Best Practices Guide

for Quality Plan Submittals

Nevada Quality of Plan Submittals Task Force

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2
Introduction 3
Communication 4
1. Designate a Single Point of Contact 4
2. Develop a User Guide for Submittals 5
3. Establish Procedures for Concurrent Submittals 6
4. Conduct Pre-submittal Meetings 6
5. Designate Project Technical Review Team 8
6. Hold Regularly Scheduled Inter-Departmental Meetings 9
7. Establish Workarounds for Proximity of Professional Staff 9
Standardizing the Process 10
1. Develop Checklists and Flow Charts 10
2. Establish predictable processes 11
Appendix A – Sample Checklist 12
Credits 14

Introduction

About This Guide

In July 2021 the **Quality of Plan Submittals Task Force (QPSTF)** was formed to address concerns surrounding the submittal process for obtaining permits. The submittal process can vary amongst public agencies, and this guide strives to assist with the process by offering best practices to make the submittal process more efficient and effective.

Nevada enjoys a reputation of being friendly to development and building. The best practices in the Guide are intended to illustrate ways that public agencies can better serve their constituents and ways that professionals can serve their clients.

The best practices in this Guide are organized around **improving communication** and **standardizing the submittal process**.

Each best practice details the benefits and challenges and includes recommendations for implementing them. The best practices seek to improve predictability, efficiency, timeliness, and quality.

Conventions Used in This Guide

After the need for a widely adopted and accepted best practices guide became clear, the task force identified four primary participants in the submittal process:

1. Clients – The terms “Owner”, “Builder”, or “Developer” may also be used
2. Professionals – May include Licensed Engineers, Land Surveyors, Architects, and Contractors
3. Public Agencies – State, county, or municipal agencies
4. Utility Companies – may be publicly owned, privately owned, or cooperatives (private organizations created by the government)

Roles and Responsibilities

Identifying and understanding the roles and responsibilities of the four participants listed above is an important first step in ensuring the submittal process runs smoothly. This guide will be most effective if each participant adopts policies/practices that supports their roles and responsibilities.

Objective

Where all three participants to the submittal process make use of these guidelines, **a reasonable goal is that 90% of the projects should be completed in three or less plan-check cycles**.

Communication

Improving Communication

The task force identified communication as one of the most important areas of concern in the submittal process. It was noted that smaller public agencies are sometimes more effective communicators than large public agencies, primarily because smaller agencies often speak with a single voice whereas large agencies often speak with multiple voices. Multiple voices often result in inconsistent feedback from review staff. Having multiple reviewers is perfectly ok as long as the reviewers apply or interpret codes uniformly.

The following Best Practices can be used to improve communication between stakeholders in the submittal process:

1. Designate a single point of contact or an electronic portal for managing submittal communications
2. Develop a user guide, separate and distinct from a checklist, for submittals
3. Establish procedures for concurrent submittals
4. For complex projects, consider scheduling a pre-submittal meeting, a meeting after first review, and a mandatory meeting if reviews exceed three
5. For non-complex projects consider a meeting after first review and a mandatory meeting if reviews exceed three
6. Designate project technical review team
7. Hold regularly scheduled inter-departmental meetings
8. Establish workarounds for proximity of professional staff

1. Designate a Single Point of Contact

Public Agencies

If staffing levels allow, agencies should designate one person or one department as a single point of contact to work with submittal applicants. Typically, this would be an individual from either the engineering or planning department. Similarly, each project should have a single point of contact throughout the review and approval process. An example of this would be the planning manager receiving an application for a land development plan, coordinating its review by other individuals and agencies, ensuring the plan is placed on appropriate agendas, and communicating outstanding issues with the applicant. This also requires the single point of contact to actively communicate with any of the necessary reviewers to ensure there is clarity around expectations and communications. Further consideration should be given to making the department that accepts development applications the one-stop-shop for all other agency submittal approvals regarding development (i.e., zoning permits, driveway permits, etc.). The duties of such a position within the department would generally include:

- → Responsibility for intake of submittals, including a completeness review of the submittal prior to acceptance into the review queue. Agencies should not allow any files or sheets within a file to be swapped or added after a document is submitted for review.
- → Agencies should require the professional to submit a response to all the comments made by the agency in the previous review.
- → Coordinating the review of the land development/subdivision application among the different reviewers, including reviews done by third party consultants, such as traffic, and reviews done by outside agencies such as NV Energy, Southwest Gas, Southern Nevada Water Authority, TMWA.
- → Tracking the project through the review process, including clearly communicating to the applicant which meetings they are scheduled for and what the applicant needs to provide for such meetings.

