BerryDunn

Sonoma County

Permit Sonoma Management Study
Final Plan

Submitted by:

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Executive Summary

This section describes the background of the project leading up to the Final Report, the work performed in its development, the primary issues identified in the current environment, and a summary of recommended initiatives.

Project Background

The County of Sonoma (County) has retained Berry Dunn McNeil & Parker, LLC (BerryDunn) to assist in a management review of the County's Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD), also known as Permit Sonoma. The focus of the project is to review, document, and evaluate the County's current management practices; analyze service delivery, organizational structure, and operations; solicit feedback from the community; and provide recommendations for management processes and service improvements. The project consists of six phases.

Figure ES.1: Project Phases

1	Project Initiation
2	Service Delivery and Analysis
3	Organizational Assessment
4	Operational Assessment and Cost Analysis
5	Best Practices and Benchmark Analysis
6	Final Recommendations

Work Performed

BerryDunn conducted project initiation activities in June 2022. Meetings with staff and other analysis activities started in July 2022. The following table summarizes key analysis activities completed as part of the project.

Table ES.1: Key Analysis Activities

Key Analysis Activities	
Activity	**Description**
Current Environment Web Survey	BerryDunn issued a survey to 127 staff members of Permit Sonoma and received 85 survey responses, or a 67% response rate.

Key Analysis Activities	
Activity	**Description**
Meetings with Staff	In July 2022, BerryDunn conducted a series of fact-finding meetings with County staff. During the fact-finding process, BerryDunn met with 41 staff members of Permit Sonoma and conducted 37 meetings.
Meetings with Board of Supervisors (BOS)	BerryDunn also met with all five members of the County Board of Supervisors as well as the County Administrator.
External Stakeholder Focus Groups	In August 2022, BerryDunn conducted two in-person focus group meetings.
External Stakeholder Individual Meetings	In August and September 2022, BerryDunn conducted 14 virtual meetings.
Social Pinpoint Website	BerryDunn created a community engagement webpage on Social Pinpoint. On this website, stakeholders could complete a survey and provide input on an ideas wall. The survey remained open until September 12, 2022.
Job Analysis Questionnaire	On August 19, 2022, BerryDunn emailed a Job Analysis Questionnaire to all Permit Sonoma staff and requested responses by September 9, 2022. The firm received 60 responses.
Organization Chart and Staff Roster File Review	In November 2022, BerryDunn reviewed the current versions of the Permit Sonoma Organization Chart and Staff Roster files.
Budget and Funding Analysis and Peer Comparisons	BerryDunn completed a Permit Sonoma budget and funding analysis and peer counties comparison and benchmarking analysis in support of the County's management review and analysis efforts.
Application Data Analysis	BerryDunn analyzed the provided data to calculate the number of records by record type, number of records by status, and the average number of calendar days the records have been in the identified status.

Strengths

This project focused on identifying opportunities to improve process and service delivery; however, strengths were observed during BerryDunn's analysis. The five primary strengths are summarized below.

1. **Business Process Improvements.** Permit Sonoma is forward-thinking and has staff members who work on business process improvements to help the department become more effective and efficient. This helps build a foundation for successful implementation of recommendations identified during the management review process.

2. **Strong Leadership Team.** Permit Sonoma has a strong leadership team that is diverse in skillsets and talent. This team consists of progressive individuals who help navigate the department through challenges and advance it.

3. **Disaster Management.** Permit Sonoma has constantly provided support to residents impacted by natural disasters. Permit Sonoma has provided fire prevention resources, post-disaster cleanup resources, and expedited permits to help rebuild after a disaster.

4. **Dedicated Staff.** During fact-finding interviews with staff members, it was evident that Permit Sonoma has staff members who are dedicated to what they do and believe in the department's ability to improve and be successful. Additionally, many external stakeholders discussed that the staff members care about what they do and are invested in helping the County.

5. **Available Information.** Permit Sonoma provides a significant number of resources on its website. These include contact information to help customers with requests as well as in-depth information about the services Permit Sonoma provides and how to access them. While there is a large volume of information on the Permit Sonoma website, the organization of information can create challenges finding specific information.

Issues Identified

Based on information collected in phases 1 – 5, BerryDunn developed a List of Issues and Opportunities, which contains the challenges BerryDunn identified as having the largest effect on overall performance of Permit Sonoma. Based on a review with the County Project Manager, issues 1 – 4 were identified as highest priority. An additional issue was added following initial review of the Draft Final Report. The initiatives included in section 4.0 of this report were based on addressing these issues.
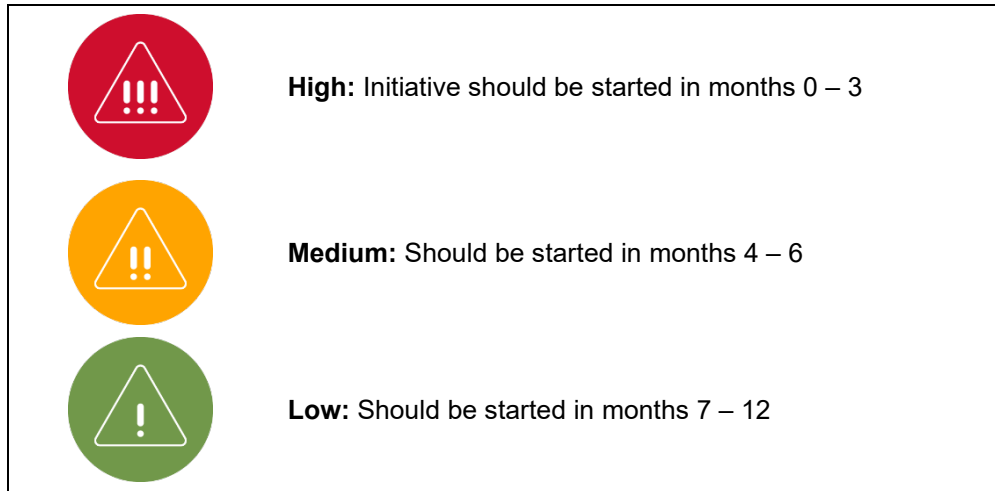
Table ES.2: List of Issues and Opportunities

No	List of Issues and Opportunities
	Description
1	**Applicants are not provided time frames for how long an application process should take.** Historical processing durations for some application types are available on the Permit Sonoma website, but this does not include an estimate of how long a new application should take.
2	**Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.** Customers reported that in addition to a lack of certainty about how long a process should take, the process itself takes too long. Examples of average duration, from application submission to permit issuance, from an analysis of applications submitted from January 1, 2021, through October 31, 2022, included: • Building Permit with Plan Check (6,481 permits issued): 65 days • Demolition Permit (1,055 permits issued): 33 days • Encroachment Permit (553 permits issued): 71 days • Grading Permit (239 permits issued): 172 days • Septic Permit (698 permits issued): 115 days • Well Permit (819 permits issued): 45 days

No	Description
3	**The Accela system is configured and utilized inconsistently across Permit Sonoma.** Not all divisions are using Accela for online application submittal. There are 126 statuses configured in Accela. This includes separate statuses for similar steps (i.e., Closed, Complete, Complete for Processing, File Closed, Final, Finaled, Finished). Greater consistency across all divisions will improve clarity to applicants and simplify reporting.
4	**The Accela system is being underutilized.** For divisions that are using Accela for online application submittal, there are minimal required fields, which contributes to receiving incomplete applications. Not all divisions are using Accela proactively to plan and manage work. Tasks and due dates are not utilized in the manner necessary to closely track differences between target and actual review time frames. Standard comments are not used as part of application review. Time tracking for invoicing purposes is done outside Accela.
5	**Applicants lack certainty regarding application review costs.** The current approach of minimum planning fees with additional time being billed as incurred or "at cost" leads to applicant frustration when application review costs exceed the initial estimate.
6	**Process, procedure, and training documentation is not available.** Documentation critical for standardization within divisions and for onboarding new staff is not available. This includes overall process diagrams, desk-level procedures, and software training materials. Where materials do exist, staff reported that this information was not current.
7	**Business process improvement efforts lack effective governance.** There are divisions working on business process improvements; however, there is no unified structure or process for making process improvements. This includes a lack of process for considering resource requirements for process improvements and reprioritizing identified improvements as priorities change. This results in partially completed improvement efforts and missed opportunities to coordinate between divisions.
8	**Permit Sonoma does not have a detailed customer service framework.** The department has undertaken efforts to improve customer service, including technology improvements and staff positions (e.g., Customer Service Ombudsperson), but there is no department-wide framework for divisions to follow and be measured against.
9	**Policies for responding to customer inquiries are inconsistent.** Divisions have different targets for responding to customer inquiries, ranging from 24 to 72 hours. Applicants and other interested parties have different experiences interacting with divisions across the department.
10	**Responsibilities of staff with the same classification differ across divisions and sections.** Inconsistency exists between and within divisions and sections. For example, four positions have the classification "PRMD Division Manager." Only two of these positions are part of the department leadership team, and only one of these positions has supervisory responsibilities.
11	**No change control process exists for implementing Accela system changes.** No standard or well-defined process exists for identifying, evaluating, prioritizing, implementing, and testing system configuration changes. System configuration changes are also tested in the production environment, which is typically reserved for processing live customer data, instead of in a testing or training environment.

Initiatives

BerryDunn identified 15 initiatives for Permit Sonoma. Summaries for these initiatives were shared with the County Project Manager for review and input prior to development of the Final Plan. Table ES.3 contains summary descriptions and a priority for each initiative. Full initiative detail is contained in section 4.0 of this report. Each initiative has been prioritized based on the indicators contained in Figure ES.2.

Figure ES.2: Priority Indicators

High: Initiative should be started in months 0 – 3

Medium: Should be started in months 4 – 6

Low: Should be started in months 7 – 12

Table ES.3: Initiatives Summary

Initiatives Summary		Priority
Initiative Description		**Priority**
	Expand instance issuance over-the-counter (OTC) permits and implement an express permits program. Permit Sonoma should expand OTC offerings and implement an express permit program. OTC permits should be offered for minor projects that do not require plan reviews, are non-structural, and do not alter existing floor plans. Expanding OTC offerings may improve customer service and permit issuance efficiency. Residential rooftop solar and storage systems are currently processed as issuance OTC permits. Permit Sonoma has also started efforts to set up water heater, furnace, and re-roof permits to be instance issuance OTC permits. OTC permits should be automatically issued digitally after submission of a complete application. Projects that require a basic review should be set up as express permits. Express permits should be issued within five business days from the date of a complete application submittal. This initiative should also include a review of current Conditional Use Permit (CUP) processes within the Planning Division. CUP guidelines should be reviewed to help ensure applications follow a CUP process only when required. A Zoning Administrator role should be established to lead this process. The current application type of "Building Permit No Plan Check" should be split into two record types: 1) "Building Permit No Plan Check – OTC" and 2) "Building Permit No Plan Check – Express." Recommendations for specific permit types to include in the OTC and Express program have been identified in Appendix A.	
	Create and publish application response and review time frame targets. Permit Sonoma should establish application review time frame targets. Establishing these targets will help applicants better understand how long they should expect applications for specific project types to be reviewed. Establishing time frames and targets and tracking review times will also allow creation of internal performance metrics that can be analyzed and reviewed. These time frame targets should also include customer response time frame targets to help applicants better understand how long they should expect it to take to receive a first response related to a complete submittal. Permit Sonoma currently has some online dashboards that show actual review times for some application types. Some of these dashboards have a line suggesting a six week target for review, however this is not presented on dashboards or explicitly stated as what should be expected by the applicant.	

Initiatives Summary

Consolidate and standardize Accela statuses. Permit Sonoma should consolidate application statuses in Accela, with the goal of creating uniform or consistent statuses across divisions where possible. Approximately 126 statuses are currently used in Accela. These include separate statuses for similar steps (e.g., Closed, Complete, Complete for Processing, File Closed, Final, Finaled, Finished). The overall number of statuses and application statuses should be reduced. Key statuses used to indicate when an application has been submitted, when it was ready for review, when reviews were completed, and when the application was approved or issued should be standardized.

Expand task functionality in Accela and implement due date tracking. Once the application review time frames are established, Permit Sonoma should configure Accela so that each application type has tasks with default durations that support the overall review time frame targets (e.g., if there is a target for initial review within five days, the completeness review task should be complete within two days and the review task itself should be complete within three days). This functionality would also support management-level reports showing the status of tasks by division and individual (e.g., reviews due tomorrow, reviews due today, and reviews overdue). Staff will need to be trained on the new task functionality and educated on how this information will be tracked and reported on.

Expand online submittal, electronic review, update required fields, and status inquiry. System configuration for planning applications should be updated so that all Permit Sonoma application processes managed in Accela are available for online application submittal and status inquiry.

Digital Plan Room (DPR) should be implemented for all other application types that require plan review.

Permit Sonoma should also use the required field functionality to the greatest extent possible. This functionality is currently underutilized. The required field functionality can help prevent the receipt of incomplete applications, which require additional staff time in application follow-up.

After Accela statuses have been consolidated and standardized, the status information and supporting detail available in the Civic Portal should be expanded. This should include displaying current status, the date the status was entered, and the remaining steps or activities in the workflow process.

