

The Human Engine of Digital Transformation: Burnaby's People-Centred Approach to Planning Innovation

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Rethinking Digital Transformation

Digital transformation is often framed as a technology-first endeavour that promises to streamline operations, modernize and elevate customer service delivery. Yet, when tech solutions are introduced without meaningful engagement from the people who use them, friction and resistance can stall progress.

In planning practice, this paradox is especially pronounced. While digital tools promise efficiency and innovation, their success depends on how well they align with how people work, what they value and they culture they operate in.

Technology as Enabler, People as Driver

The City of Burnaby's approach to digital transformation reflects a growing recognition that people and not platforms are the true engine of change. The City's continuous improvement framework for permitting puts people at the centre of transformation. It emphasizes that while technology facilitates transformation, sustained progress depends on the people who provide context, creativity, and continuity.

A key example is the Development Approvals Process (DAP) Program, launched in 2023 to improve permit processing times, customer experience, transparency, and efficiency across five core development processes: rezoning, subdivision, preliminary plan approval (PPA), and residential and commercial building permits.

Through DAP, a Lean Six Sigma review of residential building permits, beginning with new home construction, identified three foundational drivers of people-centred transformation: early engagement, digital literacy, and a culture of adaptability.

- Early engagement builds trust and ensures technology responds to real user needs.
- Digital literacy equips staff with the skills and confidence to adopt new tools.
- Adaptability fosters a mindset of continuous improvement, where experimentation is encouraged and failure is safe.

Case Study: Residential Permitting Reform

In January 2023, Burnaby kicked off an initiative to tackle long approval timelines for new home construction. The project, named R1, initially involved a Lean review of the residential building permit process for single- and two-family dwellings. When the Province of BC introduced Bill 44, later that year, requiring municipalities to allow 3 to 6 dwelling units on lots zoned for single- and two-family uses, Burnaby expanded the review to include all Small Scale Multi-Unit Housing (SSMUH) building typologies. The City also consolidated 12 residential zoning districts into a new R1 SSMUH District.

The R1 initiative focused on three things: streamlining process, enabling projects and empowering people. The Lean review included an overhaul of business processes, including introducing a new engineering pre-application stage, updated forms, standardized requirements, and time tracking. These improvements were supported by tech enhancements and digital tools: an executive dashboard for KPI analysis and reporting, a digital submission portal, and an application information portal. The project also introduced changes in human resourcing side of the permit review process such as how files are assigned and how and when reviewers provide input. New staff roles supported greater collaboration and responsiveness, and weekly team huddles and a dedicated SharePoint site created a single source of truth, enabling consistent and confident reviews. A strong change management strategy unified process, technology, and people changes to drive impact.

The result? A sustained decline in permit processing times (Figure 1). This graph shows the end-to-end residential permitting times, from when a customer applies to when the permit is approved.

Before introducing process changes in April 2023, the 12 month rolling average for end-to-end processing times was almost 180 days, falling well below customer expectations. By streamlining application intake, refining file assignment and reviews, Burnaby

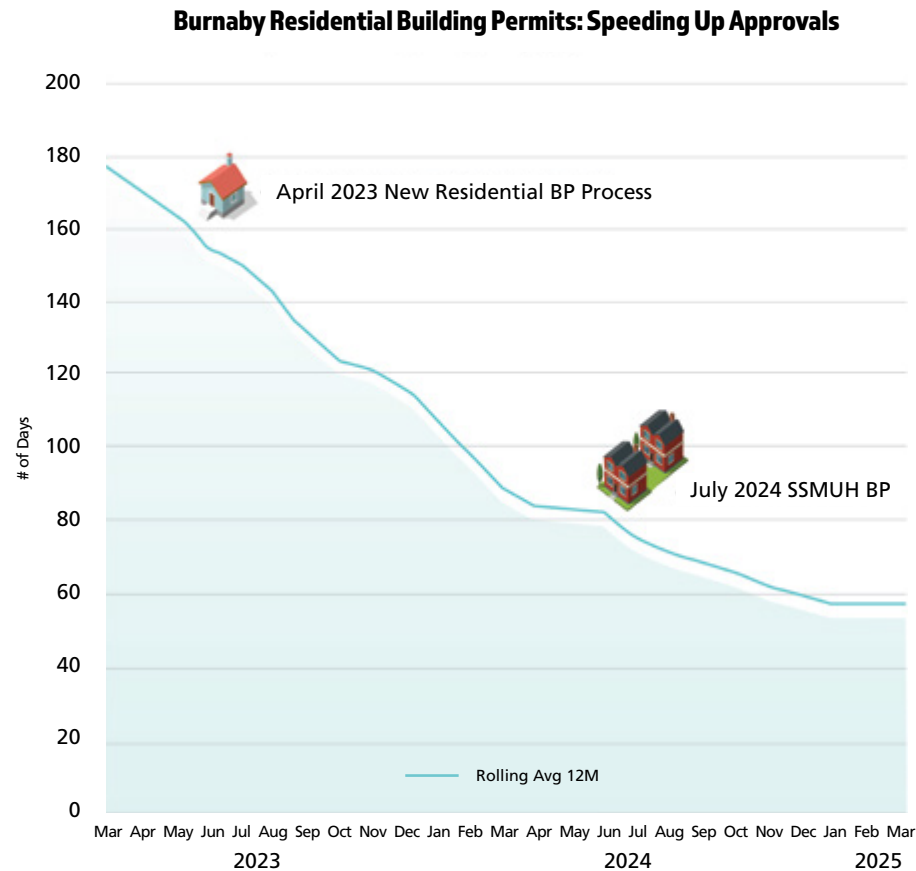


Figure 1

achieved a significant and steady decrease in permitting times.

These gains continued even after the introduction of more complex SSMUH typologies in July 2024. Permitting timelines are now stable at 53 days, a 70% decrease compared to prior to the beginning of the lean review, and 59% since April 2023.

One small but impactful technology change was the introduction of a “chess clock” for time tracking. The clock allows staff to separate review time from applicant response time, giving a clearer picture of where delays were happening. Supported by digital literacy efforts and refined data analysis, this feature boosted transparency and reporting accuracy. Through the Microsoft Power BI platform, staff are able to visualize complex development data geospatially, monitor performance metrics, and assess resource allocation in real time. More than a dashboard, it’s a decision-support tool that informs planning practice, strengthens staff development, and fosters a culture of data-driven improvement.

The R1 initiative illustrated how a culture of adaptability can lay the foundation for broader

transformation. Robust change management and early wins helped normalize new processes and smoothed the adoption of subsequent changes, including new housing forms under SSMUH zoning, new financial requirements and updates to alteration permits. By integrating process redesign, staff empowerment and technology adoption, Burnaby through the R1 initiative achieved lasting and meaningful improvements in permitting efficiency.

Sustaining Change Through People

Burnaby continues to advance technology-forward projects that support planning and business transformation. Piloting generative AI zoning compliance software and expanding real-time dashboards for internal and public use are recent examples.

But technology implementation is only the beginning. Ongoing success depends on people to maintain, iterate and adapt tools to evolving needs, ensuring relevance and impact.

Conclusion: Planning for People

Burnaby’s experience reframes digital transformation as a human-first, tech-enabled

journey. By engaging early, building digital literacy, and fostering adaptability, planners can lead change that is both effective and enduring.

At the end of the day true transformation is not about the tools, it’s about the people who use them. When organizations invest in culture, capability, and collaboration, technology becomes a multiplier and not a barrier.

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