



## **PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT**

2850 Fairlane Court, Placerville, CA 95667

Phone (530) 621-4650, Fax (530) 642-0508

Date: September 13, 2022

To: Honorable Board of Supervisors

From: Karen L. Garner, Director of Planning and Building

**Subject: Planning & Building Department – Permit Activity Status**

At the Special Board Meeting-Budget Hearing held on June 7, 2022 (Item 22-0973), the Board requested an update on the permit backlog in the Planning and Building Department. The following information provides data and context around permit activity and the Permit Center of the Planning and Building Department.

The organization chart shows the various divisions and groups within the Planning and Building Department. Most of these divisions have inter-related functions such as Economic Development assisting Planning by handling key projects that have a large economic impact on the County. Another example is Code Enforcement that inspects sites for compliance with zoning and issues notices for unpermitted structures that must then obtain Building Permits.

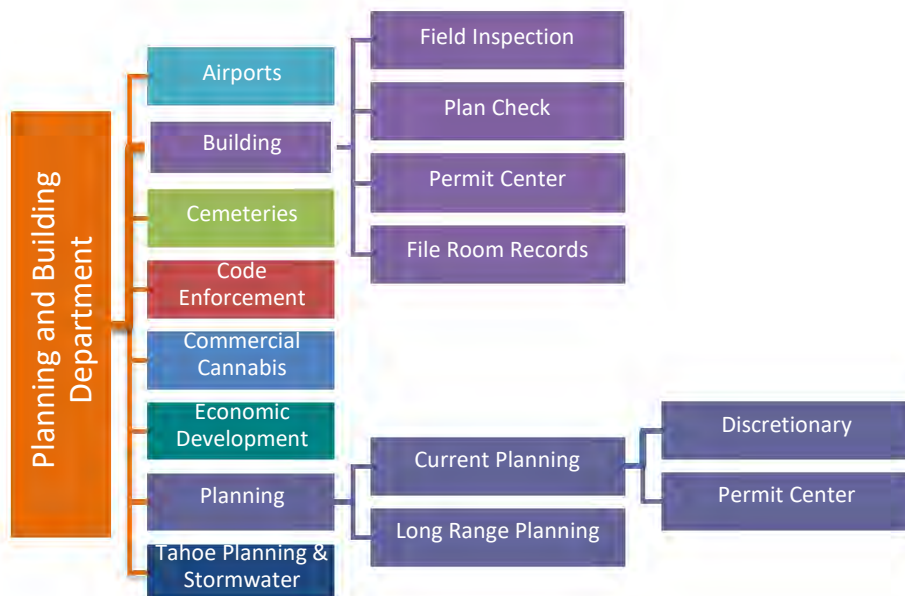


Figure 1: Planning and Building Department Organization Chart

The Planning and Building Department is responsible for processing a wide variety of permits through its various Divisions, but most permits are issued through the Planning and Building Divisions and are processed through the Permit Center. The Permit Center is generally thought of by customers as the physical location where project applicants interact with Planning and Building staff. However, the department is also functionally organized to serve the Permit Center as shown above.

All Building Permits are processed through the Building Permit Center group. The Planning Permit Center group intakes and processes ministerial planning permits, processes zoning verifications, responds to over the counter, email and phone inquiries and conducts permit reviews among other tasks. Discretionary planning entitlements such as Conditional Use Permits, Design Review Permits and Specific Plans are routed to the Discretionary Planning group.

Following is information on data on the specific permit activity for both the Building and Planning Divisions.

