SONOMA COUNTY GJ 2017-2018 REPORT

Overall Progress at Permit Sonoma Contributes to the Rebuild Effort

SUMMARY

Permit Sonoma, formally known as the Permit & Resource Management Department (PRMD), was the subject of two Civil Grand Jury Investigations in 2012-2013 and 2014-2015. The purpose of this investigation is to determine progress on the recommendations made in those reports and to determine if Permit Sonoma is ready to assist owners who lost property in unincorporated areas of the County during the firestorm of October 2017.

Permit Sonoma is a consolidated land use, planning and development permitting agency for land and structures in those areas outside the nine incorporated cities in Sonoma County. In those areas, land development, construction, or reconstruction, are reviewed, permitted and inspected by them. This includes wells, septic systems, and environmental concerns.

Permit Sonoma has made sustained and substantial changes, and has become a more professional, customer-based organization. For example, it has improved its website to assist customers in navigating the permitting process. As a result of this change, the amount of time it takes from application submittal to final approval has been reduced. Industry representatives report positive feedback from customers that supports the Civil Grand Jury’s observations that the changes Permit Sonoma has made have been beneficial and helpful.

Permit Sonoma was already operating at maximum capacity when the firestorm swept through the County. In order for this agency to continue day to day operations, West Coast Code Consultants, Inc., under contract to the County, established the Resiliency Permit Center to issue permits quickly for fire burned homes in unincorporated fire damaged areas. These two agencies work together to meet the needs of citizens seeking permits to build and rebuild. This collaboration has reduced the red tape of rebuilding and expedited the permitting process for fire burned properties.

A variety of factors outside the responsibility of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center are impacting the rebuild process. There is a shortage of available construction workers and materials. Residents continue to have issues with insurance companies and the costs associated with upgrades required by code.

The Civil Grand Jury recognizes that positive changes have occurred in the operations and functioning of Permit Sonoma. The firestorm brought into sharp focus the fact that Permit Sonoma alone would be unable to meet the needs of the fire survivors and the rebuilding of their homes. The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center continue to build on this positive collaboration and on lessons learned from the firestorm in order to be better prepared for the next emergency.

GLOSSARY
**Permit & Resource Management Department:** This is Sonoma County’s consolidated land use agency. It is often referred to as “PRMD”, renamed Permit Sonoma.

**Sonoma County Incorporated Areas:** Includes Cloverdale, Cotati, Healdsburg, Petaluma, Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, City of Sonoma, and Town of Windsor. Coffey Park and parts of Fountain Grove are within Santa Rosa city limits.

**Sonoma County Unincorporated Area:** Includes all areas not within the nine incorporated cities. Portions of the Mark West-Wikiup neighborhoods are in unincorporated areas of the County.

**West Coast Code Consultants, Inc.:** This agency operates the Resiliency Permit Center under contract to Sonoma County. It works as an extension to state and local building departments. They specialize in providing plan review, and they offer a range of professional inspections services to city, county, state and federal agencies.

**Resiliency Permit Center:** Works with Permit Sonoma to focus on permits and property management for Sonoma County fire victims and their rebuilding efforts.

**Code enforcement:** As building standards are upgraded and made safer by the state, they are put into the building codes. New building projects must adhere to these new standards.

**United Stated Geological Survey (USGS):** Created by an act of Congress in 1879. The USGS serves the Nation by providing reliable scientific information to describe and understand the Earth; minimize loss of life and property from natural disasters; manage water, biological, energy, and mineral resources; and enhance and protect our quality of life.

**BACKGROUND**

Previous Civil Grand Juries investigated and reported on operations and customer service complaints in PRMD. The Civil Grand Jury reports from 2012-2013 and 2014-2015 discuss this in detail. The firestorm had the potential to exacerbate problems that had plagued PRMD for years. The current Civil Grand Jury wants to verify progress made and determine if PRMD is ready for future challenges.

**METHODOLOGY**

The Civil Grand Jury:

- interviewed and observed members of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center
- attended public meetings presented by members of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center
- reviewed Permit Sonoma’s website
- reviewed internal documents of Permit Sonoma
- interviewed members of the construction industry including North Coast Builders Exchange

**DISCUSSION**
The purpose of this report is to determine if Permit Sonoma has made progress in implementing the recommendations made by previous Civil Grand Juries. The Civil Grand Jury wants to determine if Permit Sonoma is rebuild ready for residents who lost property and homes in unincorporated areas of the County during the firestorm of October 2017.

Dramatic changes that are notable and sustainable have been observed by members of the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury. Permit & Resource Department Management (PRMD) has been changed to Permit Sonoma, a more professional and customer-based organization. Industry representatives note increased professionalism and better customer service.

