

REPORT

**Small Business Development Center  
City of Bellingham Permit Center  
2007 Second Quarter Survey**

**August, 2007**

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

During the second quarter (April to June) of 2007, Western Washington University's College of Business and Economics' Small Business Development Center (SBDC) sub-contracted with Applied Research Northwest to continue a satisfaction survey of recent customers of the City of Bellingham's Permit Center. This follow-up report includes respondents that used the Permit Center's services from October 2006 to June 2007.

This customer satisfaction survey was again conducted online, so researchers first needed to obtain email addresses for the individuals that used Permit Center services. Many Permit Centers users (148) in this time period had also used the Permit Center in previous quarters, so their email addresses were already available. One hundred thirty (130) new email addresses were gathered this quarter.

Sixty (60) individuals completed the survey during this time period, resulting in a 22% response rate. This calculates to an 11% margin of error on the survey, down slightly from the 9% margin of error in last quarter's report.

The findings of this follow-up customer satisfaction survey are compared to previous quarter's findings in order to inform the continuous quality improvement efforts of the Permit Center. A couple of survey items have changed since the baseline survey: the departmental professionalism section was changed from a yes-no response scale to a continuum, and open-ended items were added after the pre-application and pre-construction meeting sections.

Also new to the current survey was the opportunity for respondents to request a copy of the results of this study. Forty-two (42) respondents provided their email addresses at the end of the survey (70%) so that they could receive a memo of this study's key findings.

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. Appendix A presents the full script of the online survey, and Appendix B documents the verbatim comments made by respondents.

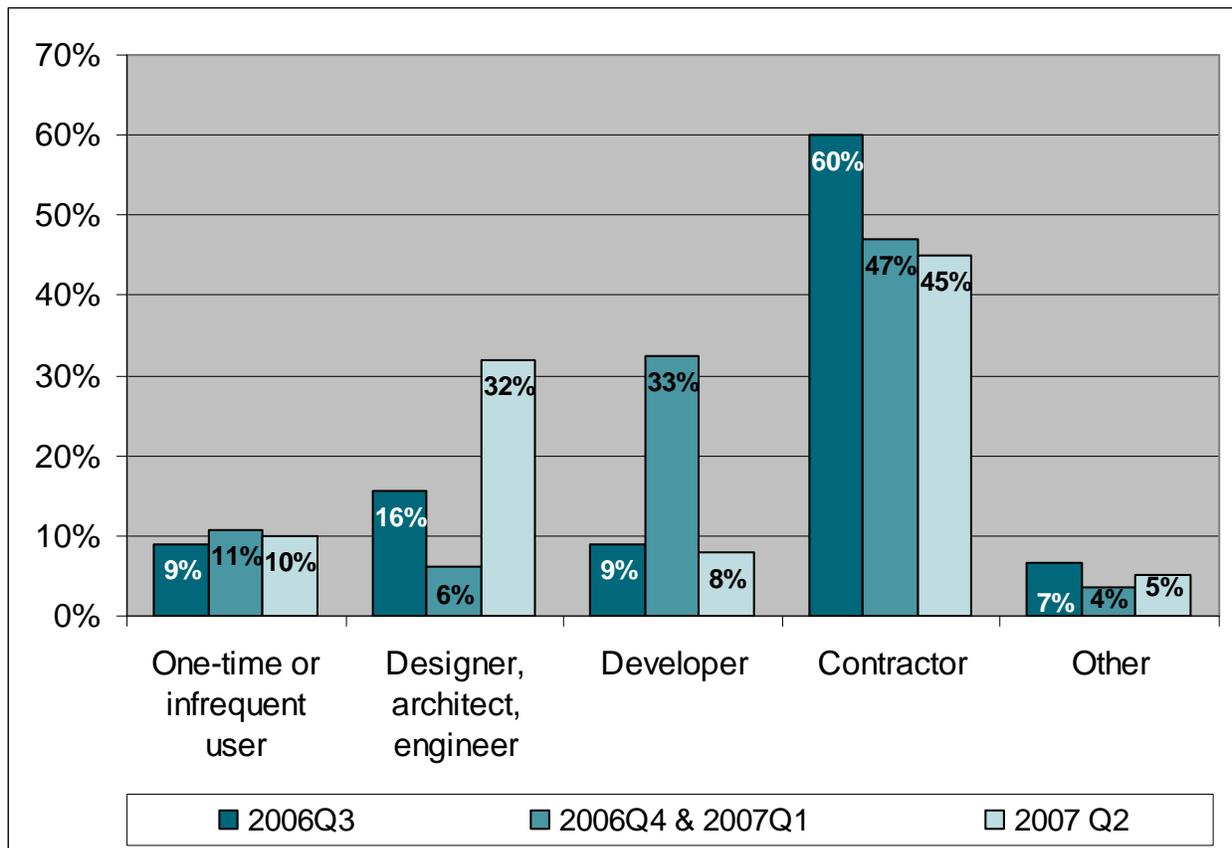
## TYPE OF CUSTOMERS

Customers of the Permit Center were first asked to describe the role that brought them to the Permit Center from April to June of 2007. As figure 1 indicates, the majority of respondents were contractors (45%) and designers, architects, and engineers (32%).

The biggest shift since the last quarter is the large increase in the proportion of designers, architects, and engineers (from 6% to 32%) and the relative drop in the proportion of developers (from 33% to 8%), which was previously the second largest group of Permit Center users.

**Figure 1. Distribution of Permit Center Customer Type**

(N=60 for current time period, N=83 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q4, N=45 in 2006 Q3)