### Building Division Permit Activity

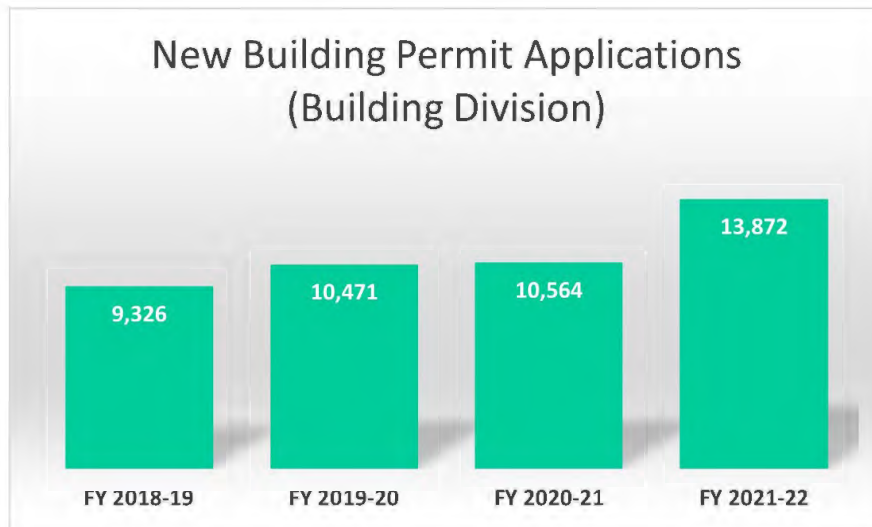


Fig. 2 New Building Permits Applications Submitted by Year

Overall, Building permit activity has steadily increased over the past several years. The slight dip in Building permit applications in FY 2020-21 can be attributed to Covid. Though Covid-induced shut-downs of businesses and construction occurred at the end of FY 2019-2020, the impact on new applications submitted to the County was felt in FY 2020-21. Even so, the effect was minimal and activity quickly picked back up. Increased activity is primarily reflective of the steep rise in housing demand, however, other construction activity including new commercial, commercial tenant improvements and home improvements has remained strong.

The impacts of increased new permits being taken in can be seen by looking at the progression of permits through the permit process.

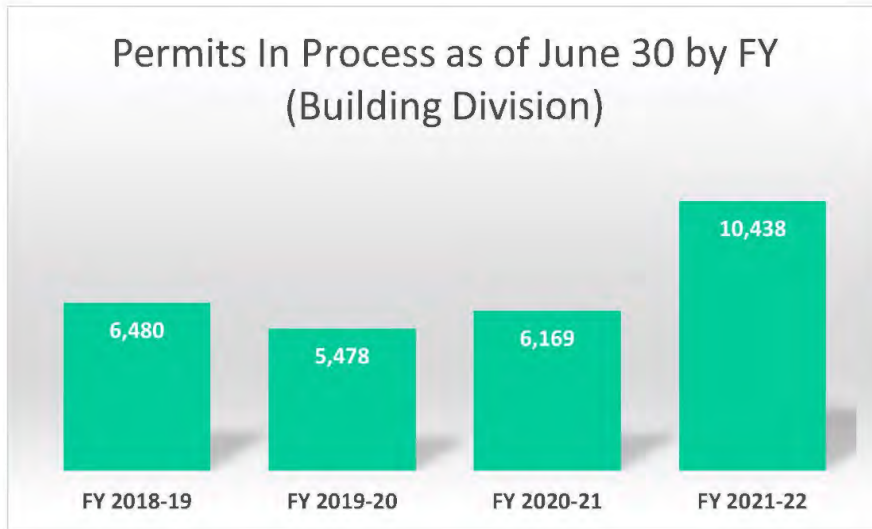


Fig. 3 Number of Building Permits in Process as of June 30

This graph shows a large increase in the number of Building permits in process for FY 2021-22. This increase is due to the increased number of Building permits taken in as shown in Figure 2, but may also be reflective of a “bottleneck” and an increasing number of permits that are not being completed in a timely manner.

