



COUNTY OF SONOMA

575 ADMINISTRATION
DRIVE, ROOM 102A
SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 3/25/2025

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma

Staff Name and Phone Number: Tennis Wick (707) 565-1925, Michelle Arellano (707) 565-2296

Vote Requirement: Majority

Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:

Consolidated Fee Hearing - FY 2025-26 Fees for Permit Sonoma (First Reading)

Recommended Action:

Adopt a Resolution introducing, reading the title and waiving further reading of a Proposed Ordinance increasing and adjusting fees for development applications, permits, and services provided by Permit Sonoma to attain a level of cost recovery that better approaches the reasonable costs of providing the related services effective July 1, 2025.

Executive Summary:

Permit Sonoma provides land use planning, permitting services, and plan check and inspections for: planning, building, engineering, fire prevention, hazardous materials, natural resources, and code enforcement for the unincorporated areas of Sonoma County.

Fees for services are associated with the review, approval, and inspection of construction, land use, and development projects covering a range of activities, including permit fees for residential, commercial, or industrial construction projects, land use applications, zoning requests, and other planning-related activities, environmental impact assessments or compliance with environmental regulations, reviewing plans and conducting on-site inspections to ensure compliance with local codes.

The department is proposing a 3.0% increase to fees based on projected increases to labor and services and supplies costs. The department is also proposing other fee adjustments and modifications as well as establishment of new fees, discussed in more detail below. A cost analysis was performed to ensure that the recommended rates do not exceed the actual average cost to provide the associated services. If approved, the proposed changes will become effective July 1, 2025, or sixty (60) days from passage of the ordinance(s), whichever is greater.

Discussion:

Permit Sonoma is Sonoma County's consolidated land use planning and development permitting agency. Land development or construction that takes place in the unincorporated area of Sonoma County is reviewed, permitted, and inspected by Permit Sonoma. The department fees for services are organized by division as follows: Planning,

Engineering and Construction (including County Surveyor, Engineering, Well and Septic, and Building plan check and inspection services), Code Enforcement, and Fire Prevention and Hazardous Materials.

Proposed Fee Increases

FY 2025-26 proposed adjustments are based on projected department cost increases in both salaries and benefits and services and supplies, while ensuring that the rates do not exceed 100% of the cost to deliver services. The FY 2025-26 proposed rate increases above current fees are as follows:

- Planning fees increase by 3%. Planning fees recover the cost for processing applications related to land use and development.
- Engineering & Survey fees increase by 3%. Engineering fees are assessed on plan check and inspection services for encroachments, grading, storm water, and water and sewer systems, as well as transportation and special event permits. Survey fees are assessed on activities performed for land surveys, boundary surveys, topographic surveys, or property assessments.
- Well and Septic fees increase by 3%. Well and Septic fees for services include evaluating site suitability for well or septic system installation, conducting inspections, and ensuring compliance with local health regulations.
- Building fees increase by 3%. Building plan check and inspection services include review and approval of building plans, as well as for the inspection of construction work to ensure it complies with local codes and regulations. Fees for services also include electrical, mechanical, and plumbing permits.
- Fire fees increase by 3%. Fire Prevention fees cover the cost of fire inspection services, fire investigations, construction plan checks and issuing operational permits to ensure compliance with the fire code. The Hazardous Materials program (Certified Unified Program Agency) fees recover the cost associated with ensuring businesses that generate or store hazardous materials comply with environmental laws and regulations.

Customer Service Fees - Staff Hourly Labor Rates

Staff hourly rates are used to set fees and to bill staff hourly charges to At-Cost projects and contracts. These rates are calculated based on employees' salaries and benefits costs. The department is proposing to increase administrative staff hourly rates by 3% in FY 2025-26 based on projected increases to salaries and benefits and indirect costs. Proposed increases are as follows:

	FY 24-25 Adopted	FY 25-26 Proposed
Accountant	\$133	\$137
Building Inspector	\$197	\$203
Clerical	\$116	\$119
Code Enforcement Inspector	\$197	\$203
Customer Service	\$150	\$155
Division Manager	\$270	\$278
Engineer	\$207	\$213
Engineering Technician	\$167	\$172
Environmental Health Specialist	\$182	\$187
Environmental Specialist	\$186	\$192
Fire Prevention & Hazardous Materials	\$265	\$273
Information Systems	\$159	\$164
Plan Check	\$202	\$208
Planner I, II & Tech	\$176	\$181
Planner III	\$201	\$207
Senior Engineer	\$246	\$253
Surveyor	\$237	\$244

