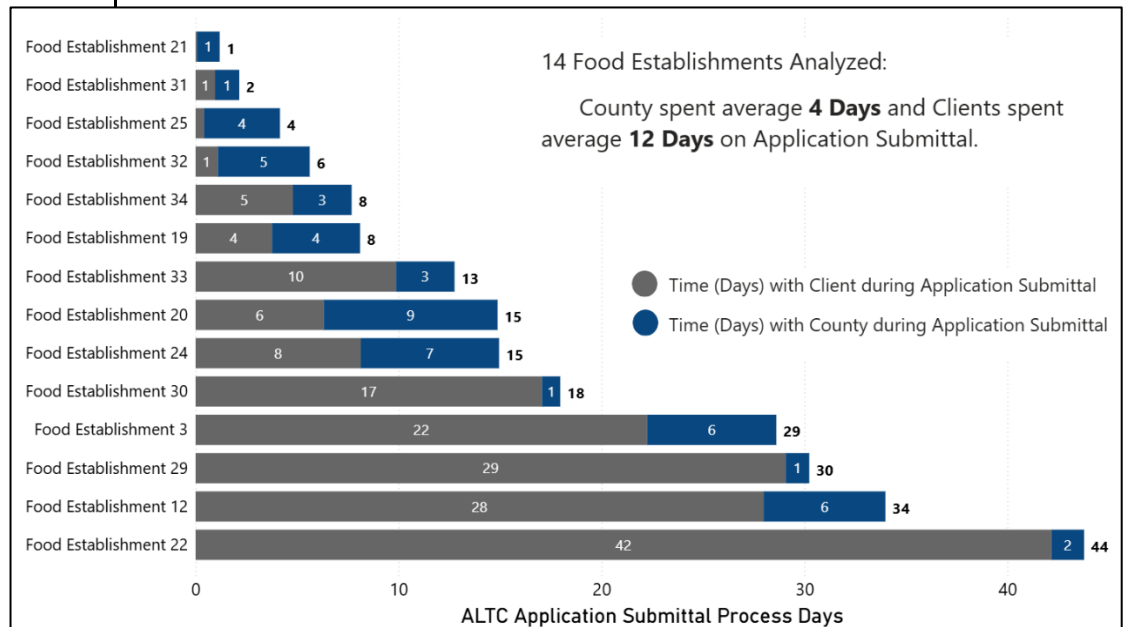
Note: Agency-level review days may not sum to the total County review days shown in the bar because agencies perform concurrent reviews or activities not attributed to a specific agency that may include administrative processing, routing, coordination, and other workflow activities.

The next two graphics summarize the division of time between the County (shown in blue) and the applicant (shown in gray) for both the application submittal and plan review phases for the 14 sampled food establishments with ALT-C applications. Unlike the earlier graphic created for one restaurant, the visuals below do not depict the iterative, back-and-forth interactions between the County and the applicant. Instead, they aggregate all County time and all applicant time across the sample to provide a high-level view of how responsibility for each phase is distributed.

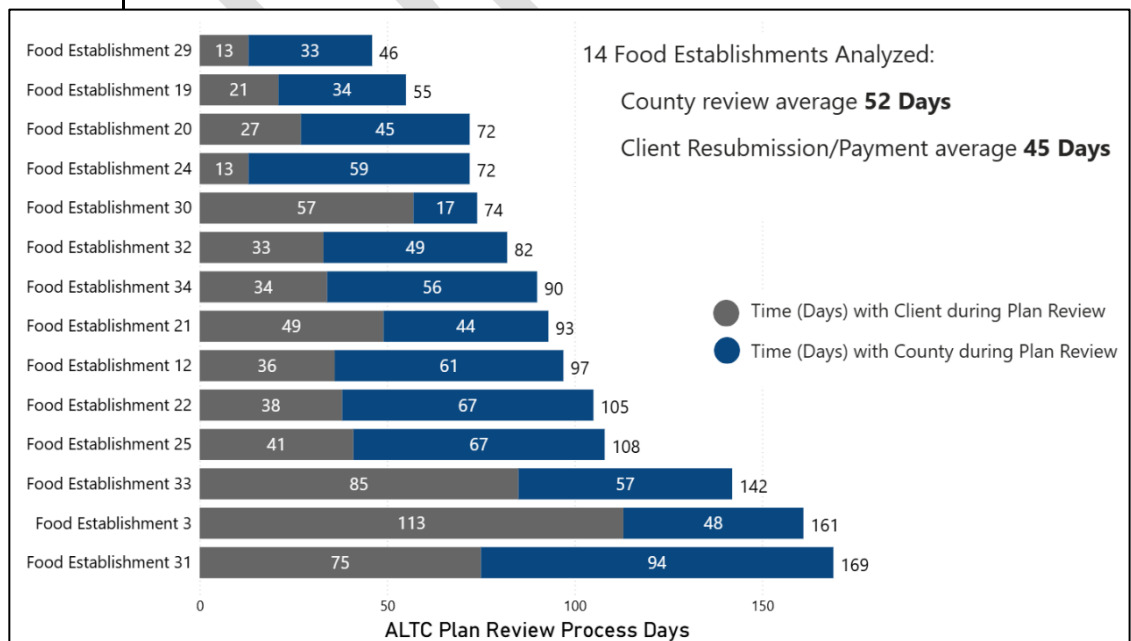
Across the application submittal phase, the County averaged 4 days, while applicants averaged 12 days. During the plan review phase, across all rounds of reviews, the County's average total time was 52 days, and applicants averaged 45 days. (Note that this time does not include any time

the applicant spent with designers, architects or engineers before beginning the application process in PLUS.) These combined durations highlight the shared responsibility for overall timeline length, as both County processing time and applicant response time contribute meaningfully to the pace of each phase.

Application Submittal – Time with County versus Time with Applicant for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records



Plan Review – Time with County versus Time with Applicant for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records



The LDS 2025 Annual Report indicates that in FY25, Commercial Alterations (ALT-Cs) took 100 days on average to issue the permit (to begin construction), with an average of 3 plan submissions.

County staff emphasized that when restaurants hire experienced design professionals, especially those familiar with Fairfax County requirements and restaurant design, the likelihood of moving quickly through application submission and plan review increases greatly.

OFPA could not perform the same analysis for construction and inspections because the available data does not consistently identify when an inspection-related item was awaiting action by the County versus the applicant.

Fairfax County Plan Review Goals

The bar graphs above illustrate the total time ALT-C permit records spent with both the County and the applicant. We also analyzed review times by round and by agency to understand how these durations compare to the metrics for each reviewing entity (see bar graph on page 14). Currently, LDS, the Health Department, and the Office of the Fire Marshal each establish targets for review timelines, with expectations varying depending on whether the review is an initial submission or a subsequent resubmission.

For example, LDS has a goal of 39 business days or less for the first plan review (for all commercial building permits that are not fast-tracked), and 15 days for each subsequent submission. However, LDS does not provide information on how many resubmissions applicants typically experience, making it difficult for applicants to estimate the full timeline for plan reviews and permitting. See [Appendix 5](#) for an example of the LDS metrics.

Environmental Health does not provide metrics or goals on the County's website, but they shared with OFPA that their internal review goal is to complete a plan review within 10-15 business days after fee payment. The Office of the Fire Marshal posts their weekly and monthly plan review averages for Class 4 or greater Architectural Reviews, which range from 30-34 days per review. Sprinkler and Fire Alarm reviews have a slightly shorter average review time. Overall, LDS plan reviews in our sample generally met or exceeded their goals, while the Health Department's average in our sample was just slightly over the goal for the first round, and the Office of the Fire Marshal also met or exceeded their metrics per round.

Taken together, our analysis illustrates the complexity of the restaurant permitting process. An applicant seeking to open a new restaurant, particularly one that involves renovations, may need to submit multiple applications, move through several rounds of review, work with numerous reviewers and inspectors, and repeatedly interact with the County before they can open. Our analysis of the full permitting timeline for the sampled food establishments shows that even when individual agencies generally meet their established review-time targets, the cumulative sequence of steps, handoffs and interdependencies can still result in substantial overall

durations. Currently, the County does not provide restaurant applicants with readily accessible information about the total amount of time they should expect to spend navigating the end-to-end process. Applicants are left trying to calculate the full timeline by interpreting separate processing metrics from LDS and the Office of the Fire Marshal, while the Health Department does not publish processing time metrics.

