COUNTY OF SONOMA

SUMMARY REPORT

Agenda Date: 12/5/2023

To: Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Department or Agency Name(s): Permit Sonoma
Staff Name and Phone Number: Tennis Wick, Director (707) 565-1925, Scott Orr, Assistant Director (707)565-1754
Vote Requirement: Informational Only
Supervisorial District(s): Countywide

Title:
Permit Sonoma Management Review Implementation Update

Recommended Action:
Receive the Implementation Update - Informational Only

Executive Summary:
A formal management review of Permit Sonoma was completed in January 2023 and a follow-up implementation plan with a total of $4,060,000, including 6.0 positions as new resources, was approved by the Board of Supervisors as part of the FY23-24 budget. This item provides an update on implementation progress to address the recommendations from the management review.

Of the 110 implementation plan identified items, 59 are started or ongoing with the remaining 51 scheduled to begin within the next 6 months. Of the 59 started tasks, 18 have been completed. Of the 51 tasks not yet started, 15 are delayed or behind schedule because those tasks either rely on other tasks to be completed first or require contract support that has not been finalized through the county procurement process. Schedule and task status information is displayed publicly on the Permit Sonoma website for the management review, found at <https://permitsonoma.org/performancedata/managementreview>, in addition to Attachment 1 to this report.

Many of the initiatives the department is charged with implementing require upgrades to the Accela permitting platform. Initial discussions with the Accela on these upgrades have been slowed due to Permit Sonoma running an old version of the platform, with estimates from Accela on updating to the current version at approximately $540,000 per year compared to the current annual expense of $95,000. As accounting for an additional $445,000 per year was not contemplated as part of this effort, and addressing such an increase would require a combination of fee increases and County General Fund support, the Process Improvement team is currently prioritizing upgrades that can be done under existing contracts with the current version of Accela. An assessment of permit platform options is in progress, but any updates, or change in provider, would likely require a multi-million dollar contract and multi-year commitment to be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Even with adjusted timelines for delayed items, consistent with the approved 18-month schedule that began in July 2023, Permit Sonoma anticipates completion of the recommended measures by December 2025.

Discussion:
Implementation of the measures approved by the Board of Supervisors as part of the FY23-24 budget began in July 2023 with the establishment of internal process improvement teams, collaboration with procurement for additional contract support, and working with Human Resources on recruitments for the additional approved staffing. Attachment 1 to this summary is a table of the 15 initiatives, 110 discrete tasks, task start date, task status, and whether the implementation is on schedule.

Initiative Progress

Initiative 1: Expand issuance of over-the-counter (OTC) permits and implement an express permits program.
An Express Permit Team was formed consisting of members from each of the divisions within Permit Sonoma. The team has worked to identify permit types that would fit in the following categories: auto-issue (instant), "over-the-counter" (within 24-hours), and express (within 1-week).

Auto-issue
The intent with auto-issue permits is to create an automated process where specific, relatively simple, permits can be applied for by customers and have an instant authorization to proceed with the desired work. Permit types that have been identified for this process currently include re-roofs, water heaters, property manager certifications, vacation rental business licenses, and transportation permits. Re-roofs and water heaters are now live for auto-issuance to pilot this effort.

Over-the-counter
While staff have maintained the over-the-counter naming convention to better align with the report, it is worth noting that the term was from a time when applications could only be submitted during regular business hours and thus could be approved prior to the customer leaving the permit center. Since customers can now submit applications 24-hours a day and 7 days per week, we are focusing on the idea of same day, or within 24 hours of submittal, to replicate the spirit of the over-the-counter approval.

Express
The permits that are appropriate for this category are those that are relatively low complexity but do require dedicated staff time to verify code compliance. While priority is being given to auto-issue and over-the-counter at this stage of implementation, staff has identified the following as good candidates for a potential express permit process:

- Zoning Permits for farmstays, periodic special events, vacation rentals, hosted rentals, farm stands, agricultural employee dwellings, farm family dwellings, and riparian corridor encroachment.
- Building Permits for existing cell tower modifications, demolition, and driveway gates.
- Well & Septic Permits for tank/well destruction.

