

REPORT

**Small Business Development Center
City of Bellingham Permit Center
2006 Third Quarter Survey**

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INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 2006-07, the Small Business Development Center sub-contracted with Applied Research Northwest to conduct a satisfaction survey of users of the City of Bellingham's Permit Center. This baseline report includes respondents that used the Permit Center's services in the third quarter (July – September) of 2006.

This customer satisfaction survey was conducted online, so researchers first needed to obtain email addresses for the individuals that used Permit Center services. Of the roughly 300 users in the third quarter of 2006, 196 email addresses were gathered for the emailed invitation to participate in the survey.

Forty-six (46) individuals completed the survey, resulting in a 23% response rate. This calculates to a 13% margin of error on the survey, a strong indication that more participation would greatly benefit the project.

The findings of this initial customer satisfaction survey will be used to guide quality improvement efforts within the Permit Center, as well as to create a baseline against which future results can be compared. In subsequent reports, changes to respondents' perceptions of the Permit Center will be tracked.

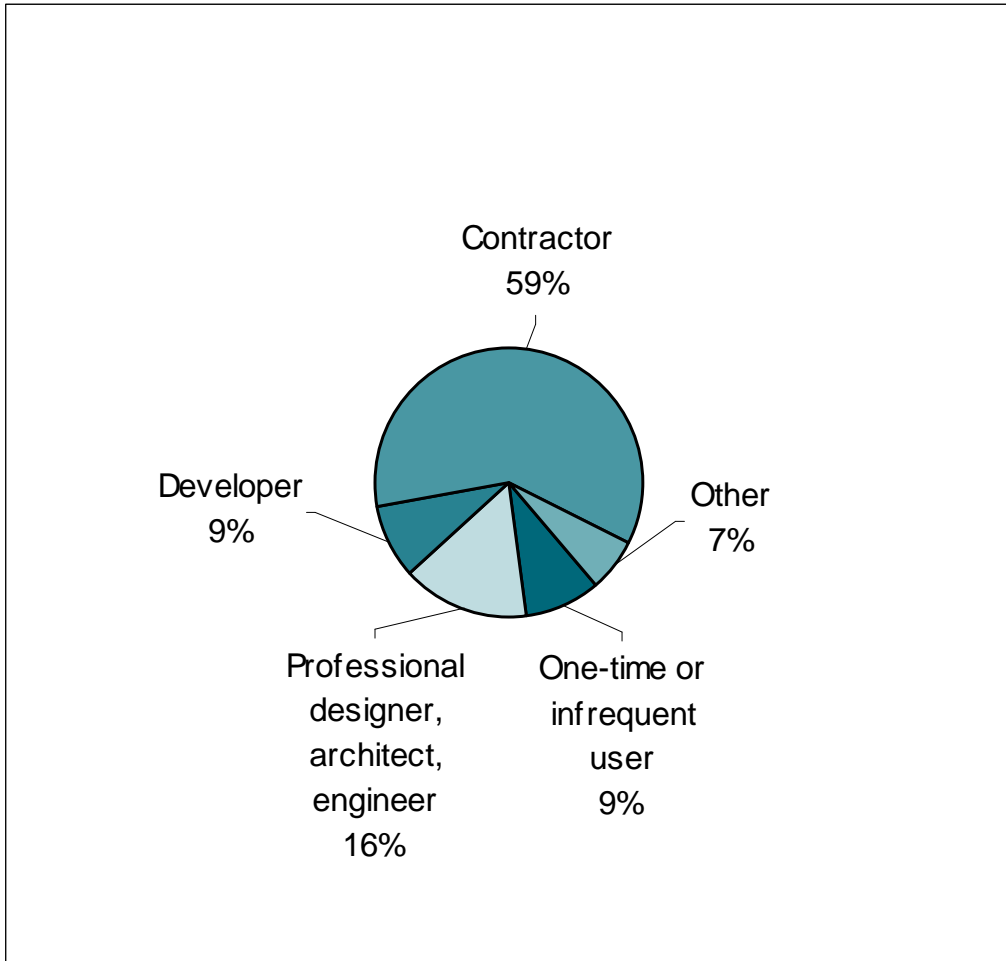
This report uses the convention of *italicizing* any verbatim response option from the survey in an effort to fully convey the voice of the respondents' survey responses.

FINDINGS

Customers of the Permit Center were first asked to describe the role that brought them to the Permit Center in the third quarter of 2006. As figure 1 indicates, the majority of respondents were contractors (59%). The combined grouping of designers, architects, and engineers made up another 16% of the sample.

One respondent did not answer this questions, perhaps due to a concern about being identified.

Figure 1. Distribution of Permit Center Customer Type (N=45)

