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Summary of Unfinished Business at San Mateo County Planning and Building Department

Issue

To what extent has the San Mateo County Planning and Building Department implemented the recommendations of the 2004-2005 San Mateo Civil Grand Jury to improve the building permit process for the unincorporated areas of the County?

Summary

On June 7, 2005 the Board of Supervisors accepted the recommendations of the 2004-2005 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury to improve the County's building permit application and approval process through better trained employees, the use of current communications technologies and the solicitation of recommendations from the public on means to improve the permit application and approval process.

The 2006-2007 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) investigated the implementation of the accepted recommendations and found that little progress has been made. The San Mateo County Planning and Building Department does not maximize the benefits of current technologies to process permit applications or to communicate the status of permit applications in an informative, effective and timely fashion.

The Grand Jury recommends that the 2004-2005 Grand Jury recommendations be implemented fully, including creation and completion of an in-depth and comprehensive survey designed to solicit from homeowners and building professionals suggestions to improve the permit process.



Unfinished Business at San Mateo County Planning and Building Department

Issue

To what extent has the San Mateo County Planning and Building Department implemented the recommendations of the 2004-2005 San Mateo Civil Grand Jury to improve the building permit process for the unincorporated areas of the County?

Investigation

In response to a citizen complaint the 2004-2005 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury investigated the application process for a building permit for the unincorporated areas of San Mateo to determine if the County provided efficient, timely and needed services. That investigation focused on the Current Planning section of the Planning and Building Department (Planning and Building), which was then part of the Environmental Services Agency. That investigation resulted in six recommendations (the 2004-2005 Recommendations), five of which were accepted for implementation by the County. The sixth recommendation was consistent with a program then in development. The County Manager stated that the County's response would be updated in a future report to the Board of Supervisors.

The 2006-2007 San Mateo Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) toured the Development Review Center (DRC) of Planning and Building, observed the permitting process, reviewed a small sample of printed brochures, interviewed staff and reviewed web-based on-line processes. During the course of this investigation, Grand Jurors reviewed space plans for the reconfigured physical premises, construction of which is scheduled to commence in September 2006 and be completed in approximately six months. The processes of Planning and Building were examined to determine if the 2004-2005 Recommendations had been implemented. The Grand Jury did not independently assess the merits of each of the 2004-2005 Recommendations.

Findings

Grand Jurors were unable to locate the promised updates to the County's response to the 2004-2005 Recommendations.

The DRC is intended to act as a one-stop permit center where all of the County's major development review functions are located. The Current Planning section is located in the DRC and is responsible, among other things, for the issuance of building permits for the unincorporated areas of the County. The Planning and Building lobby, when used in this report, refers to the lobby adjacent to the DRC.

As of November 20, 2006, as part of the reorganization of County government, Planning and Building will become the Planning and Building Department.

Each of the 2004-2005 Recommendations is set forth below, followed immediately by its implementation status:

2004-2005 Recommendation 1. *Follow through with the formal training program for new Current Planning employees and allow ample time to learn regulations before handling customer inquiries.*

- In July 2005, Planning and Building adopted a formal training program for its Current Planning employees. The program is required for new employees and available as a refresher course for existing employees. Not all employees have completed all phases of the training program.
- A program is in place to staff the Current Planning customer counter with at least two employees at all times, one of whom is to be experienced with applicable regulations and able to assist a less experienced employee.

2004-2005 Recommendation 2. *Immediately set up an express line for picking up and processing simple permits in the Planning and Building lobby.*

- Planning and Building has not implemented an express line and has not committed to its implementation.

2004-2005 Recommendation 3. *Immediately raise awareness of the fax-in and mail-in options as well as the on-line permit status through the website, brochures, automated phone messages and personal contact with the applicants.*

- All Current Planning employees working at the customer counter are now instructed to inform permit applicants of these options.
- There are no signs posted in the Planning and Building lobby advising applicants of these options.

