

# **AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION**

## **TOWARD A MORE TRANSPARENT AND RESPONSIVE PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

### **Introduction**

While property values have soared, decisions by planning agencies charged with implementing land use codes (zoning) have raised the level of public rancor toward these agencies and among neighbors. This has led to demands to reform planning agencies and their procedures. Unless action is taken to change how planning agencies operate, the hostility will continue.

After inquiring into planning and development processes and procedures throughout Santa Barbara County, the Civil Grand Jury noted that all planning and development agencies had competent planning staffs dealing with complex land use issues. Unfortunately, these procedures are not well understood. The public often perceives the process as unfair and unresponsive.

Introducing a more transparent and responsive process as early as possible into planning procedures would prevent problems later. Adding a customer satisfaction survey could provide quantifiable feedback that should bring planning agencies more in line with customer expectations. In this case, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

### **Background**

Land use in California is regulated by two sovereign governments. The United States government regulates military bases, Indian reservations, and national parks and forests. The State of California regulates the remaining land. The State has created 58 counties that enforce state laws, including those for land use. Each county's Board of Supervisors designates particular uses for land through the zoning process. Usually a planning and development department carries out this process.

City formation takes place in response to the desire of citizens to exercise more local control, especially in land use decisions. The power to zone within a city's limits is removed from county control and usually lies with the city's planning and development department. There are eight cities in Santa Barbara County, each with its own planning and development department: Guadalupe, Lompoc, Buellton, Solvang, Santa Maria, Goleta, Santa Barbara, and Carpinteria. Unincorporated areas remain under the control of the County. All of these entities act in accordance with State statutes and according to local policies, resolutions, and ordinances.

As property values have continued to increase, property owners have rightfully sought to make optimum use of what may be their primary investment. This requires permits and sometimes zoning changes to facilitate improvements or development. Neighboring residents often view these changes as having a negative impact on their environment. In this controversy, planning agencies have had to implement policies adopted by city councils and the County Board of Supervisors that favor either one side or the other. These decisions often result in increased rancor between the perceived winner and the perceived loser. This anger has come to be focused on the planning agencies and the planning process.

### **Investigation**

The Grand Jury began its investigation of planning and development departments after receiving a variety of complaints. The complaints, some involving hundreds of citizens, varied from accusations of incompetence to cronyism. Many were stridently stated. The Jury then reviewed numerous past Grand Jury reports on planning and development issues. The Grand Jury interviewed all nine planning and development department heads in Santa Barbara County. The Jury examined mission statements, planning policies and procedures which included the application process, timelines, notification guidelines, and the complaint and follow up process. Finally, the Jury examined other public documents dealing with planning issues throughout the County.

### **Observations**

The Grand Jury found that planning departments are staffed by competent professionals. Planners follow the policy guidelines, ordinances, and resolutions determined by elected officials. In some cases, the regulations governing land use are extremely complex requiring detailed knowledge by the planning staff. In other cases the process is less formal and open to interpretation. It is apparent that the planning staffs' procedures follow the directives of their elected and appointed officials. While all officials of all agencies express support for good customer service, planners adhere to their statute and policy guidelines as their first priority. Few agencies list customer satisfaction as a high priority in their mission statement. Agencies implement procedures to comply with directives without great regard to customer satisfaction. For instance, all agencies have specific timelines but have not placed any in public view, nor have they provided any material to explain how those timelines might change.

Two of the nine departments extend their notification of property use changes beyond the minimum State requirement. Only two agencies notify non-property

owners such as renters of those changes. This lack of notification enraged residents of at least one neighborhood.

Customer service forms and complaint forms, if they exist, are non-quantifiable and are not routinely provided to the public. Complaint procedures vary considerably, from no procedure whatsoever to computer tracking with limited follow-up. Recognition and rewards for planning staff based on customer satisfaction are not part of any formal customer service program. No planning departments have quantifiable customer service surveys for the purpose of making on-going procedural adjustments, policy change recommendations, or modifications to services offered.

### **Conclusion**

The fundamental tension caused by land use issues between land owners, others affected by changes in land uses, and public agencies that regulate the use of land cannot be eliminated. It can be reduced. Planning agencies can play an important role in accomplishing this by working transparently from the beginning of the process. The personalization of the process by providing information and support, must start early on. The public would be more likely to accept less-than-favorable outcomes if included in the process. Involving a wider number of affected citizens will reduce the volume of complaints later. Planning agencies must commit to a higher level of customer satisfaction and use measurable feedback mechanisms that will allow them to fine-tune their entire process.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

#### **Finding 1**

Mission statements, when available, were often outdated and did not list customer satisfaction as a primary goal.