Permit Sonoma is a large and complex department of the County government. It is a consolidated land use, planning and development permitting agency for land and structures outside the nine incorporated cities in Sonoma County. Land development, construction and reconstruction in those areas are reviewed, permitted and inspected by them. Wells, septic systems, and environmental concerns and other areas not listed here are also within the scope of Permit Sonoma. Fire recovery, in the context of this report, does not include incorporated areas such as Coffey Park and some Fountaingrove neighborhoods.

Within the scope of Permit Sonoma’s mandate to serve the public, employees hold 18 different professional licenses. Some of these include: Soil & Water Geology, Architectural, Code Enforcement Engineering, Surveyor, Large Machinery and electrical and plumbing licensing.

The department has 160 employees, including permanent, extra help and temporary personnel. Its total budget is about $27 million, and approximately 20% of its funding comes from the County General Fund. The balance of its funding comes from licenses, permits, and charges for services, including inspections of projects in process.

Permit Sonoma issues a total of 72 different types of permits, and in 2013 about 13,000 permits were issued. By the end of 2018, it is projected that 20,000 permits will be issued. Permit Sonoma reports that before the firestorm, most of its customers were single family homeowners, and much of its business was and is granting permits for upgrades to homes built in the 1940s and 1950s. These older homes need a variety of upgrades such as new roofs, upgraded electrical panels and septic systems, and remodeled bathrooms and kitchens.

Permit Sonoma has developed a comprehensive checklist for all types of permit applications. These checklists are now available online at Permit Sonoma’s website. Builders and contractors can use them to efficiently prepare their permit applications. In the past, securing a permit could be an unwieldy process complicated by internal structural and personnel problems as well as by the lack of relevant technology. These problems added time and cost to the project.

The new changes have resulted in a decrease in time from permit application to the granting of the permit. This process used to take months, and now takes weeks. The Permit Sonoma website provides easily accessible public information. Within this website, there is a dashboard with current wait times and other useful information about the most commonly requested permits.

Below are some substantial and sustained changes that were initiated and in place prior to the October fires:

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Web-based services enhance efficiency for customers of Permit Sonoma.

- A recently launched "dashboard" is embedded on the website. It shows monthly permit data regarding the time needed to go from application submission to issuance. Permits included are: building permits, grading permits, encroachment permits, and well and septic permits.
- Short videos instruct the general public on the types of projects that require permits.
- Pre-permit checklists and appointments are provided to ensure projects are expedited and approval-ready when submitted.
- Commonly used forms are available online.
- Apps for smartphones allow contractors and residents to schedule inspections, manage projects, and move through the process more efficiently.
- Workshops are designed to provide information to the public on a variety of construction related topics.
- Peak-hour information is posted so that customers may visit Permit Sonoma during slower hours, reducing wait times. (See the Appendix)

Residents who want to learn more about the permit process can attend workshops or view Permit Sonoma’s YouTube videos. These resources provide information to contractors and residents that can help them to better navigate and maneuver through the permit process.

Prior to the fires, Permit Sonoma was operating at its maximum capacity and had incorporated the positive changes listed above. To anticipate the workload created by the rebuilding in fire damaged areas, and to maintain the positive changes in Permit Sonoma, an outside consulting agency, West Coast Code Consultants, Inc., was contracted by the County of Sonoma to provide building services to fire survivors.

The Resiliency Permit Center is staffed by West Coast Code Consultants, Inc., which issues permits for construction on burnt property only. This company reviews plans, issues permits and conducts inspections in unincorporated fire zones, thus streamlining the permit process.

The Resiliency Permit Center works under and closely with Permit Sonoma. They are contracted to provide five public workshops on the permit process for rebuilding. This allows Permit Sonoma to continue day to day business in planning, permitting and inspecting, while issuing permits for non-residential structures and property burned in the firestorm. These workshops are:
- 3 Design & Development Rebuilding Meetings
- 2 Rebuilding Community Meetings, one in Sonoma Valley

The Permit Resiliency Center, in conjunction with Permit Sonoma, is adding additional workshops for fire rebuilders as needed.

West Coast Code Consultants, Inc. observed and adopted customer service strategies and protocols unique to Permit Sonoma. From the first day of operations, the Resiliency Permit Center was able to incorporate the positive customer-based culture they observed. The Resiliency Permit Center’s goal is to streamline the permit process for builders, provide customer service, and rebuild safely. While the Resiliency Permit Center provides direct services
to rebuilders, Permit Sonoma provides historical data and local expertise to speed the permit process.

Staff of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center work collaboratively to provide answers to project-specific questions. These include how to expedite the process, reduce fees, and use the pre-permit interview process. Permit Sonoma had this practice in place before the firestorm and continues to offer it after the fires. Permit Sonoma reports that 80% of its clients who use the pre-permit interview process are able to make necessary changes before actually applying for permits.