Initiatives Summary

	Establish contracts with third-party plan reviewers to provide as-needed supplemental review assistance. Permit Sonoma should establish contracts with third-party plan review companies to assist with completing technical reviews of applications. These as-needed resources should be used for one-time efforts to clear backlogs and then on an ongoing basis to provide supplemental review assistance when application volume in a defined period exceeds the capacity of Permit Sonoma staff to complete the review in accordance with target review time frames. Permit Sonoma should start this initiative focused on permits that have the longest current application review time frames, from submission to issuance. Based on the Accela data provided and the information available on the Permit Sonoma performance dashboard, these application types should include septic, well, grading, encroachment, and building with plan check.	
	Implement a checklist-based review and resubmittal process for plan review. Permit Sonoma should adopt a process designed to focus the review of resubmitted applications on items that changed based on previous comments. After the initial review, comments should be provided back to applicants in a clear and numbered list. As part of the resubmittal process, applicants should provide a written response to each comment, in addition to providing updated versions of the changed plans. Permit Sonoma's review of resubmittals should focus on the previously provided comments and any other indirect changes made to address the comment.	
	Implement Time Accounting in Accela and develop a policy for plan review time tracking. Permit Sonoma should move all time tracking for at-cost fees to be managed in Accela. This includes implementing Accela time-tracking and invoicing functionality, which would replace the functionality currently managed in the Dimensions system. Permit Sonoma should also develop and implement a time-tracking policy that includes the following elements: • Daily entry of staff review time and release to be available to applicants in real-time • Further defining the project cost-estimation process described in the fee schedule to include providing overall hours estimate to the applicant after initial application review • Monthly reports, provided to applicants for all in-progress applications, containing the percentage of hours expended against the initial estimate, the percentage of completion for the application, description of remaining activities, and an updated hours and expense estimate	

Initiatives Summary

	Modify and promote third-party review process for select application types. Permit Sonoma should modify and expand the Third-Party Plan Check (TPPC) program. The TPPC program allows applicants to utilize a preapproved outside consultant to complete plan review. The purpose of this initiative it to modify, promote, and expand this program. Currently the TPPC program is available for building plan review. Permit Sonoma staff estimated that approximately 5% of current building permit applications with plan review are processed through the TPPC program. Key changes to this program include modifying the fees required for applications in this program, promoting it as an option to customers, and expanding the program to additional application types. Permit Sonoma should consider expanding the TPPC program to permits issued by Engineering & Water Resources and Well & Septic sections. Appendix A includes recommended application types for program expansion.	
	Implement a self-certification program for select application types. This program would eliminate staff review of plans for select application types where a registered professional is assuming additional responsibility. In this program, a registered professional (e.g., architect, professional engineer, landscape architect) takes responsibility for and certifies a project's compliance with all applicable building codes, standards, and ordinances. Permit Sonoma should pilot this program with regular grading permits. Additional application types should include private driveways, minor private roads, landscape, small commercial tenant improvements, and minor traffic control.	
	Establish a customer service framework. Permit Sonoma should develop a customer service policy, create a Customer Service Committee (CSC), develop a customer satisfaction measurement system, develop a customer complaint submission process, and provide public access to performance data.	

Initiatives Summary

Centralize process improvement and establish a governance process. Permit Sonoma should have a standard process for submitting, evaluating, and implementing process improvements. Some divisions are working on business process improvements. Staff reported many in-progress improvements and plans; however, staff stated priorities and dates are not communicated and enforced as new requests are made. This centralized process should include improvements to Accela and other software tools.

Permit Sonoma should establish a process improvement governance committee. This committee would coordinate closely with the CSC and may have some overlap in membership, but the process improvement governance committee should also focus on internal improvements that will not directly contribute to customer service (e.g., improving the time entry and invoicing process, updating internal system training materials after system updates).

Develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) and training materials. Establishing SOPs provides staff with clear guidance on department processes and procedures to help ensure consistency across the department. SOPs can help streamline processes and improve cross-division communication and collaboration. SOPs help ensure that staff are providing consistent services to customers, and customers know what to expect when they work with multiple divisions. As part of this initiative, Permit Sonoma should conduct a process diagramming and analysis effort. This exercise will create diagrams for inclusion in SOPs and training materials, but will also help identify areas of process inefficiency, duplicative steps, and other areas for potential process improvement.

Internal process documentation and system training materials should be developed for each application or record type. This should include overall process diagrams, desk-level procedures, and software training materials. Code Enforcement currently has a policy and procedure manual, and Planning has started development.

Provide opportunities for customers to learn about Permit Sonoma processes. Establishing an information bulletin on the Permit Sonoma website or hosting lunch and learn sessions can help educate the public on Permit Sonoma business processes and application types. Topics can range from department business processes for different application types to expectations for customers submitting applications. Informational bulletins or lunch and learn sessions can also be used to educate on new County ordinances or provide customers the opportunity to provide feedback on how new initiatives are working.

Initiatives Summary
Standardize division and section structure. The organizational structure of Permit Sonoma should be updated to create greater consistency in class titles and descriptions for staff in division and section leadership roles. Consistency is also recommended in class titles for positions considered part of the department leadership team.

2.0 Trends and Best Practice Considerations

This section includes trends and best practice considerations for Permit Sonoma based on BerryDunn's experience and research conducted in developing the recommended initiatives contained in this report.

The following subsections contain descriptions and examples of industry trends and best practices similar organizations have implemented to improve customer service and application review processing times.

2.1 As-Needed Third-Party Plan Review Services

Many organizations have contracts with professional firms to provide plan review services on an as-needed basis. Organizations commonly contract with multiple firms and use these firms to assist during times of peak application volume or to assist with reviewing a backlog of applications. To effectively utilize third-party plan review firms, it is important to have a defined baseline for application volumes that can be supported by internal staff resources. Some organizations also use third-party plan review firms to review specific application types (e.g., projects over a certain size).

Third-party plan review firms are commonly provided access to county plan review software systems. Contracts with third-party review firms provide an opportunity to require review turnaround time expectations. A 2018 RFP for third-party plan review services in Nevada County, California, included the following expectations for review times for third-party firms:

> "The standard turnaround time for assigned plan reviews shall be ten (10) business days for initial review, and five (5) business days for rechecks. Expedited plan review for initial review and rechecks may be requested with a turnaround time of not more than (5) business days."

2.2 Third-Party, Private Provider Programs

In some parts of the country, cities and counties have implemented third-party plan review programs where applicants have an option to work directly with third-party firms for plan review and approval instead of having the city or county complete the plan review. In Florida, these third-party firms are referred to as private providers.

In this type of program, municipalities typically have a role in managing the certified third-party firms and also have a role in approving the use of a provider on a project-by-project basis. The fee paid to the municipality is reduced, and applicants enter into a separate financial arrangement with the third-party firm. Examples of counties in other parts of the country with established third-party, private provider programs include:

- Fairfax County, Virginia

- Collier County, Florida

- Miami-Dade County, Florida

Most commonly these programs provide applicants with an alternate option or plan review; however, in some municipalities, this is required for certain types of projects. Prince Georges County, Maryland, mandates third-party plan review for some types of projects, including, but not limited to, commercial buildings valued over $50 million, all fire protection systems, and all multifamily residential buildings valued over $50 million.

2.3 Self-Certification Programs

Some municipalities have implemented self-certifications. These programs eliminate the plan review process by allowing a registered professional to take responsibility for and certify projects' compliance with all applicable building codes, standards, and ordinances.

Applications submitted under a self-certification program are still tracked in the respective jurisdiction's permitting system, but they do not undergo a review process. Applications are commonly reviewed for completeness and then approved. Municipalities with self-certification programs typically have an audit process to review a select percentage of plans submitted. Self-certifications are commonly limited to specific application types.

Examples of cities and counties with established self-certification programs include:

- San Diego County, California

- City of Phoenix, Arizona

- City of Mesa, Arizona

- City of North Las Vegas, Nevada

- City of Chicago, Illinois

2.4 Review Time Frame Requirements

It is becoming increasingly common for cities and counties to post application review target time frames on their websites. The City of Scottsdale, Arizona, and Clark County, Nevada, both have posted application review time frames. Figures 2.1 and 2.2 below show the published application review time frames for Scottsdale and Clark County.

Figure 2.1: Example Application Review Time Frames – Scottsdale, Arizona

Review Time frames in calendar days

Plan Type	Administrative Review	Substantive Review
Small Scope Review (SSR)	1	3-7
Small Scope Review (SSR) - A Flood Zones Only	1	7
Pools/Fences/Walls/Signs	5	7
Tenant Improvements	10	14
All Other Plan Types	10	21

Figure 2.2: Example Application Review Time Frames – Clark County, Nevada

Building
First Review Timeframe Goals
Commercial: 21 days
Commercial Minor: 14 days
Commercial 7 Day: 7 days
Standard Plan: 21 days
Custom Single Family Residence: 21 days
Residential Minor: 14 days
Revisions: 10 days
Phased Projects: 42 days
Correction / All subsequent reviews: 10 days

In Texas, a state law (HB 3167) mandates all cities and counties respond to subdivision plat applications and several similar types of applications within 30 days. Resubmittals must be responded to within 15 days. The acceptable actions to be taken within 30/15 days include 1) approve, 2) approve with conditions, and 3) disapprove with explanation.

HB 3167 defines "plan" to mean a subdivision development plan, subdivision construction plan, site plan, land development application, and site development application. HB 3167 defines "plat" to include a preliminary plat, general plan, final plat, and replat. If the city or county fails to respond, the plan or plat is considered approved. This is commonly referred to as a "shot clock" policy.

While BerryDunn has not seen this type of "shot clock" policy adopted at a city or county level when not state-mandated, it is possible that municipalities outside Texas may consider implementing "shot clock" policies at the local level.

In Florida, a state law (553.79) includes permit issuance time requirements and repercussions for failing to meet time frames. If a city or county fails to issue a building permit for a single-

family residence within 30 business days of receiving the application, the building permit fee is reduced by 10% for each business day beyond the 30-day deadline.

In 2019 the City of Fresno, California, implemented a short-lived money-back guarantee program for missed review time frames in the planning department. This program was eliminated in 2020. In 2017 the City of Salem, Oregon, was highlighted in an International Code Council best practices publication for a similar money-back guarantee program. The City of Salem website shows no evidence that this program still exists.

3.0 Initiative Format

This section describes the format and indicators used to present each initiative.

Each initiative in section 4.0 has been presented using a standard template. Table 3.1 provides a sample template.

Table 3.1: Initiative Template

Initiative Name
Initiative Summary
Summary description for initiative and visual icon representing the initiative
Related Issue(s)
• *Issue(s) the initiative seeks to address*
Action Items to Implement
☑ *Tasks required to implement the initiative.*
Anticipated Benefits
• *Benefits anticipated as a result of implementing the initiative* • *Visual indicator communicating the anticipated benefits*
Risks
No Action: • *Risks of taking no action or not implementing the initiative*
During Implementation • *Risks the County should consider while implementing the initiative*
Implementation Timeline
Priority • *Description of the implementation timeline, including any dependencies or connections to other initiatives* • *Visual indicator communicating the initiative priority* • *Visual indicator communicating the initiative complexity* **Complexity**
Best Practice Considerations
Description of best practices related to the initiative and a visual indicator communicating the best practice or maturity of the initiative.

Figures 3.1 – 3.4 describe the different indicators used in the initiative descriptions.

Figure 3.1: Priority Indicators

High: Initiative should be started in months 0 – 3

Medium: Should be started in months 4 – 6

Low: Should be started in months 7 – 12
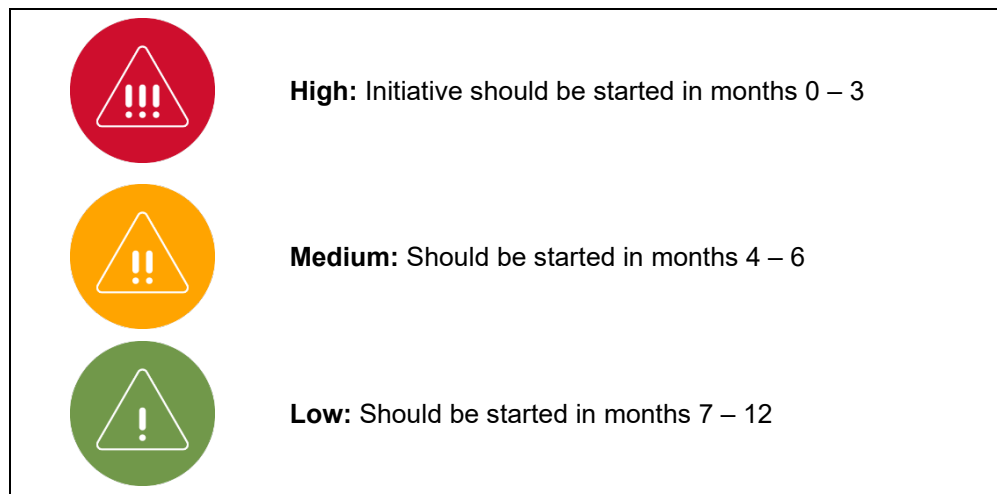
Figure 3.2: Relative Benefit Indicators

High: Implementation of this initiative will offer significant improvement moving Permit Sonoma toward the desired future state.

Medium: Implementation of this initiative will offer moderate improvement moving Permit Sonoma toward the desired future state.

Low: Implementation of this initiative will offer minor improvement moving Permit Sonoma toward the desired future state.

Figure 3.3: Implementation Complexity Indicators

Low: Initiative will not require significant resources to implement.

Medium: Initiative will require moderate resources to implement.

High: Initiative will require significant resources to implement.
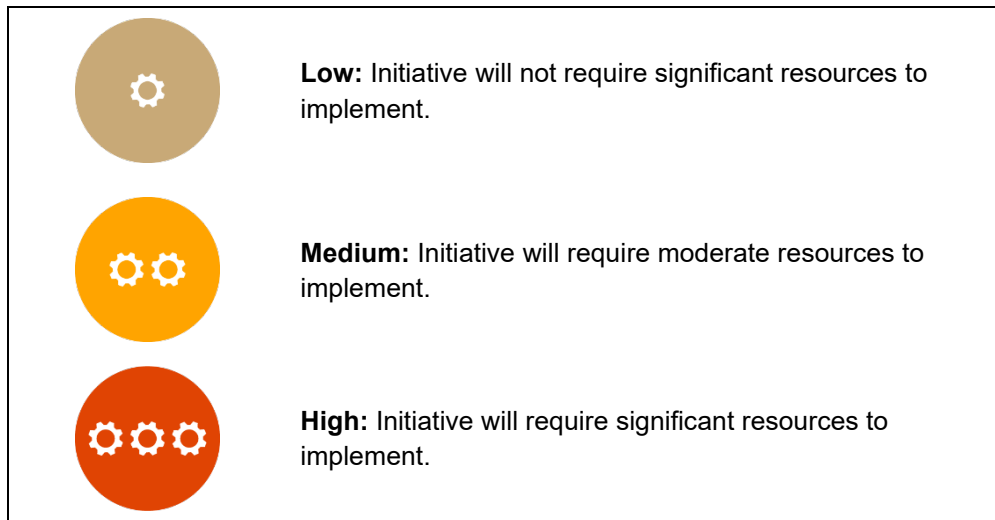
Figure 3.4: Best Practice Indicators

Established: The practice included in this initiative is established and an industry best practice.

Leading Edge: The practice included in this initiative is common but is not broadly adopted as an industry best practice.

