



City of Hamilton Report for Information

To: Chair and Members
General Issues Committee

Date: April 9, 2025

Report No: PED25047

Subject/Title: Innovation in Planning Approvals (Bloomberg
Harvard City Leadership Initiative – Innovation Track
Program)

Ward(s) Affected: City Wide

Recommendations

- 1) That Report PED25047 respecting the City of Hamilton's participation in the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative Innovation Track Program **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the City of Hamilton's participation in the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative Innovation Track Program (BH Program) and the initial outcomes of the resulting pilot projects.
- The City's objective in the BH Program was to explore opportunities to improve the development approvals process to address housing affordability and availability in support of the Mayor and Council's commitment to facilitate the construction of 47,000 housing units by 2031.
- Members of the development community including residential developers, non-profit housing developers, planning consultants, and external commenting agencies were engaged in this work to help define the problem and generate ideas for improvement.
- Through collaboration, over 800 ideas for improvement were generated forming a portfolio of initiatives for future improvement work with two prototypes developed and piloted in the Planning Division – First Wave Portal and All4One.

- Initial outcomes of the First Wave Portal Pilot resulted in automations to support staff in completing application reviews quicker. So far, the All4One Pilot has seen a 60% decrease in the number of days it takes from submission to issuance of a Formal Consultation document, and a 71% decrease in the number of days from Site Plan application to Conditional Site Plan approval when compared to 2024 processing times. As part of the All4One Pilot, staff also experienced quicker decision making and more clarity for next steps and action were seen by both staff and applicants.

Financial Considerations

There are no budget impact(s) or costs associated with the recommendation.

Background

The City of Hamilton was one of twelve international municipalities selected to participate in the 2023-2024 BH Program. The BH Program is designed for interdisciplinary city teams to build innovation capabilities to design, test, and prototype solutions to pressing city issues. The BH Program teaches creative problem-solving approaches that help cities with their toughest internal and external challenges. The 2023-2024 cohort included participants from Anaheim, Arlington, Chandler, Fort Lauderdale, Oakland, Moreno Valley, Richmond, Port St. Lucie (United States); Verona (Europe); and Hamilton, London, Ottawa (Canada).

The Mayor put forward an application to the BH Program with the challenge for staff to improve the development approvals process to address housing affordability and availability to support the Mayor and Council's commitment to facilitate the construction of 47,000 housing units by 2031. The goal for staff working through this challenge in the BH Program was to identify and implement innovative practices and technologies to streamline and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of development application reviews through collaboration. Successful exploration of the challenge through the BH Program would result in creative solutions and tools for staff to use to review development applications more efficiently, faster processing times and better transparency for applicants, and enhanced collaboration and relationship building between staff and the applicant community.

Analysis

To support the work on the BH Program challenge, a cross-departmental project team was created with members from the City Manager's Office, Mayor's Office, Planning and Economic Development and Public Works.

Over the course of the ten-month program, the project team conducted activities in three phases:

1. Understand the problem;
2. Generate and test new ideas; and,

3. Deliver initiatives.

As part of understanding the problem the project team worked together to create and focus on the following problem statement: There is insufficient coordination and unclear expectations for development approvals needed to achieve housing targets efficiently and effectively for the City of Hamilton.

Consultation and Engagement

With this problem statement at the forefront of their work, the project team engaged with over 60 internal and external collaborators. This included members of the development community including residential developers, non-profit housing developers, planning consultants, and external commenting agencies were engaged in this work to help define the problem and generate ideas for improvement.

A high-level summary of the external engagement work is provided below:

- 35 external partners engaged.
- 28 interview sessions (14 internal and 14 external).
- 12 idea sessions were held.
- 6 other jurisdictions reviews.

Through engagement, internal and external collaborators helped to generate 821 ideas for improvement. These ideas were further refined into eight themes in a Portfolio of Initiatives to be actioned. The Portfolio of Initiatives themes include relationship building, redefining expectations, optimizing and documenting processes, creating transparency, improving internal and external communication, and identifying software supports and technology tools. The Portfolio of Initiatives also includes two ideas the project team selected to be developed as prototypes and piloted – First Wave Portal and All4One.

First Wave Portal Pilot

The first initiative to be piloted was the First Wave Portal. This is an artificial intelligence technology to provide data informed development and planning assistance to applicants with clear communication of application requirements and expectations. The technology can review zoning compliance submissions and development applications to determine if they meet the City of Hamilton's requirements for items such as development standards and the minimum information needed to complete an Ontario Building Code review.