3. What is the impact on restaurants and other food establishments?

The data does not indicate that every restaurant experiences a lengthy or identical permitting process. Rather, it demonstrates that the process varies substantially depending on the project and can involve a significant number of applications, reviews, revisions, and inspections, all of which take time. Even when agencies meet their individual goals for plan review days, the cumulative effect of all the rounds of reviews and inspections is significant and can be costly to the applicant. We explore the impact of costs and delays in the section **Economic Impact of Permitting Process for Restaurants** (page 24).

The analysis provides context for evaluating permitting effectiveness, not only in terms of how quickly individual reviews are completed by County agencies, but also how efficiently and effectively the full process moves a restaurant toward opening through multiple agencies and applications. This length of time (315 days for a new establishment to open and 110 days for a change of ownership) was a primary concern voiced by restaurants in our interviews; the results of which are in the following section.

Restaurant Interviews

OFPA interviewed 11 restaurant owners and restaurant groups that recently opened, or were in the process of opening, restaurants in Fairfax County to better understand their experiences navigating the County's permitting process. The interviewees included both first-time and experienced restaurant operators, as well as small, independent restaurants and larger restaurant groups.

Restaurant owners were very appreciative that the County was studying the permitting process and seeking direct input from businesses. Overall, 60 percent of interviewees had a negative view of their permitting experience, while 40 percent had a neutral view. Although experiences varied, several recurring themes emerged.

1. Lengthy and Unpredictable Timelines

The most frequently cited concern was the length and unpredictability of the permitting process. Interviewees reported typical timelines of approximately four to seven months, with some projects taking substantially longer. One

owner who anticipated a three-month process ultimately waited approximately seven months. Lengthy and unpredictable timelines were an overarching concern because they often resulted from the other challenges identified below, and in turn, drove up the overall cost of opening a restaurant.

Indeed, these delays can have significant financial consequences. Two owners had negotiated leases with six months of free rent while permits were being obtained, but delays resulted in rent payments before their restaurants could open. One first-time owner reported taking out a loan to cover rent during the delay. Another estimated that unpredictable timelines and delays resulted in approximately \$45,000 in additional rent.

Owners attributed delays to multiple factors, including repeated review and inspection cycles, changing or inconsistent comments, unclear requirements and staffing availability. Several noted that the process was particularly difficult to predict because the County would often send back plans for resubmission without reviewing the entire plan, which added multiple additional rounds of plan reviews.

2. Inconsistency Across Reviews and Inspections

Inconsistent direction from reviewers and inspectors was one of the most significant concerns raised by interviewees. Several owners described receiving new comments or requirements from different reviewers or inspectors after addressing issues identified in earlier rounds. In some cases, owners perceived the comments as contradictory or believed an inspector was applying a different interpretation than the one reflected in the approved plans.

For restaurant owners, these inconsistencies translate directly into additional time and cost. One experienced restaurateur reported that resolving a reviewer's concern about the location of a sink—despite the owner's understanding that the location complied with code—delayed the project by approximately three months because the County's different inspectors gave conflicting feedback on the sink location.

Several interviewees suggested assigning a single reviewer or County point of contact to a project, particularly for smaller businesses. Others recommended that the County conduct a more comprehensive review before returning comments to an applicant, rather than identifying only a portion of the issues in each round. They believed this would reduce the number of review cycles and provide greater predictability on timelines.

3. Lack of Clear Guidance and Support for First-Time/Small Restaurant Owners

Interviewees also noted that the permitting process was difficult to understand, particularly for first-time business owners. None of the interviewees were aware of the County's 2022 Restaurant Guide, and only one was aware of the County's expedited peer-review option. Two additional owners said they would have considered using peer review had they known about it.

Several owners said they wanted clearer, restaurant-specific guidance on what would be required for their particular type of establishment. One first-time owner said the permitting process was the "most difficult and most stressful" part of opening his business and encouraged the County to consider the process from the perspective of a first-time business owner.

Owners also recalled that the County had previously provided more comprehensive process information for commercial construction and suggested that a similar, user-friendly roadmap for restaurant openings would help applicants understand requirements, sequencing, and expected timelines.

Several owners emphasized that both the County and applicants have a role in keeping projects moving. Some acknowledged that applicants, contractors, and design professionals may not fully understand County requirements or may incorrectly attribute delays to the County when the underlying issue is incomplete or incorrect work. Clearer guidance could help reduce this confusion and allow both sides to identify responsibility for delays more quickly.

4. Communication Challenges, Customer Service, and PLUS

Interviewees reported mixed experiences with County communication. Several had difficulties reaching responsive staff at times, particularly when staff were unavailable due to vacations or holidays. Many also said that key aspects of the process, including the potential for multiple review cycles and the time required to address comments, were not clearly communicated at the outset.

Several owners described PLUS as cumbersome or difficult to navigate, although others reported that it worked adequately. None of the interviewees we asked were familiar with the County's customer feedback surveys, although most indicated they would be willing to provide feedback if they were aware of the opportunity.

The interviews also revealed differences in how applicants experienced interactions with County staff. Some owners described certain interactions

with LDS and fire inspectors as adversarial or expressed concern that raising questions about an inspection decision could negatively affect their project. In contrast, several owners specifically praised Health Department staff as responsive, fair, and willing to work collaboratively to resolve issues. One owner cited an instance in which County staff participated in a call with the tenant's landlord that helped resolve an issue and avoid additional delay.

5. Fees and Costs Associated with Delays

Fees

Larger restaurant groups generally considered County fees reasonable, while newer and smaller restaurants were more likely to view fees as a financial burden. Some interviewees specifically raised concerns about resubmission fees and questioned whether those fees provide sufficient value when reviews identify only a portion of the issues that ultimately need to be addressed.

Several owners appreciated having the expedited services, like peer review offered by the County, but others viewed the cost of expedited services as a barrier for smaller businesses. One owner cited approximately \$30,000 in third-party expedited review costs.

Financial Impact of Delays

The financial consequences described by interviewees were substantial. Owners cited additional rent, architectural and contractor costs, repeated construction changes, expedited review fees, employee training costs, and lost revenue associated with delayed openings. One owner estimated that a delayed opening could result in \$70,000 to \$100,000 in weekly losses for one of his smaller restaurants and added that if staff had been hired, the losses would increase an additional 50%.

While individual estimates varied and were not independently verified by OFPA, the interviews demonstrate how even small delays in a permitting process can become significant financial costs for businesses. As one interviewee summarized, time ultimately becomes cost. In the next section on Economic Impact, OFPA explores these costs further.

6. Collaboration as a Goal

Despite their frustrations, several restaurant owners expressed a broader desire for a more collaborative relationship with the County. Some suggested that the County should clarify whether attracting and supporting new businesses, particularly restaurants, is a priority and, if so, work in partnership with businesses to help them navigate the regulatory process successfully. Another restaurant owner expressed frustration because the

Economic Impact of Permitting Process for Restaurants

process did not feel collaborative and noted that he feared retaliation if he pushed back on an inspection's results that he felt were incorrect.

Interviewees generally wanted the County and applicants to have a shared goal of meeting requirements while moving projects forward as efficiently and predictably as possible. From the owners' perspective, clearer expectations, duration transparency, consistent application of requirements, and a designated, single point of contact could help establish that partnership while maintaining the County's regulatory responsibilities.

Overall, the interviews indicate that restaurant owners are not necessarily seeking fewer requirements; they are seeking a process that is clearer, more consistent, more predictable, and more collaborative. At the same time, interviews with County staff indicated that sometimes applicants and their contractors can also contribute to delays when requirements are misunderstood, applications are incomplete, or work does not conform to approved plans. Improving the process therefore requires attention to both sides of the interaction.

Opening a food establishment is a major financial undertaking, requiring substantial upfront investment in design and construction, permitting fees, equipment purchases, and pre-opening staffing. These costs are generally necessary to prepare and operate a restaurant and are not incurred solely because of the permitting process. However, the longer the permitting process takes, the longer an applicant must carry these costs as they wait for the restaurant to generate revenue. The following sections review both the direct costs of permitting and the costs associated with delays in the permitting process.