- The brochures available in the Planning and Building lobby explaining the application process and requirements for various types of permits include a facsimile number and mailing address but do not emphasize these options.
- A brochure titled “How to Apply for a Permit by FAX or Mail” limits the types of permits qualifying for mail-in or fax-in to (i) re-roofing, (ii) water heater replacement, (iii) furnace replacement, (iv) termite reports (only under certain conditions), (v) electrical service change by a licensed contractor only, and (vi) gas, water or sewer line repair (not requiring an encroachment permit).

2004-2005 Recommendation 4. *Expand the use of fax and e-mail in the Planning and Building Department to facilitate and expedite the processing of permits and responses to customer inquiries.*

- Planning and Building did not provide statistics, but advised the Grand Jury that fax and e-mail access to the permit process expanded in 2005 and is expected to continue to expand in 2006.
- Virtually all re-roofing and water heater permits are processed via fax.
- The status of permit applications can be accessed by applicants via the Internet by means of a numeric access code. However, when permit applications are dependent upon approvals of third party agencies (e.g., a fire district), the third party correspondence and processes are not available through the website.

2004-2005 Recommendation 5. *Improve accessibility to the website by creating better links from the County’s homepage.*

- Links between the County’s homepage and Current Planning are not intuitive. A word search for “building permits” on the homepage will not link directly to Planning and Building or Current Planning.

2004-2005 Recommendation 6. *Immediately solicit written feedback from architects, contractors and homeowners on recommendations for improving the application process.*

- Planning and Building makes the generic “San Mateo County Cares” customer satisfaction survey available to applicants via the Internet and in printed form. The Grand Jury did not review the results of the surveys.
- Planning and Building has not implemented a program to solicit recommendations from architects, contractors and homeowners for improving the permit process.

Conclusions

The County is reconfiguring and remodeling the physical premises of the DRC. It is creating a new Planning and Building Department as part of its government reorganization. The application process for building permits should be improved to make it as user friendly as possible.

Planning and Building has responded to the need for better educated employees by implementing an ongoing formal training program. The Grand Jury commends this change and anticipates that a better trained staff will deliver more accurate and efficient services to permit applicants.

Planning and Building does not maximize use of information technology and electronic communication. The planning process remains very paper intensive. The 2004-2005 Grand Jury concluded that Planning and Building had not taken full advantage of available technologies to improve operating efficiencies and communications with applicants. The Grand Jury has observed improvement in this Department's use of facsimiles and electronically accessed databases, but the progress appears to be disjointed and not a priority. There is no single electronic database which can be accessed in real time by both the applicant and County employees to determine the conditions for issuance of a permit or the status of a permit application which includes third party correspondence and processes bearing on the permit approval.

The Grand Jury commends the use of customer satisfaction surveys as recommended by the 2004-2005 Grand Jury. However, it appears that Planning and Building has not conducted a focused and in-depth survey of homeowners and building professionals to solicit ideas to improve the permit process.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the newly created Planning and Building Department to implement each of the following recommendations of the 2004-2005 Grand Jury previously accepted by the Board:

1. Create an express line in the Planning and Building lobby for simple permits (Recommendation 2);
2. Raise awareness of fax-in and mail-in options as well as the on-line permit status through the website, brochures and signage (Recommendation 4);
3. Improve accessibility to the website by creating better links from the County's homepage. These links should reflect the Planning and Building Department's function in the planning and permit process (Recommendation 5); and

4. Design and implement an in-depth survey to solicit recommendations from architects, contractors and homeowners for improving the permit process (Recommendation 6).

The Grand Jury also recommends that the Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department to improve the information content available on-line to create a single access point for building permit applicants to review the status of their permit applications. If third party agency approvals are required for permit issuance, links should be created to the websites of the third party agencies or, if links are not available, information from the third party agencies received by the Planning and Building Department should be scanned and uploaded.



COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
Inter-Departmental Correspondence

County Manager's Office

DATE: February 12, 2007
BOARD MEETING DATE: February 27, 2007
SPECIAL NOTICE: None
VOTE REQUIRED: None

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors
FROM: John L. Maltbie, County Manager
SUBJECT: 2006-07 Grand Jury Response

Recommendation

Accept this report containing the County's responses to the following 2006-07 Grand Jury report: Unfinished Business at San Mateo County Planning and Building Division Report.

