



Permit Timelines Summary Report

January 2023



Seattle Department of
Construction & Inspections

Executive Summary

The following report provides a snapshot of permit times between July 2018- December 2022, corresponding to when the current Design Review policy went into effect in 2018. Permit timelines vary by type and complexity of project, as such, this report distinguishes between:

- Streamlined Design Review (SDR) – small developments, mostly townhouses (Staff review)
- Administrative Design Review (ADR) – mid-size developments and affordable housing (Staff review)
- Full Design Review (FDR) – larger and more complex developments (Design Review Board review)

This report also includes other Master Use Permits (MUPs) which do not include Design Review, for additional comparison and greater understanding of overall permit timelines.

The purpose of this report is to respond to the City Council Statement of Legislative Intent dated November 16, 2021, and the specific request to provide “Design Review Program outcomes since the program was modified in 2017, including review times by design review type and project complexity.”

This report quantifies:

- Overall calendar time from Early Design Guidance (EDG) intake to MUP Decision (ADR and FDR) or Construction Permit approval (SDR)
- Overall calendar from EDG intake to MUP issuance (ADR and FDR) or Construction Permit issuance (SDR)
- Overall calendar time for MUPs without design review
- Percent of the time that permits are with SDCI vs. with the Applicant

SDCI identified a sample and analyzed a total of 295 design review permits, including:

- 158 Streamlined Design Review (SDR) permits (EDG and Construction Permit)
- 74 Administrative Design Review (ADR) permits (EDG and MUP)
- 62 Full Design Review (FDR) permits (EDG and MUP)

SDCI identified 245 Master Use Permit records without design review for comparison.

Overall, the data showed that SDR and ADR had shorter review times compared to FDR times (Table 1 and Table 2). In addition to the Design Review Board public meetings which may add time to FDR projects, there are other possible reasons for this difference in time:

- SDR and ADR projects are smaller in size and usually less complex
- FDR projects are larger in size and tend to be more complex with additional coordination between different departments and agencies and more complex code requirements

SDCI analyzed the amount of time that design review permits spent with SDCI compared to the amount of time spent with the Applicant. Applicants affect the overall permit timeline at steps such as:

- Scheduling intake appointments

- Submitting required items
- Paying permit fees
- Responding to correction letters

The overall calendar time includes time spent with the Applicant and with SDCI. However, SDCI has no influence on the time permits spend with Applicants. Overall calendar time was similar to the design review permit times described in a past study conducted by others¹. SDCI confirmed that this past study by others included time that permits spent with Applicants as well as time spent with SDCI.

Measuring overall calendar time of all steps from EDG through MUP issuance (ADR and FDR) or for EDG through Construction permit issuance (SDR) showed (Tables 6 and 7):

- FDR: 739 days (24.3 months)
- ADR: 641 days (21.1 months)
- SDR: 465 days (15.3 months)

For projects without design review, no EDG phase is required. Non-Design Review MUPs generally had shorter overall calendar review times. However, MUPs with greater complexity (including SEPA Determination of Significance and Contract Rezone permits) took close to the amount of time for ADR and FDR permits (Table 11):

- Non-design review MUPs from MUP intake to issuance ranged 155-652 overall calendar days
- Complex non-design review MUPs from MUP intake to issuance ranged 613-652 overall calendar days

The permit time spent only with SDCI measures the overall calendar time minus time when the permit in the Applicant's control. For EDG through MUP decision (ADR and FDR) and EDG through Construction permit issuance (SDR), the data showed the percent of the time with SDCI was consistent across all three types of design review permits (Tables 8-10):

- FDR: 66% of the overall calendar time was only with SDCI (490 days/16 months)
- ADR: 65% of the overall calendar time was only with SDCI (408 days/13.4 months)
- SDR: 61% of the overall calendar time was only with SDCI (285 days/9.23months)

For projects without design review, the range of time that MUPs spent with SDCI was comparable to the percent of time for design review projects (Table 12):

- Non-design review MUPs ranged from 47%-79% of the overall calendar time with SDCI
- Design Review permits ranged from 61%-66% of the overall time with SDCI
- Of the Design Review permits, Full Design Review required the most time with SDCI reviewers during review (Table 12).