Initiative 2: Create and publish application response and review time frame targets. Effective January 1, 2024, the application response and review time frame for the department is as follows:
- 15 days from submittal to a determination whether the application is complete and ready for plan check.
- 30 days from complete and ready for plan check to permit approval.

- 30 days from resubmittal to plan check if there were required revisions.

Initiative 3: Consolidate and standardize Accela statuses (Accela is the online permit portal). Accela is an online platform that Permit Sonoma and many other jurisdictions utilize for electronic record keeping and permitting. The inventory of different application types and status is complete, and the Process Improvement team has begun triaging consolidation and updates to the permit types that constitute the largest portion of the department's business. This task has become more complex than outlined in the Management Review report, due to the nature of how Accela is coded, and will require the use of our third-party consultants to perform backend programming. This was an anticipated challenge and considered in the approved budget estimate of $400,000 for Admin/Accela support.

Initiative 4: Expand use of task functionality in Accela and implement due date tracking. Team members have been identified and priorities set but this initiative is not scheduled to begin until other Accela improvements are made after December 2023.

Initiative 5: Expand online submittal, electronic review, civic portal, and update required fields and status inquiry. Digital Plan Room (DPR) has been rolled out for grading and building permits. Refinements to these permit types are underway and the Process Improvement team are identifying additional permit types to utilize this plan review platform. Two in-person open house learning sessions were held for customers and a help page has been created to help customers navigate the new system (<https://permitsonoma.org/permitservices/permitsonline/digitalplanroomhelp>). As additional types of applications become available through DPR, such as design review or septic permits, the supporting material will be updated to help customers through the process.

Accela Initiatives
Many of the initiatives the department is charged with implementing require upgrades to the Accela permitting platform. The BerryDunn report found that the Accela system is being underutilized for staff efficiency, accounting, and the public user experience. Sonoma County currently operates on an older version of the platform that is hosted locally with a cost of approximately $95,000 a year with an annual increase of 6-9%. Similar to other software providers, Accela has shifted to a cloud-based approach (known as Software as a Service) with annual fees based on the number of users. The most recent quote we've received from Accela constitutes an annual increase of 500% to update to the latest version, for an annual estimated cost of $540,000. As accounting for an additional $445,000 per year was not contemplated as part of this effort, and addressing such an increase would require a combination of fee increases and County General Fund support, the Process Improvement team is currently prioritizing upgrades that can be done under our existing contract with the current version of Accela. An assessment of permit platform options is in progress, but any updates, or change in provider, would likely require a multi-million dollar contract and multi-year commitment to be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Permit Sonoma staff will continue to assess whether the Accela-related tasks can be fully implemented under the current software version, and if not, return to the Board with recommendations.

Initiative 6: Establish contracts with third-party plan reviewers to provide as-needed supplemental review assistance. A contract is in place for septic permit plan review with additional contracts for grading permits and building permits currently in union negotiations. These two additional plan review contracts will likely not

be in place until early 2024, at which point they will be used aggressively until our internal plan review metrics are down to 30 days from submittal of a complete application until department comments or approval back to the applicant. Metrics for review times are displayed the Permit Sonoma website Performance Data page, <https://permitsonoma.org/performancedata>.

Initiative 7: Implement a checklist-based review and resubmittal process for plan review. The Process Improvement team is focusing first on a checklist for submittal requirements and consolidating all submittal requirements on one easy to access page on the Permit Sonoma website. The subsequent tasks in this initiative have been delayed as they either rely on a number of other Initiative efforts to be complete or for the tasks to be done twice: first with the existing application requirements and again with the updated application requirements.

Initiative 8: Manage time accounting in Accela and develop a policy for plan review time tracking. Team members have been identified and priorities set but this initiative is not scheduled to begin until other Accela improvements are made after December 2023. Priority is being given to efficiencies within the accounting team to more regularly update customers on account balance status.

