



County of Santa Cruz

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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(831) 454-2200 FAX: (831) 454-3262 TDD/TTY - Call 711

MANU KOENIG
FIRST DISTRICT

KIMBERLY DE SERPA
SECOND DISTRICT

JUSTIN CUMMINGS
THIRD DISTRICT

FELIPE HERNANDEZ
FOURTH DISTRICT

MONICA MARTINEZ
FIFTH DISTRICT

September 24, 2025

The Honorable Katherine Hansen
Santa Cruz Courthouse
701 Ocean Street
Santa Cruz, CA 95060

RE: Response to the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Report “Navigating the Building Permit Process Again: Site Plans, Septics, and Plan Checks, oh my!”

Dear Judge Hansen,

The purpose of this letter is to formally transmit the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors' response to the 2024-2025 Grand Jury Report “Navigating the Building Permit Process Again: Site Plans, Septics, and Plan Checks, oh my!”

Sincerely,

FELIPE HERNANDEZ, Chair
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors

Attachments

CC: Clerk of the Board
Santa Cruz County Grand Jury



The 2024-2025 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury

Requires the

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors

to Respond by September 22, 2025

**to the Findings and Recommendations listed below
which were assigned to them in the report titled**

Navigating the Building Permit Process AGAIN

“Site Plans, Septics, and Plan Checks, oh my!”

Required Responses apply to elected officials, elected agencies or department heads, elected boards, councils, and committees. The respondent is **required** to respond and to make the response available to the public under California Penal Code ([PC](#)) [§933\(c\)](#). A required response will be considered **compliant** under [PC §933.05](#) if it contains an appropriate comment on **all** findings and recommendations **which were assigned to you** in this report.

Invited Responses are encouraged but are not required by the California Penal Code.

Please follow the instructions below when preparing your response.

Instructions for Respondents

Your assigned [Findings](#) and [Recommendations](#) are listed on the following pages with check boxes and an expandable space for summaries, timeframes, and explanations. Please follow these instructions, which paraphrase [PC §933.05](#):

- 1. For the Findings, mark one of the following responses with an “X” and provide the required additional information:**
 - a. **AGREE with the Finding**, or
 - b. **PARTIALLY DISAGREE with the Finding** – specify the portion of the Finding that is disputed and include an explanation of the reasons why, or
 - c. **DISAGREE with the Finding** – provide an explanation of the reasons why.
- 2. For the Recommendations, mark one of the following actions with an “X” and provide the required additional information:**
 - a. **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – provide a summary of the action taken, or
 - b. **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – provide a timeframe or expected date for completion, or
 - c. **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – provide an explanation, scope, and parameters of an analysis to be completed within six months, or
 - d. **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – provide an explanation of why it is not warranted or not reasonable.
- 3. Please confirm the date on which the assigned responses were approved during an official meeting:**

We approved these responses in a regular public meeting as shown in our minutes dated September 9, 2025.

- 4. Please attach a PDF version of your completed responses to an email sent to:**

The Honorable Judge: Katherine Hansen Katherine.Hansen@santacruzcourt.org and

The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury: grandjury@scgrandjury.org.

If you have questions about this response form, please contact the Grand Jury by calling (831) 454-2099 or by sending an email to grandjury@scgrandjury.org.

Findings

F1 . Excessive delays in the building permit process increase costs to applicants in cash, time, and frustration.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The primary contributors to delays in the building permit process are incomplete or insufficient application materials, the timeliness of applicant responses to correction comments, and overall departmental workload. Despite implementing more rigorous completeness checks and developing detailed guidance materials over the past five years, most applications still contain deficiencies, making incomplete submittals the single largest cause of delays and added costs. The department remains committed to supporting applicants through resources and coordination with the County Executive Office, but timely and thorough applications are essential to reducing processing times.

F2 . The permitting process has become so detailed and intricate that it often requires applicant homeowners to hire professionals to make submissions, thus increasing cost and time.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The permitting process involves numerous regulatory components, including the California Building Code (CBC), the County's Local Coastal Program, and various state and federal environmental protection laws. These requirements are not unique to Santa Cruz County but are consistent statewide, and are implemented locally through CBC Sections 1803.5.11 and 1803.5.12 and Santa Cruz County Code (SCCC) Sections 16.10.050 and 16.01.010. Depending on project scope, plans must be prepared and stamped by licensed professionals in accordance with CBC Sections 107.1 and 107.3.4 and SCCC Section 12.10.325, with additional technical reports (e.g., soils, geology, biotic assessments) required from licensed specialists as appropriate.

F3 . Homeowners are often unaware that ordinary household maintenance requires a permit, leading them to unknowingly have the work performed illegally.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

Permits are not required for many routine household maintenance activities. Examples include minor plumbing work such as repairing leaks or clearing stoppages; minor electrical work such as replacing lamps or connecting portable equipment; mechanical system work such as replacing filters or parts that do not affect system approval; and finish work such as painting, tiling, carpeting, cabinets, and countertops. These exemptions ensure that ordinary household upkeep does not trigger permitting requirements.