¹ <https://seattleforeveryone.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/06/Seattle-Design-Review-Evaluation-041421.pptx>

The EDG phase is unique to design review. SDCI examined how much time EDG requires in the overall calendar time (Tables 3 and 4):

- For ADR projects, EDG took 22% of the total permit time from EDG to MUP issuance
- For FDR projects, EDG took 23% of the total permit time from EDG to MUP issuance
- For SDR projects, EDG took 19% of the total permit time from EDG to Construction Permit issuance

Some applications include long periods of time between the completion of the EDG phase and the next step of review. The time between EDG completion and submittal of the MUP (ADR and FDR) or Construction permit (SDR) is a combination of the Applicant's choice and the availability of SDCI intake appointments (Table 5):

- FDR: 46 days
- ADR: 74 days
- SDR: 21

Some MUPs are appealed to the Seattle Hearing Examiner or the Shoreline Hearings Board. When an application is appealed it can add several months to the permit process. The schedule and steps for an appeal are outside of SDCI's and the Applicant's control. For comparison, the analysis included both the time to an issued MUP (which may include an appeal) and the time to a published MUP decision (excluding appeals).

In summary, both Design Review and non-Design Review permit timelines appear to be affected by complexity such as:

- The number of reviews on a permit (Ex. land use, zoning, mandatory housing affordability, incentive zoning, city light, public utilities, sustainability, housing, ECA, geotechnical, shoreline, tree, transportation, and historic reviews)
- Coordination with other departments and/or agencies
- Code requirements

The data showed that complex permits such as Full Design Review MUPs and Contract Rezones (for non-Design Review permits) take the most time. Full Design Review MUPs and complex non-design review MUPs take comparable overall calendar time for a permit, even though non-design review MUPs are exempt from the EDG phase of review.

Permit timeline studies conducted by others have often combined the time that permits spend with both SDCI and the Applicant, as well as time spent on steps outside of SDCI or Applicant control (such as appeals). These past studies show numbers that are closer to the overall calendar times in this study (15 months to 24.3 months). The overall calendar times include time that is in the Applicant's control and beyond SDCI's control.

The total amount of time SDCI spends on design review projects ranges from 15 months to 24.3 months, which is comparable to complex permits without design review.

Background

What impacts permit timelines?

There are many factors to consider when looking at permit times including project complexity. For example, Streamlined Design Review and Administrative Design Review projects are smaller in size and tend to be projects of less complexity. Full Design Review projects may include full block developments, tower projects, and overall are larger projects with greater impact on the built environment. As such, Full Design Review project often include more reviews, complex requirements, and additional coordination between different departments and agencies.

Master Use Permits (MUPs) frequently require the following reviews. When required, each review must be resolved before SDCI can publish a MUP decision.

- Land Use (design review, environmental review, and others)
- Zoning
- Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA)
- Incentive Zoning
- Seattle City Light
- Seattle Public Utilities
- Sustainability
- Housing
- Environmentally Critical Areas (ECA)
- Geotechnical
- Shoreline
- Trees
- Transportation
- Historic Preservation

SDCI requirements and Applicant behavior both affect the overall calendar time for permit reviews. This report analyzes total calendar time, including time when permits are “with SDCI” and time when permits are “with the Applicant.”

Time when permits are “with SDCI” include:

- Preparing public notice
- Assigning reviews
- Conducting reviews
- Writing design review reports or decisions
- Processing permits for issuance

Time when permits are “with the Applicant” include time spent waiting for:

- Applicant to schedule a permit intake appointment
- Applicant to submit required materials for permit intake
- Applicant to paying fee
- Applicant to install and confirm a public notice sign on site

- Applicant to submit responses to corrections

Some things are beyond the control of either SDCI or the Applicant, such as appeals and Code required public notice periods.

When a MUP appeal is filed with the Hearing Examiner or Shoreline Hearings Board, SDCI has no authority over timeframe or scheduling as appeals are managed by the Hearing Examiner's office or Shoreline Hearings Board. Appeals can add several months between the time a MUP decision is published and the issuance of the MUP.

Code required public notice can affect EDG and MUP permit times. Public notice periods are required by the Land Use Code for:

- Early Design Guidance (SDR, ADR, and FDR)
- Master Use Permit application (ADR and FDR)
- Design Review Board meetings (FDR) and other public meetings
- Master Use Permit decision appeal periods (ADR and FDR)

Design Review Types

Three paths for design review currently in the City of Seattle:

- **Streamlined Design Review:** Type I Decision (not appealable to the Seattle Hearing Examiner) reviewed by SDCI staff. Includes Early Design Guidance only and then straight to Construction permit. Includes public comment but not a design review public meeting.
- **Administrative Design Review:** Type II Decision (appealable to the Seattle Hearing Examiner) reviewed by SDCI staff. Includes Early Design Guidance, Master Use Permit / Recommendation, Construction permit. Reviews completed by city staff. Includes public comment but not a design review public meeting.
- **Full Design Review:** Type II Decision (appealable to the Seattle Hearing Examiner) reviewed by Design Review Boards. Includes Early Design Guidance, Master Use Permit / Recommendation, Construction permit. Reviews completed by city staff using recommendations from the Design Review Board. Includes public comment and public meeting(s).