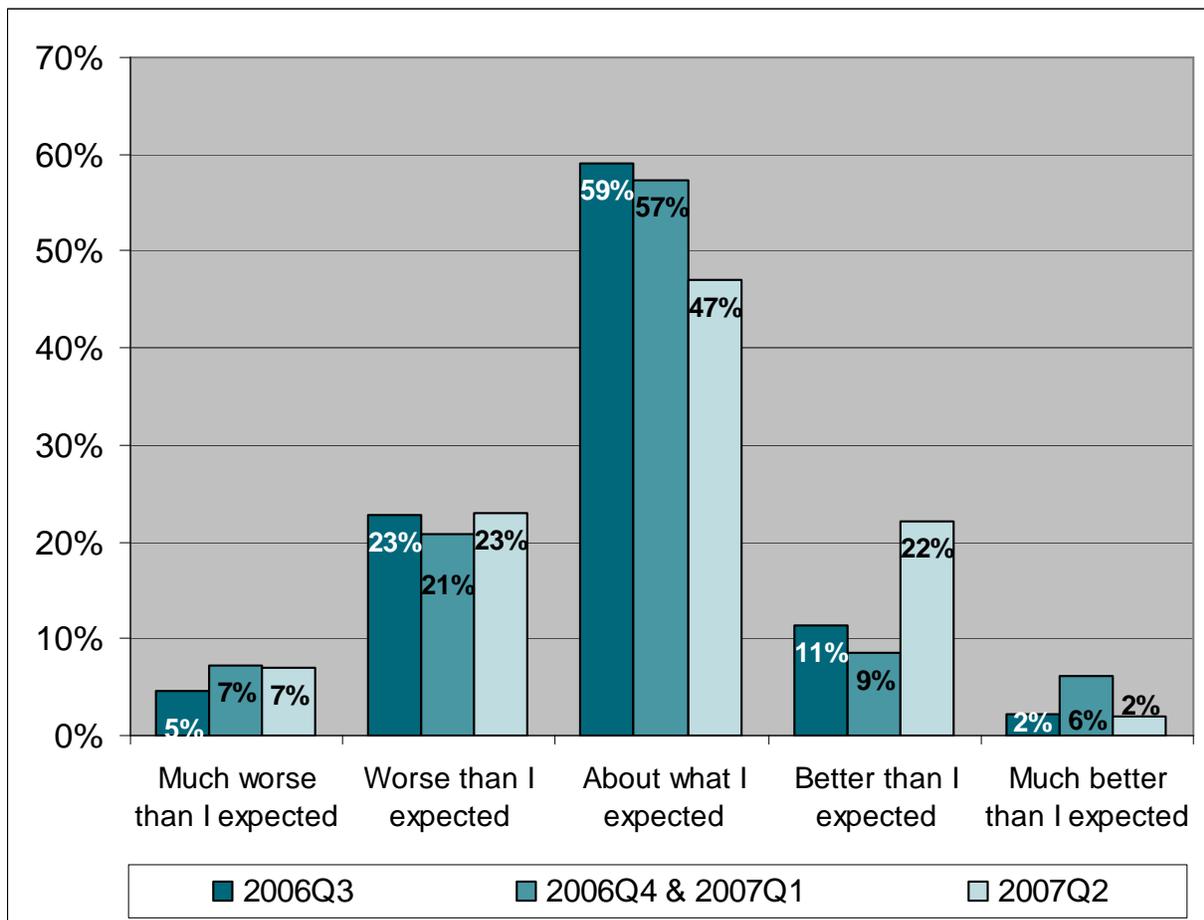
## OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Respondents were then asked about their overall experience with the Permit Center. Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents (71%, down slightly from 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, although there is no empirical improvement since the third quarter of 2006.

However, almost a third of respondents (30%, up slightly from 28%) reported that their experience was *worse or much worse* than expected. While this is still the minority of customers, it is still a noticeable proportion that needs to be addressed in quality improvement efforts.

**Figure 2. Overall Experience with the Permit Center**

(N=60 for current time period, N=82 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=44 in 2006 Q3)



## PROJECT TYPES

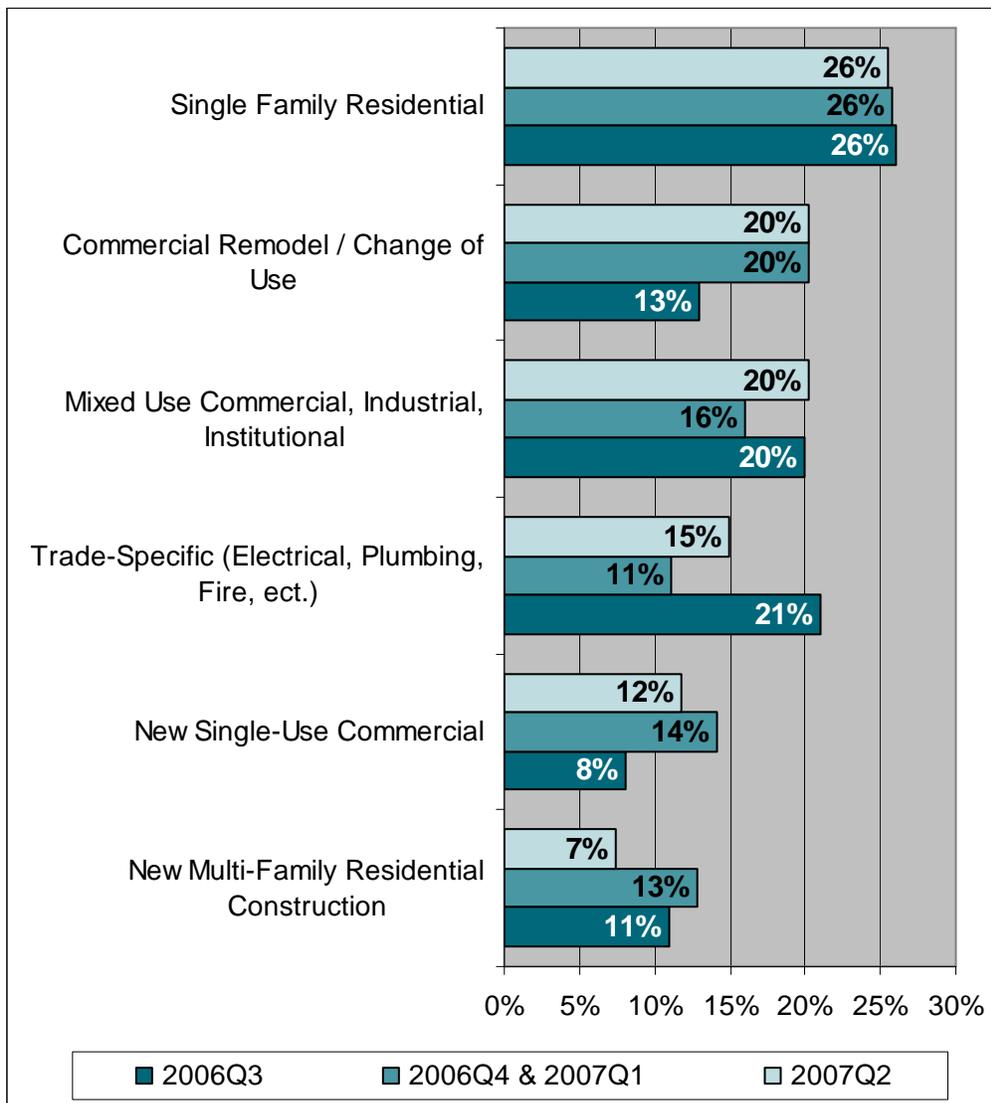
Respondents were asked to indicate what kind of project they were working on that brought them in contact with the Permit Center. As figure 3 shows, single family residential projects were again the most common, followed by commercial remodel and mixed-use commercial.

Please note that respondents could select more than one type of project, so the total number of projects (94) exceeds the total number of respondents (60).

Since the baseline study, the most variable type of project has been trade-specific, which increased to the 4<sup>th</sup> most common project type this quarter, up from the least common project type in last quarter's report.

