

Preliminary Land Use Service (PLUS)

Service Efficiency Blitz Report - July 2025

Background and Purpose

PLUS was established via legislation in 2004 to replace the Land Use Planning Act, or LUPA, which had existed in Delaware since 1996. LUPA required that land use changes requiring state action, such as local ordinances, proposed annexations, and conditional use applications, be submitted to the Office of State Planning Coordination (OSPC). Then, OSPC would communicate proposals to the state's 11 agencies for review and comment. LUPA was criticized for a lack of timely decision, lack of consistency, and lack of information exchange. PLUS was designed to address these concerns regarding LUPA.

The Preliminary Land Use Service (PLUS) process plays an advisory role in coordinating land use development across Delaware by organizing guidance from State agencies and providing this preliminary information to developers. This guidance provided by the PLUS process is associated with land use proposals above a certain size and scale defined by State statute and local ordinances¹. Recognizing opportunities for greater efficiency and value delivery, the State of Delaware's Government Efficiency and Accountability Review (GEAR) Program Management Team and the Office of State Planning Coordination (OSPC) launched a three-day Service Efficiency Blitz (SEB) to analyze the end-to-end customer experience, evaluate system performance, and initiate immediate efficiencies. Using Lean and Agile practices, the team examined the process from a customer perspective through key PLUS personas. The PLUS value stream was mapped to identify pain points, implement immediate solutions, and establish a framework for further efficiency efforts. This rapid improvement event was timely given the focus by the Office of the Governor on overall business permitting process efficiency and the need for these efficiencies to positively impact affordable housing development and economic development in the State of Delaware.

Maximizing Value

The SEB process reaffirmed the key customers of PLUS and reinforced the mission of the program as it was originally established in 2004 by focusing on –

- Improved coordination (advanced knowledge of required permits, or providing quality information surrounding other unknown development information “unknowns” to customers, from all relevant permitting entities)
- Efficient resource usage (providing expertise to smaller local governments and lesser experienced developers where they lack land use development capacity)
- Consistent practices (virtual meetings and standard documentation with structured timelines)
- A streamlined process for development (efficiencies had potentially been achieved through PLUS after its inception in 2004, but remains open to examination)

The customer segments central to the PLUS process are developers (comprised of both large and small business owners, firms, and their representatives) and local governments (comprised of the counties and small and large municipalities throughout Delaware). Given the differing needs of these groups, the

¹ Projects reviewed through PLUS typically include comprehensive development plans, residential subdivisions with more than 50 units, non-residential plans with more than 50,000 square feet of floor area, and annexations and rezoning proposals that are not in compliance with a certified comprehensive plan.

value propositions discussed were through the perspectives of specific customer segments, for example - small business owners who have no experience with the PLUS process to large developers who have repeated experience with PLUS – each deriving a distinct value proposition from the process. While the value proposition of PLUS became clear for certain customer segments, it was revealed that the ability to measure customer value has not been in place for the program so only anecdotal evidence of the customers' experience and satisfaction are available to date. Thus, it became an early objective of the SEB to begin development of customer value measurement surveys that will be implemented as soon as possible.

It is important to note that the customers of PLUS were the central focus of the SEB process, whereas, other stakeholders in the process, who may have input to or output from the process, such as State agencies (e.g., Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control, Delaware Department of Transportation, Delaware State Housing Authority, Fire Marshal, Historic Preservation, Delaware Department of Agriculture), advocacy groups, the public, and news outlets/media were not the primary focus of the SEB process.

Participants from the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) and the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) were represented in the SEB event and neither party expressed that PLUS was a value-added mechanism for their organizations, for different reasons. DNREC participants noted that they gather input from approximately 25 sections within their organization, which is challenging due to the existing timelines and level of coordination needed, however, the content that is gathered is primarily recommendations, not legal nor regulatory requirements. There is a sense from the DNREC sections that the recommendations are not followed, even though staff feel these recommendations are valuable because they focus on protecting the environment, health, and safety for the public. In contrast, DelDOT noted that the program is not value added due to the preliminary nature of PLUS and that developers will encounter their requirements, not recommendations, later in the development process. Given these perspectives, it is worth gathering the other agency stakeholder perspectives about PLUS and determining if (and if so, how) they derive value in the process. However, given that the State agencies are stakeholders, not customers of PLUS, a stakeholder analysis should rely on making their functions as efficient as possible while validating the customers' needs in the process to determine the PLUS process for the future.

