

Chicago Department of Buildings

2019 Budget Statement to the City Council Committee on the Budget and Government Operations

October 25, 2018

Judy Frydland, Commissioner

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Chicago's building industry is thriving and the Department of Buildings is working hard to support construction and investment in all communities of our city. In the last three years we have implemented several reforms that make it more cost-effective to build and easier to obtain permits through a streamlined, more user-friendly process. Our efforts to enhance and streamline the permit process, together with Chicago's building boom, resulted in a record number of 48,408 permits issued in 2017, and we are on track to surpass that number this year.

In 2018, DOB issued streamlined and updated rules for our popular self-certification permit program which expanded projects eligible to participate to include new construction of buildings for business and/or mercantile use up to four stories and 30,000 square feet, as well as tents and stages for special events. Through September 30, 2018, we've issued 2,758 self-certification permits. This is a seven percent increase over last year and a 17 percent increase over the average of the last three years.

In mid-November the Department of Buildings will roll out further enhancements to its online plan review system. Chicago was one of the first major cities to move most of its plan review function to an electronic system in 2012. Today, architects can submit plans from anywhere with an internet connection and multiple departments and divisions review the plans simultaneously. This has significantly reduced time to permit. Our E-Plan system and other permitting and inspection processes are considered best practice models in North America and abroad. The updated version coming online next month will improve usability and performance for architects and engineers based on customer feedback.

We are also pleased to announce that the Direct Developer Services pilot program will become a permanent program effective January 1, 2019. The Department initiated the pilot in 2016 with the goal of further streamlining and expediting plan reviews for large development projects. Through Direct Developer Services, the time it takes to permit large projects can be drastically reduced from several months to only a matter of weeks. More than 360 permits have been issued under Direct Developer Services since the program launched.

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Last year, we provided all our permit field inspectors with electronic tablets, allowing them to enter inspection results in real time. This has allowed inspectors to spend more time in the field available for inspections and less time on paperwork.

Trade licensing is also a major role of the Department. We license 12 different trades and regulate more than 25,000 licensees. While the overwhelming majority of licensed contractors are responsible and reputable, we have a handful of bad actors that were putting enormous demands on the Department's resources and compromising safety for workers and the public. In 2017, the City Council gave the Department additional tools to progressively discipline contractors who are caught breaking the rules or endangering public safety. In addition, a long sought-after initiative by the Department and aldermen to allow inspectors to work evenings and weekend hours was effectively implemented earlier this spring. These reforms have been tremendously successful in bolstering the City's efforts to identify and take action against bad contractors who do work without permits or work beyond the scope of a permit. The new inspection shifts combined with the passage of the Bad Actor ordinance has resulted in the suspension of permitting privileges for more than 60 contractors whose illegal work was compromising safety for workers and the public. Most importantly, these measures have spurred a real change in attitude in the field by deterring bad practices and leveling the playing field for contractors who play by the rules. To further these efforts, the Department established a working group between Buildings, BACP and Law and consumer fraud units from the Cook County State's Attorney and the Illinois Attorney General to share information on bad contractors and coordinate consumer fraud efforts.

Another key role of the Department is complaint-based inspections. Overall, response times by inspectors have improved significantly and our inspectors are spending more time in the field due to improved technology and our initiatives to reallocate resources and reassign inspectors. For heat related calls during winter, for which rapid responses are critical, the DOB has inspectors on the property within 24-48 hours. Through September 30, 2018, the Department completed 41,236 complaint-based inspections in response to 311 calls or online requests. Nearly a fourth of those requests are complaints about construction work without permits. From January 1, 2018 through September 30, 2018, DOB responded to 5,003 complaints for work without permits. The DOB takes these complaints seriously and responds to each and every complaint. While the number appears high at first glance, it's important to note that only about 15 percent of the total complaints are found to be actual cases of work without permits that result in enforcement action by DOB. This is consistent with overall inspection results of 311 complaints. Often complaints are duplicative, unfounded or inspectors are unable to gain entry to the building. As you know, DOB inspectors cannot force their way into people's homes. That said, we make every effort to conduct inspections

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In March, changes to the Chicago Electrical Code took effect. The DOB introduced the new Electrical Code last fall, making Chicago one of the first major cities to align with the National Electrical Code. The new Electrical Code advances sustainability and brings additional energy efficiency to our booming building industry. It improves safety requirements and can lower costs on electric bills for residents and businesses. The major effort to update the code was initiated by the Chicago Electrical Commission, which was reinstated in 2015 after a hiatus of 14 years. The transition to the new code was remarkably smooth and seamless due to extensive preparation and training prior to implementation as well as strong buy-in from the industry.

