

COUNTY OF NAPA PERMITTING DEPARTMENTS CUSTOMER SERVICE PROJECT REPORT



A Tradition of Stewardship
A Commitment to Service

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Abstract: This report documents the customer service research and action planning conducted in 2010-11 by the County of Napa Permitting Departments: Conservation, Development & Planning, Public Works, Fire Marshal, and Environmental Management.

County of Napa Permitting Departments Customer Service Project Report

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This project has been conducted by The Halle Group, an organizational development consulting firm. The Halle Group provides consultation, facilitation, and training on leadership and organizational effectiveness. You can reach The Halle Group by visiting www.thehallegroup.com.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF PROJECT

In 2010, the Napa County Board of Supervisors and the management of the land-related County departments were interested in evaluating the level of customer service in their permitting processes. In October of that year the Board approved a contract with The Halle Group to conduct customer research and to recommend ways of improving the customer experience.

Data were collected through focus groups, interviews, and an online survey. In February 2011, after all data were compiled and analyzed, staff meetings were conducted to identify priority improvement areas and develop action plans.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The typical applicant is generally satisfied with the process and feels the staff is courteous and helpful
- However a significant number express dissatisfaction
- Complaints (from satisfied and dissatisfied customers alike) include:
 - processing times are too long
 - service and application of rules are inconsistent
 - it's hard to reach people who have information about their applications
 - applications sometimes fall into a black hole between departments

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Create** clear metrics for processing times and tracking performance
- **Identify** ways of achieving more same-day processing on minor permits
- **Offer** customers a contact point person (*case manager, concierge, ombudsman, permit coach*) who can guide them through the process and break logjams
- **Improve** inter- and intra-departmental communication and coordination through technology, staff training and meetings, development of protocols and standardized practices
- **Convene** a staff-customer “user group” as an ongoing feedback channel and problem-solving forum
- **Develop** ongoing feedback mechanisms: customer satisfaction cards at the conclusion of all transactions; online “suggestion box” for each department web page; periodic telephone follow-ups with customers by managers. Log, review, and take appropriate action on feedback.

METHODOLOGY

To collect data on the permitting processes in general, as well as on specific departments, The Halle Group employed the following approaches.

INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER DATA GATHERING

- Planning meetings with management of the four permitting departments to:
 - identify questions to use in surveying staff and external customers
 - identify external customers who frequently apply for permits
- Following these initial planning meetings, The Halle Group conducted interviews and focus groups with permitting department managers (in interview settings) and 23 staff members (in three focus groups).
- They were asked for overall observations, and to identify key external stakeholders, such as repeat permit applicants and their representatives, to participate in external focus groups.
 - Staff focus group participants also provided input on:
 - what is working and are strengths of the permitting departments
 - what is not working and needs improvement
 - specific ideas for improvements
- Interviews were conducted with the five members of the Board of Supervisors, the County Chief Executive Officer, the Auditor Controller, County Counsel representatives, the Assessor Recorder and a member of the County Planning Commission.

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER DATA GATHERING

FOCUS GROUPS

Three focus groups were conducted with 25 key external stakeholders and other relevant community members, including land use planners, attorneys, developers, builders, Napa Chamber of Commerce representatives and community group representatives. Participants were asked to discuss:

- Overall level of satisfaction with permitting processes
- Opinions on each department's customer service interactions, communication, enforcement procedures and use of technology
- Ways the County could improve relationships/interactions with customers
- Ways permit seekers and other external stakeholders might improve the relationships/interactions with the County
- Preferred mechanisms for giving customer feedback to the County
- Procedures other jurisdictions use that the County should consider
- Suggestions for the County to provide education on the permitting processes and code compliance
- Ideas that would improve the level of customer satisfaction

ONLINE SURVEY

- A 23-question online external survey provided data from a broader group of stakeholders:
- The survey was available for thirty days
- 1000+ email invitations to participate in the survey were sent
- Links to the survey were posted on County website, Facebook pages and in staff email signatures
- Flyers inviting participation were placed at the counters of Conservation Development & Planning, Public Works, Environmental Management and the Chief Executive Officer's office
- A press release from the County Public Information Officer was published in the Napa Valley Register
- Of the respondents, 164 were complete responses and 64 were "partial" responses
- 91 respondents gave their names and contact information
- 42 respondents expressed interest in participating in an ongoing "advisory" group

DATA DISSEMINATION

Upon completion of the interviews, focus groups and online survey, The Halle Group:

- Documented and summarized all data
- Conducted meetings with management and staff of the four permitting departments to discuss the survey results and develop action plans and process improvements
- Conducted a presentation of the data gathering input and action plans to the public and Board of Supervisors
- Identified options for collecting ongoing customer feedback
- Developed recommendations for the formation of an ongoing Advisory Group

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

OBSERVATIONS FROM ONLINE SURVEY

- **There is a significant number of “unhappy campers” but most respondents are satisfied overall**
 - A majority of respondents express satisfaction with the County permitting processes overall and regard staff as courteous and helpful
 - A third of respondents, however, are not satisfied and feel the process is biased, inconsistent and political

- **The big issue is processing times**
 - Also, better **communication** between departments
 - And greater **accessibility** and **accountability** of staff
 - They’re also not pleased with **fees**, but believe more efficient processing could bring fees down

- **Top choices for improvement**
 - Quicker turnaround times
 - More same-day processing of minor permits
 - Improve communication between departments
 - Reduce fees
 - One staff member responsible for tracking an application
 - More consistent application of rules

- **The “dog that didn’t bark”: what was not identified**

Significantly, despite the fact that some of the survey (and focus group) respondents had strong feelings and harsh criticisms, there was *not a single* mention of corruption or *any* ethical issues, real or suspected, in the County’s permitting systems.

- **They’re prepared to help**
 - Over a quarter of respondents are willing to participate in an ongoing customer feedback group

OBSERVATIONS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

(Staff and External Stakeholders)

County staff and external stakeholders agree Napa County has a unique profile:

- While there is a prevailing no-growth sentiment in the community, there is also a desire to have a healthy business climate
- Agriculture and food-processing are the key industries but here (unlike other ag areas) they must coexist with--and are dependent on--tourism, hospitality and high-end residential
- The County policy of steering development to the cities and keeping the rest in agriculture and open space reduces the County's permitting workload but also:
 - leads property owners in the County area to get more "creative" in their applications, and
 - subjects every proposal for development or a change in use to greater scrutiny
- The stakes are high on applications here
 - Land is valuable
 - Owners have ample resources
 - Neighbors have resources too and are sensitive to any change in their areas
 - Projects involve big-ticket costs and require high-powered professional talent

Staff and stakeholders also agree that:

- Staff is courteous and professional
- While most staff members try to respond to customer inquiries in a timely way, it is often difficult for the applicant to connect quickly with the proper staff person
- Application of the rules is not consistent
- There is a need for better sharing of information within and among departments
- Management is accessible when there is a problem--the flip side is that management seems to focus on case-by-case issues rather than systems and policy
- No one on staff is accountable for the timely processing of an application from start to finish and the burden is often on the applicant to track down the current status of an application and move it to the next step
- Applications sometimes fall into a black hole (between departments)
- Field inspections now are more by-the-book and less subjective than in the "old days"
- There are opportunities to use technology to improve service

Points of Difference:

- Staff felt some applicants submit incomplete applications and expect staff to clean them up, which requires more staff time (and therefore higher fees); Staff feels they are often blamed for delays in processing when the fault is that of the applicant's representative (attorney, consultant, engineer, etc.)
 - The external stakeholders feel some staff members aren't as experienced and knowledgeable as they should be and therefore take more time to process applications
- Staff feels some applicants come in with "chips on their shoulders," assuming the staff will be bureaucratic and/or lazy and will be hostile to their requests
 - Applicants feel they are treated with suspicion by staff members as if they are trying to sneak something by them
- Staff feels some applicants use their political clout to get around the standards
- Applicants feel they often need to appeal to management or a supervisor because staff does not exercise common sense flexibility when confronted with an atypical situations
- Staff feels that at times they are not supported by Management
 - When an applicant complains, Management reverses the decisions of the staff

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- **Develop a Customer Service Philosophy:**

An important first step is for the County of Napa to *state officially* that it intends to provide good customer service in its permitting processes. Customer service may seem to be an inherent aim of a public agency, but you will want to make it clear internally that “helping people” is as fundamental as “enforcing codes” and “processing applications.”

An articulated philosophy and set of standards will help establish a culture of customer service. A key is to define what “excellent customer service” means.

- The definition should identify who the customer is (applicants, development professionals, neighbors, community groups, media, etc.).
- It should also describe the signs of good customer service and establish metrics (e.g., processing times, satisfaction levels, etc.)
- The definition should be developed with and regularly communicated to all staff.