Initiative 9: Modify and promote third-party review process for select application types. The department has begun a review of how third-party plan check has been utilized and will evaluate changes to current, and future contracts, after February 2024. The current priority is expanding the third-party contracts that the department has to alleviate backlog and reduce plan check times. Due to RFP and procurement timelines, these additional third-party resources will not be available until early 2024.

Initiative 10: Implement a self-certification program for select application types. This initiative is not scheduled to begin until December 2024 with initial permit types being launched in March 2024.

Initiative 11: Establish a customer service framework. A Customer Service Committee (CSC) was created and the team has developed a mission statement to guide their efforts in improving how the department approaches customer service The majority of the tasks relating to customer service are scheduled to begin between December, 2023 and March, 2024. The CSC will hold its first meeting with customer stakeholders in December 2023.

Initiative 12: Centralize process improvements and establish a governance process. Initiative 12 is largely complete in that a Process Improvement Team was created in August 2023 and established a central electronic communication tool to help with group coordination, and is working towards Initiatives 2, 3, 4, 5A-D, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, and ongoing tasks. Task 12.10 (creation of a quarterly department newsletter) has been delayed until Q2 2024 with this Board item also serving as the internal update from the various committees.

Initiative 13: Develop standard operating procedures (SOP) and training materials. The Process Improvement team established in August 2023 is also taking the role of the SOP Team. The first standard operating procedures being rolled out are updated to the existing Code Enforcement SOPs with updates coming to Planning, Building, Engineering, and Well & Septic. This Initiative is largely an ongoing task that reinforces process updates with instructions on how staff, and the public, can most efficiently navigate the changes.

Initiative 14: Provide opportunities for customers to learn about the Permit Sonoma process. This initiative is not scheduled to begin until June 2024.

Initiative 15: Standardize division and section structure. The creation of the Assistant Director position was the first step towards updating the organizational structure to successfully implement the necessary improvements outlined in the Management Review report. The focus within this initiative is currently aimed at further consolidating Permit Sonoma staff within the same building. Permit Sonoma is working with Sonoma County Public Infrastructure on reconfiguring existing workstations to relocate the Fire Prevention division into the main Permit Sonoma building. This effort will also further facilitate communication between the permit center and back-office support.

Staffing Progress
On June 16, 2023, with the fiscal year 23-24 budget, the Board approved 6.0 FTE for Management Review implementation to create additional capacity for the effort. At the writing of this report, 3.0 of the 6.0 FTE are filled with the remaining 3 in various stages of recruitment.

Assistant Director	Recruitment completed and position filled 8/14/23.
Department Analyst	Recruitment completed and position staffed as of 10/31/23.
Permit Technician	Recruitment ongoing for two vacancies.
Engineering Technician	Recruitment complete and 1 of 2 vacancies staffed as of 11/14/23
Engineer	Recruitment complete and 1 of 2 vacancies staffed as of 11/14/23
Planner	Recruitment ongoing and 0 of 4 vacancies filled.

Strategic Plan:
N/A

Racial Equity:

Was this item identified as an opportunity to apply the Racial Equity Toolkit?
No

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Prior Board Actions:
6/16/23   Approved FY 23-24 Budget with allocation for positions and contracts necessary for Management Review Implementation.
5/16/23   Received revised Management Review Implementation timeline and approach from Permit Sonoma.
1/31/23   Received findings from the management review of Permit Sonoma; requested Director of Permit Sonoma to return to the Board with an implementation schedule for the Board's consideration.
5/24/22   Authorized contract with BerryDunn in an amount not to exceed $120,000

FISCAL SUMMARY

Narrative Explanation of Fiscal Impacts:
N/A

Narrative Explanation of Staffing Impacts (If Required):
N/A

Attachments:
Attachment 1: Implementation Schedule

Related Items "On File" with the Clerk of the Board:
N/A