



Staff Report

REVIEW AND DIRECTION ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE PERMIT EFFICIENCY TASK FORCE

Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Summary

Over the course of seven meetings, the Permit Efficiency Task Force (PETF) crafted a series of recommendations, organized under four categories that seek to improve service levels relative to planning and zoning process, building permits, and related activities. The four categories of recommended improvements are Quality of Service, Fee Structure, Planning Review Process, and Other Recommendations. Many of the recommendations were agreed upon with unanimity by the PETF, while several achieved only a partial consensus. They are included in the report for the degree in which they resonated with some members of the task force, along with the widely accepted recommendations, and offered to the Council for consideration.

Background

Following a joint City Council/Planning Commission meeting on December 14, 2004, the Council directed the establishment of a Task Force to explore ways to improve development services. The Council has continuously stressed the importance of responsive customer service, as reflected by the creation of the Permit Center and the enhanced content of the City's web site. However, despite these improvements, the Council remains concerned about actual and perceived problems in reviewing, issuing and overseeing permits for development and construction. As a result of these concerns the PETF was formed and met for the first time on April 6, 2005.

The Task Force is comprised of eleven members: two City Council representatives in Mayor Dave Warden and Vice-Mayor Phil Mathewson; Planning Commissioners Jacki Horton, Bill Dickenson and Rick Frautschi; and citizen representatives Colette Sylver, Brian Korn, Ken Hall, Will Markle, Steve Simpson and Jerry Steinberg. Staff members Interim Community Development Director Carlos de Melo and Building Official Mark Nolfi provide support. Finance Commissioner Chair Robert Ledoux also attends the meetings.

Discussion

In preparation for the first meeting of the PETF, surveys were sent to recent applicants of building projects and distributed at the public counter at the Permit Center. From the returned surveys, two themes developed involving the timing and cost of the development review process. These themes were corroborated by members of the Task Force and became the basis for many of the recommendations. The following is a summary of the categories of recommendations.

Quality of Service

The recommendations within this segment relate to general and specific aspects of customer service. They reinforce the importance of a positive first contact between the public and staff. To that end, recommendations are made to assemble and develop application packets, a process handbook, design guidelines, simplification of the zoning and municipal code and preparation of “frequently asked questions” document.

Also included in this section, along the lines of improved dissemination of information, are recommendations for the re-establishment and expansion of the owner-builder seminars, pre-application meetings and appointments with senior staff members. The section concludes with process recommendations that include hours of operation, measuring of service delivery and a discussion an expediting fee and levying of surcharges for excessive re-submittals.

Fee Structure

In response to the requests for earlier and more accurate assessment of fees, this section proposes a simplified means of providing that information early in the application process. The section also proposes an expedite fee for building permit applications only and a surcharge levied on applicants for excessive re-submittals.

Planning Review Process

As reflected in the surveys returned and the sentiments of the Task Force members, the timeliness of the planning review process was a topic of primary importance. This subject resulted in a great deal of discussion and several of the recommendations offered in the report did not achieve complete consensus with the Task Force. One of the recommendations suggests reducing the scope of Planning Commission staff reports only to a summary project description and analysis of required findings; all other background information would be stripped from the Planning Commission reports. A second recommendation suggests deferring the review of detailed geotechnical data to the building plan check stage and requiring peer review of the soils report.

The recommendation that received the greatest attention of the Task Force called for modifications of the Single Family Design Review ordinance. One option is to establish a middle tier review by creating a Design Review Board. Another is to raise the threshold of the size of a project requiring a public hearing before the Planning Commission.

This section includes several other recommendations on related development and construction activities that include Permanent Encroachment Permits, Hauling Permits, projects requiring design professionals, landscape review and updating the Grading Ordinance.

Other Recommendations

This final section has two distinct segments that relate to human resources and technology. As the timeliness of the planning review process is, in part, connected to staffing levels, on-going assessment of those levels is recommended. To further enhance staff's productivity, additional training and cross-training is also recommended.

The technology section calls for review of our current resources and the implementation of new tools to further aid the development process.

Fiscal Impact

Many of the recommendations in the report can be implemented with little or no additional resources. Furthermore, several recommendations, such as appointments with senior staff, have already been implemented. However, items such as the creation of a process handbook and a user's guide to design guidelines will require outside consultants at a cost that is not known at this time.

Public Contact

The Task Force met in a public forum. Agendas and minutes were posted on the City's web site. Efforts were made to reach out to the public by the continuous dissemination of surveys. The agenda item was posted. A copy of this report has been forwarded to all members of the PETF.

Recommendation

The Task Force recommends Council consider this report and implement the recommendations found within.