VISION ALIGNMENT:

Commitment: Responsive, effective and collaborative government.

Goal 20: Government decisions are based on careful consideration of future impact, rather than temporary relief or immediate gain.

This activity contributes to the goal by ensuring that all Grand Jury findings and recommendations are thoroughly reviewed by the appropriate County departments and that, when appropriate, process improvements are made to improve the quality and efficiency of services provided to the public and other agencies.

Discussion

The County is mandated to respond to the Grand Jury within 90 days from the date that reports are filed with the County Clerk and Elected Officials are mandated to respond within 60 days. It is also the County's policy to provide periodic updates to the Board and the Grand Jury on the progress of past Grand Jury recommendations requiring ongoing or further action. To that end, attached is the County's response to the Grand Jury report on Unfinished Business at San Mateo County Planning and Building Division Report issued December 1, 2006.

Unfinished Business at San Mateo County Planning and Building Division Report Access to County Employee Directory Information

Findings:

Staff is in general agreement with the Grand Jury's findings.

Recommendations:

The Board of Supervisors should direct the newly created Planning and Building department to implement each of the following recommendations of the 2004-2005 Grand Jury previously accepted by the Board:

1. Create an express line in the Planning and Building lobby for simple permits.

Response: Concur. The Planning and Building Department will create an express line so that representatives from various customer groups such as architects, contractors, and homeowners can help define which projects should be considered "express." Customers will be included in the discussion and implementation of an express line to address and respond to actual customer need and the concern that some customers may be helped more quickly than others. Defining express projects should be carefully considered so that a customer does not have a negative experience when the "express project" customer receives service before the "non-express project" customer—when the "non-express project" customer came to the counter first. The express line is scheduled to be implemented by the end of June 2007.

2. Raise awareness of fax-in and mail-in options as well as the on-line status through the website, brochures, and signage.

Response: Concur. Signs have been posted in the Planning and Building lobby about the fax and mail-in option for applicable permits. The Department will update its website and brochures by June 2007 so that fax and mail-in options for applicable permits are emphasized. To meet this deadline, stickers will be added to pertinent brochures emphasizing the fax and mail-in options. As brochures are updated and reprinted, the stickers will be replaced with text integrated into the description of the permit process.

3. Improve accessibility to the website by creating better links from the County's homepage. These links should reflect the Planning and Building Department function in the planning and permit process.

Response: Concur. The County of San Mateo homepage has recently been updated as part of the Countywide reorganization and links to the Planning and Building Department have been improved. The Department is now directly accessed

from the County homepage by its department name rather than through the name of a larger Agency. The link to the Planning and Building Department directly links to the “Permit Plan” tracking system and permitting processes.

The Department’s “Permit Plan” tracking system includes information fields for in-house and third party agencies, such as special districts, that are responsible for reviewing and commenting on permit applications. Anyone can access this information on-line through the application number, site address, or assessor’s parcel number.

Department staff is responsible for filling in all project status fields. The Department will coordinate with Accela, the service provider for “Permit Plan,” to upgrade the tracking system so that comments and documents received from third party agencies can be directly attached to the tracking system and applicants and interested parties thereby have access to more complete information.

The Department also understands that it can improve its customer service by facilitating communication between applicants and third party agencies. To achieve this goal, the Department has hired a Permit Coordinator who is responsible for serving as liaison between an applicant and a third party agency. The Permit Coordinator informs third party agencies of timelines for comments and will assist in communicating the comments received from third party agencies to applicants. Although this is not an on-line solution, it does provide a County liaison between applicants and agencies so that communication during the permit process is enhanced.

4. Design and implement an in-depth survey to solicit recommendations from architects, contractors and homeowners for improving the permit process.

Response: Concur. The Department will convene a focus group of selected customer representatives—architects, contractors and homeowners—to design and implement an in-depth survey that will be used to solicit specific recommendations for improving the permit process. This survey will include solicitation on how to design and implement an “Express Line” in the lobby as well as other ways to streamline the permit process. The Department will develop a workplan and budget, based on the focus group recommendations, by the end of June 2007.