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## San Mateo County Planning and Building Division

### Issue

Does the Current Planning section of San Mateo County Planning and Building Division provide the citizens of the county with efficient, timely and needed services?

### Summary

In response to a citizen complaint, the Grand Jury investigated the Current Planning section of the County Planning and Building Division with a focus on the efficiency, timeliness and adequacy of the services provided.

Current Planning is responsible for providing development information, conducting preliminary reviews of development proposals, and coordinating and processing permit applications in the unincorporated areas of San Mateo County. With 14,000 customer inquiries at the Planning office and 2,400 building permits issued in the last year, they are extremely busy. A staff of eight planners handles customer inquiries and processing of these applications. In the last year turnover led to a shortage of three employees significantly increasing the workload for the remaining five. This created long delays for permits, frustrated customers, and frazzled employees. Despite this frustration, the Grand Jury heard many favorable comments concerning the employees of Current Planning.

In a County known for its complex regulations, employees must be trained sufficiently before handling inquiries or processing applications. In the past, customers have dealt with misinformation due an inexperienced staff. Those interviewed felt it could take up to a year to gain the necessary knowledge. The Grand Jury found that, due to staff shortages, the training of new employees has been lacking. A program is now in place to improve employee training.

Current Planning is not taking full advantage of the technology available to improve efficiency and communication with applicants. Much of the unincorporated areas of the county lie along the coast and a visit to Current Planning requires a substantial time commitment. Customers are unaware of the fax-in option for simple permits and there is very little use of email and fax as a way to address questions or submit changes. Additionally, applicants are unaware of the availability of their permit status online. There is no notice of this in the Planning lobby despite the fact that half of their calls are

concerning permit status. Additionally, finding the web site is a challenge as it lies under an agency, Environmental Services, which is not intuitive to the user.

Through interviews, the Grand Jury found that many contractors and architects have extensive experience in dealing with Current Planning and could be a valuable source of recommendations.

The Grand Jury's recommendations include ensuring adequate training, better use of technology, better publicity of the fax-in option and the online permit status, easier accessibility to the web site, and soliciting recommendations for improvement from the community.



## **San Mateo County Planning and Building Division**

### **Issue**

Does the Current Planning section of San Mateo County Planning and Building Division provide the citizens of the county efficient, timely and needed services?

### **Background**

In response to a citizen complaint, the San Mateo Civil Grand Jury investigated the process of filing for a permit to build in the unincorporated areas of San Mateo County.

For purposes of this investigation, we narrowed our focus to the Current Planning section in the Building and Planning Division of the County Environmental Services Agency. Current Planning works closely with the Building Inspection section to process applications for development and constructions permits in the unincorporated areas of San Mateo County.

The primary responsibilities of the Current Planning section are to:

- provide development information
- conduct preliminary reviews of development proposals
- accept and process permit applications
- coordinate the permit application approval process

As part of the approval process, the staff reviews the plans and routes them to several other agencies as needed for review including:

- Environmental Planning
- Health
- Building Inspection
- Fire
- Public Works
- Public Utilities

Each of these organizations must either approve or recommend changes to the plans. Changes to the plans must be made by the applicant and then resubmitted. The plans are approved for building only when all of the approvals are obtained.

In FY 2003-2004, there were 2,400 building permits finalized, a 21% increase from the previous year. Currently there are eight funded Current Planning positions with a workload of approximately 480 active applications.

For this investigation, the Grand Jury interviewed staff from the Planning and Building Division, an architect, and several contractors who do work in the unincorporated areas of this county. Various county reports were also used as reference.

## **Findings**

In 2004, three Planners resigned for various reasons. All parties interviewed agreed this made a significant impact on the efficiency of the department and on employee morale. There was less coverage at the front desk and an increase in processing times. The result was frustrated customers and frazzled employees. In December, the three positions were filled but the five experienced Planners are still handling approximately 78 cases each. Despite the delays, those interviewed felt that the staff works as a team, are hardworking, and for the most part courteous.

Turnover in Current Planning has also meant that just a few employees have sufficient experience to competently deal with the myriad of regulations in the county. This may have caused misinformation at the front desk resulting in citizens searching out and relying on a few experienced employees to answer their questions.