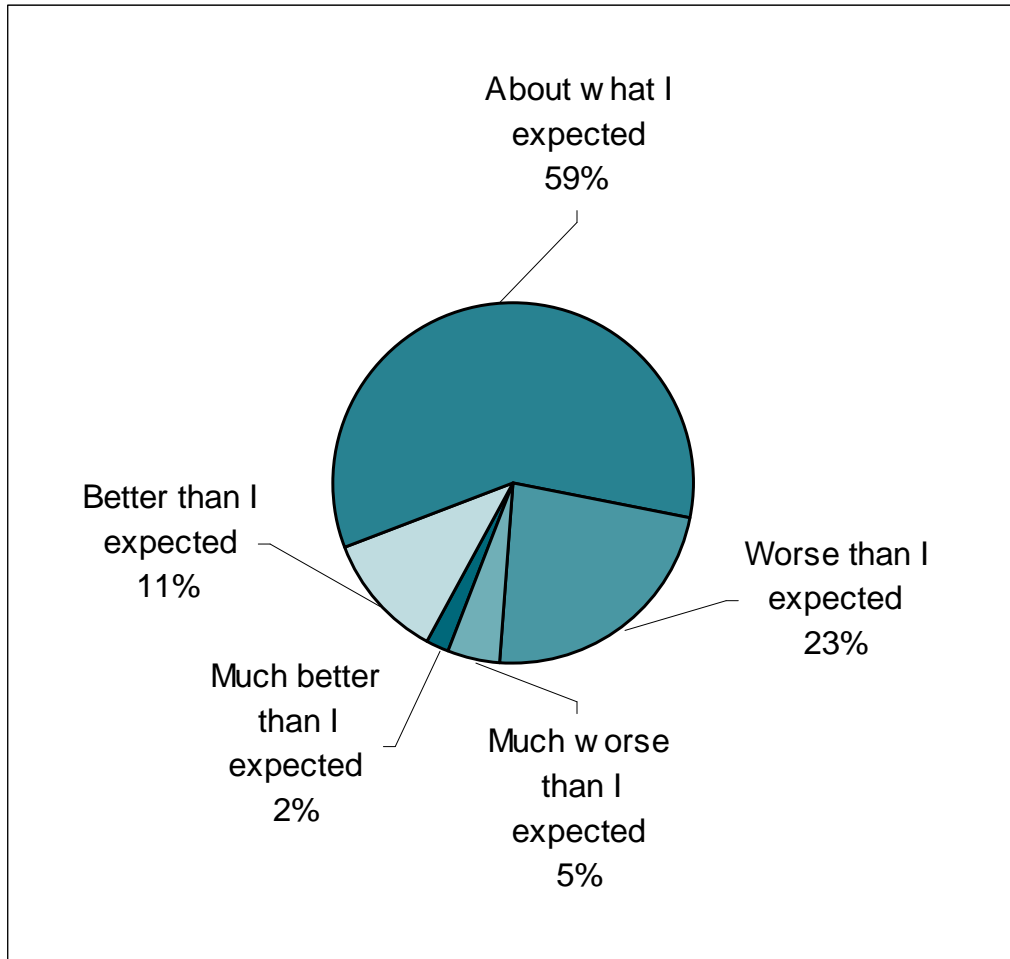


Respondents were then asked about their overall experience with the Permit Center. Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents (72%) said that their experience was *about what I expected* or better. This high proportion of respondents indicates that customer expectations are being met by the Permit Center.

However, more than one in four respondents (28%) reported that their experience was *worse or much worse than expected*. While this is the minority of customers, it is still a noticeable proportion.

Two respondents chose not to answer this question.

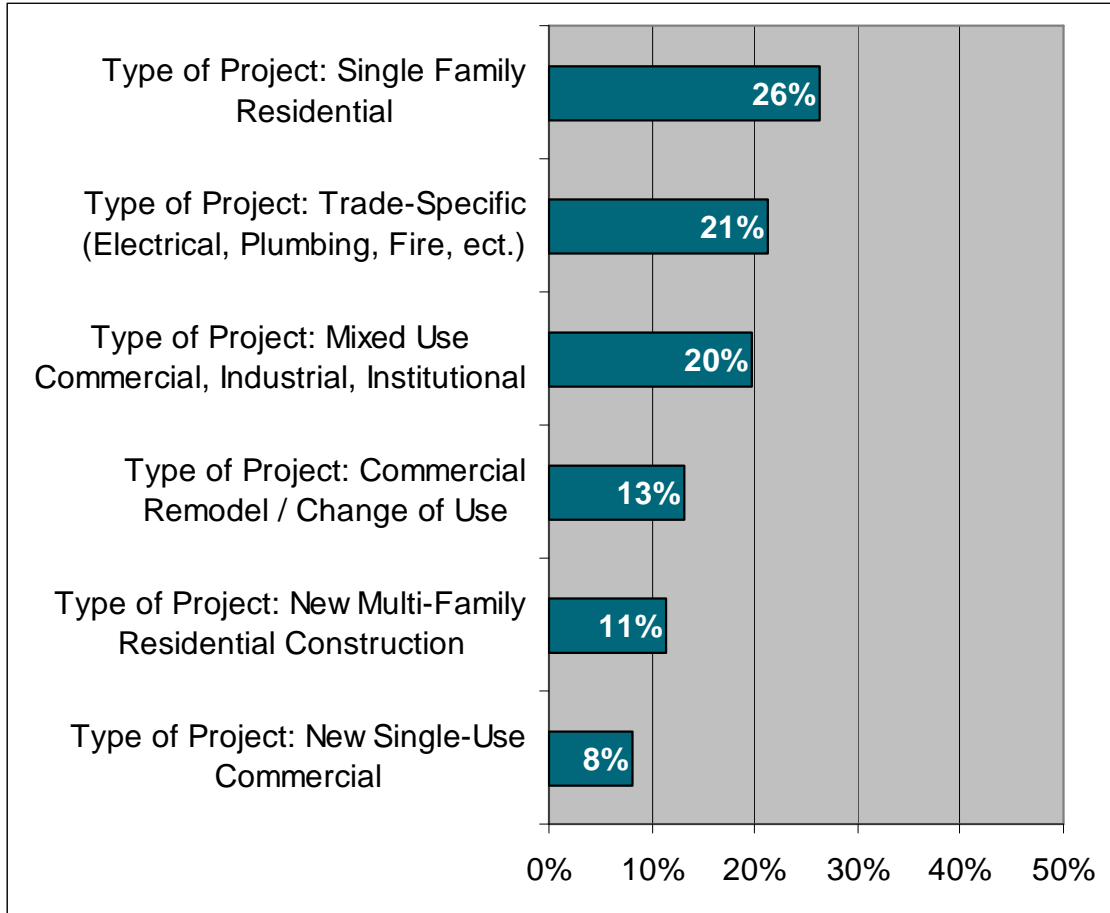
Figure 2. Overall Experience with the Permit Center (N=44)



Respondents were asked to indicate what kind of project they were working on that brought them to the Permit Center. As figure 3 shows, single family residential projects were the most common in the third quarter of 2006, although all categories were selected to a certain degree.

Please note that respondents could select more than one type of project, so the total number of projects (61) exceeds the total number of respondents (46).

Figure 3. Distribution of Project Types (N=61)