**Figure 3. Distribution of Project Types**

(N=60 for current time period, N=83 for 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=45 in 2006 Q3)



## PERMIT CENTER MATERIALS

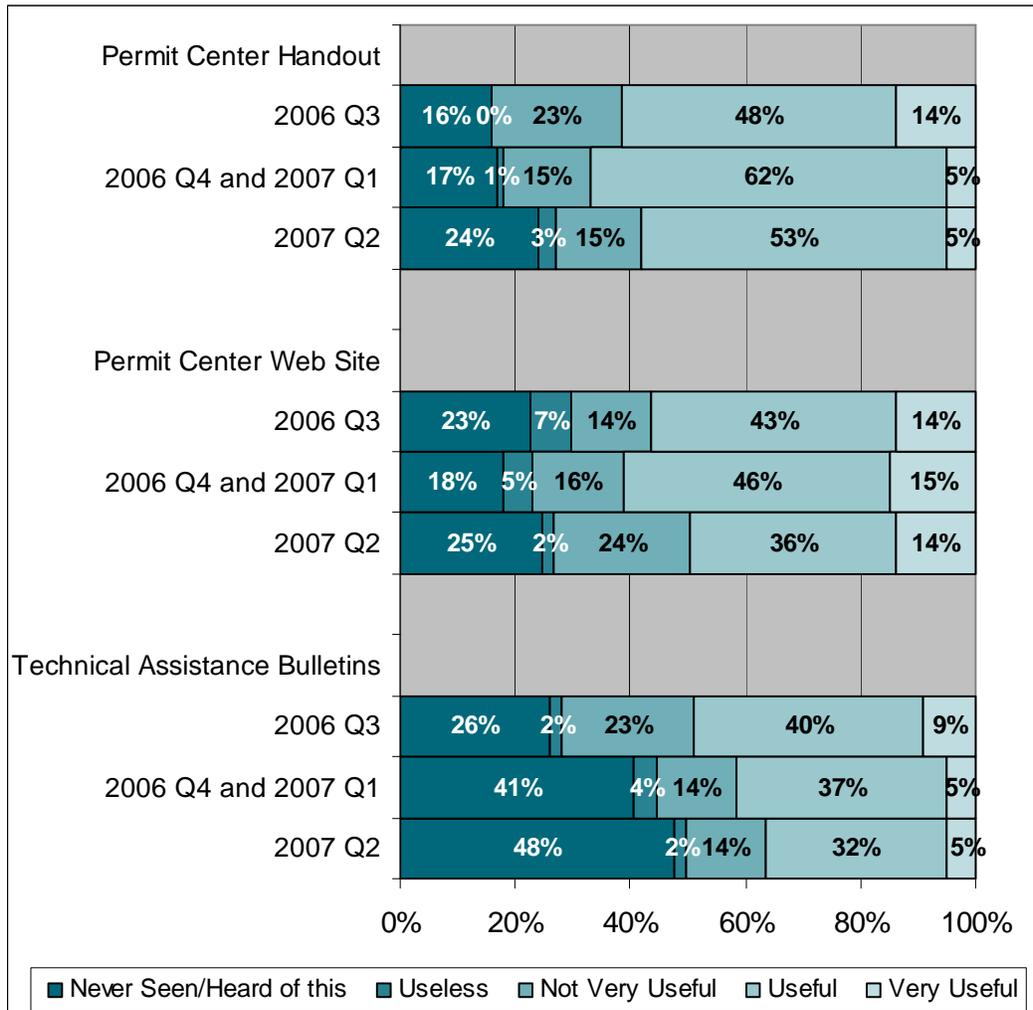
The first rating items on the survey asked respondents to indicate how useful the Permit Center materials were. This included the Center’s website, handouts, and assistance bulletins.

Figure 4 indicates that all three types of resources were found to be relatively useful to customers, although each resource saw a drop in the usefulness ratings provided by customers in the second quarter of 2007.

Customer awareness about the availability of the website, handout, and technical bulletins dropped for each of the resources in the past quarter. Committing to increasing the awareness of the highly rated but somewhat under-utilized resources could positively affect customer satisfaction with the Permit Center.

**Figure 4. Usefulness of Permit Center Materials**

(N=59 for current time period, N=81 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=44 in 2006 Q3)



## COUNTER ASSISTANCE

Respondents were then asked to indicate their satisfaction with the assistance they received from the Permit Center’s counter staff. Overall satisfaction with the counter staff was still relatively high, although changes were seen in this quarter’s findings.

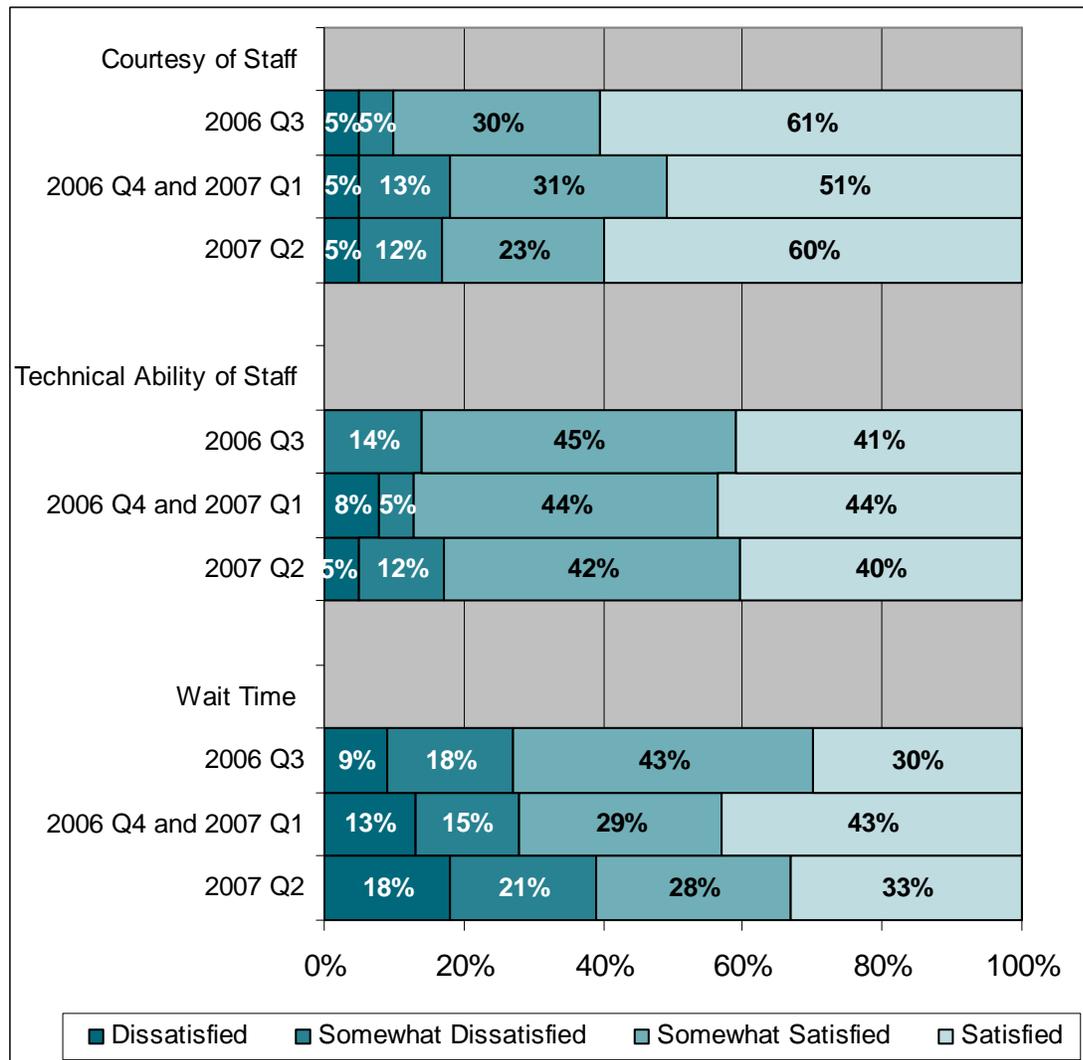
Customer satisfaction with the courtesy of the staff was the only component to show an improvement, which was a slight increase from 82% to 83%.