Bleeding Edge: The practice included in this initiative is rare but has been adopted by other organizations.
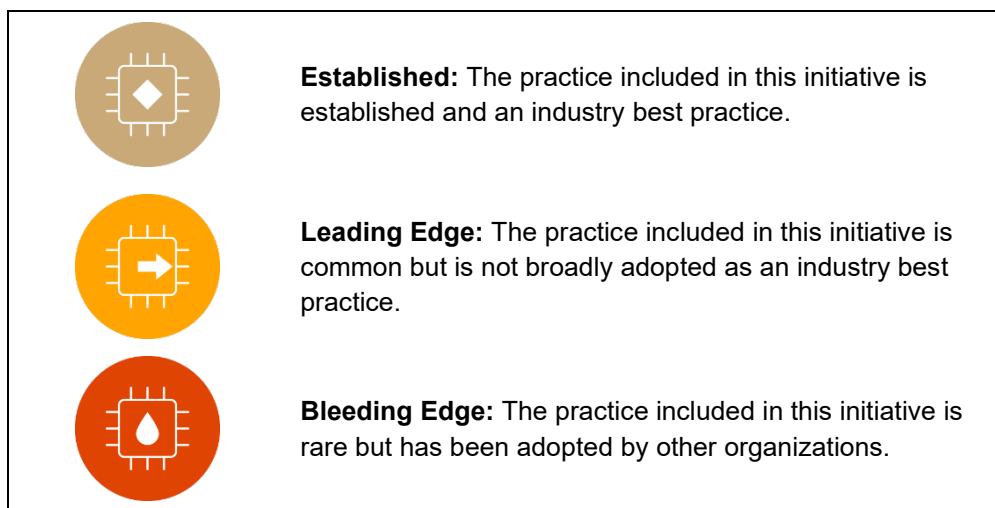
4.0 Recommended Initiatives

This section includes the detailed descriptions of each initiative.

4.1 Expand Instant Issuance OTC Permits and Implement an Express Permit Program

Table 4.1: Expand Instance Issuance OTC Permits and Implement an Express Permit Program

Expand Instant Issuance OTC Permits and Implement an Express Permit Program
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should expand OTC offerings and implement an express permit program. OTC permits should be offered for minor projects that do not require plan reviews, are non-structural, and do not alter existing floor plans. Expanding OTC offerings may improve customer service and permit issuance efficiency. Residential rooftop solar and storage systems are currently processed as issuance OTC permits. Permit Sonoma has also started efforts to set up water heater, furnace, and re-roof permits to be instance issuance OTC permits. OTC permits should be automatically issued digitally after submission of a complete application. Projects that require a basic review should be set up as express permits. Express permits should be issued within five business days from the date of a complete application submittal. This initiative should also include a review of current Conditional Use Permit (CUP) processes within the Planning Division. CUP guidelines should be reviewed to help ensure applications follow a CUP process only when required. A Zoning Administrator role should be established to lead this process. The current application type of "Building Permit No Plan Check" should be split into two record types: 1) "Building Permit No Plan Check – OTC" and 2) "Building Permit No Plan Check – Express." Recommendations for specific permit types to include in the OTC and Express program have been identified in Appendix A.
Related Issue(s)
• Applicants are not provided time frames for how long an application process should take. • Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.
Action Items to Implement
☑ **Task 1: Develop new policy for instant issuance OTC expansion and express permit implementation.** Permit Sonoma should develop a policy for OTC expansion and express permit implementation. This should also include guidance on CUP permit processes. This policy should also include a description of the process that will be followed if staff review an application submitted as an express permit that they believe does not quality. In these situations, Division Manager approval is recommended. This policy will help to communicate the purpose of the initiative and how Permit Sonoma plans to implement the policy. The policy should identify the challenge and the intent of the policy. It should include broad objectives, strategies for implementation, and stakeholders responsible for implementation. Policy development will

communicate the purpose and objectives to all stakeholders and will unify all participants under a common mission.

☑ **Task 2: Develop a representative program team to implement the policy.** A team that represents diverse expertise should be assembled to implement the policy and develop the program. This team should include staff members with first-hand knowledge of the plan review process and current permit application requirements. Representatives from Building, Engineering, and Planning divisions should be included on this team. A clear action plan should be developed to implement the policy and develop the program. The program team should meet regularly in the beginning to maintain momentum behind the policy, with each meeting focused on action plan accomplishments, progress, and next steps. The initial focus should be on deploying water heater, re-roof, and furnace permits as OTC.

☑ **Task 3: Develop evaluation criteria to determine which permit types are eligible for OTC and the express permit program.** The action plan should include a process to evaluate existing permits for consideration of inclusion under the OTC and Express permit program. Guidelines that specify criteria for permit type eligibility should be developed. Clear criteria will help solicit the participation of staff members in the evaluation process.

☑ **Task 4: Initiate a process to evaluate permit types to determine eligibility.** Following evaluation guidelines, program team members should work with staff members in their sections and/or divisions to evaluate permit types that can be handled OTC or through the express permit program.

☑ **Task 5: Amend any existing regulations, standards, and applications to help ensure application documents reflect program criteria.** During the evaluation process, permit types might be identified that are good candidates for the program but require minor application document revisions to reflect the evaluation criteria. The program team should develop a plan that prioritizes the completion of these revisions and process requirements needed to complete them.

☑ **Task 6: Initiate a public information process to inform the public and business community of the express permit program and OTC permit expansion.** This task can occur simultaneously with Task 5. A new program announcement should be included on the department's website. Other major County communication channels should also be considered to announce the program. Permit Sonoma should also consider announcing the program to key partnership groups through attendance at future meetings or events.
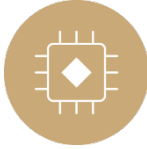
Anticipated Benefits
• This program will expedite permit reviews and save time for applicants. • Expedited permit reviews can also save time for Permit Sonoma staff. This time can be reallocated to other department initiatives. OTC permit expansion and express permits can simplify the plan review process for many permit types. • This program can improve customer service and strengthen the relationship with key stakeholder groups, the business community, and residents.

Risks
No Action: • Permit backlogs can continue and exacerbate public frustrations in the permitting process.

Expand Instant Issuance OTC Permits and Implement an Express Permit Program
- No action can adversely impact the department's customer service performance and cause tension between the department and the public.   - No action can negatively impact staff morale and motivation, which will impact overall performance of the department.
During Implementation   Modifications to existing application requirements may become complex and time-consuming. It is important to prioritize modifications and keep the project moving forward as changes are occurring.
Implementation Timeline

Priority		Complexity
	- This initiative should be started immediately, with a target of completing all six tasks within 3 months. Tasks 1 and 2 should be completed in month 1, tasks 3 and 4 should occur in month 2, and tasks 5 and 6 should occur in month 3. - This initiative is not dependent on other initiatives; however, the application changes will require some updates to the Accela system. A Permit Sonoma Accela support resource should be included in the program team established as part of task 2.	

Best Practice Considerations
OTC and Express permit programs are common across the country. These programs allow simpler application types to be reviewed and returned to applicants sooner. Some organizations have a dedicated review time for express permits.
Napa County, California, has a program for water heater replacement, furnace change-out, re-roofs, electrical service upgrades, and agricultural electrical service to be applied for, paid for, and issued automatically through the County's online permit system. This program is referred to as "Online Permits." Napa County also has an express permits program with a review time of three to five business days.
Napa County, California has a Zoning Administrator position. The position description is:
"The Zoning Administrator (ZA) hears and decides on a broad range of minor planning permit applications over which it has authority (see County Code Section 18.10.020 - Duties – Specific Subjects), unless the ZA determines that the public interest would be furthered by having a particular application heard and decided by the Planning Commission. The Director of the Planning, Building and Environmental Services Department is appointed to serve as the ZA, and may appoint a Deputy ZA to perform the duties of the ZA."
Marin County, California, has an express permit program for minor residential remodels, rooftop photovoltaic systems, junior accessory dwelling units, and standard retaining walls.

4.2 Create and Publish Application Response and Review Time Frame Targets

Table 4.2: Create and Publish Application Response and Review Time Frame Targets

Create and Publish Application Response and Review Time Frame Targets
Initiative Summary

	Permit Sonoma should establish application review time frame targets. Establishing these targets will help applicants better understand how long they should expect applications for specific project types to be reviewed. Establishing time frames and targets and tracking review times will also allow creation of internal performance metrics that can be analyzed and reviewed. These time frame targets should also include customer response time frame targets to help applicants better understand how long they should expect it to take to receive a first response related to a complete submittal. Permit Sonoma currently has some online dashboards that show actual review times for some application types. Some of these dashboards have a line suggesting a six week target for review, however this is not presented on dashboards or explicitly stated as what should be expected by the applicant.

Related Issue(s)

- Applicants are not provided time frames for how long an application process should take.
- Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Review existing data on review time frames to determine existing review time averages.** To begin this initiative, Permit Sonoma should evaluate the current review time frames. This task should include a review of any existing review time frame targets measured against actual review time frames. This will help the department gain an understanding of actual time reviews are taking measured against current goals.

☑ **Task 2: Document current review time frame averages for each application type and group similar application types.** A single, concise document should be created to present the current average review time frames. This document should serve as the baseline for measuring future improvements.

☑ **Task 3: Establish current time frame targets for groups of application types.** Review time frames by application type should be tracked internally; however, providing an application type level review target document to the public might not simplify applicant understanding. Application types involving a similar level of review effort should be grouped with a single review target time frame. For example, if average data indicates initial reviews for well permits are 43 days and septic permits are 59 days, these two permit types should be grouped for a single review target (e.g., 50 days).

☑ **Task 4: Identify planned time frame target reduction goals.** Once time frame targets are identified based on current average review times, review targets for 6 and 12 months into the future should be identified. Permit Sonoma should consider targeting and publicizing a target for a 10% time frame reduction within 6 months and a 20% time frame reduction within 12 months.

☑ **Task 5: Publicize time frame targets so that applicants have clear expectations on review time frames.** Once new targets are established, they should be publicized on the department webpage and integrated into Accela, where possible. This will provide greater transparency to the applicants and will help give them valuable data to build more realistic project schedules. The Performance Data dashboards on the Permit Sonoma website should also be updated to show

Create and Publish Application Response and Review Time Frame Targets

current application time frame targets, actual average review time frames, and target future time frames.

☑ **Task 6: Integrate time frame targets with due date tasks in Accela.** This task should be coordinated with initiative 4.4.

☑ **Task 7: Continue to monitor review time frames to help ensure consistency with established targets.** Once these targets are established, they need to be monitored regularly to help reinforce public accountability and to build trust. The department should note and plan for key events or peek workload periods that may adversely impact established targets. Where possible, a plan of action should be established when a known key event is approaching. The plan could include temporary adjustments to staffing resources or processes to minimize target impacts.

Anticipated Benefits

- This initiative can help increase transparency in the plan review process. It will help to give applicants a greater understanding of the review time frames for permit application types.

- Developing review and response targets for each application type will also help provide a pattern of uniformity and consistency between the reviews of permits in each permit type. This can increase predictability for the applicant so they can plan projects with appropriate time frames.

Risks

No Action:

- If clear time frame targets are not established and/or communicated, public distrust can result, which could cause tension between public and department relationships.

- A lack of time frame transparency may impact project deadlines for the applicants. This may deter the business community from developing and doing business in Permit Sonoma.

During Implementation

- Permit Sonoma may experience challenges calculating average review dates based on how data is currently being tracked in Accela. The large number of statuses used across all application and record types may create challenges identifying what is considered the initial review.

- There is a risk that the initially published time frames are too aspirational. The initially published application review time frames should be realistic based on historical averages, with future improvement targets communicated.

Implementation Timeline

Priority	This initiative should start immediately, with tasks 1 and 2 being completed in month 1. Tasks 3 and 4 should be completed in month 2. The time frames should be published on the Permit Sonoma website (Task 5) in month 3. Task 6 should occur concurrent with initiative 4.4. Task 7 should be ongoing.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations

Create and Publish Application Response and Review Time Frame Targets

While internal tracking of review time frame targets is broadly adopted, not all organizations post clear application review time frames on their websites. Review time frame targets should be communicated in days.

After implementing review targets and expanding Accela due date functionality, division and section leaderships should receive a daily summary report of all applications that are within three days of a target review time frame, at the target review time frame, and exceeding the target review time frame.

Permit Sonoma should consider a review time frame for grading permits of four to six weeks. This and other review timelines should be evaluated and updated as other improvements are implemented designed to reduce processing times.

Napa County, California, has three levels of permit review timelines posted on its website. This includes express review permits (3 – 5 business days), quick permits (7 – 10 business days), and standard permits (28 days).

Clark County, Nevada, has very clear application review time frames for building and fire prevention plan reviews. Each application category also has clear and concise descriptions.

4.3. Consolidate and Standardize Accela Statuses

Table 4.3: Consolidate and Standardize Accela Statuses

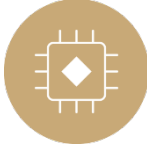| Consolidate and Standardize Accela Statuses |
|---|
| **Initiative Summary** |
| Permit Sonoma should consolidate application statuses in Accela, with the goal of creating uniform or consistent statuses across divisions where possible. Approximately 126 statuses are currently used in Accela. These include separate statuses for similar steps (e.g., Closed, Complete, Complete for Processing, File Closed, Final, Finaled, Finished). The overall number of statuses and application statuses should be reduced. Key statuses used to indicate when an application has been submitted, when it was ready for review, when reviews were completed, and when the application was approved or issued should be standardized. |
| **Related Issue(s)** |
| • The Accela system is configured and utilized inconsistently across Permit Sonoma.
• The Accela system is being underutilized. |
| **Action Items to Implement** |
| ☑ **Task 1: Take an inventory of the different application types that Permit Sonoma processes, grouping similar application types.** It is important for the department to start with an inventory to understand what currently exists. This will also help prevent over-simplification when developing the new status naming convention. With each group of application types, identify the phases in the review process. |
| ☑ **Task 2: With each group of application types, develop one common naming convention to use that will identify the status describing each phase in the process.** For example, a residential building permit might have statuses such as plan review, permit issuance, under construction, inspection, reinspection, and finaled. |
| ☑ **Task 3: Cross-check the naming convention of different application types against one another to look for similarities in terms.** Where similarities exists, one universal term should be used to identify the status. For example, different permit types might use different terminology to describe the review process of a permit—under review, pending, or review in process. Where common phases exist across permits, identify one universal terminology to use for that phase for all permits it applies to. |
| ☑ **Task 4: Develop a reference guide of terms.** All Permit Sonoma staff who process permits in Accela should follow this reference guide. In addition, the guide should be publicly accessible and easy to use. When developing this reference guide, avoid using wording that is too technical and without a description of the meaning. Any member of the public should be able to understand the terms in the guide regardless of professional background. |
| **Anticipated Benefits** |

Consolidate and Standardize Accela Statuses

	• Standardizing application statuses will improve clarity for applicants viewing the statuses of submitted applications. • Standardizing application statuses will help improve internal communication between staff members as there will be a universal understanding of the statuses of the applications in process. • This initiative will serve as the foundation for improved division- and department-level reporting.

