

SANTA ROSA FIRE MARSHAL INSPECTIONS

Summary

The Grand Jury investigated the inspection procedures for new construction by the Fire Marshal's Office of the Santa Rosa Fire Department (SRFD). In October 2001 the Grand Jury found there were significant delays in scheduling such inspections and sometimes there were inconsistencies between building plan approval and subsequent inspections. In March 2002 a follow-up interview with the Fire Marshal was held. At this time the Grand Jury found that new policies and procedures have been created by the SRFD that address all of the Grand Jury's concerns. Two recommendations are presented.

Reason For Investigation

The investigation was initiated in response to a complaint regarding delays and inconsistencies of the inspection procedures of the Fire Marshal's office. Subsequent interviews with architect/builders dealing with the Fire Marshal's office indicated similar problems.

Background

The Fire Marshal's office is under the jurisdiction of the Fire Chief of the Santa Rosa Fire Department. This office is responsible for public safety and is charged with enforcing state and local fire codes and those building codes related to fire safety. In addition, it assists the State Fire Marshal by inspecting state buildings and schools for compliance with water flow and emergency vehicle access regulations. The inspection process is in four phases:

1. The builder submits detailed plans for the proposed construction to the Fire Marshal's office.
2. A plan checker with the Fire Marshal's office examines plans for compliance with fire safety codes. Changes and/or corrections to the plans may be required before approval.
3. Upon plan approval, construction may begin.
4. During and/or after construction, the Fire Marshal's office performs inspections to determine if the building is built according to code. If code violations are noted, the Fire Marshal may require changes even if construction complied with the plans approved by his office.

Building plan checkers and inspectors must have detailed knowledge of safety systems, including fire alarms, sprinklers, and hydrants. Technical requirements of the positions often make it difficult to find qualified candidates to fill vacancies. In FY 2001 the SRFD performed approximately 7,000 inspections (not including single family residences) many of which were major in scope. The number and complexity of these projects were unanticipated, straining personnel and overwhelming previous procedures.

Investigative Procedures

The Grand Jury:

1. Interviewed the following persons:
 - Complainant
 - Santa Rosa Fire Marshal
 - Members of three architectural firms
 - Chief, Santa Rosa Fire Department
 - Executive Director of a new public building
 - City plan checker.

2. Reviewed the following documents:
 - Letter to Fire Marshal
 - School – Fire Inspector’s report
 - Division of State Architect information pertaining to responsibility shared by City Fire Marshal and the state, i.e., codes for water flow and access
 - Letter from a builder regarding ordered changes to a newly constructed building and a response letter from the Fire Marshal explaining the changes
 - Letter from architect regarding requirements for school fire hydrants
 - Letter from architectural firm to plan checker
 - Letter from Fire Marshal to architect about need for extra flow in hydrants
 - Letter from Fire Chief with data on number of inspectors and annual inspections done in department
 - Organizational chart of Fire Department
 - Written reply from a construction company with regard to requests for inspections
 - Letter from a construction company discussing the Fire Marshal’s procedures
 - SRFD Plan Review and Inspection Process
 - SRFD Customer Satisfaction survey.

Findings

- F1. As of October 2001 there were no written procedures establishing time lines for scheduling inspections during construction and upon completion of a building. Because of this, the architect/builder sometimes incurred costly delays.

- F2. As of March 2002 timelines for scheduling inspections were in place with written and measurable objectives.

- F3. As of October 2001 there were occasional inconsistencies between the plan checker’s approval of building plans and subsequent findings by the building inspectors even when the structure was built according to the approved plans.

- F4. As of March 2002 personnel changes were made in both the plan checkers section and inspection section of the SRFD that should help minimize inconsistencies between plan checkers and inspectors. In addition, meetings were held with City Building, Utilities,

Engineering and Planning Departments in an effort to improve the overall plan review process.

F5. As of October 2001 there was a customer complaint procedure in place at the Fire Marshal's office that was used only occasionally.

F6. As of March 2002 a new procedure was in place that provided all customers with a comprehensive and user-friendly assessment form that provided excellent feedback on customer satisfaction. An assessment of the results after the implementation of the new procedures has shown significant improvement in customer satisfaction.

Conclusions

The Grand Jury concludes that the Santa Rosa Fire Department has recognized its problems and is taking appropriate actions to correct them. The Grand Jury commends the department for its efforts. However, because the corrective actions are in their formative stages, two recommendations are presented.

Recommendations

R1. The Chief, Santa Rosa Fire Department should implement and monitor the new written policies and procedures that address improvements to the inspection process.

R2. The Chief, Santa Rosa Fire Department should minimize instances where approved plans are later rescinded or modified by the Fire Marshal.

Required Responses to Findings

None

Required Responses to Recommendations

Chief, Santa Rosa Fire Department: R1 and R2