



COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
Inter-Departmental Correspondence

PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT

DATE: June 8, 2007
BOARD MEETING DATE: June 19, 2007
SPECIAL NOTICE/HEARING: None
VOTE REQUIRED: Majority

TO: Honorable Board of Supervisors
FROM: Lisa Grote, Director of Community Development L.G.
SUBJECT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Planning and Building Task Force – Status Report on Implementation of Phase One and Two Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION

1. Accept the status report on the Implementation of Phase One and Two of the Planning and Building Task Force Report.
2. Authorize the Department of Planning and Building to continue implementing the approved recommendations.

VISION ALIGNMENT

Commitment: Responsive, effective and collaborative government.

Goal(s): (20) Government decisions are based on careful consideration of future impact, rather than temporary relief or immediate gain. (21) County employees understand, support and integrate the County vision and goals into their delivery of services. (22) County and local governments effectively communicate, collaborate and develop strategic approaches to issues affecting the entire County.

BACKGROUND

In June 2005, the Planning and Building Task Force issued a report addressing concerns about the Planning and Building Department. The Task Force Report was

divided into three phases. The Board of Supervisors accepted and approved the Department responses to the first two phases, the Internal Improvement Plan and the Public Services Improvement Plan in September 2005 and December 2005, respectively. This report provides an update on the progress the Department has made implementing the phase One and Two recommendations within the past 18 months.

DISCUSSION

The Board of Supervisors approved three recommendations in the Phase One response to the Task Force Report: Returning the project workload for each planner to 30 – 40 projects; Providing for administrative decision-making; and Increased opportunities for advancement within the Department. Although progress has been made implementing these recommendations, difficulty in recruiting for and filling the vacant positions within the Department has impeded that progress. The Department has just now filled all but one of nine new positions; fully 18 months after the Board of Supervisors approved the new positions. Hiring planning consultants, however, has enabled the Department to eliminate 70 of the 100 projects in its backlog. The Department has created opportunities for advancement within the Department and six employees have benefited from those opportunities.

The Department has fully implemented five of the sixteen recommendations the Board approved as part of the response to Phase Two of the Task Force Report including: Returning to a five day work week; Improving the physical work environment; Implementing a staff training program; Increasing internal communications; and not increasing fees for a three-year period. The Department is in the process of implementing another four of the recommendations including: Improving the Department website; Improving internal tracking of projects; Updating application checklists; and concurrent plan check for outside agencies. The remaining seven Phase Two responses will be implemented as staff is fully trained and able to assume full responsibilities. Those recommendations include: Increasing pre-application meetings; Standardizing review periods for outside agencies; Standardizing review periods for design review committees; Developing a system to coordinate and handle complaints; Developing a fast track system for some permits; Designating a single contact person for the duration of a project; and Further improvements to the public counter system.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report



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BACKGROUND

In June 2005, the Planning and Building Task Force issued a report addressing concerns about the Planning and Building Department. The Task Force Report was divided into three phases. The Planning and Building Department responses to the first and second phases, the Internal Improvement Plan and the Public Services Improvement Plan, respectively, were accepted and approved by the Board of

Supervisors in September 2005 (Phase One) and December 2005 (Phase Two). This report provides an update on the progress the Department has made implementing Phase One and Phase Two recommendations within the past 18 months.

The Board of Supervisors approved three recommendations in the Phase One response to the Task Force Report and sixteen recommendations as part of Phase Two of the Task Force Report. The status of those recommendations is discussed below.

Phase 1 Recommendations

1. Return the project workload per planner to 30 – 40 projects

The Department committed to achieving the first recommendation by hiring outside planning consultants to help process the backlog of projects and filling the nine new positions the Board approved. As of late June 2005, three planning consulting firms were hired by the Planning and Building Department. To-date the consultants have completed 70 projects, which is 70% of the 100 total projects that accumulated in the Planning Division's backlog over the past five years. Completing these projects has helped reduce the number of additional projects each staff planner would otherwise be assigned.

In addition to hiring planning consulting firms, the Department has been recruiting for and hiring personnel for the nine new positions approved by the Board. The nine new positions increased the total number of positions in the Department from 46 to 55 and brought the San Mateo County Planning and Building Department into line with other similarly sized jurisdictions such as Marin County. Five of the new positions are in the Planning Division, three in the Building Division and one in the Code Compliance Division. In addition, the Department has recruited for and is filling vacant existing positions in both the Planning Division and the Building Division.