- **Create a customer focus**

Instilling and maintaining a customer focus require constant management effort. Everything from office design to website to printed materials to employee selection, training and incentives should take the customer experience into account. Managers need to talk about customer service, and talk about customer service, and then talk more about customer service.

Specific recommendations:

- Establish an ombudsman position
 - This would be a staff member (or a role shared by several staff members) who would be available to customers as a coach or troubleshooter. This person would not be the one reviewing and approving an application but would be a single contact point for customers and would track the progress of the review and help break logjams.
- Establish an ongoing customer advisory group:
 - Designed to provide regular feedback, generate or respond to process improvement ideas, and strengthen the relationship between County and permit seekers.
 - Composed of trusted external stakeholders meeting with selected staff.
- Establish performance standards and monitor results
 - In order to achieve excellent service, the level of service needs to be measured
 - Develop and implement clear customer-focused metrics and measure the quality of work performance against those standards
 - Identify specific “customer service” behaviors
 - Regularly seek customer feedback; communicate results to all staff on an ongoing basis so all know how the departments are performing
 - Solicit service improvement ideas from staff at all levels

- Establish formal and informal processes to hold people accountable and recognize and reward “customer satisfying” service
 - Staff are more likely to focus on those behaviors on which they will be getting feedback
 - Acknowledge those who go above and beyond
 - Build in feedback around customer service standards in performance evaluations
 - Connect feedback to compensation

- Train and support staff
 - Without training, employees can’t be expected to deliver
 - Training should be tailored to meeting customer needs
 - Training should be formal and informal; train managers on customer service standards and behaviors so they can mentor and teach by example

- Examine systems, policies, procedures
 - The systems should enable staff to deliver quality service
 - The systems should be user-friendly for staff and customers. The goal would be that customers can answer yes to the question “is the County easy to do business with?”
 - Staff should be empowered to point out policies and procedures that get in the way of good customer service
 - Examples of procedures to explore:
 - Hiring practices
 - Job descriptions: do they include customer service behaviors?
 - Forms, timelines, technology
 - Improve coordination among the four departments. Questions to answer include:
 - Do the departments communicate?
 - Are they mutually supportive?
 - Do customers have a seamless experience?

ONLINE SURVEY QUANTITATIVE DATA

PERMITTING PROCESSES & DEPARTMENTS IN GENERAL

On average, how many permit requests do you process at the County per year?	
0-5	158 (69 %)
6-10	32 (14 %)
11-20	14 (6 %)
More than 20	16 (7 %)
Other, please specify	8 (4 %)

What type of permits do these requests most often represent?	
I most frequently apply for building permits	108 (51 %)
I most frequently apply for use permits or other planning permits	66 (31 %)
I most frequently apply for permits from Environmental Management	24 (11 %)
I most frequently apply for permits from Public Works	3 (1 %)
I most frequently apply for permits from CalFire	10 (5 %)

Experiences with the County Development Permitting Agencies and Processes in General						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
I am satisfied with the County permitting processes overall.	24 (14 %)	31 (18 %)	28 (16 %)	62 (35 %)	29 (16 %)	2 (1 %)
Staff is helpful and courteous.	9 (5 %)	13 (7 %)	34 (19 %)	58 (33 %)	60 (34 %)	2 (1 %)
I use the County's website to check on the status of my application.	26 (15 %)	32 (18 %)	42 (24 %)	29 (16 %)	18 (10 %)	29 (16 %)
I am told how long it will take to process my request.	19 (11 %)	28 (16 %)	32 (18 %)	61 (35 %)	30 (17 %)	6 (3 %)
The County processes the application in the time specified.	30 (17 %)	29 (16 %)	34 (19 %)	41 (23 %)	33 (19 %)	9 (5 %)
I am satisfied with the processing times.	44 (25 %)	38 (22 %)	27 (15 %)	37 (21 %)	26 (15 %)	4 (2 %)
The service I get from Napa County is better than the service I get from other jurisdictions.	31 (18 %)	18 (10 %)	44 (25 %)	26 (15 %)	26 (15 %)	31 (18 %)

Feedback about Communication						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
The County website allows me easy access to the information I need.	12 (7 %)	26 (15 %)	50 (29 %)	41 (24 %)	17 (10 %)	26 (15 %)
There is ample printed information to advise me about the permitting process.	5 (3 %)	24 (14 %)	46 (27 %)	65 (38 %)	26 (15 %)	7 (4 %)
The criteria for permit approval are clearly communicated.	27 (16 %)	29 (17 %)	39 (23 %)	48 (28 %)	26 (15 %)	4 (2 %)
County Departments efficiently share information with each other about my application.	36 (21 %)	37 (22 %)	36 (21 %)	32 (19 %)	19 (11 %)	12 (7 %)
I prefer to communicate with County staff by email.	11 (6 %)	8 (5 %)	63 (37 %)	55 (32 %)	22 (13 %)	11 (6 %)
I prefer to communicate with County staff by phone.	10 (6 %)	16 (9 %)	59 (35 %)	47 (28 %)	31 (18 %)	6 (4 %)

Fairness of Processes						
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	N/A
The permitting process is fair, consistent, and unbiased.	31 (18 %)	28 (17 %)	37 (22 %)	43 (25 %)	29 (17 %)	1 (1 %)
The permitting process is based on policy not politics.	33 (20 %)	25 (15 %)	31 (18 %)	46 (27 %)	32 (19 %)	2 (1 %)
The criteria for permit approvals are reasonable.	33 (19 %)	23 (14 %)	36 (21 %)	51 (30 %)	26 (15 %)	1 (1 %)

Top 4 areas where County permitting departments and processes could use the most improvement	
Quicker turnaround times	80 (45 %)
More same-day processing for minor projects	67 (38 %)
Improve communication between departments	66 (38 %)
Reduce fees	46 (26 %)
Make one staff member responsible for tracking an application	44 (25 %)
More consistent application of rules	43 (24 %)
Locate all permitting departments in one location	33 (19 %)
Improve website including making more information available online	31 (18 %)
Improve frequency of communication to applicants	29 (16 %)
More selective hiring of staff	25 (14 %)
Clearer written guidelines for applications	24 (14 %)
Greater use of technology	20 (11 %)
Restructure fees	19 (11 %)
Better training of staff	19 (11 %)
Increase staffing levels	15 (9 %)
Staff attitude at the counter	13 (7 %)
Other, please specify (see verbatim comments)	20 (11 %)
Would not make any changes	13 (7 %)

Are you interested in participating in an ongoing customer feedback group?	
Yes	42 (27 %)
No	113 (73 %)

DEPARTMENT SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

Feedback about Conservation, Planning, and Building Department					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the permitting process of the Conservation, Planning, & Building department.	17 (20 %)	13 (15 %)	24 (28 %)	19 (22 %)	12 (14 %)
When I visit the office, Department staff is available to assist me in a reasonable time.	3 (3 %)	7 (8 %)	22 (26 %)	32 (37 %)	22 (26 %)
Department staff is competent and professional.	7 (8 %)	11 (13 %)	16 (19 %)	28 (33 %)	23 (27 %)
I know who to talk to about my application and how to reach them.	3 (4 %)	9 (11 %)	25 (30 %)	28 (34 %)	18 (22 %)
Department staff returns calls and emails in a timely manner.	8 (10 %)	17 (20 %)	25 (30 %)	22 (26 %)	12 (14 %)
Department staff doesn't just tell me what's wrong with my application but suggests changes that could be approved.	8 (10 %)	11 (13 %)	25 (30 %)	24 (29 %)	14 (17 %)
I am satisfied with the time it takes to get a response to my application.	14 (16 %)	25 (29 %)	18 (21 %)	19 (22 %)	10 (12 %)
The rules are consistently applied by this department.	13 (16 %)	13 (16 %)	27 (33 %)	21 (25 %)	9 (11 %)
If I have a problem with the staff member I am working with, I am able to talk to a supervisor and get a fair resolution.	8 (10 %)	14 (17 %)	33 (41 %)	16 (20 %)	10 (12 %)

Feedback about Environmental Management Department					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the permitting process of the Environmental Management Department.	8 (11 %)	13 (18 %)	27 (38 %)	18 (25 %)	6 (8 %)
When I visit the office, staff is available to assist me in a reasonable time.	7 (10 %)	9 (12 %)	21 (29 %)	26 (36 %)	10 (14 %)
Department staff is competent and professional.	5 (7 %)	7 (10 %)	24 (33 %)	25 (34 %)	12 (16 %)
I know who to talk to about my application and how to reach them.	4 (5 %)	9 (12 %)	29 (40 %)	22 (30 %)	9 (12 %)
Department staff returns calls and emails in a timely manner.	8 (11 %)	11 (15 %)	26 (36 %)	16 (22 %)	12 (16 %)
Department staff doesn't just tell me what's wrong with my application but suggests changes that could be approved.	7 (10 %)	8 (11 %)	34 (47 %)	16 (22 %)	7 (10 %)
I am satisfied with the time it takes to get a response to my application.	10 (14 %)	14 (19 %)	24 (33 %)	18 (25 %)	6 (8 %)
The rules are consistently applied by this department.	10 (14 %)	5 (7 %)	30 (42 %)	19 (26 %)	8 (11 %)
If I have a problem with the staff member I am working with, I am able to talk to a supervisor and get a fair resolution.	6 (9 %)	10 (14 %)	31 (45 %)	16 (23 %)	6 (9 %)