Immediate Achievements and Results

The total time and cost savings, along with customer improvements for the event, are outlined below, though each measure will be improved further based on implementation of the quick wins and strategic bets discussed in the upcoming sections.

PLUS Process Immediate Changes and Benefits

Timeline	Prior PLUS Process	New PLUS Process
Week 0	Applicant Required to Complete Pre-Check in Online ESRI System and Submit Report with Application	ESRI Pre-check Eliminated for Applicants (-30 Minutes Saved Per Application)
Week 1		Applications Submitted and Distributed to Agencies as Received

Week 2	Applications Submitted and Distributed to Agencies Once All Supporting Material Received	Supporting Material Provided to Agencies as Received
Week 3	Up to 2 Weeks for Agency Review	Up to 3-4 Weeks for Agency Review
Week 4	PLUS Meeting Held	PLUS Meeting Held
Week 5		
Week 6		
Week 7		Final Letters Within 15 Business Days of Meeting (-1 Week Eliminated)
Week 8	Final Letters Within 20 Business Days of Meeting	+1 Week Saved for Overall Process! More to Come...

Detail on Process Improvements and Associated Cost Savings

Category	Impact	Annual Cost Savings (\$)	Calculation	Opportunity to Further Maximize Impact and Cost Savings
Total Process Time	-5 business days eliminated overall (from 20 to 15 business days to provide the PLUS comment letter to customers)	\$162,500	5 business days = -8% of the overall average processing time from 63 to 58 days. 65 land use applications per year (3 year average) X 5 business days = 325 business days saved annually. Assuming a blended daily cost of \$500/day per application review (staff time and delay costs), $325 \times \$500 = \$162,500$	Yes – significantly through other objectives
Total Agency Preparation Time for Meetings and Comment Letters	+5 business days capacity shifted to agencies	Time is shifted, not added or eliminated; may enhance quality and internal flow, but cost savings would need further analysis	The PLUS meeting is being moved to the 5 th Wednesday within the required 45-day window following the applicant's request for a meeting - allowing an additional week of time within the process for agencies to improve the quality of their comments.	Yes – moderately through other objectives
Total Applicant Submission Time	-30 minutes saved per application (out of 2.75 total hours)	\$2,438	$65 \text{ applications/year} \times 0.5 \text{ hours} = 32.5 \text{ hours. Assuming applicant time valued at } \$75/\text{hour} \rightarrow 32.5 \times \$75 = \$2,438$	Yes – significantly through other objectives
Customer Satisfaction	From mixed to satisfied scores for developers and localities	Pending survey data via Survey123; however, improved satisfaction can reduce rework and inquiries,	Baseline measures will be established for developers and localities through new surveys in the Survey123 application that were prototyped during the SEB event	Yes – significantly through other objectives

		indirectly saving time/costs		
Customer Experience	From confusion to clarity surrounding the PLUS process	Better information reduces redundant questions, unnecessary meetings, and misdirected applications. Should lead to reduction in support inquiries which allows for some cost savings	Website revisions were drafted focused on providing clear information to developers and localities with an updated MOU matrix and enhanced developer tools/manual	Yes- significantly through other objectives

The details on the near and mid-term improvements that were identified and launched through the event, include:

I. Just Do Its (To Be Achieved Within Several Days of Completing the Event)

- Eliminating the ESRI geographic information system (GIS) pre-check requirement for applicants, saving 30+ minutes per submission.
- Sharing all applications (without supporting documents, unless already received) as they are received by OSPC staff with State agencies via Teams to enhance feedback and preparation time.
- Establishing the comment letter in Teams to allow concurrent input from State agencies.
- Adding timestamps to PLUS meeting recordings to improve usability to viewers.

