

June 2015

Funding Added to Buildings Department for Reform Measures, Speed Processing of Affordable Housing Plans

Three months after calling for “fundamental reform” at the Department of Buildings (DOB) in his State of the City address, the Mayor intends to increase the agency’s budget by \$120 million over the next four years as part of a plan to expand the department’s staff and improve operations. The new funds are projected to cover a variety of initiatives beginning in 2016, including expediting plan approvals and building inspections, intensifying enforcement activities, and ensuring the agency has sufficient staff to implement the Mayor’s affordable housing plan. (Unless otherwise noted, years refer to city fiscal years.)

The funds for the new initiatives added in the executive budget, which total \$29 million next year, are projected to raise the agency’s planned spending to \$149 million in 2016—about a 25 percent increase over what the Mayor allocated in his preliminary budget released in February. The new funds will allow DOB to make investments in information technology, improve its facilities, and hire an additional 194 staff members (an increase of about 15 percent) in 2016. Another 126 new staff members are expected to be hired with the new funding in 2017.

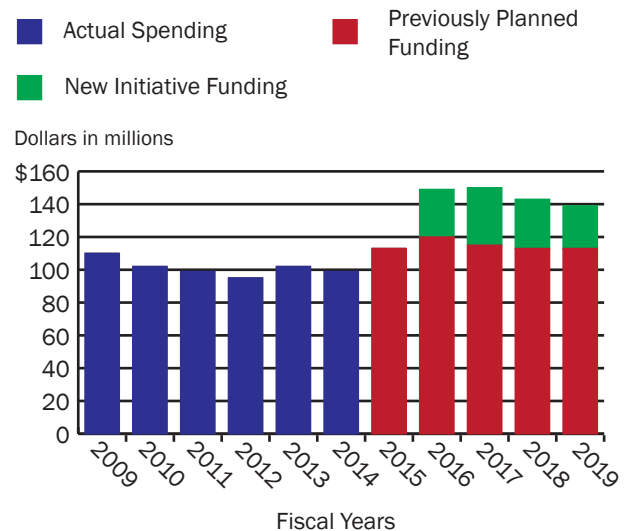
The increased funding comes as job filings with the department have increased 16 percent in the first four months of 2015 compared with the same period last year, while wait times for reviews of new building plans and major alterations increased by 86 percent and 17 percent, respectively. Besides adding staff to reduce wait times, the department is also increasing its enforcement and anticorruption efforts after 11 employees were arrested in February on charges of accepting bribes.

About half of the new positions (159) set to be hired over the next two years will be plan examiners, who review new building plans and building alteration applications. This will

increase the DOB plan examination staff by 70 percent at a cost of about \$13 million per year (excluding fringe benefit and pension costs) once fully implemented. With the new examiners, DOB projects it will be able to reduce the time it takes to review new building plans from the current average of 15 days to 10 days, cut waits for the review of Alteration I applications (for major alterations of existing buildings that require a new or amended certificate of occupancy) from slightly over 12 days to 10 days, and reduce the time it takes to review Alteration II and III applications (for plumbing, general construction work, etc.) from close to 4 days to 2 days, according to a plan DOB released in May.

In order to reduce inspection wait times, DOB intends to hire an additional 34 development inspectors by 2017, a 28 percent increase over the number of development

Funding for New Initiatives Boosts Department of Buildings Budget



SOURCE: Fiscal Year 2016 Executive Budget
NOTE: 2015 through 2019 is projected spending.
New York City Independent Budget Office



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inspectors previously planned. The new positions are expected to cost about \$2 million a year (excluding fringe benefit and pension costs). The majority of the new inspection staff will be elevator inspectors, along with an increase in the number of boiler inspectors. Given the additional staff, DOB expects the average wait time for boiler and elevator inspections to decline from the current averages of about 22 days and 23 days, respectively, to just 5 days.

The increase in resources also includes slightly more than \$1 million a year specifically to expedite plan review and inspections for housing being constructed or rehabbed through the Mayor's affordable housing program. This includes hiring eight plan examiners and five inspectors to deal exclusively with the expected increase in construction of affordable housing. According to DOB, the affordable housing team will work closely with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to avoid unnecessary delays. Dedicating staff solely to affordable housing is expected to result in shorter-than-average wait times for these projects. For example, DOB expects to take an average of 7 days to review new building plans for affordable housing, compared with an average of 10 days to review new building plans in general.

In addition to the funds added to reduce wait times, DOB intends to strengthen its enforcement efforts through two initiatives that are projected to cost a total of about

\$5 million annually (excluding fringe benefit and pension costs). First, DOB will create an Office of Risk Management to be staffed by eight analysts. The analysts will be charged with creating data systems to identify unsafe buildings and untrustworthy builders and architects. Along with the legal division, the new risk management unit will pursue parties who are engaged in corrupt and unsafe behavior. DOB also plans to expand its proactive enforcement program by hiring 65 new staff members by 2017, a 15 percent increase compared with the current enforcement staff. Through the new positions, DOB plans to improve its efforts to reduce tenant harassment and enforce rules pertaining to on-site construction safety, plumbing and gas installations, and electrical inspections.

Other positions added through the funding increase include new administrative staff to manage the reorganization and the increased personnel, as well as new information technology analysts to improve the department's IT systems and develop online tools to further expedite the inspection and plan examination process. Lastly, DOB has budgeted slightly over \$5 million over the next two years to make improvements to its office space and public facilities, both to accommodate the additional staff and improve customer service.

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