New employees are primarily trained on the job. There has been no formal training of new employees because experienced planners could not be spared to mentor them formally. There have been cases where new employees were working at the customer service counter within two weeks of hire and were unclear of many of the regulations. The Grand Jury found in a follow-up interview that the new employees will not be working at the customer service counter for their first three months to ensure that the information given out is as error free as possible. There are also plans to start a formal training program in a few months. New employees will attend scheduled training sessions with lead people in Current Planning, Long Range Planning, Graphics, Building Inspection, Public Works, Geotechnical, and Environmental Health. Staff estimates that the training should take about six months, but others interviewed by the Grand Jury felt that up to one year may be required for employees to gain the knowledge necessary to competently assist applicants.

The most recent San Mateo County Cares Survey covering the Planning and Building Division found that although overall customer satisfaction with service has been dropping

since 2001 (from 90% to 80%), Planning and Building has a target to improve to 90% by 2005-2006.

Current Planning has a goal of returning phone calls by the next business day. The Grand Jury found that for the most part this was true. However, rarely can a staff person be reached by phone during working hours. Both staff and those interviewed noted with frustration the frequency of “phone tag” when calls are returned.

Some permits qualify for mail-in or fax-in service including re-roofing, water heater replacement, furnace replacement, some termite reports, electrical service change by a licensed contractor, and gas, water, or sewer line repair. Typically, the application will be completed within two or three working days from receipt of a complete and valid application. Many applicants are unaware of the fax-in option for simple permits.

In both the interviews and the customer survey, applicants are asking for more use of the fax and other electronic forms of communication. The Grand Jury found that in most cases, applicants were required to bring all documents to Current Planning because they required the “original.” In California, businesses have been subject to, and governed by the California Electronic Transactions Act since late 1999. The act provides that an electronic signature has the same valid, binding, and legal effect as a handwritten signature. The Act also provides that an electronic document or record has the same valid, binding and legal effect as a paper contract.

Applicants wanting to pick up a permit or process a simple permit in the Planning and Building office have to wait with all other applicants. The waiting time can be up to two hours. Although the county survey revealed the need for an express line, such a service has yet to be implemented. The express line is a program priority in the 2004-2005 budget.

Through interviews, the Grand Jury found that it is difficult for a homeowner, contractor, or architect to deal with the bewildering number of regulations that can affect a design. Many applicants need substantial assistance at the preliminary stage to understand all the requirements. Much of the planner’s time is spent at the counter explaining where the regulations are located in the various zoning documents, while the applicant takes laborious notes. In addition, planners take many calls every day trying to explain complex regulations over the phone. It is frustrating to applicants when they invest a substantial sum of money in preparing plans only to learn later that there is a regulation that prohibits or heavily impacts their project. Interviews with county residents revealed a need for Current Planning to clearly communicate the requirements. One suggestion was to have a sheet adapted for each zoning district that outlines all the regulations and references the proper zoning ordinances. Interviewees felt that a data sheet with the regulations for each zoning district would help inexperienced planners who might otherwise overlook relevant regulations. Handouts that explain the regulation in detail could also be made available. Another suggestion was to keep contractors and architects informed of regulation changes by means of email or fax.

The Planning and Building lobby provides handouts on the permit process and fees for different types of projects, but both the survey and our interviews found a continuing confusion with the process. Interviewees expressed the need for more checklists and other visualizations of the approval process to make clear to the applicants what type of approvals are needed for the various projects.

Current Planning uses a permit tracking system for in-house use. This site is also available for the public to access via the Internet. Our interviews found that most people were not aware of the web page and those who were aware found it somewhat confusing. There is no mention of this service in the lobby. However, a brochure is planned for a future date. It is also difficult to find the Planning and Building Division on the County website. It resides under Environmental Services which is not intuitive to the user. Because approximately one-half of the calls received regard the status of a permit, more public use of the web site would decrease this part of the workload.

## **Conclusions**

Employee turnover along with the complexity of regulations in the county, and a lack of adequate training have resulted in a highly stressful environment for employees in the Current Planning section and frustrating delays for county residents. Management seems to be addressing the training problem with plans for a formal training program which would allow employees more time for training before assisting customers at the service counter. Despite the delays and occasional misinformation, those users interviewed had a high regard for many of the employees who are attempting to complete applications promptly under difficult circumstances.