Code Enforcement Services Fees

The Code Enforcement Division handles violations of the County's building, zoning, and health regulations. The department is proposing to increase Code Enforcement fees for services by 3% in FY 2025-26 based on projected increases to salaries and benefits and indirect costs. These fees are one-time fees provided for services. Proposed increases are as follows:

	FY 2024-25 Adopted	FY 2025-26 Proposed
Code Enforcement Reinspection (each)	\$297	\$306
Abatement Repair Permit	\$676	\$696
Building Board and Secure	\$136	\$140
<u>Hearing Officer</u>		
County Staff Support	\$529	\$545
Hearing Officer - Hearing	\$2,482	\$2,556
Hearing Officer - Drive Time	\$233	\$240
Court Reporter	\$633	\$652
Board of Building Appeals	\$776	\$799

Proposed Fee Decreases

Surveyor Fees (1):

Corner Record Review Fee (Fee item 0602) - Decrease from \$21 to \$17.

As authorized by Business & Professions Code 8773.2(e), the County Surveyor is authorized to recover a charge for examining, indexing and filing a corner record in an amount not to exceed the amount required for the recording of a deed. The fee is being lowered from \$21 to \$17 to match the current County Recorder's fee for recording deeds. This fee was inadvertently increased to \$21 as part of the FY 2024-25 Consolidated Fee Hearings, however the fee was administratively adjusted in the FY 2024-25 fee schedule in early July 2024 noting that the Corner Record fee adopted by the Board of Supervisors Ordinance 6572 is statutorily capped by Business & Professions Code, § 8773.2. The department is identifying fees charged to customers at the higher rate and will process reimbursements accordingly.

Proposed Fee Deletions

Fire Prevention Fees (1):

LPG Tank Install (Fee item 1258) - Delete "Underground LPG All" fee subcategory. The Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) Tank Install fee recovers the cost of reviewing the installation plan for propane tanks pursuant to fire safety codes. The fee is currently levied on whether the installation is for: Aboveground LPG Residential, Aboveground LPG Commercial, or Underground LPG All (Residential and Commercial). The department proposes to eliminate the "Underground LPG All" fee subcategory given that there is no difference in labor time for plan review activities.

Well & Septic Fees (3):

Easement Review (Fee Item 0373). The department is proposing to delete this fee because Well and Septic staff do not perform easement reviews, rendering it obsolete. Easement review services are currently provided by the Surveyor unit recovered through the Survey & Land Development Fee -Surveyor Processing Fee (Fee Item 0605).

Dispute Resolution (Fee Item 0388). The department is proposing to delete this fee as it is no longer needed. The dispute resolution fee was established to cover the cost associated with services provided by the Dispute Resolution panel to resolve disputes between staff and designers of septic systems. In over thirty years the Dispute Resolution Panel has rarely convened, and disputes are now resolved through direct communication between staff and designer. The department has formalized this approach so that the designer can discuss any disputes with staff, supervisor, manager in that order and if not resolved, the designer can file an appeal with the County's Board of Building Appeals.

Operational Permit - Package Treatment Plant/Community System/High Flow System (1,500 or more gallons per day) (per Equivalent Single-Family Dwelling) (Fee Item 0389).

The department is proposing to delete this fee given that the criteria for an Operational Permit changed and is no longer dependent upon the septic system being a package treatment plant, community system or a system with high flow rates. The Operational Permit Program (OPR) was originally created to comply with the Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) Basin Plans which required post-construction

monitoring of all non-standard onsite wastewater treatment system (OWTS) and any that utilized supplemental treatment. In 2023 the California State Water Resources Control Board adopted a new policy for wastewater treatment systems that require local agencies to only conduct long-term monitoring of onsite wastewater treatment systems that utilize supplemental treatment. To align local requirements with revised State requirements, in June 2023 the Board of Supervisors approved amendments to Chapter 24 to require operating permits for OWTS utilizing supplemental treatment. While the criteria for an Operational Permit now only applies when a septic system utilizes supplemental treatment, septic permits are still required for both residential and non-residential uses. The department’s request to delete this fee is also part of consolidation efforts since there already exists other fees (Fee Item 0340) to cover the work required to monitor septic systems related to package treatment plants, community systems, or systems with high flow rates.