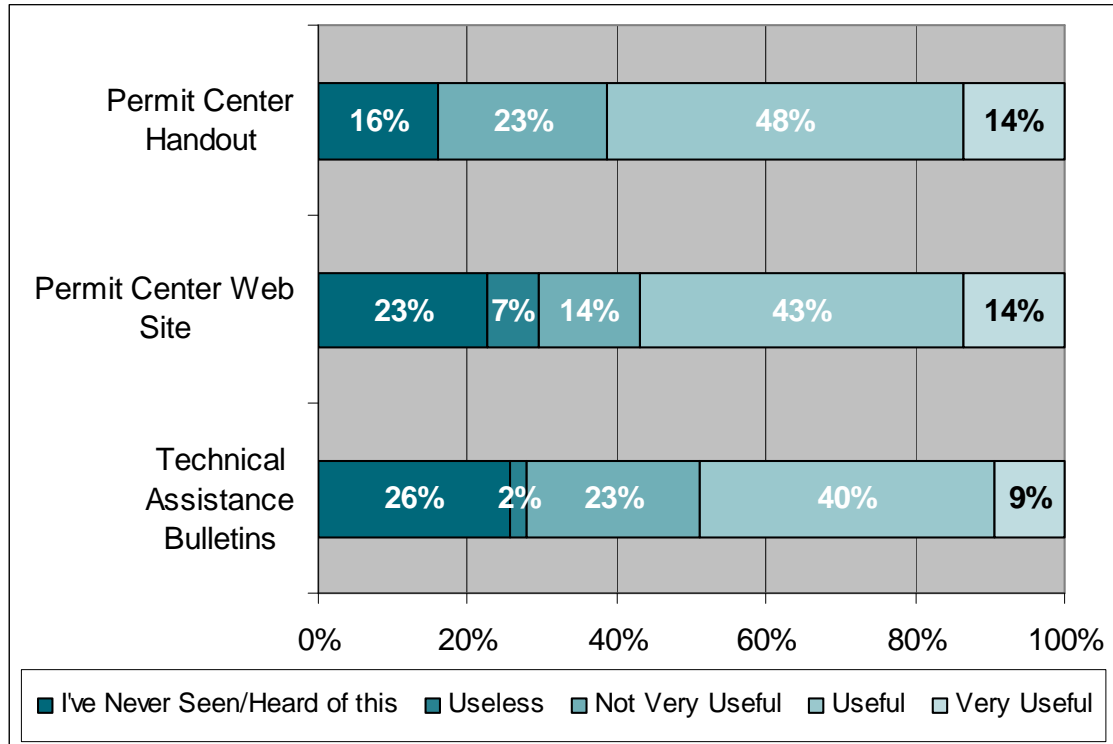


The first rating and evaluation items on the survey asked respondents to indicate how useful the Permit Center materials were. This included the website, handouts, and assistance bulletins.

Figure 4 indicates that all three types of resources were found to be relatively useful to customers, with the handout rated as 62% *useful* or *very useful*.

Note that about a quarter of respondents had not heard of any of these resources. Increasing the awareness of the highly rated but somewhat under-utilized resources could positively affect customer satisfaction with the Permit Center.

Figure 4. Evaluating the Usefulness of Permit Center Materials (N=44)

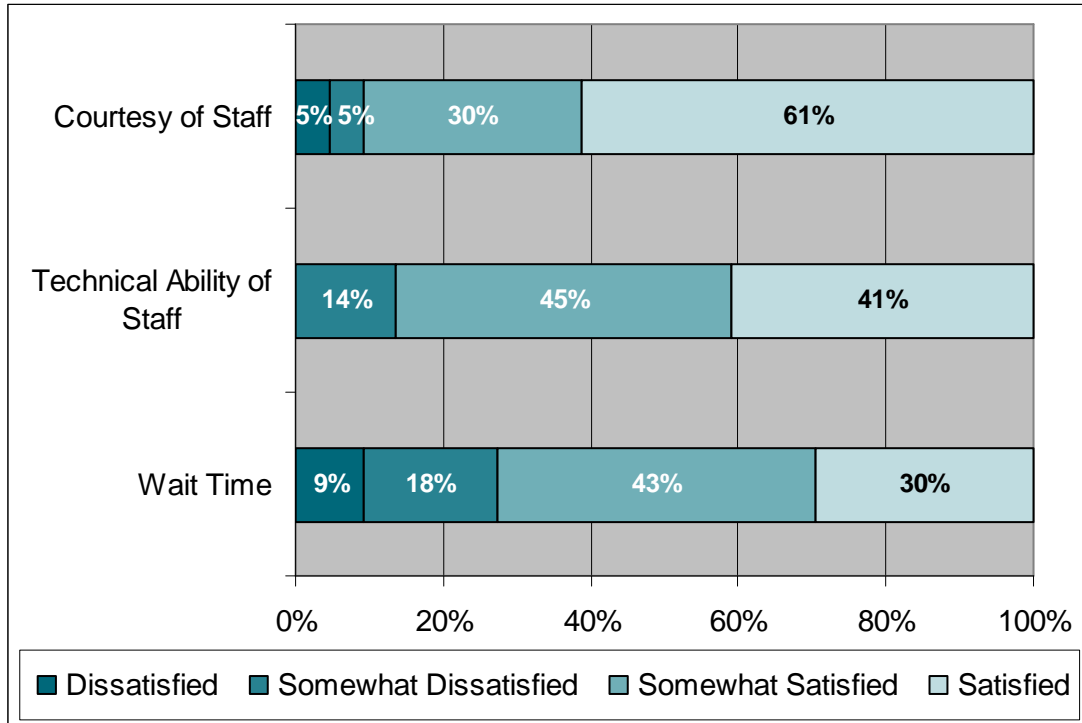


Respondents were then asked to indicate their satisfaction with the assistance they received from the counter staff. Satisfaction with the courtesy of the counter staff was high (91%), while the level of satisfaction reported by customers around wait times was much lower (73%).

When including *somewhat satisfied* in the analysis, the level of satisfaction ranges from 91% (courtesy) to 73% (wait times). No respondents were *dissatisfied* with the technical ability of the counter staff.

Two respondents did not answer these questions.

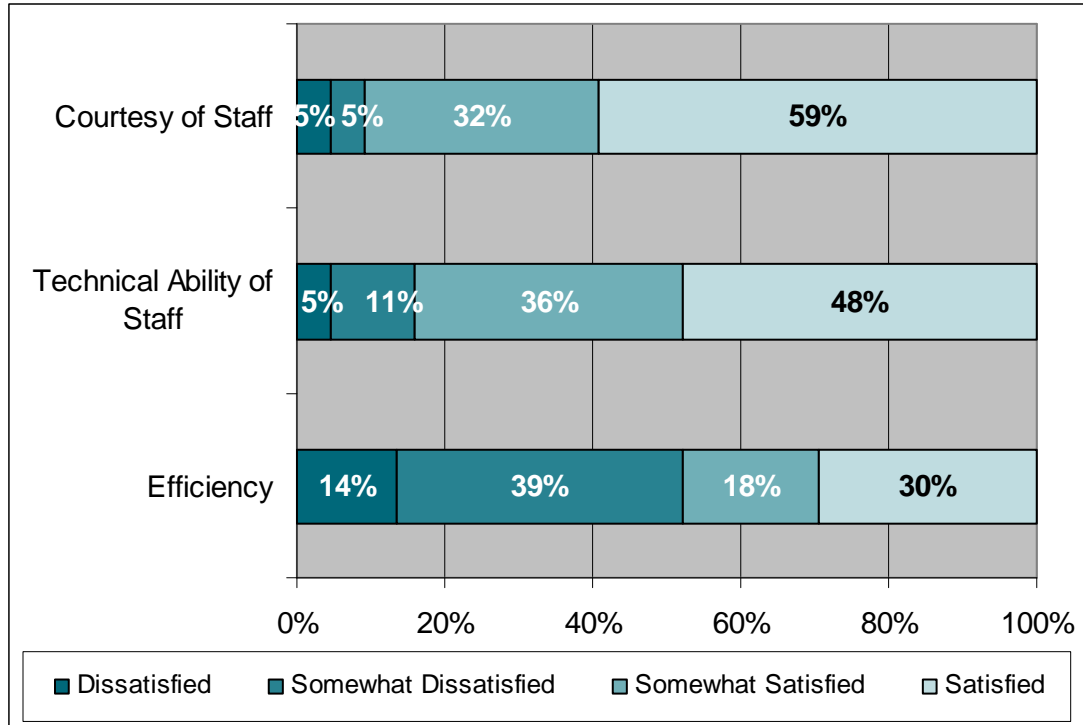
Figure 5. Customer Satisfaction with the Counter Assistance (N=44)