Feedback about Public Works Department					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the permitting process of the Public Works Department.	4 (6 %)	9 (13 %)	28 (41 %)	23 (34 %)	4 (6 %)
When I visit the office, staff is available to assist me in a reasonable time.	3 (4 %)	8 (12 %)	29 (42 %)	23 (33 %)	6 (9 %)
Department staff is competent and professional.	2 (3 %)	6 (9 %)	24 (35 %)	26 (38 %)	10 (15 %)
I know who to talk to about my application and how to reach them.	3 (4 %)	7 (10 %)	29 (42 %)	23 (33 %)	7 (10 %)
Department staff returns calls and emails in a timely manner.	5 (7 %)	13 (19 %)	27 (39 %)	16 (23 %)	8 (12 %)
Department staff doesn't just tell me what's wrong with my application but suggests changes that could be approved.	3 (4 %)	2 (3 %)	31 (46 %)	28 (41 %)	4 (6 %)
I am satisfied with the time it takes to get a response to my application.	6 (9 %)	10 (15 %)	25 (37 %)	21 (31 %)	6 (9 %)
The rules are consistently applied by this department.	4 (6 %)	6 (9 %)	31 (46 %)	21 (31 %)	5 (7 %)
If I have a problem with the staff member I am working with, I am able to talk to a supervisor and get a fair resolution.	3 (4 %)	4 (6 %)	41 (61 %)	15 (22 %)	4 (6 %)

Feedback about Fire Marshal Department					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the permitting process of the Fire Department.	4 (6 %)	5 (7 %)	28 (39 %)	26 (37 %)	8 (11 %)
When I visit the office, staff is available to assist me in a reasonable time.	4 (6 %)	6 (8 %)	33 (46 %)	19 (27 %)	9 (13 %)
Department staff is competent and professional.	3 (4 %)	2 (3 %)	25 (35 %)	27 (38 %)	14 (20 %)
I know whom to talk to about my application and how to reach them.	2 (3 %)	10 (14 %)	23 (32 %)	25 (35 %)	12 (17 %)
Department staff returns calls and emails in a timely manner.	3 (4 %)	13 (19 %)	28 (40 %)	18 (26 %)	8 (11 %)
Department staff doesn't just tell me what's wrong with my application but suggests changes that could be approved.	3 (4 %)	4 (6 %)	28 (39 %)	29 (40 %)	8 (11 %)
I am satisfied with the time it takes to get a response to my application.	4 (6 %)	7 (10 %)	28 (39 %)	23 (32 %)	9 (13 %)
The rules are consistently applied by this department.	4 (6 %)	7 (10 %)	26 (37 %)	24 (34 %)	10 (14 %)
If I have a problem with the staff member I am working with, I am able to talk to a supervisor and get a fair resolution.	3 (4 %)	4 (6 %)	35 (52 %)	18 (27 %)	7 (10 %)

ONLINE SURVEY QUALITATIVE DATA KEY THEMES

PERMITTING AGENCIES & PROCESSES IN GENERAL

Survey Question: “Tell Us about Your Experiences with the County Permitting Agencies and Processes In General”

- Processing times take too long
- Staff lacks a sense of urgency in moving applications through
- Staff is generally helpful but there is inconsistency in timeliness and competence
- Not advised how long it will take – or, it took longer than we were told
- Case manager and timeline would be helpful
- It’s on the shoulders of the applicant to push the permit through

COMMUNICATION

- Explanation of Process. The County needs to do a better job of explaining the process to laypeople
- Inter-departmental communication and coordination is lacking
- Intra-Departmental. Applicants receive conflicting communications from different inspectors or planners regarding the same issue
- Communication methods and practices. Phone calls and emails need to be returned, website needs to be improved and permit data on it need to be more consistently updated
- Status of Application. The County does a poor job of communicating the status of applications to applicants

FAIRNESS OF PROCESSES

- Some applicants say their biggest worry is getting assigned certain “bad apples”, i.e., staff members who are overly rigid and obstructionist
- Favoritism. Applicants are favored (or disfavored) based on who they are, who they know, or how much money they have
- Nit-Picking
- Politics. Politics plays too much of a part in the process
- Sense that neighbor groups and other interest groups have too much influence when opposing proposed projects

PRIORITY AREAS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

- All departments should be co-located; specific times for over the counter permits. FASTER! MAKE IT EASY!
- Consistency. Both in terms of how applicants are treated and how County staff performs
- Cost
- Credit Cards
- Enforcement. Some respondents suggest adding more code inspectors to go after open and consistent code violators

- Internet Permits. They should be available for minor projects with licensed contractors
- Office Hours need to be consistent from one department to the next and adhered to
- Timeframe. The County should give applicants a firm and correct timeframe for how long the application process will take
- Uniformity in rules, interpretations, and hours

CONSERVATION, PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT

- Competent. In general, this department is competent
- Counter. The physical layout of the counter is poor. There's not enough space to lay out plans and there's no privacy
- Staff professionalism. Some planners are fair and professional, while others seem to have a personal agenda. Senior staff is very competent, but many staff planners are not
- Inconsistency. Permit requirements and policy interpretations are inconsistent depending on the planner assigned
- Infrequent applicant (e.g., individual homeowner) and Repeat Applicant. Repeat applicants know the process well, know who to talk to and what questions to ask. The same is not true for the infrequent, individual homeowner
- Website. Able to get information regarding permits on My Property/Permits

ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT

- Favorable comments but staff needs to be available more often

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

- Timing. Applicants not provided with an approximate time frame for processing unless asked; for the most part the provided time frame is met
- Staff do not return calls in a timely manner
- Understaffed

FIRE MARSHAL DEPARTMENT

- Unclear who is point of contact
- Positive staff reviews
- Sense of bureaucracy

ONGOING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

- Good idea
- Several respondents expressed fear of retaliation

SUMMARY NOTES: FOCUS GROUPS

INTERNAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Focus group participants represented the four permitting departments and responded to the following questions.

What is working well?

- **Faxing Documents:** some County staff fax applicants documents that are technically supposed to be picked up in person (e.g., site plans).
 - *Pros:* (1) user-friendly; (2) reduces office foot traffic and wait times.
 - *Idea:* scan documents and send via email.
- **Express Permit Review:** applicants like the over-the-counter same-day review system.
 - *Pros:* (1) user-friendly; (2) reduces permit backlog; (3) allows Fire Department to offer services in Napa proper.
 - *Idea:* publicize the program (many applicants are not aware of it) and if there is enough interest consider offering the service more than once per week.

Which parts of the process are inefficient?

- **Emails:** it is difficult to find staff email addresses on the website, so most incoming emails go to a catch-all address and can get lost or overlooked.
 - *Idea:* make all relevant email addresses easy to find on the website.
- **Location:** separate locations for permitting departments are inconvenient for applicants.
 - *Idea:* co-locate the departments.
- **Phone calls:** applicants spend too much time having their calls routed around to different parties and leaving voicemails and not getting called back.
 - *Idea:* establish call-back standards (e.g., 24 hours or next business day) and require staff to state in their voicemail greetings if they are out of the office.

Which parts of the process are inconsistent?

- **Code Interpretation:** lack of written policies regarding code interpretation means permit reviewers must rely on their own discretion to make ad hoc determinations, resulting in application processes and results varying depending on the reviewer.
 - *Idea:* establish, memorialize and publicize code interpretation policies.
- **Costs:** some incidental costs (e.g., photocopying) vary by department.
 - *Idea:* establish uniform prices for similar services across departmental lines.
- **Hours:** business hours vary depending on the department.
 - *Idea:* establish uniform hours for all departments.

Which parts of the process are not user-friendly?

- **Website:** visitors must click through several layers in order to find things. For the most part the content is on the website but is difficult to find.
 - *Idea:* hire outside firm to redesign website.

What kind of feedback do customers give?

- **Expensive**— permit process costs too much.
- **Inconsistent** – County decisions and interpretations are inconsistent.
- **Too Much Time** – permit process takes too long.
- **Unresponsive** – takes too long to get phone calls returned.

How do customers feel about County staff and County government?

- **Frustrated** – customers are frustrated. Perception of government may be at all time low.
- **Government Worker Stereotype** – incompetent, lazy and rude.