#### **Recommendation 1**

Planning departments should have mission statements specific to their department. These mission statements should have customer satisfaction as a primary goal.

#### **Finding 2**

Planning departments did not have basic customer satisfaction procedures in place.

#### **Recommendation 2**

To increase customer satisfaction, each planning department should publicly post the agency's mission statement, post timelines and mitigating factors, provide easy access to all relevant forms with adequate explanations as to their use, post a list of key personnel involved in completing an application, and clearly define the complaint

process. In addition, handouts should be provided to each customer explaining the application and complaint process.

### **Finding 3**

Notification of changes to land and property use in most jurisdictions was limited to mandated State *minimum* requirements to owners only, and within 300 feet from the borders of the property site.

### **Recommendation 3**

Notification of land use changes should include the owner *and occupants* within at least *500* feet of the border of the property site.

### **Finding 4**

The complaint process in most jurisdictions was not designed for quantifiable analysis and could not be used to find strong and weak points in the planning process.

**Recommendation 4:** Planning agencies should track all complaints and conduct random quantifiable surveys of 10% of the customers who have used their services. (*See Appendix A for an example of a possible customer satisfaction survey.*) Agencies should use the results of these surveys to make the planning process more customer friendly. The results should also be added on a quarterly basis to the department website for public viewing. (*See Appendix B for an example of how to display the results of the customer satisfaction surveys.*)

## **Affected Agencies**

### **Santa Barbara County Planning and Development**

#### **City of Santa Maria**

#### **City of Guadalupe**

#### **City of Lompoc**

#### **City of Buellton**

#### **City of Solvang**

#### **City of Santa Barbara**

#### **City of Carpinteria**

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4

### **City of Goleta**

Finding 1, 2, 4

Recommendations 1, 2, 4

## Appendix A Planning Department Customer Satisfaction Survey

**Please Circle Choice:**

Type of Project	Residential	Commercial	Land Use
Estimated Cost of Project	<50K	50-250K	250-500K 500K-1M >1M
Number of Permits Requested in the Last 12 Months	0-5 6-10 10-20 >20		

**How Satisfied Were You with the Following:**

Circle One Number Only

		Unsatisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	
1. Counter assistance	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
2. Material provided	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
3. Planner assistance during the initial meeting	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
4. Staff's ability to help you overcome obstacles in permit process	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
5. Timeframe for approval	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
6. Your treatment as a valuable customer	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
7. Explanation of the planning permit process	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
8. Staff communication during the approval process	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
9. Responsiveness to requests	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
10. Overall staff knowledge	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
11. Ability of staff to relate to your project	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10
12. Your overall planning department experience	1	2	3	4	5 6 7 8 9 10

Were any of our staff especially helpful? If yes, please identify. \_\_\_\_\_

Any additional comments about the planning process or department? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## Appendix B

### Planning Department Customer Satisfaction Survey Results

	Average Survey Response				
	1 <sup>st</sup> qtr	2 <sup>nd</sup> qtr	3 <sup>rd</sup> qtr	4 <sup>th</sup> qtr	year
1. Counter assistance	7.6	7.1	6.9	6.0	6.75
2. Material provided	6.5	7.5	7.4	7.5	7.22
3. Planner assistance during the initial meeting	7.1	6.9	7.6	8.0	7.40
4. Staff's ability to help you overcome obstacles in permit process	6.8	7.0	7.7	8.2	7.42
5. Timeframe for approval	6.7	6.8	6.1	6.3	6.47
6. Your treatment as a valuable customer	7.8	6.9	7.2	7.3	7.30
7. Explanation of the planning permit process	5.6	5.8	6.1	6.6	6.0
8. Staff communication during the approval process	8.9	8.8	7.9	8.1	8.42
9. Responsiveness to requests	8.5	8.3	8.2	8.8	8.45
10. Overall staff knowledge	7.8	7.9	8.0	8.1	7.95
11. Ability of staff to relate your project	6.5	6.6	6.6	6.1	6.45
12. Your overall planning department experience	7.0	7.1	7.2	7.1	7.1

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	1 <sup>st</sup> qtr	2 <sup>nd</sup> qtr	3 <sup>rd</sup> qtr	4 <sup>th</sup> qtr	Year
Total Surveys Sent Out	52	75	65	85	277
Surveys returned	32	52	45	75	204
Percentage	61.5	69.3	69.2	88.2	73.6

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- Use Excel or other math program to calculate the results of the returned surveys.
- A survey score of less than 7.0 may require a phone call to determine the cause.
- A yearly score of 8.0 or more in each area is the goal.
- The department heads should use these averages to establish performance goals for each item listed.