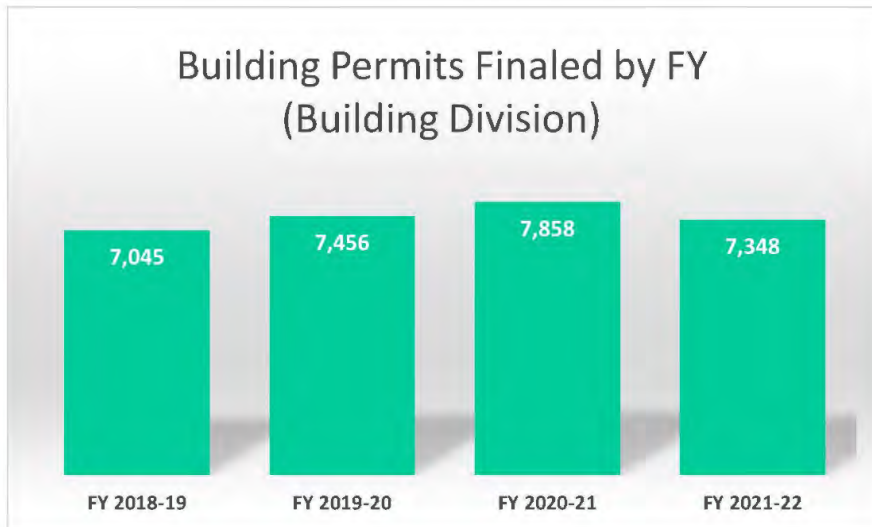


Fig. 4 Building Permits Finaled by Fiscal Year

This chart further shows the “bottleneck” of Building permits in FY 2021-22. Ideally, with an increase in new Building permits or Building permits submitted, you would see a corresponding increase in the number of permits in process and finaled. There is typically some lag time between the steps in the process as the permits make their way through the processing cycle. The number of permits finaled had been steadily increasing to keep

pace with the number of permits submitted and in process, however, in this last fiscal year, the number decreased by 6.5%.

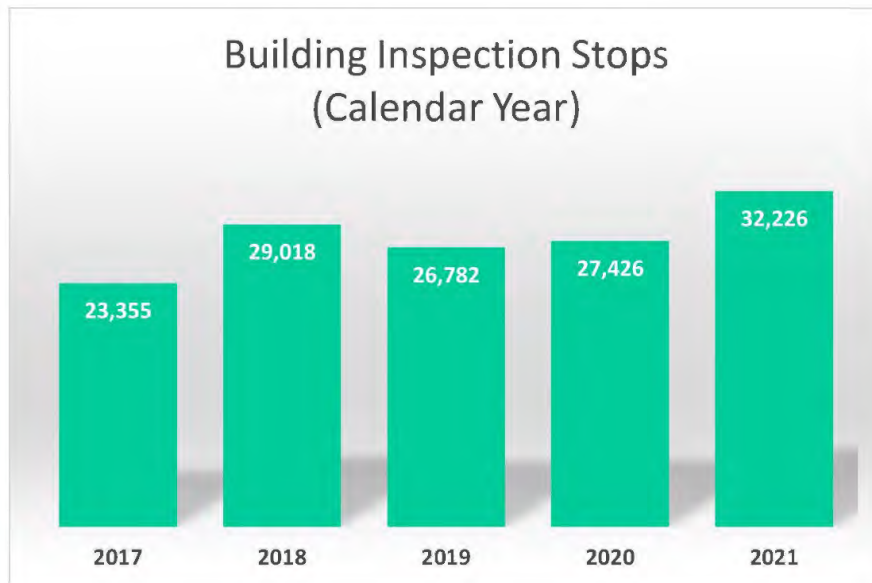


Fig. 5 Building Inspection Stops per Calendar Year

This chart shows the number of Building Inspection stops per year. Each inspector averages around 10 stops a day. As expected, the trend is generally upwards. However, what is not reflected in the numbers is the increased complexity of each inspection stop. As new codes and building requirements are added, such as residential fire sprinklers and solar, the number of items to inspect and the time it takes to inspect a structure continues to increase.