Risks

No Action:

- If no action is taken, the public and Permit Sonoma staff may not have a clear understanding of the status of permits in Accela. This may result in miscommunications between staff members and the public.

During Implementation

- While there are universal terms to describe the statuses of permits, it is important to avoid being too general. Certain statuses might need to be included to describe unique circumstances. For example, during a building inspection process, a modification to site plan may need to be approved to match site conditions. While this may not happen often, a plan modification terminology should also be included in the final reference guide of terms.
- This initiative requires dedicated staff members assigned to complete it. It also requires the same team members to do post-implementation monitoring.

Implementation Timeline

Priority	This initiative should start immediately, with task 1 occurring in month 1. Task 2 should be completed in month 2, and tasks 3 and 4 should start and be completed in month 3. Permit Sonoma has two active contracts with vendors that could assist with Accela configuration updates. There are current active contracts with IKC Consulting, LCC and Grey Quarter, Inc. The IKC Consulting contract is $140/hour for the following services: "*Consultant will work with County staff to enhance the existing Civic Platform implementation in addition to providing new development to augment and increase functionality within the Civic Platform for the County.*"	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations

	Using standard statuses for similar types of applications is common. In addition to reducing the overall number of statuses used (at least 126 currently), Permit Sonoma should also seek opportunities to limit the number of statuses one application could be in. Currently many high-volume application types have 10 or more application statuses. San Luis Obispo County, California, has 16 statuses for all permits, 26 statuses for planning applications, and 20 statuses for code enforcement cases.

4.4. Expand Task Functionality in Accela and Implement Due Date Tracking

Table 4.4: Expand Task Functionality in Accela and Implement Due Date Tracking

Expand Task Functionality in Accela and Implement Due Date Tracking
Initiative Summary

Once the application review time frames are established, Permit Sonoma should configure Accela so that each application type has tasks with default durations that support the overall review time frame targets (e.g., if there is a target for initial review within five days, the completeness review task should be complete within two days and the review task itself should be complete within three days). This functionality would also support management-level reports showing the status of tasks by division and individual (e.g., reviews due tomorrow, reviews due today, and reviews overdue). Staff will need to be trained on the new task functionality and educated on how this information will be tracked and reported on.

Related Issue(s)

- The Accela system is configured and utilized inconsistently across Permit Sonoma.
- The Accela system is being underutilized.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Identify a team of staff members who will be responsible for establishing and maintaining updates in Accela.** This team should also coordinate with team members responsible for initiative 4.2. BerryDunn recommends that a communication system be established for ongoing communication between team members. For example, on Microsoft 365, a Teams Channel can be established solely dedicated to a specific initiative or project. Teams Channels are effective tools for maintaining real-time communication between team members.

☑ **Task 2: Prioritize the application types with the highest application volume.** To help expeditiously establish an organized application review system, start with the application types that are most frequently submitted.

☑ **Task 3: Update Accela system configuration to add tasks and due dates.** Using either internal or contracted resources, Permit Sonoma should update Accela configuration to have review tasks and due dates established for each application type. These updates should be made in a test environment before being deployed to a production environment.

☑ **Task 4: Establish a required training schedule for staff members to be trained on the new functionality of the system.** Training should also include education on developing reports for tracking and monitoring.

☑ **Task 5: Expand level of detail and transparency, allowing applicants to see the names of reviewers currently assigned the application.** After other Accela improvements have been completed, the information shared online with applicants should be modified to include specific reviewer information. This level of detail is currently disclosed online as "TBD".

☑ **Task 6: Coordinating with initiative 4.2, develop a protocol that will trigger updates in Accela any time a time frame target is amended.** All team members under initiatives 4.2 and 4.4 should create the protocol for modifying task due dates. The Permit Sonoma Department Director should approve these changes. Communication on the protocol should be shared with all Permit

Expand Task Functionality in Accela and Implement Due Date Tracking

Sonoma staff so that everyone is aware of the process, what is required to maintain the process, and team members to go to for time frame and target amendments.

Anticipated Benefits

- Increases the functionality of Accela, which helps make the plan review process more efficient.

- Increases convenience and transparency for the applicants. With this information being visible online through Accela, applicants can get a clear understanding of the time frame for review of applications in a convenient way.

- Improves interdepartmental coordination and time management. Permit Sonoma staff members who are part of the plan review process will be able to see where applications are in the plan review process and coordinate their reviews with established time frames in the system.

Risks

No Action:

- The plan review process may become disjointed. Targeted time frames established under initiative 4.2 will not be coordinated with the Accela program. This may cause confusion for applications who use Accela as they will not be able to get all the information they need from the program to track their project.

- Communication breakdowns may occur. Accela is an effective tool to increase coordination and communication. Without improved functionality of Accela, staff members and applicants may not be fully informed on application statuses that impact their project schedules and workloads.

During Implementation

- Requires dedicated staff members assigned to this initiative to complete it. This may cause a shift in staff workload priorities.

- There is potential for staff resistance to task due date tracking and reporting. It will be important that this initiative has visible executive support.

Post-Implementation

- If regular monitoring of due date tracking is not shown to be a clear priority, staff may start to ignore due dates.

- Careful attention must be given to maintain coordination of this initiative with initiative 4.2. If ongoing coordination does not occur, changes in target time frames under initiative 4.2 may not be changed in Accela. This can cause inconsistencies in targeted time frames, which will confuse applicants and staff members.

Implementation Timeline

| **Priority** | This initiative should start in month 3. Tasks 1 and 2 should be complete in month 3. Task 3 should be completed during months 4 – 5. Staff should be trained (Task 4) in month 6. Task 5 should be ongoing. | **Complexity** |

Expand Task Functionality in Accela and Implement Due Date Tracking

Best Practice Considerations

	Tracking task due dates and compliance with task due dates are established processes. Task-level due dates are the foundation for tracking compliance with review time frame targets.
	Permit Sonoma has two active contracts with vendors that could assist with Accela configuration updates. There are current active contracts with IKC Consulting, LCC and Grey Quarter, Inc.

4.5. Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

Table 4.5: Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

Initiative Summary

	System configuration for planning applications should be updated so that all Permit Sonoma application processes managed in Accela are available for online application submittal and status inquiry.
	DPR should be implemented for all other application types that require plan review.
	Permit Sonoma should also use the required field functionality to the greatest extent possible. This functionality is currently underutilized. The required field functionality can help prevent the receipt of incomplete applications, which require additional staff time in application follow-up.
	After Accela statuses have been consolidated and standardized, the status information and supporting detail available in the Civic Portal should be expanded. This should include displaying current status, the date the status was entered, and the remaining steps or activities in the workflow process.

Related Issue(s)

- The Accela system is configured and utilized inconsistently across Permit Sonoma.
- The Accela system is being underutilized.

Action Items to Implement

A. **Establish an Accela Improvement Team (AIT)**

☑ **Task 1: For completion of all action items under this initiative, a cross-functional team focused on Accela improvements should be developed.** This team should be coordinated by management information services (MIS). Staff from MIS should have expertise in the Accela system and be able to make system adjustments. The team should include one or two staff

members from each division and/or section who process plan reviews. Representatives should have first-hand knowledge in plan review, with familiarity of Accela. They should be able to make decisions on system requirements for plan review.

☑ **Task 2: Develop a work plan to prioritize and coordinate all assignments.** AIT should develop a work plan and project schedule outlining the assignments the team will be charged with. At a minimum, AIT should be responsible for all actions under this project, including the expansion of DPR, the required field functionality, and the Civic Portal. AIT can also be responsible for actions under initiatives 4.3 and 4.4: "Consolidate and standardize Accela statuses" and "Expand task functionality in Accela and implement due date tracking." For each assignment, the work plan should note responsible team members who will be charged with executing and completing the assignment. At a minimum, the work plan should include all tasks in subsections noted below under DPR, Expand Required Field Functionality, and Expand Civic Portal.

☑ **Task 3: Establish a meeting schedule and establish micro-teams.** AIT should consider meeting at least monthly in the beginning to build project momentum and keep assignments on track. Consider developing a Teams Channel for the team in Microsoft 365, or consider other comparative mechanisms that will foster strong communication between team members in between larger team meetings.

☑ **Task 4: In coordination with the work plan, establish micro-teams to complete assignments.** Micro-teams should be prepared to share project updates and discuss challenges and solutions with the larger AIT during meetings. This will keep assignments on track. In addition, discussing challenges and solutions can help develop information-sharing and learning among team members.

☑ **Task 5: After implementation of system improvements, the AIT should develop a monitoring plan.** This plan can help monitor system functionality and troubleshoot breakdowns. A monitoring plan should also discuss how the AIT plans to stay current with regulatory and process improvements in the department that may impact data in the system.

B. **Expand Online Submittal and Plan Review**

☑ **Task 1: In accordance with the work plan established for the team, create a cross-functional micro-team of team members with expertise in planning and in MIS.**

☑ **Task 2: Develop an action plan for the rollout of DPR.** The focus of this action plan should be to increase the functionality of DPR and include all planning application types in the system. At a minimum, the action plan should include tasks 3 – 7 below.

☑ **Task 3: Start the initiate by making significant progress in process improvement.** Planning team members should develop the steps necessary to complete plan review for planning applications, prioritizing the applications with the greatest number of submittals. Prioritizing the more frequently received applications will make a bigger impact in process improvement than prioritizing less frequently received applications.

☑ **Task 4: Cross-check process steps with Accela implementation contractors to help ensure steps are consistent with Accela system requirements and functionality.**

☑ **Task 5: Accela implementation contractors should integrate new process steps into the Accela system.** All team members should review before going live, with department leadership doing a final check to help ensure quality control. These updates should be made in a test environment before being deployed to a production environment.

Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

☑ **Task 6: Go live with the new process steps for Planning applications.** Within the first two months of the go-live date, the team should meet weekly to discuss system progress, challenges, and adjustments needed to improve system functionality.

☑ **Task 7: Develop a priority list of system improvements needed after the go-live date.** Start working on system improvements with the greatest impact on customer service outcomes first.

C. **Expand Required Field Functionality**

☑ **Task 1: Prioritize the application types that generate the highest number of submittals.** Develop cross-functional micro-teams of AIT participants from IT and from the respective disciplines of each application type. In coordination with the work plan and project schedule developed for AIT, develop a schedule that includes and prioritizes all application types where the required field functionality needs to be expanded. By communicating to the larger group, everyone is aware of the time frame when their input will need to be required to complete project action steps.

☑ **Task 2: Micro-team members from the discipline associated with the application type should develop a list of documentation required for a complete application.**

☑ **Task 3: MIS team members and/or Accela configuration contractors should integrate documentation requirements into Accela.** System changes should be made, tested, and approved in a test environment before being deployed to the live environment.

☑ **Task 4: Go live and monitor progress**. If adjustments are needed after the new requirements are implemented, prioritize adjustments that will have the greater impacts on customer service performance.

D. **Expand Civic Portal**

☑ **Task 1: Complete initiative 4.3, "Consolidate and Standardize Accela Statuses."** Expanding the Civic Portal requires the completion of initiative 4.3 above.

☑ **Task 2: Develop micro-teams consisting of technical experts and experts from the respective disciplines associated with the application types.** Group application types in accordance with the division and/or section relevancy in Permit Sonoma. For example, all application types relevant to planning should be assigned to the IT/Planning micro-team.

☑ **Task 3: Each micro-team should develop a plan to expand Civic Portal.** This plan, at a minimum should include the following functions: improving details displayed for current application status, the date the status was entered, and the remaining steps or activities in the workflow. The plan should be coordinated with work plan and schedule for the AIT.

☑ **Task 4: Each micro-team should test the functions before going live with system changes.** These updates should be made in a test environment before being deployed to a production environment.

☑ **Task 5: Monitor progress and make a prioritized list of challenges that require adjustments in the system.** In prioritizing adjustments, consider adjusting application types with the largest number of application submittals.

Anticipated Benefits

Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry	
	• Accela will be further leveraged, enhancing Permit Sonoma's investment in the system.
	• All applications and supporting documents will be submitted through a central portal, eliminating email submission processes.
	• Expanded application status details should reduce phone and email inquiries regarding application status.

Risks

No Action:

- Accela will continue to be underutilized, and process work-arounds may increase.
- The cost-benefit of purchasing the Accela system could be compromised. Full system benefits will not be realized if functionality is not expanded. Another budgetary implication is the staff time associated with doing manual tasks of system work-arounds to compensate for the underutilization of Accela.

During Implementation

- Most tasks associated with this initiative will require technical expertise, which could be time-consuming and may take MIS time away from other department priorities. To mitigate this risk, Permit Sonoma should include multiple MIS staff members on the AIT to divide task assignments into manageable amounts. Permit Sonoma should also leverage existing contracts with Accela configuration support resources.
- This initiative is complex and consists of many different assignments, which requires heavy cross-functional representation throughout the department to accomplish tasks. With multiple tasks to complete, a risk exists that tasks may fall out of priority or be overlooked. To mitigate this risk, a strong project management protocol is essential to run the AIT. A work plan and schedule will help keep tasks on track. Revisiting and adjusting the work plan and schedule throughout the process is critical to maintain a realistic and up-to-date schedule.

Post-Implementation

- After implementation, process improvements and regulatory changes in the department may require changes in Accela. Accela must stay current with regulatory and process changes. If it does not, inaccurate information could be provided to applicants and other staff members who use the system. This could result in communication breakdowns that could adversely impact customer service.

Implementation Timeline

Priority		Complexity
	This initiative should start in month 1 and be completed by month 12.	

Best Practice Considerations

Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

| | Online application submittal, electronic plan review, use of required fields, and application status transparency are leading practices that are becoming more common.

Manatee County, Florida, has developed a webpage focused on assisting applicants using DPR.

Maricopa County, Arizona, allows detailed application look-up functionality in its Accela Civic Portal. This includes a visual display of application processing status, including the steps the application has gone through, the current application status, and remaining processing steps. Permit Sonoma has the same functionality enabled; however, the processing status details are not as helpful. For example, most applications include descriptions for processing status steps, including "Marked as TBD on TBD by TBD."