Direct Permitting Costs

OFPA analyzed the County fees associated with the permits and approvals identified for the 34 restaurants in its sample. The total cost varied considerably depending on the type and scope of the project. Restaurants requiring renovations (such as an ALT-C) generally incurred more fees because they required additional building, trade, fire, and other permits.

Across the sample, the median County permitting fees were **\$6,234** for new establishments (ranging from \$175 - \$77,554) and **\$168** for changes in ownership (ranging from \$80 - \$15,893). Fees included charges associated with the various permits required, including the fees to resubmit an application after the County sends it back to the applicant for corrections.

Median County Fees by Permit/Record Type for 14 Food Establishments with ALT-C Records

Index	Record Type	Number of Records	Median Fees Assessed	Minimum Fees Assessed	Maximum Fees Assessed
1	Alternative Fire Extinguishing Systems	11	\$ 320	\$ -	419
2	Building Permit Amendment	1	151	151	151
3	Certificate of Occupancy (Non-RUP)	25	95	-	160
4	Commercial Addition/Alteration	15	5,630	112	72884
5	Commercial Electrical	13	599	133	1593
6	Commercial Mechanical	13	329	-	1315
7	Commercial Plumbing	15	406	133	1400
8	Critical Structures Revision	1	-	-	0
9	Fire Alarm	6	847	419	2494
10	Fire Plan Review Amendment	2	274	114	433
11	Food Establishment Application	34	80	-	180
12	Food Establishment Renovation or Change	1	-	-	0
13	Occupancy Inspection	10	52	-	135
14	Sprinkler System or Standpipe System	10	676	275	3123

The Cost of Permitting Delays

The economic impact of the permitting process is not limited to County fees. While waiting for permits, approvals, or inspections, owners continue to incur pre-opening costs without generating revenue. These can include rent, financing costs, contractor and construction expenses, insurance, and labor costs associated with hiring and training staff.

The financial impact of extended timelines and delays varies by project. A delay may not create new costs in every instance, but it does extend the time during which the owner is paying expenses without restaurant revenue. As noted in the *Interviews* section, several owners reported substantial impacts: one estimated losses of \$70,000–\$150,000 per week due to delayed permitting, while another needed to take out loans when the process extended beyond six months.

Permit-related delays also affect County revenue. Once a restaurant opens, it begins generating meals tax revenue. Delayed openings postpone these payments. For example, a restaurant generating \$30,000 in taxable weekly sales (industry average reported by QSR Pro) would generate approximately \$1,200 in weekly County meals tax revenue. A one-month delay would defer about \$4,800. If even half of the 280 new food establishments opening each year experienced a one-month delay, the County would forgo an estimated \$672,000 in meals tax revenue, as well as amounts received through the local option tax (the 1% local portion of Virginia's sales tax).

Overall Economic Impact

The cost of permitting should be understood within the broader investment required to open a restaurant. County permitting fees represent a small

Restaurant revenue varies significantly per restaurant. While pizza chain Papa John's averages \$22,000 a week in sales, steakhouse chain LongHorn Steakhouse averages \$155,000 in average weekly sales.

Existing Efforts to Improve the Permitting Process

share of that investment. Unexpected delays in the permitting process can add meaningful financial pressure because an applicant may need to continue carrying rent, financing, professional fees, construction expenses, and labor costs until the business can open and begin generating revenue. Applicants also may underestimate the amount of time needed for the phases of permitting, as the County does not provide guidelines or estimates for the typical duration of the end-to-end process. When a restaurant underestimates the time required or experiences delays in the permitting process, owners need to carry pre-opening costs for longer, and additionally, the County's meal tax revenue is postponed.

Over the years, LDS has worked to improve the parts of the permitting process that they control. The **Permitting Resources** and **Options for Additional Support** sections earlier in this report highlight a few of the resources and processes available to applicants that LDS has created to improve the process.

In addition to these resources, LDS has made other internal changes to improve the process. The recent ***Economic Competitiveness Strategic Roadmap***, put together by the County's Economic Competitiveness Task Force, includes multiple agencies focused on addressing the economic challenges faced by businesses in the County. The Roadmap includes several initiatives to improve the permitting process. Although it does not identify restaurant permitting as a standalone initiative, actions under *Strategic Area 3* are intended to streamline commercial development and can assist applicants navigating restaurant-related permits, including those involving small-business tenant spaces, commercial alterations, new construction, building permits, and fire review. Through initiatives 3.7 - 3.9, LDS aims to provide clearer project-based dashboards, dedicated assistance for qualifying small-business and tenant projects through the Tenant Support Services Pilot, and tiered building-plan review pathways based on project complexity. Together, these efforts are intended to improve timeline transparency, reduce unnecessary review steps and resubmissions, and provide applicants with better access to project status and milestones.

Other planned initiatives focus on identifying issues earlier and reducing delays during review and construction. These include multidisciplinary pre-submission meetings, more opportunities for parallel review, approval of certain minor code-compliant field changes without formal plan revisions, and publication of common submission errors. The County is also working on a two-phased digital modernization and automation initiative. The first phase focuses on automating PLUS workflows, and the second phase would work with the Department of Information Technology (DIT) to pilot AI-enabled plan review tools. One last initiative aims to provide eligible

projects with a single point of contact to provide guidance during the process. These improvements could reduce conflicting guidance, correction cycles, manual handoffs, and administrative delays, making the process more predictable and efficient for restaurant applicants.

Although these initiatives are not limited to restaurants, they could improve several permitting and review challenges commonly encountered by restaurants opening in the County.

Additionally, the **LDS Plan Review Quality Control Program** regularly reviews a selection of plan review comments to ensure they meet guidelines and are clear, specific, actionable, referenced to applicable code or policies, and are not repetitive.

Lastly, back in 2018, LDS began a **customer service survey** option for customers. This process evolved over time and offers a way for customers LDS customers to provide feedback on application submission, plan uploading, building inspections and the Customer Experience Team. However, OFPA learned that due to some technical glitches, the surveys have not been easy to access for customers, leading to a sharp decline in responses over the past few years. LDS provided us with customer survey data dating back to 2020/2021, but most surveys have had no responses since November 2024. Also, during our interviews, restaurant owners were not familiar with the option to provide feedback but expressed interest in having that option.

Permitting challenges are not unique to Fairfax County. To provide context for the County's permitting experience, we reviewed practices in nearby jurisdictions, including permitting durations. This comparison is important not only to identify relevant benchmarks, but also because restaurants and restaurant groups have choices about where to locate their businesses. Understanding how Fairfax County's process compares with those of neighboring jurisdictions can help the County assess its competitiveness. The table below summarizes available permitting metrics for nearby jurisdictions.

Permitting Timeline Jurisdiction Comparison: Renovations and New Builds

Metric	Fairfax County	Arlington County	District of Columbia	City of Alexandria	City of Fairfax	Loudoun County	Prince William County
ALT-C Average Plan Review Time	39 days (Target for first review)	15 days	52.7 days	20 days	7.4 calendar days (first review)	15 days	9.2 days for first review in FY26 (goal is under 11.5 days) (tenant layout)
	15 days (Target for subsequent resubmission)	Express: 2-5 days			7 calendar days (subsequent review)		
	Fast Track: 1 day						
BLD-C Average Plan Review Time:	39 days (Target for first review)	15 days	40.9 days (actual)	20 days	17 calendar days (first review)	15 days	18 days (first review in FY26, target is 18.45 days)
	15 days (Target for subsequent review)	Express: 5 days			12.5 calendar days (subsequent review)		
	Fast Track: 1 day						
Average # of Submissions (Review Cycles)	3 Review Cycles				2.3 (ALT-C)		2.75 for ALT-C (Tenant Layout)
					2.8 (BLD-C)		4.03 (FY26 for BLD-C)
Total Time to Issue Permit	100 calendar days ALT-C (FY25)				61 calendar days ALT-C		
	287 calendar days BLD-C (FY25)				134 calendar days BLD-C		

Note: Most days listed above are business days, not calendar days, unless otherwise noted. Prince William County did not specify calendar or business days.

Leading Practices to Streamline Restaurant Permitting

We also reviewed leading practices and trends from jurisdictions across the United States to identify approaches that may offer opportunities for Fairfax County to make its permitting process more predictable, accessible, transparent, and efficient.