Alternatives

1. Implement the recommendations in part.
2. Take no action.

Attachments

- A. Recommendations of the Permit Efficiency Task Force
- B. Recommendations from the 2002 Task Force

Respectfully submitted,

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Building Official

Carlos de Melo
Interim Community Development Director

Jack Crist
Interim City Manager

**City of Belmont
Permit Efficiency Task Force
Recommendations
April – October 2005**

Chair and Vice Chair Permit Efficiency Task Force

Bill Dickenson, Planning Commission

Ken Hall, Architect

Voting Members

Dave Warden, Mayor

Phil Mathewson, Vice Mayor

Rick Frautschi, Planning Commissioner

Jacki Horton, Planning Commissioner

Steve Simpson, Architect and resident

Colette Sylver, Architect and resident

Jerry Steinberg, Civil Engineer

Will Markle, Owner/Builder

Brian Korn, Property Owner

Carlos de Melo, Inter. Dir. Community Development

Mark Nolfi, Chief Building Official

Non-voting member

Robert W. Ledoux, Chair, Finance Commission

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Introduction

The Permit Efficiency Task Force (Task Force) was first created in 1999 to develop a one-stop-shop for permitting. The Task Force was then re-activated from 2001-2002. It was put on pause until April 2005 when the renovated City Hall was approaching completion. One of the original recommendations was to provide a Permit Center that was easily accessible, to all who needed a permit or information. The City of Belmont now has a state of the art Permit Center and Information Counter. These services are provided in the City Hall located at One Twin Pines Lane, on the first floor as you enter the lobby.

The 2005 Task Force proposes the following recommendations be implemented immediately to improve the current perception, process and overall customer satisfaction with Belmont's permitting experience.

The recommendations are divided into four categories:

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (1) Quality of Service | (3) Planning Review Process |
| (2) Fee Structure | (4) Other Recommendations |

One issue the task forces grappled with was the issue of just what information is needed for planning review. Several of the recommendations proposed address this issue, but there are significant policy considerations in making the final determination as to what information is "really needed". Also it should be noted that many of the recommendations proposed are contingent upon implementation of other recommendations.

The Task Force members would again like to restate the importance of acting quickly to take "immediate" action on all of the recommendations. The content denoted in *italics* are items where the Task Force was unable to reach total agreement. There was a minority of Task Force members that felt some of the recommendations did not meet their goals for efficiency. The minority is defined as no more than four of the thirteen total members.

- 2005 Permit Efficiency Task Force

1. Quality of Service

The Task Force agreed that the City of Belmont should orient its customer service more toward an applicant's perspective. Important issues for the applicant are: (1) reducing the time from submittal to final approval (2) providing a clear understanding of the City's policies, and (3) experiencing a helpful and constructive attitude from staff and decision-makers. The Task Force believes that the following will assist in implementing these values.

1.1. Emphasize Importance of "First Contact"

First contact is more of a value than an operational recommendation. However, the focus is on assuring that information and guidelines are correctly communicated at the earliest possible interaction (whether on the City web site, via written materials, counter interactions or through staff and applicant meetings).

1.1.1. Creation of Applicant Packet

1.1.1.1. Leverage staff resources while communicating with applicants more effectively through the creation of an applicant package. This package will contain a set of updated materials that summarize the review process and guidelines in a manner that can be easily understood by applicants with varying levels of familiarity with the permitting process

1.1.1.2. The applicant packet will include a toolbox of materials which can be included based on the scope of the applicant's project. In an effort to increase staff productivity and ease applicant burden, these documents should be posted to the City web site. A nominal fee is proposed for applicants wishing to receive a printed copy. The recommended documents include:

1.1.1.3. Process Handbook

A user's guide to the City of Belmont's planning and building procedures this handbook should explain what an applicant can expect when applying for permits. Further the handbook will detail the following items: types of approvals, expected costs, expected timelines, review required by other departments, required applicant information, best practices, list and samples of required forms.

1.1.1.4. Design Guidelines with Graphics

A user's guide for good site planning and architectural design will depict the elements of a well-designed residential project in the City of Belmont. The guide will include detailed suggestions on how to fit with neighborhood character, deal with lots (size, shape, slope, existing natural features), manage public views and privacy issues, understand expectations around building bulk, measure building height, hardscape limits, landscape, use of "pictures of what to-do and not-to-do" format, provide clear criteria for submittals by use of a submittal checklist.

1.1.1.5. Simplified Zoning and Municipal Code Information

A user's guide to the City of Belmont's rules will leverage text and graphic elements to depict the limits and requirements for development in residential zones. This document will detail: required yards ("setbacks") and maximum building and wall heights for all residential zones, how to calculate maximum floor area ratio (FAR), required parking and driveways, regulations around tree removal, grading, drainage and encroachments, special uses and structures, description of variances and exceptions, definitions and frequently used acronyms.

