

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

January 29, 2019

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Marin County Board of Supervisors
3501 Civic Center Drive
San Rafael, CA 94903

Re: Update on Permitting Improvements Initiatives

Dear Supervisors:

RECOMMENDATION: Accept report on the Community Development Agency's (CDA's) Building Permit Improvements Program and provide feedback to staff regarding additional program enhancements.

SUMMARY: This report provides an update to the Board of Supervisors on the status of progress made to the CDA's development review program and seeks feedback regarding improvements to the program.

Background

Over the last several years, CDA has pursued and implemented a number of changes to the development review program, working with a Board subcommittee comprised of Supervisors Judy Arnold and Dennis Rodoni. Permitting and inspection of construction projects represents one of the CDA's core services with an annual volume of approximately 3,500 building permits. Given the limited availability of vacant land, and the type and distribution of land uses in the unincorporated area, most of the construction permits processed by CDA involve additions and remodels of residential structures.

CDA's efforts to pursue ongoing improvements in the development review program are guided and informed by the Strategic Assessment and the recommendations from the Regulatory Improvements Advisory Committee. The following provides an update on the status of key components of the improvement program with a focus on building permits.

1. Permit Coordination

In 2016, CDA launched a permit liaison service by creating a new Building Permit Services position that offers building permit applicants a single point of contact to identify and resolve problems associated with multiple review authorities (e.g. Planning, Environmental Health, Fire, Public Works). This position also identifies and makes recommendations to improve the permit routing procedures, maintains consistency in information provided to applicants, and troubleshoots problems causing delays with specific permits.

2. Technology Improvements

With the assistance of Information Systems Technology (IST) Department, CDA completed the new permit tracking system for Planning Permits in November 2015 and online Building Permits for “over-the-counter” permit types (e.g. reroof, siding, etc.) in July 2016. Online permitting provides applicants with the convenience of applying for and receiving a building permit electronically, saving time and reducing vehicular emissions associated with travel to and from the Civic Center. In FY 2017-18, approximately 54% of all “over-the-counter” permits were issued online. Last December, your Board authorized CDA to contract with Avolve Software to implement electronic review of building permit applications to improve plan review workflow and plan check response times. Implementation is scheduled for late 2019, to be followed by integration with the final phase of the permit tracking system for all other types of building permits commencing in 2020.

3. Same Day Permitting

Aside from over-the-counter permits, the balance of the building permit types involves projects that require full (complex) engineering plan checks (such as new structures) or minor reviews involving some engineering (such as structural remodels/additions, and site retaining walls). The same day (Express Permit) program was launched in July 2012 to define a class of minor projects that could benefit from streamlined same-day reviews where staff from the various reviewing authorities (Building, Fire, Public Works) can be scheduled on an appointment basis to provide the same day review and approvals. The first phase of Express Permits was limited to minor construction types, such as non-structural interior remodels, simplified structural interior remodels, rooftop photovoltaic or solar thermal installations, and standard retaining walls. This program has proven to be very successful, accounting for over 32% of all Building Permits issued in FY 2017-18 that required plan review. Originally limited to two half-days per week, the program was subsequently expanded to four half-days per week to meet demand.

To maximize the utility of the Express Permit program, staff developed a list of additional construction types that could be eligible. These include minor repairs that do not constitute a substantial remodel, demolition, non-structural skylights, uncovered decks, and limited structural remodels and additions. In some cases, projects served by individual sewage disposal systems could be eligible if the project meets criteria in the existing additions and remodels policy. Projects in the coastal zone would not qualify, unless a Coastal Permit approval, exemption, or categorical exclusion has first been obtained.

Proposed interior remodels and repairs/additions to decks would be eligible for the Express Permit if they meet certain objective standards. To meet the objective of same-day permit issuance, permit requests would benefit from a presumption that the work involves a legal structure, thereby reducing the time and effort of researching permit history. This approach would effectively legalize certain types of construction relative to conformance with setbacks, height, and building code standards, thereby eliminating the conventional code enforcement and legalization process for structures built or expanded without permits.