II. Quick Wins (To Be Achieved Within 2 Weeks of Completing the Event)

- Developing and launching a customer feedback survey tool in Survey123 for developers and local governments to start measuring the value they derive from the process.
- Shifting the PLUS meeting schedule from the 4th to 5th Wednesday following receipt of applications with tightened agency comment deadlines (required within 15 business days instead of 20 business days following the PLUS meeting), thus reducing the overall process timeline by one week and increasing State agency time to prepare for meetings and sufficiently detailed comments.
- Enhancing communication of the State's role via the PLUS website to enhance clarity and access to information for customers, including the publication of the MOU table on the website.

III. Strategic Bets (To Be Achieved Within 1 to 6 Months of the Event)

- Additional PLUS evaluation with a focus on value to customer segments (the goal will be to increase customer satisfaction and experience provided through the feedback that is generated internally through the surveys and any additional external review of the program)
- Reformat recommendations to leverage a new PLUS “best practices” manual with prioritized health and safety considerations for development. This should right size the level of detail in the PLUS letter, prioritizing requirements (laws and regulations) over recommendations which may be cited through a brief reference to appendices in the manual (the goal is to reduce the PLUS letter from ~9 to ~2 pages minimizing the volume of work on participating organizations and highlighting to the customer the information that is most valuable).
- Evaluate Opt-In or Opt-Out Format for meetings as well as potential for Question and Answer structure of meetings (the goal is to reduce the number of PLUS applications, provide meetings only for those developers and local governments who derive the most value, and review time put forth by State agencies, which may allow for further timeline reductions)
- Implement Customized PLUS pathways as follows:
 - School site feasibility (would not change – maintain status quo)
 - Certified comprehensive development plans for local governments (would incorporate additional quality/standard MOU terms – *may be deemed outside scope for SEB objectives*)
 - Small business applicant waiver path (new waiver to provide concierge service to small business owners)
 - Pilot fast track/concierge service for affordable housing projects (new path for Governor’s priority focus area)
 - Land use development (new opt out process based on pilot – prioritize development reviews under PLUS if they are misaligned with Delaware Strategies for State Policies and Spending, “State Strategies,” and for developers/local governments requesting the input of PLUS)

IV. Other Potential Deliverables (To Be Evaluated and Launched When Other Deliverables are Achieved)

- Review ESRI data layers for accuracy in GIS to determine if there is value in the functionality of this geospatial system for applicants in the future.
- Review the DelDOT Gateway geospatial system in comparison to ESRI to determine if the State can move to a centralized geospatial system
- Comprehensively review the MOU structure to develop standardized terms with local governments (“service tiers”). While it was validated during the SEB event that developers can begin the processing of permits with State agencies in parallel to the PLUS process, the requirements from local governments vary widely based on their MOU structure with PLUS and may require PLUS to occur prior to local plan submission.

This variability leads to added costs and unpredictability for customers that would be improved through a simplified and tiered MOU structure with standardized terms and conditions.

- Evaluate the potential for a rolling application process.
- Evaluate the elimination of the PLUS meeting (provide feedback through the letter and conversations as requested).
- If the fast track/concierge service model is successful for affordable housing, assess whether this could be the default path for all customer segments (“development accelerator”).
- Implement incentives for land use development aligned with State Strategies (Levels 1-3) and create disincentives for land use development in Level 4 through the PLUS process.
- Determine if there are specific recommendations that are currently offered through PLUS that should become statutory requirements (e.g., Delaware Environmental Protection Act).
- Establish a dedicated PLUS coordinator in the Office of the Governor.
- Reframe comments in the PLUS response letters to developers as next steps, with clarity on:
 - What needs to happen next with sufficient detail.
 - Where to go for specific information (forms, websites, agencies etc.).
 - Who to contact within each area for details and guidance, or if the developer gets stuck in any part of the process.
- Implement PLUS 2.0 system updates with efficiencies for participating State agencies to eliminate an additional week from the overall timeline.
- PLUS statutory amendment for the General Assembly in 2026 – if needed.