What barriers keep you from providing customer-satisfying service internally?

- **Software:** Accela is unanimously disliked.

What barriers keep you from providing customer-satisfying service externally?

- **Billing System:** staff less likely to: (1) go the extra mile for applicants if the work does not fit into a specific billing category (such work is assigned a general, catch-all billing number, i.e., written off); and (2) answer preliminary questions for potential applicants before they have opened an application if the questions take less than 15 minutes because that time is not billed.
- **Understaffing:** 21-day turnaround for plan checkers is difficult as there are only two regular plan checkers, which are not enough to accommodate the volume of applications.

In what areas could management and the Board of Supervisors help?

- **Management**
 - **Ad Hoc Approach:** too much time devoted to responding to specific ad hoc issues, as opposed to overall organizational issues and strategic goals.
- **Board of Supervisors**
 - **Squeaky Wheel Syndrome:** Supervisors rarely get involved in the overall process and instead, weigh in on specific squeaky wheel issues.

Recommended changes to the permitting departments and processes:

- **Applications**
 - **Forms:** easier to understand and fill out.
 - **Language:** make available in Spanish.
 - **Staff Meeting:** pre-application “All Hands” meeting where representatives from all relevant departments meet with applicant and offer advice and map out next steps.
- **Community Outreach**
 - **Public Relations Campaign:** “Hey, we’re not so bad. Come see us.”
 - **Seminars:** for builders, contractors, homeowners, etc. to educate them about permit process requirements and timeframes.
- **Facilities**
 - **Help Desk:** a place to pick up informational materials (permit process checklists, timelines, policy summaries, fact sheets, etc.) and speak to a full-time help desk attendee. Also a clearinghouse for incoming phone calls to route to the correct County worker so as to avoid circuitous games of phone tag.
 - **One-Stop-Shopping:** a centralized room with a different desk for each department.
 - **Records:** centralized public filing system containing paper versions of all public documents pertaining to parcels. (As it is now, public documents are either scattered among different departments or not available publicly.)
- **Payments**
 - **Collection:** independent fee collection department/desk.
 - **Method:** accept credit cards and debit cards.

- **Staff**
 - **Help Desk Attendee (“Concierge”):** answer general pre-application questions and specific questions regarding application status.
 - **Project Manager:** oversee and shepherd applications. Point of contact for applicants.
 - **Water Expert:** in-house expert focusing solely on increasingly-complex water issues.

- **Technology**
 - **Accounting:** software that doesn’t require manual input and generates summary reports.
 - **Digitization:** digital documents, or if paper, scanned into computer system.
 - **Internal Webpage:** for making announcements, asking questions, raising concerns, etc.
 - **Online Applications:** website that’s able to accept online permit applications.
 - **Online Database:** search and access applications, permits, plans, maps, GIS links, etc.
 - **Online Tracking:** system to inform staff and applicants about application status, e.g., which phases are complete, which are pending, who the point person is, etc.
 - **Software:** instead of Accela, better software system.

- **Training**
 - **“Brownbag” Meetings:** once-a-month lunch where a department introduces its staff and explains its organizational structure and discusses the work it does.
 - **Cross-training:** so staff can learn one another’s roles.

EXTERNAL FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

Of the permitting processes, what is working?

- Digitized Use Permits
- Express Permit Review
- Fee Consolidation

What needs to be different?

- **Culture**
 - **Accessibility**
 - **Email:** Return emails by next day. Addresses easily locatable on website.
 - **Phone Calls:** Return calls by next business day.
 - **Voicemail:** Indicate in greetings whether employee is in or out of the office.
 - **Accountability:** Assess and hold staff responsible for customer service standards.
 - **Assistance:** Coach and assist applicants through application process.
 - **Attitude:** Need a “can-do”, customer service-orientation. If the codes allow for a certain project, the County’s job is to help make it happen, not try to stop it.
 - **Communication**
 - **External:** Keep applicants informed of application status.
 - **Internal:** Quickly convey decisions down the chain of command.
 - **Consistency:** Benchmarks, standards, and training are needed.
 - **Coordination:** Departments need to talk and coordinate.
 - **Experience:** Planners should not be entry level workers.
 - **Incentives:** To motivate staff toward “customer service” behavior.
 - **Mindset:** Not all development is bad. There is such a thing as good development. Developers leaving Napa for other more development-friendly jurisdictions means lost tax revenue, jobs, etc.
 - **Promptness:** Identify and implement aggressive deadlines and standards for turnaround time.
- **Staff**
 - **Case Manager:** Assigned to each application. In charge of overseeing and shepherding applications through various steps of the process.
 - **Contract Planners:** Outsource to reduce costs, improve customer service, and speed up turnaround time.
- **Fees**
 - **Billing System:** Because staff bill 100% of their time, it is possible they are less likely to spend time on issues that do not fit into specific billing categories (and therefore will be written off) or help potential applicants (as opposed to actual applicants) because they do not have billing numbers yet.
 - **Consistency:** Fees for photocopying, etc. should be the same in all departments.
 - **Expedited Applications:** Allow applicants to pay to have applications expedited.
 - **Transparency:** A fee schedule should be posted prominently on the website.

- **Logistics**

- **All-Hands-On-Deck Meetings:** One representative from each relevant department should meet with applicants at the beginning of the application process.
- **Checklists:** Pre-application checklists with all the steps in the application process.
- **Hours:** Need uniform hours across departmental lines and improved communication about the hours.
- **Information Packet:** Available pre-application. Describes the various steps.
- **Facilities:** Co-locate permitting departments.
- **Files:** Need to be tracked better.
- **Forms:** Overhaul outdated, redundant and inconsistent forms.
- **Organizational Charts:** Website should contain easily locatable charts describing hierarchical composition of departments with names and contact information.
- **Policies:** Code interpretation and application processes should be governed by written policies posted on the website.
- **Pre-Permit Work:** Applicants should be able to begin demolition work while their applications are pending.

- **Technology**

- **Digitization:** Scan and digitize all documents.
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Ongoing online customer feedback survey.
- **Tracking Systems**
 - **Applications:** Internally and externally accessible online system that tracks application progress and status.
 - **Staff:** Internally accessible online system that tracks where employees are.
- **Website:** Needs to be overhauled and made more user-friendly.

Jurisdictions to Benchmark:

- **Sonoma:** Applicants come to one building and talk to a representative from each relevant department. Applicants tell the front counter what they are planning to do and front counter staff provides information, including who they need to see. There are county workers who shepherd applicants through the process and tell them what forms are needed, etc.
- **Yolo:** Planners say to applicants, “We want this project to work” and “Here is a calendar and checklist of the steps you need to take and the timeframe you need to take them in if the project is going to work”. Additionally, there is reciprocity, i.e., planners say “If you meet these deadlines, we’ll meet these other deadlines.”

SUMMARY NOTES: CUSTOMER ADVISORY GROUP

A kick-off meeting of the Customer Advisory Group occurred on April 21, 2011. 22 participants (customers and County staff) met, discussed the items below, and agreed to regularly meet to identify process improvements and to provide feedback on customer serviced improvement ideas.

Responses to Question: “If You Could Change One Thing in the Permitting Process in the Next 3 Months, What Would it Be?”

- Streamline the permitting process
- Make permit fee balances clear to customer at each stage
- Take credit cards
- Increase and improve communication
- Improve consistency
 - Water Efficiency Landscape Ordinance
 - Responses
 - Internal consistency
- Improve responsiveness to emails – respond as quickly as business people do
- Expand over-the-counter permits
- Improve inter-departmental coordination
- Develop an exit survey (upon permit approval)
- Develop and publish clear expectations for applications
 - Process must be transparent and predictable
- Create a one-stop shop

Responses to Staff Preliminary Action Plan Items

- Permit coach
 - Could this be the same person as Intake?
 - Figure out how to fund/staff without adding staff
 - Needs to be knowledgeable about each of the permitting departments
 - Identify a “case manager” assigned to each permit
- Mandatory Completeness Checklist
 - Include a “Notes” space to elaborate on any items
 - Include “N/A” or “Other”
 - Edit terminology: “Completeness” may not fit with CEQA
 - Keep it manageable; it won’t work for all types of applications
- Metrics
 - Identify accountability process if targets are not met
- Staff Directory
 - Add “Area of Expertise” column
- Pre-submittal meetings
 - Identify and communicate which permits this will work for
- Exit interviews
 - As long as it is quick, easy, available online
- Online MyProperty link
 - Make sure it is accurate
 - Conduct beta test
- Co-location
 - Make sure all desks are staffed at all times

Additional Input

- John McDowell will identify use permit applications and standard conditions
- Fee predictability

Logistics for Advisory Group

- Convene on specific, “mini” issues
 - By type of permit
- Conduct periodic “global” meetings
- Attend when you can and if issue is relevant to you
- John McDowell to develop global email group
 - Provide regular updates
 - Invitations to meetings
- To be held Thursdays from 2 to 4 p.m.
- Use technology
 - Set up a blog
 - Use SharePoint
- Include feedback discussions about enforcement and inspections (i.e., post-permit)

APPENDIX

This section includes:

- Online survey questions
- Qualitative Survey Data (Representative Comments)
- Roster of interviewees and focus group participants

Online Survey Questions

- For each ranking question in the survey, a Comments section was included.
 - Survey participants self-selected.
1. On average, how many permit requests do you process at the County per year?
 - 0-5
 - 6-10
 - 11-20
 - More than 20
 - Other, please specify
 2. What type of permits do these requests represent?
 - I most frequently apply for building permits
 - I most frequently apply for use permits or other planning permits
 - I most frequently apply for permits from Environmental Management
 - I most frequently apply for permits from Public Works
 - I most frequently apply for permits from Cal Fire
 3. Feedback about experiences with the County development permitting agencies and processes in general.

