

PERMITS AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT REDUX

SUMMARY

Since 2000 the Grand Jury has received a number of complaints regarding the operations of the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD). These complaints have come from within PRMD and from public clients. Investigation has revealed that many of the identified problems have been or are in the process of being corrected. Specific wrongs alleged in some recent complaints have been investigated with inconclusive results. However, interviews conducted indicate that more could be done to assist clients in understanding permit requirements they face, and to avoid internal bottlenecks which create unpredictable variation in the time it takes to complete the process.

REASONS FOR INVESTIGATION

The 2009-2010 Grand Jury has received two complaints regarding the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD). Investigation of these complaints has been inconclusive with regard to the particulars alleged. However, in the course of investigating these complaints, it was determined that the PRMD had been the subject of numerous other complaints over the last 10 years, resulting in Grand Jury investigations in five of the last nine years. Three of these investigations resulted in Grand Jury reports published in 2001, 2002, and 2004. Therefore we decided to take a broader look at the PRMD, not limited to the specifics of the complaints received this year.

BACKGROUND

The PRMD was established in 1995 to consolidate all County land use planning and developmental activities. Prior to that time these activities were conducted by a number of different County Offices. Major activities include processing permits for buildings, well and septic, and sanitation planning. Other activities include enforcement of building and development codes (established by State and County statutes) and updating the County General Plan. Their jurisdiction covers all areas of unincorporated Sonoma County. Plans submitted to PRMD for construction of new facilities, modification of existing facilities, modification of use conditions, and changes in zoning for specific sites are reviewed by PRMD before permits are issued. During construction of new facilities or remodeling, PRMD performs inspections to insure that they are in compliance with relevant codes and permit conditions. Established properties are occasionally inspected for compliance with permitted use conditions, with such inspections initiated by complaints from the public.

INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURES

Interviews were conducted with the following persons:

- Complainants
- PRMD Director
- PRMD Deputy Director Planning
- PRMD Manager of Customer Service
- PRMD Manager of Code Enforcement
- PRMD Building Inspector
- PRMD Plan Checker
- Former PRMD Building Inspector
- Santa Rosa City Building Inspector
- Two private planners
- Small Business owner

The following documents and resources were reviewed:

- Zucker Report (January, 2001)
- Fee schedules for PRMD
- Sample projects and associated fees provided by PRMD
- Office Culture Action Team Recommendations (2009)
- Grand Jury reports on PRMD from 2001, 2002, and 2004
- Report to Sonoma County Board of Supervisors on Status of Zucker Report Recommendations for PRMD Improvements (8-17-04)

FINDINGS

F-1 PRMD monitors complaints received from their clients. Types of complaints received, in order of frequency, are:

1. Time it takes to complete process
2. Consistency of requirements
3. Cost of completing process

F-2 Many of the complaints received by the Grand Jury deal with problems of communication within the Department and between the Department and the public it serves.

F-3 Slow but persistent efforts have been made over the last ten years to resolve communication problems.

F-4 There is an apparent reluctance on the part of some within PRMD and some of its public clients to say anything negative about the agency for fear of retaliation. However, the Grand Jury was not able to substantiate any instances of retaliation.

F-5 Projects are sometimes initiated and irretrievable costs incurred by members of the public without a clear understanding of the permits needed and the costs of permits, if they can be obtained.

F-6 The number of permit applications has dropped steadily over the last five years.

F-7 Cost per plan review has increased during the last five years due to new regulations to protect public resources.

F-8 Speed of permit approval varies, with some inordinately slow. There is a policy in place regarding turn-around time for the plan check portion of the PRMD process.

F-9 Pre-application meetings are offered by PRMD for a fee. These meetings are designed to identify all approvals and permits a client will need for a particular project.

F-10 An automated system to reduce waiting time for applicants scheduled to visit various desks within PRMD has been successfully installed in the last year.

F-11 Marin County uses a software package for permit applicants which produces a checklist of required permits, based on the location of the project and an applicant-supplied project description.

F-12 A survey of PRMD employees was conducted in 2009 to identify problems they felt existed in the Department. Action Committees have been established to make recommendations for resolving identified problems.

CONCLUSIONS

Obtaining the permits required to proceed with almost any project within unincorporated Sonoma County is a daunting task, especially if it represents a departure from what has been done before. The task will get more difficult as population growth puts more pressure on public resources and public infrastructure. As the agency designated to administer this permit process, PRMD inevitably generates complaints from the public it serves. Any steps it can take to reduce the cost and frustration of this process are desirable. The following recommendations of the Grand Jury are paths which could be explored to approach this goal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R-1 PRMD should take a more active role in leading applicants through the complexities of the permit process. For example, initial screening could be provided to determine whether or not a specific application calls for a pre-application meeting. If a pre-application meeting is called for, it could be required. The fee structure for such a screening and pre-application meeting could be adjusted to the size and complexity of the project and should be revenue neutral with respect to the current fee structure.

R-2 More emphasis is needed on avoiding unreasonable delays. Monitoring of application progress should be used to detect and resolve any bottlenecks. If a delay is due to the workload or abilities of the staff assigned to the task, then steps should be taken to provide additional assistance for completing the application review in a timely fashion. The entire Division should take responsibility for adhering to the turn-around time policy, as appropriate for each case.

Required Responses:

PRMD Director: R-1, R-2