Proposed New Fees & Fee Modifications

Fire Prevention Fees (4):

Fire Sprinkler Systems - New Building/Tenant Improvement/Paint Spray Booth (Fee item 1266) - Propose to modify the fee structure for fire sprinkler count, by dividing the current 1-99 count range into two categories: 1-49 sprinklers and 50-99 sprinklers.

Current	Proposed
Fire Sprinkler System: 1-99 Sprinklers	Fire Sprinkler System: 1-49 Sprinklers
100-199 Sprinklers 200 or more	50-99 Sprinklers 100-199 Sprinklers 200 or more

The current fee structure is based on plan review and inspection of fire sprinkler systems for new construction and tenant improvements. Fees are levied on fire sprinkler counts of 1-99, 100-199, and 200 or more. Staff have observed that on average the majority of plan review and inspection time is spent on systems with fire sprinkler counts ranging from 25 to 30 however the current fee system reflects labor time required to perform activities up to and including the higher end of the 1-99 range. To ensure that property owners with smaller systems pay for the proportional cost to provide this service, the department is proposing to modify the current 1-99 sprinklers fee range into two new ranges: 1-49 and 50-99. The department proposes to establish a fee of \$543 for 1-49 fire sprinklers based on the average labor time of 1.5 hours. The fee for 50-99 sprinkler range will remain at the same rate that was previously applied to the combined 1-99 range, or \$758 as proposed in FY 2025-26. While technically a new fee, the proposed change will allocate costs in a more refined way and the net result will be a general reduction to customers. □

Sprinkler Plan Check - Tenant Improvement (Fee item 1268). Propose to modify the fee structure for fire sprinkler head, by dividing the current 1-99 head range into two categories: 1-49 heads and 50-99 heads.

Current	Proposed
Sprinkler Plan Check - Tenant Improvement: 1-99 heads 100-199 heads 200+ heads	Sprinkler Plan Check - Tenant Improvement: 1-49 heads 50-99 heads 100-199 heads 200+ heads

The current fee structure is based on plan review and inspection of fire sprinkler head counts that will be installed as part of a tenant improvement project within an existing building. Fees are levied on sprinkler heads ranging from 1-99, 100-199, and 200 or more. Staff have observed that the majority of plan review and inspection time is spent on systems with fire sprinkler heads ranging from 25 to 30. Given that the current fee system reflects labor time required to perform activities at the higher end of the 1-99 range, to ensure that property owners with smaller systems pay for the proportional cost to provide this service the department proposes to modify the existing 1-99 head range into two new ranges 1-49 and 50-99. The proposed fee for 1-49 fire sprinklers heads is \$543 based on average labor time of 1.5 hours. The fee for 50-99 fire sprinkler heads will remain at the same rate that was previously applied to the combined 1-99 range, or \$758 as proposed in FY 2025-26. □

Maintenance Worker Hourly Rate - Proposed New fee \$137 per hour.

Maintenance Workers perform cost recovery services in abatement of properties for chipping and clean up services, special projects to Fire Districts, and hazardous materials support to help transport and move equipment. There is currently no fee in place to recover costs for activities carried out by Maintenance Workers under the Chipper Program. While the department currently has an established hourly rate for Fire Prevention & Hazardous Materials services, this fee is not used to recover Maintenance Worker costs as the services provided by Maintenance Workers are separate and distinct in nature. The establishment of an hourly rate for Maintenance Worker will allow the department to recover the cost for services requested by property owners and Fire Districts during emergencies and abatement, and special projects as well as ensure that the department is charging the appropriate rates for different types of work. The proposed fee was calculated based on base salary, benefits and indirect costs.

Defensible Space Inspection Fee - Proposed New Fee \$481 per inspection.

The proposed new fee is based on average labor time of 1.33 hours (average of 0.83 hours Fire Inspector II time and 0.50 hours Secretary administrative time) required to perform inspection services needed to verify if a property complies with defensible space requirements. Assembly Bill 38 (California Civil Code Section 1102.19), effective July 1, 2021, requires that when selling a property in the State Responsibility Area (SRA) that is also located in designated High or Very High Fire Severity Zones, the seller must provide buyers with documentation that the property complies with defensible space requirements. This means sellers must ensure the vegetation around their property is properly cleared to create a buffer against wildfire spread. AB 38 aligns with and complements [County Code Chapter 13A Hazardous Vegetation and Combustible Material Ordinance](#) <<https://permitsonoma.org/divisions/firepreventionandhazmat/servicesandfees/vegetationmanagementservices/hazardousvegetation>>, which requires that properties located in the unincorporated area of the County comply with the vegetation management requirements. It also complies with Public Resources Code (PRC)

4291 which requires property owners to create defensible space around their buildings to reduce the risk of wildfires.