4. Consolidated Building Permit Review

With the support of the Department of Public Works, CDA launched the multi-disciplinary “generalist” review program in 2018, whereby plan review for compliance with building code standards is consolidated with public works standards for grading, accessibility, and erosion/sediment control and undertaken by a generalist who is trained in both building and public works engineering. This program is intended to reduce queue and review times by consolidating the time and resources expended by multiple reviewers to a single reviewer. To date, initial training has been completed for Building Division plan review and field inspection staff to consolidate these reviews. Training for a generalist review for conformance with Planning standards will be undertaken as part of the expansion of the Same Day Permitting program discussed in Item 3 above. Full rollout of the generalist review with engineering and planning is expected later this year.

5. Public Information

To improve applicants’ understanding of application submittal requirements and permit review procedures, CDA completed an application guide to Planning permits and updated submittals checklists for both Building Permit and Planning applications. In addition, prototypical “sample plans” were developed to assist in determining the adequacy of application submittals. These efforts are intended to assist homeowners, design professionals, and contractors in preparing application materials by clearly identifying information and construction details needed to more expeditiously move through the permit review process.

6. Training and Staff Development

Staff attrition can have disruptive impacts to productivity and consistency in services associated with time needed to recruit, train, and onboard new hires. With the assistance of the Human Resources Department, CDA has consolidated three technician classifications into one (Community Development Technician). This created opportunities for training in more than one program area (e.g. Building and Safety and Environmental Health Services), strengthening the “bench” and reducing the severity of service impacts when there is attrition.

Consistent with one of the goals of the Five-Year Business Plan, we are also exploring ways to provide greater career development opportunities and to be more competitive in recruitments by utilizing the engineering classification to fill plan review positions in the Building and Safety Division, where engineering skillsets, education, and experience requirements are transferable. For instance, CDA currently utilizes the Associate Civil Engineer classification to conduct the most complex plan checks involving structural and engineering review, and have recruited for the Senior Civil Engineer classification in the past. With your Board’s support, staff will continue to work with the Human Resources Department to look at other classifications in the engineering series that could be utilized for CDA.

7. Office Space Modernization

In December 2013, CDA opened a new Permit Center that consolidated Building, Planning, Public Works, and Fire review functions in a new and expanded lobby

(Suite 308) that is laid out to allow staff to more efficiently help customers. The new design also allowed the back offices for the Building and Planning Divisions to be consolidated and to better integrate staff from the two Divisions. The redesigned spaces provided staff with better opportunities to collaborate, making more efficient use of space for offices, meetings, and storage. Additional work has been planned to improve the applicant waiting area in the Permit Center, to consolidate staffing of the Permit Center with the land use program from Environmental Health Services, and to consider reopening the Permit Center partially on Fridays.

ISSUES SEEKING BOARD DIRECTION

CDA's efforts to undertake improvements to the development review program are ongoing, and staff will continue to work with the Board subcommittee. We are seeking the Board's feedback specifically on the following enhancements: (1) to expand the types of work eligible for the Same Day Permitting program as discussed in Item 3 above; and (2) to continue to work to identify opportunities utilizing the engineering classification that could meet business needs and provide opportunities for staff growth and development, as discussed in Item 6 above.

FISCAL/STAFFING IMPACT: The Building and Safety Division operates on a full cost recovery basis for operations (i.e. no general fund support), though the general fund did provide one-time support of \$350,000 recently for the electronic plan review software mentioned above. Implementation of the improvements may result in staffing impacts associated with changes in the scope of work, which we would bring to your Board at a subsequent date for consideration.

Staff will continue to work with the Board's subcommittee and the County Administrator's office to monitor the budget impacts. We anticipate returning to your Board later this Spring with building permit and technology fee adjustments intended to maintain 100% cost recovery and fund additional customer service enhancements.

REVIEWED BY: (These boxes must be checked)

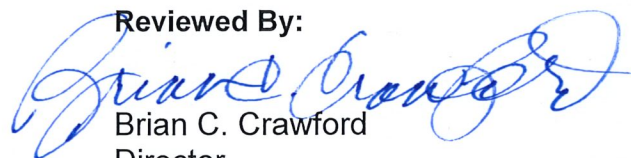
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SIGNATURE:



Tom Lai
Assistant Director

Reviewed By:


Brian C. Crawford
Director