Methodology

This report provides a snapshot of permit times between July 2018- December 2022. The start date corresponds to when the current Design Review regulations went into effect in July 2018. A permit sample was identified from a total of 539 permits, including:

- 158 Streamlined Design Review (SDR) permits
- 74 Administrative Design Review (ADR) permits
- 62 Full Design Review (FDR) permits.

In addition, 245 other Master Use Permit (MUP) records were analyzed for permit times (Figure 1). MUPs may include multiple types of reviews, including or excluding design review. The MUPs in this sample excluded design review and included the following types of reviews:

- Administrative Conditional Uses
- Contract Rezones
- Environmental Critical Areas
- SEPA, Shoreline
- Special Exceptions
- Temporary Use
- Variances

Design Review Types	Number of Permits
Streamlined Design Review	158
Administrative Design Review	74
Full Design Review	62
Other MUPs	245
Total	539

Figure 1

Findings

The next sections provide findings outlined as follows:

- Section 1: EDG prior to MUP timelines
- Section 2: EDG through MUP (ADR and FDR) or Construction Permit (SDR) timelines
- Section 3: Percent permits are with SDCI vs. with the Applicant
- Section 3: Non-Design Review permit timelines

Section 1:

EDG timelines prior to MUP

Overall, Streamlined Design Review and Administrative Design Review had shorter review times compared to Full Design Review times (Table 1 and Table 2).

Regarding the percent of time in EDG phase of the total Master Use Permit issuance timeline, both ADR and FDR were about 15% of the total permit time with FDR slightly higher at 16% of the total permit time (Table 3).

Streamlined Design Review does not require a Master Use Permit and instead moves straight from EDG complete to Construction Permits. As such, the percentage of EDG to the overall issuance was analyzed using different metrics (EDG/Construction permit Issuance, rather than EDG/Master Use Permit issuance). The EDG phase for Streamlined Design Review projects accounted for 19% of the overall permit time. (Table 4)

The amount of time between EDG complete to submittal for either Construction permits (SDR) or master use permits (ADR and FDR) ranged from under one month to over two months with 21 days for SDR, 74 days for ADR, and 46 days for FDR. This time frame represents time solely with the Applicant but may be affected by the availability of SDCI intake appointments (Table 5).

