

PERMIT AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT: IS CHANGE PERMITTED?

SUMMARY

In 1995, the Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD) was established to provide a “one-stop shop” for Sonoma County land use planning, permitting, code enforcement, and development activities in all unincorporated areas of the County. It is responsible for interpreting and enforcing Federal, State, and County regulations as well as maintaining and updating the County’s General Plan as it relates to land use. Regulations can be complex and require interpretation by highly skilled personnel. In the last five years, due to attrition and budget cuts, the department has experienced a 40% reduction in staff, resulting in a critical loss of expertise. The decrease in experienced personnel and the resulting increase in workload have negatively affected the morale of the current staff.



The Grand Jury received a complaint from a citizen contending inefficient service and excessive fees at PRMD. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) and PRMD management are aware that there are issues with customer service. In 2012, the BOS created an Ombudsman position within PRMD to provide clients with a single point of contact to assist in resolving problems involving permits, land use, and development issues. In January 2013, PRMD launched the Citizen’s Academy with workshops held on the first Friday of each month. The first session explains how to navigate the permitting process in a one-hour workshop for the owner/builder. The second session caters to regular clients who are familiar with the permitting process, but would benefit from the latest regulatory information. During the second session, a new topic is offered each month. The training schedule is available on the PRMD website.

Other improvements have been initiated to address PRMD customer service issues, but more needs to be done to create a user-friendly atmosphere at PRMD. The Grand Jury attempted to compare County permit fees with those charged by other counties. Since applicable fees can vary greatly based on a number of variables we were unable to evaluate if the County fees are excessive.

BACKGROUND

The Grand Jury investigated a complaint from a citizen questioning if PRMD uses its resources to best serve the needs of County residents and the construction industry. The complaint included claims of inefficient services and excessive fees.

APPROACH

The Grand Jury interviewed members of organizations, businesses, and individuals who frequently interact with the department and members of the BOS and PRMD staff. We reviewed various websites, PRMD Director's Advisory Group (DAG) meeting minutes, BOS agendas and meeting minutes, documents provided by PRMD, and miscellaneous publications. We attended the January 2013 Open House and Citizen Academy information sessions hosted by PRMD.

DISCUSSION

If you have ever built or remodeled a home, made repairs or improvements to your property, or worked in the construction industry in the unincorporated areas of the County, you have been subject to the authority of PRMD. It is the agency responsible for interpreting and enforcing the regulations governing development in the unincorporated areas of the County. It processes, evaluates, and approves permit applications to ensure projects meet County, State, and Federal regulations. PRMD's stated mission is to provide a customer-focused process for the orderly development of real property, balanced with the protection of natural resources. It maintains standards that protect the health and safety of the public. It was established to consolidate multiple departments and provide a "one-stop shop" for County land use planning, permitting, code enforcement, and development activities.

The experiences related to the Grand Jury by interviewees indicate that the permitting process is slow and hard to navigate and that total fees are difficult to predict. They stated that some of the staff are unresponsive and interpretations of regulations can vary from one staff member to another. Some interviewees believe that the fees are excessive but would be less objectionable if staff were more helpful. The interviews reflect a perception that the overall culture of PRMD is not consistent with its mission to provide customer-focused service. PRMD is a regulatory enforcement agency that is required to scrutinize a wide range of rural considerations, farming and resource protections, as well as zoning issues. Improved customer service, consistent interpretations, and staff efficiency are needed to aid the client in navigating the maze of regulations.

In an attempt to evaluate the assertion that fees are excessive, the Grand Jury tried to compare County fees with those charged by other counties. Comparing building and planning fees among counties is difficult since the cost of finalizing a permit can vary greatly due to local zoning, differing physical topography, and neighbor concerns.

The PRMD Director formed the Director's Advisory Group in 2004 to advise the PRMD Director on permit processing and customer service issues. According to its charter, DAG should provide input on areas where improvement in services and processes are needed and work with the Director and others to develop solutions to these issues. DAG members are tasked with providing feedback on proposals developed by PRMD staff to address issues identified by DAG. Members are volunteers selected by the Director with the intent to represent a broad cross-section of the customers served by PRMD. They serve in an advisory capacity and have the potential to effect positive change.

In the last five years due to attrition and budget cuts, PRMD has experienced a 40% reduction in staff resulting in a critical loss of expertise resulting in an increase in workload. These changes have negatively affected morale.

The BOS has recognized the need for improvement with respect to customer service, and is working with PRMD to address the areas of concern. In the last year, the BOS created an Ombudsman position within PRMD that provides the client with a single point of contact to assist in resolving problems involving permits, land use, and development issues. PRMD has also developed a Professional Priority time slot program to expedite the permitting process for building professionals. PRMD is working to increase the percentage of permits that are obtained on a same-day or on-line basis. Residential owner/builders can apply for a simple on-line permit for such things as a new water heater, reroofing, and window replacement. The process goes more smoothly and permits can be obtained more expeditiously based on the level of preparedness and completeness of required documents by the client.

In January 2013, PRMD launched the Citizen's Academy with sessions held on the first Friday of each month. "Navigating the Permitting Process," a one-hour workshop for the owner/builder, is offered monthly at 11:00 a.m. in the PRMD Hearing Room. The goal of the workshop is to present information to help citizens more effectively navigate the permitting process. Participants receive a certificate that entitles them to one Professional Priority time slot appointment to discuss their project with staff. The noontime one-hour monthly workshop caters to regular clients who are familiar with the permitting process, but would benefit from the latest regulatory information. A new topic is offered each month. The training schedule is available on the PRMD website. The sessions allow attendees to ask questions, get clarification, and bring forth issues they have encountered.

The PRMD Director has announced his retirement effective September 2013. This presents an opportunity to continue moving PRMD towards a more customer-service oriented philosophy.

PRMD is a regulatory agency and its directives are frequently unpopular with clients, resulting in negative perceptions of the department. Mutual respect and efficiency along with improved customer service can contribute in making the experience more productive for all involved.

FINDINGS

- F1. Government regulations make the planning process for land development complicated.
- F2. Many clients have a negative perception of PRMD.
- F3. PRMD staff interpretations of regulations are not consistent.
- F4. PRMD staff do not always follow appropriate customer service protocols.
- F5. The newly developed Ombudsman position has the potential to aid clients in navigating the planning and permitting process in a positive way.
- F6. Ongoing improvements have been made in expediting the processing of professional and simple permit approvals.
- F7. The recently formed Citizen's Academy has the potential to help clients successfully navigate the complicated maze of permitting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. The PRMD Director develop, implement, and ensure adherence to written training to consistently interpret and apply regulations by staff.
- R2. The PRMD Director formalize and implement a required ongoing customer service training program.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors and the PRMD Director support and advertise the Ombudsman role in assisting clients.
- R4. The Board of Supervisors take the opportunity to hire a Director committed to making the culture of PRMD consistent with its mission to provide customer-focused services.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- R1, R2, R3 - Director of Permit and Resource Management Department
- R3, R4 - Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

The governing body 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Sonoma County Permit & Resource Management Department - www.sonoma-county.org/prmd
- Sonoma County Board of Supervisors meeting agendas and meeting minutes
- Director's Advisory Group meeting minutes, 2011 - Present
- Director's Advisory Group - Charter
- Sonoma County Residential Construction Manual
- Sonoma County General Plan 2020

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.