In lieu of a person serving as a single point of contact, an electronic portal could serve a similar role. All communications would occur via the portal and all participants in the submittal process would have access to communications. The electronic portal would serve as a single source of information for the submittal participants.

Professionals and Clients

Similarly, professionals and clients should also designate a single point of contact for each submittal. Professionals and clients may designate others to reach out to agency staff when appropriate to aid in growth and development of staff. However, every effort must be made by the professional to ensure there is adequate internal coordination to avoid different people contacting agency staff members asking the same question.

In the absence of an agency electronic portal that provides for a single source of communication, professionals and clients can consider using electronic tools, such as Bluebeam, that may be helpful in providing a single source of communication for managing their submittal process.

When submitting documents to an agency for review, professional and clients must submit a complete document for review. Submitting incomplete documents to get a "holding spot" in the review queue wastes resources and creates significant inefficiencies in the submittal review process. After submitting a complete set of documents for review and receiving the agencies review comments, professionals should submit written responses to all the comments made by the reviewer/s. If there are more than three reviews, professionals and the clients should request/attend a meeting with the agency to get clarification on the agency's submittal concerns for the project.

2. Develop a User Guide for Submittals

Public Agencies

Each agency should create a brief reference guide to help applicants navigate the submittal process. The reference guide should contain all applicable information regarding the submittal process, including who reviews the submittal with contact information (including outside agencies) and which boards and commissions make decisions and/or recommendations. The reference guides should include step-by-step directions for the submittal review process, as well as any applicable forms and fees. The guide is not intended to specify submittal requirements or the plan requirements but is to describe what is required for the applicant to navigate the submittal process. The guide should be written in plain English so that non-professionals can understand the agency's submittal process.

Agencies should review the guide at least annually to keep it up to date. The guide should be clear and concise and contain information that is as complete as possible. The agency should implement proper document control processes. Changes and updates to the guide must have an effective date and provide for a grace period to allow stakeholders time to understand and implement the changes.

The guide should include:

- Explanation of activities required, and permits issued by each authority
- Description of each agency, department, authority, board and commission involved
- Meeting times and schedules
- Contact information for relevant people and/or agencies
- Online instructions on how to obtain the appropriate information

Professionals and Clients

Professionals and clients should thoroughly familiarize themselves with, and abide by, the guidelines provided by the agency. When a submittal varies from the guidelines provided by the agency, professionals should include a brief explanation of any deviations from the guideline requirements.

3. Establish Procedures for Concurrent Submittals

Public Agencies

For projects which require permits from more than one agency, the option to submit concurrent applications can save review time and encourage greater collaboration among agency officials and regulators. There are numerous outside agencies or third-party consultants that also review and/or approve submittals. In some instances, this is worked into the agency review process, and for others it is a separate review. In any case, these reviews should happen concurrently where possible. Outside agencies may already have, or could develop, specific policies on how concurrent reviews are addressed and any related limitations to their review. Reviews that can happen concurrently with a submittal include:

- **Water** – Any submittal which will include a hookup to a public water system should have its lateral and/or main line extensions reviewed at the same time the applicant's project is going through the agency submittal process.

- **Sewer** –Any sewer laterals, proposed main lines, or septic systems should be reviewed by the appropriate authority at the same time as the project is being reviewed by the permitting agency.

- **Transportation** – Larger land development/subdivision applications will also require a review by the Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) and/or the Regional Transportation Commission. This can include the completion of a Traffic Impact Study, which the applicant would complete, but NDOT/RTC/Public Agency would review. The review of this aspect of an application can be time consuming, and both the applicant and the agency need to be aware of the timing of this review and its impact on the submittal review schedule.

- **Stormwater** – Depending upon the amount of impervious coverage proposed in a development, the preparation of a stormwater management plan as part of the submittal process may be required.

Submittals that include dry utilities such as NV Energy, SW Gas, Cox, etc must be submitted to a utility company prior to making a submittal to an agency. Agencies require dry utility improvements to be signed by the utility company prior to submittal approval by an agency. If the plans are not submitted sufficiently in advance for the utility to review/approve/sign, it can cause substantial delays to the submittal review process.