Los Angeles, CA: Restaurant and Small Business Express Program and Restaurant Beverage Program

The Los Angeles Department of Building and [Safety \(LADBS\) Restaurant & Small Business Express Program \(RSBEP\)](#) is a free case-management program designed to help restaurants and small businesses navigate the permitting, plan review, inspection, and approval process. Restaurants, bars, and outdoor dining projects can participate regardless of project valuation, while other eligible small businesses generally must have construction projects valued below \$1 million.

A key feature of the program is the assignment of a dedicated Case Manager who serves as a single point of contact throughout the development process. Case Managers can coordinate meetings with relevant agencies during design, help resolve conflicts and monitor plan review during permitting, coordinate inspections during construction, and assist with final approvals and Certificates of Occupancy. The program can be accessed at any [stage of a project](#), allowing businesses to receive assistance before plans are submitted or after permitting or construction has already begun.

City of Santa Rosa, CA: Business Concierge Program

The City of Santa Rosa's [Business Concierge Program](#) provides one-on-one assistance to businesses navigating planning, permitting, licensing, and construction. A Small Business Ombudsman serves as a central point of contact for businesses by coordinating with City departments and providing businesses with technical and financial resources and helping resolve issues that may slow projects. Notably, Santa Rosa reported that the [program supported](#) more than 150 entrepreneurs and small-business owners and facilitated more than 250 service touchpoints from February through August 2025, including assistance with permitting, licensing, and other business needs.

The program does not replace the normal permitting process; instead, it helps businesses navigate and coordinate that process more efficiently. Santa Rosa's Business Concierge Program is part of the city's [One-Stop-Shop](#), which offers business owners a single, streamlined access point for permits, licensing, and development support. Designed to "[eliminate guesswork and accelerate progress](#)", the One-Stop-Shop functions as both a physical hub and an online resource that business owners, entrepreneurs and developers can use to advance their projects.

San José, CA: Streamlined Restaurant Program (SRP) and Small Business Ally Program

The City of San José's [Streamlined Restaurant Program \(SRP\)](#) expedites permitting for qualifying restaurant and food/beverage tenant improvements, reducing review times to as little as 1–2 months compared with the typical 4–6 months, with no additional expedited-review charge. Projects generally must be 3,000 square feet or less, have kitchens of 1,000 square feet or less, include no more than four new kitchen hoods, and involve no new construction, two-story spaces, mezzanines, or full façade rebuilds. The process includes pre-qualification, a 1.5-hour kickoff meeting with City reviewers and the applicant's architect, and an expedited plan review to identify and resolve issues early.

The City's [Small Business Ally Program](#) complements the SRP by providing step-by-step assistance with permitting, inspections, zoning, building codes, and other City requirements. Bilingual Small Business Allies help businesses navigate requirements and connect with appropriate City departments. From July 2023 through June 2024, the program assisted 2,977 entrepreneurs, including 112 food-related businesses that received streamlined assistance through the SRP. The program also conducts multilingual outreach, workshops, and training, with Vietnamese and Spanish translation support to help business owners understand regulatory requirements.

San José also launched [two initiatives](#) to reduce permitting delays. The **Best Prepared Designer Program** allows experienced design professionals and contractors with a strong record of submitting code-compliant plans to receive permits for eligible smaller projects within about five days, compared with two to three months. By placing greater responsibility for code compliance on qualified professionals, the program can also reduce staff plan-review workload. The **Self-Start Building Permits with Plan Review Program** allows applicants to upload plans directly and track permit status and responsibility for next steps, reducing intake delays and improving transparency.

Chicago, IL: Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection (BACP) Neighborhood Business Development Centers (NBDCs)

In [2019](#), Chicago's Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection (BACP) aimed to expand its one-stop-shop model beyond City Hall and make business assistance more accessible in Chicago neighborhoods through a network of [Neighborhood Business Development Centers \(NBDCs\)](#). The initiative was built on BACP's Small Business Center, which already served as a centralized location for business licensing, public-way permits, and other resources. [NBDCs](#) extend the one-stop shop model into neighborhoods by funding and partnering with local nonprofit organizations, chambers of commerce, and community development organizations that already work with area businesses.

NBDCs do not replace the City departments that issue licenses, permits, or approvals. Instead of requiring entrepreneurs to rely solely on City Hall, businesses can visit an NBDC in their community for free, individualized assistance with starting, operating, or expanding a business. BACP operates the NBDC program through contracts with these local organizations, including organizations designated as NBDC [“Generalists” or “Specialists.”](#)

While jurisdictions across the United States are taking a variety of approaches to streamline permitting, emerging technologies such as AI also

offer opportunities to further improve the efficiency and consistency of the process.

AI Tools Utilized in Leading Practices

AI tools are increasingly being used at the front end of the restaurant permitting process to help restaurant applicants understand jurisdiction-specific requirements and submit applications. Jacksonville, Florida, uses an AI tool that screens permit materials before they reach a reviewer. The tool analyzes review comments and identifies potential issues, helping staff complete reviews more efficiently. Jacksonville reported that commercial permit turnaround times decreased from 30 to 13 days, reducing delays associated with construction and opening.

Austin, Texas, uses an AI-powered platform to compare building plans with digitized planning, zoning, and building code requirements. The platform provides immediate feedback on potential compliance issues, allowing applicants to correct problems earlier and reducing the need for multiple revisions.

AI plan review tools are also being used in other jurisdictions to scan building plans for possible code violations that are later confirmed by staff. These AI tools can help improve submission quality, reduce coordination errors, and shorten review periods, with reported reductions of 80 percent in peer-review time and 70 percent in coordination errors.

Key Takeaways from Other Jurisdictions and Leading Practices

Across the jurisdictions reviewed, the strongest approaches do not necessarily eliminate regulatory requirements or require a complete redesign of the permitting system. Instead, they focus on making existing processes simpler to navigate, better coordinated, and more responsive to the complexity of individual projects.

These approaches are consistent with broader recommendations for improving business permitting. The [Institute for Justice](#), for example, analyzed barriers to starting a business across 20 cities and recommends that local jurisdictions streamline rules for small businesses to “*make it cheaper, make it faster, and make it simpler.*” Similarly, Virginia’s Permit Transparency initiative illustrates the value of making permitting information easier for applicants to understand and track. In general, where possible, online permitting systems (and supporting resources) should be intuitive and guide applicants through the process rather than require them to interpret the County’s processes and organizational structure and determine the appropriate steps themselves.

Leading Practices Summary

Collectively, the research points to several practical principles for improving restaurant permitting:

- **Make the process easier to navigate:** Give applicants a clear entry point and guidance across agencies. Provide applicants with a single point of contact across agencies.
- **Coordinate earlier:** Identify missing information and potential conflicts before formal review generates multiple correction cycles.
- **Tailor review to project complexity:** Provide simpler or expedited pathways for lower-risk projects rather than applying the same process to every restaurant.
- **Make technology work for the applicant:** Online systems should be intuitive, transparent, and actively guide applicants through requirements and next steps.
- **Look beyond individual review times:** Improving the overall customer experience and reducing unnecessary handoffs and review/inspection cycles may be as important as meeting individual departmental targets.

Observations and Recommendations

Observation 1

Fragmented, Outdated Guidance and Limited Support Dedicated to Restaurants

Restaurants in Fairfax County face a complex, multi-agency approval process, with multiple applications, inspections and permits, yet there is no comprehensive, easy-to-find, end-to-end guidance available to help them navigate it. Business owners must independently piece together requirements from various departments, including Health, Fire Marshal, Land Development Services, Planning and Development, and Tax Administration, and navigate different modules in PLUS for the different record types (applications). The County's only consolidated resource tailored to restaurants, "**Opening a Restaurant in Fairfax County**," is outdated (published in April 2022, prior to the implementation of PLUS) and does not reflect current workflows, requirements, or expected durations.

The County recognizes that permitting is complex and can be burdensome for businesses and therefore offers a variety of programs and services to support business owners, including restaurants. However, information about these programs and services is dispersed across multiple County websites with no centralized location to clearly communicate to restaurant owners what is available and what they may be eligible for at no additional cost. Additionally, some private-sector services, such as County-certified peer reviewers and expeditors who are not certified by the County, can help owners navigate complex requirements. However, these services come at a cost and may be prohibitive for some businesses.

