

# 2015 Achievement Awards Virginia Association of Counties

## APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2015.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

Locality: Prince William County  
Program Title: FMO Process and Customer Service Improvement Plan  
Program Category: Customer Service

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Lance McClintock  
Title: Assistant Chief  
Department: Prince William County Fire & Rescue  
Complete Mailing Address: 1 County Complex Court, Suite 200  
Telephone # 703-792-6364 Fax # 703-792-7691  
E-mail: lmcclintock@pwcgov.org

### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: Christopher E Martino  
Title: Deputy County Executive  
Signature: Christopher E Martino

**VACo Achievement Award Entry**  
**Prince William County Department of Fire and Rescue**  
**FMO Process and Customer Service Improvement Plan**

**Overview:**

The Prince William County Fire Marshal's Office (FMO) has been proactive in developing new processes that improve business efficiency, economic development, and customer service. The initiatives taken by the FMO focused on three new processes. The improvement to customer service and economic development consists of three distinct processes that enable developers and builders to gain a full understanding of FMO processes and ways to take full advantage of opportunities that will expedite the plan review time.

With the use of the first process, a *Master Plan on File* for Fire Protection Permits for single family home models with NFPA 13D systems was developed. This process allowed the fire sprinkler systems for each house model to be approved and placed in a master file for repeated use without resubmitting the same plan each time. This dramatically reduces the review time for additional submissions with the same house type.

The second process was to implement a Fire Alarm Systems Plan Review *Walk-thru* Process. This now allows contractors to avoid the standard submittal process and reduced plan review time from forty-two days to a single day.

The third process was to develop and conduct a Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar. This seminar provides industry specific information for Prince William County to all developers, builders, and contractors. The Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar consolidates information regarding our plan review and inspection processes. The inspection seminar also provides the FMO the ability to educate our contractors/customers on the processes and different services available to help them succeed in future activity and growth when developing in Prince William County.

## **Brief Summary of the FMO Process Improvement Plan**

As the local economy improves, developers and builders have an unstable window of opportunity to build and develop properties and communities. With the unpredictability of interest rates and construction loans, the time line associated with constructing a building becomes more critical. The result is an increased number of submittals for fire protection systems that must be completed within a shortened time frame. The Fire Marshal's Office (FMO) has seen approximately 400 residential sprinkler systems submitted to our office during the course of a single year in addition to other commercial and residential projects. This situation created new plan review times to exceed our desired goal of 30 days for the initial review. The increased plan review time line resulted in more delays due to the number of resubmittals, rejection letters and phone calls associated with a plan rejection.

As a result of the increased delays, the estimated review time for plans exceeded 6 weeks. Our strong commitment to customer service motivated our office to become proactive and develop innovative solutions in anticipation of the future increase in workload for the upcoming year. In order for the new process to work, it became necessary for the FMO staff to work with various governmental departments including the Development Services and Information Technology departments and gain acceptance and cooperation. The *Master Plan on File* for Fire Protection Permits was the first process put into action.

The *Master Plan on File* single family home models with NFPA 13D systems was created. Fire sprinkler systems for each house model are able to be approved and placed in a master file for repeated use without resubmitting the same plan each time. This end result reduces the review time for additional plan submissions with the same house type.

This year, the FMO added Fire Alarm plan reviews for systems containing less than 10 devices into this *Walk-thru* process. This enables small tenant spaces the ability to gain occupancy in a more efficient manner. The owners of the small tenant spaces are able to significantly reduce the amount of time and money spent during the construction process. Small businesses are able to have all fire protection permits that include hood, sprinkler, and fire alarm systems reviews expedited. Beginning in September 2004, the FMO successfully implemented a plan review *Walk-thru* process for fire sprinkler systems with 40 sprinkler heads or less, underground fire lines and kitchen hood suppression systems.