Rating scale:

Strongly disagree = 1

Disagree = 2

Neutral = 3

Agree = 4

Strongly agree = 5

- I am satisfied with the County permitting processes overall.
 - Staff is helpful and courteous.
 - I use the County's website to check on the status of my application.
 - I am told how long it will take to process my request.
 - The County processes the application in the time specified.
 - I am satisfied with the processing times.
 - The service I get from Napa County is better than the service I get from other jurisdictions.
4. Feedback about communication:
 - The County website allows me easy access to the information I need.
 - There is ample printed information to advise me about the permitting process.
 - The criteria for permit approval are clearly communicated.
 - County Departments efficiently share information with each other about my application.
 - I prefer to communicate with County staff by email.
 - I prefer to communicate with County staff by phone.

5. Feedback about fairness of processes:
 - The permitting process is fair, consistent, and unbiased
 - The permitting process is based on policy not politics.
 - The criteria for permit approvals are reasonable.

6. Feedback about fees:
 - Permit fees based on the value of the construction project are reasonable.
 - Flat fees based on staff processing time are reasonable.
 - When fees are charged on an hourly basis, the total amount is reasonable.
 - My receipt clearly lists the fees that have been assessed and what they are for.

7. Identify the top 4 areas where the County permitting departments and processes could use the most improvement. Select up to four areas.
 - Staff attitude at the counter
 - Reduce fees
 - Restructure fees
 - Better training of staff
 - More selective hiring of staff
 - Increase staffing levels
 - More consistent application of rules
 - Clearer written guidelines for applications
 - Improve communication between departments
 - Quicker turnaround times
 - Improve website including making more information available online
 - Make one staff member responsible for tracking an application
 - Improve frequency of communication to applicants
 - More same-day processing for minor projects
 - Greater use of technology
 - Locate all permitting departments in one location
 - Would not make any changes
 - Other, please specify

8. Department Specific Questions (same questions for all four permitting departments)
- I am satisfied with the permitting process of the Conservation, Planning, & Building department.
 - When I visit the office, Department staff is available to assist me in a reasonable time.
 - Department staff is competent and professional.
 - I know who to talk to about my application and how to reach them.
 - Department staff returns calls and emails in a timely manner.
 - Department staff doesn't just tell me what's wrong with my application but suggests changes that could be approved.
 - I am satisfied with the time it takes to get a response to my application.
 - The rules are consistently applied by this department.
 - If I have a problem with the staff member I am working with, I am able to talk to a supervisor and get a fair resolution.
9. The County permitting departments are interested in establishing an ongoing user group to provide input and ideas as well as to provide feedback on possible process improvement ideas. Are you interested in participating in an ongoing customer feedback group?
- Yes
 - No
10. Comments or questions about this idea (of an ongoing customer feedback group) and/or this survey?

Online Survey Qualitative Data Representative Comments

NOTE: Each section includes a summary of the verbatim responses and have been edited for spelling, grammar, syntax, and clarity.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS, PERMITTING AGENCIES & PROCESSES IN GENERAL

Survey Question: “Tell Us about Your Experiences with the County Permitting Agencies and Processes In General”

Category	Comments
<p>Staff helpfulness, courtesy, responsiveness, availability</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everybody is great to deal with. • Some of the staff are very helpful; others are quite difficult. • Building department staff is great. • Environmental health counter is not very helpful. • Planning staff is helpful and informative but Building is vague, difficult, condescending and they think everyone coming into their department is a professional expediter. • It's tricky to know if someone is out of the office because you don't get a response until after they have returned. • Certain individuals in both Building and Planning Departments excel in facilitating the permit process. • Whenever I go in for a use permit the office staff is not available to answer my questions. • I had one experience on a Friday 4:15 p.m. at the Building Department. Everyone had gone home and nobody could help me with a new electrical service permit. Not good. • The typical attitude is adversarial and confrontational; record keeping is sloppy and lack of accountability is the norm. • County employees make extraordinary efforts to increase cost, delay, obfuscate, make up regulations and otherwise hinder, for no logical reason whatsoever, simple projects.
<p>Process Timing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan checks take longer than we prefer. • The processing times seem to vary depending on the time of year and the economy. When there is a lot of business and building activity, the process slows down, but these days when the economy is weak, things move through faster. • The processing time was extended because instead of calling/e-mailing questions, mail was used. It was a miscommunication that could have been handled in a couple of minutes by phone/e-mail and it extended it by a week. • Some departments were timelier than others. Had to be proactive to nudge the process along. • Each time I talked to the Building Department I was told my plans were #5 and would be processed in about a week. This answer was repeated every week for several weeks after the target time for completing plan check.

Category	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It would be good if the process didn't take 60 days. • Environmental has been fairly good even with cutbacks in hours; Building is and always has been a problem; planning is probably the best at responding but the process seems to always take longer even for simple reviews. • Plan checks are very inconsistent in amount of time as well as comment. I can never advise clients accurately as what to expect. • The online application for the special event permit is long and complicated. Could be simplified and filled out online. • A simple use permit for a single family house took almost a year; constant requests from the staff planner resulted in tens of thousands of dollars in unnecessary engineering fees. • My permits are all over-the-counter re-roof permits. The permitting process for these permits is fairly painless, although sometimes time-consuming depending on the number of people at and/or behind the counter. Please be aware this is not a complaint as I understand there's nothing the County can do to control the number of customers at the counter when I happen to walk in. • I'm not entirely sure whether the delays in our initial process were due to the County or to our architect; our regular inspector was VERY helpful. He made good suggestions and worked with us to get the projects completed in a timely and efficient way. Unfortunately, he was not the inspector who then returned on a regular basis to follow-up. • I would say the NCEM is most accurate in their estimate of processing time and they pretty much hold to it. I've had a harder time in getting responses to my questions/processing time requests from the Building Department. The processing time in the Building Department for minor permits seems to take quite a while compared to other Departments within Napa County and other County Building Departments. • Need to do a better job of communicating when a project is deemed complete. It is a very important date that starts a lot of the shot clock time periods, and it is like the staff doesn't understand or care about that. • At the counter it's a challenge to reach the Planning Department staff. The number of hours they state they work on any one issue must be inflated because there is no way it can take a person that long to do the plan checks they do. • We are told permits will be ready on specific day and then told County Counsel is reviewing and it will be another two weeks. • We are not advised of how long the process will take. In fact, the length of time a permit takes is a big concern. It seems to take longer than it should. • Permit process takes way too long, sometimes several weeks because staff is overloaded - I guess. No good explanation on why it takes so long to process my plan review, nobody knows what's going on, seems like nobody really cares what it costs or how long it takes, what permit status is, how much permit will cost; can NEVER get a straight answer from anyone; seems like nobody knows what's going on. • Plans done by my architect and brought to department by him took forever to get through and accepted; required many revisions. Plans I did myself as homeowner were handled much more expeditiously. But the slow first experience cost a lot more than it should have.