As a result, restaurant owners and entrepreneurs looking to open a restaurant must navigate a fragmented and decentralized information landscape, making it difficult to identify required steps, applications, expected timelines and available support programs or services. Larger restaurant groups often offset this complexity by hiring expeditors, certified peer reviewers, and specialized consultants, allowing them to move through multi-agency requirements more efficiently. Applying a OneFairfax equity lens highlights that outdated guidance and decentralized information may disproportionately affect small and first-time businesses, leading to longer timelines and increased costs for businesses that may be least able to absorb them. A common theme in our restaurant interviews is that restaurants noted the absence of a single point of contact for the permitting process, which they believe could reduce confusion and improve coordination.

Finally, current feedback mechanisms, such as customer service surveys, are not functioning effectively, making it difficult for the County to identify gaps in service and also address barriers experienced by business owners, especially under-resourced business owners.

To address these challenges, OFPA offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations to Address Observation 1

To improve the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of the restaurant permitting process, the County should consider the following actions:

1. Update (and maintain) a **comprehensive restaurant guide** (with input from all relevant agencies, including Health, Office of the Fire Marshal, and Department of Economic Initiatives) so it is aligned with current PLUS workflows. Work with other agencies (DEI, OPA) to actively market it to business owners. The guide should include clear information on the review and resubmission process (including duration expectations and total timelines for different types of processes), inspections required, the value of utilizing available resources, and the benefits of consulting the County before signing a lease. Where possible, link the guide within PLUS so that any applicant beginning a food establishment application (or potentially a commercial building permit application) can be directed to the guide. Alternatively, if the option exists to automate emailing the guide to applicants who identify as food establishments during the PLUS process (through a download or link), the County may want to explore this option. The guide would be most effective when applicants can readily access it or are proactively provided with it early in the permitting process.
2. A wide variety of individuals and commercial businesses, including small businesses, must navigate the permitting process with the County. Agencies that provide guidance on the permitting process (including LDS, Health and the Office of the Fire Marshal) should **review their permit-related County websites** and related resources for clarity and comprehensiveness. The County may want to establish permitting pages specific to key audiences, such as the restaurant industry, so that applicants don't need to hunt and peck around to find resources (such as the Tenant Support Services program and the Expedited Building Plan Review Program) that relate to their needs. Ensure county websites related to permitting, small businesses and food establishments link to the updated restaurant guide.
3. Consider whether County resources can provide the option of a **single point of contact** (such as a case manager or concierge) for first-time and small-business restaurant owners navigating the complexities of the permit process. Based on our conversations with County staff, this concept is being explored as part of the TSS Pilot.
4. **Improve dashboards** that provide permitting goals and current processing times. Either present dashboards for the full end-to-end process or harmonize the dashboards for Health, Land Development Services, Zoning and Fire Marshal so the presentation and terminology are consistent. Consider tracking new metrics that may give the restaurant applicant a better sense of the entire process, rather than just the expected time frames for one review round. Based on our conversations with County staff and OFPA's review of the Economic Competitiveness Strategic Roadmap, dashboard improvements are a planned initiative of the Economic Competitiveness Task Force.
5. Update and improve the **customer service survey** and outreach to capture feedback and identify barriers experienced by business owners, particularly small and first-time businesses. Ensure there is a process to take action on issues that repeatedly arise.
6. Consider the feasibility of using **AI and/or other automation and system tools** to accelerate initial plan review processes, especially to support small businesses that may lack technical expertise. Based on our conversations with County staff and OFPA's review of the Economic Competitiveness Strategic Roadmap, evaluating AI and automation are a planned initiative of the Economic Competitiveness Task Force.

Providing better, clearer resources to potential applicants can help reduce timelines and get restaurants and other food establishments opened more quickly. OFPA recognizes the efforts already underway through the **Economic Competitiveness Strategic Roadmap**, which, if implemented, should help meet several of these recommendations.

Management Response:

Management agrees that the Restaurant Guide should be updated and agencies' disparate webpages/information could be consolidated to provide a focused entry for prospective restaurant permittees. To this end, starting in November 2026, LDS will stand up a multiagency workgroup with participant invitations to the Health Department, Office of the Fire Marshal, Department of Economic Initiatives and Zoning to accomplish the following:

1. Inventory published information related to establishing (permitting) a restaurant in Fairfax County. (Completed by March 2027)
2. Delineate a plan to consolidate and update this information. One likely place to consolidate the information is in the permit library published on LDS's webpage. The agency developed this library to provide a single set of instructions for permittees, making it a natural fit. (Completed by June 2027)
3. LDS is already working with the Office of the Fire Marshal to coordinate publicly facing metrics / dashboards regarding permit review processing timelines. This work requires adjustments to PLUS, PowerBI and website platforms. This should be completed by June 2027. Through the workgroup established in #1, staff will develop a plan of action for similarly consolidated metrics for Health Department permit work by June 2027.
4. The County expects PLUS to migrate to the vendor cloud (SaaS) in late calendar year 2026. Once complete, customer surveys can be reestablished as a part of the customer experience. New surveys will launch by August 2027.
5. LDS and partner agencies seek PLUS vendor offerings to leverage AI within plan review. To date, the current PLUS vendor's offerings cannot perform this task. Simultaneously, LDS monitors competitors' offerings to augment or replace PLUS's plan review component with something that can leverage AI. (Ongoing – implementation dependent on market availability, etc.)

Accountable Individual(s):

The LDS PACA Division Director in LDS will lead items 1, 2 & 3 (currently Brandy Mueller)

The LDS Operations Division Director in LDS will lead items 4 & 5 (currently Helman Castro)

Implementation Dates:

- Multi-agency workgroup - by November 2026
- Inventory of information - completed by March 2027
- Plan - completed by June 2027
- LDS and OFM dashboard platform work - completed by June 2027
 - Develop a similar plan of action for Health Department - completed by June 2027
- PLUS migration - December 2026
 - New surveys will launch - August 2027

- AI plan review - implementation dependent on market availability, etc. – Ongoing

Observation 2

Cross-Agency Workflow Challenges in Food Establishment Plan Reviews

When an applicant submits a building or alteration permit application in PLUS, LDS assigns plans to the required review departments. According to staff interviews, at times, the applicant does not correctly designate their business as a food establishment or LDS misses that the applicant is a food establishment, and LDS does not add the Health Department as a reviewer of the plans. As a result, the Health Department sometimes learns about the application late in the process, sometimes after LDS has issued the building permit to the applicant. When the Health Department is notified of the building permit (often because the applicant has submitted their food establishment application), staff must still complete the plan review to ensure that the construction complies with Health Department requirements, which can create delays for the applicant and cause frustration.

Recommendation to Address Observation 2

LDS should review intake and routing procedures to ensure staff consistently identify food establishment applications and add the Health Department as a required plan reviewer. LDS can consider adding or updating prompts or mandatory fields in PLUS during the building and alteration application process to improve categorization, providing refresher training for staff, and establishing a verification step before plans are assigned. The County might also explore the use of AI tools that review plans could also help flag food establishment projects earlier in the process. These improvements will help ensure the Health Department receives applications at the correct stage, reduce delays and applicant frustration, and support more timely, coordinated plan review.

Management Response:

We acknowledge that this can occur. However, we believe this to be anomalous. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that it does occur occasionally as first submission commercial projects are distributed by the Building Division and the full distribution can be missed. We will task the workgroup established in Observation #1 response, to consider options to prevent this error moving forward, including possible PLUS automations to prevent user error upon distribution or moving this task to PACA permit technicians as part of the initial QA/QC review. Notwithstanding the findings of the workgroup, focused training for building plan review staff represents a no regrets option to move forward. The Building Division training to improve distinguish restaurant applications manually during review distribution will be implemented by December 2026. By March 2027, we will identify any PLUS or process changes to remedy this issue.