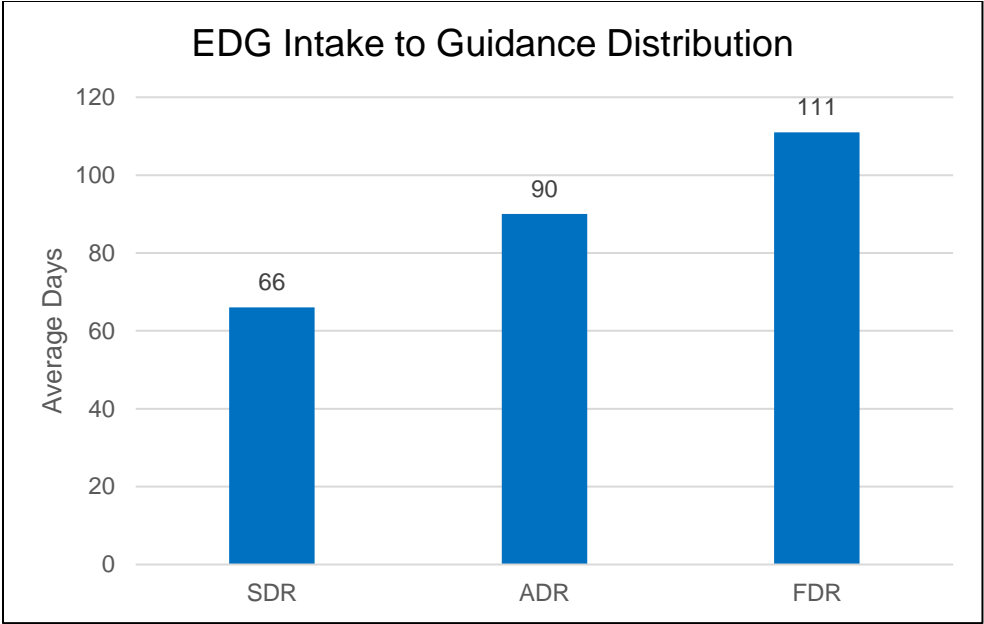


Table 1

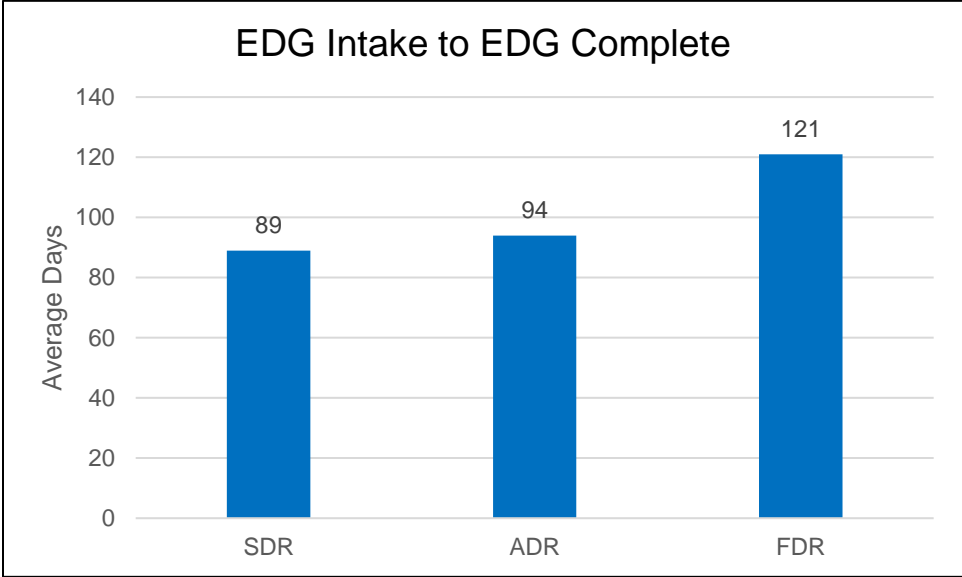


Table 2

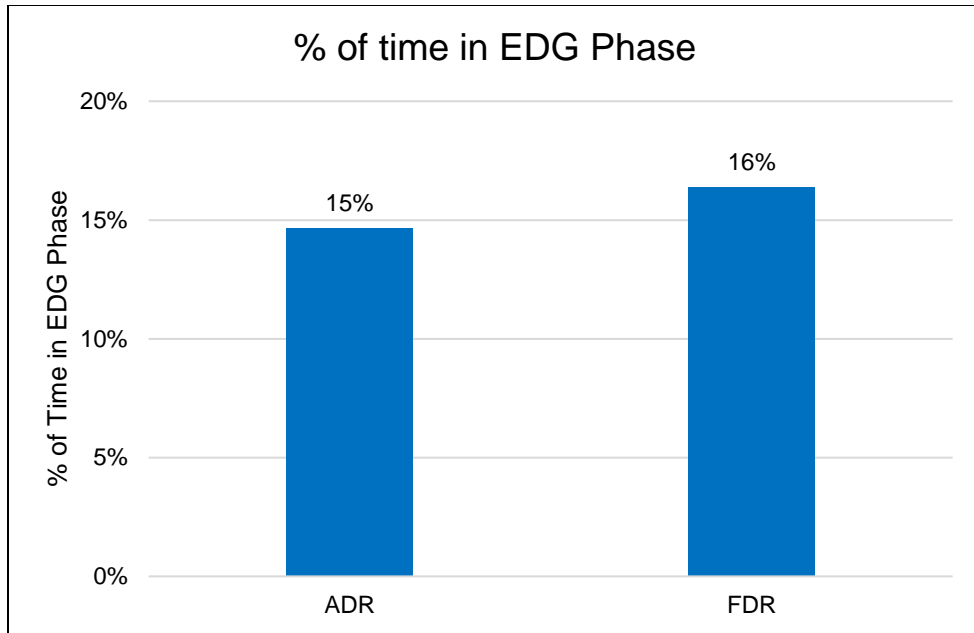


Table 3

*percent of time in EDG phase compared to total time from EDG intake to MUP issuance

