

Opening a Small Business in a Commercial Location - Customer Experience and Process

Customer Experience

Putting customer experience at the centre of a service is beneficial to improvement efforts. It is understood that while permits and licences are a necessary part of operating a business, businesses can be negatively impacted when obtaining permits and licences.

Business owners may experience challenges such as:

- waiting for permits and licences in order to open and generate revenue while incurring lease and other operating costs. For example, permit and licensing timelines that exceed typical lease agreement condition periods, or leasing a location not fit for their proposed business;
- unclear understanding of the application process, including what applications are needed and in what order, and why technical documents or professional involvement would be required;
- regulations and processes that over mitigate risk and add time and complexity to the process;
- overall confusion and frustration with the number and complexity of regulations and processes;
- time and money needed to hire a consultant to help them navigate the process; and
- thinking they have all required approvals, but then being directed through the permit and licensing process as a result of enforcement.

The timeline experienced by a business owner will vary based on the number of permits and licences needed, the time of year, the type and complexity of their business, its location and the completeness and quality of an application. Simple applications (eg. retail store replacing a retail store) that do not require a development or building permit can be approved within days, and many are approved in less than two weeks. Complex applications (eg. a new restaurant in an old building previously used as a retail store) can take up to 12 months because the process may include development and building permits, regulatory agency input and inspections. These multiple processes are a result of the complexity of the business and its location. Each process may take weeks to complete. More information on the City's permitting and licence timelines can be found in Attachment 4.

Homeowners doing renovations are also a major customer group accessing permit and licensing services. Renovating homeowners and business owners can experience similar challenges if they are unfamiliar with licensing and permitting services.

Opening a Small Business - City Process Overview

In order to receive their business licence, a small business opening in a commercial location may have to navigate up to seven steps. A small business may try to navigate the process themselves by finding information available online (edmonton.ca/smallbusiness) or by visiting the Edmonton Service Centre to gather information. They may also access the [One-On-One Support Program](#) that supports small businesses through the processes. Since its inception in 2016, the program has helped over 2,300 business owners and entrepreneurs navigate the following processes:



1. Research

During this first stage, Administration recommends that the business owner take steps to research their desired locations prior to submitting any applications or signing a lease. The small business owner can search for a property that is zoned appropriately for its intended use. Business owners are also advised to understand the safety code requirements for their business. Business owners can research zoning using maps.edmonton.ca. They can also visit the Edmonton Service Centre or contact the one-on-one support program to schedule a meeting to learn more about zoning and safety code requirements.

Administration also recommends business owners research the regulatory requirements for other agencies, such as Alberta Health Services, and Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis. These agencies may have their own sets of regulations, requirements and application processes that the small business will need to navigate.

2. Apply for a Business Licence

Once the small business has a location, they can apply for a business licence. This application can be submitted online, by mail, or in person at the Edmonton Service Centre (temporarily closed in response to COVID-19).

The small business pays the business licence fee later prior to inspections.

3. Zoning Review and Approval

The business licence application is first forwarded to a development officer to review the zoning and development permits. The development officer determines

whether the applicant has zoning approval, requires a development permit, or will not be permitted to operate in that zone. Where a permit is required, the development officer works with the applicant/business to get the appropriate permissions in place.

4. Building Permit Review

This step ensures the selected building is designed and built safely for the intended use. Small changes, such as painting, typically do not require a building permit. However, the building permit review must still be completed. A safety codes officer determines whether a building permit is required.

IMPROVEMENT: This step was refined in June 2020 to reduce the time required. A risk-based and data-informed approach was applied that removes this step for businesses that have a low likelihood to need a building permit.

5. Inspections and Permission to Occupy

Before a business is able to open its doors to customers, the City needs to conduct various inspections to ensure compliance with the Alberta Safety Codes.

After final inspection, the business is granted permission to occupy.

Even if no construction happens, they may still need to have their site inspected. This is prompted by the business licence application.

6. Referrals

There are other agencies that are required to do inspections on businesses, including Edmonton Fire Services and Alberta Health Services. The City will refer the business licence application to these agencies so they can complete their inspections.

7. Business Licence Granted

Once the business has completed steps one through six, the City will finalize the business license application.