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Let me share with you additional details about our key accomplishments from 2018.

### **Permit Update**

As of September 30, 2018, DOB issued a total of 36,623 building permits. Through September 30, 2018, the city has collected \$33,932,961.59 in building permit fees.

Of the 36,623 permits issued as of September 30, 2018, 42 were issued through Developer Services, 139 permits were issued through Direct Developer Services, 8,682 through Standard Plan Review and 27,760 through the Easy Permit Process.

There are currently 40 high-rise buildings currently under construction, and 22 tower cranes are currently operating on construction sites in the city with two more pending installation. To date in 2018, 25 cranes have been erected and 55 have been operating on construction sites throughout Chicago.

### **Inspection Update**

DOB performs a wide variety of inspections each year, including annual technical inspections for buildings, signs, elevators and other devices; permit inspections; restaurant and other small business inspections; carnival rides and stages to ensure life safety during summer events; and

thousands of inspections in follow-up to complaints coming into the 311 CSR system with regard to local homes or businesses that may not be in compliance with the Municipal Code.

Our inspectors completed 180,582 inspections as of September 30, 2018 which includes 41,256 complaints closed via 311. To date in 2018, DOB has responded to 15 emergency incidents including building inspections post-fire and other incidents related to building structures.

### **Targeted Programs**

#### ***Vacant Buildings***

DOB works closely with the Chicago Police Department (CPD) to identify, secure and in some cases, demolish vacant buildings that can serve as a hub for criminal and gang activity. That successful working partnership with CPD continues with the focus on vacant buildings in high-crime districts. To date, DOB has demolished 375 buildings to remove these hubs of violence from our communities. Additionally, DOB has boarded up and secured 1,824 properties through September 30, 2018.

In addition to working with CPD, DOB also received 5,312 vacant building related calls to 311 through October 1, 2018 and the DOB demolition unit inspections have led to 742 cases on the demolition call in Cook County Circuit Court. As of October 1, 2018, 4,991 vacant buildings have been registered as required under the vacant building ordinance and DOB completed 6,207 troubled building complaint inspections.

Our Forfeiture Program encourages redevelopment of vacant property through third-party ownership assigned in housing court. We continue to meet with our community groups and developers to educate them on the program.

#### ***Strategic Task Force***

DOB's Strategic Task Force (STF) works closely with CPD and the Department of Law to keep neighborhoods and school passages safe by holding building owners responsible for activities inside their building, encouraging landlords to properly screen all new tenants and taking action against those that are destroying communities. This includes the enforcement of the Drug and Gang House Ordinance and the Responsible Establishment Safe Neighborhood initiative (RESN), which targets troubled businesses.

Through September 30, 2018, STF has conducted 664 inspections of buildings referred to DOB by CPD, including 72 inspections of troubled business, of which 47 businesses were determined to have dangerous and hazardous conditions and were closed down. STF will continue to actively partner with CPD in 2019.

#### ***Signs***

DOB continues to work with the Illinois Sign Association and is actively working to address sign issues and make the sign permit process more efficient. Through the tools granted by the Bad Actor ordinance passed by City Council last year, the Department has cracked down on illegal sign installations throughout the City. To date we have suspended the licenses of 11 contractors and we have issued 10 cease and desist orders against unlicensed contractors.

### ***Life Safety Evaluations***

For many years, the Department has been diligently working to get buildings to achieve compliance with the Life Safety Evaluation ordinance. There are a total of 733 pre-1975, high-rise buildings that require LSE reports. We are pleased to report that there are only 16 buildings remaining that need to come into compliance with the ordinance and we are 98 percent complete. Fourteen of the buildings are working toward compliance in Circuit Court and the DOB is closely monitoring and working with the other two buildings.

### **Communications Strategy**

Building upon our regular communication with Aldermanic offices, in 2018, DOB continued ongoing communication to the design professional community, industry partners and the public at large, including:

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- Active social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook highlighting important DOB events and public safety information.
- Continued conversations with industry partners to listen to their ideas and explore additional opportunities to streamline our processes, identify policy initiatives and evaluate potential code updates.
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Chicago Department of Buildings

2019 Budget Statement to the City Council Committee on the Budget and Government Operations

October 25, 2018

Judy Frydland, Commissioner

Good morning Chairman Austin, Vice Chairman Ervin and Aldermen of the City Council. I am pleased to be here today to discuss the 2019 budget request for the Department of Buildings (DOB). I am grateful for the opportunity to serve Mayor Emanuel and the members of the City Council and work in partnership to support the economic development of our city and the safety and quality of life for its residents through the administration of the Chicago Building Code.