Permit Center customers were also asked to evaluate the processing application procedures. As figure 6 shows, the courtesy of staff was again the highest rated aspect of this particular process (91%). The efficiency of the processing application was rated much lower (48%) with the overall *dissatisfaction* coming in at 53%.

Two respondents did not answer these questions.

Figure 6. Customer Satisfaction with the Processing Application (N=44)

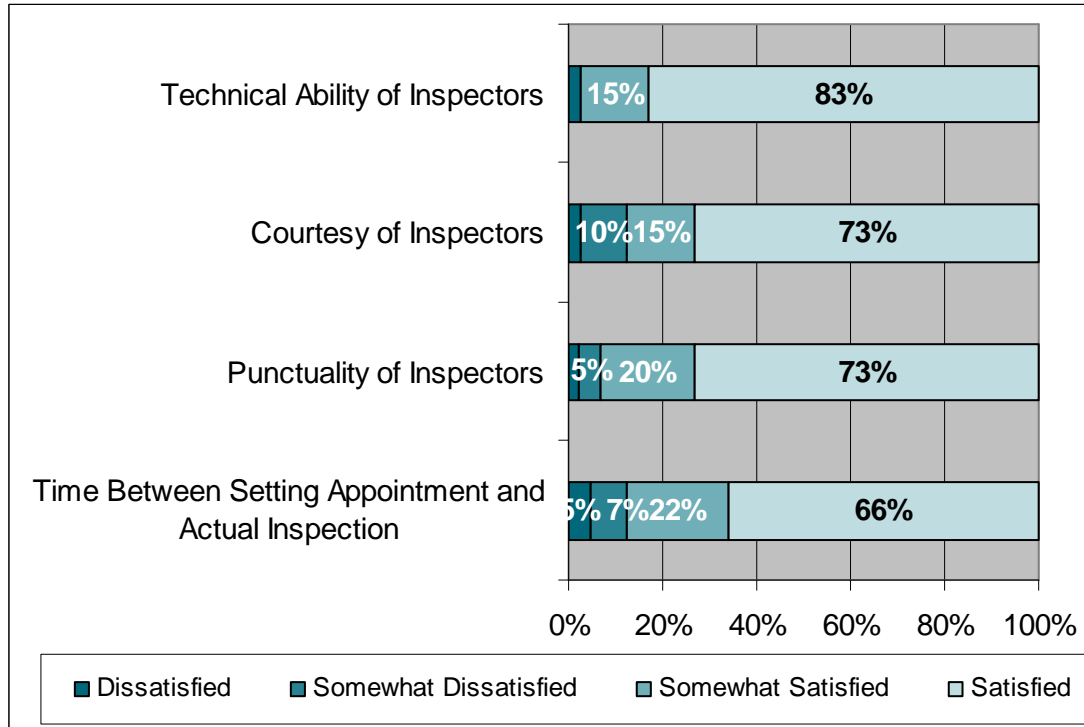


The inspectors from the Permit Center were also evaluated by customers. Eighty-three percent (83%) of customers reported that they were *satisfied* with the technical ability of the inspectors. Another 73% said that the inspectors were courteous, and 66% were *satisfied* with the wait time between when they set the appointment and when the inspection actually occurred.

The overall satisfaction in this section (when combining the *somewhat satisfied* and *satisfied* responses) is the highest off all the areas that Permit Center customers evaluated.

Five respondents did not answer these questions.

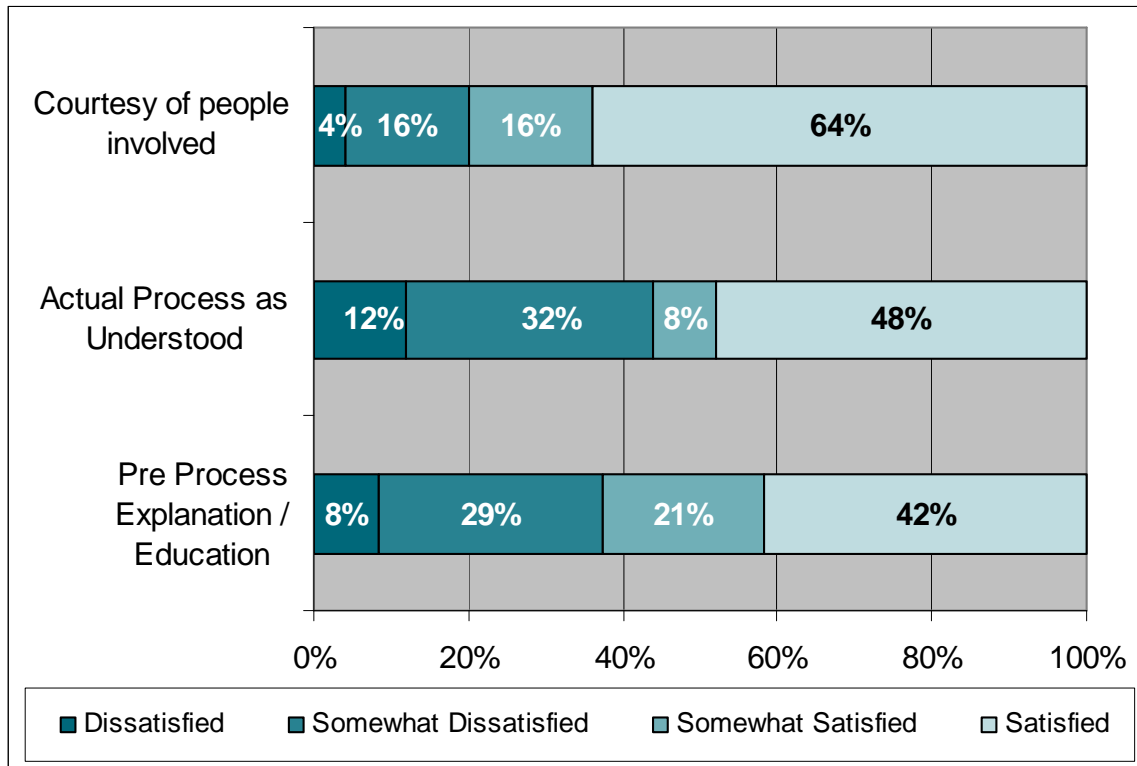
Figure 7. Customer Satisfaction with Inspectors (N=41)



The Certificate of Occupancy process was also rated by customers. As figure 8 shows, the courtesy of these staff members was rated highly by respondents (a combined 80% reported being *somewhat satisfied* or *satisfied*).