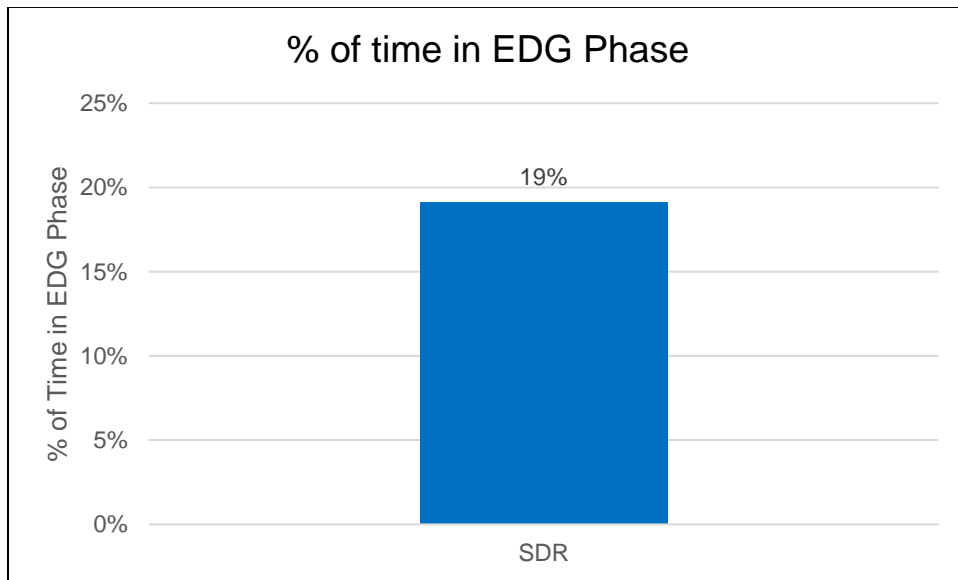


Table 4

*percent of time in EDG phase compared to total time from EDG intake to Construction Permit issuance. Streamlined Design Project do not require Master Use Permits.

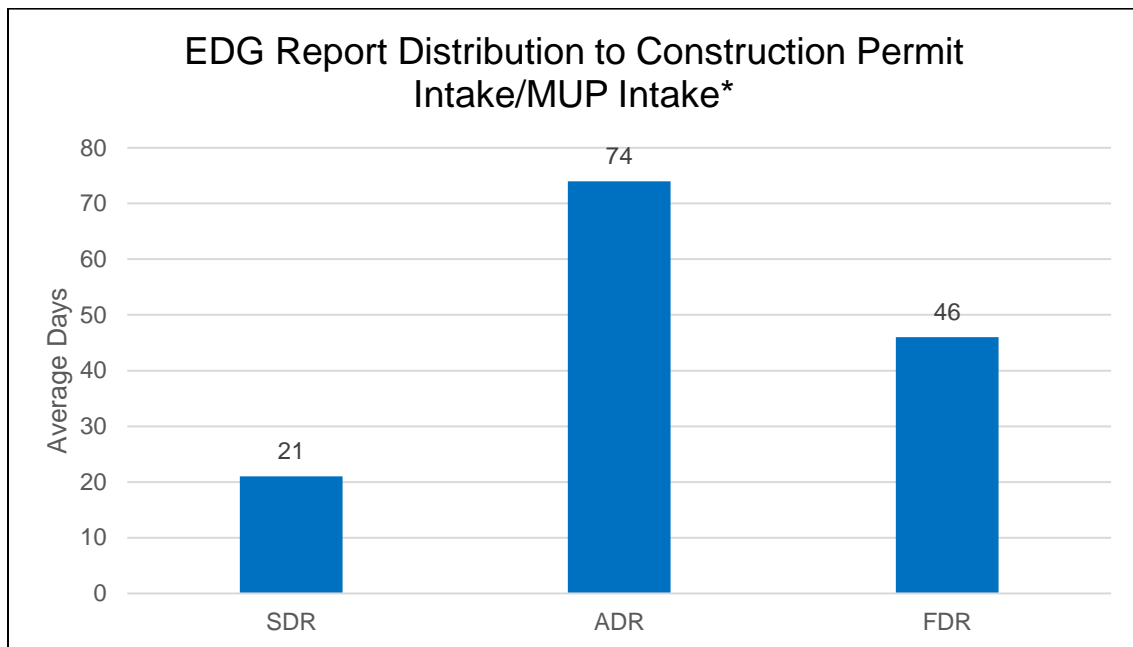


Table 5

* SDR process moves from EDG to Construction Permit.
 ADR and FDR processes move from EDG to MUP.

Section 2:

EDG through MUP (ADR and FDR) or Construction Permit (SDR)

Overall permit times appear to reflect project and review complexity with times increasing from SDR to FDR with 465 days for SDR, 641 for days for ADR, and 739 days for FDR (Tables 6 and 7).

MUP appeals add time between the MUP Decision and the MUP issuance steps, which is outside of SDCI or the Applicant’s control. The time from EDG intake to MUP Decision published measures time that is within SDCI and the Applicant’s control. The average time from EDG intake through MUP Decision published was an average of 604 days for ADR and 739 Days for FDR (Table 6).

Land Use review is one of many reviews on a Construction Permit. For SDR applications, the time from EDG intake to Land Use approval of the Construction permit was an average of 352 days (Table 7).

