



## **EL DORADO COUNTY GRAND JURY 2010-2011**

### **DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE INVESTIGATION**

Case Number GJ010-017

#### **REASON FOR REPORT**

The El Dorado County Grand Jury received complaints about the service provided by the El Dorado County Development Services Department (commonly referred to as the Building Department or Planning Department). El Dorado County officials reported receiving a large number of complaints regarding this Department. The number of complaints has not been quantified.

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Development Services Department is comprised of two parts. Building Services processes all requests for building permits and building inspections. It corrects and approves applications for building permits. Planning Services processes the collection of fees for El Dorado County and some special districts. The Development Services Department, located in Building C of the Government Center, is the first point of appeal for persons wishing to dispute a decision by the Department or oppose a building project within El Dorado County.

The complaints received covered all aspects of the Development Services Department.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The El Dorado County Grand Jury investigation included the following:

Reviewed correspondence and documents:

- Individual complaint letters to the Development Services Department (12/10)
- Individual Building Services Project Files (1/11)
- Building Applications, fee schedules, and filing instructions (2/11)
- Uniform Building Codes (1/11; 2/11)
- Superior Court "Small Claims Advisor" Brochure (1/11)

Conducted the following interviews:

- A member of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors (BOS)
- The El Dorado County Chief Administrative Officer
- Director of the Development Services Department
- Development Services Department personnel
- A member of the BOS staff
- Members of the public

Members of the El Dorado County Grand Jury conducted user interfaces to determine the manner and style used by the counter personnel.

## **FINDINGS**

1. The current Department procedure requires consumer complaints and any responses be filed in individual building files, but does not require retention of all complaints in a single collective file. This procedure makes reviewing, monitoring and use for personnel customer service training difficult because of the overwhelming number of individual building files.
2. The Department processes two types of complaints: first, those received from applicants; second, those received from persons or groups who have been impacted by Department decisions and wish to alter or void them. According to county public officials and members of the public, there is concern among both types of applicants who felt the Department does not "listen" or pay sufficient attention to their complaints.

3. Applicants to the Department are of two general groups. The first group are professionals such as builders, architects and planners. This group generally understands the planning and building process and has fewer complaints. The second consists of members of the general public who possess little or no experience in building issues such as codes and fees. Our interviews indicate this group generates the most complaints.
4. When anyone approaches the Development Services Department, they are given a large packet of papers containing applications, instructions and fee schedules. To the untrained person, this packet generally is perceived as overwhelming and unclear because the building codes are complex.
5. The Department demonstrated an inconsistent quality of customer service during Grand Jury user interfaces. During interviews, county officials reported hearing complaints from the general public regarding customer service.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. In addition to the current individual files, establish and maintain a central repository of complaints and subsequent responses. This system would make complaints and subsequent responses available for management monitoring, department accountability and personnel training.
2. Provide readily available customer service feedback forms. Written feedback would assist the Department in monitoring and improving customer service.
3. Train personnel in effective customer service. It would improve the Department's customer service, enhance public perception of the Department, and reduce public complaints.
4. Create a network of volunteers who are professionals in the building trades to guide the nonprofessional builder through the process. This group of volunteers would be available by telephone to the public for inquiries regarding applications and complaints. This group could be similar to the 'Small Claims Advisor' created by the courts to assist non-lawyers in the policies and procedures regarding small claims actions.
5. The following sample script could be used when training Department personnel in how a volunteer group could be used to promote customer service.

The Department customer service personnel could make a simple inquiry, "Are you familiar with the building permit process and the fees?" If the answer is, "No," the applicant would be advised of the volunteer group and be given a

printed sheet with names and phone numbers of those available to assist. It could contain a disclaimer such as, "The volunteers are available to assist you through the permit or dispute process. They can only give information on the application process, fees and cost, or advise you on a potential protest. They are not available to instruct you on construction or to prepare plans." The intent is to inform, educate, and extend to the public a "helping hand."

6. The complainants affected by Department decisions could be supported by the same volunteer advisory group. The volunteer professional could explain the complex details of the codes, planning, and appeals process. Public understanding of the building codes, planning process and accessibility to a hearing may help avoid many of the nonprofessional complaints.
7. Implementing best practices will improve the overall operation of the Department, including customer service. To accomplish this, it would be beneficial to compare and contrast the Department's current system of management practices with those best practices of other counties.

## **RESPONSES**

Responses to both numbered findings and recommendations in this report are required in accordance with the California penal Code §933 and §933.05. Address responses to: The Honorable Suzanne N. Kingsbury, Presiding Judge of the El Dorado County Superior Court, 1354 Johnson Blvd., South Lake Tahoe, CA 96150.

Reports have been provided to the Director of the El Dorado County Development Services Department and the Chairperson of the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors for responses.

Elected officials under statute are given 60 days to respond, and non-elected officials are provided a 90-day response period from the release date of this report.