Satisfaction with wait times has decreased in each of the three time periods analyzed in this research, down to 61% this quarter from 72% last quarter.

While customer satisfaction with the counter staff’s technical ability remained high, this service component experienced a slight drop this year, decreasing from 88% to 82%.

**Figure 5. Customer Satisfaction with the Counter Assistance**

(N=57 for current time period, N=75 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=44 in 2006 Q3)



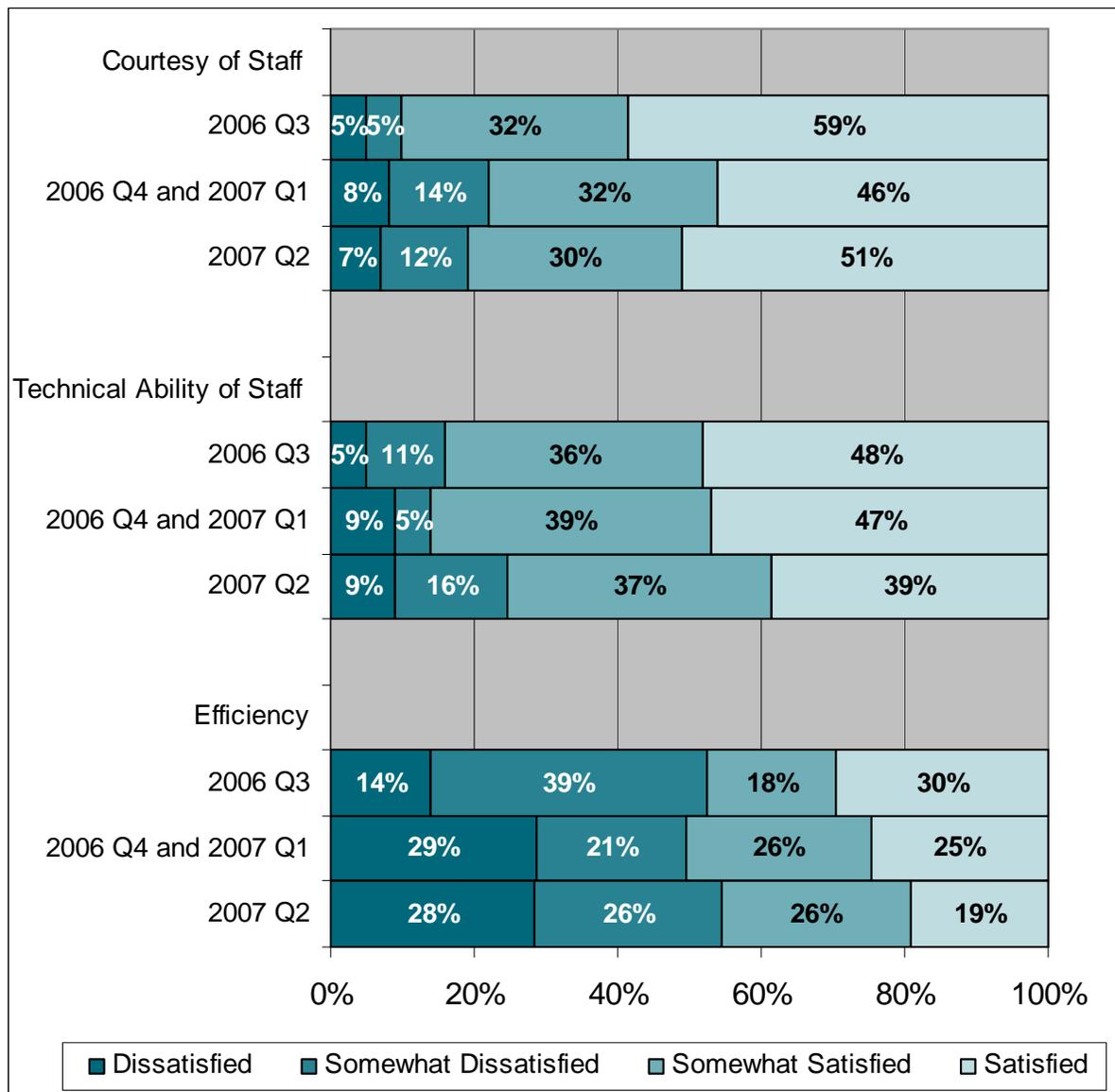
## PROCESSING APPLICATION

Permit Center customers were then 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, seeing an improvement from 78% to 81% in the last quarter.

The customer satisfaction with other components in this section (technical ability and efficiency of application staff) remained relatively flat although there was a slight regression in both aspects of the application process.