The *Walk-thru* process provides a method of review for less complex fire protection system designs to be approved within the same business day. This process has provided the customer/contractor an expedited plan review process that works well with their respective construction timelines. Each *Walk-thru* is designated a 30 minute time slot which includes time for a review, stamped approval, and administrative processing associated with the permit for the types of fire protection systems.

In order to assist contractors to better understand the specific fire protection requirements for Prince William County, the FMO has developed a Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar as the critical third component to improve and expedite economic development and customer service. With the complex level of building and fire codes the developers, builders, and contractors all have a difficult task to ensure their projects are meeting code standards and regulations. The Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar was the FMO's strategy of demonstrating our commitment to customer service by effectively and efficiently consolidating information regarding our plan review and inspection processes. Together, the combination of these processes has enabled the FMO to provide more services

without having to increase the staffing needs of the department. The end result amounted to a cost savings benefit to both the customer and taxpayers of Prince William County.

### **Process Improvements and Initiatives of the FMO**

The Prince William County Fire Marshal Office (FMO) was proactive in developing a *Master Plan on File* process to help expedite the needs of the developers and the members of the community. This situation was important due to the unpredictable nature of the economy and possible impact on new construction. The level of growth throughout the county has rapidly expanded causing an increase in the number of submittals for fire protection systems that still must be completed within the same 30 day review time. In order to meet the growing needs of the county, the FMO established a process that accommodated the approximate additional 400 residential sprinkler systems that were submitted to our office during the course of a single year.

This situation created a timeframe that were in excess of our standard review period. The increase in plan review time would result in more delays due to the number of resubmittals, rejection letters, and phone calls associated with a rejection. As a result of the increased delay, the estimated time for plan review exceeded a 6 week period. Our commitment to improving customer service motivated our office to develop an innovative solution in anticipation of the future workload for the upcoming year. In order for the new process to work, our staff needed to meet with various governmental departments including Development Services and the Department of Information Technology.

The *Master Plan on File* single family home models with NFPA 13D systems was created. Fire sprinkler systems for each house model are able to be approved and placed in a master file for repeated use without resubmitting the same plan each time. This end result reduces the review time for additional plan submissions with the same house type.

In 2015, the FMO added Fire Alarm plan reviews for systems containing less than 10 devices into this *Walk-thru* process. This new addition to the *Walk-thru* process has enabled small businesses to expedite plan review processes to ultimately obtain occupancy in a more economical time period. Since 2004, the FMO has been utilizing a plan review *Walk-thru* process for fire sprinkler systems with 40 sprinkler heads or less, underground fire lines and kitchen hood suppression systems.

This enables small tenant spaces the ability to gain occupancy in a more efficient manner. The owners of the small tenant spaces are able to significantly reduce the amount of time and money spent during the construction process. Small businesses are able to have all fire protection permits that include hood, sprinkler, and fire alarm systems reviews expedited utilizing the *Walk-thru* process. This proven process has provided the customer/contractor an expedited plan review process that works well with their respective construction timelines. Each *Walk-thru* is designated a 30 minute time slot which includes time for a review, stamped approval, and administrative processing associated with the permit for the types of fire protection systems.

In order to assist contractors to better understand the fire protection requirements for Prince William County, the FMO has developed a *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* as the critical third component to improve and expedite economic development and customer service. With the ever growing complexity level of building and fire codes everyone involved experiences a difficult mission to ensure their projects are meeting code standards and regulations. The *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* was the FMO's solution to honoring our commitment to customer service by effectively and efficiently consolidating information regarding our plan review and inspection processes.

## **Current Problems and Challenges facing the FMO**

Residential home builders are facing ever increasing time constraints for new construction. All building trades are required to follow certain sequences during the construction phase. If a trade is delayed for any reason, the entire project will be delayed. With the unstable economy and interest rates being key factors when building and buying homes, the occupancy and settlement dates are critical. The Fire Marshal's Office has anticipated the demand on the construction industry and has received an influx of commercial and residential fire suppression plans. With an increase in the number of fire protection plans to review with a limited number of staff, the goal to review new plans within 30 days of submittal was being exceeded on a regular basis. When this situation occurs, it negatively impacts all the time lines for the construction industry. The *Master Plan on File* process is now being utilized to reduce time delays and improve customer service to all members of the community.