Professionals and Clients

In terms of processing applications concurrently, the responsibility for submitting necessary applications to the appropriate agencies must be clear to the applicant and the agency.

4. Conduct Pre-submittal Meetings

Public Agencies

An agency should set requirements for a pre-submittal meeting. A pre-submittal meeting can occur during the design phase or any time prior to or after a professional has complete documents for a submittal. A pre-submittal meeting provides an agency the opportunity to explain the review and approval process to the professional or client and to discuss the documentation required for a complete submittal. Checklists and timelines, as well as a list of minimum standards that submittals must contain to be reviewed, can be provided. A pre-submittal meeting also allows for the informal discussion of a project and can bring to light any potential issues with the submittal process.

A pre-submittal meeting should occur well in advance of any project deadlines for bringing the project to fruition. At a minimum, a pre-submittal meeting should include the presentation of a sketch plan or conceptual plan for review by all those attending. Other pre-submittal documents such as point of connection for sewer and hydraulic analysis

for water, should be available at the pre-submittal meeting to facilitate efficient feedback from the agencies attending the meeting.

In addition to a pre-submittal meeting, the client may also wish to discuss a sketch plan during a regularly scheduled project coordination meeting, or possibly during a public hearing or neighborhood meeting, depending on the scope and nature of the project.

In addition to the client, professional and agency staff, the pre-submittal meeting could include representatives from each of the following:

- Community Development or Planning
- Public Works
- Building Department
- Regional Flood Control
- Regional Transportation Commission
- Water and Sewer Authority
- Fire Department
- Nevada Department of Transportation
- Third Party Consultants/Professionals
- Utility Companies (when appropriate for a specific project)
- Due to the number of agencies involved in the review process, each reviewing agency should commit to being present for a pre-submittal meeting.

If multiple agencies/reviewers are present at a pre-submittal meeting, someone should be designated to document the discussion, comments, and suggestions. Otherwise, the content of important matters discussed may be lost in the absence of a well-organized process.

If a sketch plan is presented, the issues discussed will be relevant only to the information provided at that time. Any change to the plan not discussed during the pre-submittal meeting may render previous comments and suggestions irrelevant. Every effort must be made by an agency to provide clear and correct direction to the professional/client. When an agency is circuitous in its wants/desires/requirements for a project, it results in costly re-designs for the client and inserts unnecessary delays in delivering community project benefits.

If an agency adopts a pre-submittal meeting process, it should be formally adopted and be incorporated into an agencies standard process as a means of informing professionals and clients of this option for initiating a project that will be subject to an agency's submittal process.

Professionals and Clients

Professionals and clients should participate in all pre-design/submittal meetings as they provide a forum for informal review to discuss a proposal and the associated requirements well in advance of the required submittal process. The process can save time and money for all parties. It also allows the parties to develop a good working relationship and build communication channels that can prevent confusion later in the submittal process.

5. Designate Project Technical Review Team

Public Agencies

When a submittal is made to a public agency, the agency may choose to conduct a coordinated review of the submittal. This process differs from the pre-submittal meeting in that, at this stage, an application has been formally submitted for consideration of approval.

A project technical review team should consist of the public agency staff and representatives from other agencies that will be reviewing the submittal. Typically, the applicant is not present during the technical review.

In addition to providing a forum for a coordinated review, the comments, suggestions, and questions that arise from each of the reviewing parties can be consolidated into a single review letter/report to be provided to the applicant. This review letter or report can be emailed to the applicant once completed. The technical review team should consist of representatives from the agencies that will ultimately review and approve the submittal.

A meeting, if needed, should be held with the applicant to review the comments in the coordinated review report. A technical plan review will typically consist of at least some of the following, and may include other topics:

- Water and Sewer services
- Traffic and access permitting
- NPDES approvals
- Environmental issues
- Transit, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities
- Erosion and sedimentation control
- Fire protection
- Code requirements
- Area, bulk, and density requirements
- Landscaping, lighting, open space
- Parking

6. Hold Regularly Scheduled Inter-Departmental Meetings

Public Agencies

Interdepartmental meetings provide an opportunity for sharing information and updates between departments within a public agency. All public agency departments may have input in the submittal process, and a regularly scheduled meeting would help each department understand the processes specific to the other departments. This meeting is not intended for specific submittal reviews but is intended to provide improved coordination including updates on current practices and any anticipated changes in those practices. When inter-departmental meetings result in changes to the submittal process, industry notices should be published to make stakeholders aware of the changes.