Permit Sonoma has two contracts with vendors that could assist with Accela configuration updates. There contracts are with IKC Consulting, LCC and Grey Quarter, Inc. |

4.6. Establish Contracts With Third-Party Plan Reviewers

Table 4.6: Establish Contracts With Third-Party Plan Reviewers

Establish Contracts With Third-Party Plan Reviewers
Initiative Summary

| | Permit Sonoma should establish contracts with third-party plan review companies to assist with completing technical reviews of applications. These as-needed resources should be used for one-time efforts to clear backlogs and then on an ongoing basis to provide supplemental review assistance when application volume in a defined period exceeds the capacity of Permit Sonoma staff to complete the review in accordance with target review time frames.

Permit Sonoma should start this initiative focused on permits that have the longest current application review time frames and time frames from submission to issuance. Based on the Accela data provided and the information available on the Permit Sonoma performance dashboard, these application types should include: septic, well, grading, encroachment, and building with plan check. |

Related Issue(s)

- Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Work with the County's procurement process to select third-party plan review companies.** At least two firms should be selected. One firm can serve as on-call support if the primary firm is temporarily unavailable or if additional support is needed that exceeds the staffing capacity of the primary firm. The backup firm can also be a resource to call upon during emergencies that impact staffing availability of the department.

☑ **Task 2: Train selected firms in Permit Sonoma processes.** Firms should be provided an overview of Permit Sonoma processes and be trained on the Accela system.

Establish Contracts With Third-Party Plan Reviewers

☑ **Task 3: Permit Sonoma should initiate a three-month initiative rollout, having the third-party reviewers handle an increased number of applications to allow Permit Sonoma staff to focus on a timelier resolution to previously submitted applications.** For example, for the first month, the third-party reviewers take 75% of new applications; for the second month, they take 50% of new applications; and in the third month, they take 25% of new applications. In the second and third months, the third-party reviewers should also supplement the new applications with existing applications in an effort to clear permit backlogs. The third-party reviewer should continue to help clear the backlog, even after conclusion of the three-month rollout.

- During the three-month rollout, Permit Sonoma should establish biweekly meetings with the third-party reviewing firm so that both the department and the firm can discuss updates, initiatives, and any current or anticipated issues or challenges. Coordination throughout the process helps maintain the integrity of the process and prevent communication breakdowns.

☑ **Task 4: Once the backlog has been cleared and applications are being processed within the review time frame targets established in initiative 4.2, the third-party reviewing firms should be used an ongoing basis to help ensure application time frame targets are being met.** Permit Sonoma should determine the maximum application load the staff can absorb while still meeting time frame targets. Once that application threshold has been met, the third-party firm should receive all additional applications beyond the maximum application load amount. In its ongoing review of permits, the third-party reviewing firm should still continue to meet application timeline targets established by the department.

Anticipated Benefits

- Applicants will receive more timely responses in the plan review process. This will help them receive feedback in accordance with the targeted time frames established.

- This initiative can increase staff morale as additional help from the third-party reviewer assists in clearing permit backlogs. The ongoing work of the firm will help keep department staff from becoming overworked.

Risks

No Action:

- Permit backlogs might continue and expand, which can negatively impact customer service delivery and result in public frustrations.

- Permit Sonoma staff may become overworked due to application volume that exceeds staffing capacity. This may have a negative impact on morale. Risk of staff burnout is also possible.

During Implementation

- The third-party firm may experience staffing issues of its own at some point. If this occurs, start the process to engage the on-call firm. Permit Sonoma should keep the on-call firm up-to-date with changes to Accela and the plan review process in case it is called on to help.

- During the initial three-month rollout, minor inconsistencies in plan review results could occur as the third-party begins to pick up plan review assignments. The third-party reviewer may have a high and quick learning curve as it becomes familiar with the department's specific process and requirements. This may result in slight differences in plan review as applications

Establish Contracts With Third-Party Plan Reviewers
transition from Permit Sonoma and the third-party firm. The biweekly meetings will help ensure communication during this process and help resolve any inconsistencies that develop during the process. These inconsistencies should decrease by the end of the three-month rollout.

Implementation Timeline		
Priority	This initiative should start immediately, with the RFP drafted and issued in month 1. Firms should be selected and trained (task 2) in months 4 and 5 and they should start working to clear application backlogs in month 4. After three months of third-party review assistance (months 5 – 7), there should be a shift to use the third-party firms on an as-needed basis.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations	
	Using third-party plan review firms to supplement review capacity is an established process widely adopted across the country. Permit Sonoma has used third-party plan reviews in the past.

4.7 Implement a Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal Process

Table 4.7: Implement a Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal Process

Implement a Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal Process
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should adopt a process designed to focus the review of resubmitted applications on items that changed based on previous comments. After the initial review, comments should be provided back to applicants in a clear and numbered list. As part of the resubmittal process, applicants should provide a written response to each comment, in addition to providing updated versions of the changed plans. Permit Sonoma's review of resubmittals should focus on the previously provided comments and any other indirect changes made to address the comment.
Related Issue(s)

- Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.
- Process, procedure, and training documentation is not available.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Develop a template for a checklist to create a standard, consistent format for all application types.** This template should be centrally located and easily accessible for Permit Sonoma staff. At a minimum, the template should contain basic information, such as the date of review, the review round (first, second, third review…), plan-identified data (date of plan, title of project, property owner, applicant, and so on). The template should also provide comment fields and corresponding fields for applicant responses to the comments. The template should include a clear numbering system.
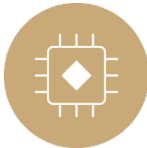
Implement a Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal Process

☑ **Task 2: Develop standard comments for use in plan review.** Standard, succinct, comments should be developed for all plan reviewers to access. A file should be maintained centrally with changes approved by Division Managers. The comments should include regulation references and where appropriate, include a placeholder for staff to update based on application specific details. As Accela improvements are made, these standard comments could be added into Accela and available to plan reviewers.

☑ **Task 3: When completing a plan review, the staff member assigned to the project should note comments using the template.** Standard comments should be used as the basis for comments added to the template. Where possible, include a regulation reference number that the comment corresponds to (For example, "Zoning Regulations – Parking Requirements, Section X.X").

☑ **Task 4: Provide comments to the applicant on the prescribed form.** This form should be integrated into Accela in the future, but after other Accela improvements (initiatives 4.3 – 4.5) are implemented. In the interim, this form should be provided back to applicants as a separate file that accompanies marked-up plan files.

☑ **Task 5: Upon resubmittal of plans, the applicant should provide a response to each staff comment on the form provided.** The response should include a description of how the comment was resolved (for example: "Plans amended to add two more parking spaces in accordance with the parking requirements in the Zoning Regulations.")

☑ **Task 6: When staff review the applicant's resubmittal and responses to comments, staff should confirm whether the issue was resolved to staff satisfaction.** The County should consider providing two checkboxes on the template for each comment field. The checkboxes will note that either the comment was resolved, or that the comment has to be reissued in the next round of staff comments.

☑ **Task 7: For comments that have to be reissued to the applicant for resolution, the staff member should note why it needs to be reissued** (for example: "Parking spaces added to the plans do not meet the size requirement in accordance with Zoning Regulations – Parking Requirements, Section X.X"). If comments are reissued, retain the comment numbering system established in the initial review for easy identification and tracking.

☑ **Task 8: New comments after the initial review should be avoided where possible. In the event that a new comment has to be provided, a protocol should be developed so that these issues are handled with consistency from one project to the next.** This protocol should provide that the staff member should review the new comment with the Department Director. This approval process is recommended to help identify training or other consistency gaps within a section's or division's review team. Additionally, a clear description of the reason for the new comment should be communicated back to the applicant. To minimize the negative impact on trust between staff and applicant, BerryDunn recommends that the staff member have a phone, video chat, or in-person conversation with the applicant to explain the reason for the new comment.

Anticipated Benefits

- Increases predictability in the process for applicants.
- Makes the staff more accountable, which builds trust between Permit Sonoma staff and the public.

Implement a Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal Process
• Helps identify staff training needs. Addressing training needs can help build more creditability for the staff.

Risks
No Action: • Predictability in the plan review process will suffer because applicants can receive new comments, they were not anticipating in subsequent plan review rounds.   • New staff comments provided in subsequent submittal rounds can cost the applicant time and money to resolve. This could increase frustration for applicants and have a negative impact on customer service.   • New comments in subsequent submittal rounds can erode public trust and have detrimental impacts on public relations.

Implementation Timeline		
Priority	This initiative could be started immediately but should be continually revisited as changes to application status and other Accela improvements are made. This initiative should start in month 1 and checklists should be developed and fully implemented by month 4.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations
The use of review checklists with a process for direct applicant response to comments is a broadly adopted practice. As DPR is implemented, having separate checklist forms circulated with applicants should be phased out in favor of having this comment identification, applicant response, and comment resolution process managed in DPR.   The International Code Council offers plan review checklists for purchase and download that could be purchased and adopted to meet Permit Sonoma's specific plan review requirements.

4.8. Implement Time Accounting in Accela and Develop a Policy for Plan Review Time Tracking

**Table 4.8: Implement Time Accounting in Accela and
Develop a Policy for Plan Review Time Tracking**

Implement Time Accounting in Accela and Develop a Policy for Plan Review Time Tracking
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should move all time tracking for at-cost fees to be managed in Accela. This includes implementing Accela time-tracking and invoicing functionality, which would replace the functionality currently managed in the Dimensions system.   Permit Sonoma should also develop and implement a time-tracking policy that includes the following elements:

Implement Time Accounting in Accela and Develop a Policy for Plan Review Time Tracking

	- Daily entry of staff review time and release to be available to applicants in real-time - Further defining the project cost-estimation process described in the fee schedule to include providing overall hours estimate to the applicant after initial application review - Monthly reports, provided to applicants for all in-progress applications, containing the percentage of hours expended against the initial estimate, the percentage of completion for the application, description of remaining activities, and an updated hours and expense estimate

Related Issue(s)
• Applicants lack certainty regarding application review costs.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Expand Accela time accounting and invoicing functionality.** Using internal and consultant resources from IKC Consulting, Permit Sonoma should configure, text, and deploy the time accounting and invoicing functionality within Accela. This should include a limited period of parallel processing between Accela and Dimensions.

☑ **Task 2: Develop and publish plan review time-tracking policy.** Concurrent with task 1, Permit Sonoma should develop, adopt, and publish a time-tracking policy. This policy should include process instruction for daily entry of staff review time and release to be available to applicants in real-time. This policy should also further define the project cost-estimation process described in the fee schedule to include providing overall hours estimate to the applicant after initial application review. This policy should also establish format, content, and communication methods for a monthly report to applicants of in-progress applications containing the percentage of hours expended against the initial estimate, the percentage of completion for the application, description of remaining activities, and an updated hours and expense estimate.

☑ **Task 3: Annually update minimum fees so the minimum fee represents the average cost for the previous year.** The minimum fee amounts should be updated annually to reflect the average cost for completed applications of that type during the previous year.

☑ **Task 4: Evaluate moving to a flat fee.** After two complete fiscal years of calculating the average cost for each application type, Permit Sonoma should explore moving to a flat fee for planning application review. This flat fee would still be revisited annually to align with actual costs to provide service, but it would eliminate the time-tracking and invoicing process.

Anticipated Benefits

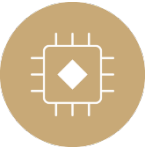|	- Customers are provided more timely information related to staff review time and application costs. - Review staff do not need to use separate systems for completing review activities and logging time. - Review timelines are quantified to measure service delivery performance. Targets are established and published to help staff and applicants measure progress in terms of increasing outputs, enhancing the quality of outcomes, and allowing a transparent look into whether Permit Sonoma is meeting objectives.

Implement Time Accounting in Accela and Develop a Policy for Plan Review Time Tracking
Risks
No Action: • Customers will continue to experience a lack of certainty regarding application review fees and timelines. • Staff will continue to use separate systems to record review information and review time.
During Implementation • Staff may be resistant to the process change involved with entering time on a daily basis.
After Implementation • The roles of staff involved in the invoicing process may change. Proactive adjustments to roles and responsibilities of staff involved in the invoicing process is recommended. • Staff will continue to analyze aggregate review time and review cost data to report on the trajectory of Permit Sonoma performance and service delivery quality over time.
Implementation Timeline

Priority		Complexity
⚠️	This initiative should start in month 5 and be implemented by month 8 and then evaluated annually.	⚙️⚙️⚙️

Best Practice Considerations
Tracking time for planning and permitting applications for the purposes of fee calculation is a common practice across the country. In some areas, managing deposit accounts for applicants is a common method for tracking time expense against a project. Establishing and posting a policy for time tracking is less common among similar organizations.

4.9. Expand and Promote Third-Party Review Process for Select Application Types

Table 4.9: Expand and Promote Third-Party Review Process for Select Application Types

Expand and Promote Third-Party Review Process for Select Application Types
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should modify and expand the TPPC program. The TPPC program allows applicants to utilize a preapproved outside consultant to complete plan review. The purpose of this initiative it to modify, promote, and expand this program. Currently the TPPC program is available for building plan review. Permit Sonoma staff estimated that approximately 5% of current building permit applications with plan review are processed through the TPPC program. Key changes to this program include modifying the fees required for applications in this program, promoting it as an option to customers, and expanding the program to additional application types. Permit Sonoma should consider expanding the TPPC

Expand and Promote Third-Party Review Process for Select Application Types
program to permits issued by Engineering & Water Resources and Well & Septic sections. Appendix A includes recommended application types for program expansion.

Related Issue(s)
• Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Review historical TPPC program use.** Analyze TPPC use over the last two years. This should include reviewing volume by application type, average time from application submission to permit issuance, and fee revenue collected.

☑ **Task 2: Revisit list of preferred third-party reviews.** Permit Sonoma currently lists seven approved TPPC consultants. This list was last updated in September 2021. This list should be confirmed for accuracy before the TPPC program is promoted.

☑ **Task 3: Revise the TPPC fee.** Currently, applicants who submit through the TPPC process pay the full application fee to the County and pay fees separately to the consultant. Because permit application review fees are based on the staff time required to conduct both administrative and plan review processes associated with managing an application, a reduction in time required to complete plan review may also result in a reduced fee. Permit Sonoma should consider a 25% reduction in permit fees for applications submitted following a TPPC process.

☑ **Task 4: Develop a workflow process and video for the TPPC process.** The current narrative description included on the Permit Sonoma website should be converted into a process flow diagram. A video should also be created and published on the Permit Sonoma YouTube channel. This flow chart and video should be added to the existing TPPC webpage.

☑ **Task 5: Evaluate the third-party review program on a quarterly basis.** Permit Sonoma should evaluate the program at least quarterly to review program adoption, performance of third-party firms, revenue impacts, and possible program modifications (e.g., adding a new application type).