1.1.1.6. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

A FAQ section will detail the questions posed most often to staff by applicants who are novices to the development review process and will include clear and consistent answers. This document will touch on numerous aspects of the process from "do I need a permit to change a light fixture" to "do I need a permit to cut down a tree".

1.2. Acknowledge Neighborhood Expectations of City Staff

- 1.2.1. This is a value that focuses on the neighborhoods and the significant role they have in the community's planning process, including access to information, staff assistance, and involved decision-makers.

1.3. Zoning and Building Seminars

- 1.3.1. Re-establish the twice-yearly public workshops, with special focus on the planning process for Single Family Design Review. These evening events would:
 - 1.3.1.1. Provide applicants an opportunity to learn about the City's requirements
 - 1.3.1.2. Provide and review Printed Material (Section 1.1.1)
 - 1.3.1.3. Offer tips and guidance from staff (Section 1.1.1.6)

1.4. Expand the use of optional pre-application meeting

- 1.4.1. Establish a requirement for types of projects, such as new homes, sloping sites, HRO-zoned properties
- 1.4.2. Execute an acknowledgement of the pre-application meeting
- 1.4.3. Require a applicant and design professional be in attendance
- 1.4.4. Following the meeting direct the applicant to the appropriate next step of the process

1.5. Appointments with Senior Planning Staff and City Officials

- 1.5.1. Make the Planning and Community Development Director and Principal Planner available for initial appointments when complex or controversial projects are proposed (include Director of Public Works or designee, when it is going to involve new infrastructure such as a new road)
- 1.5.2. Include the City Manger on high exposure projects (large or complex development)
- 1.5.3. Provide early policy guidance on projects that are beyond the typical or routine submittal
- 1.5.4. Appointments with Department Representatives
- 1.5.5. Appointments for nonstandard Permit Center counter hours to allow applicants to conduct business before 8 a.m. or after 5 p.m.
- 1.5.6. Create web based appointment request for standard and nonstandard hours
- 1.5.7. Allow applicants to schedule appointments with a team of department representatives from Building, Planning, Public Works and Fire
- 1.5.8. Provide early insight into review processes to allow Applicant an opportunity to prepare a complete and acceptable submittal. All regulatory points of view together, identify any overlapping or conflicting standards, and allow for consideration of alternative solutions and arrangements.

1.6. “One-Stop-Permit-Counter” Service

- 1.6.1. Publish a list of permits that can be approved “same day – over the counter”.
 - 1.6.1.1. Create web based applications that can be filled out online and printed, faxed or emailed to Permit Counter Staff.
 - 1.6.1.2. Staff would receive applications and process them in 12 hours or less
 - 1.6.1.3. Created a detailed web based list of permits outlining, estimated or actual cost and time from submission to “full approval”
 - 1.6.1.4. Example: Minor Kitchen Remodel = \$175.00 and 6 hour approval
- 1.6.2. Service Level Measurements
 - 1.6.2.1. Monthly review of internal and external surveys by all departments
 - 1.6.2.2. Modify survey to maximize its use as a training tool

2. Fee Structure

The Task Force agreed that the City needs to make its fee structure less complicated. Applicants expect to know at the beginning of a project the total cost, including all anticipated fees. The following fee-related actions may improve the applicant's permitting experience:

2.1. Optional Building Plan Check Expedite Fee

Establish an additional fee for expediting Building Plan Check. The construction drawings can be reviewed in house or through a contractor. The basic process confirms conformance with current building code. (Note: This process would occur after public review if required)

2.2. Accurate Estimates of Fees

- 2.2.1. Develop a worksheet enabling the applicant and staff to estimate total project fees at the earliest processing stage*
- 2.2.2. Provide training and materials which enable Permit Center counter staff to provide a reasonably accurate estimate of all fees – planning, building, engineering, business license, arborist, geotechnical, grading and hauling, encroachment, sewer, school, tree removal, utility connections

2.3. Surcharge for Excessive Re-submittals

- 2.3.1. Institute a surcharge for every submittal from the fourth (re)submittal of all planning and building applications
- 2.3.2. The fees should defray the cost of the staff time spent on assuring applications are complete beyond the time typically spent on a project prepared by a competent and attentive applicant

* Refer to Finance Commission for input

3. Planning Review Process

The following approaches have been suggested to make the process more efficient:

3.1. Simplify Analysis, Reduce Timelines

Planning Commission review; reduce the level of analysis outside the Commissions legal authority and focusing only on project-related considerations during public meetings.

