A Hub of Economic Activity and Innovation

Regulations, policies and programs are efficient and reliable while protecting the public's interest

What strategies are working?

CITY STAFF WANTS TO BE RESPONSIVE AND DO A GOOD JOB.

- Despite being in different departments, the system of plan review comes together and focuses on customers. The basic strategy of cross-departmental involvement is working.

- Members of the business community appreciate the opportunity to have a study session with City staff about their plans. Meeting together is an opportunity for staff to take a concentrated look at the plan.

- If businesses have an established relationship with someone in City government, they have someone who can steer them in the right direction. It's important to have a personal connection.

- Planning for the 2014 All Star Game was a huge undertaking. There were so many elements related to this big event: construction, traffic control, police protection, fire safety, permitting, food trucks, public works, etc. It was messy, but it worked. Departments stepped up and got things done.

- City staff, elected officials and the business community worked together to change the City regulations on the sale ratio between food and liquor. It took a community effort to accept change and let go of regulations. The whole package worked because of mutual trust.

THE CITY IS MAKING INTERNAL CHANGES TO IMPROVE SERVICE.

- Business Licensing and Construction Code Services were moved to the Community Planning and Economic Development Department.

- The Contract Compliance Division has worked to improve its relationships with City staff in other departments and eliminate silos. When we come together as a team, we provide better service to our external partners.

MINNEAPOLIS IS ATTRACTIVE TO BUSINESS.

- Developers see Minneapolis as a good place to do business.

- Some large U.S. cities have a stereotype that, for something to happen, a deal gets made under the table. That is not the case in Minneapolis.

What strategies are not working?

THERE ISN'T ENOUGH TIME OR STAFF TO DEVOTE TO MANAGING COMPLICATED PLANS.

- Development Review does not have enough staff to provide the level of service that businesses expect.

- City staff recognize the need for speed, but their workload prevents them from spending the needed time to explore complex issues and meet with businesses. You need time to offer quality service.

- You can get a fast "yes" or "no" answer if you use a checklist, but it takes time to find a way to convert a "no" to a "yes." Innovation requires adequate time for staff to search for solutions.

SOMETIMES THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS.

- Complicated development plans evolve and inevitably change. Businesses have to accept that the City's answers will change as new issues arise. Sometimes there are no quick and simple answers.

- The City tries to streamline processes, but it doesn't always work as we had hoped. For example, when the City revamped the massage licensing process, we thought we could manage the revised process with one staff member, but demand for applications far exceeded what we expected.

MINNEAPOLIS' GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE MAKES IT DIFFICULT TO ACT QUICKLY.

- The City's complex structure makes everything take longer. Some department heads report to 14 people. That requires a high level of coordination.

Conversation held April 10, 2015

Minneapolis
City of Lakes

- City staff come to meetings wanting to help, but they're not empowered to make decisions. They have to get approval from other people, so businesses wait. Time is money.
- It takes the City Council too long to get back to a business or developer.

BUSINESSES CAN'T FIGURE OUT WHO TO TALK TO OR HOW THE PROCESS WORKS.

- Minneapolis' system is so complicated that it's difficult to figure out how to navigate the process. It's a challenge to get to the right person. The process is intimidating.
- Regulation governing development is spread out over three departments.
- Planning for a big event is intimidating because there are so many elements to chase down. Organizers can't possibly know the system. And, it's hard to find the right person to answer questions.
- Minneapolis' website is not intuitive. It's hard for staff to find the right information and even harder for outside businesses.
- Our information isn't helpful. It's full of gobbledygook and difficult to understand. The City provides a lot of information, but it isn't always the right information at the right time.
- Small companies may have a harder time navigating Minneapolis' governmental structure than large companies that are used to dealing with Minneapolis and other large cities in the United States. Smaller companies may be more used to working with smaller units of government and may not understand that some of the experiences they face in Minneapolis may simply be typical of many large cities. It's not clear how much is specific to Minneapolis.
- Large, well-known firms appear to get a higher level of responsiveness from the City than small firms.

THERE IS TOO MUCH NEGOTIATION.

- If a business doesn't get the answer it wants from staff, the business calls the City Council. In trying to be responsive, we've created an "If mom says 'no,' then go ask dad" dynamic.
- The City's goal is to grow Minneapolis' population, but zoning restrictions mean that the only way to grow is through variances. As a result, everything is a negotiation.
- The City Council has talked about being more punitive in an effort to achieve race and gender contract compliance. That's not the best approach because contract compliance depends upon collaboration.