V. Parking Lot Recommendations (Deemed Outside the Scope of this Project, But May be Valuable for Others)

- Delaware Department of Justice – review liability protections for State employees if their recorded “likeness” is utilized other than intended. Concerns were expressed about maintaining recordings online from the PLUS meeting in perpetuity by the State agency representatives involved.
- Sussex County regulatory reform and standardization – Sussex County was characterized as the most time-consuming entity of all three counties for State agencies to provide development proposal comments due to the lack of clear regulatory guidance.

Metrics and Trend Evaluation

Ongoing metrics for the PLUS process should focus on waiting time reduction, maximizing value-added activities, eliminating non-value-added steps, and increasing customer satisfaction/engagement. Regular feedback from developers and local governments should inform continuous improvement efforts and their input can be used in piloting new ideas for the program to determine if they are satisfactorily meeting customer needs. Initial data for PLUS showed a ~39% decline in application volume from June 2022 (126 applications) to May 2025 (77 applications), which may be attributable to economic conditions and is worth further study. Over the three-year period roughly 2/3rd, or 194 out of 302 applications, focus on land use development distributed among the following project types:

- 29 percent Commercial/Industrial
- 10 percent Institutional
- 13 percent Mixed-Use
- 48 percent Residential

With an average of 65 land use development applications reviewed annually under PLUS over the prior three years, it is worth estimating the impact of further process improvements through modified PLUS paths which would continue to reduce the overall volume of applications and directly reduce the amount of work on the PLUS program, State agencies, developers, and local governments.

The initial outcomes of reorganizing PLUS toward prioritizing value for key customer segments in the development and local government communities emphasizes the need for more predictable and value-focused engagement. As part of the SEB event, a discussion surrounding how value may be measured in the future was held and the following key questions were recommended for the program's specific customer and stakeholder segments:

- For OSPC and the participating State agencies in the PLUS program –
 - What is the follow through rate on requirements versus recommendations in the development process?²
 - What is the timeliness and quality of content in the developer response letters that are received in response to the State's PLUS comment letter?
- For developers –
 - What important and essential knowledge is gained through the PLUS process during this early stage of land use development?
 - How does PLUS facilitate a more efficient development process other than without having it?
- For local governments –
 - To what degree do they utilize and value PLUS comments and recommendations?

With baseline measures developed in the value stream map (found in Appendix A) for PLUS and the overall process taking 58 calendar days in the refined model, it will be possible to measure future improvements and quantify time and cost savings outcomes for the program. While the 58 calendar days is an improvement compared to the estimated 90 days that the 2019 KPMG Analysis of Permit Competitiveness report referenced, there is room for further efficiency to eliminate additional waiting time and ensure that this process takes no longer than 45 calendar days once the near-term improvements are in play. In addition, the KPMG report referenced PLUS as occurring sequentially prior to completing the design phase for a land use project. In contrast, PLUS can occur in parallel with other aspects of the design process and occur in tandem with beginning to obtain state permits in advance of local government submission. PLUS provides the greatest value for permitting processes when engaged in the earliest stages of land use development.

² This was previously analyzed in a 2017 study commissioned by OSPC through the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration. In this analysis, nine PLUS projects were reviewed after the implementation phase of development. The results of the analysis showed that the follow through rates on the recommendations and requirements issued by the PLUS program varied – from a low of 46 percent to a high of 82 percent compliance with all comments issued to developers (the average rate of compliance was 65 percent).

In addition, it was estimated that the processing time for a single PLUS application takes roughly 18.25 hours of work from the parties involved. In a single monthly PLUS cycle, assuming there are 7 applications per cycle, this equates to 128 hours of work or 17 business days of work per cycle. This can also be expressed as 17 days of work occurring within 58 calendar days among other duties and responsibilities of the staff involved. Many of the objectives outlined in this report (e.g., the standardized development best practices manual) focus on reducing the 17 days of work that currently constrain resources for the State agencies engaged in PLUS.