3.2. Establish Tiered Review Process

Modify the thresholds for the Single Family Design Review (SFDR) process and consider the following changes:

*3.2.1. Option I. 400-1,000 square feet – middle tier review by:**

3.2.1.1. Create a Design Review Board

3.2.1.1.1. Interviewed by Planning Commission and appointed by City Council

3.2.1.1.2. Board to consist of one licensed Architect, one Commissioner, and two at large community members

*3.2.1.2. Over 1,000 square feet to Planning Commission**

3.2.1.3. Current Administrative review by staff of projects is up to 400 square feet

3.2.2. Option II. Allow an increased level of administrative approvals

*3.2.2.1. Allow up to 500 square feet projects to be reviewed by staff. **

3.2.2.2. Raise the threshold for Planning Commission review to 500 square feet and above

3.3. Defer Geo-Tech Reports to Plan Check

3.3.1. Modify the review procedures for projects subject to geo-technical evaluation to allow simplified feasibility analysis at the planning review stage.

3.3.2. Detailed geotechnical analysis shall be performed at the building plan check stage, including third party review by Engineering Consultant for the City

* Requires Zone Text Amendment (ZTA) to Section 13A, Single Family Design Review

3.4. Permanent Encroachments

- 3.4.1. Authorize staff to approve replacement of existing (in kind), legal permanent encroachments in public right-of-way.

3.5. Revise the Hauling Permit review process as follows:*

- 3.5.1. Administrative review of 250 cubic yards or less
- 3.5.2. Planning Commission review for 251 cubic yards and above

3.6. Require an Architect and or Engineer on 18% or greater sloped lots

- 3.6.1. Adopt a policy that requires an architect/engineer be the lead designer for projects located on steeper slopes 18% and inform of this policy early.

3.7. Simplify Landscaping Review

Landscaping is a valuable part of the finished look of a project, but elements of the review process need to be improved to create an efficient approval of landscape plans and installation:

3.7.1. Staff Approval of Final Plan

- 3.7.1.1. The landscape requirements need to be clearly explained and understood by applicant before they start project plan (section 1.1.1.1)
- 3.7.1.2. Planning Commission shall give clear direction to staff for conditional approval to landscape plans
- 3.7.1.3. *Allow staff to approve the final plans for conformance with the Commission's actions.*

3.7.2. *Final Signoff after Landscaping Installed (vote 7 yes 3 no)*

- 3.7.2.1. *The applicant can finish entire project to include landscape plan or*
- 3.7.2.2. *The City can allow applicants to take temporary occupancy of a complete structure without final approval of landscape installation for a period of 30 days*
- 3.7.2.3. *In the event landscaping is not completed within the 30 day period, the building permit will expire within 180 days; activation of an expired building permit will require repayment of all original building permit fees (section 1.1.1.1)*

3.8. Update Grading Ordinance

- 3.8.1. Create a more consistent ordinance that works with the Uniform Building Code
- 3.8.2. Provide rational exceptions to the grading moratorium time period

* Requires both Municipal Code and Zone Text Amendments

4. Other Recommendations

The Task Force recommends that the topics in this section be reviewed and updated as soon as possible. The recommendations made in this document are directly effected by the performance of these items.

4.1. Human Resources & Organizational Development

4.1.1. On-going assessment of staffing levels through ongoing internal and external surveys

4.1.2. Training and cross training program

4.2. Review Effectiveness of 1999 Master Technology Plan

4.2.1. Review the current Permit Web Site

4.2.2. Integrated Voice Response System (presentation to CC October 2005)

4.2.3. Mobile Trak-it – used on a handheld device (PDA) by building inspector

4.2.4. On-line review active permits (operational October 2005)

4.2.5. Online permitting through the “One-Stop-Permit” – Section 1.6

4.2.6. On-line payment

Attachment I

The October 2005 Task Force has reviewed the previous January 2002 recommendations with staff and has ranked them with a percentage of completion.

January 2002 Permit Task Force Recommendations

The following seven categories include the thirty-three recommendations: Quality of Service, Process Revision, Physical Improvements, Public Outreach, Ordinance Amendments, Training, and Administration

Quality of Service

- 1) **20 % Recommendation 1** Develop a statement of overall goals and objectives for the City's permitting and licensing functions with specific emphasis on continually enhancing customer service.
- 2) **60 % Recommendation 4** Clarify the roles of involved departments, divisions, and individual employees implementing the development review and building permit processes. **Human Resources to keep current job descriptions.**
- 3) **60 % Recommendation 6** Set specific performance requirements for department heads and employees and hold them accountable to meet agreed upon requirements.
- 4) **40 % Recommendation 8** Ensure performance standards regarding the handling of permits/projects for intra- and inter-departmental use are in place and clearly understood by those tasked with completing them; standards should be formally agreed upon between divisions and departments and then measured.

