

CAN THE PLANNING AND BUILDING DEPARTMENT HELP IMPROVE THE ECONOMY?

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Can the Planning and Building Department help improve the economy? The answer unequivocally is: YES! The Planning and Building Department entitlement, building permit review and approval process is integral to the economic success of a project. When making the decision to invest in a construction or development project, the contractor or developer requires good communication, certainty and consistency from government. Planning and Building Departments have an obligation to provide these critical components to their customers.

Economy

Webster's Dictionary defines economy as the process or system by which goods and services are produced, sold, and bought. There several types of services that are produced, sold and bought in a construction or development project. Design professionals and consultants preparing plans, engineering designs and discretionary entitlement application documents. Banks and other lending institutions make loans available for projects. The contractor and sub-contractors provide oversight and management of the construction project. Contractors, design professionals and consultants meeting with government staff on behalf of their client to obtain the necessary entitlements and permits. Supply stores also provide service by having the building materials in inventory, and having the staff to load and deliver the materials. The Planning and Building Department provides a critical service in reviewing and approving entitlement and construction permit applications. All of the above services are bought and paid for by the developer, property owner or business owner.

There is a wide array of goods produced, sold and bought in a construction or development project such as lumber, concrete, gravel, plumbing, mechanical, electrical, landscaping materials and much more. Some of the other goods and services that are an indirect part of a construction or development project are the gas stations that provide fuel for the trucks, rental yards that provide equipment on the job site, retail outlets that provide lunches for employees, work clothes, insurance policies and myriad other items that everyone associated with a construction or a development project needs. The Planning and Building Department entitlement and building permit review and approval process is an equally important service in addition to those outlined above.

Communication

Communication is the key to any successful endeavor. In the early stages of a project, it is important that a contractor or developer be provided as much information as possible from the government agency about what will be required. It is the responsibility for government staff to give an applicant advance knowledge of any requirements that will be expensive to comply with or if a project has a "fatal flaw." This is accomplished by clear, knowledgeable communication between government staff and the applicant.

Many jurisdictions in California (including the City of Healdsburg) have developed a One-Stop Assistance Center to provide this information. The purpose of a One-Stop Assistance Center is to communicate to the applicant the jurisdictions' requirements prior to the final preparation of plans and submittal documents. Representatives from the Administration, Planning, Building, Fire, Electric, Health and Public Works Departments meet with property owners, contractors and potential developers to discuss their proposals.

Information about the review process and jurisdictional requirements is provided by all representatives at a single meeting. This process results in better submittals and a significant reduction in the time frame for reviewing, approving, and issuing entitlements and building permit applications.

Certainty

Cost certainty is the probability of completing a project within the budget agreed between clients and contractors before the commencement of construction. Time certainty is the certainty and reliability of completing projects on an agreed upon time line between clients and contractors before the commencement of construction.

The lack of certainty in the review and approval process for development projects can result in a waste of resources, escalate the cost of development to the consumer, and discourage investment. Lending institutions require assurances from an applicant that the project will be reviewed, approved and constructed in a timely fashion before financing is approved. Lengthy review periods and unforeseen requirements that were not communicated to the applicant prior to submittal will delay and increase the cost of a project. It is vitally important that a Planning and Building Department make a commitment to provide clear communication and a comprehensive and timely review and approval process that takes the least amount of time and provides the least possible economic cost to the applicant.

Consistency

Consistency is the equitable application of regulations in the built and natural environment through plans review, inspections, enforcement and the issuance of permits and licenses. Contractors and developers understand the need to comply with building codes, local ordinances and other government regulations. It is a part of doing business. However, when a government agency is inconsistent in its application of the regulations or in the review process, this inconsistency costs the applicant money and delays the project. It is important that a Planning and Building Department provide consistency. This is accomplished by hiring the right personnel, regular training, and internal controls such as checklists and informational handouts.

In summary, the Planning and Building Department helps the economy by providing the public good communication, certainty and consistency when reviewing and approving projects. In doing so, projects are constructed, jobs are provided, and goods and services are produced, sold, and bought. This economic activity benefits the Planning and Building Department by producing sales tax revenue and increased property taxes to help fund government services. Government employees should always be cognizant of the fact that when you provide good service to a customer, you are part of a broader economic circle from which we all benefit.