



Residential Building Permits: Additional Resources and Further Process Enhancements Can Reduce Wait Times and Improve Service Delivery

A Report from the City Auditor
Issued November 2023

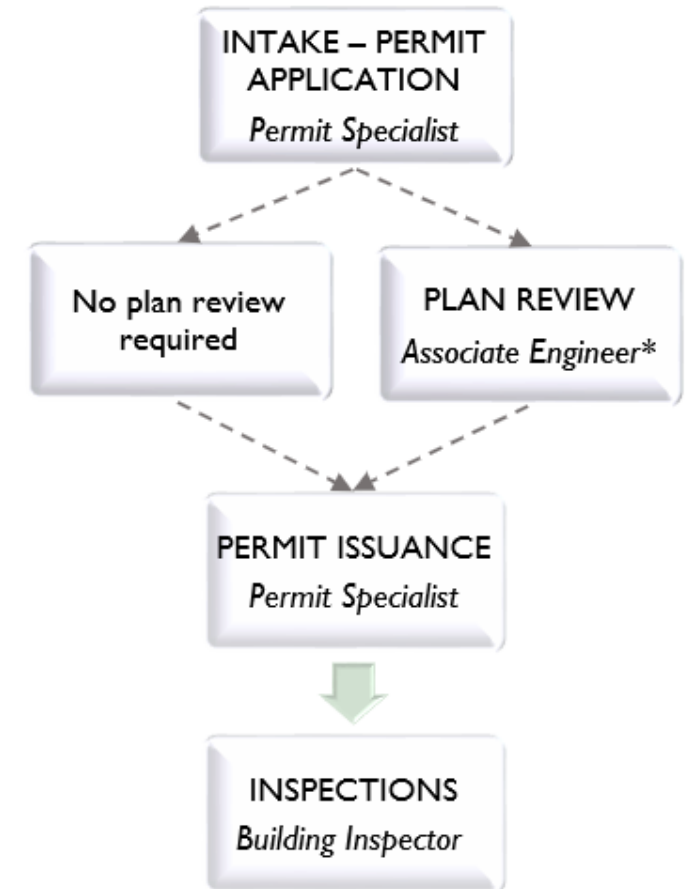
<http://www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor>

CED Committee, November 27, 2023
Item (d)2

Presenters: Joe Rois, Gitanjali Mandrekar, Michelle Mallari, Dilnoza Khudoyberganova

Background

- PBCE conducts plan reviews, issues building permits, and inspects residential building projects for building code compliance.
- The City requires building permits for new structures and changes to existing structures.
- Project scopes determine the level of review by City staff
- The Building Division has ongoing initiatives to expedite parts of the permit process.

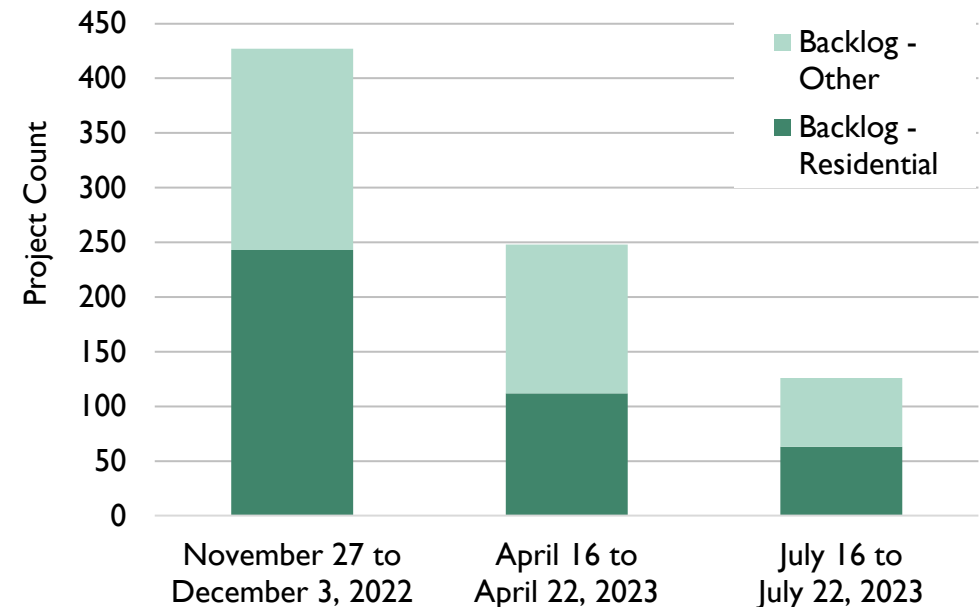


*Most projects go through plan review by Development Partners, including Fire, PW and Planning

Finding I: Staffing and Workload Imbalances Have Impacted the Timeliness of the Building Permit Process

- Because of significant vacancies in recent years, Building has not been meeting its timeliness targets.
- This has resulted in the growth of a backlog of projects, which peaked in December 2022.
- Using consultants to augment existing staff, Building was able to reduce this backlog to roughly 130 in July 2023.

Exhibit 7: Plan Review Reduced Its Backlog Over Eight Months (page 17)



Finding I: Staffing and Workload Imbalances Have Impacted the Timeliness of the Building Permit Process

- Even if all vacant positions were filled, Building may not have had sufficient staff to manage all incoming projects timely.
- Assumptions within the fee model have not been reassessed since 2016, and reserves and some fee-related activities are currently not accounted for in the model.