The goal of regularly scheduled inter-departmental meetings within an agency should be to establish predictable processes for submittals/permitting.

7. Establish Workarounds for Proximity of Professional Staff

Public Agencies

Physical proximity of agency staff is not always possible due to the geographic locations of individual buildings. In addition to agency staff there are also other departments, project inspectors, and others involved in the submittal process that may have offices in other locations, making them less available for in-person joint reviews and discussions. While a lack of physical proximity can inhibit the ability to conduct simultaneous reviews of plans, technology can be used to bridge this gap and allow for easier interaction among staff. The use of internet resources, including but not limited to email, shared document editing, and multi-user document viewing, as well as teleconferencing, would allow for simultaneous review of plans and better interagency coordination.

Agencies should consider a virtual review/comment meeting with the professional and client after the first submittal review to ensure the professional and client understand the review comments and any requirements that need to be met prior to a subsequent submittal. For agencies that cannot accommodate a virtual review/comment meeting after the first review, the meeting should be considered mandatory if the submittal is not approved by a pre-determined point, such as after a third review. The meeting should also include the client to ensure no miscommunication between the project stakeholders.

Implementation

- Digital copies of plans could be received with all applications and then distributed to all reviewers so that simultaneous review can take place.
- If needed, teleconferencing is a method of allowing all reviewers to discuss a plan simultaneously.
- Municipalities could assign one individual to be the “project coordinator” responsible for collecting and forwarding comments from all reviewers. The project coordinator could also initiate a teleconference so that plans could be discussed by all reviewers simultaneously as needed.
- Plan reviewers could hold meetings on a regular basis, either in person or via teleconference, to allow all reviewers to discuss potential issues with the plans. This would allow everyone involved to be aware of general concerns that should be considered when making comments.

Professionals and Clients

Physical proximity of professionals and clients should not preclude in-person reviews and discussions. Technology can be used to bridge this gap and allow for easier interaction among all parties. Video conferencing and sharing of computer screens can be an effective means of collaborating during the submittal process.

Standardizing the Process

Predictability and consistency of the submittal process within an agency advances the goal of more efficient submittal process. Professionals and clients should know what to expect from agencies and staff when they interact through the process. This includes submittal requirements, plan requirements, public meeting schedules, and review timeframes.

One of the most common frustrations voiced by private-sector participants was preparing similar information many ways. For example, the forms used for, and information required by a public agency could be coordinated and standardized so that the same information is required for similar processes in different agencies. For the most part, information required to apply for a variance could be consistent regionally. An agency should consider only requiring what is necessary per code/statute in lieu of what is solely an agency preference. If there is a regional design manual, an agency should align its requirements rather than inserting its preferences into the submittal requirements.

This best practice promotes efficient permitting because it employs a standard across agencies. Public agencies have a great deal of autonomy, and boards and commissions exercise varying degrees of discretion. Many participants believe there could be consistency among the agencies to improve predictability and efficiency while maintaining individual authority within an agency.

The following best practices, described in more detail on the following pages, can be used to standardize an agency submittal/permitting process:

1. Develop checklists and flow charts
2. Establish predictable processes

1. Develop Checklists and Flow Charts

Public Agencies

As part of the planning or permitting process, providing a checklist to the applicant can provide valuable information which can help both the applicant and the agency. A checklist should include, but may not be limited to, a timeline for the review and approval process, clear submittal requirements, information on fees, and information pertaining to other agencies from which approvals may be required. The checklist should provide detail on all relevant processes in a concise and easily understandable format. In addition to a checklist, it is recommended that a flowchart(s) along with a general timeline be created to assist the applicant.

Similar to the agency submittal guideline document, the agency should implement proper document control processes for checklists and flow charts. Changes and updates must have an effective date and provide for a grace period to allow stakeholders time to understand and implement any changes.

When developing checklists, agencies must be sensitive to implementing standards that avoid duplication of information that is requested. Duplicated information often leads to contradictions and reduces clarity for reviewers. A checklist can introduce duplication of information when items are added to the checklist without attention to items that are already included on the checklist.

The links below are checklists and flowcharts used by agencies that participated in drafting this document. Appendix A provides a template that agencies can use to build their own checklists.