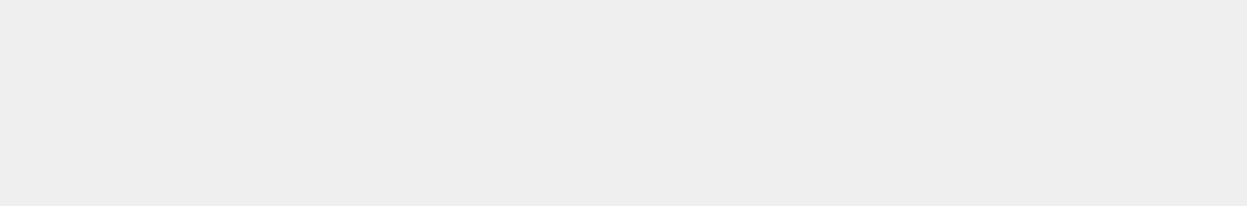
F4 . Some people willfully ignore obtaining a building permit because they think it's too costly, it takes too long, or they think they can't get the improvement they want by obeying the law.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):



F5 . Ignoring obtaining building permits causes a loss of revenue for the County, both in one-time fees from permits and, more importantly, in ongoing tax revenue from improved property.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

Building permit fees are one-time charges designed to recover the cost of staff review and processing; they are not a general revenue source for the County and often do not fully cover program costs. Property tax assessments are handled independently by the Assessor's Office, which bases valuations on existing structures regardless of permitting status, meaning tax revenues are not directly affected by building permit activity.

F6 . Professionals in the county can be difficult to find for a project because the permitting process is so difficult.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The Building Division disagrees that the difficulty of the permitting process is the reason professionals are hard to find. The permit review process is designed to be clear and predictable through comprehensive submittal requirements and tools like the Camino Guide, which specifies necessary technical reports. These requirements stem from the California Building Code, state and federal environmental laws, and the Santa Cruz County Code, which in some cases require licensed professionals to prepare and stamp project plans. While many projects do necessitate specialized expertise, the primary challenge is the high regional demand for qualified design professionals rather than the structure of the permitting process itself.

F7 . Applicants have a hard time tracking their project's progress because applications are not tracked end-to-end by permitting software.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

While the current permit tracking system (Infor) already allows applicants to monitor individual permits, the department recognizes the need for greater transparency around processing timelines. In response to the Baker Tilly audit, a Building Permit Tracking Dashboard was launched in June on the Planning Department website, providing public data on average review times, number of review cycles, and fees by project type. In addition, the ePlan Review portal enables applicants to upload files, view and respond to comments, and track real-time status updates pulled directly from Infor, including expiration dates and agency review charts. Together, these tools significantly improve visibility into project progress and reflect the department's ongoing commitment to accountability and clear communication.

F8 . The services of an Ombudsman could be utilized by tradespeople and homeowners to make the permitting process smoother and less costly.

AGREE

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The County already employs an Ombudsman who helps applicants navigate the permitting process by addressing customer concerns, overseeing permit center operations, ensuring service standards are followed, and coordinating across review departments to resolve conflicts that could delay permits. This role is specifically designed to reduce time and costs for tradespeople and homeowners. While adding a second Ombudsman could increase capacity, it would also raise department costs and necessitate higher fees to offset those expenses.

F9 . The BFCA Board was disbanded, and the Appeals process, as currently constructed, is little known, not staffed by trade professionals, and therefore an ineffective means for resolving disputed decisions.

—

AGREE

—

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

X

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The policies, regulations, and hearing procedures of the Building and Fire Code Appeals Board are set forth in Santa Cruz County Code Section 12.12. While the Board was previously composed of industry representatives, it is now comprised of the Board of Supervisors, and this change has not raised any due process concerns. In fact, no appeals have been filed in more than 12 years. Should one occur, established procedures ensure impartial review and decision-making.

F10 . The DIYer and the small contractors need the support and/or instant answers they get from a knowledgeable staff person at the counter. However that service no longer exists.

—

AGREE

—

PARTIALLY DISAGREE

X

DISAGREE

Response explanation (required for a response other than **Agree**):

The Building Department continues to provide direct support to DIYers and small contractors through walk-in counter hours Monday–Thursday from 8:00–9:00 a.m., as well as scheduled appointments Monday–Thursday from 9:00 a.m. to noon and Monday–Tuesday afternoons. Appointments may be held in person, by phone, or via Microsoft Teams to ensure flexible access to staff expertise, and currently there is ample appointment availability each day.

Recommendations

R1 . The BoS should have staff review best practices from other jurisdictions and then select strategies that will reduce costs and delays in our county's Permitting Services by January 1, 2026. (F1, F2, F7, F8)

- **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- X** **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The County engaged the consulting firm Baker Tilly to review best practices from other jurisdictions and provide recommendations for improving permitting services. Staff are actively developing and implementing these recommendations, several of which address cost and timeliness. This work is ongoing and will continue to be evaluated prior to the January 1, 2026 deadline.