**Figure 6. Satisfaction with the Processing Application**

(N=57 for current time period, N=77 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=44 in 2006 Q3)



## INSPECTORS

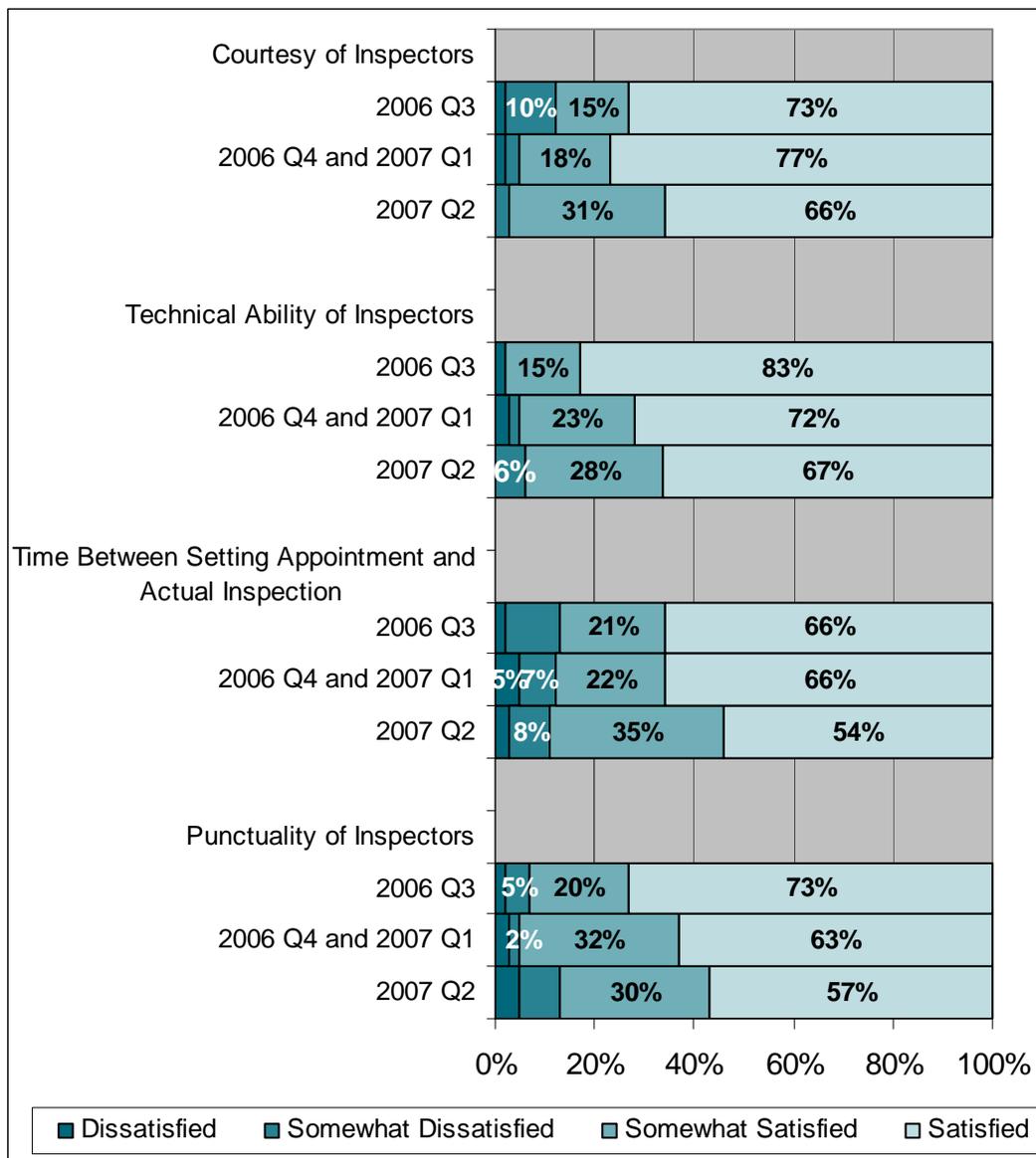
The inspectors from the Permit Center were also evaluated by customers. Figure 7 shows that, while the Inspectors are still highly rated by customers, there was a drop in satisfaction for each of the four aspects of service.

The largest drop is with customers' satisfaction with the courtesy of the inspectors, which dropped from 77% satisfied to 66%. Note also that the technical ability and punctuality of the inspectors have dropped each of the past three time periods.

In all, effort needs to be spent regaining the historically high level of satisfaction reported by customers in this area.

**Figure 7. Customer Satisfaction with Inspectors**

(N=37 for current time period, N=60 in 2006Q6 & 2007Q1, N=41 in 2006 Q3)



## CERTIFICATE OF OCCUPANCY PROCESS

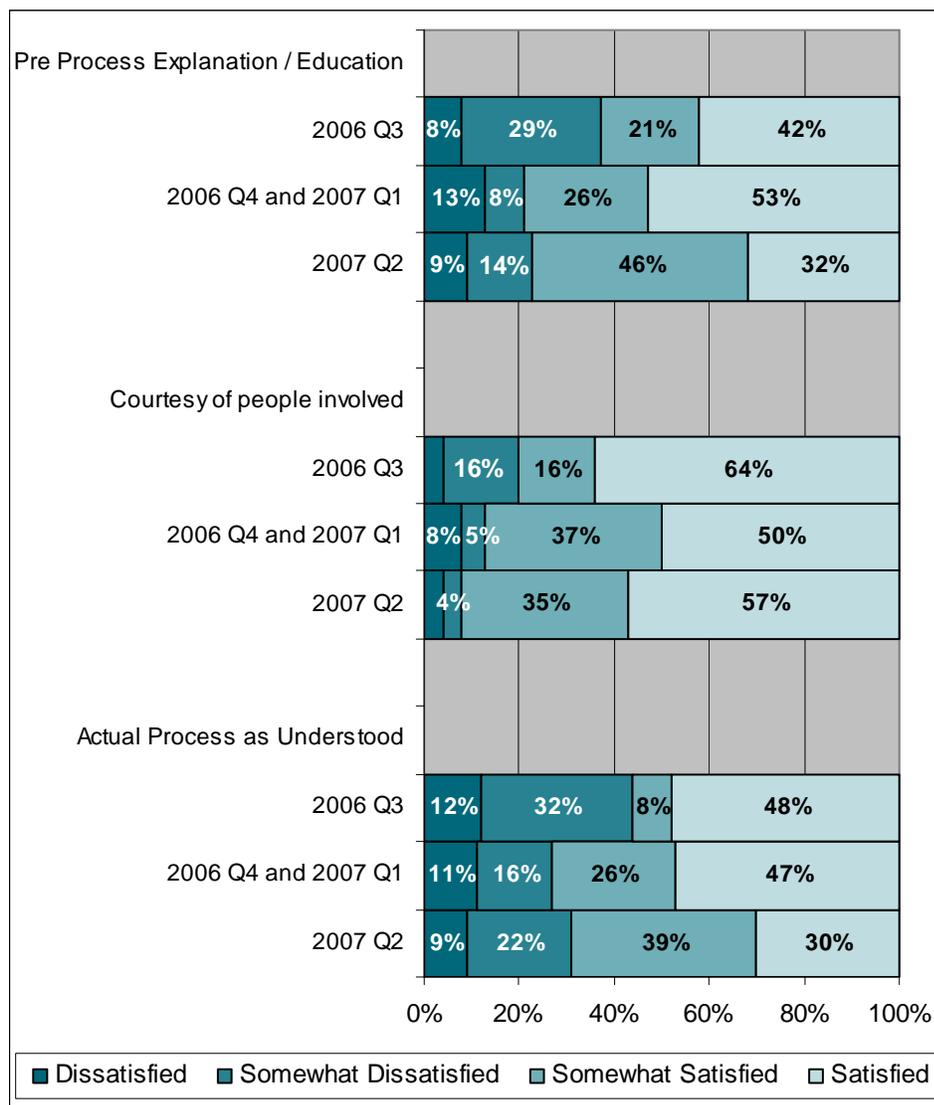
The Certificate of Occupancy process was also rated by customers. As figure 8 shows, there are mixed results and emerging trends in this area of the Permit Center's service.

