

September 26, 2022

Re: Item #22-1640

Dear Members of the Board of Supervisors:

I am writing on behalf of the El Dorado County Community and Economic Development Advisory Committee (CEDAC) to provide comments on the Planning Director's report on the permit backlog. The permit backlog and other long-standing, chronic issues at the Planning and Building Department have become major impediments to economic development in El Dorado County, and as such, CEDAC discussed this issue at its August 11, 2022 meeting. Members provided direction to the CEDAC Chair to provide comments to the Board of Supervisors when this matter came before the BOS.

The Planning and Building Department has serious problems that long precede the current Planning Director's tenure that have been further exacerbated by the increase in permit applications. Yet to be clear, the increase in permit applications did not cause the problems – those problems have existed for many years. However, in the past year or more, the permit backlog has risen beyond the crisis point. Members of CEDAC, as citizen representatives of the business community in El Dorado County, are hearing anecdotal reports that permit applications for a simple resident remodel are taking more than 5 months and sometimes up to a year (or more) to process. Conditional Use Permit applications are taking 1 ½ years or more to get to the Planning Commission. Unfortunately, anecdotes are all we have in the absence of data and metrics collected by the Planning Department. Yet we are hearing many, many stories of incredibly long waits for permits as well as staff mistakes and inconsistencies that cost extra time and money for the applicant, severely impacting the ability of applicants to do business in our County. I would imagine that members of the Board of Supervisors are hearing similar stories from their constituents. Navigating the Planning and Building Department continues to be a frustrating challenge for too many permit applicants.

While the Planning Director's report on the permit backlog is a step in the right direction, CEDAC would like to urge the Board of Supervisors to treat this matter like the very urgent economic development issue that it is and request substantive changes and accountability to improve the Planning and Building Department. Recommendations include:

- 1) Provide a report on what is being done to improve recruitment of new employees. Employee recruitment and turnover is a long-standing problem in the Planning Department that needs to be met with creative solutions. Refer to the recent Grand Jury report for suggestions of ways to improve employee recruitment.
- 2) Provide metrics on employee retention rate; review exit interviews to inform procedural and culture changes to improve employee retention. Survey existing employees to inform changes that would improve employee retention. Develop employee retention goals and hold department accountable to meeting them.

- 3) Review department and permit processing procedures to find ways to improve efficiencies. (This is a very big complaint of permit applicants, that the procedures are cumbersome, time consuming, and in many cases, of questionable utility). Include staff as well as permit applicants in the review effort. Provide a report to the BOS on findings, including steps to improve departmental efficiencies. Hire an outside consultant if necessary to conduct the review and make recommendations.
- 4) Track permit application timeframes and set performance goals that support economic development.

The County's General Plan Objective 10.1.2: Improve Regulatory Process, developed in 2004 and updated in 2019, directs the county to reform and improve regulatory processes relating to business in order to foster the spirit of cooperation, understanding, and consensus between government and business.

- Policy 10.1.2.1 - Create methods to assist government regulators in understanding and making positive responses to the needs and priorities of business owners.
- Policy 10.1.2.2 - Improve, streamline, and monitor permit processing procedures.

CEDAC urges the Board of Supervisors to take these elements of the General Plan seriously and prioritize improvement of the Planning and Building Department. CEDAC members would welcome the opportunity to participate in these efforts. Members of CEDAC are business owners, representatives of trade organizations, community volunteers, and former or current permit applicants that are well-positioned to help inform the process.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Tamara Johnston
Chair, CEDAC