

CONSTRUCTION PERMITS

Service Description

The construction permit service staff review plans, issue permits, and conduct inspections of construction activities to ensure that all construction and development meet or exceed applicable Federal, State, and City regulations. The area of responsibility includes all of the properties within the city of Eugene and Eugene's Urban Growth Boundary. In FY05, the City issued 11,639 permits. This included 2,309 building permits for new construction, additions, and alterations that had a total valuation of \$278 million. The total FY06 budget for the Construction Permit Service area is approximately \$5 million which includes 42.40 FTE from three departments: Planning and Development, Public Works and Fire. In addition to reviewing plans and conducting inspections, staff provides general development assistance, public information and other property related services to the public.

Plan review involves checking proposed projects against local, state and federal requirements. These include structural, mechanical, plumbing and electrical codes. Other regulations address fire prevention, land use and zoning, public infrastructure, and wetlands and other environmental issues. Systems development charges also are assessed during plan review, and are based on projected impacts to the city's transportation, parks, and other systems. Following approval of reviews, a permit is issued authorizing construction activity to begin.

Field inspectors monitor construction activity for adherence to reviewed plans and to ensure that all components meet or exceed standards. The Rental Housing Code, new in 2005, sets forth habitability standards and provides a process for education and enforcement for property owners and tenants. This compliance program joins enforcement for non-permitted work and dangerous buildings.

Historic Perspective

- FY86 The Permit and Information Center (PIC) was established, consolidating public information, plan review, inspection and enforcement related to building and land use permits.
- FY98 Following statewide passage of property tax limitation measures, Council establishes a special fund for Construction Permit Services and directs that it be 100% fee supported.
- FY03 Council approves an ongoing General Fund contribution to the Construction Permit service area, recognizing the challenge and potential inequities of subsidizing general public information and organizational support through permit fees.

FY05 Rental Housing Program adopted by Council and implemented July 1, 2005. The program is scheduled to be repealed December 30, 2008.

Citizen Involvement

Policy oversight is provided by the City Council and Budget Committee. In addition, advisory groups have been formed throughout the PIC's history to provide feedback and guidance on services, policies and funding. In FY05, PDD formed an advisory group on green building to recommend ways the City can promote more sustainable property development in the community.

Customer Input

Every two years, a statistically valid telephone survey is conducted by randomly contacting several hundred persons who have interacted with the permitting process during the previous year. The survey addresses their satisfaction with construction permit services and asks them to rate the importance of service attributes. The PIC also publishes information on the City's web site and produces a newsletter throughout the year that provides information about regulations, procedures and services. Those resources also query interested parties about specific issues in an effort to consider varied perspectives. In addition, staff regularly meets with members of the design and building community. Customer feedback is also considered during employee hiring processes and performance reviews. Selected plan review applicants are randomly selected for periodic feedback, and real-time surveys also are available at the reception, intake and technical assistance counters, as well as on the City's website.

Mission

Our mission is to preserve and improve the public's safety, health, welfare, and environment through the timely and consistent review and inspection of construction projects to ensure they meet federal, state, and local standards.

Outcomes

- Ensure public health and safety through properly planned and installed plumbing, electrical, and mechanical systems.
- Ensure sufficient structural integrity of buildings to withstand natural disasters.
- Minimize loss of property and life due to fires.
- Promote orderly, attractive development compatible with the public infrastructure and consistent with local land use policies.
- Provide timely and consistent service to customers.

Operating Principles

- We believe that code requirements provide public benefit in the built and natural environment.
- We strive for uniform application of codes in a timely, equitable, and cost-effective manner.
- We believe our services are most effectively provided through the informed participation of staff, customers, and policy makers.
- We believe that fulfilling our commitment to customer service and technical excellence requires an innovative and well trained staff.
- We believe it is important to plan strategically in order to develop and implement effective responses to change.
- We believe the exchange of information between the customers and staff facilitates the permit process.
- We believe it's important to reflect our community's diversity in our workforce, and in the delivery of services and programs.

Current Operating Environment

External Trends

Development Activity

Permit Center services react to external development activity and schedules with limited influence over project variety and timing. Projects that involve re-development are more complex than new development, requiring more time and staff resources. In FY04 and FY05, residential activity has been especially strong. Development plans in the community suggest that new commercial activity may pick up in FY06 and continue for several years.

Sustainable Development

The City of Eugene has committed to designing, constructing and maintaining city facilities in a more sustainable manner, using LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) as a yardstick. Other public agencies and a number of private developers also are looking at ways to factor "green building" into their plans. Some of the technologies and approaches easily match State and local regulations, while others require adjustment approvals. The range of green building includes use of earthen materials to complex mechanical systems. Some of these pose challenges and opportunities for staff trained for more conventional construction.