MINNEAPOLIS ISN'T A DOMINANT NATIONAL PLAYER.

- Minneapolis doesn't have as large a national footprint as other big cities, so developers don't see much difference between locating in Minneapolis or in a suburb. Without national leverage, developers rightfully wonder whether wading through the extra level of bureaucracy is worth the effort. Minneapolis has far more layers to peel to get things done.

WE DON'T DO ENOUGH TO LEARN FROM OTHER CITIES.

- I want to learn from other cities' mistakes before we implement a new system. I want to make sure we get the new system right, but there isn't funding for travel to see those systems in action.

Working in partnership, what strategies could we pursue?

CHANGE ZONING TO ALIGN WITH GOALS FOR GROWTH.

- Change zoning to allow for growth. A streamlined approach would reduce the number of variances.
- Review zoning to make it easier for established businesses to grow and new businesses to come here.

REDUCE THE BUREAUCRACY AND MAKE IT EASIER TO NAVIGATE THE PROCESS.

- Create a City development review process that triggers a team approach. That process should include assigning a City

Minneapolis
City of Lakes

staff member to coordinate the behind-the-scenes work and navigate the project through the process. Ensure there is a higher level of coordination for big projects.

- Require a City staff member to hand off an issue to the next department so the customer doesn't have to explain the whole process every time the project moves to the next phase of the process.

- Get a higher level person to the table so it's possible to get a decision more quickly.

- Take a hard look at City policies. Ask which policies provide value and throw out the ones that aren't needed anymore.

- Simplify complicated processes and look for efficiencies. Take the time to review the overarching framework for regulations.

FOCUS ON SERVICE AND COLLABORATION.

- Pursue a strategy that lets staff seek alternative solutions to issues that arise. Communicate that we want to work with businesses, not make life difficult.

- Provide small firms with the same level of responsiveness given to large, well-recognized organizations. Assign a coordinator to help smaller businesses, instead of using a "one size fits all" approach.

- Use a collaborative approach with businesses to achieve race and gender goals. Use training to show businesses what they need to do. Help them make a good faith effort.

- Make sure that contract compliance is part of the plan review process. View civil rights as a City requirement, not just one department's requirement.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND MANAGE EXPECTATIONS.

- Make it easier to understand regulations and how to comply with them. Eliminate government jargon.

- Revamp the City's website to make it more intuitive and oriented to customer needs and questions.

- Create a basic overview of the development process to help businesses know what they need to do and when. Give businesses a readable, step-by-step checklist instead of 800 pages of regulations.

- Create an event planning checklist. Consolidate information so event organizers don't have to chase everything down and learn the entire system.

- Manage expectations about the turnaround time for complicated plans. Help developers understand that there are no quick, simple answers for evolving plans. At the same time, commit to working together to solve issues as they arise. Communicate what we are doing and what needs to be done.

HELP US LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER.

- Ask business representatives to come and meet with City staff so they can learn how business approaches its processes.

- Get all downtown businesses in the room together with City staff. We need to talk to one another on a regular basis to understand issues, remain informed and develop relationships.

- Make sure that employers are at the table when the City discusses its "Working Families" proposal. We need to make sure the requirement doesn't inadvertently hurt the employees the City is trying to help, and we need to make sure it is workable for employers.

INVEST IN STAFF AND TRAINING.

- Raise fees to improve staffing levels. Hire staff to oversee and coordinate projects through the process.

- Provide City staff with training on how other departments function. They need to know how their work feeds into other departments' efforts. This would reduce silos and improve coordination.

- Give staff the time to examine their business practices.

Minneapolis
City of Lakes

A Hub of Economic Activity and Innovation

Regulations, policies and programs are efficient and reliable while protecting the public's interest

- Make sure everyone is at the table when new tools and technology for plan submittal and plan review are planned. These tools can only simplify and improve processes if all parties are involved.

- Allow staff to visit other cities that use systems we will implement. Help us learn from them.

This conversation had representatives from City Attorney's Office, City Coordinator's Office, City Council Office, Civil Rights Department, Community Planning and Economic Development, Health Department, Regulatory Services Department, Minneapolis Downtown Council, Mortenson Construction and Twins Baseball.

Minneapolis
City of Lakes