Category	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In multiple use permit and development project experiences, what has been explained to us as a certain timeframe for processing has more often taken 2 to 4 times the timeframe. • It seems that the County has no incentive to move applications forward in a timely manner. Is this due to job security? Perhaps it should be just the opposite - that if the staff cannot process applications in a timely manner, then their job security should be at stake. • Any way to reduce permit costs and speed up the length of time it takes for a plan review of submittals is MUCH needed. Sometimes it takes 3 to 4 weeks - sometimes longer - to get a submittal approved so work on project can begin, even on small jobs. It's pitiful how long it takes.
<p>Web Site</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County of Sonoma has a better website and process for accepting applications and speeding the review process along. They also provided a pre-application process/meeting with comments from all of the applicable departments before the application was made. This was helpful and reduced application errors.
<p>General Comments about Processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a strong proponent for assigning a project a permit application number and manager at any point in the process to allow the applicant access to staff to review and resolve design and construction issues prior to the start of Construction Documents. • The experience one has at the County is based on which planner is assigned your project and there is hardly any common denominator among those. Some projects go very smoothly with good customer service and others are not at all acceptable in terms of the planner's knowledge and experience, the timeliness or accuracy of the work product, or the manner in which they approach various issues. There needs to be much better oversight and more accountability from staff. • In most cases the staff was not helpful, nor was there any sense of urgency in processing our request. Often things were requested more than once because reports were lost or it was not known that they were in the file. It seemed a classic case of the left hand not knowing what the right had was doing between the departments. • The special event permitting process is overly daunting for fundraising dinner-type events, but the staff is incredibly helpful with the process. • The Environmental and Building Department put my small residential remodel/addition project in the middle of their department struggles to get the other to establish guidelines. Wasting time and money for my clients and me. • It seems that the process could be more clearly spelled out ahead of time so that we know what is required from us and how the process should flow (in fact a printed flow chart would be nice). • No coordination from department to department. Applicant is on his own to shepherd project through, unless you get fed up enough to contact Director, then things seem to go more smoothly. • They really don't grasp how much time and money is wasted in the County's "permit mill." • It would be nice to have a standardized permit process and requirements for photovoltaics.

Category	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The fact that they require a plot plan for a small repair or remodel is asinine and often makes the permit cost prohibitive. • It is difficult to change the people; will take some time for a change in attitudes to take effect; the system and its implementation could improve greatly in a short time if it were mandated and supported from those with power to hire and fire. • County departments refuse to look up records of previously submitted, approved and completed projects. Caused us added expense to have architects and engineers re-produce documents already in County files, but they are too "busy" to research in existing files. Also County employees have "interpreted" written codes and regulations. Their job is not to interpret but to say yes or no, legal or not legal, not find ways to interpret so as to cause extra expense and time hiring expensive professionals. • I think the Ag. Commissioner's Department is a great example of the way a department should be run. They are very friendly and welcoming. They are eager to help. They work hard to educate farmers and the public on what the rules and regulations are and regularly invite the public in for seminars and forums. They also regularly ask the public for ways to improve their service. The best example of doing things right is in this county. • My clients are often incredulous at the regulations they are being required to comply with in order to get simple projects accomplished or approved.
<p>Interaction and Coordination between Permitting Departments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each department acts like an island and there is no cross communication or coordination apparent between the departments. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Some items overlap (Building and Fire) and you wind up with two departments telling you different things. ○ Staff are courteous if you can reach them but they are slow to respond and if anyone is out on vacation you are stuck until that individual returns - there is no advanced notice of staff absences. ○ It is wholly upon the shoulders of the applicant to push the permit through, repeatedly contacting the various departments for sign-off. ○ Each application should have a project manager (perhaps the planner or plans examiner) who is responsible for shepherding the application through the process. ○ It would be great if there were a pre-submittal review for comments at the early stage of Construction Document development (mandatory or not) and an entire departmental staff review within X days of submittal giving important initial feedback like a road, fire protection, septic issue, etc. that the applicant could be notified of and working on while the plans sit and await formal review - this could speed the process instead of waiting to find out later and adding time to fix them. ○ Finally, it would be great to feel some sense of 'urgency' from staff to process our applications. They work for us and not the other way around. • As a project manager I have to spend time shepherding and rattling cages to get a project through all these departments. Staff helpfulness and courteousness is inconsistent. Some are very, some are not. "UP TO A YEAR" originally quoted as necessary to process a use permit for a very small winery addition and minor "major mod"? It doesn't seem like it should take more time to review an application

Category	Comments
	<p>than it took to put it together.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In applying for a sign permit, I was juggled between three departments, one of which (Roads) was dysfunctional, holding up and confusing the whole process.
<p>Miscellaneous</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I've only helped a landowner seek one encroachment permit through the County. All other permit possibilities, we've been exempt due to excavated volume. All other County permits have been ECPAs and I'm not considering those in my answers. We have eight major industrial properties in the County. In addition to constantly processing new permits for Tenant TI's and Mods, we also often need to review old permits, drawn before we purchased the Properties.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: COMMUNICATION

Category	Comments
<p>Interdepartmental communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interagency communication does not happen; requires special visits to initiate/require the communication. • Individual permit information on the website is constantly updated by some personnel and not by others. • More consistency would be appreciated. It would also be nice to have more detail about each specific permit accessible on the website (for instance if it's a Use Permit, what it is for exactly, production limit, tasting room addition, etc.?). • Repeated requests for clarification on the staff's interpretation of requirements went unanswered or I was redirected to a different department, who then sent me back to the original department. • The communication of permitting process between the Building Department and CDF/NCF seems to be slowing the process down; permit packages lost; have had to completely resubmit. • Departments do not share information with each other relating to a given application. It would be most helpful if there were one application form that each department could refer to online, to see what other departments were doing, if they had a given criterion completed, etc. As it is, unless the applicant makes sure that one department is aware of what another department has already approved, nothing moves forward. • I was talked in circles, asked for a sheet that clearly outlined all steps, not given one. So I wasted countless hours of my time and theirs hoping to understand what they wanted. • In the Planning Department, the receptionists are neither helpful nor happy to see you at their counter. However the building permits department is very helpful and friendly.
<p>Email and other methods of communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email is great when there are black/white questions and answers but when something isn't so cut and dry (often the case in our trade) we need to be able to get answers in a timely manner. • It's important that plan checkers, building inspectors and planners make themselves available to take/return calls in a timely manner. • Also, it would help if contractors could mail in the permit application package. We are in Windsor and it is difficult and costly to send someone to Napa when it could simply be mailed. • When attempts to communicate by email were stonewalled we went into the office, but we were never able to meet with the individual emailing us and no one else would discuss the matter.
<p>Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permit process takes way too long, sometimes several weeks because staff is overloaded - I guess (no good explanation on why it takes so long to process my plan review, nobody knows what's going on, seems like nobody really cares what it costs or how long it takes, what the permit status is, how much the permit will cost. Can NEVER get a straight answer from anyone, because seems like nobody knows what's going on. • A serious problem at the County has been the lack of follow-through in meetings

Category	Comments
	<p>and communications. The staff frequently changes their mind on projects, which results in additional time, money, and frustration as you go through the process.</p>
<p>Web Site</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The website contains a lot of information but is far too difficult to work through. As redesign of the higher-level pages (i.e., those first reached when going to www.Countyofnapa.org) need serious streamlining and simplification to direct visitors to the info they need. • Go to the home page then click Info for Businesses and then click on "apply for a building permit" and see where that takes you. I have most necessary places bookmarked now, but those bookmarks represent some significant time in locating info I need regularly. The copious printed documentation seems forever disjointed and cobbled together, even within departments. For instance, I was just asked to complete a "Greenhouse Gas" Reduction Checklist that was not on the original Planning Submittal checklist. I only found out about it because I called the planner to check on the application status. Some forms like the traffic worksheet are just not clear or good at fitting every situation. As for how best to communicate, I don't care; just want it to be prompt. Recently both planning and EM took several days to return calls. I do not appreciate calling to ask if a planner or a plan checker is available and being put straight into voicemail. If they're not available can't the receptionist at least say, "I'm sorry, no... I can direct you to her/his voicemail" or, "Would you like to hold?"

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: FAIRNESS OF PROCESSES

Category	Comments
<p>Consistency, fairness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Received project approval through Planning after all departments approved, received approval for permit from all departments except Building. • Across the board, consistency is totally lacking. • Building had issues with Fire Department approval then proceeded to get Fire to change their review and put us back in the beginning after all the issues had already been worked out and the project moved forward based upon those recommendations. • Client gave up because it meant a complete redesign at that point; no consistency and no accountability. • Keep the same person doing the plan check. Multiple people makes for multiple interpretations. • Some plan checkers are more unreasonable than others, so it's hard to give general answers. • The Health Department permitting process is particularly onerous; the staff are exceedingly mistrustful and difficult to deal with. • Can't make up your minds even in your own departments. Inconsistent application of regulations. • Great variability from inspector to inspector, from reviewer to reviewer. • Requirements are neither consistent nor reasonable. Building staff (code enforcement) acts like the Gestapo. Why are there twice as many plan checkers as inspectors when the permit submissions are down? I understand plan checking is now taking 3-4 months. This is obviously not pursuant to governmental code. • "Little" guy has to play by the rules and jump through hoops. Big money people are allowed to proceed without having to do the same processes as the little guy. • We were jerked around at the whim of one of the planners, only to later learn this individual's behavior was well known and people (if they were lucky) were advised to avoid her at all costs. • I have clients who get the feeling that more is expected of them because of their wealth, which I think would count as bias and inconsistency. I recently had a planner tell me as much, so it's not just a perception. One can simply look around the County and see that there are a lot of inconsistencies. • The policy is clearly "Do whatever we can to make this more difficult than is necessary!" The written permit conditions are fine, it is the "interpretation" that is the problem. I have experienced what I would consider an unwritten policy and philosophy within sections of the Napa County bureaucracy that the taxpayer and private landowner is "an enemy of the state" and needs to be "controlled", when we just want to build or install what is legal, and these people just erect hurdle after hurdle, smaller and smaller, moving the goalposts beyond what the black and white regulations read.
<p>Policy and Politics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political and local neighborhood group influences are getting too influential, involving and dictating planning and building design restrictions. • In a recent permit application, County staff changed their mind about our