Increased Local Regulations

Increases in the number and complexity of local regulations place additional burdens on permit processes, funding, staffing, and the need for public understanding and support. These new requirements can make it difficult to determine applicability of standards to projects and ensure appropriate enforcement. The complexity of new regulations requires more skillful

coordination, higher levels of knowledge, and staff time to determine what applicable standards apply to case by case development.

Changing Workforce

Changing demographics in the workforce create challenges for the service area. An aging and shrinking existing workforce and retirements require succession planning. As the demand for existing qualified staff increases, recruitment becomes more challenging. This impacts training and staff development needs. The loss of organizational history and perspective has the potential to impact continuity and consistency of services. At the same time, a greater proportion of the workforce seeks non-traditional working arrangements, work schedules, etc. creating challenges for staffing public service functions.

Public Information

The complexities of construction and development and the jumble of changing regulations create a need for information and assistance to the public ranging from the homeowner to the design professional dealing with the technicalities of sustainable development. Necessary resources include creating and maintaining web pages, publications, displays, and direct staff assistance. The department has lost public information and graphics support through budget cuts.

Internal Conditions

Financial Planning

The Construction Permit Fund is self-supporting, by City Council mandate, through plan review and permit fees. This provides flexibility for adjusting staffing levels with actual activity; however, institutional constraints slow down the hiring and training of qualified staff to keep pace when permits are up or workload increases. As part of a larger organization, the Construction Permits area also is unable to control many costs. State law provides for separation of permit revenues and expenditures by program area, which creates a disadvantage for the application of local regulations as fee revenues more easily are generated by State code administration. The construction industry is volatile and permit activity is difficult to predict. However, planning for staffing and other resources occurs on a lengthy cycle, with budget development underway in the fall preceding the fiscal year. This means activity projections are committed 8-17 months before service delivery.

Staffing

The technical skills increasingly necessary to staff the permitting functions mean 6-12 months of training is regularly necessary for newly hired staff to be fully competent. In addition, the expert staff is aging with higher leave usage and retirement turnover. The need for succession planning for

anticipated retirement and staff turnover is acknowledged but costly and not easily incorporated into the constraints of the budget process. The applicant pool for positions requiring certifications for plan review and, especially, inspections for State codes lacks diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity and race, although there is an increasing ethnic mix in the construction labor industry itself.

Complex Internal Working Relationships and Business Processes

The effectiveness of this service area depends on coordination with numerous related business functions and processes across departments and divisions within the City organization. Organizational structures and the competing demands of service delivery areas create a complex framework within which to operate. As other programs evolve and focus on their own service delivery priorities, impacts on the Construction Permit service area can occur. Periodic review and continuous optimization of organizational structures and business processes are necessary.

Performance Measures

Total System

Effectiveness

- Number of paid claims related to building code violations missed in plan review or field inspection.
- Percent of survey respondents who rate timeliness and consistency in plan review as "good" or better.
- Percent of survey respondents who rate timeliness and consistency in inspection as "good" or better.

Efficiency

- Number of permits per plan review FTE.
- Number of inspections per inspection FTE.
- Percent of all permits approved within target cycle-time.
- Percent of inspection requests completed within one day.

Financial

- Percent of service costs recovered from fiscal year revenues.
- Has the target reserve been reached?

Customer Satisfaction

- Percent of customers surveyed who rate the services as "good" or better during the biennial survey.

Activity Indicators

Number of permits issued: 11,639 (FY05)

Number of inspections conducted: 46,843 (FY05)

Total service FTE: 42.40 (FY06)

Total service budget: \$5.1 million (FY06)

Strategy 1: Increase access to building and permit services information through multiple channels.

Objective: Increase the number of visits to the building permits website by five percent annually.

Work Activities:

- Implement and sustain increased hours PIC is open to the public.
- Increase capacity for "self-help" via website and on-line applications.
- Evaluate requests for information and target information content to meet needs of different constituents (e.g., homeowner versus design professional).

Strategy 2: Develop flexible staffing approaches to respond to changing workforce demands.

Objective: Maintain a minimum contingency budget of ten percent of total salary to respond to unforeseen changes in activity and service demand that occur mid-budget cycle.

Work Activities:

- Continue and enhance workforce and succession planning to respond to changing demographics.
- Increase cross-training of staff to allow deployment to areas of highest fluctuating demand.
- Examine and implement feasible techniques to adjust resource levels to meet demand in a more timely manner.

Strategy 3: Generate greater understanding, acceptance and practice of green building design and construction through training and information.

Objective: Increase available resources to educate and promote green building initiatives by ten percent annually.

Work Activities:

- Expand market demand by educating building industry professionals and the public about the benefits of green building.
- With assistance from the green building advisory group, investigate potential regulatory and financial barriers to green building, and make recommendations where appropriate for policy and procedural changes.
- With assistance from the green building advisory group, research possible incentives and requirements that would promote green building in the Eugene community. Develop recommendations for management and elected officials.
- Identify staff training opportunities and develop staff expertise in green building concepts.