Current Planning is not taking full advantage of the technology available to improve efficiency and communications with applicants. Many county residents are unaware of the option to fax in simple permits or the ability to view the status of their permit application online. If they manage to locate the website, there is no mention of the fax-in option although the on-line status is well marked. Simply publicizing these options would reduce the number of phone calls and wait times at the Planning and Building office. There should also be consideration given to expanding the use of fax and email. Better use of e-mail could result in quicker, clearer and more complete answers to customer inquiries. Allowing greater use of facsimiles would certainly increase customer satisfaction considering that many applicants reside on the coast and must invest substantial time coming to the Planning office.

Current Planning has attempted to guide the applicant through the intricacies of the permit process by developing an extensive set of brochures for various aspects of the permit process. However, the permit process remains confusing and unclear to many applicants. Particularly bothersome is the concern by applicants that some arcane requirement will arise late in the approval process that has not been addressed in the plans, thereby causing time delays and major costs.

Many contractors and architects in the county have extensive experience in dealing with Current Planning and could be a valuable source for recommendations on improving the current process. Rather than being merely critical of the department, they had many excellent suggestions which would provide a more complete picture of customer needs, and expedite the approval process.

## **Recommendations**

The Board of Supervisors should direct the Environmental Services Agency Director to:

1. follow through with the formal training program for new Current Planning employees and allow ample time to learn regulations before handling customer inquiries.
2. immediately set up an express line for picking up and processing simple permits in the Planning and Building lobby.
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.
4. expand the use of fax and e-mail in the Planning and Building Division to facilitate and expedite the processing of permits and responses to customer inquiries.
5. improve accessibility to the web site by creating better links from the County's home page.
6. immediately solicit written feedback from architects, contractors, and homeowners on recommendations for improving the application process.





**COUNTY OF SAN MATEO**  
**Inter-Departmental Correspondence**

County Manager's Office

**DATE:** May 26, 2005  
**BOARD MEETING DATE:** June 7, 2005  
**SPECIAL NOTICE:** None  
**VOTE REQUIRED:** None

**TO:** Honorable Board of Supervisors  
**FROM:** John L. Maltbie, County Manager  
**SUBJECT:** 2004-05 Grand Jury Response

**Recommendation**

Accept this report containing the County's response to the 2004-05 Grand Jury report on the San Mateo County Planning and Building Division.

**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's report on the San Mateo County Planning and Building Division issued March 21, 2005. You will continue to receive updates on the progress of implementing recommendations requiring ongoing or further action.

## San Mateo County Planning and Building Division

### Findings:

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

### Recommendations:

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

**Response:** Concur. The Planning and Building Division is committed to training new employees. The Current Planning Section is recruiting to fill three vacancies in the near future. With this recruitment, the Current Planning Section will have the opportunity to initiate and complete the Division's training program with each of the new employees. The program will include instruction provided by senior staff in their areas of expertise and other relevant planning topics. The training program will also include assigning senior staff to mentor new employees. We believe that ample time is required to fully understand complex Planning regulations. Before a new employee is assigned counter or phone duty, an assessment by senior staff will be completed to insure new employees exceed a minimum level of competence for those responsibilities.

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

**Response:** Concur. The Planning and Building staff are taking the necessary steps to develop a work plan for implementing this recommendation. Through feedback provided in customer surveys, the Planning and Building Division identified the need for an express line service for picking up permits and simple permits. This recommendation is one of the program priorities identified for the Development Review Services group for next fiscal year. Staff believes this recommendation will be fully implemented within 60 to 90 days.

**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.**

**Response:** Concur. The Planning and Building Division staff is currently in the process of implementing this recommendation. Staff is developing a new brochure that identifies the different methods for the public to contact the Division, submit applications and review application status on-line. In addition, as part of the Division's community outreach and information program, phone messages will be updated to reflect options for submitting permits.

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

**Response:** Concur. The Planning and Building Division staff is currently in the process of implementing this recommendation. Staff will notify customers of the option of providing a fax number in order to expedite plan check review comments and/or responses to customer inquiries.

**5. Improve accessibility to the web site by creating better links from the County's home page.**

**Response:** Concur. The Planning and Building Division management staff is currently developing a work program and budget with the Information Services Department (ISD) to improve the Planning and Building Division's web site links, and will work with the County Manager's Office (CMO) and ISD to make necessary improvements to comply with established guidelines for the County's homepage.

**6. Immediately solicit written feedback from architects, contractors, and homeowners on recommendation for improving the application process.**

**Response:** Planning and Building management staff is currently developing a work program and assigning responsibilities to develop a survey form and method for soliciting comments and suggestions from the public to improve the application process.

The status of these responses will be reported to the Board in a future Grand Jury update.