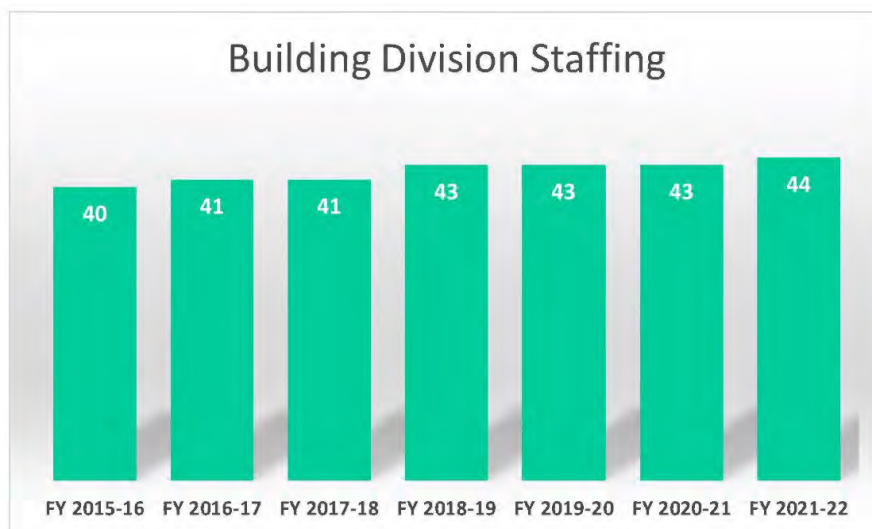


Fig. 6 Building Division Staffing

Building Division staffing has remained relatively flat despite increase permit activity. The number of Building Inspectors in particular has remained at 17 for the past several years. Building Inspectors are responsible for both plan check and inspection of projects. Staffing is somewhat flexible in that some Building Inspectors can be shifted between plan checks and inspections depending on the need, however the overall number of Inspectors has not increased. This has led to an increase in the number of days between requesting an inspection and an inspector conducting the inspection. In the past, the Building Division responded within one to two days of an inspection request. That number has steadily increased over the past year and a half. This was further exacerbated by the Caldor Fire. Half of the inspectors assisted with the month-long Safety Assessment Program inspections of structures damaged or destroyed by the Caldor Fire. Today, there is a seven-to-eight-day gap between calls for inspection and the inspection being completed. Many inspectors are working overtime, but the number remains higher than Department goals.

Some Extra Help Building Division positions have been added over the past couple of years, however most have been extremely difficult to fill and remain vacant. Those hired as Extra Help often take full-time positions elsewhere in the County or with other jurisdictions when the opportunity arises.



Fig. 7 Walk-In Customers in the Permit Center

Walk-In customers to the Permit Center not only need services from the Planning and Building Division, but other divisions within the Department as well as services from other departments including Environmental Management and Department of Transportation. The front counter receiving walk-in customers is primarily staffed with Building Division staff but is also supported by staff from other divisions and departments. Similar to permit activity, there has been a steady increase of walk-in customer activity.

Another challenge has been with the land use permitting system, TrakIt. It is recognized that TrakIt, at its full potential, could be more efficient and save time for customers and staff. One example is electronic submittal of plans. Building currently accepts electronic submittal of plans for trade permits, such as water heaters and reroofs, it cannot be used for electronic submittal of larger plan sets that are routed to other departments for review. This is due to a lack of sufficient tracking and management functionality of the electronic plans as they are routed, reviewed, commented on, and approved by multiple departments and agencies. Planning and Building along with IT Staff have recently made a renewed commitment to working on TrakIt issues and have begun meeting regularly with upper management staff from CentralSquare, the company that owns TrakIt, to find solutions to ongoing issues.

The need for increased Building staffing in the Tahoe basin has also been identified as a priority. Changes are currently in the works to locate a Building Inspector Supervisor and Assistant Building Inspector in the Tahoe Office. The higher level Supervisor position will provide a greater level of autonomy and decision making ability, resulting in better and more efficient customer service for residents in South Lake Tahoe and Meyers.

Building Permit Center staff meet each week on Wednesday mornings prior to opening to the public to review current stats related to permit processing and customer service and compare that on a four-week rolling basis (Attachment B). Other relevant updates are shared with staff. These regular meetings help Permit Center staff monitor performance, trends and anticipate changes. Supervisors and managers also use the time to reinforce or share new policies and procedures.

### **Building Division Summary**

Permit processing and inspection turnaround times have increased. Contributing factors include:

- Increased Building permit activity.
- Increased complexity of plan check and inspections.
- Staffing that has not increased to keep pace with permit activity.
- Ongoing vacancies and the time it takes to train new staff to bring them up to full capacity.
- Unrealized efficiencies due to the delay in technology solutions (TrakIt).

### **Next Steps**

- Additional and higher level Building staff in Tahoe office.
- Using salary of continuously unfilled Extra Help positions and converting to full-time positions.
- In partnership with IT, a renewed commitment to maximize TrakIt functionality and capabilities.
- Regularly monitor Building processing times and staffing to inform additional changes or areas of focus as needed.