Process Revision

- 5) **100% Recommendation 2** Make one person responsible for the overall development review and building permit processes. **Community Development Director.**
- 6) **80 % Recommendation 3** Implement a permit/project management structure for planning and building permits that will establish accountability across division and department lines.
- 7) **100% Recommendation 7** Clarify the roles of involved committees, commissions, and boards.
- 8) **100% Recommendation 12** Implement project management for planning reviews to ensure accountability for projects.
- 9) **100% Recommendation 15** Establish a consistent definition for "completeness" and communicate it to all reviewing departments. **Ongoing management of process.**

- 10) **60 % Recommendation 19** Each department should clearly outline its submission requirements for various project types and the Community Development Department should create one comprehensive submittal requirements list encompassing all departments.
- 11) **100% Recommendation 20** Reduce the number of plan sets required for submission. **Number of plans was 15 has been reduced to 6 sets.**
- 12) **40 % Recommendation 24** Mandate that all reviewing departments enter comments and conditions into, and attach all related documents to, the CRW system. **Need to clarify task in job descriptions and follow up by manager of process.**
- 13) **100% Recommendation 30** Clarify the role, responsibilities and reporting relationship of the city's arborist for planning and plan check functions.

Physical Improvements

- 14) **100% Recommendation 10** Establish a single point for payment of development review and building permits. **New City Hall Lobby.**
- 15) **80 % Recommendation 11** Establish a "one stop shop" for permitting activities in the City. **Outlined in 2005 Task Force recommendation 1.6.1**
- 16) **90 % Recommendation 28** Provide the Building Division with laptop/handheld computers for field entries. **Ongoing according to 1999 Technology Master Plan.**

Public Outreach

- 17) **40 % Recommendation 9** Help to educate the customer about permitting processes and requirements through the use of promotional materials. **In progress.**
- 18) **80 % Recommendation 13** Educate the customer about the process and enhance inter-departmental coordination through the use of formal pre-submittal meetings. **Development Review Committee (DRC) in progress.**
- 19) **80 % Recommendation 18** Implement formal pre- and post -construction meetings for projects meeting a specific threshold.
- 20) **100% Recommendation 21** Develop an availability of technical staff to work at the ~~Building and Safety~~ **Permit Center** Counter on a continuing basis.
- 21) **90 % Recommendation 22** Solicit customer feedback on a regular basis and use the resulting information to improve service. **2005 Task Force recommends an ongoing program to be used to manage the departments operations.**

- 22) **97 % Recommendation 23** The city should create new ways to ensure public noticing regarding projects is comprehensive. **Stronger policy needs to be implemented: to include larger signage, placement and duration of posting**

Ordinance Amendments

- 23) **0 % Recommendation 14** Increase the use of Administrative Approvals for processing of basic projects. **2005 recommendation section 3.**
- 24) **50 % Recommendation 16** Streamline the Development Plan process to eliminate a redundant detailed review. **2005 recommendation section 3.1-3.5 & 3.7**
- 25) **20 % Recommendation 31** Assess the state of various codes and regulations and create a work-plan to revise and update them. **2006 City Council Priority Calendar**
- 26) **0 % Recommendation 32** Begin a revision of the city's grading ordinance. **2005 recommendation section 3.8**
- 27) **100% Recommendation 33** Remove development and design review of tree issues from the Tree Board (parks and Recreation Commission) and redesignate these duties to the Planning Commission.

Training

- 28) **30 % Recommendation 5** Provide employees with more training in order to improve communication and role clarity and provide better tools for completing their work. **2005 recommendation section 4.1**
- 29) **30 % Recommendation 27** Mandate employee attendance at key training sessions. **2005 recommendation section 4.1**

Administration

- 30) **90 % Recommendation 17** Consider alternative methods of contracting with technical consultants. **Currently contracting planner(s) to manage backlog.**
- 31) **80 % Recommendation 25** Hold Technology Committee meetings on a regular basis. **2005 recommends that a senior manager attend regular meetings*.**
- 32) **80 %* Recommendation 26** Using the Technology Committee, develop plans, policies and procedures for technology that support the overall desire for process improvement and customer service, taking into account the goals, objectives, and functional reorganization.
- 33) **80 %* Recommendation 29** Undertake a review of staffing for all permitting and licensing functions after an appropriate amount of time following implementation of other recommendations pertaining to process and technology.