For instance, the courtesy of people involved in this process has improved in each time period since data were collected. Conversely, while the combined percentage of *somewhat satisfied* and *satisfied* for the pre-process explanation remained relatively flat (78% this quarter, 79% last quarter), but there is a noticeable drop in the percentage the top satisfaction category specifically (32%, down from 53%). Customers' actual understanding of the process declined slightly this quarter, but is still above the baseline levels.

None of these changes are statistically significant, however, and a larger sample size and/or a few more time periods worth of data points are needed to confirm this trend.

**Figure 8. Satisfaction with Certificate of Occupancy Process**

(N=23 for current time period, N=38 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=24 in 2006 Q3)



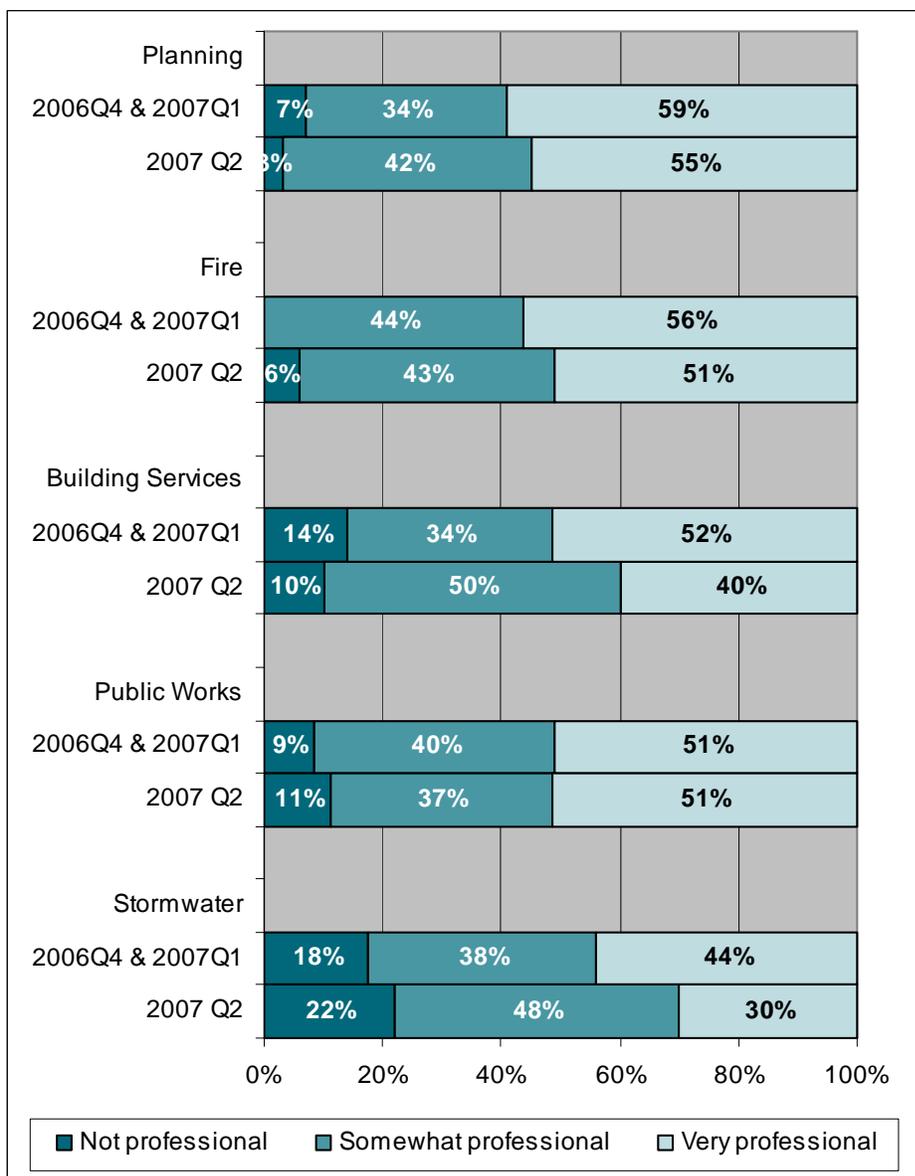
## PROFESSIONALISM

Customers of the Permit Center were asked to rate the professionalism of each department with which they interacted. The results of this section can not be compared to the baseline time period because the format of the items changed.

As figure 9 indicates, there is still a relatively high level of professionalism in every department, although some variability exists (*not professional* ratings range from 3% to 22%). It appears, then, that the goal for these departments is again not to act professionally, but to act very professionally.

**Figure 9. Rating of the Professionalism of each Department**

(Ns vary by year and department)



