


Date: May 11, 2021

To: Thomas B. Modica, City Manager 

From: Oscar W. Orci, Director Development Services 

For: Mayor and Members of the City Council

Subject: **Building Permit Activity**

The COVID-19 pandemic created challenges to service delivery in the Building and Safety Bureau (Bureau) that have resulted in delays issuing permits, primarily the issuance of minor construction permits. On March 13, 2020, the Development Service Center (Permit Center) closed to the public as part of the City's wider response to COVID-19 and the associated Health Order. During the 14 months since then, the City has provided homeowners, businesses, contractors, and other customers with permit processing through a remote email-based process and has continued to provide inspection services at jobs sites throughout Long Beach. During this period, permit turnaround times, customer communication, and overall development review process have not met the City's goals nor the needs or expectations of our customers.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Bureau transitioned from an in-person service delivery model to a digital format. The transition has not been perfect but was being managed until the departure of key staff at the end of 2020. Since January 2021, the Bureau has experienced a 50 percent vacancy rate, up from 27 percent vacancy overall in 2020. Furloughs, in effect from October 2020 to April 2021, also resulted in fewer available staff. To fill the vacancies until permanent employees can be hired, the Bureau has relied on consultants, Pacific Gateway Workforce Development employees, transitional duty employees, additional overtime, and the use of employees from outside the Bureau. More recently, the Bureau has been hiring additional temporary staff, beyond the budgeted positions, to process the backlog of applications. The table below shows Permit Center staffing levels for January 2020 through April 2021.

Month	Filled by FTE	Filled by Contractor	Vacancies	Filled by Other Staff	% Staffed
January 2020	11	1	0	0	100%
February 2020	10	1	1	0	92%
March 2020	10	0	2	0	83%
April 2020	10	0	2	0	83%
May 2020	10	1	1	0	92%
June 2020	9	2	1	0	92%
July 2020	8	2	2	2	100%
August 2020	8	2	2	2	100%
September 2020	8	3	1	0	92%
October 2020	8	4	0	0	100%
November 2020	8	4	0	0	100%
December 2020	8	4	0	0	100%
January 2021	6	6	0	0	100%
February 2021	6	4	2	0	83%
March 2021	6	4	2	2	100%
April 2021	6	3	3	5	117%

Both the need to adequately train temporary employees and the transitory nature of these staff members have presented challenges to the Bureau's goal of delivering quality service to customers. Following authorization by the City Manager, the Civil Service and Human Resources Departments have prioritized the hiring of permanent Permit Center employees beyond the budgeted positions to address both the backlog of permits and the rapid turnover experienced in the Bureau due to temporary staffing.

Another challenge in the digital format permitting process has been the receipt of incomplete applications. Staff now spends more time (via phone and/or email) collecting required information that are needed to process applications than they spend issuing permits. The in-person process typically takes one business day (same day) to issue permits. On the other hand, due to incomplete applications, permits now can take weeks to complete. Prior to the Permit Center closure, permit applicants were served between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on weekdays. However, under the online submittal process, the Bureau receives submittals on a 24-hour basis.

Additionally, construction activity has significantly as homeowners and businesses invest in their properties leading to even more applications.

The following internal and external enhancements have been made since the Safer at Home Health Order was issued to enhance service delivery in the new digital format:

- Inspection Link: Provides customers with an electronic way to schedule inspections. <http://www.longbeach.gov/lbds/building/inspection/schedule/>
- Plan Review Status Log: Provides customers with an electronic way to track progress on their requested plan checks. <http://www.longbeach.gov/lbds/building/permit-center/project-review-status/>
- Processing of solar, pool, and other specialty permits are performed by management staff.
- Waiving pre-payment requirements for plan check services to expedite review completion and permit issuance.
- Extension of plan check and permit expiration timelines.
- Fee collection through new online fee payments.
- New Public Records Request response process (frees up time to devote to permit reviews).
- Business License verification deferred to first inspection to reduce data collection burden and accelerate permit issuance.
- Cross-training and cross-assignment of staff across Development Services to relieve bottle-necks in the permitting process.

The Development Services team is working on final arrangements with staff to restart limited in-person services starting today, May 10, 2021. These services will be by appointment only and limited to Express Permit (minor construction) projects such as water heater replacements,

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electrical service or heating upgrades, window replacements, and re-roofs. Staff and those with appointments entering City Hall will follow all COVID-19 safety guidelines. Walk-ins will not be accepted, but same-day appointments may be granted pending availability. Through this new in-person model, we will be prioritizing the backlogged applicants and expect this to provide significant improvement over the next few weeks.

Department management have taken an all-hands on deck approach to focus on improving the Permit Center customer experience. Managers and supervisors have been dedicating resources, as well as taking on permitting duties in addition to their normal tasks to speed up response times, including troubleshooting and responding outside of normal work hours and on weekends. We received feedback recently that these efforts are showing positive results and response times are improving.

In the medium-term, the Bureau is partnering with the Technology and Innovation Department to upgrade the permit software (Infor/Hansen) utilized to process permit requests. It is anticipated that these software upgrades will offer an improved online application and payment process for Express Permits by summer. It is also expected that in-person Permit Center operations will be expanded by late summer or early fall.

We will continue to provide updates as key milestones are achieved and the City moves forward toward a full reopening.

If you have any questions, please contact me at Oscar.Orci@longbeach.gov or (562) 570-6369.

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