As part of the First Wave Portal Pilot, staff have used sample applications to complete testing and validating of the technology for low density residential applications against City of Hamilton zoning regulations. The benefits realized from this pilot have included:

- Automation of time consuming and repetitive tasks;
- Accurate reviews for zoning and building code compliance;

- Automation of data entry into zoning compliance responses;
- Reduction of human error; and
- Concise, plain language responses to complex zoning regulation.

Further testing is required of the technology to include broader types of planning applications. The technology must also be tested by both internal and external user groups to ensure it is easy to use and feedback from users is incorporated into the design. The First Wave Portal technology is expected to be launched for use by staff and the public in Q4 2025.

All4One Pilot

The second initiative to be piloted is the All4One approach which is a cross-departmental team that comes together for focused collaboration to accelerate development application approvals with a dedicated point of contact for each application. The aim of the All4One Pilot is to work with the applicant early in the process allowing Conditional Site Plan approval within 30 days of receiving an application and reduce the time it takes applicants to clear conditions and advance the development application through to building permit. The concept will be piloted on three to five Site Plan applications for affordable housing projects in collaboration with the Housing Secretariat. The All4One Pilot will use lessons learned through the work to develop a “playbook” of roles and expectations for both City staff and applicants use to achieve compressed approval timelines.

There are currently three applications that are going through the All4One Pilot, with one application granted conditional Site Plan approval. Though it is still early in the pilot, success has been seen in the approval timelines as shown in the table below.

Key Performance Indicator	All4One Target	Percent Reduction	Actual Performance	Percent Reduction
#1 - Formal Consultation application completion to Formal Consultation document issuance	14 days	60% reduction from 2024	14 days	60% reduction from 2024
#2 – Site Plan application to conditional Site Plan approval	30 days	37% reduction from 2024 50% reduction from legislated timeline	14 days	71% reduction from 2024 77% reduction from legislated timeline

In addition to the key performance indicators, staff have expressed that the All4One Pilot supports solution driven discussions and quicker decision making. There has also

been more clarity for next steps and action experienced through the pilot for both staff and applicants.

Next Steps

Work will continue to expand the First Wave Portal Pilot and complete implementation of the All4One Pilot including an assessment of lesson learned to identify which learning can be applied to other steps in the development application process to help streamline approvals in those service areas. Staff have also developed an Action Plan to support implementation of ideas for improvement across the themes in the Portfolio of Initiatives. Staff have already begun to share knowledge with colleagues across the Planning and Economic Development Department and will continue to apply innovation tools used through the BH Program to other City challenges.

In alignment with the BH Program work, the Planning and Economic Development Department is currently working on several continuous improvement initiatives engaging with customers to improve the development application process. These initiatives include:

- New planning, permitting, and licensing technology system;
- Public facing dashboards with key performance indicators and annual reporting on development activity;
- Continued commitment to meet Planning Act timelines for Official Plan and Zoning By-law Amendments;
- New Mid-rise and High-rise zoning and expanding the Transit Oriented Corridor zones;
- New subdivision agreement;
- Updated public notices and notice circulation;
- Formal Consultation process and fee review;
- Holding Removal process and fee review;
- Site Plan conditions process review; and,
- Customer experience journey mapping on approvals and incentive programs.

The work of the BH Program along with the continuous improvement initiatives listed above have helped to address many of the items in the motion on Permit Reform Process made at the Planning Committee on March 18, 2025.

Alternatives

None.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The work that took place as part of the BH Program directly addresses the Council Priority of Responsiveness and Transparency. This work advances outcome **3.2 Get**

more people involved in decision making and problem solving through the collaborative work that took place with the development community to understand the problem and generate and test new ideas. This work also continues to move forward outcome **3.4 Modernize City systems** through streamlined processes and accelerated approvals for city services.

Previous Reports Submitted

- Permit Reform Process, Planning Committee Meeting: March 18, 2025 <https://pub-hamilton.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=441804>

Consultation

A cross-departmental project team including staff from the Planning and Economic Development Department, Public Works Department, Government Relations & Community Engagement Division, and the Mayor's Office was put together to participate in the BH Program.

Appendices and Schedules Attached

None.

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