The Resiliency Permit Center opened for business on February 13, 2018. In the first month of operation, personnel report that they saw approximately 200-300 clients per week and held 10-12 pre-permit meetings per day with homeowners and contractors. Applicants can have their new plans reviewed for code errors and minor errors are corrected by staff immediately. More substantial changes are outlined in a follow-up letter sent within three days. Therefore, errors are corrected prior to applying for permits, expediting the process.

Permits are issued under strict state guidelines, and building codes have changed dramatically since many homes were originally built. Rebuilders are required to have plans that meet the current code. Recent and substantial code changes complicate the rebuild process. Rebuilding a house exactly as it was before the firestorm may not be possible because new code changes can increase costs and mandate plan changes.

Permit Sonoma has anticipated one of many bottlenecks for residents rebuilding. The State requires soil samples so that the configuration of the building pad and foundation on a site can be determined. Because Sonoma County has very few soil sampling firms, this hinders and substantially delays the rebuild process as homeowners wait for this requirement to be done.

In the Mark West-Wikiup area, USGS maps and all previous soil sampling done at the time of original construction has been made available to determine geologic shifts. The Mark West-Wikiup area experiences little geologic shift over time, and Permit Sonoma has adjusted the sampling requirement. Instead of two or three samples per lot, Permit Sonoma is allowing two or three samples per 50 lots, saving rebuilders time and money. This modification couldn’t be offered to some homeowners, such as those in the Fountaingrove area, because of geologic shifts often found in hilly terrain.

Economic factors outside the control of County agencies might affect the decision of residents to rebuild. Rebuilt homes must adhere to upgraded codes, which can add as much as an additional 20% to the cost of rebuilding. Homeowners may find they are underinsured for the cost of rebuilding their home.

The shortage of a qualified and/or licensed workforce impacts rebuilding. Local contractors prefer to use local subcontractors with whom they have built professional, reliable relationships. These relationships allow contractors to better estimate construction and materials’ costs, and can result in savings which may be passed on to homeowners.
The changes initiated by Permit Sonoma over the past several years have created a more user-friendly and efficient department. The establishment of the Resiliency Permit Center, operating under Permit Sonoma, has expedited the permitting process for fire survivors. These agencies work together to assist the residents of Sonoma County in the rebuilding for our community.
APPENDIX

Permit Center Peak Hours

Below is a listing of the peak hours visitors to the Permit Center should expect to experience the longest wait times. Generally the shortest wait times will occur in each morning at the opening for business, except Wednesdays, which typically have the longest wait times throughout the day. Permit applications with plans are not accepted after 3:00 PM.

Monday Permit Center hours are 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Peak Hours**

- 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM -- Medium wait time
- 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM -- Medium wait time
- 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM -- Medium wait time

Tuesday Permit Center hours are 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Peak Hours**

- 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM -- Medium wait time
- 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM -- Medium wait time

Wednesday Permit Center hours are 10:30 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Peak Hours**

- 10:30 AM - 1:00 PM -- High wait time
- 1:00 PM - 3:00 PM -- Medium wait time
- 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM -- High wait time

Thursday Permit Center hours are 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Peak Hours**

- 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 12:00 PM - 2:00 PM -- Medium wait time
- 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM -- Medium wait time

Friday Permit Center hours are 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Peak Hours**

- 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM -- Low wait time
- 12:00 PM - 3:00 PM -- Medium wait time
- 3:00 PM - 4:00 PM -- High wait time

FINDINGS
F1. Permit Sonoma made substantial and sustained changes prior to the firestorm.

F2. Permit Sonoma’s improved website assists customers in navigating the permit process.

F3. Permit Sonoma has streamlined and improved the permit process with emphasis on increasing customer satisfaction.

F4. The Resiliency Permit Center, which operates under Permit Sonoma, has been set up to expedite the permitting process for fire damaged properties.

F5. Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center responded quickly and effectively to the needs of firestorm victims while maintaining the improved day to day operations in Permit Sonoma.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. Permit Sonoma continue to build on the successful changes noted in this report. (F1, F2, F3, F4, F5)

R2. Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center continue to collaborate for the benefit of Sonoma County residents and fire survivors and apply the lessons learned from this emergency for future individual or large emergencies. (F4 and F5)

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

• Director, Permit Sonoma (R1 and R2)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

• Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Reports: 2012-2013, 2014-2015 sonoma.courts.ca.gov

• Permit Sonoma Website: https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Permit-and-Resource Management/

• United States Geological Survey: https://www.usgs.gov/

• Contractors State License Services: http://www.cslb.ca.gov/About_Us/Library/Licensing Classifications/B _General_Building_Contractor.aspx

• Resiliency Permit Center: sonomacounty.ca.gov

• West Coast Code Consultants Incorporated: www.wc-3.com

• Santa Rosa maps of incorporated and unincorporated areas: http://www.sonomacounty.org/prmd/gisdata/map_gallery.htm
Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.