## Current Planning Division

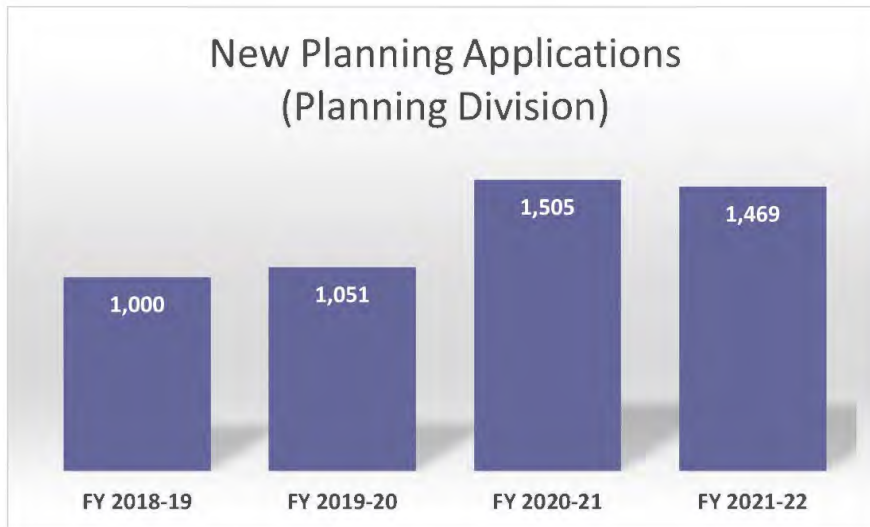


Fig. 8 New Planning Permits Application Submitted/Entitlements Applied for by Year

Planning application activity has also increased, though there was a slight decrease between FY 2020-21 and FY 2021-22. The steep increase between FY 2019-20 and FY 2020-21 is the result of the implementation of the Vacation Home Rental (VHR) program and submittal of initial VHR applications.

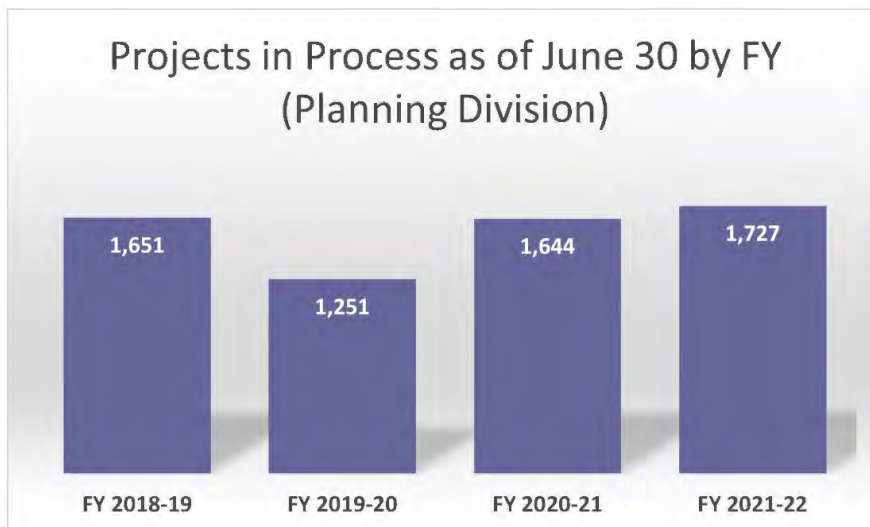


Fig. 9 Planning Projects in Process as of June 30 by Fiscal Year

After a dip in the number of projects in process for FY 2019-20, Planning project activity has increased the past two years.

