

PMC needs to get its act together

Pune Newslines: Thu Oct 24 2013, 04:11 hrs

The Pune Municipal Corporation has followed the requirements of the RTI Act 2005 in a superficial manner with pro-active disclosures under Section 4 of the RTI Act on its website. However, a deep understanding of this powerful tool provided to the ordinary citizen under RTI Act 2005 is yet to be accepted and or implemented. RTI applicants are treated as 'citizens who have nothing better to do' 'time wasters', 'cranks', 'suspects'.

CURRENT SCENARIO

POIs and APOIs: On the website, there is a list of 41 PIOs under Section 4 (ii) of the Act. Through an RTI application, it was revealed that in total, there are 84 POIs and APOIs. Can you imagine the monumental task that is required if one has to choose which PIO the application has to be addressed and submitted to? Or, if the application has several questions with regard to the same topic but which is dealt with by different PMC departments as per their wisdom?

What PMC actually does is that when the deadline of 30 days approaches, the applicant is informed that for some of the questions on the RTI application, the applicant must approach another department. A real example: A letter was sent asking me to approach the 'Prakalp Dept' (without giving the address). As an ordinary citizen, I expected this department to be found in the Main building. But no, after one week of stubbornly checking through all the offices in the main building and other buildings, I discovered this to be the JNNURM Project cell at Orion building. It is no wonder the most ordinary citizens feel harassed and give up, labelling the RTI Act as "useless."

Submission of RTI application

: Over and above that, currently, the applicant cannot submit the RTI application at a single window, but must trace the relevant department by trudging through the maze of offices at PMC Main building, Veer Savarkar Bhavan, Garden Dept, Fire Dept, 15 ward offices and the various JNNURM cells.

Tracking System:

The PMC does not activate a tracking system on its website to track the readiness of the requisite information. Thus, one has to wait - sometimes indefinitely. (This citizen-friendly process is available on Amdavad Municipal Corporation - www.egovamc.com). If PMC has to allot a tracking number, which it should in these times of internet accessibility, then there is a need for single-window submission.

Collection of Documents under RTI:

One would think that when and if the information is ready, the concerned officer would have the courtesy of calling or emailing the applicant (who has provided the information on the application) to give the cost involved so the process can be completed fast. But no, PMC will post a letter through ordinary post, so it may reach after upto 45 days (given how dismal our postal service is). It is also found that the PMC letter may actually have a certain date on the letter, but the postmark will reveal it was posted anything in the region of 8 days after.

Payment process

: This is another convoluted process. Finally when/ if the documents are ready, PIO in the concerned office will prepare a challan, wait for a signature from the senior office in the same dept when/ if he is available. Thereafter, the applicant has to go to the Bank of Maharashtra in OMC Main building to complete payment. After the challan is received, the applicant has to trudge back to the concerned department, wherever it is located in Pune, in the hope that the senior officer is still there to approve release of the RTI documents. These are nothing but time-delaying tactics in order to deter future requests.

Solution

Apart from 84 PIOs and APOs appointed in case mandated under RTI Act 2005 sec 5(1), PMC must constitute a Nodal officer as RTI application single window. If the applicant is confused about which of these 84 offices to approach, this Nodal Officer on receipt can understand the RTI request and submit it to the concerned department internally or transfer it to another authority under Section 5 (3) (4) (5) which states inter/ intra-departmental interface without resorting to wastage of time by sending it back to the applicant. If there are several questions pertaining to the same topic but concerning several PMC departments, it should be passed on intra-departmentally, instead of sending it back to the applicant asking that separate applications be submitted.

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