The explanation given to customers (63% *satisfied*) and the understanding of the process (56% *satisfied*) were given lower satisfaction rankings by customers, and might be a good place to improve overall customer satisfaction.

Figure 8. Customer Satisfaction with the Certificate of Occupancy Process



Customers were asked to indicate which areas within the Permit Center they interacted with. Respondents could select multiple departments, so the number of selections (136) exceeds the number of respondents (46). These numbers indicate that the average customer interacts with almost three (2.95) departments within the Permit Center for any given project.

Figure 9 shows the percentage of customers that interacted with each particular area within the Permit Center.

Figure 9. Percentage of Customers Interacting with each Permit Center Department (N=46)

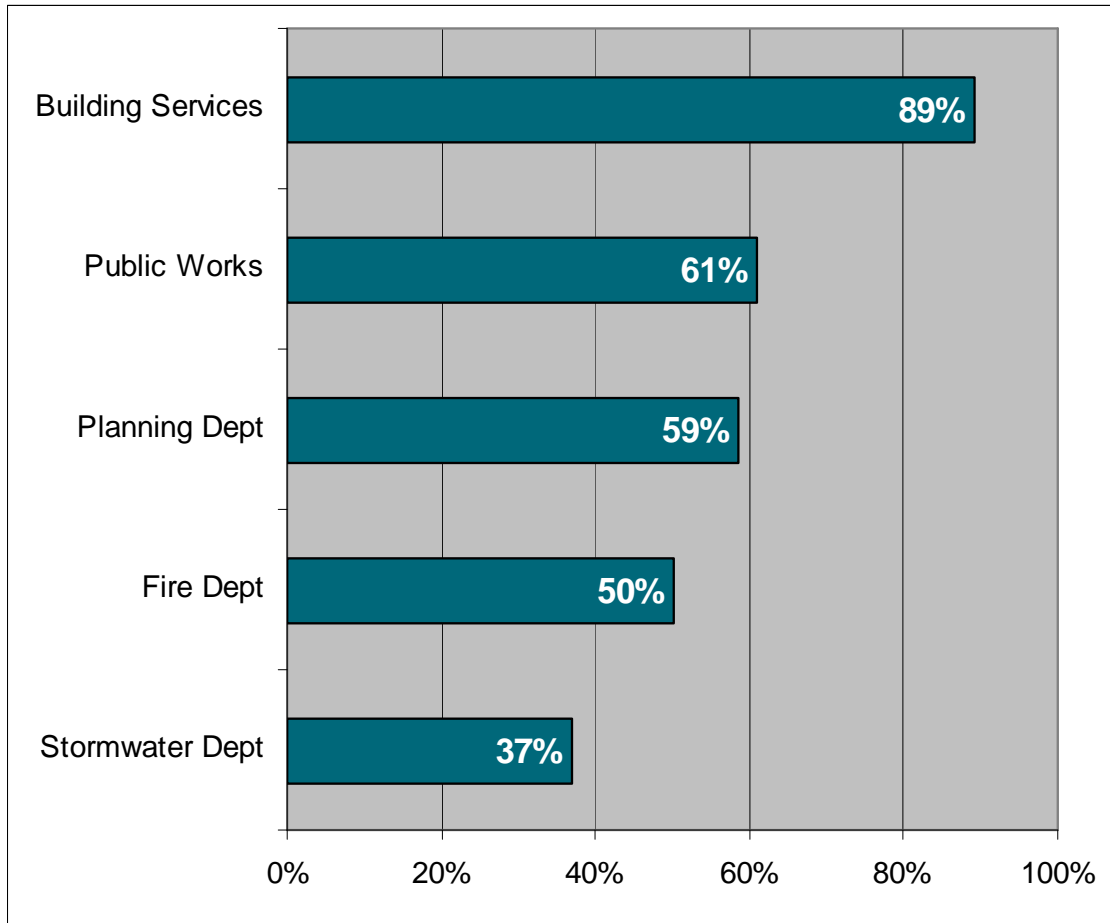
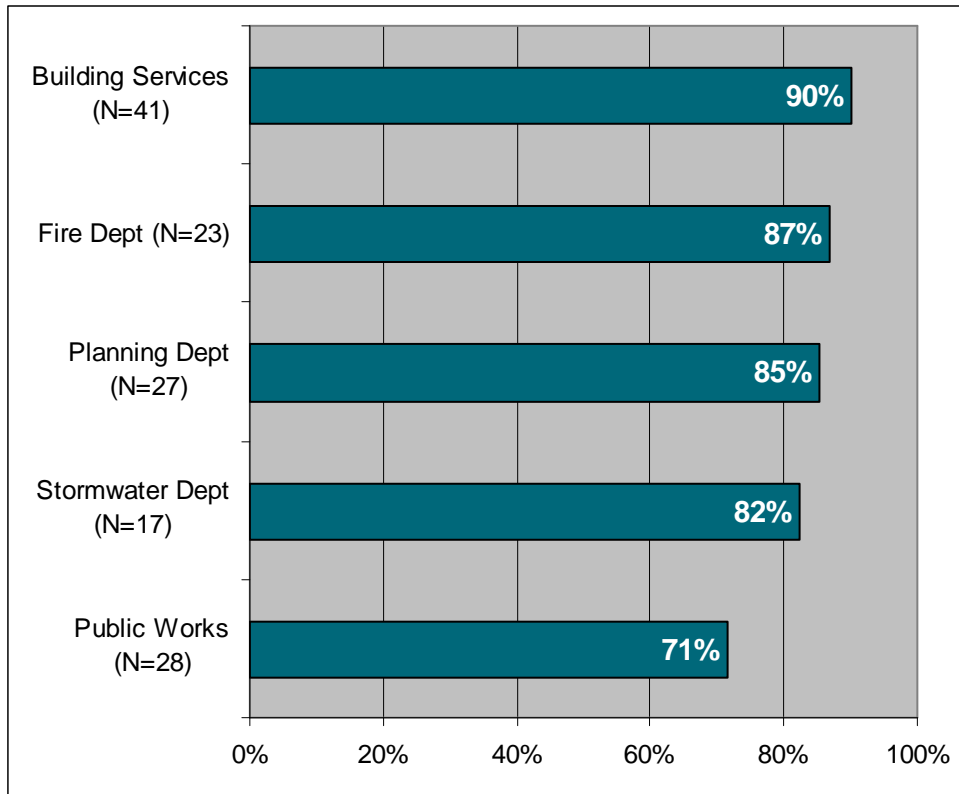


Figure 10 shows the percentage of customers that indicated which departments were professional during their interactions. Building Services is ranked the highest in terms of professionalism (90%), although all departments get relatively good ratings.

