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THE PLANNING APPROVAL AND BUILDING PERMIT PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

The City Committee of the 2005-2006 Fresno County Grand Jury examined the planning approval and building permit process of the Planning and Development Department (PDD) of the City of Fresno.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

Increased construction activity in recent years has created large numbers of permit applications slowing the planning approval and building permit process. The processing of applications has taken such an inordinate amount of time that in many cases businesses have given up and located elsewhere. This issue of time has discouraged commercial, industrial and residential development in the City.

BACKGROUND

The Planning and Development Department is responsible for planning the future development of the City of Fresno emphasizing where growth will occur and how it will be accomplished. After the planning approval process, construction documents are submitted for a building permit. This process is complex and time consuming. In the past, incomplete plans were accepted, revised and returned thus delaying the processing time. Once building begins, inspection of each phase of construction is under the purview of the PDD.

Reasons for the lengthy processing time include:

- Volume in the past 18 months to 2 years has doubled and sometimes tripled.
- Projects have gotten more complex. The General Plan promotes high density development which complicates the process.
- The process itself takes time. If the plans are incomplete, they have to be corrected and resubmitted for approval.
- Projects requiring California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) or Environmental Impact Report (EIR) approval add months to the application process in the planning approval phase.

In 2004, the decision was made to hire outside firms to assist with the planning and building permit process. This practice is called outsourcing. The first contracts awarded were for \$49,999; a City ordinance mandates the City Council must approve all contracts for \$50,000 or more. Because those first contract firms proved reliable, accurate and timely, the department let two contracts for \$300,000 and \$500,000. The

City Council vote was 4 to 3 in favor. The most recent Council approval was unanimous.

To answer the criticisms from the building industry and the need to address the workload that sheer volume of applications has placed on the department, there has been a concerted effort to revamp and streamline procedures in the plan approval and building permit processes:

- Meetings have been instituted for architects, engineers, planners and developers informing them of updated policies and procedures.
- In October 2005, an Application Assistance Center, utilizing a manager and seven staff, was opened for the purpose of assisting plan preparers to make sure plans meet the specifications needed to obtain a building permit.
- As a result, there is no need for incomplete plans to be accepted, thus eliminating multiple submissions.
- The concept of combination-inspectors was instituted whereby one inspector could approve multiple phases of a structure thus saving time.
- New computer software has been installed to help track the internal functions of the department.
- Future computer upgrades will enable an applicant to track the exact phase or location of the application.
- A private company has been hired to evaluate PDD procedures that may be wasteful due to overlaps and duplication.
- Files and records are being scanned to compact disc (CD) in an effort to save space and make these records more accessible.

Many within the industry acknowledge the efforts being made by the Planning and Development Department. As Fresno continues to grow, efficient cost-effective procedures for the building industry are essential in order to entice prospective businesses to locate here.

SOURCES

- Leaders within the building industry
- City Councilmen
- Civic leaders
- Planning and Development Department
 - o Interviews
 - o Site visit
- 2025 Fresno General Plan
- News media

FINDINGS

- F1 The Application Assistance Center was started in October 2005, as an aid to project applicants helping to make sure their applications were properly filed as completed.
- A manager and staff of seven, representing components of the planning approval process, are placed together in one location as a way to consolidate resources for the public's convenience.
 - Here questions are answered, plans are coordinated, reviewed and changed as needed to save time and reduce the need to resubmit.
- F2 Meetings are held with architects, engineers, planners and developers to inform them of updated departmental policies and procedures.
- F3 Incomplete applications are no longer accepted.
- F4 Projects are being outsourced.
- Outsourced contracts are funded by monies generated from planning and building permit fees.
 - Outsourcing contracts of \$50,000 or more need City Council approval.
 - The first two outsourcing contracts resulted in a City Council vote of 4 to 3 for approval.
 - The last outsourcing contract received unanimous Council approval.
 - To date, approximately \$1.5 million in outsourcing contracts have been approved.
- F5 Fifty percent of the building inspectors are now trained as combination-inspectors qualified to check multiple phases of the building process.
- The use of combination-inspectors has helped reduce the number of individual inspections per day.
 - Four combination-inspector positions have been outsourced.
 - In January 2006, requests for inspections were 400 per day. By March 2006, the requests numbered 1350 per day.
 - Currently, inspections are down to a manageable 600-700 per day.
- F6 Projects that are determined to need further CEQA or EIR scrutiny require more time.
- F7 Plans have been finalized for reconfiguration of the public space within the department to better serve the public.
- Additional chairs and tables will be added and a large flat screen TV will be used for posting information.
 - Future plans include:
 - o Computers within the department, for public use, to assist in tracking the progress of an application

- o Software enabling the applicant to track an application from his home or business will be possible by logging onto the City's website using an assigned password or number.
- o Applications submitted and processed via CD
- o While improvements have been made, additional alterations will be needed to ensure optimum customer service.

CONCLUSIONS

- C1 The Application Assistance Center assists plan preparers in submitting a complete set of documents.
- C2 By not accepting incomplete plans, the department has eliminated the time consuming problem of multiple submittals.
- C3 Outsourcing reduces workload volume.
- C4 Combination-inspectors have resolved the problem of most inspection delays.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2005-2006 Fresno County Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1 The Planning and Development Department continue to refuse incomplete plans
- R2 The Planning and Development Department continue to outsource as necessary
- R3 All Planning and Development Department inspectors be trained as combination-inspectors
- R4 The Planning and Development Department continue to meet with architects, engineers, planners and developers as needed
- R5 The Fresno City Council continue to approve outsourcing contracts

COMMENDATIONS

The Planning and Development Department is making a concerted effort and progress toward a timely and efficient plan approval and permit process.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code § 933.05, the Fresno County Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

Fresno City Planning and Development – R1, R2, R3, R4

Fresno City Council – R5

Please be reminded that the responses from elected officials are due within 60 days of the receipt of this report and 90 days for others.

**THE
COMMUNITY HEALTH COMMITTEE**