Accountable Individual(s):

LDS PACA Division Director (currently Brandy Mueller)

Implementation Dates:

- Training - by December 2026
- PLUS or process changes to remedy the issue - by March 2027

Observation 3**Restaurants Report Inconsistent, Conflicting and Lengthy Permitting Processes**

Interviews with restaurant owners and managers revealed concerns regarding the timeliness and consistency of permitting reviews and inspections, with delays accumulating and significantly affecting the end-to-end permitting process. Applicants reported that requirements sometimes shift between review cycles, that different reviewers or inspectors provide conflicting guidance, and that inspections often require multiple visits. These issues generate delays, rework, and additional costs, including repeated plan revisions, resubmission fees, redoing completed work, and prolonged periods during which restaurants cannot open and begin generating revenue.

When OFPA discussed these concerns with County staff, they offered reasonable explanations, including that applicants may submit incomplete applications, misunderstand the code requirements, or schedule inspections before the work was complete. These perspectives indicate that some delays may reflect shared responsibility and an expectations gap between the County and applicants. OFPA was not able to independently confirm the prevalence of these issues through our analysis of permitting data; however, the consistency of feedback from restaurant owners suggests challenges that the County has not fully addressed.

Restaurant owners also expressed concerns that some requirements may reflect individual reviewer or inspector preferences rather than the consistent application of established codes. LDS staff indicated that the department does not maintain standard operating procedures governing reviews and inspections. Instead, staff rely on training as well as the Virginia Uniform Statewide Building Code, the Statewide Fire Prevention Code, and the Public Facilities Manual, and reviewers and inspectors may create their own checklists. This individualized approach increases the potential for inconsistent expectations and contradictory guidance. Staff also described challenges with inspection logistics, including difficulties using PLUS to efficiently route inspectors, which may further contribute to extended timelines.

Combined, these issues demonstrate that the County may not have sufficient insight into the restaurant applicant's experience and where contradictions originate. These ongoing challenges highlight the need for the County to examine the underlying causes of delays and inconsistencies to determine whether they arise from misaligned expectations, insufficient visibility, unclear communication, limited coordination, or gaps in execution in the permitting process.

Recommendation to Address Observation 3

To address the consistency and timeliness issues identified by restaurants and the cumulative delays that affect the end-to-end permitting process, OFPA recommends the following:

1. Establish a cross-agency workgroup, with representation from LDS, the Health Department, the Department of Economic Initiatives and the Office of the Fire Marshal, to gather and analyze restaurant-applicant feedback, staff insight, and PLUS data to determine why requirements shift, contradictory comments occur, inspections require multiple visits, and overall timelines extend. The workgroup should use these insights to identify whether challenges stem from a gap in expectations, or communication, coordination, or execution issues; and implement improvements (that are within the County's control) based on those findings.
2. The County should strengthen consistency among reviewers and inspectors by clarifying expectations, improving alignment in how code requirements are applied, and creating internal mechanisms or escalation processes to resolve conflicting interpretations before they reach applicants.
3. In addition, the County should explore options to improve inspection logistics by optimizing scheduling and routing tools (available in PLUS).
4. Finally, where possible, these efforts should be coordinated with initiatives underway in the Economic Competitiveness Strategy Roadmap to ensure consistency, avoid duplication, and reinforce broader County goals related to business experience and economic growth.

Management Response:

As stated in the management response to Observation #1, LDS will stand up a multi-agency workgroup to include staff from the Health Department, Office of the Fire Marshal, Department of Economic Initiatives and Zoning by November 2026. Once the new customer surveys are established (management response to Observation #1 – August 2027) this workgroup will review all customer input to identify root causes and corrective measures. If input is received by management ahead of these surveys, they will provide it to this workgroup.

The building inspections group in LDS will develop an inspection manual to cover all commercial inspections. This will be directly applicable to restaurant establishments. This manual will be finished by September 2027.

The routing tools for inspections in PLUS have not worked well. LDS inspection supervisors have had to compensate by manually re-sorting work each morning. Staff are eager to find an automated solution. Once PLUS is fully migrated to SaaS, the PLUS team will identify a path forward to resolve this issue. The path forward will be identified by April 2027.

Accountable Individual(s):

Workgroup – LDS PACA Division Director (currently Brandy Mueller)

Inspection Manual – LDS Building Official (currently Jay Riat)

Routing Solution – LDS Operations Division Director (currently Helman Castro)

Implementation Dates:

- Multi-agency workgroup - by November 2026
- Review of customer service surveys - to begin after August 2027

- Inspection manual - September 2027
- Routing Tools options identified - April 2027

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Appendix 1

Data Integration and Sampling Methodology

We combined restaurant permitting data provided by the Health Department (HD) and Land Development Services (LDS) to develop a more complete view of the permitting process.

1. We first combined HD food establishment application and permit data using restaurant name and address as matching identifiers.
2. We then incorporated LDS Certificate of Occupancy (Non-RUP) and commercial addition/alteration and new building (ALT-C/BLD-C) data using available identifiers, including restaurant name and address, where available. However, certain records contained different or incomplete identifying information. For example, ALT-C/BLD-C (renovation and new build) records did not include restaurant names, and restaurant names in food application records did not always match those in LDS Non-RUP records. As a result, we standardized available identifying fields and used multiple identifiers to match records as much as possible across the agencies' datasets.
3. Because the agencies were unable to provide complete workflow history data for the entire population of restaurant permitting records, we used a sample to evaluate detailed permitting workflows and processing timelines. We used non-statistical sampling to select 34 food establishment applications with a closed status and LDS ALT-C/BLD-C records dating from FY24 through FY26, and staff accessed PLUS to obtain the corresponding detailed workflow histories. The workflow histories provided task-level information, including workflow tasks and statuses, status dates, responsible parties, and other record-level details.
4. We used the combined data to analyze the sequence and timing of permitting activities and to distinguish, where supported by the workflow data, agency processing time from other portions of the overall permitting process.

Appendix 2

Record/Application Types for Sampled Restaurants

Index	Record Type	PLUS Prefix
1	Alternative Fire Extinguishing Systems	FALTV
2	Building Permit Amendment	ELEC
3	Certificate of Occupancy (Non-RUP)	NONRUP
4	Commercial Addition/Alteration	ALTC
5	Commercial Electrical	ELEC
6	Commercial Mechanical	MECHC
7	Commercial Plumbing	PLBC
8	Critical Structures Revision	CRIT
9	Fire Alarm	FFALRM
10	Fire Plan Review Amendment	FALTV
11	Fire Plan Review Amendment	FSPRK
12	Food Establishment Application	HFOODA
13	Food Establishment Renovation or Change of Equipment	HAMEND
14	Occupancy Inspection	FOCC
15	Sprinkler System or Standpipe System	FSPRK

Note: The Occupancy Inspection record type shown above refers to the pre-occupancy inspection.

Appendix 3

Food Establishments in Fairfax County as of July 21, 2026

Food Establishment Type	Number of Food Establishments
Fast Food Restaurant	1,251
Full Service Restaurant	1,100
Public School Food Service	194
Child Care Food Service	181
Carry Out Food Service	147
Caterer	101
Nursing Home Food Service	56
Hotel Continental Breakfast	39
Private School Food Service	39
Adult Care	23
Grocery Store Food Service	16
Group Home Food Service	11
Hospital Food Service	9
Commissary	8
Convenience Store Food Service	2
Jail Food Service	2
Other Food Service	2
Bakery	1
Summer Camp Food Service	1
Total	3,183

Note: Food establishment types in grey are within the scope of this report.