It may be beneficial to identify best practices in the higher rated departments as a means to inform quality improvement efforts in the other departments.

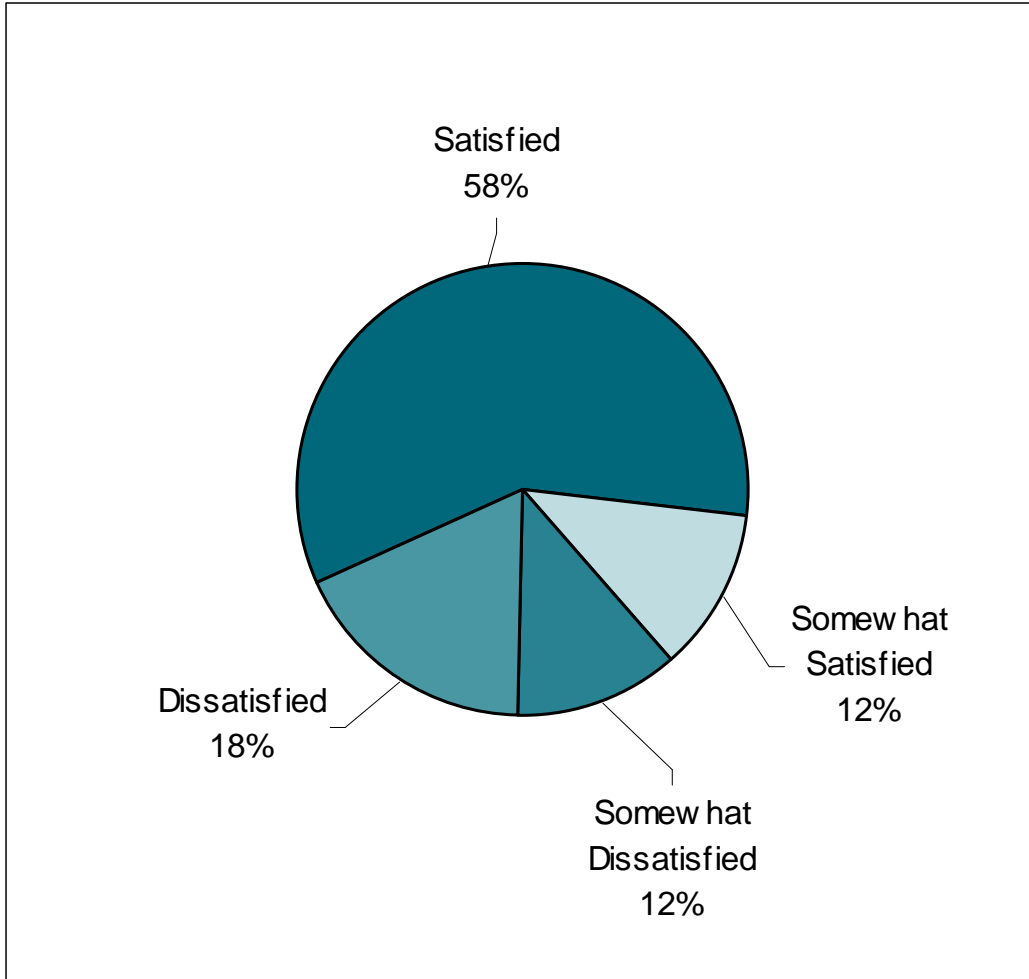
Figure 10. Percentage of Customers Indicating each Department was Professional



Respondents that had participated in a pre-application meeting (17) were asked to evaluate the process. As figure 11 shows, 70% were *somewhat satisfied* or *satisfied*.

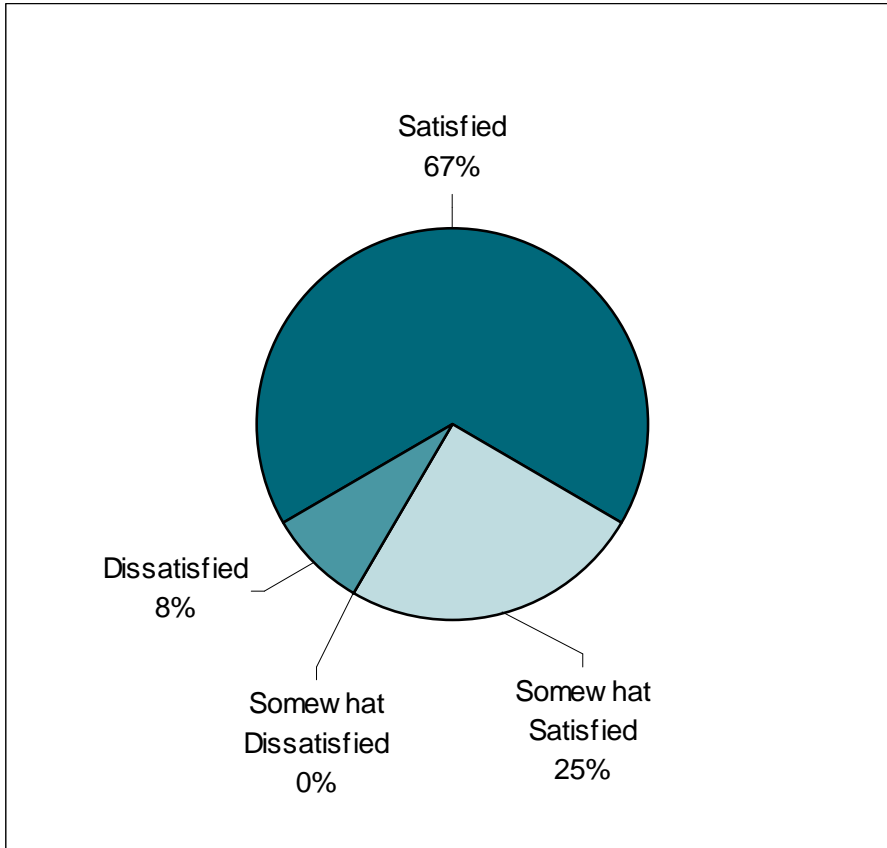
It may be beneficial to conduct some informal qualitative interviews with customers that have used this service to identify what could be improved since this survey does not ask for that specific feedback.