R2 . The BoS should direct staff to adopt software that removes barriers to applicants and is comprehensive to all departments. The software should flag any permits that have been unaddressed for longer than two weeks to avoid application delays. This recommendation should be accomplished by January 1, 2026. (F7, F8)

—

HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED – summarize what has been done

X

HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE – summarize what will be done and the timeframe

—

REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)

—

WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The County is developing a phased plan to integrate technology improvements for permit processing, consistent with recommendations from the Baker Tilly analysis. Short-term improvements, such as enhancements to pre-application support, ePlan submittals, and review procedures, are being implemented on a rolling basis. Longer-term efforts, including the evaluation of integrated technology solutions such as upgraded permit tracking systems, AI tools, and chatbot functionality, are estimated to take approximately two years. These efforts are intended to create a virtual “one-stop shop” for applicants and ensure timely tracking of all permits.

R3 . The County of Santa Cruz should separate the Ombudsman duties from Manager of Unified Permit Center resulting in two separate positions: a full-time, dedicated Ombudsman and a full-time Manager. The resulting new staff position should be filled by June 1, 2026. (F7, F8)

- **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- X** **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The UPC Manager position was specifically designed to function as an ombudsman, facilitating timely permit issuance, resolving issues during review, and leading process improvements. While the role's effectiveness was temporarily limited as the manager filled other critical vacancies, all Building Division positions are now staffed, enabling the UPC Manager to focus fully on these responsibilities. As such, creating a separate Ombudsman position is unnecessary, and the existing structure is effectively meeting its intended purpose.

R4 . The Ombudsman function should be clearly identified and publicized to make the public aware of the additional customer services that position provides. This recommendation should be accomplished by June 1, 2026. (F7, F8)

- **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** –
summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe
(not to exceed six months)
- **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The Ombudsman function has been implemented and publicized through public forums during the merger of Planning and Public Works, as well as in the Baker Tilly report and subsequent Board letters. The UPC Manager serves this role by resolving customer issues, coordinating between review agencies, and overseeing permit center operations to reduce delays and improve service.

R5 . Santa Cruz County should develop a plan to educate the population about different permit types to reduce illegal builds through staff participation in community events, newspaper articles and/or other Unified Permit Center media involvements by Jan 1, 2026. (F2, F3, F4, F5, F6, F10)

| | |
|----------|---|
| X | HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED – summarize what has been done |
| — | HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE – summarize what will be done and the timeframe |
| — | REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months) |
| — | WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED – explain why |

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The County has implemented this recommendation by updating its website with clear information on permit requirements and by using multiple communication channels, including social media and electronic newsletters, to educate the community about permitting and reduce illegal construction.

R6 . Santa Cruz County should establish a walk-up front desk service four hours per workday to assist home-owners, non-building professionals and small contractors navigate the permit process. This service should be posted on the website, implemented by Jan 1, 2026. (F3, F4, F5, F10)

- HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The Building Department has implemented this recommendation by offering walk-in counter service Monday through Thursday from 8:00–9:00 a.m., with the flexibility to expand hours if needed. In addition, applicants can schedule daily appointments—available in person, by phone, or via Microsoft Teams—ensuring homeowners, DIYers, and small contractors have accessible, knowledgeable staff support throughout the permit process.

R7 . Santa Cruz County BoS should reconvene the Building and Fire Code Appeals Board, populated by seasoned building professionals, to adjudicate permit disputes quickly, publicly, and professionally, and with less cost. This recommendation should be accomplished by Jan 1, 2026. (F9)

- **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- X** **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

The policies and procedures for the Building and Fire Code Appeals Board are set forth in County Code Section 12.12. While the Board was previously composed of industry professionals, it is now comprised of the Board of Supervisors. This change has not raised due process concerns, and no appeals have been filed in over 12 years. Should one occur, established procedures ensure impartial review. Reconvening a separate board is therefore unnecessary and would increase costs without improving outcomes.

R8 . Santa Cruz County BoS should direct the Building Department and any other relevant departments to review the State code parameters that allow county adjustments for building permit fees and find the least-cost, least-delay alternative. Anything that can be free should be free. This recommendation should be accomplished by Jan 1, 2026. (F1, F2, F3)

- **HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED** – summarize what has been done
- **HAS NOT YET BEEN IMPLEMENTED BUT WILL BE IN THE FUTURE** – summarize what will be done and the timeframe
- **REQUIRES FURTHER ANALYSIS** – explain the scope and timeframe (not to exceed six months)
- X** **WILL NOT BE IMPLEMENTED** – explain why

Required response explanation, summary, and timeframe:

Building permit fees are required to be cost-neutral to ensure the County recovers the costs of providing permitting services. Offering free services would shift costs onto the broader community, reducing resources available for other essential County programs and services within a limited budget. For this reason, permit fees cannot be waived or eliminated.