

Valley cities investing in more user-friendly permit systems

Published on 10/21/2015 - 4:14 pm

Written by Hannah Esqueda

0 Comments

Two Central Valley cities are in the midst of revamping their planning and building departments in an effort to accelerate the approval process for local developers.

The City of Fresno's efforts to create an easier experience for permit customers began in 2013 and has been a central part of Mayor Ashley Swearengin's "Business Friendly Fresno" initiative. The plan has sought input from an external task force, comprised of business owners and developers on how to create a smoother permitting process.

Visalia has also recently taken steps to improve its building safety and permitting division, and both cities have implemented new organizational standards to help users navigate the approval process.

"We're really trying to build public trust in the process by informing them rather than just streamlining it," said Chuck Clark, building official with Visalia's Building and Safety Division.

While the city handles a lower volume of applications — 3,786 between January and October compared to the 7,483 Fresno saw from January to June — the department's efficiency has increased in the last year.

"Our permit numbers have increased 30 percent since last year and even with the increased volume, we're seeing fewer projects miss their target dates," Clark said.

The city is also outsourcing less, and recently switched to a new contract with CSG Consultants, which has allowed the city to drop its average monthly cost by 52 percent.

"I don't like outsourcing and, to me, it should only be necessary for large projects where you need peer reviews," Clark said. "I think you can get better customer service in-house and that's really our goal."

Fresno and Visalia have also introduced new categories for projects based on complexity. Minor projects like tenant improvements now fall within Fresno's level 1 and have a processing goal of under 14 days.

Visalia has incorporated a similar system, and also unveiled a new "one stop shop" appointment option for customers with smaller projects. The format allows applicants to meet with and seek approval from multiple officials at once rather than spreading the process over several days.

So far, the city has seen positive results. Clark said his staff has been working hard to turn around projects on time and minimizing the number of overdue projects.

Fresno has also seen an internal restructuring, with staff from several departments reshuffled to create the new Development and Resource Management Department.

The change allowed the city to centralize its permitting and inspection services within one location and has led to shorter wait times at the counter.

"We're also adding more personnel like in public works and utilities and residential fire inspectors," said Jennifer Clark, director of the Development and Resource Management Department.

Both cities are also looking to update their technology in order to allow for online application submissions.

Such software can already be found in a handful of cities throughout California, and Visalia's Clark said he encountered similar changes during his previous position in San Mateo. The department was entering the beginning stages of the software transition before he came to Visalia in 2013.

"It took 11 months before the [e-automation process] went live in San Mateo. But, I think we can do it faster [in Visalia] because I've been through it before," he said.

"[Builders] are chomping at the bit. They want that e-plan review and they want to be able to see their inspection results in real-time."

Visalia's system already allows customers to review inspection information online, but would be further improved with online submission, automated updates and alerts, said Paul Miller, owner and lead architect at Fresno's Vernal Group.

While the firm conducts a majority of its work within the City of Fresno, he said he is familiar with the planning and permitting processes for cities throughout California.

"Visalia has always had a good system and they're a little further along in the [e-review] process than the city of Fresno," he said. "But, this is really something that I thought would have come up 20 years ago."

Currently, when working in Fresno, applicants are forced to call in or ask in person to follow-up on the status of their permit — a requirement that costs time and money, Miller said.

As the city's technology gets more advanced, architects and developers will be able to login and see how far along their project is, what inspections have already been done and by whom.

"We're in the process of requesting proposals for that but with the timeline right now, it would not be operational until the summer of 2017," Jennifer Clark said.

The change would also see the Fresno department move from its 17-year-old address-based system to a more user-friendly geographic-based model.

As an architect, Miller said he welcomes any updates that could result in a faster and more informative permitting and inspection process.

"It would be fantastic. We have a lot of demanding, and high-paying clients, that expect answers right now, and sometimes I just have to say 'I don't know.' I really don't like saying that," he said.

Providing real-time notifications would also help cities be more competitive with the private sector, a main goal for Visalia, Clark said.

"We're really trying to be a frontrunner with how we do business. I really want Visalia to be looking at how we're doing and how we can do it better," he said.

[inShare](#)