Insights From the Customer Journey

As part of the SEB process the team reviewed the customer journey (found in Appendix A) from the perspective of four fictional personas that represented customers who would normally be involved in the PLUS process. The team analyzed pain points and goals from the perspective of the personas:

1. **A Dedicated Developer:** A seasoned real estate developer in Delaware with extensive experience navigating the PLUS process. Steve seeks streamlined coordination, reduced redundancies, and greater scheduling flexibility to support efficient project delivery.
2. **A Mission-Driven Newcomer:** A newcomer to the development landscape with a passion for sustainability and community impact through an affordable housing project. Maya needs clear guidance and supportive navigation through complex regulatory processes that she is unfamiliar with.
3. **A One-Off Business Owner:** A small business owner in Wyoming, DE, pursuing a one-time development project. Jane values simplicity, clear expectations, and minimal bureaucratic hurdles to bring her vision to life.
4. **A Municipal Manager:** A municipal worker balancing local governance and State requirements. Karin looks for consistent standards, better communication, and timely feedback to effectively represent her local community interests.

The result of the customer journey review generated pain points that were later selected and prioritized for improvement, which included the following:

- Confusion and frustration in the early stages due to not knowing what is needed to engage in the PLUS process (all four personas).
- Frustration with the timeliness of PLUS process and wondering if it could move faster (all four personas).
- Not knowing that PLUS was required until a local government entity told them that it was necessary (Mission-Driven Newcomer).
- Lack of familiarity with PLUS and an unpredictable path through development phases/permits (Mission-Driven Newcomer and One-Off Business Owner).
- Feeling a sense of responsibility to the town council and local community with a need to obtain quality information from PLUS (Municipal Manager).
- Having a limited understanding of or not having known about the development project at all, until the PLUS meeting was scheduled (Municipal Manager).
- Feeling intimidated in the PLUS meeting and afraid to ask clarifying questions (Karin, One-Off Business Owner and Mission-Driven Newcomer).

- Wanting to know if key requirements are missing but then wanting to move fast (Steve).
- Feeling frustrated with PLUS comment letter responses having lengthy recommendations and being required to obtain the property owner's signature (Steve).

The pain points noted here were also reinforced through prior conversations that the GEAR Program Management Team held with two private sector business leaders who were actively engaged in land use development initiatives in New Castle County. Overall, between the value stream analysis with the associated process metrics and associated risks, and the customer journey analysis, that revealed the additional pain points, these two exercises led to the tiers of objectives detailed at the outset of this report that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the PLUS program.

Leadership Support

The single most important variable to implementing change is clear and visible sponsorship from leadership. In the case of the PLUS program, there is clear and aligned sponsorship from the Governor, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and the Director of the Office of State Planning Coordination to move forward with implementation. To sustain momentum, leadership is asked to:

- Continue to reinforce alignment with the Governor's priorities.
- Champion business cases for engaging additional State agencies involved in permitting.
- Prioritize existing resources for implementation of strategic initiatives.

Continued executive support will be essential to build on this momentum and achieve long-term transformation.

Next Steps and Conclusions

The team will finalize prototypes, conduct a 30 day check in with the PLUS team to evaluate near term results, establish ongoing evaluation mechanisms and sustainability plans, and align change management efforts with GEAR's operational excellence standards. Strategic leadership messaging and cross-agency alignment—especially on priorities like affordable housing—will continue to be essential.

One key theme and opportunity by operating within a Lean framework is providing organizations the ability to repurpose time, energy, and dollars from non-value-added activity to value-added activity. While many organizations are inclined to ask for additional resources to implement strategic recommendations, the GEAR Program Management Team would recommend implementing the time and cost savings objectives outlined in this document, then reassess internal capacity among the programs, prior to providing additional resources to pursue additional objectives.

