

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

42 **Permit & Resource Management Department:** This is Sonoma County’s consolidated land
43 use agency. It is often referred to as “PRMD”, renamed Permit Sonoma.
44 **Sonoma County Incorporated Areas:** Includes Cloverdale, Cotati, Healdsburg, Petaluma,
45 Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, City of Sonoma, and Town of Windsor. Coffey Park and
46 parts of Fountaingrove are within Santa Rosa city limits.
47 **Sonoma County Unincorporated Area:** Includes all areas not within the nine incorporated
48 cities. Portions of the Mark West-Wikiup neighborhoods are in unincorporated areas of the
49 County.
50 **West Coast Code Consultants, Inc.:** This agency operates the Resiliency Permit Center under
51 contract to Sonoma County. It works as an extension to state and local building departments.
52 They specialize in providing plan review, and they offer a range of professional inspection
53 services to city, county, state and federal agencies.
54 **Resiliency Permit Center:** Works with Permit Sonoma to focus on permits and property
55 management for Sonoma County fire victims and their rebuilding efforts.
56 **Code enforcement:** As building standards are upgraded and made safer by the state, they are
57 put into the building codes. New building projects must adhere to these new standards.
58 **United States Geological Survey (USGS):** Created by an act of Congress in 1879. The USGS
59 serves the Nation by providing reliable scientific information to describe and understand the
60 Earth; minimize loss of life and property from natural disasters; manage water, biological,
61 energy, and mineral resources; and enhance and protect our quality of life.
62

63 **BACKGROUND**

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

69 **METHODOLOGY**

70 The Civil Grand Jury:

- 71 • interviewed and observed members of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center
- 72 • attended public meetings presented by members of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency
73 Permit Center
- 74 • reviewed Permit Sonoma’s website
- 75 • reviewed internal documents of Permit Sonoma
- 76 • interviewed members of the construction industry including North Coast Builders
77 Exchange

78 **DISCUSSION**

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

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

87
88 Permit Sonoma is a large and complex department of the County government. It is a
89 consolidated land use, planning and development permitting agency for land and structures
90 outside the nine incorporated cities in Sonoma County. Land development, construction and
91 reconstruction in those areas are reviewed, permitted and inspected by them. Wells, septic
92 systems, and environmental concerns and other areas not listed here are also within the scope of
93 Permit Sonoma. Fire recovery, in the context of this report, does not include incorporated areas
94 such as Coffey Park and some Fountaingrove neighborhoods.

95
96 Within the scope of Permit Sonoma's mandate to serve the public, employees hold 18 different
97 professional licenses. Some of these include: Soil & Water Geology, Architectural, Code
98 Enforcement Engineering, Surveyor, Large Machinery and electrical and plumbing licensing.

99
100 The department has 160 employees, including permanent, extra help and temporary personnel.
101 Its total budget is about \$27 million, and approximately 20% of its funding comes from the
102 County General Fund. The balance of its funding comes from licenses, permits, and charges for
103 services, including inspections of projects in process.

104
105 Permit Sonoma issues a total of 72 different types of permits, and in 2013 about 13,000 permits
106 were issued. By the end of 2018, it is projected that 20,000 permits will be issued. Permit
107 Sonoma reports that before the firestorm, most of its customers were single family homeowners,
108 and much of its business was and is granting permits for upgrades to homes built in the 1940s
109 and 1950s. These older homes need a variety of upgrades such as new roofs, upgraded electrical
110 panels and septic systems, and remodeled bathrooms and kitchens.

111
112 Permit Sonoma has developed a comprehensive checklist for all types of permit applications.
113 These checklists are now available online at Permit Sonoma's website. Builders and contractors
114 can use them to efficiently prepare their permit applications. In the past, securing a permit could
115 be an unwieldy process complicated by internal structural and personnel problems as well as by
116 the lack of relevant technology. These problems added time and cost to the project.

117
118 The new changes have resulted in a decrease in time from permit application to the granting of
119 the permit. This process used to take months, and now takes weeks. The Permit Sonoma website
120 provides easily accessible public information. Within this website, there is a dashboard with
121 current wait times and other useful information about the most commonly requested permits.

122
123 Below are some substantial and sustained changes that were initiated and in place prior to the
124 October fires:

- 125 • Web-based services enhance efficiency for customers of Permit Sonoma.
- 126 • A recently launched “dashboard” is embedded on the website. It shows monthly permit
- 127 data regarding the time needed to go from application submission to issuance. Permits
- 128 included are: building permits, grading permits, encroachment permits, and well and
- 129 septic permits.
- 130 • Short videos instruct the general public on the types of projects that require permits.
- 131 • Pre-permit checklists and appointments are provided to ensure projects are expedited and
- 132 approval-ready when submitted.
- 133 • Commonly used forms are available online.
- 134 • Apps for smart phones allow contractors and residents to schedule inspections, manage
- 135 projects, and move through the process more efficiently.
- 136 • Workshops are designed to provide information to the public on a variety of construction
- 137 related topics.
- 138 • Peak-hour information is posted so that customers may visit Permit Sonoma during
- 139 slower hours, reducing wait times. (See the Appendix)

140

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

144

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

150

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

154

155 The Resiliency Permit Center works under and closely with Permit Sonoma. They are contracted
156 to provide five public workshops on the permit process for rebuilding. This allows Permit
157 Sonoma to continue day to day business in planning, permitting and inspecting, while issuing
158 permits for non-residential structures and property burned in the firestorm.

159 These workshops are:

- 160 • 3 Design & Development Rebuilding Meetings
- 161 • 2 Rebuilding Community Meetings, one in Sonoma Valley

162

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

165

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

171 to rebuilders, Permit Sonoma provides historical data and local expertise to speed the permit
172 process.

