

PETALUMA POTHOLES



SUMMARY

The Grand Jury reviewed the Petaluma Public Works Department, as to the providing of timely service for maintenance and repair of city facilities. Public outcry over potholes in the streets and non-functioning streetlights led to this investigation.

We found that communication between staff in the Public Works Department and their counterparts in the Water Resources and Conservation Department was not adequate to provide timely completion of work and resulted in less than satisfactory final work products. During the course of our investigation, the city initiated a reorganization abolishing the two departments mentioned above, combining them to create a new Public Works and Utilities Department.

The city indicated that this reorganization was done to address budgetary shortfall issues. The Grand Jury believes that the communication problems we observed can now be more efficiently addressed with all the city infrastructure maintenance personnel now reporting to the new position of Director of Public Works and Utilities.

GLOSSARY

Public Works—Facilities and services of infrastructure for the use and benefit of the general public.

Infrastructure—Basic facilities, services and installations needed for the functioning of a community or society. Examples applicable to this report include: water supply (treatment and distribution), wastewater collection (treatment and disposal), storm water collection, electrical service, television service, telephone service, natural gas service and public streets.

INTRODUCTION

The 2010-2011 Sonoma County Grand Jury decided to investigate the City of Petaluma's Public Works Department's continued media criticism regarding issues relating to potholes, streetlights and the overall condition of the city streets.

The investigation process led jury members to a review of the city's organizational structure and the revenue sources that support public works functions.

INVESTIGATIVE PROCEDURES

Specifically, Grand Jurors reviewed city organization charts and city websites as a whole, and specifically, the Departments of Public Works and Water Resources and Conservation. Research included review of print media for information relative to public works issues in Petaluma and interviews of several city staff members.

DISCUSSION

Petaluma's water treatment and distribution system, originally privately owned and operated, was taken over by the city over fifty years ago and became the responsibility of the Public Works Department. At that time the Public Works Director was also the City Engineer and reported to the City Manager.

In 2000, a re-organization took place resulting in the establishment of a Water Resources and Conservation Department in addition to the Public Works Department. Both departments reported individually to the City Manager. Water Resources and Conservation became responsible for the water, sewer and drainage functions that were previously the responsibility of Public Works. The City Engineer was, at one time, located in the Community Development Department and then transferred to Public Works. This was the organizational structure in place when the Grand Jury started its review, and this convoluted structure appears to have contributed to the lack of communication observed by the Grand Jury.

In recent years, the city has had to reduce staffing in many areas due to declining revenues resulting from the overall economic downturn. Maintenance staff reductions have resulted in delays in addressing on-going needs such as pavement repair and replacement of streetlights.

During the preparation of the Grand Jury report the city established a Public Works and Utilities Department replacing the two previously separate departments. While this change was primarily to address budget issues by eliminating positions, it may also result in improved services by improved communication and more efficient sharing of resources.

FINDINGS

- F1. Staff reductions, due to budgetary priorities, have left the city without the proper resources required to adequately maintain and repair all city infrastructure.
- F2. Limited communication between the two departments with public works' responsibilities creates delay in accomplishing important infrastructure activities.
- F3. The department responsible for street maintenance (former Public Works Department) did not appear to have the authority to supervise and approve street repair work done by, or under the direction of, the former Water Resources and Conservation Department.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The new departmental reorganization should result in improved cooperation between those employees responsible for repair of infrastructure buried in the streets and those responsible for the surface condition of the streets.
- R2. Cross training of Public Works and Utilities Department employees should be a major goal within the new combined administrative structure. The result should improve both service and efficiency.
- R3. Budget priorities should be set that provide the necessary funding to maintain the current minimal level of maintenance, and to prevent further degradation of infrastructure.
- R4. Future funding sources need to be found to acquire restoration, replacement and/or upgrading revenue.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

From the following individuals:

Petaluma City Manager: R1, R2, R3 and R4

From the following governing bodies:

Petaluma City Council: R1, R2, R3 and R4

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.