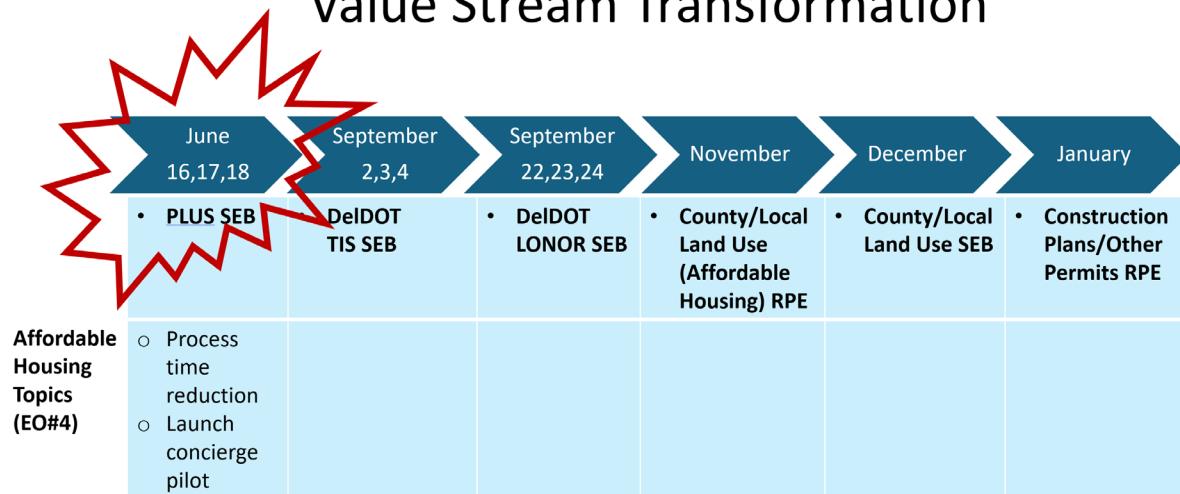
This SEB report shall be provided to the Cabinet Committee on State Planning Issues to inform their evaluation of PLUS and to be shared with other governmental partners and agencies who are interested in permitting reform.

In addition, there is an ongoing request of the Governor's office to continue reviewing and streamlining permitting processes through future SEB events (see image below) between GEAR and the relevant permitting bodies in Delaware. Support at the cabinet level down to the organizational level, where subject matter experts in permitting processes execute their objectives, are vital to engage in future SEB events. Without the engagement of those who do the work daily, or leadership expressing the business reasons for change, these efforts will move slowly and become subject to fragmentation over time.

Overall, within a three-day framework this SEB team achieved the objectives originally set forth in its project charter and will exceed expectations if the goals are carried out in a timely manner. As a framework for delivering efficiencies in a government setting, the PLUS SEB has laid the foundation for a more responsive, value-driven process.

State Permitting Process Improvement Schedule

Ready in Six Permitting Efficiency Value Stream Transformation



SEB = Service Efficiency Blitz

RPE = Rapid Planning Event

Acknowledgments

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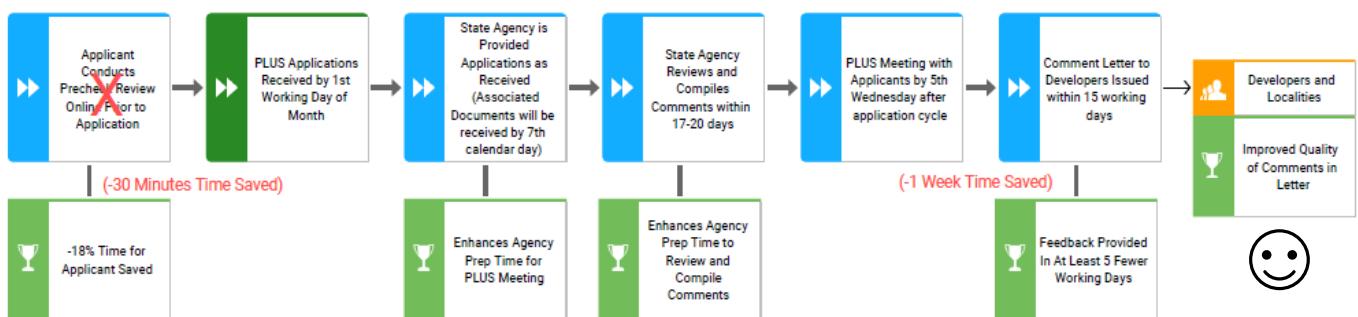
Chuck Clark, Executive Director, GEAR