Anticipated Benefits

- Customers are provided an alternate review process that may expedite their project approval.
- Permit Sonoma is seen as innovative and responsive to customer feedback on application review time frames.

Risks

No Action:

- Permit backlogs may continue and expand. This can negatively impact customer service delivery and result in frustrations from the public.

During Implementation

- Staff may not be supportive of expanding this alternate process. This initiative should have executive support, and staff should promote the program positively as an option for applicants to consider.

After Implementation

Expand and Promote Third-Party Review Process for Select Application Types
• If this program is extremely popular, the reduced fee revenue collected by Permit Sonoma could affect the department budget.

Implementation Timeline		
Priority	This initiative should start in month 5 and be implemented by month 8 and then evaluated quarterly.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations	
	Alternate, third-party review processes are established in some parts of the country but have not been broadly adopted. These programs are statutorily required in Florida and have been adopted by large counties in the District of Columbia region.

4.10. Implement a Self-Certification Program for Select Application Types

Table 4.10: Implement a Self-Certification Program for Select Application Types

Implement a Self-Certification Program for Select Application Types
Initiative Summary
This program would eliminate staff review of plans for select application types where a registered professional is assuming additional responsibility. In this program, a registered professional (e.g., architect, professional engineer, landscape architect) takes responsibility for and certifies a project's compliance with all applicable building codes, standards, and ordinances. Permit Sonoma should pilot this program with regular grading permits. Additional application types should include private driveways, minor private roads, landscape, small commercial tenant improvements, and minor traffic control.
Related Issue(s)
• Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.
Action Items to Implement
☑ **Task 1: Determine eligible self-certification plan reviews.** Each division and/or section that processes plan reviews should review application requirements for all application types and identify applications eligible for the self-certification program. Permit Sonoma should start with plan reviews associated with regular grading permits.
☑ **Task 2: Start by identifying a single type of plan review that could be eligible for self-certification.** For example, grading plan/site plan could be eligible for self-certification. Develop a list of all application types for which a landscape plan would be required.

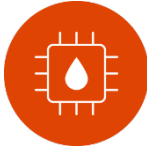| Implement a Self-Certification Program for Select Application Types |
|---|

☑ **Task 3: Determine requirements to self-certify.** Using the example provided, for grading plans, a signed and sealed letter from a licensed professional (i.e., architect, civil engineer, landscape architect, professional geologist, registered professional forester) could be a requirement.

☑ **Task 4: Standardize the requirements for consistency between self-certified plans.** For example, following the letter required in task 3, there should be standard requirements that each letter should contain. For grading plan certification, each letter should contain language that confirms the grading was completed in accordance with approved grading plans. The landscape architect could also certify that the completed grading meets size, type, and location requirements as identified on the approved grading plans.

☑ **Task 5: Develop a guide with established protocols to share with all Permit Sonoma staff who perform plan reviews.** Conduct a meeting to review the program process and requirements. All staff members who perform plan reviews should attend the meeting. The guide should be centrally located in a department shared file system. This guide should be updated as new protocols are established for additional application types in the program.

☑ **Task 6: Before the program launch date, develop a public information campaign to inform the public of the new program**. When developing the public informational process, consider the steps below:

- Who needs to be informed: in addition to the public at large, are there stakeholder groups that should be informed of the new process?
- How they will be informed: notifications on the website, Accela application portal, communicating new requirements by attending meetings of stakeholder groups.
- What they need to know to self-certify: Review of the self-certification process and requirements.
- Launch date of the program.
- Program next steps: communicate plans for application types that are next in the queue for self-certification.

☑ **Task 7: Launch the program for a type of plan review.**

☑ **Task 8: Monitor the program.** Plan to meet at the end of each month for the first three months of the program launch to discuss experience. Evaluate program effectiveness, discuss challenges, and adjust the program requirements as needed. Document lessons learned that can be applied to future application types under the program.

☑ **Task 9: At the end of the third month, start program development for the next plan type and repeat tasks 2 – 8.** As additional review types are added to the program, the monitoring step (task 8) could be abbreviated (e.g., one month of monitoring before deploying a new plan review type). Additional application types to explore inclusion in a self-certification program include: stormwater permits, well, and septic permits.

Anticipated Benefits

- Streamlines the requirements and shortens the plan review process.
- Offers an incentive to the applicants, which can have a positive impact on customer service.
- Builds trust between the development community and Permit Sonoma. The program is trusting trained and certified professionals to certify plans, which has

Implement a Self-Certification Program for Select Application Types

a positive impact on the relationship between Permit Sonoma and the development community.

- Saves staff time because staff do not have to review self-certified plans.
- Creates less risk for staff. When staff perform plan review, a risk always exists of a requirement being missed or overlooked, which can negatively impact creditability. When an applicant self-certifies, it removes this risk from the staff.

Risks

No Action:

- The plan review process will remain as is. Staff will continue to spend the time checking plans for compliance. This is time that would be allocated to other department priorities under a self-certification program.

During Implementation

- Implementing this program may require staff time to implement.
- During the development of certification requirements, Permit Sonoma staff will need to be careful not to oversimplify the process. The decision to provide a self-certification process for an application type must be carefully considered with the review of all existing plan review requirements to help ensure the application type is a strong candidate for self-certification.

Post-Implementation

- Land use approvals may have conditions attached to them. These conditions can get lost in the self-certification process. To mitigate this risk, when developing certification requirements, Permit Sonoma should make sure the process includes the potential presence of conditions of approval.

Implementation Timeline

Priority

This initiative should start in month 6, with the first self-certification plan launched in month 9.

Complexity

Best Practice Considerations

Self-certification programs have been growing in popularity but still remain relatively rare. As Permit Sonoma implements a self-certification program, it will be important to start small and allow adequate analysis and feedback. A risk exists of starting too large and then having the public negatively respond to the program scale-back.

San Diego County, California, has had a self-certification process for over 10 years. San Diego County currently allows the following project types: Minor Grading – No House, Small Commercial Tennant Improvement, Private Driveways, Private Road – 4 Houses Max, Landscape, Residential Minor Grading, and Minor Traffic Control.

4.11 Establish a Customer Service Framework

Table 4.11: Establish a Customer Service Framework

Establish a Customer Service Framework
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should develop a customer service policy, create a Customer Service Committee (CSC), develop a customer satisfaction measurement system, develop a customer complaint submission process, and provide public access to performance data.
Related Issue(s)
• Permit Sonoma does not have a detailed customer service framework.   • Policies for responding to customer inquiries are inconsistent.
Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Establish a CSC.** A CSC will have the responsibility of improving the overall service system of the department and implementing initiatives related to the department's customer service goals. The CSC should meet regularly, develop a team charter, represent all divisions and levels of the department, and include a manager or deputy director as the committee's sponsor. The CSC should monitor progress of annual goals.

☑ **Task 2: The CSC should establish a work plan and schedule to guide customer service improvement initiatives under the committee's charge, prioritizing more critical issues.**

☑ **Task 3: The CSC should consider establishing a customer service policy for the department as the first priority item.** Developing a policy will help frame the issue and the goals for remedying the issue. A customer service policy should establish a vision/mission and goals that align with a uniform standard for customer interactions and feedback.

☑ **Task 4: The CSC should operationalize a customer focus throughout the department.** To operationalize a customer focus, the CSC should include the following actions, which should also be reaffirmed in the CSC work plan.

    a. Create a customer service category of the employee recognition program with transparent nomination and selection methods

    b. Align the department with a customer service focus through emphasizing the importance of service through recruitment, hiring, orientation, and the performance feedback process

    c. Share results of customer satisfaction measurement systems with the rest of the department, department and County leadership, BOS, and community members

    d. Develop an internal support service training program

    e. Promote a customer service campaign internally and externally

    f. Improve service provision support: technology, resources, job training, and upper-level management

☑ **Task 5: The CSC should create a customer service campaign.** The committee should create a brand, logo, and name. These actions will help operationalize the service culture and help employees understand the emphasis the department places on service. This requires internal marketing efforts to instill a customer service attitude throughout the organization. Additionally, the

committee could develop a service newsletter to reinforce the work conducted by the group and expand the recognition program related to service. This task should also include updating the purpose and refreshing the membership for the Director's Advisory Group (DAG). The DAG could play a key role in implementing this initiative; however, the membership should be revisited and refreshed if needed to confirm broad representation and mixed perspectives (e.g., frequent applicants, infrequent applicants, large companies, single individual applicants).

☑ **Task 6: The CSC should develop a customer service measurement system and create a flowchart and sequence of steps involved in the customer satisfaction measurement process.** The CSC should continue its customer surveying and consider expanding survey feedback to all parts of the service delivery system regularly or in real-time. This survey should also provide an opportunity for customers to submit complaints. If a survey response is provided as a complaint, the survey form should also prompt the customer to provide additional information (e.g., permit number, request for a meeting with a Division Manager). A separate complaint process may be considered if a single survey creates administrative challenges; however, there is value in having all customer service feedback information come through a single channel. The CSC should also increase the methods of measurement to include types of measurement beyond surveys and program evaluation. The CSC should help ensure that all areas of the County are participating in the measurement process. It would be useful to track the results on a trend chart and share results annually with the BOS, department leadership, and staff, showing visual evidence of a commitment to customer service.

☑ **Task 7: In follow-up to results from customer surveying, the CSC should develop a prioritized list of customer service improvements as a result of feedback received.** These improvements should be coordinated with the overall work plan and schedule for the committee. This process should also include a mechanism to communicate improvements back to the public. This helps build accountability and trust.

☑ **Task 8: The CSC should continue to provide public access to key performance data.** Permit Sonoma currently provides real-time dashboards that show how long a permit is taking to issue. The public finds these dashboards helpful in managing expectations on the time it will take to obtain permits. Permit Sonoma should continue to maintain these dashboards on the website and update them with accurate data from the Accela system.

☑ **Task 9: Identify key customer requirements.** The CSC should create a list of key customer requirements for each core function of Permit Sonoma. The customer requirements are simply those attributes most important to the customer. Ideally, the customer should determine the requirements, but staff members who work closest to the customer could provide input. The CSC can collect and monitor this information.

☑ **Task 10: The CSC should develop a plan to improve internal support systems.** The plan should include developing an internal customer satisfaction survey process, identifying the most significant internal support process, developing a more robust reward and recognition system related to excellence in service delivery, and creating ways to communicate service success through newsletters or emails.

☑ **Task 11: The CSC should implement a system-wide customer service training program.** Ongoing customer service training should be provided to Permit Sonoma staff members. Training can be in the form of in-person training, workshops, and videos. The training program should also embed ongoing, small-scale customer service training in professional development curriculum,

Establish a Customer Service Framework

including initial onboarding sessions and division-specific classes. Permit Sonoma staff should be surveyed to gauge effectiveness of the training program.

☑ **Task 12: The CSC should develop a customer awareness and education campaign.** This campaign should focus on the needs of the customer. Educational tools may include website, lunch and learn sessions, educational public events, and quarterly virtual sessions**.**

☑ **Task 13: Coordinate a quarterly department newsletter with the SOP team and process improvement committee (PIC) that communicates updates from the three committees.**

Anticipated Benefits

- A customer service framework can improve customer service, which fosters relationship building between the department and the public.
- Actions under this initiative can decrease the occurrences of negative feedback received from customers.
- Positive customer service experiences can boost staff morale and build momentum to make additional customer service improvements.

Risks

No Action:

- Customer service may continue to suffer, resulting in tension between the department and the public. This can have an adverse impact on department accountability and credibility and may result in public distrust.

During Implementation

- Improving the customer service system will be a significant undertaking and may be one of the top department priorities. Establishing a framework and implementing improvements will require significant staff time and resources. However, there is more to gain in creating quality customer service by implementing improvements.

Implementation Timeline

Priority

This initiative should start in month 6. Tasks 1 – 3 should be completed by month 9.

Complexity

Best Practice Considerations

Many organizations have adopted portions of a customer service framework; however, a central framework has not been broadly adopted.

Waukesha County, Wisconsin, has a customer service focused webpage with a survey and data displaying customer satisfaction results. Although the County Executive's Office runs this program, a similar survey and real-time reporting tool could be established specific to Permit Sonoma.

Establish a Customer Service Framework
San Diego County, California, has a customer service survey on the Auditor and Controller's website that allows ratings specific to target area (helpfulness, expertise, attentiveness, respect, and timeliness). Permit Sonoma could adopt a similar survey that allows specific customer service target areas to be evaluated.

4.12 Centralize Process Improvement and Establish a Governance Process

Table 4.12: Centralize Process Improvement and Establish a Governance Process

Centralize Process Improvement and Establish a Governance Process
Initiative Summary
Permit Sonoma should have a standard process for submitting, evaluating, and implementing process improvements. Some divisions are working on business process improvements. Staff reported many in-progress improvements and plans; however, staff stated priorities and dates are not communicated and enforced as new requests are made. This centralized process should include improvements to Accela and other software tools. Permit Sonoma should establish a process improvement governance committee. This committee would coordinate closely with the CSC and may have some overlap in membership, but the process improvement governance committee should also focus on internal improvements that will not directly contribute to customer service (e.g., improving the time entry and invoicing process, updating internal system training materials after system updates).
Related Issue(s)
• Business process improvement efforts lack effective governance. • There is not a change control process for implementing Accela system changes.
Action Items to Implement
☑ **Task 1: Permit Sonoma should develop a PIC.** Department leadership should lead the PIC, which should be cross-functional, consisting of representatives from different divisions and throughout department tiers. ☑ **Task 2: The PIC should inventory all process improvements and develop an organized structure that states the process improvement, its purpose, responsible staff members, and the status of the improvement.** This inventory should be centrally and electronically located where the PIC will have access to it. ☑ **Task 3: The PIC should prioritize the improvements on the inventory, giving greater weight to items that can yield the greater returns in improved customer service, quality of life in the workplace, and job performance.** ☑ **Task 4: If possible, use a central, electronic communication tool to help with group coordination**. A Teams Channel on Microsoft 365 is an effective tool that can allow real-time communication, updates, and file-sharing. ☑ **Task 5: The PIC should be a committee that not only tracks the progress of improvements but also operates as a think tank.** This committee should meet monthly. Participants should

Centralize Process Improvement and Establish a Governance Process

update the group on the progress of the improvements they are developing. In addition, the committee should provide an opportunity for participants to bring issues to the PIC for thoughts on how to work through challenges and dilemmas in process improvement development.