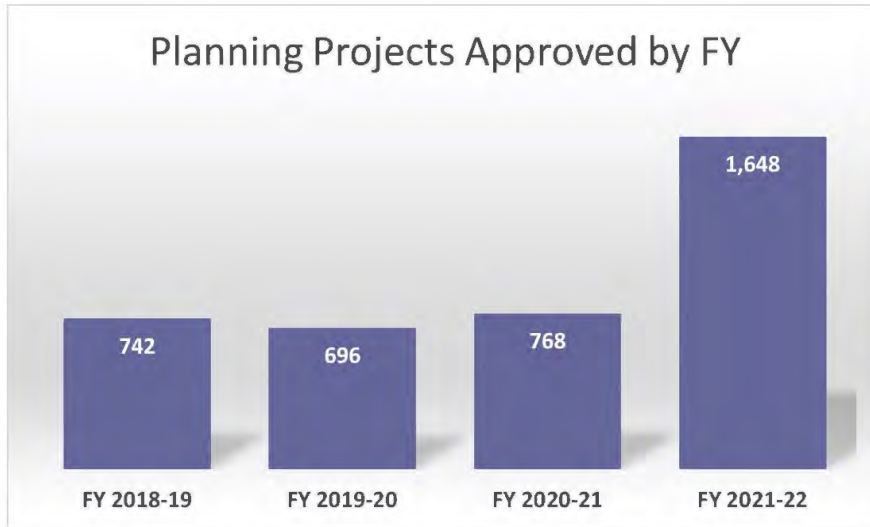


Fig. 10 Planning Projects Approved by Fiscal Year

This chart shows a large increase in FY 2021-22 which is also reflective of processing and approving applications through the new VHR program. The increased number may also be reflective of increased staffing allocated to Current Planning, thus increasing capacity to complete Planning projects, though some Current Planning positions remain vacant.



Fig. 11 Current Planning Staffing

Current Planning staffing has recently increased due to the Board's approval of additional Planning staff positions in 2020. The biggest challenge has been filling vacant positions. Staff has recently added a Planning Manager to oversee the Planning Permit Center and a Senior Planner in Discretionary Planning. The addition of the Permit Center Planning Manager has already had a positive impact on processing times for ministerial permits and plan reviews. Remaining vacancies include a Senior Planner in the Economic



Development Division who would manage high profile Current Planning projects. Vacancies in other divisions, such as two Associate/Assistant Planners in Long Range Planning and a Senior Planner in Cannabis also help by relieving staff who must take on additional workload normally done by the vacant positions. Filling these key positions will further improve Planning's processing times and allow more time to train less experienced staff and expand their capabilities.

It is critical to fill all vacancies in Planning so that the workload for staff is more manageable. This will also allow management staff capacity to identify and implement process improvements into the current planning processes.

Another challenge for Planning staff is the increase in the number and complexity of state laws affecting local land use. These new laws impact Long-Range Planning staff who are tasked with revising County Code to comply with state regulations, but also impact Current Planning staff who must implement and apply the new regulations.

### **Current Planning Division Summary**

- Increased Planning Permit/Entitlement activity
- Young staff overall that is gaining in knowledge, experience, and becoming more efficient
- Ongoing staff vacancies, particularly in key roles
- Increased state laws and regulations

### **Next Steps**

- Fill remaining vacancies in Planning (key positions include 3 Senior Planner positions and 2 Associate/Assistant Planner position.)
- Train new staff and increase capabilities so that planners can process permits more quickly and can handle a wider variety of permit types. Provide timely training on new state laws as needed.
- Continue to identify permit process improvements and develop timelines for implementation; ensure consistency in permit review. This may include developing or modifying new ordinances, policies, standard operating procedures, checklists, etc.
- Maximize use of TrakIt to increase efficiencies and reduce permit processing time where possible.
- Regularly monitor Current Planning processing times and staffing to determine if any additional changes are necessary.

### **Permit "Turn-Around" Time**

One of the most common complaints is the "turn-around" time for permits or the time it takes for a project from application submission to completion. This is a very difficult metric to measure and analyze because of the extreme number of variables such as permit or application type, applicant schedule, quality and completeness of plans submitted and applicant responsiveness to corrections or requests for additional information. In general, planning projects have a longer processing time, particularly if the project requires

environmental review and approvals from the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors.

At this time, staff does not track turn-around time, however, we are currently considering what data can be collected to better analyze the permit process so we can begin to identify common pain points, duplicative processes, and opportunities for efficiencies and enhanced communication that will assist applicants in getting through the process successfully.

### **Conclusion**

Permit processing and inspection times have increased due to a variety of factors but are primarily related to increased permit volume and complexity coupled with staffing that has not kept pace, in part due to ongoing vacancies. As key staff vacancies are filled and new staff is fully trained, we will increase focus on identifying and implementing process improvements. Metrics will be used to track and monitor progress towards reducing backlog and evaluating the effectiveness of any changes made.