Chicago's building industry is thriving and the Department of Buildings is working hard to support construction and investment in all communities of our city. In the last three years we have implemented several reforms that make it more cost-effective to build and easier to obtain permits through a streamlined, more user-friendly process. Our efforts to enhance and streamline the permit process, together with Chicago's building boom, resulted in a record number of 48,408 permits issued in 2017, and we are on track to surpass that number this year.

In 2018, DOB issued streamlined and updated rules for our popular self-certification permit program which expanded projects eligible to participate to include new construction of buildings for business and/or mercantile use up to four stories and 30,000 square feet, as well as tents and stages for special events. Through September 30, 2018, we've issued 2,758 self-certification permits. This is a seven percent increase over last year and a 17 percent increase over the average of the last three years.

In mid-November the Department of Buildings will roll out further enhancements to its online plan review system. Chicago was one of the first major cities to move most of its plan review function to an electronic system in 2012. Today, architects can submit plans from anywhere with an internet connection and multiple departments and divisions review the plans simultaneously. This has significantly reduced time to permit. Our E-Plan system and other permitting and inspection processes are considered best practice models in North America and abroad. The updated version coming online next month will improve usability and performance for architects and engineers based on customer feedback.

We are also pleased to announce that the Direct Developer Services pilot program will become a permanent program effective January 1, 2019. The Department initiated the pilot in 2016 with the goal of further streamlining and expediting plan reviews for large development projects. Through Direct Developer Services, the time it takes to permit large projects can be drastically reduced from several months to only a matter of weeks. More than 360 permits have been issued under Direct Developer Services since the program launched.

Last fall we launched a pilot program to study the use of alternative plumbing materials and gather data on cost implications. Under the program, new buildings which are completely residential up to 4 stories may apply to use PVC for drain waste and vent pipe and CPVC for water distribution pipe, both above and below grade. To encourage the reuse of existing buildings, existing buildings up to 4 stories of any occupancy may participate in the pilot program. More than 330 have participated and the program has saved \$8.746 million for building owners and small developers working on projects throughout the City including affordable housing.

Last year, we provided all our permit field inspectors with electronic tablets, allowing them to enter inspection results in real time. This has allowed inspectors to spend more time in the field available for inspections and less time on paperwork.

Trade licensing is also a major role of the Department. We license 12 different trades and regulate more than 25,000 licensees. While the overwhelming majority of licensed contractors are responsible and reputable, we have a handful of bad actors that were putting enormous demands on the Department's resources and compromising safety for workers and the public. In 2017, the City Council gave the Department additional tools to progressively discipline contractors who are caught breaking the rules or endangering public safety. In addition, a long sought-after initiative by the Department and aldermen to allow inspectors to work evenings and weekend hours was effectively implemented earlier this spring. These reforms have been tremendously successful in bolstering the City's efforts to identify and take action against bad contractors who do work without permits or work beyond the scope of a permit. The new inspection shifts combined with the passage of the Bad Actor ordinance has resulted in the suspension of permitting privileges for more than 60 contractors whose illegal work was compromising safety for workers and the public. Most importantly, these measures have spurred a real change in attitude in the field by deterring bad practices and leveling the playing field for contractors who play by the rules. To further these efforts, the Department established a working group between Buildings, BACP and Law and consumer fraud units from the Cook County State's Attorney and the Illinois Attorney General to share information on bad contractors and coordinate consumer fraud efforts.

Another key role of the Department is complaint-based inspections. Overall, response times by inspectors have improved significantly and our inspectors are spending more time in the field due to improved technology and our initiatives to reallocate resources and reassign inspectors. For heat related calls during winter, for which rapid responses are critical, the DOB has inspectors on the property within 24-48 hours. Through September 30, 2018, the Department completed 41,236 complaint-based inspections in response to 311 calls or online requests. Nearly a fourth of those requests are complaints about construction work without permits. From January 1, 2018 through September 30, 2018, DOB responded to 5,003 complaints for work without permits. The DOB takes these complaints seriously and responds to each and every complaint. While the number appears high at first glance, it's important to note that only about 15 percent of the total complaints are found to be actual cases of work without permits that result in enforcement action by DOB. This is consistent with overall inspection results of 311 complaints. Often complaints are duplicative, unfounded or inspectors are unable to gain entry to the building. As you know, DOB inspectors cannot force their way into people's homes. That said, we make every effort to conduct inspections



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