Filling the new and vacant positions has taken substantially longer than originally expected and 18 months after they were approved, the Department has just recently filled all but one of the vacant positions. The difficulty in filling the positions was partially attributable to competing with other local agencies that have different pay scales and compensation packages, partially due to the timing of the recruitments and partially due to new employees deciding to leave their positions after a very short period of time to pursue entirely different careers. The first two recruitments, which occurred during 2006, coincided with recruitments in other local jurisdictions and the Department was only able to fill two of the eight vacant positions in the Planning Division (five vacant new positions and two vacant existing positions in the Current Planning Section and one vacant existing position in the Long Range Planning Section). Six Planning candidates turned down the Department's offers of employment and instead accepted promotions at their existing places of employment or offers from other jurisdictions that had better compensation packages.

In 2006, the Department was successful in filling the new Building Plans Specialist position in the Building Division, which has increased the number of Structural Engineer/Plan Checker positions from one to two and reduced the turnaround time for building permits from approximately 14-16 weeks to 6-8 weeks. Similarly, in 2006 the Department filled the new Code Compliance Officer position, which resulted in a more manageable workload for the Code Compliance Section. Each Officer now carries an average of 150 enforcement cases a year rather than the previous average of 225 cases when there were just two Officers.

The recent Development Services recruitment in early 2007 was more successful than the 2006 recruitments and has resulted in filling all five of the new planning positions in Current Planning, the one vacant existing position in Long Range Planning and a vacant Building Inspector III position in the Building Division. The Department was able to hire journey-level planners and building inspectors with many years of experience as well as entry-level planners recently out of college or graduate school. As of June 2007, the Department has one remaining new position to fill and that is a Building Permit Technician position, which when filled will increase the total number of Permit Technicians from three to four.

The inability to fill the vacant planning positions until recently has impeded the Department's ability to implement Recommendation No. 1 above and reduce the workload for each planner to 30-40 projects. The Current Planning section of the Development Services Division remained at half-staff throughout 2006, which meant that individual planners were still carrying a disproportionately large workload and turnaround times for discretionary planning permits did not improve. As the recently hired planners are trained and can assume more responsibility, the workload for all planners will reach an average of 35-40 projects each. It takes approximately eight months to train planners, so we expect to be fully functional by February 2008 with the new staff. The Planning Consultants will also be retained throughout 2007 to further insure that individual workloads are manageable and that the backlog of projects is eliminated.

2. Provide for administrative decision-making

At the end of 2005, the Department identified the eleven application types that may be approved at staff level under the current regulations. Those applications include:

- Bayside and Coastsides Tree Removal Permits;
- Coastal Development Permits (some);
- Resource Management permits;
- Home Exception Permits;
- Architectural Review Exemptions;
- Lot Line Adjustments;

- Confined Animal Permits;
- Fence Height Exceptions (unless objections from public);
- Grading permits under specified cubic yards;
- Grading exemptions; and
- Timber Protection Permits.

It was noted then that although the initial decision for each of the above applications is made at staff level, all have an appeal procedure so that anyone in disagreement with the decision can appeal it and have it reevaluated by a hearing body. These procedures remain the same today. Any changes to these procedures or additions to staff level decisions will require modifications to existing ordinances, which must be approved by the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. The Department recommends considering future staff level decisions during the Zoning Ordinance update that will occur in Phase Three of the Task Force Report. The Department is currently in the process of developing the scope of work for the General Plan and Zoning Ordinance updates for the Board's consideration later this year.

3. Increase opportunities for advancement with the Department:

During 2006, the Department was successful in creating increased opportunities for advancement within the Department. Six internal promotions occurred including:

- The Development Services Manager was appointed the Deputy Director
- A Senior Planner in Long Range Planning was appointed the Long Range Planning Manager
- A Building Permit Technician was appointed the Permit Coordinator
- Three Planner III's were promoted to Senior Planners.

In addition to the advancement opportunities noted above, more promotional opportunities being recommended as part of the FY07/08 budget, which will be presented to your Board at the Department budget hearing on June 25, 2007. . The recommendations in the proposed budget will improve the span of control in the Department, assist in improving customer service and aid in succession planning.