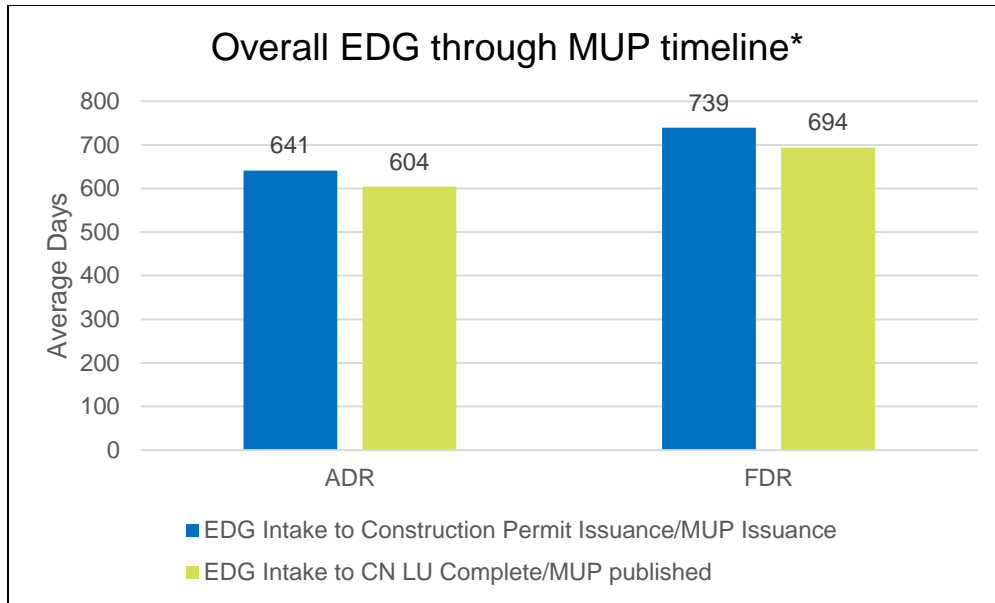


Table 6

*Once the MUP decision is published there is a 14-day appeal period with possibility of appeal. SDCI conducts final reviews prior to MUP issuance if there are no appeals. The Applicant is required to pay any outstanding fees prior to MUP issuance.

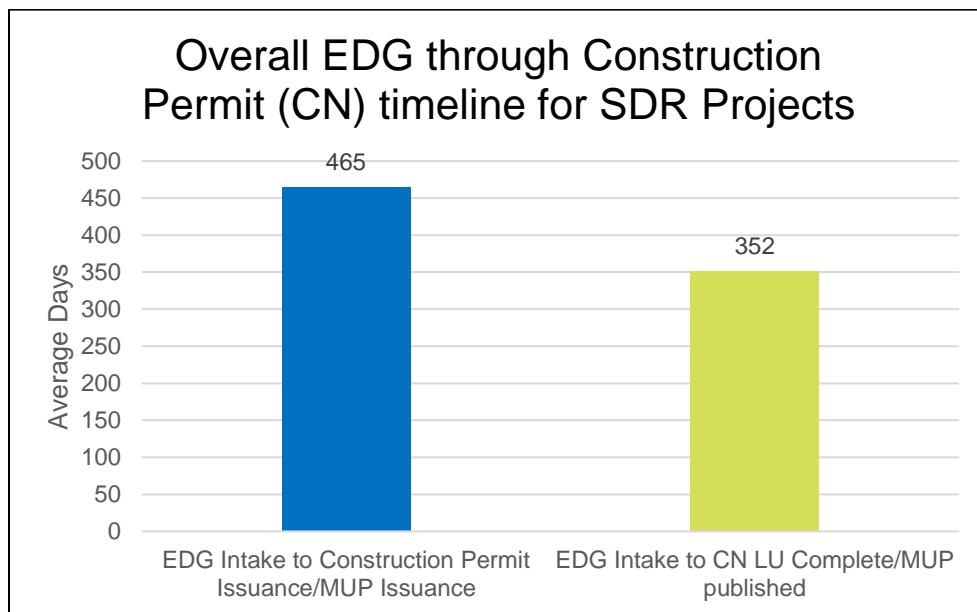


Table 7

Section 3:

Percent permits are with SDCI vs. with the Applicant

The percent of time with SDCI vs. time with the Applicant was consistent across all three types of Design Review with a narrow range of 61-66% with SDCI and 34-39% with the Applicant. SDR had 61% of the overall permit time to be with SDCI and 39% with Applicants. SDCI accounted for 64% and Applicants accounted for 36% of the overall permit time for ADR projects. SDCI accounted for 66% and Applicants accounted for 34% of the overall permit time for FDR projects.