Recommendations:

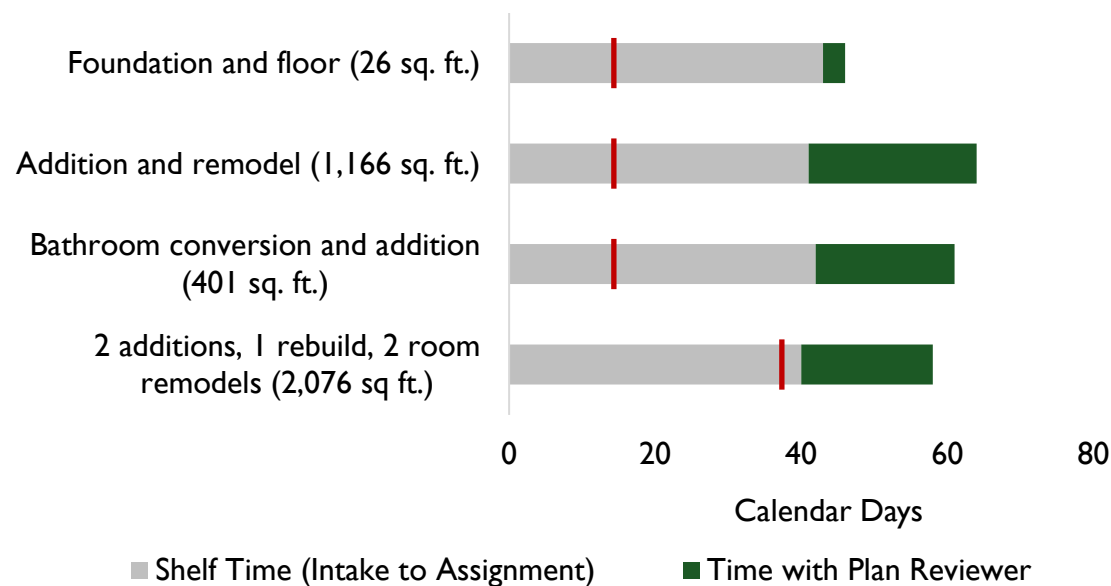
To better align resources with workload and address ongoing staffing challenges, PBCE should:

- Develop a staffing strategy, including expanding recruitment efforts, prioritizing hiring entry level positions, and considering the use of consultants and other staff for plan review.
- Reassess its current fee model assumptions to account for all staff hours and use of reserves.

Finding 2: Clarifying Plan Review Assignment and Resubmittal Responsibilities Can Improve Customer Satisfaction

- More than half of survey respondents rated the timeliness of the plan review process negatively
- For many projects, the first round of comments from plan reviewers were provided to customers well past the expected timeframe.
- Projects were not assigned to consultants until after the projects' review targets had already passed.

Exhibit 10: Projects Reached their Plan Review Target Dates Before Being Assigned



Finding 2: Clarifying Plan Review Assignment and Resubmittal Responsibilities Can Improve Customer Satisfaction

- Multiple rounds of plan submittals also delay the plan review process; staff do not consistently meet with customers to address plan review comments.
- Building can clarify plan review assignments for inspectors for OTC projects.
- Building can improve how it manages and works with consultants.

Recommendations:

To clarify responsibilities in the plan review process, PBCE should:

- Assign projects to appropriate staff in a timely manner.
- Update and communicate expected timeframes for plan review comments.
- Clarify when staff should meet with customers to minimize the number of resubmitted plans.
- Clarify roles for oversight of consultants, as well as provide them with database access.

Finding 3: Opportunities Exist to Improve Permit Center Processes and Coordination Among Work Groups

- In September 2023, it took up to 47 days for customers to get an intake appointment.
- At the time of the audit, appointments defaulted to at least one hour; however, staff report that they do not generally take the full allotted time.
- Building is implementing SJePlans, a work management software that is expected to improve coordination and communication among staff and customers.

Recommendations:

To improve Permit Center processes and enhance coordination, PBCE should:

- Evaluate the default appointment time, expand optional appointments, and enforce its cancellation policy for unprepared and unresponsive customers.
- Educate customers about how to prepare for intake.
- Standardize the permit issuance process.
- Assess whether SJePlans has met project management goals after a pilot phase has been completed.

Finding 4: Building Can Enhance Its Communications with Customers

- Permit customers have expressed dissatisfaction with Building's website, and staff have noted that customers frequently contact staff to help navigate it.
- Many phone inquiries are directed to voicemail, but customers are not given information on when they would receive a response.
- The Building Division provides limited language access on its website, phone lines, and printed materials.

Recommendations:

To enhance communications with its customers, PBCE should:

- Update its website to help customers more easily find information.
- Set minimum timeliness standards for responding to customer inquiries.
- Improve translation options for sjpermits.org, phone trees, and documents on Building's website.

Conclusion

This report has 15 recommendations to improve timeliness and enhance service delivery.

We would like to thank Planning, Building and Code Enforcement. We also thank the City Manager's Budget Office, the City Attorney's Office, the Fire Department, Public Works, and the Information Technology Department for the time and insights during the audit process.

The audit report is available at www.sanjoseca.gov/auditor

Audit staff: Gitanjali Mandrekar, Michelle Mallari, Dilnoza Khudoyberganova

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