

FOCUS 2020: Inspectional Services

Efforts in COVID-19 Compliance and Service Accessibility

The Inspectional Services Department (ISD) plays a key role in public health enforcement and meeting the public's inspection and permitting needs. The Department, which is responsible for ensuring all buildings in Boston comply with state and city code, proceeds with these key functions while confronting barriers due to COVID-19 and moving ahead with long-term plans to modernize their processes and constituent services.

COVID-19 Response and FY21 priorities

During the pandemic, ISD is focused on meeting demand for its services despite obstacles to in-person engagement. ISD's efforts already underway to move services online positioned the Department to accelerate one of its multi-year priorities: modernization of its IT infrastructure and business processes. After moving to remote-work, ISD expanded its digital presence to meet high demand. This modernization effort includes setting up an online application for zoning appeals. As part of a March 2020 Executive Order, which outlined reforms for the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), ISD is one of the main departments carrying out the Order to increase public engagement and improve accessibility.

Trends in Budget and Personnel

ISD's FY21 budget is \$20.9M, a 10.4% or \$2.0M increase from FY20 to FY21. The majority of this increase is in personnel spending, which grew 9.4% (\$1.6M) to \$18.0M in FY21. This growth is mostly due to a change in how the City accounts for overtime beginning in FY21, which is reflected in a 426% (\$1.5M) increase in ISD's overtime budget. The change makes overtime spending more transparent and reduces administrative burden in fee collection.

ISD's FY21 budget supports 239 city-funded full-time positions, with five new hires from FY20, including a dedicated project manager and IT specialist, primarily to expand ISD's staffing for process and technology improvement. Since the start of the pandemic, ISD has also repurposed some of its existing positions to inspection functions for COVID-19 response.

ISD & COVID-19 IMPACT

- **Zoning Appeals Backlog** - ISD faces a significant backlog of zoning appeals due to COVID-19 restrictions. With virtual hearings, ISD expects to resolve the backlog by the end of the year.
- **More Interdepartmental Coordination** - Since the start of the pandemic, ISD has dedicated more resources to collaboration with other departments, including technical assistance on regulatory compliance and facilitating COVID-19 programs like the Reopen Boston Fund. In May, ISD started enforcing coronavirus-specific safety plans for construction sites. More recently, ISD has partnered closely with the Office of Economic Development to provide guidance to small businesses and with the Licensing Board to offer restaurants outdoor seating.
- **Rental Inspections Decline** - In 2019, ISD conducted 13,500 rental inspections; by October 2020, they had conducted 5,600 this calendar year. Much of this decline is due to public health concerns among residents and reservations about granting access to inspectors. ISD continued housing code enforcement with a hybrid of in-person and remote inspections, as well as virtual court hearings.
- **Most Fines Paused** - ISD has paused most fine issuances to Boston households—due to financial struggles—and instead has focused on levying fines on households that violate COVID-19 regulations and the short term rental ordinance.
- **Increase in Rodent Control** - ISD has dedicated more environmental sanitation resources to pest control due to a significant uptick in rodent complaints since the spring.