Phase Two Recommendations

The Department has implemented five of the sixteen Phase Two recommendations approved by the Board. Implementation of four other recommendations is in progress and now that the new positions and previously vacant existing positions have been filled, the Department will begin implementing the remaining seven recommendations that are dependent upon being fully staffed. The Phase Two recommendations that the Department has implemented to-date include:

1. Returning to a five-day work week

The Department returned to a five-day work week a year ago, May 22, 2006, and the public counter is open from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. Negotiations with employee organizations about flexible working hours were successfully concluded and the five-day week has been successfully implemented. The Department has received very positive feedback about being open on Fridays and the wait times at the counter on Thursday afternoons and Monday mornings have been reduced as a result.

2. Improving the physical work environment

The Department recently completed remodeling the second floor of 455 County Center and as of June 4, 2007 has moved back to the remodeled offices. The remodeling process took a total of nine months and required the Department to move to a temporary location at 411 Middlefield Road from September 2006 – May 2007. The remodel has resulted in a greatly improved public counter area that allows the public and staff to sit down to transact business. It includes work stations for the nine new employees and will have a “self-help” work area so that members of the public can access applicable data bases (permit plan, and geographic information system data) if they need to wait to talk with someone at the counter. The Department has received very positive feedback about the remodeled counter area.

The Department is hosting an open house for Board Members and appointed commission and committee members on Thursday, June 28, 2007 from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

3. Implementing a training program for new staff.

The Deputy Director and senior planning team has developed a comprehensive training program for staff that covers 50 topics including: California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) regulations and review process; Subdivision Map Act and County subdivision regulations; Coastal Development Permit process, Resource Management review process; Planned Agricultural Permit review process and interaction with Agricultural Commissioner and the Agricultural Advisory Committee; Design Review processes and interaction with Design Committees; Use permit, variance and other discretionary review processes; County Counsel review and interaction; Public Works review and interaction; Environmental Health review and interaction; and other relevant processes and procedures. One full cycle of the training program has been completed for the seven current planners on staff in 2006 and the second cycle has just begun. The program is open to all 54 Department staff as well as interested staff from other Departments and the Board of Supervisors offices. It will be an on-going program.

The participants in the Program have found it very helpful in becoming familiar with County Planning Department procedures and practices.

4. Increasing and improving internal communications

All sections within the Division are holding regular weekly or monthly meetings and full Department meetings are held quarterly to discuss areas of common concern.

5. No increases in fees for a three-year period (2005 - 2008)

The Department has held fees steady for the past two years and is committed to this goal throughout 2008. The Department will be conducting an application fee study during 2008 to determine how fees will need to be adjusted in 2009 so that Development Review functions become fully funded through cost recovery.

The Department is in the process of implementing another four of the Phase Two recommendations, but as not yet completed the implementation. Those four include:

1. Improving the Department website

A basic improvement has been made as a result of the Countywide reorganization. The Department is now listed as "Department of Planning and Building" on the County web page rather than being listed as a part of a larger Agency that web users may not intuitively understand includes Planning and Building functions. Other improvements are being evaluated, but in general the Department is using the website more often to put current documents on the site. These instances include recent postings of the Highlands Estates Initial Study and the Highlands Rezoning and Resource Management text amendment Initial Study. Additional improvements are needed to update older documents and correct errors in some of the posted material. These improvements will be on going during 2007.

2. Improve internal tracking of projects

The Department is interviewing vendors that can provide upgrades to the existing computer tracking system that will allow plan checks to be completed on-line, changes or modifications to plans to be tracked and noted on revised on-line drawings and increases the capability of reviewing agencies to communicate with each other and applicants.

3. Improve/update application checklists.

The Department has collected examples of application checklists from other jurisdictions and the Midcoast Community Council and suggestions from the

Coastside Design Review Committee and will be upgrading the existing checklists in 2007.

4. Concurrent plan check for outside agencies

Concurrent plan check is available if the applicant assumes the responsibility for contacting each of the agencies. The Permit Coordinator will be assuming this responsibility once the Building Permit Technician positions are filled. This transition is expected to occur by the end of July 2007.

The remaining seven Phase Two recommendations include:

1. Increase opportunities for pre-application meetings
2. Standardize review periods for outside agencies
3. Standardize review periods for design review committees
4. Develop system to coordinate and handle complaints
5. Fast track system for specific types of permits
6. Single contact person for duration of project
7. Further improvements to the Counter system

These recommendations will be implemented, as staff is fully trained and able to assume full responsibilities. We expect to start work on these recommendations in September 2007 and will report back to the Board on our progress in February 2008.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

cc: Planning Commission Members