## PRE-APPLICATION MEETINGS

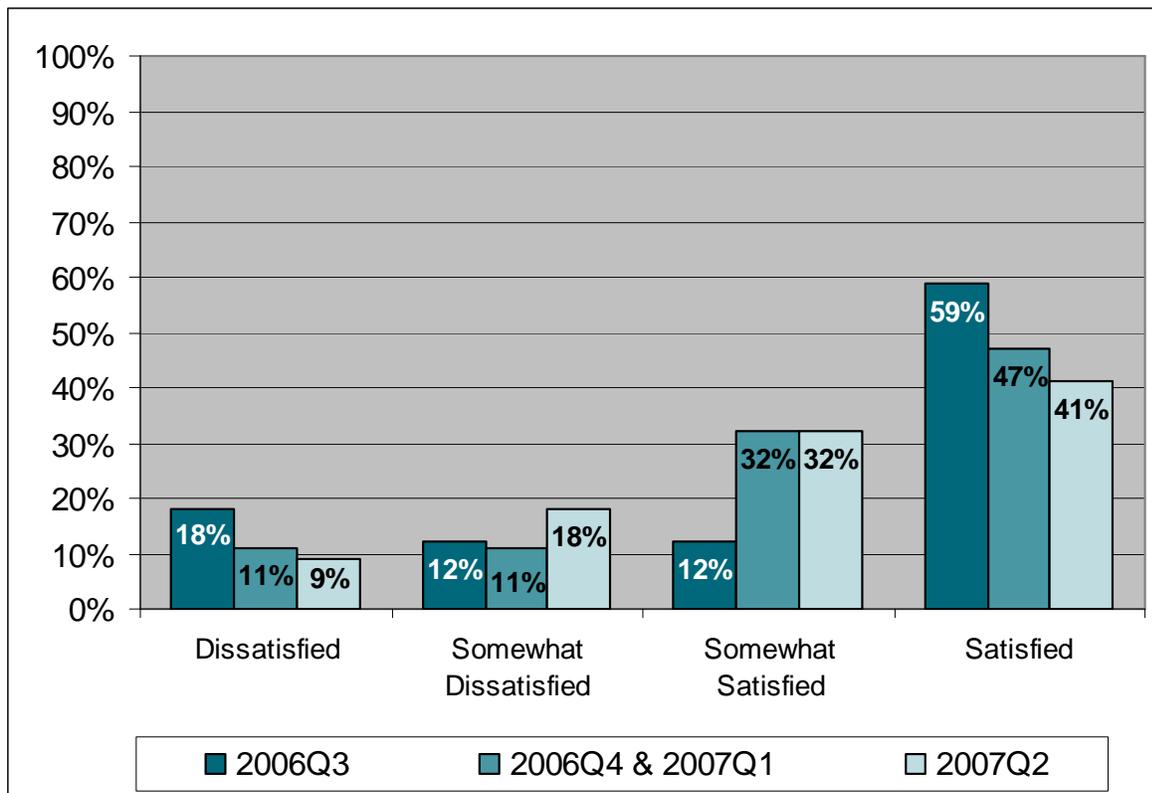
Respondents that had participated in a pre-application meeting (22) were asked to evaluate the process. As figure 10 shows, the percentage of *satisfied* customers (41%) declined for the third straight quarter, and while the percentage of somewhat satisfied customers (32%) remained constant the percentage of somewhat dissatisfied (18%) increased.

Evaluating the changing needs or expectations of customers in the pre-application meetings would be a good first step in regaining the higher levels of satisfaction reported by customers in the previous time periods.

Respondents that participated in a pre-application meeting were again asked to provide suggestions that might make the meetings more effective. Their verbatim responses are presented in Appendix B of this report.

**Figure 10. Distribution of Satisfaction with Pre-Application Meetings**

(N=22 for current time period, N=19 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=12 in 2006 Q3)



## PRE-CONSTRUCTION MEETINGS

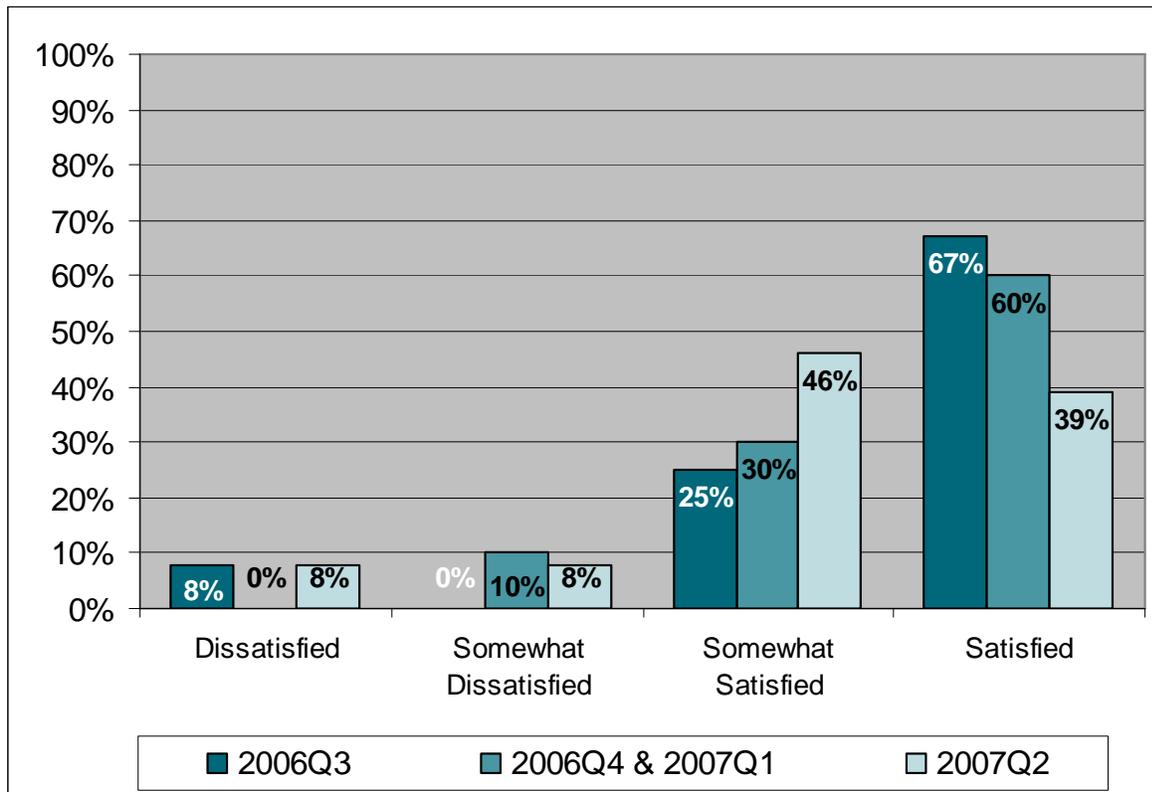
Respondents that had participated in a pre-construction meeting (13) were also asked to evaluate the process. As figure 11 shows, there is a clear migration of customers from the *satisfied* category to the *somewhat satisfied* category.

Fortunately, this down trend is not yet seen in the dissatisfied side of the continuum, but this sliding level of satisfaction should be addressed from both content and format of the pre-construction meetings, as well as from managing customer expectations.

Respondents that participated in a pre-construction meeting were asked to provide suggestions that might make the meetings more effective. Their verbatim responses are presented in Appendix B of this report.

**Figure 11. Satisfaction with Pre-Construction Meetings**

(N=13 for current time period, N=10 in 2006Q4 & 2007Q1, N=12 in 2006 Q3)



## ■ CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the previous pages have indicated, customer satisfaction with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center has remained flat and in many cases decreased in the last quarter. Internal discussions should try to identify what processes, procedures, or personnel have changed that would lead to the current lower ratings by customers.

It is also possible that customers' expectations have changed in regards to the quality of service, timeliness, and professionalism of the Permit Center staff. It is possible that the same customers have responded to this survey in multiple quarters. It could be their expectation that notable improvements are coming. If no significant changes are seen, expectations are raised, but not met. This could also contribute to the lower ratings reported in the current quarter.

