



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: Planning: Permit Centers

(831) 454-2580

Subject: Unified Permit Center Status Update

Meeting Date: January 9, 2024

Recommended Action(s)

Accept and file report on the Unified Permit Center.

Executive Summary

On February 1, 2022, Public Works and Planning integrated to become the Community Development and Infrastructure Department (CDI). A primary result of the integration is the development of the Unified Permitting Center (UPC). The initial focus of the UPC was filling key leadership positions and the creation of the new Permit Engineering Group (PEG). Two out of three UPC leadership roles are currently filled. The third position, Chief Building Official, is presently vacant. With the key leadership positions in place, the UPC's focus has shifted to operational improvements, the redesign of the UPC counter and website, and implementation of the Sustainability Update.

Background

The concept of a Unified Permit Center was first presented to the Board on June 29, 2021, as a means of integrating and streamlining land use permitting with a customer-centered service model. Realizing the goals of the UPC is a multi-phase effort requiring organizational, operational, physical, and website changes.

The focus of the first phase of the UPC effort has been to establish an organizational structure that supports UPC goals to improve staff coordination and permit streamlining. The Community Development & Infrastructure Department consolidates Public Works and Planning permitting staff under one management structure. The UPC is overseen by the Assistant Director - Permit Center. Supporting this role are the Chief Building Official and the UPC Manager, a new position approved by the Board on April 26, 2022. Both positions were filled in the spring of 2023. Unfortunately, in October the Chief Building Official terminated his employment with the County. CDI is actively recruiting to fill this position.

The UPC team's recent efforts have been focused on operational improvements to meet the Operational Plan goal of 85% on-time plan check review times by June 2025, the construction of a public UPC counter, creation of a customer focused website, and the implementation of the Sustainability Update, which was approved by the Board in December 2022, but is still awaiting Coastal Commission certification.

Analysis

UPC Staffing

One of the primary goals of the UPC organizational and staffing model is to address the need for coordinated customer support across departments and agencies that have a role in land use permitting. This level of customer service requires a fully staffed organization. Staff departures in key leadership positions have been a challenge in the past year. Filling those roles and establishing new positions to support the UPC have been a priority. The following are recent staffing changes related to the UPC.

- Assistant Director - Permit Center: This position, vacant since June, has been filled by Jocelyn Drake. Jocelyn brings extensive permitting experience from her years as Principal Planner of the County's Development Review section as well as other jurisdictions.
- UPC Manager: This position, authorized by the Board in April 2023, was filled by Brian Rubin. Brian's background includes several years employed as an architect with a local architecture firm, construction management, and most recently, as a Building Permit Technician with the County. Brian's experience on both sides of the counter provides a strong background for this role. The UPC Manager is responsible for oversight of day-to-day permit center operations, development and monitoring of key performance indicators, and coordination between permit reviewers to resolve conflicts that can delay permit processing.
- Chief Building Official: This position, vacant since the previous CBO's retirement in December of 2022, was filled by Jay Bradford in the spring of 2023. The CBO plays a critical role in the building permit process, and the delay in filling this position slowed the UPC's permit coordination and efforts to improve the plan check process. Unfortunately, as of October 13, 2023, this position became vacant again. The department is actively recruiting to fill this position. Because the prior CBO recruitment took nine months to complete, with only two qualified applicants applying in that timeframe, CDI is currently pursuing a consulting CBO contract for part-time services as a stop-gap measure to ensure essential CBO functions are maintained.
- Permit Engineering Group (PEG): The PEG, a cornerstone of the Public Works and Planning integration, was established this past September. The PEG consists of both divisions' technical staff and is designed to break down communication silos between engineering and planning staff, unify the group's mission under a single manager, and promote cross training. Rodney Trujillo, a Public Works' civil engineer, began managing this group in late September 2023. Due to funding and budget constraints, filling this role was delayed by one year. Ultimately, to fill this role, a salary savings swap took place to move funding from the Building and Safety's Senior Building Inspector position to this position. The required budget swap has resulted in a gap on the inspections team which will need to be resolved.

Other critical roles that support the efforts of the UPC are the Supervising Building Inspector and Building Counter Supervisor. Both positions manage the day-to-day operations both in the office and the field. Unfortunately, both these positions will be vacant in early 2024, and as senior level staff retire, the effort and resources involved in recruiting and training puts a burden on the ongoing effort to improve customer service.

Operational Improvements

The primary operational focus in the past six months has been on improving building permit plan check review times, which have previously hovered around 30% on-time (70% overdue). Constraints in staffing, including a vacancy on the Plans Examiner team (one of six; a recruitment is ongoing), the retirement of the previous CBO just before the new building code cycle, and the retirement of the Senior Building Plans Examiner, have impacted review times.

Improvements to the plan check timeline are further complicated by the fact that the number of building permit plan checks has quadrupled over the past decade. Analysis of the plan check data over the past 10 years revealed that the two Plans Examiners employed with the department in fiscal year (FY) 2011-12 processed a total of 1,104 building permit plan checks. In FY 2021-22, the department hired three more plans examiners for a total of five. These five processed 3,913 building plan checks. In FY 2022-23, one additional Plans Examiner was added to the team, for a total of six. In FY 2022-23, these six Plans Examiners processed a total of 5,679 building permit plan checks.