173
174 Staff of Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center work collaboratively to provide
175 answers to project-specific questions. These include how to expedite the process, reduce fees,
176 and use the pre-permit interview process. Permit Sonoma had this practice in place before the
177 firestorm and continues to offer it after the fires. Permit Sonoma reports that 80% of its clients
178 who use the pre-permit interview process are able to make necessary changes before actually
179 applying for permits.

180
181 The Resiliency Permit Center opened for business on February 13, 2018. In the first month of
182 operation, personnel report that they saw approximately 200-300 clients per week and held 10 -
183 12 pre-permit meetings per day with homeowners and contractors. Applicants can have their new
184 plans reviewed for code errors and minor errors are corrected by staff immediately. More
185 substantial changes are outlined in a follow-up letter sent within three days. Therefore, errors are
186 corrected prior to applying for permits, expediting the process.

187
188 Permits are issued under strict state guidelines, and building codes have changed dramatically
189 since many homes were originally built. Rebuilders are required to have plans that meet the
190 current code. Recent and substantial code changes complicate the rebuild process. Rebuilding a
191 house exactly as it was before the firestorm may not be possible because new code changes can
192 increase costs and mandate plan changes.

193
194 Permit Sonoma has anticipated one of many bottlenecks for residents rebuilding. The State
195 requires soil samples so that the configuration of the building pad and foundation on a site can be
196 determined. Because Sonoma County has very few soil sampling firms, this hinders and
197 substantially delays the rebuild process as homeowners wait for this requirement to be done.

198
199 In the Mark West-Wikiup area, USGS maps and all previous soil sampling done at the time of
200 original construction has been made available to determine geologic shift. The Mark West-
201 Wikiup area experiences little geologic shift over time, and Permit Sonoma has adjusted the
202 sampling requirement. Instead of two or three samples per lot, Permit Sonoma is allowing two or
203 three samples per 50 lots, saving rebuilders time and money. This modification couldn't be
204 offered to some homeowners, such as those in the Fountaingrove area, because of geologic shifts
205 often found in hilly terrain.

206
207 Economic factors outside the control of County agencies might affect the decision of residents to
208 rebuild. Rebuilt homes must adhere to upgraded codes, which can add as much as an additional
209 20% to the cost of rebuilding. Homeowners may find they are underinsured for the cost of
210 rebuilding their home.

211
212 The shortage of a qualified and/or licensed workforce impacts rebuilding. Local contractors
213 prefer to use local subcontractors with whom they have built professional, reliable relationships.
214 These relationships allow contractors to better estimate construction and materials' costs, and
215 can result in savings which may be passed on to homeowners.

216

217 The changes initiated by Permit Sonoma over the past several years have created a more user
218 friendly and efficient department. The establishment of the Resiliency Permit Center, operating
219 under Permit Sonoma, has expedited the permitting process for fire survivors. These agencies
220 work together to assist the residents of Sonoma County in the rebuilding for our community.

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APPENDIX



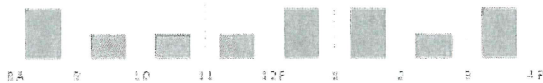
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225 Permit Center Peak Hours

226 Below is a listing of the peak hours visitors to the Permit Center should expect to experience the longest
 227 wait times. Generally the shortest wait times will occur in each morning at the opening for business,
 228 except Wednesdays, which typically have the longest wait times throughout the day. Permit applications
 229 with plans are not accepted after 3:00 PM.
 230

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

232 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

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

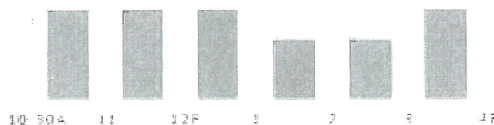
238 Peak Hours



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

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

245 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

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

250 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

254

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

256 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

261 FINDINGS

- 262 F1. Permit Sonoma made substantial and sustained changes prior to the firestorm.
263 F2. Permit Sonoma's improved website assists customers in navigating the permit process.
264 F3. Permit Sonoma has streamlined and improved the permit process with emphasis on
265 increasing customer satisfaction.
266 F4. The Resiliency Permit Center, which operates under Permit Sonoma, has been set up to
267 expedite the permitting process for fire burnt properties.
268 F5. Permit Sonoma and the Resiliency Permit Center responded quickly and effectively to the
269 needs of firestorm victims while maintaining the improved day to day operations in Permit
270 Sonoma.

271

272 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

273 The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

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

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

279

280 **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

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

- 282 • Director, Permit Sonoma (R1 and R2)

283

284 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- 285 • Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Reports: 2012-2013, 2014-2015 sonoma.courts.ca.gov
286 • Permit Sonoma Website: <https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/Permit-and-Resource-Management/>
287 • United States Geological Survey: <https://www.usgs.gov/>
288 • Contractors State License Services:
289 [http://www.cslb.ca.gov/About_Us/Library/Licensing_Classifications/B_-_](http://www.cslb.ca.gov/About_Us/Library/Licensing_Classifications/B_-_General_Building_Contractor.aspx)
290 [_General_Building_Contractor.aspx](http://www.cslb.ca.gov/About_Us/Library/Licensing_Classifications/B_-_General_Building_Contractor.aspx)
291 • Resiliency Permit Center: sonomacounty.ca.gov
292 • West Coast Code Consultants Incorporated: www.wc-3.com
293 • Santa Rosa maps of incorporated and unincorporated areas: [http://www.sonoma-](http://www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/gisdata/map_gallery.htm)
294 [county.org/prmd/gisdata/map_gallery.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/prmd/gisdata/map_gallery.htm)

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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.