Category	Comments
	<p>application three times - one of which was a result of political pressure. All three changes have resulted in dramatic costs in time and money.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The policy of the County seems to be to prevent any plans from being approved if they can possibly avoid it and to make the process as expensive and difficult as possible. • Staff can spend too much time trying to count votes or trying to anticipate the political intrigue associated with a given project instead of sticking to the processing. This translates into inconsistency and loss of momentum on applications. • It seems of regulations on Napa County businesses are enforced too strongly, probably because of the "squeaky wheel" residents who don't know what they are talking about.
Criteria for Permits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see Use Permit applications from attorneys that do not contain (or appear to require) the same information required from other consultants. • Issues with the criteria used for approval of projects: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The State, County, and City agencies should agree on a common setback for streams. ○ Costs for appeals should be lowered for nonprofit organizations. ○ Staff reports responding to comments should have a deadline for release longer than the two days before a hearing as is the present practice. ○ All comments on projects should be made available online. • Requirements would be fulfilled then more requirements would be added; the process time is too lengthy. • The County departments do not seem to have a clear consensus as to how to approach things at times, and when in doubt resort to putting up as many barricades as possible to approval. It seems they think their job is to make it as difficult and complex as possible to gain approval, rather than the opposite: streamlining the approval process. If regulations exist, then once they are met, it should be straightforward if not downright easy. That is not the case. • Criteria seem exhaustive to say the least, which I guess would imply beyond "reasonable". I have clients (and would-be clients) who are getting priced out of the building market because of the excessive costs of both the permitting process and the ever-escalating costs of conforming to codes that seem to presume their funds are unlimited. • I do not like that developers get all kinds of incentives and the person who has lived here for 35 years has to jump through hoops and learn the secret language of the Planning Department.
General	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The permit, once issued, must be acted upon within a year with limited ability to extend. I would propose a small review fee to make sure the plans/permits comply with current law but allow for greater flexibility in commencing construction.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: PRIORITY AREAS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

Category	Comments
<p>Interdepartmental Communication and Coordination</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall I would like to see better communication between departments without me prompting it for each project. More detailed permitting information on the website would be nice and might actually save some phone calls/emails to the staff. It would also be appreciated to receive a quicker response from the Building Department and more of a sense of urgency. It's frustrating how you have to get other Departments to sign-off before one type of permit can be issued and that has to happen before another permit can be issued. For example...to get a Building Permit that requires a minor mod to a Use Permit: All departments had to sign-off on the minor mod before Planning could issue the minor Mod, and then Planning and all of the Depts. had to sign-off on the Building Permit before the Bldg Permit would be issued (even though both of these permits were for the same project)...all Depts essentially had to sign-off twice and it ended up taking a month of additional sign-off/coordination time. • All departments had approved the submitted drawings except the building department. I was then directed to speak to the Environmental department, which had already approved the drawings. I was then told there had been a "computer input error" and the plans are no longer approved. The Building and Environmental Departments were incorrectly trying to force regulations onto this project. • Once or twice we haven't been notified of a permit that is ready.
<p>Fees</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The permit and plan review fees are significantly higher than neighboring counties and cities. The table for determining fees is confusing and difficult to determine total amounts for project-estimating purposes. • Building permits for new construction are outrageous. In a county which has been able to take advantage of homebuyers who pay millions of dollars for their homes, it is incredible that new construction permits are so high. A \$6500 project ended up costing \$1200 in fees, including "inspections". I was charged for an "inspection" that was done over the phone and the fire inspector drove by the house. Only one looked at the site. That is why people do not permit. • Fees have not, in my case, seemed fair: e.g.: I have been assessed for fire inspections when that department signed off without a visit. Permit costs for a \$2,000 shed cost me \$800. I cannot afford to build or permit a hay barn, so am using temporary, plastic covered structures for hay storage. I build small 10 X 12 sheds for animal storage rather than one barn, because I can build them without a permit. Unsightly, but I can afford them. It is not the way I like to live, and I am dissatisfied with the few choices I am afforded as a homeowner because of the permitting process.
<p>Staff Competence and Professionalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We had people in the Planning Department share stories about several of our neighbors' construction projects... in every case the department thought the individuals were trying to deceive the department and in every case we know they were wrong! It was a total "us against them" attitude. Not to mention gossip! • Building staff act like a police force.

Category	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve public perception so that people will not be so intimidated to initiate a project. • CDPD is overstaffed. • Very ARROGANT conversation observed between employees behind the counter after an applicant brought in plans. "Well, we'll never accept these" is this assisting the applicant to meet requirements? I think not. These two guys should have been fired on the spot. They are not serving the public (which pays them). • Improve public perception so that people will not be so intimidated to initiate a project. • The permitting process is ridiculous and "one hand does not know what the other is doing."
<p>General Comments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan check required extensive revisions to plans that were not relevant to project. This provided no benefit to anyone and cost me several thousand dollars extra. There were only one or two very minor relevant changes that could have been made on the plans and initialed at the counter without redoing the entire plan set and any cost or delay. • Communication, time, same-day processing, one person responsible for one application. • Better management of the current planning function. • More accountability of the department overall. • County Counsel is a part of the department coordination and due to their overload, they are often the cause of delay. Does County Counsel have to be so involved? • Need someone from CalFire available to answer questions for both residential and commercial. CalFire plan check (timing) has been a problem as well. • There are way more than 4 areas that need to be improved: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Communication, time, same-day processing, one person responsible for one application, etc. ○ All of these are areas that could lead to increased efficiencies, and increased county revenues, which pay the salaries for those in the county departments. ○ In every other business, there is a much clearer realization of who pays the salary for employees-in this case those that use the services ARE paying for the salaries. Sure would be nice to see a wake-up call in the county as to who is their customer AND the persons paying their salaries. Residents and businesses are paying for them to be there—get a clue! • Is the department's goal to: 1. assist the applicant to meet building criteria with a degree of common sense. 2. Make sure that any and all "I's" are dotted and no possible regulation is ignored- thus insuring NO LIABILITY for our "public servants." 3. Exercise power and show us (the "public") who is BOSS. 4. Note that I have not given my name (although it could certainly be figured out). Does this suggest that I really believe that my responses to this inquiry are going to be anonymous? Will I pay for my frankness in the future? I am not at all sure, from my experience the department does not engage in "retribution."

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: CONSERVATION, PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT

Category	Comments
<p>Overall Comments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighborhood interest groups have too much sway over the Planning Dept. and influence their policies/restrictions. The Dept. can only follow the established rules. • It took us a year of "friends of friends" and Supervisors getting involved before we were able to get a simple permit. • My time, engineering, architectural and legal support are costly. Businesses actually defer, even eliminate projects rather than deal with NV Government.
<p>Staff Competence and Professionalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building staff act like a police force, instead of acting helpful. Why would anyone want to get permits if they are going to be treated like a criminal and rudely? • I was so frustrated with Planning Department; all other departments were helpful, friendly and clearly outlined what they needed, wanted and how much it would cost me. • Everyone in the Building Department should be on the same counter and "on the same page." • Over-staffed with people who don't have the same rules or opinions. • The Planning Department is well run. I do not see a reason for change. • Senior staff is very competent, but that is not true for all staff planners. • Inconsistent requirements and interpretation of policy by different planners. Some planners appear to have a personal agenda and others are more fair • I have never had an issue with staff that required a discussion with their supervisor. • I do not always get feedback on how to address an issue with an application. It is typically a hit and miss proposition. • I've never had any difficulty with Staff. They have certainly made very helpful suggestions, time and time again. • The person I am currently dealing with is really helpful and good to work with. It has not always been so and there are some officious, unpleasant people I have had to work with in the past. • These are not problems with the better qualified staff planners. The process falls apart with those without qualifications who are trying to learn on the job without adequate training and/or supervision.
<p>General Feedback about Processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recently we've seen a lot more minor modifications to Use Permits being required where they haven't been required for similar projects in the past. This has severely impacted our construction schedules and increased the costs tremendously. It should be identified early on if a minor mod is going to be required...not 4 weeks after a Building Permit has been applied for. • If Code enforcement is wrong, management will not override their authority. Instead of admitting a mistake they will push an applicant to the point of legal action then back down with a vague answer that is not a "no" or "yes"