The *Walk-thru* process was also implemented to improve the review time of plans and to provide superior customer service. Fire alarm contractors were originally required to submit plans through the traditional plan review process that had a departmental goal with a 30 day review time. For small fire alarm systems, this plan review time has a negative impact on small business. The FMO has posted all information regarding the *Walk-thru* process on the Prince William County website, supplies hand-outs at the Plan Intake counter, and sends out the information to contractors with the approved plans.

Third, Prince William County has different developers, builders and contractors that work in various jurisdictions and construction related processes throughout Northern Virginia. The *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* was developed as a way to improve



customer service and streamline processes by providing clear guidelines and requirements for the industry. The customers have benefited from comprehensive and consistent information.

### **Program Results and Success**

Prince William County did not incur any additional cost associated with the implementation of these three new processes. The implementation of these new processes provided a cost savings benefit by improving the efficiency of the plan reviewers. Currently, additional staffing is not required in order to facilitate the approval of the increased number of plans submitted. Finally, the *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* provided clear and concise direction to the contractors on all processes involving fire protection and safety systems.

The normal review time has been decreased to approximately a single day. Without the *Master Plan on File* process, projects such as Potomac Shores who predict building 400 houses per year, the plan review times will increase due to the pure volume of plans and inevitably prohibit us to meet our 30 day plan review goal. The increased plan review times would create a negative effect on the construction industry.

First, the current fire sprinkler contractor designers who have submitted a *Master Plan on File* are also currently experiencing the benefits of the new *Walk-thru* process. The home builders typically need the sprinkler contractor to be installing the fire sprinkler system approximately three weeks after they begin construction. The *Master Plan on File* process will allow the sprinkler contractor to get their fire protection permit and enable them to begin construction within their planned time frame. This new process provides a positive solution for the builders, contractors, homeowners and the County. The additional time saved in plan review

will also benefit all other contractors, owners, and customers who are submitting through the standard process.

Second, the *Walk-thru* process has proven to be extremely successful and well received by the construction community. The face to face interface with the customer is very valuable in situations when there is a potential code discrepancy. Any potential corrections can be addressed immediately. This eliminates the need to reject the plans and have the customer leave to make corrections, and return at a later time. In addition, the *Walk-thru* process provides a personal experience for the customer and allows them to get direct feedback from the plan reviewer.

Third, the annual *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* was performed in December, 2014. The contractors in attendance were provided vital process updates along with printed and digital documentation. At the conclusion of the seminar, a customer satisfaction survey was conducted and the results were extremely positive. 92% of the responses met or exceeded their expectations and found the information useful. 94% of the attendees agreed or strongly agreed that the plan review information was relevant to their company's needs.

The FMO's ability to design and implement these new processes has provided an innovative solution to improving workflow between county agencies and contractors, improved economic development, and increased the level of customer service. These three processes have promoted intergovernmental cooperation within our local government offices and third-party private enterprises. Further, the combination of these new processes could be implemented in other jurisdictions as a model to improve their workflow and customer service satisfaction. As an example, the FMO *Master Plan on File* Process can easily be adapted to meet the needs of contractors working in other jurisdictions that are building similar planned communities.

Finally, the *Walk-thru* and the *Fire Protection Plan Review and Inspection Seminar* have increased the number of residential homes containing sprinkler systems in the county increasing the safety standards for the county. While more safety guidelines were put into place, the amount of time required for the initial plan review decreased. As a result of the combination of processes, the FMO has been able to reduce the original plan review time of in excess of 6 weeks to a single day in many cases resulting in increased development, interdepartmental coordination, and customer service to all contractors and residents of Prince William County.