☑ **Task 6: The PIC should develop a communication plan for the rollout of finalized process improvements.** This communication plan should include how each improvement will be rolled out to department staff members. PIC members should also act as ambassadors who can reinforce the importance and purpose of the improvements with their divisions/sections and as liaisons who can provide support with implementing the improvements.

☑ **Task 7: The PIC should develop an education and awareness plan for each improvement.** The plan should include a process for educating staff members on the new improvement. In this part of the process, staff members responsible for direct implementation of the improvement should be educated and trained. Secondarily, staff members who may be indirectly involved in the process improvement should be educated on the improvement from the standpoint of providing general awareness. These individuals might not have direct implementation responsibility, but awareness of the improvement can help inform how they approach work assignments or how the improvement changes process or job duties for colleagues they work closely with. Communicating awareness can be implemented through email or staff meetings.

☑ **Task 8: A governance subcommittee should be part of the PIC.** The governance subcommittee should have a liaison who is also part of the CSC. In coordination with the efforts of the CSC, this subcommittee would focus on process improvements that will improve internal processes of the department. Process improvements of the governance subcommittee should also be part of the larger PIC inventory, as described in task 2.

☑ **Task 9: Foster a culture of continuous process improvement.** To foster a culture of continuous process improvement and team building, the PIC should develop a system that would allow Permit Sonoma staff to make suggestions for process improvements. This could occur through a comment box on a department webpage or through a common email address that is solely for the purpose of continuous process improvement recommendations. A representative from the PIC should monitor the suggestions submitted and bring them to the PIC for discussion.

☑ **Task 10: Coordinate a quarterly department newsletter with the SOP team and CSC that communicates updates from the two committees.**

Anticipated Benefits
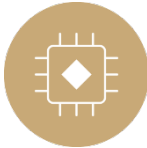
- A centralized process for process improvements will help keep Permit Sonoma staff focused on completing items that will yield the greatest benefit for the department and customers.
- This governance process will help ensure that in-progress initiatives are completed and evaluate the resource impacts of taking on new initiatives.

Risks

No Action:

- Process improvements will continue to lack structure. This could lead to stalled process improvements or a lack of prioritization of improvements.
- A lack of structure for process improvements may also lead to a duplication of efforts, which can exhaust staff time that could be focused on other essential improvements.

Centralize Process Improvement and Establish a Governance Process

During Implementation

- Process improvements can take time to develop and implement. This may have an impact on available staff time. Development of a process improvement structure may also require a change in staff work priorities as the improvements will require a schedule for implementation.

Implementation Timeline

Priority		Complexity
⚠️	This initiative should start in month 10, after the other initiatives in this report have been completed or are in monitoring/evaluation phases. Task 2 should be complete by month 12.	⚙️⚙️

Best Practice Considerations

Governance processes for evaluating and deploying process and system improvements are broadly adopted. The Project Management Institute® has resources specific to project governance and establishing change control boards that will be helpful for Permit Sonoma to reference. Permit Sonoma may even consider having one or more members of the PIC obtain their Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) certification.

4.13 Develop SOPs and Training Materials

Table 4.13: Develop SOPs and Training Materials

Develop SOPs and Training Materials

Initiative Summary

Establishing SOPs provides staff with clear guidance on department processes and procedures to help ensure consistency across the department. SOPs can help streamline processes and improve cross-division communication and collaboration. SOPs help ensure that staff are providing consistent services to customers, and customers know what to expect when they work with multiple divisions.

As part of this initiative, Permit Sonoma should conduct a process diagramming and analysis effort. This exercise will create diagrams for inclusion in SOPs and training materials, but will also help identify areas of process inefficiency, duplicative steps, and other areas for potential process improvement.

Internal process documentation and system training materials should be developed for each application or record type. This should include overall process diagrams, desk-level procedures, and software training materials. Code Enforcement currently has a policy and procedure manual, and Planning has started development.

Related Issue(s)

- Process, procedure, and training documentation is not available.

Action Items to Implement

Develop SOPs and Training Materials
☑ **Task 1: Permit Sonoma should develop an SOP team.** This team should be cross-functional, consisting of representatives from different divisions and throughout department tiers. A staff member in the upper-management tier of the department should lead the team.
☑ **Task 2: The SOP team should take inventory of all existing SOPs and develop an organized structure that states the process improvement, its purpose, responsible staff members, and the status of the improvement.** This inventory should be centrally and electronically located where the PIC will have access to it. A universal SOP template should be developed. The template should help organize each SOP and make it easy to follow. The template will create consistency in format between SOPs.
☑ **Task 3: The SOP team should share the inventory of existing SOPs with department managers and supervisors and request feedback on SOPs that need to be developed.** SOP needs should be prioritized, with ones having the greatest impact on customer service improvement, quality of life in the workplace, and job performance being handled first.
☑ **Task 4: The SOP team should work with individual divisions/sections to develop SOPs. The team should develop a schedule that prioritizes the SOPs that need to be developed and provides a time frame for development and implementation.** The schedule should also include the names staff members who will be involved in developing each SOP. This SOP should include a process diagram for each process. The staff members from the respective divisions/sections should develop the SOP using the template. Each SOP development process should have an assigned SOP team member. The SOP team member will help keep the development of the SOP on track, provide technical support where needed, and operate as a liaison between the SOP development staff and the SOP team.
☑ **Task 5: The SOP team should have a liaison who works with the PIC and the CSC. The liaison should help orchestrate SOPs that need to be developed based on new process improvements and CSC improvements.** The liaison should work with PIC and CSC members to develop an SOP using the template.
☑ **Task 6: The SOP team should develop a communication system that communicates SOP updates to the department.** Coordinate a quarterly department newsletter with the PIC and CSC that communicates updates from the three committees.

Anticipated Benefits
- New staff joining Permit Sonoma will have clear documentation on department processes.   - Consistency will be improved by having standard procedures to follow.

Risks
No Action:
- SOPs standardize and bring consistency to process. In absence of SOPs, inconsistencies in process may develop, which could confuse staff members and the public.   - Lack of a unified, standardized SOP structure could create uneven communication of SOPs across the department, which can result in misperceptions of process.
During Implementation

Develop SOPs and Training Materials
• SOP development can take time to create and implement. This may have an impact on available staff time. Development of SOPs may also require a change in staff work priorities as the improvements will require a schedule for implementation. **Post-Implementation** • Without a strong line of communication between the PIC, CSC, and the SOP team, there is a risk that new improvements developed from the CSC or PIC may lack coordination with the SOP team's inventory. This could result in an SOP inventory that is not current with new changes in the department. Ongoing communication between the three groups can help ensure proper coordination with the SOP inventory.

Implementation Timeline		
Priority	This initiative should start in month 11, after the other initiatives in this report have been completed or are in monitoring/evaluation phases. Task 3 should be complete by month 13.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations	
	Although creating and maintaining SOPs and training documents are a best practice, organizations are challenged to maintain documents over time as process and technology changes are implemented. Permit Sonoma should use a standard template in Microsoft Visio for creation of process diagrams used in SOPs. Permit Sonoma has extensive instruction and forms webpages and forms to support different applications. These files could serve as the foundation for developing internal procedure files and creating visual process diagrams to help communicate the process internally and to customers. Sacramento County, California, has customer-facing workflow process diagrams for the encroachment permitting processes. After internal staff operating procedures and training documents are developed, Permit Sonoma should develop process flow documents for customers.
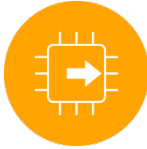
4.14 Provide Opportunities for Customers to Learn About Permit Sonoma

Table 4.14: Provide Opportunities for Customers to Learn About Permit Sonoma

Provide Opportunities for Customers to Learn About Permit Sonoma
Initiative Summary
Establishing an information bulletin on the Permit Sonoma website or hosting lunch and learn sessions can help educate the public on Permit Sonoma business processes and application types. Topics can range from department business processes for different application types to expectations for customers submitting applications. Informational bulletins or lunch and learn sessions can also be used to educate on new County

Provide Opportunities for Customers to Learn About Permit Sonoma
ordinances or provide customers the opportunity to provide feedback on how new initiatives are working.

Related Issue(s)

- Applicants are not provided time frames for how long applications processes should take.
- Application review time frames are longer than customer expectations.

Action Items to Implement

☑ **Task 1: Develop an education campaign.** A team of Permit Sonoma staff members should develop a plan that will describe educational events and tools to help educate customers about the department and what the department does. In developing the plan, include possible internal and external resources who can help implement the plan and budget implications. For example, lunch and learns may require funding or possible sponsorship for food.

☑ **Task 2: Solicit feedback from the public.** Permit Sonoma should issue a survey to the public to gauge interest in the educational campaign. Questions should include feedback on whether the survey respondent is interested in participating in educational services, their professional background (e.g., developer, resident, or environmentalist), and specific topics they are interested in hearing more about. This will help guide the creation of topics for the educational events throughout the year. Other questions can be included to help guide the framework for the educational campaign, but the survey should be kept brief. The survey should also allow the public to provide an email address so that interested respondents can be included on emails for future services and events. In administering the survey, Permit Sonoma should help ensure it is distributed in an equitable manner and is able to reach underserved populations in the County.

☑ **Task 3: Develop a schedule for education events.** Using the survey results, plan a schedule of educational events throughout the year. Topics of events may be directly related to Permit Sonoma or may be relevant to development. Topics related to development should still help the participants apply what they learn to what they do. An example of a topic that relates to the department is the self-certification program (see initiative 4.8). An example of a topic of interest that relates to development may be guidance on implementing green building techniques in development proposals. In developing these events, Permit Sonoma should consider bringing in professionals from outside agencies who may help with the subject matter. Outside agencies may include state agencies, college and university research institutions, and nonprofit advocacy organizations.

☑ **Task 4: Develop educational tools and resources to keep the public engaged throughout the year.** Educational tools could include a social media page, short videos that provide educational tips, and a webpage with recommended resources and best practices. On a webpage, Permit Sonoma should also provide department guides and brochures.

Anticipated Benefits

- Helps reinforce customer service improvements. This initiative develops the customer service role of the department, helping it become a resource for education and guidance. This can move the department from being a transactional service provider to a transformational service provider.
- Helps demonstrate Permit Sonoma as being a community resource, which will help build relationships and trust with the public.
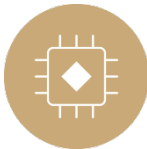
Provide Opportunities for Customers to Learn About Permit Sonoma
Risks

No Action:

- Failure to initiate an educational campaign will not impact the service the department currently provides. However, the department will miss the opportunity to implement a culture-changing educational campaign that can transform relationships with the public.

During Implementation

- An educational campaign may take significant personnel and fiscal resources to implement. However, if the campaign is done correctly, the benefits gained can outweigh the startup cost.

Implementation Timeline

Priority	This initiative should start in month 12, after other initiatives in this report have been implemented. The first educational event should occur in month 13 or 14.	**Complexity**

Best Practice Considerations

Many organizations have similar types of customer outreach programs; however, implementing these programs with a series of scheduled education events has not been broadly adopted.

The City of San Marcos, Texas, posts and distributes a monthly Planning & Development Services newsletter. The City of Portland, Oregon, Bureau of Development Services holds lunch and learn sessions that are recorded and made available on the city's YouTube channel. If Permit Sonoma adopted similar processes, they could be posted on the Permit Sonoma News webpage. A current webpage titled "Newsletter" does not load any content.

4.15 Standardize Division and Section Structure

Table 4.15: Standardize Division and Section Structure

Standardize Division and Section Structure
Initiative Summary

The organizational structure of Permit Sonoma should be updated to create greater consistency in class titles and descriptions for staff in division and section leadership roles. Consistency is also recommended in class titles for positions considered part of the department leadership team.

Related Issue(s)

- Responsibilities of staff with the same classification differ across divisions and sections.

Action Items to Implement

Standardize Division and Section Structure
☑ **Task 1: Working with the department leadership team, the Human Resources section of the department should inventory the current inconsistencies in the department organizational structure.**
☑ **Task 2: Develop a plan to resolve the inconsistencies in the organizational structure.** Research the process required to resolve the organizational structure issues and outline steps for resolution in the plan.
☑ **Task 3: Working with department leadership, prioritize organizational structural issues to resolve and implement the plan.**

Anticipated Benefits

- This initiative will help create greater clarity and consistency between class titles in the organizational structure, which will make the organizational chart easier to understand and follow.
- The leadership hierarchical structure will have more clarity, which will make the reporting structure easier to navigate.
- A defined and consistent hierarchy allows clear staff development paths.

Risks

No Action:

- The organizational structure will continue to have inconsistencies in position descriptions and class titles, which can make it challenging to understand and navigate.
- The organizational structure may be difficult to new employees to understand and may have adverse impacts on the onboarding process.

Implementation Timeline

Priority		Complexity
	This initiative should start in month 12.	

Best Practice Considerations

Consistent organization structure across all divisions and sections within a department is broadly adopted. Many different structures exist, but a common hierarchy for Permit Sonoma to consider is:

- Department Director
  - Deputy Director
    - Division Manager
      - Section Manager

San Diego County, California, has an organization chart for the Planning & Development Services department that is a good example of consistency in titles and reporting

Standardize Division and Section Structure
	structure. San Diego County uses a Director, Assistant Director, Deputy Director, Chief, and Manager structure for department and division leadership.

5.0 Initiative Implementation

This section contains an implementation timeline for recommended initiatives, describes the approach to ongoing governance, and implementation success factors.

5.1 Implementation Timeline

BerryDunn prioritized initiatives included in section 4.0 are based on when they should start. Figure 5.1 contains a visual representation and monthly sequencing for each of the 15 initiatives.

Figure 5.1: Implementation Timeline

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14

Expand OTC and Express Permits

Application Response and Review Time Frames

Standardize Statuses

Expand Task Functionality and Due Date Tracking

Expand Online Submittal, Electronic Review, Required Fields, and Status Inquiry

Contracts with Third-Party Plan Reviewers

Checklist-Based Review and Resubmittal

Time Accounting and Time-Tracking Policy

Alternate, Third-Party Review Process

Self-Certification Program

Customer Service Framework

Centralized Improvements and Governance

Standard Operating Procedures

Opportunities for Customers to Learn about Permit Sonoma

Standardize Division and Section Structure

5.2 Plan Governance

Planning, deploying, and managing improved processes, systems, technology, and service delivery mechanisms will require strong leadership and clear strategic and tactical plans to best address the County's challenges.

Once new initiatives are implemented, the County will need to actively communicate the new processes, system functions, and/or services, and their benefits, to both internal and external stakeholders. For example, the County should not expect that a self-certification program will be widely adopted unless the benefits of the program are effectively communicated, and the training is easy to attend or obtain.