Appendix A – Process Maps from the SEB Event

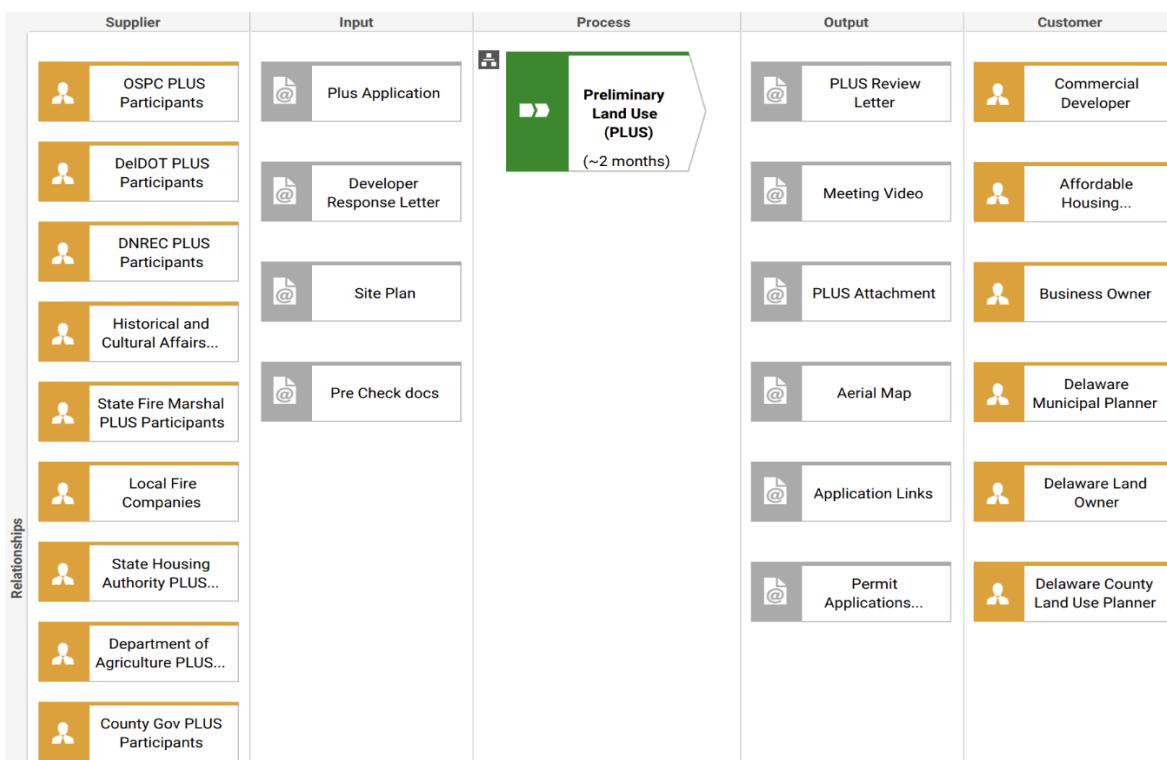
Previous PLUS Process



New PLUS Process



PLUS SIPOC Diagram



PLUS Customer Journey Map

Journey Elements	1. Initial Research	2. Pre-application Consultation	3. Application Preparation and Precheck in ESRI	4. Application Submission in ARCGIS Survey 123	5. Dropbox Submission, Application Review & Scheduling	6. PLUS Meeting Preparation	7. PLUS Meeting Attendance	8. Receipt of PLUS Comments	9. Developer Response to Comments	10. Local Jurisdiction Submission	11. Project Monitoring	12. Project Completion
Customer Touchpoints	PLUS website, Documentation portal, FAQ section	Phone call with planning staff, Email correspondence	Online application form, Document upload portal	Application portal, Confirmation email	Email notification for submission, Wait for Documentation, Online status checker	Agenda email, Pre-meeting materials	⭐ MoT: In-person/virtual meeting with review committee	Comment letter, Online report portal	Comment response form, Support contact	Local government portal or other touchpoint, Application forms	Status updates, Follow-up communications	Final approvals, Permit issuance
Customer Experience	❗ Confusion about requirements	💡 Clarification of needs	❗ Frustration with complexity	💡 Relief but uncertainty	⌚ Waiting and uncertainty	💡 Concern about readiness	❗ Anxiety during presentation	❗ Concern over requirements	⌚ Frustration with revisions	❗ Fatigue with process	💡 Satisfaction with progress	💡 Relief and satisfaction