Figure 11. Distribution of Satisfaction with Pre-Application Meetings (N=17)



Respondents that had participated in a pre-construction meeting (12) were also asked to evaluate the process. As figure 12 shows, 92% were *somewhat satisfied* or *satisfied* with this aspect of the Permit Center.

Figure 12. Distribution of Satisfaction with Pre-Construction Meetings (N=12)



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APPENDIX B: SURVEY SCRIPT

Thank you for participating in the City of Bellingham's Permit Center's listening tool. Western Washington University's Small Business Development Center is joining with the City of Bellingham to gather user responses. The City of Bellingham will use your input to help improve the services offered by the Permit Center.

Your thoughts are greatly appreciated and will be confidential. All information reported to the City of Bellingham will be in aggregate form so that no one individual's answers can be identified.

Your opinion is vital to the successful operation of the Permit Center. Responses to this survey will be used to advise the City of Bellingham, make future improvements and promote greater customer satisfaction.

Your input is valuable. Thank you for participating.

Q1. Which description best fits you as a user of City of Bellingham Permit Center during the 3rd quarter of 2006?

- One-time or infrequent user
- Developer
- Professional designer/architect/engineer
- Contractor
- Other, please specify

Q2. How have your recent experiences with the Permit Center compare to your expectations?

- Much better than I expected
- Better than I expected
- About what I expected
- Worse than I expected
- Much worse than I expected

Q3. Which description best fits your project(s) from July 2006 - September 2006? (check all that apply)

- Single Family Residential
- New Multi-Family Residential Construction
- Commercial Remodel / Change of Use
- New Single-Use Commercial
- Mixed Use Commercial, Industrial, Institutional
- Trade-Specific (Electrical, Plumbing, Fire, etc.)

Q4. Please rate each of the following RESOURCES provided by the Permit Center:
(Very Useful, Useful, Not Very Useful, Useless, I've Never Seen/Heard of this)

- Permit Center Web Site
- Permit Center Handout
- Technical Assistance Bulletins

The following section of the survey pertains to the Permit Center as a whole. The individual departments (such as Planning and Fire) will be surveyed in a later section.

Please rate your SATISFACTION WITH THE SERVICE you received from the Permit Center during the months July - September of 2006.

Q5. General counter assistance including intake review
(Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied)

- Rate Counter Assistance: Technical Ability of Staff
- Rate Counter Assistance: Courtesy of Staff
- Rate Counter Assistance: Wait Time

Q6. Processing your application including review and corrections
(Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied)

- Rate Processing Application: Technical Ability of Staff
- Rate Processing Application: Courtesy of Staff
- Rate Processing Application: Efficiency

Q7. Construction Inspections (if applicable)
(Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied)

- Rate Construction Inspections: Technical Ability of Inspectors
- Rate Construction Inspections: Courtesy of Inspectors
- Rate Construction Inspection: Time Between Setting Appointment and Actual Inspection
- Rate Construction Inspections: Punctuality of Inspectors

Q8. Certificate of Occupancy Process (if applicable)
(Satisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied)

- Rate Certificate of Occupancy Process: Pre Process Explanation / Education
- Rate Certificate of Occupancy Process: Actual Process as Understood
- Rate Certificate of Occupancy Process: Courtesy of people involved

The Permit Center represents a number of departments that may have been involved in the review / approval of your permit application.

The following two questions will measure the effectiveness of those departments during your interaction with the Permit Center between July and September of 2006.

Q9. Please indicate all departments involved in your permit application process:

- Planning
- Public Works
- Stormwater
- Building Services
- Fire

Q10. Of the departments selected, which treated you in a professional manner?

- Planning
- Public Works
- Stormwater
- Building Services
- Fire

Q11. If you participated in a pre-application meeting, please describe your satisfaction with that process.

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

Q12. If you participated in a pre-construction meeting, please describe your satisfaction with that process.

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

Q13. Please provide any additional comments you would like to share with us regarding your experiences with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center. (Responses can be found in Appendix B)

That is the end of the survey. Thank you very much for participating in this survey.

APPENDIX B: VERBATIM CUSTOMER COMMENTS

“Please provide any additional comments you would like to share with us regarding your experiences with the City of Bellingham’s Permit Center.”

- Stormwater approvals are very slow and it takes them weeks to respond to questions and to review answers. Storm water requirements are somewhat unrealistic. Common sense does not seem to apply. They rely on tables that are making us create water retention ponds much greater in size than they need to be. In evidence of this I have observed numerous water detention areas that are empty even in this wet weather. Kids World on Sunset is a good example.
- I would like more efficient response time to building permit and project permit submittal. I don't know if this is the permit center's responsibility or the individual departments. I feel that the lack of adequate staff (not enough reviewers) produces inadequate permit review and approval time frames.
- I live in the City of Seattle and you would think it would be impersonal and less efficient based sheerly [sic] on size and demand. The City of Bellingham was the hallmark WORST experience that I have ever had. There were thank God a couple of 1/2 way decent people that made my permit happen (for filming - which brings money to the surrounding community), but there were 2 people who were absolutely rude, unhelpful, counter productive, combative and total nightmares! This was just their initial basic approach!
- In general the staff is pleasant to work with BUT everyone I work with and my self complain about the multiple times it takes to submit a set of plans for permit...it appears that every time a "revised" set of plans is submitted a "new" issue comes up by staff that could have been handled at the first review. VERY frustrating to have to go back multiple times for permit application. Most of my colleagues and myself go to the counter before the permit application to minimize any staff changes to the permit application and yet have to have the plans changed several times later because new items are brought up that were not pointed out the first time around.
- The Permit Center has been very helpful and courteous whenever I have dealt with them.
- A few times the front person has been engaged in a personal phone call as I wait to talk with her, which I find very unprofessional and disrespectful of my time. Otherwise, everyone has been wonderful to work with.
- The City of Bellingham should be much more stringent on PE's that rubber stamp documents. Many of these documents do not have a proper PE or Architect stamp per RCW/WAC requirements. This includes checks on PE that do structural work but are only civil engineers. All projects even exempt ones should satisfy minimum city of Bellingham sustainability requirements and get if 'green buildings' a reduced permitting and review time. I would challenge the City along with the AIA (already done) to take the up green buildings and sustainability and particularly the 2"030 Challenge" i.e. if you haven't heard of it " design all buildings and developments to use half of the fossil-fuel energy they would typically consume..." Our children's future depends on it!
- We believe the skill of the department in the area of code knowledge to be excellent and the staff is courteous. However the time it takes to get to the

review process for a small job is extreme. We are a subcontractor in the fire alarm and fire protection field and often the job is near complete before we even get the permits. Electrical permits are tied to the Fire Alarm permit and are not issued before the Fire Alarm permit is issued further complicating the schedule for small jobs and or remodels. 6 to 8 weeks for permits is not uncommon. There is not enough staff to do the review and inspections.