New strategies create significant opportunity to change how the County manages daily operations. The County must plan for significant business process changes that streamline operations and focus on improving customer service.

5.3 Success Factors

One of the critical success factors for the implementation of these initiatives will be executive support. The County should commit to undertaking the initiatives in this document, which will require executive support to allocate the appropriate County resources, as well as help ensure that projects outside the scope of this report in current and future years are thoroughly evaluated before adjusting existing priorities.

In order to implement the initiatives in this report, it will be critical for the County to implement the recommended policies and project management practices and identify an internal resource(s) to lead the project management and initiative implementation efforts. Implementing the initiatives in this report takes not only County resources, appropriate staff, and third-party resources, but also a structured project management methodology and champion to increase the likelihood of initiative success.

BerryDunn created this report using the information gathered from County stakeholders and the results of work sessions and research activities. Active involvement on the part of County stakeholders will be necessary to continually update and refine these recommended initiatives in the coming months and years.

Appendix A: Application Types for Process Change

This appendix contains additional details on specific application or record types affected by some the OTC/Express Permits and TPPC initiatives.

OTC and Express Permits

Currently solar permits for residential rooftop solar systems are the only application type that is issued following a traditional OTC process. Additional types of permits may be obtained OTC by bringing the application into the Permit Sonoma offices; however, when applied for online, these applications are not issued the same day. Permit Sonoma should consider splitting all permits in the "Building Permit No Plan Check" category to be either an OTC (instant issuance) or Express (issuance in under five business days). Initiative 4.1 contains steps and actions related to identifying and confirming specific application types for inclusion in each category.

The following table has been provided for consideration and further evaluation.

Table A.1: OTC and Express Permits

OTC and Express Permits		
Permit Description	**OTC**	**Express**
Water Heater Replacement	X	
Furnace	X	
Re-Roof	X	
Residential Plumbing	X	
Residential Siding Installation or Replacement	X	
Residential Deck Repair	X	
Residential Stair Repair or Replacement	X	
Service Upgrade (max. 225 amps)	X	
Residential Electrical		X
Residential Mechanical		X
Non-Residential Electrical (not including placement or replacement of switches or receptacles)		X
Non-Residential Plumbing (not involving placement or replacement of plumbing fixtures)		X
Transportation Permit		X
New Septic Tank (Tank Only)		X
Septic Tank Destruction		X

TPPC Application Types

The current TPPC program is solely for building permits. Permit Sonoma should consider expanding the TPPC program to permits issued by Engineering & Water Resources and Well & Septic. Potential application types to consider including in the TPPC program include:

- Grading

- Stormwater

- Road (Right-of-Way) Encroachment

- Road Improvement Plan Review

- Sanitation Sewer

- Well Permit

- Septic Permit

Appendix B: External Feedback

This appendix summarizes feedback from external stakeholders on the current department processes. Feedback was received using Social Pinpoint, focus group sessions, and individual interviews.

BerryDunn used a variety of methods to gather feedback from external stakeholders, including individual meetings, focus groups, and a Social Pinpoint website that included a survey and ideas wall. BerryDunn also received letters from four external stakeholders who did not participate in meetings or engage with the Social Pinpoint website.

Stakeholders were identified by the County and included property owners or managers, engineers, architects, developers, contractors, and community members who have worked with Permit Sonoma.

External Stakeholder Focus Groups and Individual Meetings Summary

BerryDunn conducted two on-site focus group meetings on August 30 and 31, 2022. BerryDunn conducted outreach to 87 stakeholders, provided by County staff, and received 13 responses to participate. BerryDunn staff met with stakeholders over two days and discussed strengths of Permit Sonoma, challenges working with the Department, and ideas for improvements.

An additional 22 stakeholders were identified to participate in individual meetings. BerryDunn conducted outreach and received responses from 15 stakeholders. Meetings took place virtually between stakeholders and BerryDunn staff.

Table B.1 below contains a summary of the key themes from external stakeholder meetings and focus groups.

Table B.1: Focus Group and Individual Meeting Key Themes

Focus Group and Individual Meeting Key Themes	
No.	**Description**
1	**Permit Sonoma staff care about their community.** External stakeholders felt that Permit Sonoma staff care about the work they do and are invested in helping Sonoma County. It was reported that the County and Permit Sonoma were intentional about including diverse voices and underrepresented communities in their General Plan and other countywide initiatives.
2	**Staff have done well in response to natural disasters, COVID-19, and other emergencies.** It was reported that Department staff collaborated well with local cities and County departments in emergency responses. Staff were able to set up response standards and expedite processes to help community members rebuild after fires and floods. In response to the pandemic, staff quickly moved operations online and were helpful to customers navigating the new process.
3	**Permit Sonoma should work on relationship building and strengthening partnerships with external stakeholders.** External stakeholders, such as small businesses, homeowner associations (HOAs), and the developers are Permit Sonoma's community partners. They can

Focus Group and Individual Meeting Key Themes	
No.	**Description**
	give a realistic perspective on how the rule changes impact the development community. The Department can leverage these partnerships to create more successful outcomes in rule and regulation changes.
4	**More predictability and transparency are needed in the development review process.** External stakeholders would like transparent application timelines and more consistent determination of application fees. Applicants enter the process without knowing how much they will spend on permit fees and how many, or what type, of requirements they will have to meet. External stakeholders also expressed difficulty with getting responses from the staff and finding out the status of applications in process.
5	**Recent staff departures have created a knowledge gap.** External stakeholders felt that turnover in the Department has created a gap in industry and process knowledge as new staff lack the institutional knowledge of the Department. Stakeholders also reported they receive different answers from staff when they ask the same question. This creates uncertainty in the application and permitting process.
6	**There should be a customer service improvement strategy.** Many external stakeholders discussed concerns regarding Permit Sonoma's customer service. External stakeholders reported there seems to be a lack of empathy and appreciation for customers. Additional themes that emerged include a lack of responsiveness and a lack of concern for the customer's time and expense invested in the process.
7	**Permit Sonoma should consider developing a strategic plan.** Stakeholders discussed that the Department is forward thinking and excellent at problem-solving. However, it has a very reactionary, rather than strategic, mode of operation. Discussions with staff also revealed initiatives and process improvements planned or being developed in the organization.

Social Pinpoint Feedback and Survey Summary

BerryDunn conducted additional outreach using Social Pinpoint, an online community engagement platform, which included an anonymous survey and ideas wall. This tool gave stakeholders another avenue to provide feedback.

The County identified specific stakeholders to receive the Social Pinpoint information. Stakeholders were sent the website information on August 19 and responses to the survey were due on September 12. The website was sent to 118 stakeholders, and 50 unique stakeholders provided feedback via the survey, ideas wall, or both. 31 unique stakeholders provided comments on the ideas wall and 42 stakeholders completed the survey.

Summary of Survey Responses

The survey included 14 questions and asked stakeholders how they engage with Permit Sonoma and their overall experience working with the Department. Respondents were asked about their role in the development process and how they generally interact with Permit Sonoma most often. Respondents included architects, contractors, developers, engineers, and property

owners or managers. Most respondents worked with Permit Sonoma in the permitting and site development process.

Respondents were asked to rank various elements of Permit Sonoma's development review process from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). These processes included residential building permits, commercial building permits, inspections, cannabis applications, site development applications, Engineering review process, Well and Septic review process, and CE process. Respondents were also asked to rate the timeliness of follow-up responses, clarity of the application and review process, quality of communication, and consistency and predictability of the application process.

Table B.2.1: Stakeholder Survey – Question 1

Question 1	Number of Responses	Percent of Responses
Please tell us about your role in the development review process.		
Property Owner or Manager	16	38.1%
Other	14	33.3%
Architect	6	14.3%
Engineer	5	12.0%
Contractor	3	7.1%
Developer	3	7.1%
Real Estate Broker	0	0.0%

Table B.2.2: Stakeholder Survey – Question 2

Question 2	Number of Responses	Percent of Responses
What is the purpose for most of your interactions with the County related to the development process? Select all that apply.		
Applying for residential building permits	17	16%
Other	17	16%
Applying for commercial building permits	14	13%
Applying for individual (stand-alone) permits	11	11%
Submitting zoning applications	11	11%
Submitting site development applications	10	10%
Submitting engineering plans	7	7%
Requesting inspections	7	7%
Submitting subdivision applications	6	6%

Question 2	Number of Responses	Percent of Responses
Applying for fire permits	4	4%

All parts of Question 3 ask about specific services provided by Permit Sonoma. If a respondent did not have experience working with that specific process, they were asked to select "I do not have experience working with this process." Table B.2.3 highlights the average response to each part of the question on a scale of 1 – 5. All responses of "I do not have experience working with this process" were excluded from the average calculation.

All parts of Question 4 ask about Permit Sonoma's customer service. Responses are rated on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Table B.2.4 highlights the average response score for each part of the question.

Table B.2.3: Stakeholder Survey – Question 3

Question 3		Number of Responses	Average Response
How would you rate the following services currently provided by the county? Rate the following from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). If you don't have any experience related to the service described, please select "N/A."			
3a.	Residential building permit process	42	2.1
3b.	Commercial building permit process	42	2.1
3c.	Inspection process	42	2.7
3d.	Cannabis application process	42	1.6
3e.	Site development application and review process	42	1.7
3f.	Engineering review process	42	2.2
3g.	Well and Septic review process	42	1.9
3h.	Code Enforcement process	42	1.8

Table B.2.4: Stakeholder Survey – Question 4

Question 4		Number of Responses	Average Response
How would you rate the delivery of customer service currently provided by the county? Rate the following from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent).			
4a.	Quality of communication from the County to the customer regarding the status of applications/projects under review	37	1.9
4b.	Timeliness of follow-up and response from the County when requesting information	37	1.7

Question 4		Number of Responses	Average Response
4c.	Clarity of application and regulatory requirements (Are requirements easy to understand and follow?) process	37	1.9
4d.	Consistency and predictability of the County's application and regulatory requirements	37	1.6

Ideas Wall Summary

The ideas wall is a virtual forum where stakeholders shared strengths of Permit Sonoma, challenges of working with the Department, and ideas for improvement. All responses were anonymous, and stakeholders were able to interact with comments using an agree or disagree feature. A total of 31 unique stakeholders provided feedback on the ideas wall.

Comments were broadly categorized in three ways: strengths, challenges, and ideas and suggestions. Stakeholders were asked to categorize their comments prior to submission. Overall, strengths comprised 21.9% of responses, challenges comprised 37.5% of responses, and ideas and suggestions comprised 40.6% of responses.

Ideas Wall Key Themes		
No.	Theme	Specific Example
1	Staff care about their work and helping their community.	• *"Despite the inherent challenges which are always present (cantankerous applicants) when implementing regulations, the staff is generally pleasant and tries to be helpful."* • *"Of equal importance [to the permitting functions] is effective implementation of the General Plan while simultaneously tackling complex issues which will continue to arise (homelessness, conversion of housing supply to vacation rentals, ever increasing event venues, cannabis grows, water shortages, traffic, etc.). It is a mistake to shortchange the planning aspect by focusing too much attention on churning out permits."* • *"Permit techs have been responsive, although sometimes they cannot offer too much info on the project and its status."*
2	The permit approval and planning application processes take more time than what is desired.	• *"Permit Sonoma should have processing time goals for each type of application and within each department. If they do not meet goals, consequence should occur."* • *"We submitted remodel plans via our architect in February …There are no incentives for county governments to improve this process. So, Florida started penalizing bureaucratic delays and soon Housing permits spiked."* • *"Our permit process for a parking lot took 24 months and 9 rounds of comments."*

Ideas Wall Key Themes		
No.	**Theme**	**Specific Example**
		• *"The department is generally very slow in reviewing applications, with an average review time of 5.5 months for straight-forward prefab [Auxiliary Dwelling Units (ADU)] projects."*
3	Providing effective staff training can help improve the Department's overall function and ability to meet public needs.	• *"Create dedicated agency wide training budget around customer service."* • *"Recommend better training/coordination of front-line permitting and inspection staff."* • *"Additional effort in training new staff in development review and code enforcement post hiring. There should be staff committed to this training function as their sole responsibility. Establish a manual for new hires if one is not in existence. Keep that manual updated in accordance with Commission and Board decision making on specific application reviews, including resolutions, ordinances, or actions."* • *"In recent years the dept has seen extraordinary staff turnover due to retirements (often most experienced staff). This problem compounded by Covid and multi-year fire emergencies. These external drivers have hobbled the department."* • *"There isn't enough quality time spend reviewing project applications…I'm sometimes disappointed by staff's over-simplification of issues, reluctance, or inability to consider cumulative impacts, and lack of skepticism about project consultants."*
4	Respondents have received contradictory answers to questions and have found the overall application and approval process to be inconsistent or confusing.	• *"Multiple staff members with contradicting answers to comments and questions; repetitive comments after changes were addressed and re-submitted but without clearer/other instruction; pointed to bulletins etc. in codes as reason for comments, and then don't follow them."* • *"The website is not user friendly. It may serve the needs of the professionals who use it frequently, but it is not easy to navigate for the occasional user."* • *"For a simple residential conversion ADU, we had to speak with 6 different permit specialists (who contradicted one another) and ultimately had to direct us to Assessor's Office and Sonoma Water."* • *"Contradicting answers to questions, no streamlined process nor answers for ADU builds. No one knows what the next step is as that's not their department."* • *"Better communication and transparency during the inspection process so that the applicant is made aware of any hold ups."* • *"We would like to see an explanation on the difference between "plan check" and "approvals" both of which take an extreme amount of time."* • *"We would like clarification of the status of applications in the permitting portal."*

Ideas Wall Key Themes		
No.	**Theme**	**Specific Example**
		• *"Permit Sonoma is VERY inconsistent about enforcing--or even knowing about--scenic guidelines, notifying developers and permit applicants about the rules, holding them accountable, and inspecting."*
5	Respondents enjoyed working with the Resiliency Center and Four-Leaf, a third-party reviewer.	• *"I really appreciated the Resiliency Center and employees of Four-Leaf in every aspect of permit reviews, communication, response time, expertise, knowledge of codes, and personal interaction."* • *"The Resiliency Center was great and should be the model for all permitting."*
6	Having one staff member oversee the completion of a permit or application can create more consistency.	• *"Create a process whereby the same permitting staff member works with an applicant throughout the process start to finish or train permitting staff to give consistent information to the applicant."* • *"The planner who is assigned to an application should be the project manager for a project, coordinating and pushing all reviews and should be evaluated based upon a set project timeline."*