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT

Category	Comments
Overall Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have had good experiences with this department but then I have a good working relationship with them which helps. • Surprisingly the easiest of the lot. • Environmental Management's permit process is very clear and usually goes very well and quickly. If there is an issue EM staff is more than willing to move up the ladder to help resolve the issues. • I think that EM is the most consistent and responsive out of all of the Departments. They are willing to work through any issues and keep an open mind. • NCEM consistently exceeds my expectations and is always a pleasure to work with. Some issues with conflicting requirements with Building Department on storm water diversion, but they recognize that. • Environmental Department was the least helpful of all departments on this project. The project was approved and then not approved. The reason I was given was that there was a "computer input error which has now been fixed". • I wish all departments were this helpful. • Environmental Management seems to be well run and professional. Communication and turn-around time are generally good with NCEMD. • Overall - Good experiences. The Department has improved. • Too strict on businesses while rules do not apply to homeowners. They are regulating professionals who know what they are doing, yet letting rookies pollute the environment and harm themselves.
Staff Competence and Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff needs to be available more often. Current counter hours (4 hours a day, Monday-Thursday) is not enough. Someone needs to be available at least 8 hours a day, 4 days a week. • Received conflicting info regarding secondary dwelling unit requirements. 1st staffer made huge issue of what turned out to be nothing. 2nd staffer had answers and solutions. • Perhaps because the inspectors do on-site inspections, I have found it very rare to walk in and be able to discuss my issue with someone. At times I need to call back several times before receiving a call back. • [blank] and [blank] are awesome!!! • [blank] has been especially helpful • The front desk people are not very helpful. Never know who is in the office or even try to help problem solve. They just transfer you to voice mail. • [blank] and [blank] have always been helpful and patient.
General Feedback about Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We tend to get held up with the Environmental Management process. We abide by all of the fire, garbage and tenting criteria and have shown good faith in our efforts and it should show on our records

Category	Comments
	<p>because we are an annual event; however we start the whole process from scratch even though we are proven to meet all necessary requirements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staff of NCEM needs better attention to notifying Planning once conditions and/or issues have been resolved so the application can be considered "complete."• Auto Out-of-Office email replies would help.• I was issued a red tag for merely patching a hole knocked into a sewer pipe and was forced to pull a septic repair permit that cost me over \$1000 to just make a simple repair to the pipe. The person that issued the permit also just signed off on the inspection without actually inspecting the repair. Clearly it was all just to collect money.• Recent phone calls were responded to days later if at all.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

Category	Comments
Overall Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Department has a number of "temporary" street debris collection piles around the county. Some are next to the river or next to streams. Despite erosion control measures they still run silt into the waterways. The County Public Works Department should abide by its own streamside setback ordinance and move the debris locations to other less sensitive locations. • This department has experienced the most dramatic change in their effectiveness and responsiveness of any at the County. So many changes that it's hard to keep track of who you should call on various issues. • Generally, good experiences. • Public works is anarchy and all decisions are done by one man. My building permit was held up from a final inspection because public works attached my encroachment permit so they could show their power over building and safety.
Staff Competence and Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It depends who I get assigned. • On occasion I have had to make several calls to multiple staff members before a call is returned by the one I needed to talk to. • Across the board staff seem unaware of complications due to overlapping permit requirements (primarily with state/federal) agencies.
General Feedback about Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public Works is challenging sometimes for applications that do not have a civil engineer. It would be great with these types of projects if Public Works could work under or through the Building Department so that the Building plans examiner could understand and deliver communication about Public Works comments and requirements in a more timely and congruent manner.

REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: FIRE MARSHAL DEPARTMENT

Category	Comments
<p>Overall Comments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Fire Marshal Department fairly and correctly applied the codes and regulations. • The best department by far for communication. • Inspector [blank] has been very helpful to us over the years. In my opinion the Fire Marshal Department is one of the better county entities to deal with. • Fire is perhaps the quickest, most transparent and easiest department to get a sign-off if the applicant understands what is required before hand. The only issue might then be communication with other departments and the fact that Fire is located in St. Helena. • Bureaucratic: I was not told my initial application had to be submitted to the Fire Department first; therefore after I got through plan check I discovered that I could not pull permits until the fire dept signed off. They were busy and it too several weeks. I finally talked them into a conditional release on final inspection. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Why doesn't community development circulate the plans to the fire dept and the school district? ○ Why must we get a clearance from the school district if the project is below requirements for school fees., i.e., it is not adding substantial sq. ft.? ○ The Fire Department then never entered my release even though they left a message they did. I had to make two trips back and forth between the planning department and fire department to get the release. The Fire Department lied to me about their failure to just input the release. They said the County system makes mistakes and that staff didn't know what they were doing. Fire Department input the release right before I got back to the Planning Department.
<p>Staff Competence and Professionalism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive, knowledgeable, helpful, competent. • I work with [blank] at the fire department for permits. She is fantastic. • The staff for the County Fire department are very professional and competent. We have absolutely no issues with staff. [Blank] is especially helpful and always answers our questions promptly and professionally. She has helped educate us with the many complex codes and always makes sure that we abide by them. We work with many fire departments throughout the state and consider the Napa CDF one of the best in the State. They are very concise with the codes and enforce them as written. It is very helpful for us to know that the codes remain consistent and not open to interpretation. Permit is informative and easy to understand. When we follow the guidelines in the permit, there are never any issues. In addition, the permit process is as easy as it can get...the best we have ever worked with! • The Fire Marshal Department fairly and correctly applied the codes and regulations to my project.

General Feedback about Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Length of time to process and inconsistency in responses (conflicts with Building) are too long.• Not told who point of contact is.
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REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS: ONGOING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Category	Comments
<p>Comments regarding customer satisfaction processes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This will assist greatly with the accountability of County departments. As it is, they are individual fiefdoms with no oversight other than that of their directors. Elected officials need to be better aware of the public perception of how County business is being handled, especially in an economic climate as challenging as this is and especially when they have increased County fees by more than 100% in one year. • All residents of Napa County that I have talked with about permits are afraid of the County departments in their power to blackball and retaliate against anyone who questions them; they abuse their positions time and time again and have since my first interactions with them starting in 2005. • I think this is a good idea; I participated in the recent evaluation of county services. • I think that an ongoing customer feedback group is a great idea (whether or not I'm a part of it). I also appreciate the County permitting departments' effort to solicit feedback on customer service. • An annual survey would be helpful. • Thanks for sending this out; it's always nice to know people are interested in how they're doing to keep up the good work or to work on making it better. • Afraid of likely retaliatory potential that would encumber my company more than government already has - no one on our side of this equation thinks Napa County is about anything other than self-serving fees collections. • I'm glad the County is doing this survey. I hope it helps. • Thanks for the opportunity to provide feedback and perhaps help make improvements to an already great County permitting system. • I think it is a great idea to have the people who get permits have the opportunity to give any feedback on the process.
<p>Comments regarding Advisory Group</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great idea! (many comments); would love to participate • I think it is a great idea. Communication is the only way for improvements and to be able to better understand how the other side think and operates. • I think it's a great idea and shows Napa County's commitment to providing good customer service. • The most motivated will agitate for quicker, more superficial reviews which would not safeguard the public trust. In this era of anti-government angst it is not appropriate to give a high profile platform to special interest groups.

Category	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Staff needs to know exactly what it is like to be on the opposite side of the counter. Staff needs to be informed about statutory time limits to process an application. They are in violation with almost every application submittal but just haven't been challenged yet? A face to face session would be more helpful to exchange feedback so it is communicated properly and correctly.

Interviewees and Focus Group Participants

- Board of Supervisors
- County Counsel representatives
- Auditor-Controller
- Planning Commission representatives
- County Clerk
- Andrews, Tom , Andrews & Thornley Construction, Inc.
- Anglin, Rob, Holman Teague Roche Anglin LLP
- Aspegren, Drew, Napa Valley Vineyard Engineering, Inc.
- Bartelt, Paul, Bartelt Engineering
- Beck, Rich
- Cuddy, Stephen
- Johnson, Scot, Bruce Tucker Construction
- Malan, Chris, Earth Defense for the Environment Now
- McCollister, Heather
- Meites, Norm, Cello & Maudru Construction Co., Inc.
- Muelrath, Mike, engineer
- Oldford, Donna, Plans4Wine
- Painter, Beth, Balanced Planning, Inc.
- Phillips, Mark, Dickenson, Peatman, Fogarty
- Redding, Jeff
- Russell, Brian, Russell Law Group
- Silva, Steve, Steve Silva Plumbing
- Simpson, Andy, Delta Engineering
- Songer, Craig, Songer Construction Management, Inc.
- Stephens, John, Earth Defense for the Environment Now
- Swaffar, Greg, Summit Engineering, Inc
- Valentine, Erika, Napa Chamber of Commerce