



STAFF REPORT

Discussion and Direction on Composition and Responsibilities of Permit Efficiency Task Force

Honorable Mayor and Council Members

The City Council has directed the establishment of a Permit Efficiency Task Force to explore ways to improve the services of the Permit Center, including planning & zoning, building permits & inspections and related activities. The Council discussed with the Planning Commission on December 14, 2004 some of the concerns and issues surrounding the work of such a study group. This memo summarizes the dialogue from the joint Council / Commission meeting and seeks specific Council direction on creation of the Task Force.

Background

The City Council has continuously stressed the importance of responsive customer service in the delivery of permitting activities by the Planning and Building Divisions. In 2001, the City contracted for a study of the organization surrounding permit services, and a set of recommendations was prepared and implemented over the next eighteen months.¹ Most visible of these improvements was the consolidation of permit-related departments into the new Permit Center, which opened for business in May, 2002. (The Permit Center will become even more accessible with the opening of the new City Hall entry in early 2005.)

More recent improvements regarding permit services include the provision of enhanced content on the City's new web-site; the pending release of the on-line zoning ordinance (undergoing tests with expected release in January), and the restoration in 2005 of on-line permit tracking, which was discontinued in 2003.

Notwithstanding these improvements, the Council remains concerned about actual and perceived problems in reviewing, issuing and overseeing permits for development and construction. To that end, the Council has determined that a Task Force is needed to review the state of the city's permitting services and identify problems and solutions for implementation. This memo summarizes the comments from the recent joint City Council / Planning Commission meeting and provide a framework for discussion of the Task Force's direction and membership.

1. The recommendations of the report by Management Partners, Inc. are attached as Exhibit A.

Discussion

The potential for improvement exists in all facets of the permitting and inspections process, and it is not clear at this time which improvements might be the most productive (that is, both effective and cost-efficient). It appears that the underlying purpose of the Task Force would be to investigate the current perceptions surrounding the city's permitting services, identify and validate areas of concern and explore useful improvements for implementation. In discussing the future Task Force, several ideas were put forward by the Commission and Council at the meeting of December 14th:

Current Perceptions

- Planning is more of a problem today than building
- Some problems are brought on by contractors
- Outside plan check is slower than in-house
- Communications with planners needs attention
- Staff shifts its responses to project submittals

Identifying / Validating concerns

- Look at Joint Venture Silicon Valley's *1993 Blueprint* for information / ideas
- Look at plan check and inspections, not just planning or permit issuance
- Developers / contractors may not be willing to be frank with opinions

Designing the Task Force

- Add lay people from community
- Need to find real problems out of the perceived problems
- Seek positive feedback, as well
- Include staff in interviews

Designing the Investigation

Based on this opening dialogue, there appears to be a number of sometimes conflicting viewpoints on what needs attention. Staff believes that a Task Force needs to begin with a fairly wide scan of the permitting environment in Belmont and then zero in on areas of confirmed problems. At the same time, it can review studies by other cities that have explored permitting activities to see what has been recommended for similar problems. Together, these activities would assure that effective solutions match the problems that exist in Belmont.

Scanning Belmont's permitting environment would entail soliciting opinions from those who have recently processed a development project in Belmont. Applicants for single family design review, commercial conditional use permits, major construction project building permits, and simple interior remodels would be identified over the past two to three years and queried about their experiences and recommendations. Council members, Planning Commissioners and staff could also be interviewed. These can be accomplished by written surveys sent by mail, on-line surveys and face-to-face interviews by the Task Force.

Reviewing other jurisdictions' experiences can include the following documents:

- 1993 Blueprint for Silicon Valley
- 2000 Workshop Recommendations on Permitting (City of Belmont, March 2000)
- The Mayor's Task Force on Permitting and Development (City of Berkeley, Dec. 2003)
- "R-1 Design Guidelines and Process Review" (City of San Mateo Staff Report, Dec. 3, 2004)
- A Review of the Planning and Building Department of the City of Belvedere (Nov. 2004)

- Evaluation of Development Review and Building Permit Processes (City of Belmont, Dec. 2001)

Comparisons can also be developed between Belmont and similar cities in the County on items such as thresholds for public hearings, fees, nature and extent of required findings, turn-around times, etc.

From these activities, the Task Force would focus on specific problems and develop a set of recommendations and implementation activities for the Council's review and consideration. It is expected that the effort would require six to ten months, with no less than one meeting per month. Staff offers the following general outline for a work program:

- Step One: Introduction / Orientation / Distribution of Study Materials**
Staff Follow-up: Develop Survey Questionnaire; Post On-line; Publicize;
Invite Face-to-Face Interview Participants
- Step Two: Conduct Face-to-Face Interviews**
Staff Follow-up: Review / Compile Survey Results / Prepare Draft Priority List
of Areas for Improvement
- Step Three: Review Survey Results / Identify Areas of Improvements;**
Council Meeting: Confirm Priority Areas of Improvement
Staff Follow-up: Research Comparable Cities' Response to Study Issues;
Prepare Study Paper
- Step Four: Consider Alternative / Options for Implementation**
Staff Follow-up: Prepare Draft Recommendation / Implementation Program
- Step Five: Review Draft Recommendation / Implementation Program**
Staff Follow-up: Revise Recommendation / Implementation Program
- Step Six: Finalize Draft Program for Presentation to Planning Commission**
Staff Follow-up: Prepare Final Program Report
- Step Seven: Review Commission Comments / Approve Final Program Report;**
Present to Council

Additional meetings may be required; however, six to ten months should be sufficient to complete the project. The Council may also consider using an outside facilitator to foster a neutral atmosphere for the Task Force to sort real problems from perceptions or address sensitive topics.

Composition of Task Force

The make-up of the Task Force is key to the success of the effort, and should probably not exceed twelve members. Staff offers the following roster for membership on the Task Force:

- 2 – City Council Members (also act as Task Force Steering Committee)
- 3 – Planning Commissioners
- 3 – Business representatives (merchants, applicants, real estate, architects, contractors)
- 4 – Resident representatives (homeowners, applicants, RE agents, designers, contractors)

The Council may form the Task Force however it chooses, but if it elects to include a majority of

either the Council or Planning Commission, the group would be subject to the Open Meeting Laws (Brown Act). Staff is prepared to assist in identifying and contacting possible representatives, at the Council's direction.

Public Contact

No public contact beyond posting of the agenda was initiated by the City in preparation for Preliminary Design Review.

Financial Impact

None at this time. Staff time of 250 hours has been allocated to this project in the Priority Calendar. Other costs that may accrue to this project include copying & mailing or outside facilitation / consulting services. A final program and budget will be developed based on Council direction.

Recommendation

Staff recommends that the Council initiate the Permit Efficiency Task Force with the following actions:

1. Appoint two Council Members to the Task Force and to act as project Steering Committee
2. Request the Planning Commission identify three participants to the Task Force.
3. Direct staff to:
 - a. Prepare a detailed work program and budget based on the information contained in this memo and Council direction for review by the Steering Committee.
 - b. Develop a short list of possible Task Force representatives for review by the Steering Committee.
 - c. Return the draft work program, budget and Task Force roster to the Council for final approval.

Alternatives

The Council may alternatively:

1. Revise the project scope or Task Force membership.
2. Delay or abandon the proposed study.

Attachments:

1. Appendix A of the "Evaluation of Development Review and Building Permit Processes"; (Management Partners, Inc. for the City of Belmont, Dec. 2001)

Respectfully submitted,

Craig A. Ewing
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