Appendix 4

All Review Types Associated with the ALT-C Record Type in the Sample of Restaurants

Index	ALTC Record Plan Review Phase Task
1	Building Review
2	DCC Review
3	DPWES - Wastewater Planning and Monitoring Division
4	Electrical Review
5	Fire Marshal Review
6	Health Department Review - CPP
7	Mechanical Review
8	Plumbing/Gas Review
9	Site Technician Review
10	ZAD Permits Reviewer

All Inspection Types Associated with the ALT-C Record Type in the Sample of Restaurants

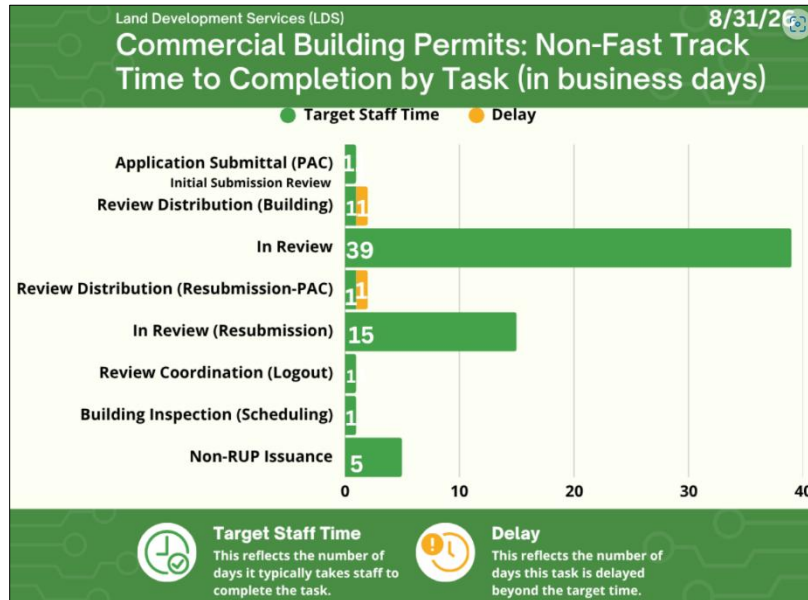
Index	Record Type	Task
1	Commercial Addition/Alteration	Ceiling Concealment
2		Concrete Pour
3		Final
4		Framing
5		Insulation
6		Routine
7		Slab
8		Wall
9		Wall Concealment
1	Commercial Electrical	Ceiling Concealment
2		Concealment
3		Conduit Underground
4		Final
5		Wall Concealment
1	Commercial Mechanical	Ceiling Concealment
2		Ductwork
3		Final
4		Grease Duct Light Test
5		Grease Duct Wrap
6		Hood Fire Suppression
7		Routine
1	Commercial Plumbing	Ceiling Concealment
2		Concealment
3		Final
4		First Gas
5		Groundwork Sanitary Sewer
6		Routine
7		Wall Concealment
1	Fire Alarm	Fire Alarm
2		Fire Alarm Visual
1	Food Establishment Application	Pre-Occupancy
1	Occupancy Inspection	Pre Occupancy
1	Sprinkler System or Standpipe System	Dry Sys. Trip Perf. Test
2		Hydro Sprinklers
3		Main Drain Perf. Test
4		Sprinkler Final
5		Sprinkler Visual

Note: Task fields can be found in PLUS workflow history.

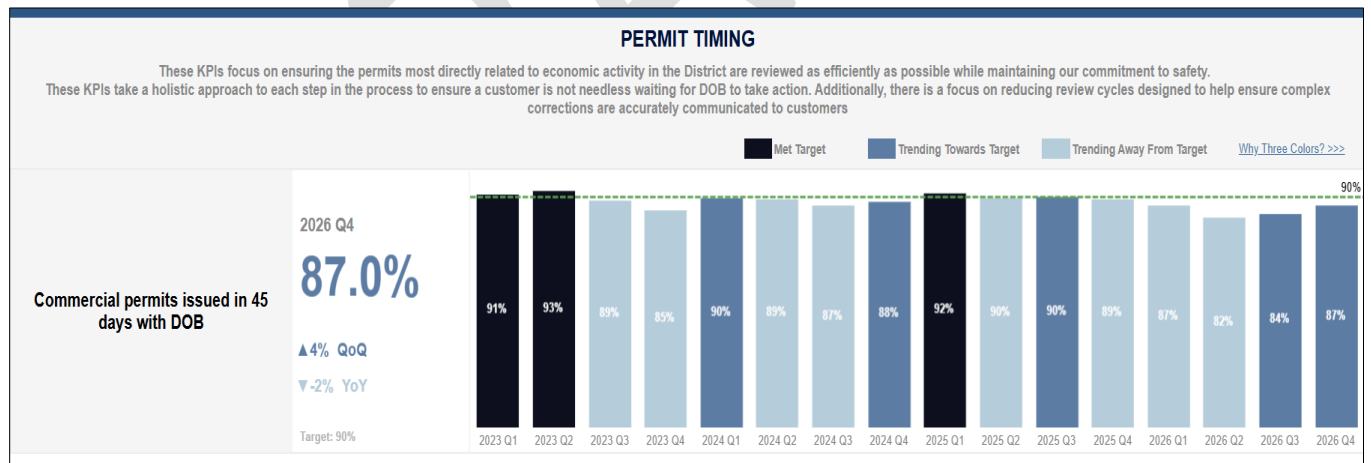
Appendix 5

Examples of Permitting Dashboards and Metrics

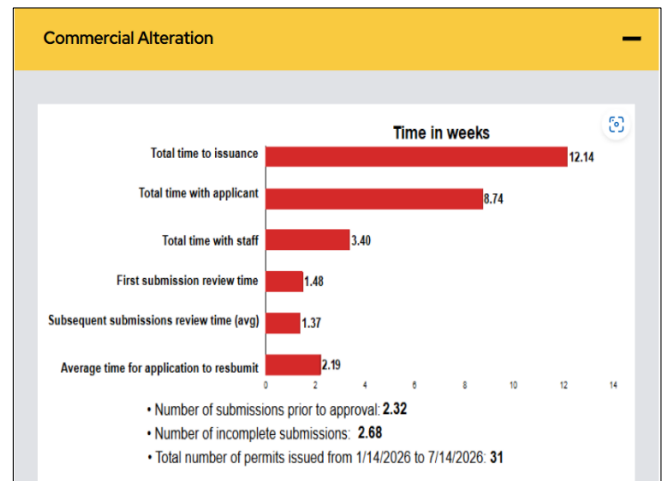
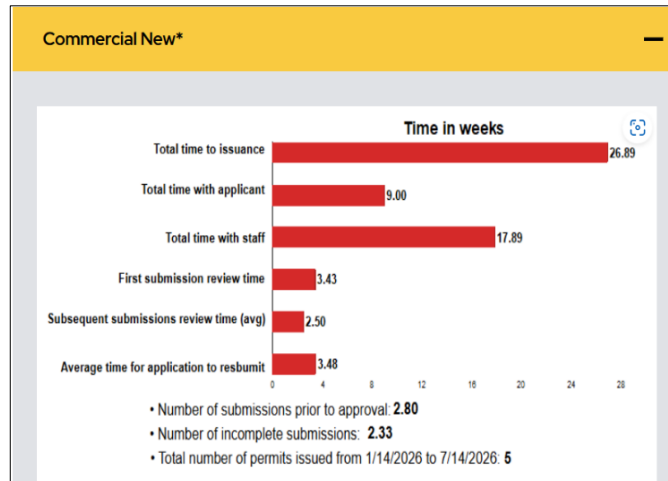
Fairfax County, VA