Planning Fee (1):

Appeals to Board of Supervisors (at cost*, min. deposit) - Proposed new \$3,000 flat fee.

The department is proposing to modify the fee structure of Appeals to Board of Zoning Adjustments, Planning Commission or Board of Supervisors (at cost*, min. deposit) (Fee 1011) (fee amount \$1,573 in FY 2024-25), by separating the activities associated with appeals to the Board of Supervisors and establishing a new fee, and changing the description of existing Fee 1011 to eliminate “Board of Supervisors” as follows: Appeals to Board of Zoning Adjustments and Planning Commission (at cost*, min. deposit).

Under the current fee structure, when planning decisions are appealed to the Board of Zoning Adjustments, Planning Commission, or the Board of Supervisors, the appellant pays a filing fee to cover the administrative costs associated with processing and reviewing the appeal. This flat fee is a standard set amount that the appellant must pay upon filing the appeal, regardless of the complexity or duration of the case. Costs incurred beyond this amount are paid for by the project applicant. Appeals to the Board of Supervisors, however, require considerably more staff time to process when compared to appeals to the Board of Zoning Adjustments and Planning Commission. This is due to increased staff time required for higher-level appeals activities which include and are not limited to accepting public comments and providing information to the appellant, preparing the staff report and associated more extensive review process, public noticing requirements, attending the public hearing, and fulfilling post appeal hearing documentation such as posting the final California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) notice and sending the final decision documents to the applicant. On average, the department annually processes three appeals to the Board of Supervisors. The cost per appeal varies based on a multitude of factors; however, based on appeals processed over the last two years, the average cost totals \$9,500 per appeal.

The Board’s prior guidance on the fee schedule has focused on keeping barriers low for appellants while striving to balance staffing costs. Establishing a new and separate fee for appeals to the Board of Supervisors will meet this goal while preventing undue billing to applicants who are responsible for covering the remaining cost of appeals. The proposed fee modification to existing Fee 1011 would change the fee description by eliminating “Board of Supervisors” and maintain the fee level for the initial appeal to Board of Zoning Adjustments and Planning Commission (\$1,620 proposed in FY 2025-26) and create a new fee for appeals to the Board of Supervisors (proposed new \$3,000 flat fee).

**Fees for projects charged At Cost are charged on an actual cost basis. A minimum fee shall be required at the time the application for each such project is submitted. After staff review of the application, a preliminary estimate of costs will be provided to the applicant if the costs are expected to exceed the minimum fee.*

Fee Description Changes

Permit Sonoma is recommending approval of three (3) description changes to planning fees, ten (10) description changes to fire prevention fees, and seventeen (17) description changes to well & septic service

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fees. See Attachment 4 for details.

Strategic Plan:

N/A

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?

No

Prior Board Actions:

4/30/2024: The Board of Supervisors and Board of Directors of the Water Agency and Sanitation Districts adopted ordinances (No. 6472 through 6478) increasing and adjusting fees for Permit Sonoma effective July 1, 2024, and adjusting certain fees for sewer permit, plan check, and inspection services for the Sonoma County Water Agency and Sanitation Districts effective July 1, 2024. <https://sonoma-county.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6645990&GUID=8E2B120E->

FISCAL SUMMARY

Expenditures	FY24-25 Adopted	FY25-26 Projected	FY26-27 Projected
Budgeted Expenses		\$632,126	
Additional Appropriation Requested			
Total Expenditures		\$632,136	
Funding Sources			
General Fund/WA GF			
State/Federal			
Fees/Other		\$632,126	
Use of Fund Balance			
General Fund Contingencies			
Total Sources		\$632,136	

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:

The fee increases will become effective on July 1, 2025. The baseline net effect of fee changes without projected department workload increases is estimated to be approximately \$632,136. This amount will be included in Permit Sonoma’s projected total revenues as part of the FY 2025-26 Recommended Budget.

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):

N/A

Attachments:

Attachment 1: Board of Supervisors Resolution Introducing Ordinance

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Attachment 2: Permit Sonoma Fee Cover Sheet FY 2025-26

Attachment 3: Permit Sonoma Fee Schedule Ordinance

Attachment 4: Permit Sonoma FY 2025-26 Fee Description Changes

Related Items “On File” with the Clerk of the Board:

N/A