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## RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AGENCY PART 2 PERMISSION GRANTED

### BACKGROUND

Tulare County Resource Management Agency (RMA) is composed of a large number of functional divisions. RMA's current organization resulted from consolidations carried out during 1996 and 1997. The Permit Center within RMA oversees discretionary planning projects, use and building permits, as well as zoning and code compliance. The Permit Center processes permit applications associated with development of commercial, industrial, agricultural, dairy, and public properties along with residential building permits.

### REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

Media reports of a Special Use Permit application that had been in process since August 2002 attracted the attention of the 2010-2011 Tulare County Grand Jury (Grand Jury). This application was finally resolved favorably in September 2010; however, the Grand Jury decided to investigate the state of the permitting backlog in RMA, the management tools being used to track applications and reporting status to the RMA Director, the County's Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), and as needed, the Board of Supervisors (BOS).

### PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

1. Interviewed relevant witnesses
2. Requested and reviewed relevant documents and policies

### FINDINGS

1. Despite repeated requests to several RMA management employees, the Grand Jury did not receive an adequate report of the backlog of in-process permit applications. The reports received on March 15, 2011, did show applications in-process in 30 day increments up to 90 days, but only a number at over 90 days without any indication whether it was days, weeks, months, or years beyond 90 days. The over 90 days category contained the largest number.
2. Interviews of the same management employees yielded only estimates of the number of open applications and of how long some of the projects might have been open. One employee estimated there are over 300 open projects with about 5 over one year old. The report mentioned in finding number one shows 1,601 pending permits, 1,389 of which are over 90 days old.

3. **There is no monthly, quarterly, or annual reporting process that rolls up project status and performance from the planners through management to the RMA Director or the CAO. The Grand Jury also found no evidence of discrete goals for the Permit Center performance at any level in RMA.**
4. The engineers whose projects make up the Permit Center's principle customer base have in recent years held a negative view of the Center's performance. This view appears to be changing positively as new management is soliciting their input and making improvements to the process.
5. The permitting process requires the participation of many outside agencies. The agencies involved are from state, county, municipal and federal jurisdictions. The Grand Jury found that the outside agencies generally provide timely support and do not normally impede the process.
6. Project planners are required by the Assessor's Office to request, in written form, when they require information from the tax rolls or parcels in the Assessor's database. This may add up to two weeks to the permit processing time.
7. Recent BOS approval of proposals to abolish the Office of Zoning Administrator and the Site Review Committee, transferring their duties and authority to the Tulare County Planning Commission, is a positive sign that RMA is seeking opportunities to streamline the permitting processes.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The Permit Center is not in control of the management practices, management tools, and status information necessary to produce and maintain a process that is both reliable and predictable.

The absence of accurate project status and performance information makes staffing and supporting the process a guessing game at best. When building and development activity returns to the levels seen prior to 2008, the Permit Center will not be able to meet the needs of Tulare County's people in a timely or satisfactory manner unless some real changes are made to its management practices.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Cleanse the permit database so that management has an aged database composed only of permit applications that are known to be active with an expectant customer participating in the processing. Archive the remaining records until some event stimulates their return to the active project database.
2. Use the active project database to establish a baseline for setting performance goals and objectives for participants at each level of RMA, including the RMA Director. Performance measurements against these goals and objectives must be a significant portion of each individual's annual performance review.

3. Institute a monthly reporting process that rolls up the Permit Center's project performance and backlog status from the planner level through RMA management to the CAO. At a minimum, the reports should contain the number of projects closed, the number opened, and the total in active backlog. Any projects older than 90 days be profiled with the reason for delay identified for escalation to management.
4. Allow RMA planners free access to the Assessor's database so they can access the data they need to do their jobs without the delay inherent in the current practice. RMA planners have the same confidentiality mandate as the personnel in the Assessor's Office.
5. Employ process mapping or some similar technique to break down the various tasks associated with the permitting process into manageable pieces that can be analyzed for opportunities to streamline the process by modifying, linking, or eliminating tasks. This type of exercise should be ongoing and employ the knowledge and experience of RMA employees who actually process permits not an outside consulting firm.

## **RESPONSES REQUIRED**

Tulare County Board of Supervisors

Tulare County Chief Administrative Officer

Director, Tulare County Resource Management Agency