

Complaint Handling At Permit And Resources Management Department

Summary

Several years ago, the Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department (PRMD or Department) made changes with the goal of becoming more customer friendly. Some of these changes included: 1) centralizing the Department in one building to provide a one-stop shop to help customers navigate the permitting process, 2) initiating a Citizen's Academy which includes workshops to educate owners/builders about permitting and the latest regulatory information, and 3) the development



of the Professional Priority time slot program to expedite the permitting process for building professionals. In addition, the position of Ombudsman was created within PRMD to help customers navigate the permitting process and generally assist in providing a more user friendly atmosphere to resolve problems with permits, land use and development issues. PRMD's focus on improving customer service, while successful in many ways, does not provide a process to inform customers who have lodged complaints about code violations as to the status of their complaints. Neither does PRMD provide sufficient, accessible information about its services to Spanish speaking customers.

The Department issues permits for the development of real property and for regulated uses and activities. PRMD is also responsible for enforcing building codes which address health and safety standards as defined by federal, state, and county codes and policies.

Each year PRMD receives nearly one thousand complaints from citizens concerned with property violations. Timely attention to those complaints serves an important role in enforcing codes and policies that protect health and safety for property owners and the general public.

The Department receives complaints from customers who object to building and land use practices, as well as the Department's own code enforcement practices. Complaints may be filed confidentially. A single customer complaint may result in the recognition of numerous violations or none at all. Once a complaint is filed there are several factors why customers are not informed of their ongoing complaint status: 1) once a complaint is assigned, the relationship between PRMD and the complainant ends to be superseded by a relationship between PRMD and the alleged violator, and 2) the high volume of code enforcement complaints makes it difficult for PRMD's limited code enforcement staff to respond.

There are approximately one hundred Department employees. The code enforcement section has seven technical staff and a supervisor, all of whom actively work on cases. In recent years, there has been a 40 percent reduction in staff due to the 2008 recession and a resulting decrease in economic activity. Despite recent renewal in economic development within the County, Department staffing levels have not been fully restored, resulting in heavy caseloads for many enforcers.

The PRMD reception lobby provides informative pamphlets and video monitor instructions, in English only, to assist customers.

There is a lack of adequate information about PRMD's services in Spanish for Spanish speaking customers.

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury's recommendations address improving communications between PRMD and its customers, by clarifying its procedures for recording and tracking complaints and by providing more accessible information and assistance to PRMD customers, including those who are Spanish speaking.

Background

In 2014, the Grand Jury received a citizen complaint alleging that the PRMD failed to resolve his complaint about a code violation in a timely manner. He alleged that the complaint he filed with PRMD in September 2012 was still awaiting resolution two years later. His concerns prompted the Grand Jury to investigate PRMD's policy for complaint handling, response, and disposition to determine if the Department's policies are adequate and, if so, are being followed.

Approach

The Grand Jury interviewed the complainant and a number of PRMD staff, including the Director, the Ombudsman, supervisors, code enforcers, and clerical staff. We toured the Department and reviewed PRMD's website, its written and online policies and procedures, and its records of complaints, including the various types of violations, staff assignments, and the handling and disposition of complaints.

Discussion

Over the past few years, PRMD has consolidated departments in an effort to become more responsive and customer friendly. For example, PRMD provides integrated one-stop permitting services for a broad range of functions inherent in building and land development. PRMD also provides an opportunity for customers to question

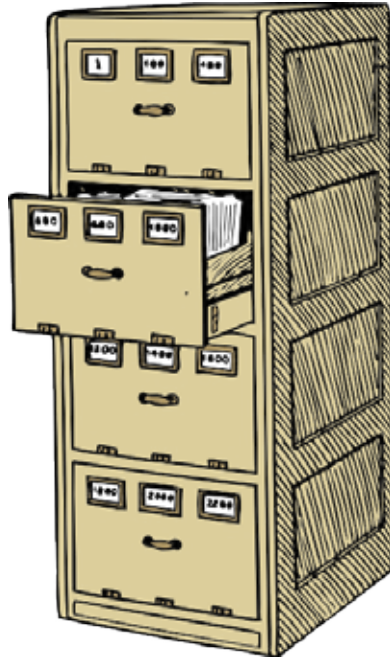
and/or register complaints about observed nonconforming building and land use practices, as well as object to the Department's own code enforcement practices.

Citizens can file code enforcement complaints confidentially by phone or in person. The Department receives nearly one thousand complaints each year. Complaints are logged in and assigned to appropriate code enforcement personnel for investigation. Pursuant to PRMD practices, the log notes the date a

complaint is received and its assignment. Complaints are prioritized and assigned with regard to urgency: health and safety or life-threatening issues are given priority. After the preliminary investigation, senior code enforcement personnel decide how each complaint should be handled. Approximately 40 percent of these complaints are dismissed as invalid or lacking sufficient substance to merit further attention. Each remaining complaint may identify one or more violations that warrant code enforcement and, for that reason, there are more outstanding code violations

than there are outstanding complaints. A complaint is closed when any of the following occurs: 1) code enforcement staff determines the complaint is unsubstantiated; 2) the facts are insufficient to support taking action; or, 3) a violation is identified and further enforcement is warranted.

The PRMD tracking system fails to show the number of complaints outstanding at any given time. The present system tracks only open violations and not the complaints which gave rise to those violations. Thus, PRMD was unable to provide statistics for the number of outstanding complaints. However, PRMD is considering a computer program which could improve ways to submit complaints, receive immediate automated feedback upon request, and assist code enforcement in their field duties. Such a program could solve many of these issues.



The existing customer complaint process is not customer friendly. Once a complaint has been filed, no further information on its progress is provided to the complainant because PRMD's relationship is transferred to the alleged violator. For that reason, the burden is on the complainant to pursue the disposition of his/her complaint, which often results in numerous phone calls, letters, emails or visits to PRMD. Such repetitive contacts consume staff time and result in frustrated and upset customers and staff, who are often diverted from one task to another.

As another means of improving its customer service, PRMD should strive to reach out to its Spanish speaking customers by providing information about its services in Spanish as well as in English. According to current Sonoma County demographics, 24 percent of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino . Spanish speaking staff is sometimes available, but customers are not informed about their availability.

Findings

- F1. PRMD is committed to creating a customer friendly service department and has made significant progress in achieving this goal.
- F2. The PRMD code violation complaint process is unable to provide customers with notification of the status or the resolution of their complaints.
- F3. Spanish speaking customers are not well served by PRMD's information services, most of which, including the code violation complaint forms, are provided only in English.

Recommendations

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. PRMD design and implement a process to notify customers when their code violation complaints have been resolved or otherwise concluded.
- R2. PRMD identify an employee to assist customers with their questions or concerns about the complaint process.

- R3. PRMD provide all relevant information concerning customer services in both English and Spanish.

Required Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses as follows:

- R1, R2, R3 - Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department

Bibliography

Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Final Report 2012-2013, "Permit and Resource Management Department: Is Change Permitted?" pg. 13-15.

Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department www.sonoma-county.org/prmd.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