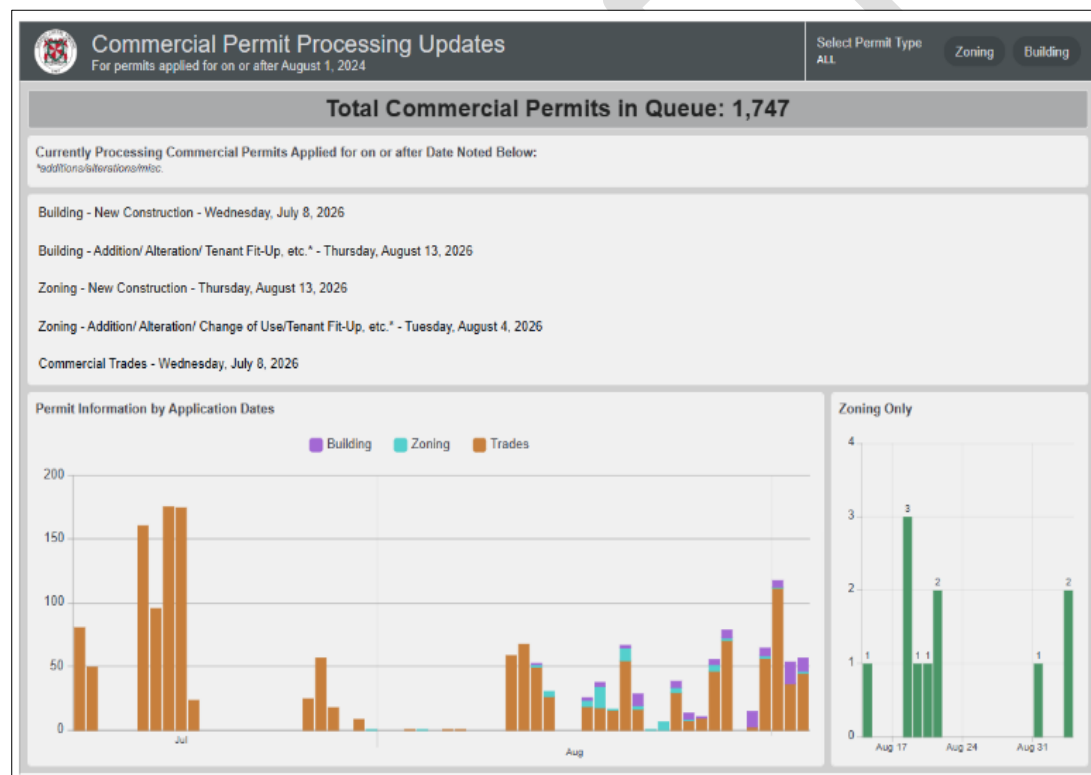
Washington, DC



City of Fairfax, VA

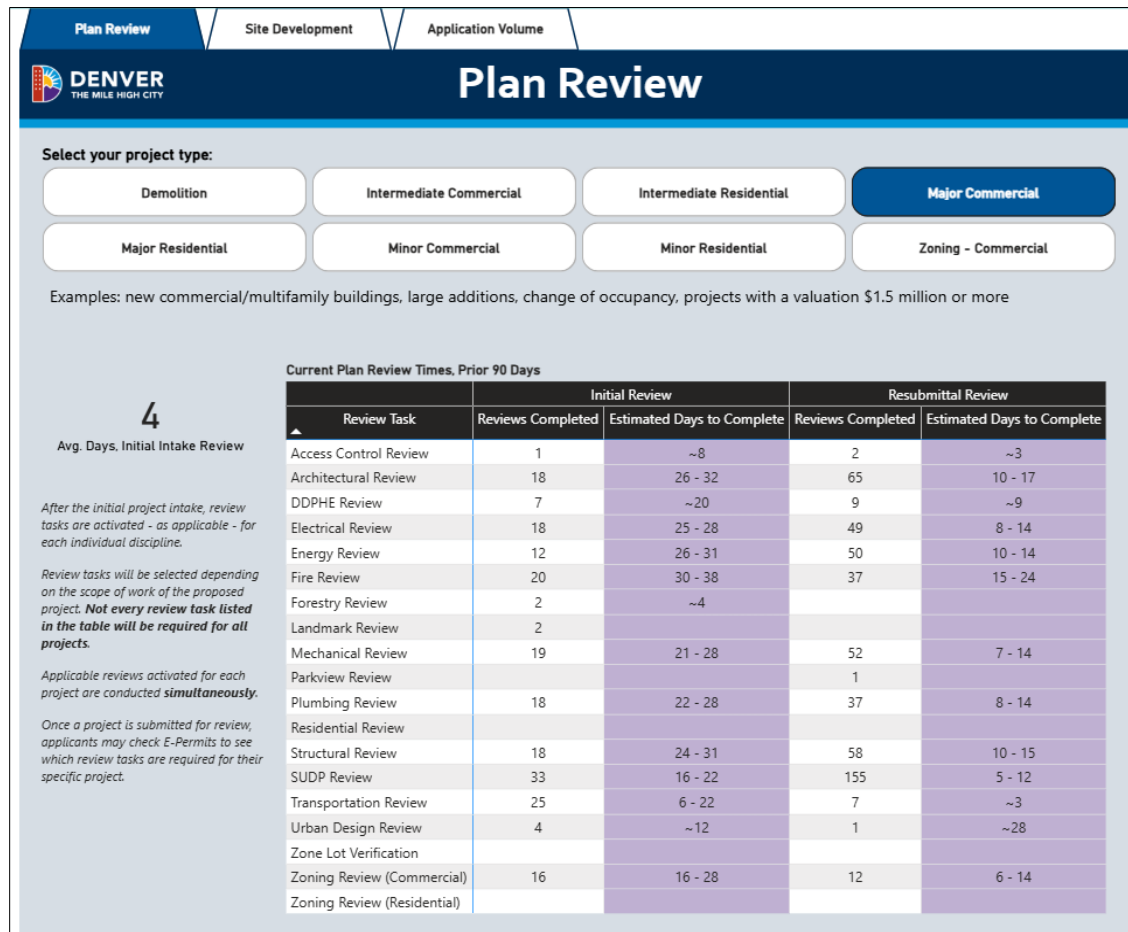


Loudoun County, VA

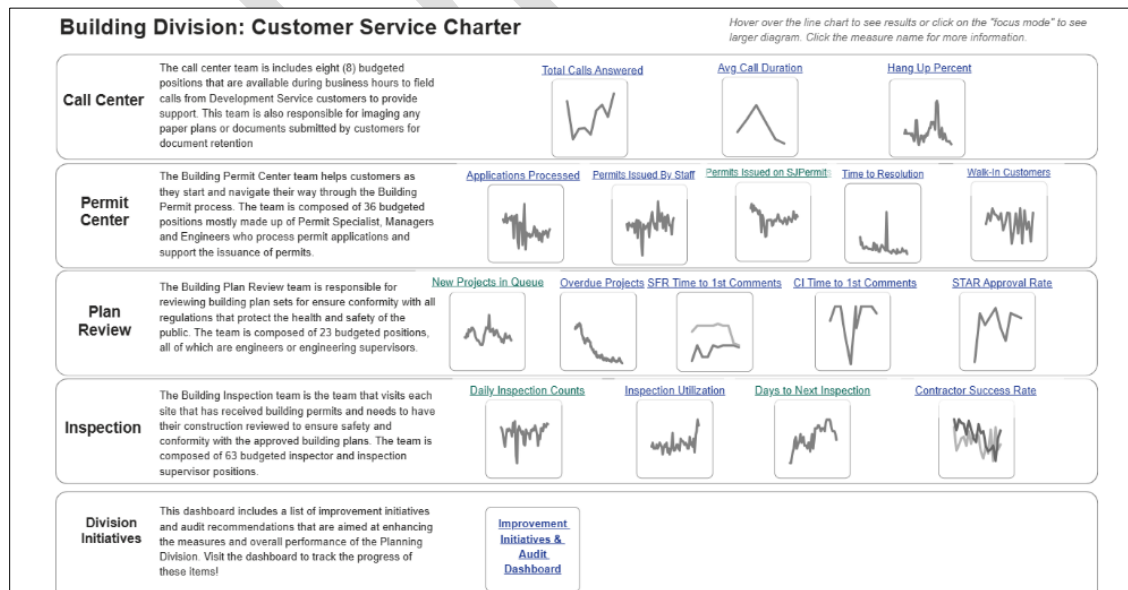


Dashboard	Timelines	
Permit Type	Building Permit Review Timeline	Zoning Permit Review Timeline
New Construction	15 days	15 days
Alterations, Additions, Change Of Use	15 days	10 days
Trades	10 days	10 days

Denver, CO



San Jose, CA



Appendix 6

Fairfax County Food Establishment Permits Issued by District

District	Number of Active Food Establishments	# of New Food Est. Permits Issued since FY24	# of New Food Est. Permits Issued Since FY24 Now Closed
BRADDOCK	169	59	8
DRANESVILLE	142	57	5
FRANCONIA	311	85	9
HUNTER MILL	264	91	9
MASON	408	128	12
MOUNT VERNON	209	70	7
PROVIDENCE	441	151	21
SPRINGFIELD	194	66	8
SULLY	361	134	20
Total	2,499	841	99

Note: The number of active food establishments as of July 2026. This includes establishments classified as Bakery, Carry Out Food Service, Fast Food Restaurant, and Full-Service Restaurant.

Office of Financial & Program Audit

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Our Goals

- Review the effectiveness and efficiency of programs and operations of county departments, agencies, and authorities.
- Identify cost savings and additional financial resources, as appropriate.
- Recommend ways to improve, promote, and increase accountability.



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