- For commercial T.I.'s in existing buildings, it would be really helpful to shorten the permit processing time to (2) weeks. They always involve the relocation of tenants and timing is always critical! Electrical inspectors are and have been extremely short handed. The time it takes for fire department review is criminal!
- The method of scheduling inspections is extremely inefficient for jobs where we have to meet the inspector. When we have to wait for confirmation of a day & time until the morning requested, our worker is in limbo until that call comes, sometimes 8:15 or later. In the meantime we haven't been able to schedule any other job.
- I would like to see the permit process modeled after L&I's. Their procedure to acquire, and request a permit, saves time and is very easy.
- I generally bring in multiple permits at one time. It would be nice to be able to list the name of each even on the permit.
- This survey is far too general to be useful. There is a problem with under trained permit techs -- this position requires a working knowledge of the codes and review processes, plus a strong desire to provide service. Compare the folks providing this function for Whatcom County to the City employees -- there is no comparison. Otherwise, the most serious problem is the lack of uniformity in the interpretation and enforcement of the code, both in building services and planning. It is pretty common knowledge that if you don't get the answer you want, you should try again with another staff member. Political interference with enforcement of the code and general policy from the mayor, mid-level administration, and the building official has disgruntled and demoralized staff, and created distrust and cynicism in the design and construction community. One solution might be to have a paid review and oversight committee composed of designers, architects and contractors.
- Public Works does not work in synch with the rest of the process. They change their minds, overrule each other, and are totally inconsistent. They issue plans, then don't allow construction per the plans. Planning is very disorganized. It took over a year to get through a process that should have been about 2 months. Individual planners enforce design standards in haphazard and inconsistent ways.
- Would like to see an online permit inspection and purchase. Also would like to have an account, so we don't have to pay on every trip.
- My only constructive criticism is that a reasonable level of counter help should be available at ALL times during posted hours. One time I made a special trip there only to discover that most of the personnel, including all that could help me with a generic permit application, were in a meeting.
- Once the plans actually get to the reviewer I am very satisfied, but I am dissatisfied with the customer service at the front counter. I go into the permit center often and it is always the same. There is a large line for the counter and the people who don't work at the front desk have no problem conversing with

each other or standing around, but not taking the time to help speed up the line. I always feel bad for the poor girl at the front counter - it's apparent no one is able to help her when the line piles up.

- No problem applying for permits, processing thereafter is a nightmare.
- Stormwater Review held me up badly time wise on my project that I received a permit on this last summer. Also, my summer '05 was held up badly by Fire Sprinkling Review. Don Smith has way too much on his desk. He is extremely proficient, professional and courteous however. This current project, he was able to do my initial, fire dept. portion of my building permit in a very timely manner, even though he appeared to still have too much on his desk. I also think the various public works departments communicate poorly during permit review. i.e. public works / Stormwater.
- Receptionist needs to be more knowledgeable and organized about their duties. (XXXXX has trouble keeping up with the multi tasking needed to be successful and XXXXX needs to move a little faster and be less grumpy) Planning, Building Services and Public works counter staff are professional and knowledgeable.
- 1) Inspection scheduling does not always leave us enough time to notify our customer for access or mobilize ourselves to meet on site....i.e. 9:30 phone call that the inspection will be first thing in the morning (which happens to be between 8:30 and 9:00). 2) We would like to be able to check our permit status on line. 3) We don't believe that any permit should be closed automatically. Permit holders should be notified first. It is rare that no work is performed after a permit is issued. 4) We need to be informed of the status of our permits after the inspection has been performed. Typically we are done with our work when the inspection is requested, and do not return to the site until the customer requires additional work.
- It seems as though efficiency and inter-departmental flow are top on the list of needed improvements.
- The permit process is very slow and unproductive. Often times we are forced to sit in the lobby and wait all day to meet with various departments. It doesn't appear that the various departments within the city talk to each other. No one seems to be in charge of a project.
- I have copied & pasted a copy of the letter I sent to the city which explains the troubles I went through: Upon our initial discussion & observation of Richards 23' sq ft, detached garage, we decided he may want to consider demolition of the structure and get something with a little more security as opposed to the carport style that had some rot. I had a set of blueprints drawn up professionally that were almost an exact replica of the structure there with added security features. Unfortunately I don't know the name of each person I talked to but after I made several changes I was told that I could not build on the existing foundation due to the amount of re-bar used in the foundation when built. Since the existing concrete didn't have so much as a hairline crack you can see why my customer & I are starting to get frustrated. With the cost of taking out a perfectly good slab & foundation & replacing them, the cost of the project has increased so much my customer opted not to do the project at all. At that point Richard & I looked over the garage again & decided it really wasn't in that bad of shape & with the replacement of the header & the cripple's the garage had a lot of life left in it. So at this point my customer has spent \$3000.00 on a combination of plans that won't be used, the permit fee as well as paying for the

running around I needed to do for your office trying to get the right stuff (4 visits before finding out no go on the project) and he has nothing to show for it. I am out a \$25,000 building project & left with a header replacement that I may be able to bill out \$5000 for only because he has clear cedar siding to match up to. So we went to work on replacing the header & within the day your city inspector stops by and tells me I need a permit to replace the header. GREAT I go get the form for that, return a week later with what I thought was more than enough information to replace a header on an existing garage. The 1st thing I am told is a was given the wrong application & would need to fill out this other one, I was then told my drawing were not sufficient do the size of the paper, I was then told my site plan wasn't good enough (although it was previously good enough for the new structure permit). I will admit I am a carpenter not a draftsman but I would think some common sense needs to be used on projects & especially in the remodel world. I have no question or concern about having any city inspector reviewing the quality & integrity of the work my company performs and approving the structure for occupancy but if you have done any remodel work you should know I can't tell you how the present structure is built without disassembling what's there & I also can't tell you exactly how things are going to go back together till I know how it was built. I can tell you it will meet your inspector's standards or be modified to do so.