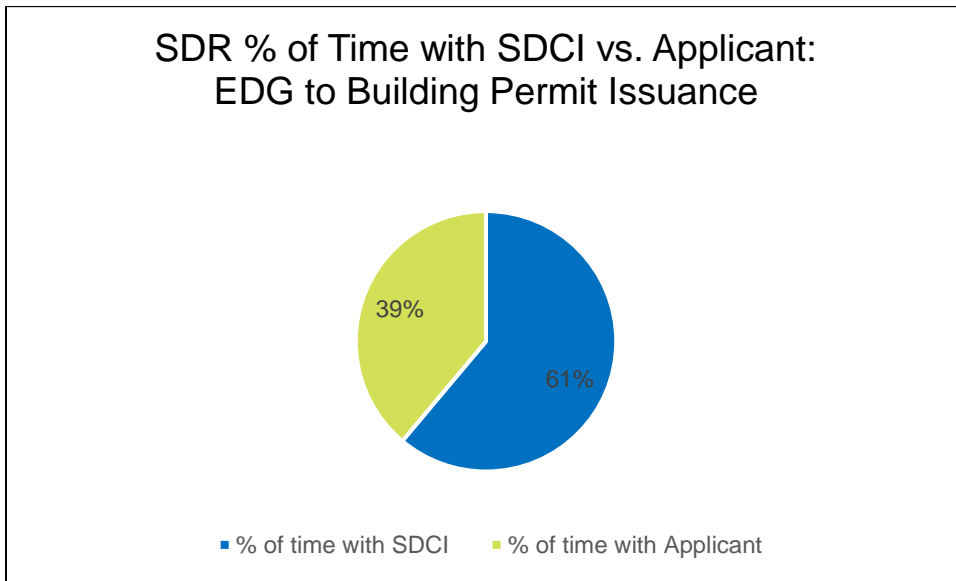


Table 8

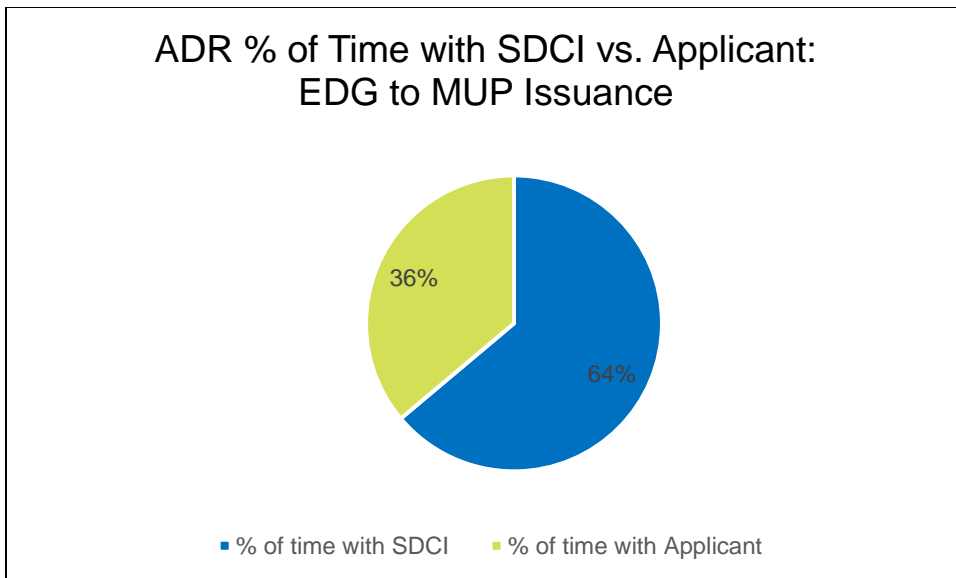


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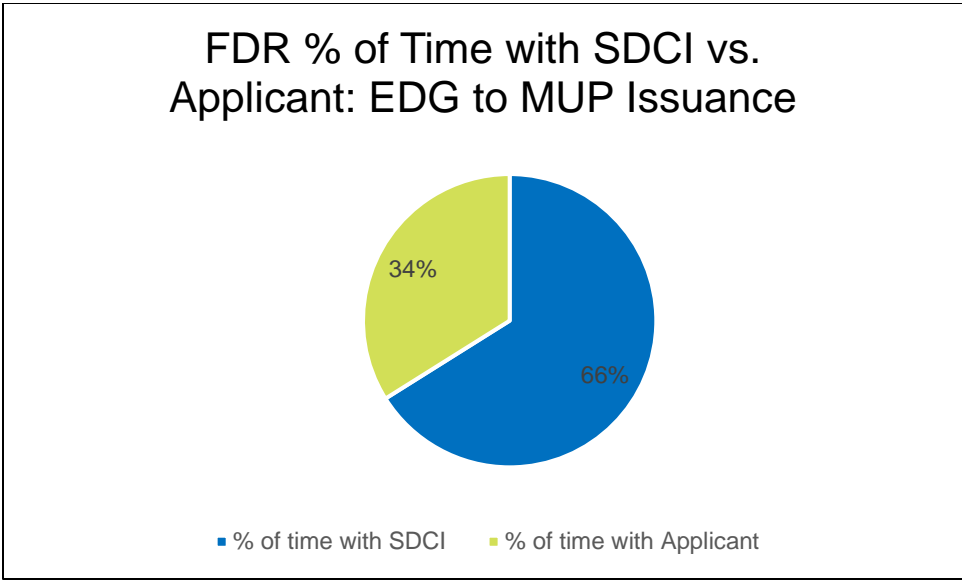