Sample Checklists

Clark County Water Reclamation District

- Plan Intake Checklist
- Plan Review Checklist

City of Henderson

- Civil Improvements Submittal Checklist

City of North Las Vegas Public Works

- Civil Improvement Plan Checklist

Sample Flowcharts

City of Henderson

- Development Guidelines

Professionals and Clients

Professionals and clients should abide by the checklists and flowcharts provided by an agency. The applicant must be aware that information contained in checklists and flowcharts will not be exhaustive. An agency will likely include a disclaimer that a checklist does not constitute the professional's full legal obligations in the submittal process.

2. Establish Predictable Processes

Public Agencies

To aid professionals/clients in the submittal process, the agency should establish a consistent predictable process for submittal reviews. The process should be clearly communicated and easy to understand. Agencies should also be aware that professionals that submit incomplete documents are violating Nevada Administrative Code chapter 625 and the agency is within their purview to file a complaint against the professional with the state Board.

Where possible, agencies can provide options for expedited submittal reviews.

Professionals and Clients

Professionals and clients should abide by an agency's submittal process and make every effort to provide complete submittals at the first time of submission. On occasion professionals have made incomplete submittals to be placed in the waiting queue, despite only having preliminary documents. At a minimum, this slows the review process for all submittals and creates extreme inefficiencies in the entire submittal process for all involved stakeholders. More importantly, submitting incomplete submittals to an agency is a violation of Nevada Administrative Code chapter 625. Incomplete submittals are a violation of NAC 625.610 (6) and/or (7) and could also be a violation of other NAC chapter 625 regulations depending on the specifics of the submittal. An agency can refer the violation to the state Board for investigation and it could result in disciplinary action against the professional.

Professionals in "responsible charge of the work" must thoroughly review all submittals before stamping and signing to ensure submittals are complete and prepared in a proper and professional manner. If possible, the submittal should undergo an in-house quality control review to ensure the submittal is project specific and meets agency requirements. Professionals that use internal checklists and quality control measures not only provide a better service to their clients but also significantly reduce the submittal review cycle.

Appendix A – Sample Checklist

The following example is intended to be a reference for agencies to use when creating their own checklists. Whether the final checklist is electronic or paper, each agency will have its own specific requirements. The following example includes the basics, such as project name, date, project type, reviewer, department/discipline, which should be applicable to all agencies.

(Name of Agency) Plan Review Checklist			
Date Received			(Today's Date)
Project Name			(Project Name)
Project Number			(XXXX-1234)
Project Description			(Include enough information to describe what type of work is being done – ie. engineering and discipline or surveying and job type)
Submitted by			(Name of individual submitting – include company name, address, phone, email, etc.)
Review Type			(ie. 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, Final, Rev)
✓	✗	N/A	Pre-submittal Checklist
			Paper or electronic submittal?
			If electronic, verify all agency electronic submittal requirements are met
			Page size (specify if applicable)
			Number of pages in TOC matches number of pages in submittal
			Project name matches name on plans
			All sheets reference the correct project/revision number
			Review project scope to determine if this is the correct checklist
			This checklist applies to new construction
			This checklist does not apply to existing or revisions (use XXX checklist instead)
			Professional(s)
			Electronic stamp with signature and date on cover/title/first sheet of each discipline
			Digital signature applied to cover/title/first sheet for their discipline (refer to agency requirements)
			Professional license is from Nevada?
			Verify contact (POC) is correct
			Verify that client/developer and each professional is correctly entered into agency contact list

First Submittal

Date	Agency Disc.	Status	Details	Attached to	Created by	Updated by	Changes Y/N	✓	✗
			Insert heading type (ie. COMMENT, CORRECTION, RESPONSE) then enter narrative text						
Second Submittal									
			Insert heading type (ie. COMMENT, CORRECTION, RESPONSE) then enter narrative text						
Third Submittal									
			Insert heading type (ie. COMMENT, CORRECTION, RESPONSE) then enter narrative text						

Credits

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Carson City

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Westwood

Las Vegas Valley Water District

Southern Nevada Water Authority

Wright Engineers

GCW Engineering

City of Henderson

NV Energy

Lumos & Associates

Atlas

Wood Rodgers

Kleinfelder

WMK Surveying

Clark County Water Reclamation District

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CFA

City of North Las Vegas