Building permit review metrics indicate that appropriate staffing and staffing support are the key determining factor in producing successful review timelines and improved customer service. Plan Check staffing levels have gone up 300% to handle a 500% increase in building permit plan checks. In addition, over the course of the past few years, several State laws have been passed mandating expedited building permit review times for certain types of projects, such as Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), eligible affordable housing projects, and solar installations, resulting in longer review times for non-state mandated expedited projects. In 2024, a new state law comes into effect (AB2234) which mandates a 15 day turnaround for first review comments and a 30 day turnaround for permit issuance of residential projects (25 or fewer units). As currently staffed, the department does not have the staffing resources to meet this mandate. To address this issue, the UPC management team is pursuing an increase to the consulting plan checker service contract amounts, from \$50,000 each to \$200,000 each, to handle the continued influx of building plan checks, as well as to ensure compliance with State law in 2024. Staff will return to the Board this winter with an in-depth report on this matter.

Despite these staffing challenges, UPC staff has continued to move forward with other strategies, including:

- The development of the Building Permit Dashboard to facilitate metrics-based management of building permit applications, which allows staff to quickly get a snapshot in time, review progress, and identify issues and needs more easily;
- The strategic use of consultant plan check services to respond to spikes in new applications and re-routes, as well as supporting accelerated timelines for specialty projects such as Homekey or grant-funded housing projects. To ensure continued availability of consulting plan check services, the department finalized three contracts, in the sum of \$50,000 per contract in October, as approved by the Board (RFP 22P3-012) in May 2023.

- Revisions to qualifying building permit change order criteria, resulting in a reduction in the number of change orders accepted for processing which, because they are prioritized, delay the review of new building permits;
- The implementation of Santa Cruz Notes Sheets, which allows staff to redline plans and apply notes to a plan set, rather than require another routing for corrections.

As a result of these efforts, 65% of plan reviews are occurring on time (35% overdue), which is a substantial gain towards achieving the Operational Goal of 85% on-time reviews by June 2025. Recent efforts that are not yet reflected in review times, such as the recent adoption of Solar APP+ which automates solar PV plan checks for registered contractors, and the option for customers to utilize Third-Party Plan Check (TPC) to engage with plan check consultants early in the design process, are anticipated to result in additional improvements.

Other operational improvements have been completed recently, including the option for customers to request a Spanish interpreter when scheduling consultation appointments, the automation of building permit card delivery, the creation of a digital archive for discretionary projects, and the creation of a discretionary calendar system to provide a date-certain intake date.

UPC Public Counter Redesign

Under the direction of the General Services Department (GSD), preliminary design work for the UPC counter remodel was completed by Spector Corbett Architects, Inc in FY 2022-23. Due to cost constraints and architectural proposals the project was delayed to rebid architecture services for the completion of the project. The Board approved a new architectural firm in August 2023, William Fisher Architecture, Inc., to refine the design and finish the construction documents phases incorporating some value engineering to control costs with a targeted construction start in mid 2024. Once the scope of the project is finalized, GSD will provide a construction timeline and updated budget.

The current cost estimate for the project is approximately \$1.7 million which is slightly above the total budget of \$1,670,000 for this project. To help absorb potential cost overruns, anticipated revenue from the Technology & Facilities Update fee is anticipated to generate an additional \$150,000 annually and may be used to address potential cost overruns. GSD in partnership with CDI and the architect continue to look for opportunities for value engineering, including the option of reducing the footprint of the UPC, as a part of the re-design process and preparation of construction documents phases.

Construction will require several phases, including a first phase to create a temporary permit center in the hallway for use during construction of the permanent space. The second phase will shift staff out of the footprint of the new UPC area so that the new UPC can be constructed. The internal shifting of staff and the relocation of resources during the remodel will pose challenges in terms of increasing review timelines and improving customer service largely because Building Permit Technicians and Building Plan Checkers are the primary staff that will be displaced.

UPC Website

Efforts have been underway in the past year to create the CDI website to reflect the integration of Public Works and Planning and the County Brand Guidelines. A feature of the new website will be the online consolidation of permit services in a new customer focused UPC website. This is an important element of the customer service model as most customers have continued to interact with permit services online following the COVID pandemic rather than in-person.

C\R Strategy Partners provided preliminary design work for the website. Their work, now complete, includes customer interviews, mapping of existing webpages, and development of templates and recommendations for the new website. Planning and Public Works staff have completed their review of existing online content for accuracy and clarity. We anticipate that the UPC website will be completed by March 2024 with the rest of the CDI website to follow later in the year, depending on the availability of IT staff.

Implementation of the Sustainability Update

The Sustainability Update, approved by the Board in December 2022, is anticipated to be certified by the Coastal Commission and become effective in early/mid 2024. The Sustainability Update includes a modernization of the County Code, new Design Guidelines, and policies on housing production, transportation, agriculture and resource conservation, commercial development, community services, sustainable communities and environmental justice. Because of the broad scope of the changes, efforts are underway to train staff and update brochures so that the UPC staff is ready to implement these new codes and policies.

Financial Impact

No financial impact

Strategic Plan Element(s)

6.B (Operational Excellence: County Workforce) -The Unified Permit Center will improve customer service by integrating permit services for all County reviewing agencies, and co-locating services in one place.

2.C (Attainable Housing: Local Inventory) - An improved and more predictable entitlement process encourages development of housing of all types.

Submitted by:

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Recommended by:

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