Table 10

Section 4:

Non-Design Review Permit Timelines

The majority of non-Design Review Type II permits had shorter review times. However, the non-Design Review Type II permits with greater complexity (including SEPA Determination of Significance and Contract Rezone permits) were closer to the amount of time for ADR and FDR permits. The range for the percent of time with SDCI and Applicants for non-Design Review Permits had a larger range than Design Review Permits:

- 47%-79% with SDCI and 14%-53% with Applicants for Non-Design Review permits
- 61%-66% with SDCI and 32%-39% with the Applicants for Design Review permits

Total Days from MUP Intake to Issuance for Non-Design Review MUPs

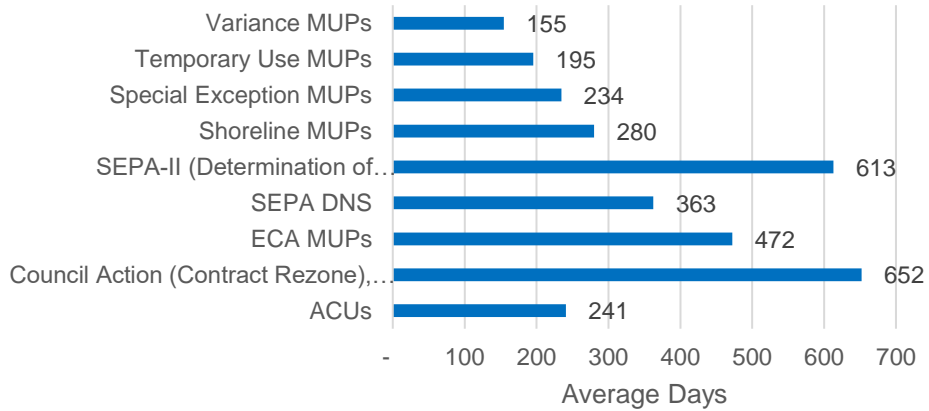


Table 11

% of time with SDCI vs. time with the Applicant

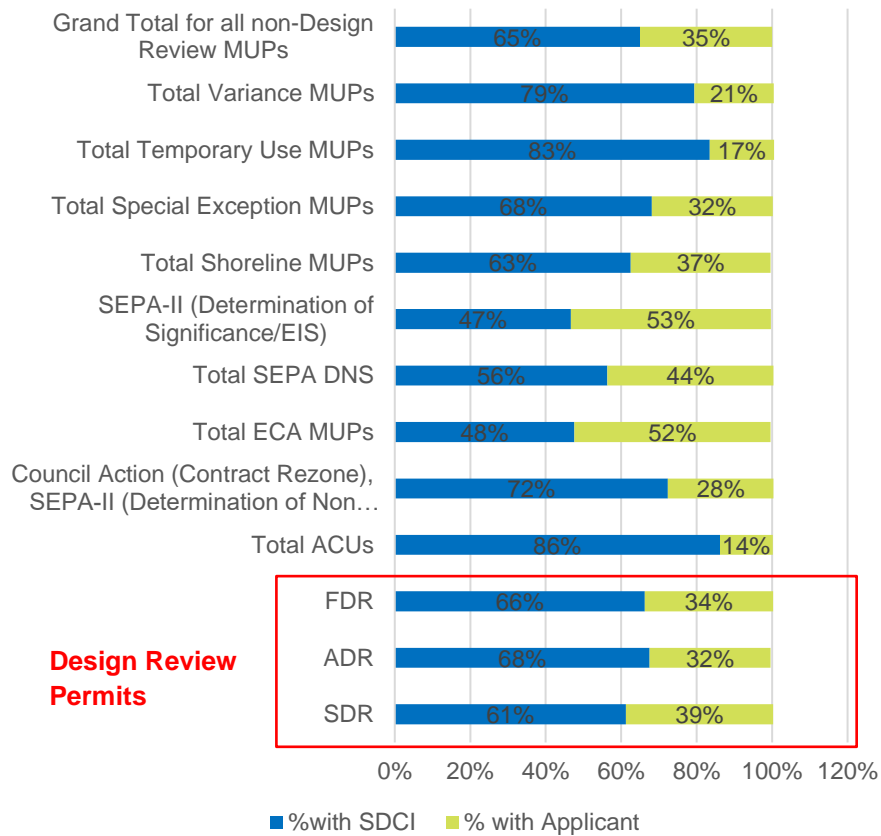


Table 12