Another consideration to address for future studies is the low response rate. Not only does the small sample size make it difficult to find statistically significant trends, but it also challenges the representativeness of the findings. Future research would be greatly assisted by increased advertisement of the survey. It will also encourage respondents to complete future surveys if the summary results are sent to them as indicated at the end of this quarter's survey. Finally, it would help to make a valid email address a required piece of information gather during the permit application process.

In the end, customer satisfaction with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center is still relatively positive, but it appears to be heading in the wrong direction. New tactics and approaches are needed to reverse this trend.

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY SCRIPT

Thank you for participating in the City of Bellingham's Permit Center's listening tool. 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.

Q1. Which description best fits you as a user of City of Bellingham Permit Center during the 2nd quarter of 2007?

- 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 April to June 2007? (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 from April to June of 2007.

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: Courtesies 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 section will measure the effectiveness of those departments during your interaction with the Permit Center between April and June of 2007.

Q9 & Q10. For each department that you interacted with, please rate how professionally they treated you. (If you did not interact with any of the following departments, click on 'does not apply')

- 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

Q11a. If you participated in a pre-application meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective? (open-ended)

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

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

Q12a. If you participated in a pre-construction meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective? (open-ended)

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

### Q11a. If you participated in a pre-application meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective?

- The process and requirements for our permits have changed rather dramatically since last year.
- Public Works representative needs to offer solutions rather than see what he can have owner pay for.
- I prefer that the pre-application meeting be conducted with the individual who will be initially reviewing the application to ensure understanding of all requirements.
- Keep good records and solve problems then and there if possible or eliminate them as another step in a bureaucratic nightmare.
- vesting the decisions made at this stage is critical to eliminating surprises later.
- I'm a homeowner trying to make repairs and found the level of detail required for a permit very intimidating. The process took a long time and required detailed architectural drawings and views of the existing structure from all angles. The staff was courteous and gave me advice on how to get the proper documentation together but photos would have been a lot easier and more descriptive.
- I have a project in the UGA, a pre-app meeting was conducted at the County, the City was invited but NOBODY attended. I consider this a callous disregard for the process. The pressure for development in the UGA is enormous, and the City must be at the table.

### Q12a. If you participated in a pre-construction meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective?

- have them on site, not at city hall

### Q13. Please provide any additional comments you would like to share with us regarding your experiences with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center.

- Getting an electrical permit takes too long. Labor and Industries is immediate on-line and we wish we were able to get a permit on-line with the City.
- I think copies of reports found via inspection corrections should be mailed to the contractor, not left on the jobsite. Also I would like to be able to pull up online if the inspection passed/failed & why.
- SOME REQUIREMENTS FOR ACCEPTANCE OF PERMIT ARE NOT ALWAYS AVAILABLE AT THE TIME THE PERMIT IS REQUIRED IE-FAULT CURRENT CALCULATIONS FOR ELECTRICAL PERMIT, PUGET POWER HAS TO PROVIDE THE CONTRACTOR WITH THESE NUMBERS AND THEY ARE NOT AVAILABLE UNTIL AFTER THE PROJECT IS STARTED
- The cooperation between Building services and Public Works needs to improve
- I miss that we no longer can receive our permits/and approved plans via mail!!!!
- We deal in mechanical permits. Even complex ones are issued same day in Everett with the risk falling on us to comply with code. At least we can get started while plans are in review. It forces us to be diligent in our knowledge of the code in order to reduce risk, but seems like that is the overall intent anyway. Why make us wait in order to police us before the fact?
- In regards to building permits and how they are processed. In my experience, if there is a deficiency in a plan or application, the project is held up in the department where the deficiency occurs. It seems prudent that the plans not be held up but forwarded on to other departments and the applicant be notified of the deficiency so that changes can occur and resubmitted all at one time rather than piece mealed together and re-submitted on different dates.
- Still tied to process / procedure, Staff is professional enough to allow some flexibility in dealing with plan reviews and applications. I have a hard time justifying to clients that a response to a plan review goes to the bottom of the pile instead of being dealt with more quickly. Perhaps the reviewers could take some time each day to deal with review responses.
- Attitude of one woman who has been there too long. You know who.

- I routinely bring in detailed plans to the permit center to work out problems before submitting for permit. Construction bids are based on these unofficial pre approvals with your staff. Permits are issued often with dramatically different requirements than were given over the counter. This is a very frustrating experience because we are never able to recoup the extra costs.
- Getting my permit approved required me to take time out of my day to go to the permit desk in person. There was a line item on the permit that had not been signed off by the Fire Marshall, however the Fire dept. did not realize that it had not been signed off. Even with a direct phone call to the Fire Marshall, the person I spoke with did not realize that a signature was missing on the permit. Had I not dealt with this matter myself, who knows how long the permit would have been held up, at my cost! Perhaps better communication between fire and city would help. This was almost as bad of an experience as seeing the bill for the permit of nearly \$70,000! It seems that this kind of money could pay for at least one more public servant to help out.
- Very difficult to get a permit for simple jobs. Other areas we work in are no where this hard to get a permit. Seems like we have to jump through a lot of hoops for even the smallest of jobs and your pricing compared to other counties is outrageous.
- Most of the ladies at the front desk are very nice, easy to work with and are willing to help. But a couple are just outright rude and pretty much insult you if your application is not perfect. Another thing that would be helpful is to be able to apply and have the ability to keep track of the review process online. Just some ideas. As for fire I think you need to hire some help for those guys. Review process is too long and not thorough. We always have something new that needs to be added or changed on every job!!! But the marshalls are great and courteous. I just think they need a hand in some areas.
- Better web access to design documents and which current Code is enforced. Please be a greener city encouraging water conservation and energy efficiency on par with the City of Seattle including rebates and programs for construction recycling, waterless urinal, dual flush toilets etc
- Overall, I enjoy dealing with the Permit Center because all the people are courteous and professional and efficient. The only negative comment I have is that the various departments providing advice be a little bit more consistent in their responses. Sometimes I am given conflicting advice. This results in additional visits for clarification.
- I would like to see the application process timing sped up and the process simplified.
- speed up the process time for permits. Implement an 'over the counter' permit for small tenant improvements and remodels - There is absolutely no reason to wait 3-5 months for a permit for smaller projects.
- Main problem I've seen is XXXXX XXXXX's inability to get back to people on a timely basis if at all.
- Single point contact, a project manager if it were, for commercial projects would be helpful, however they would have to be accountable for the actions of the various departments
- Unpleasant! It isn't that the staff is rude, it's just that everything is so cumbersome. The "Same As" program is a joke. At other jurisdictions all you need to do is submit a new application and site plan for the new lot on a basic or same as plan. But in Bellingham you still have to do all the paperwork and plan sets, and it does not shorten the time to get a permit, so it's of little use. In Lacey, Fife and Snohomish County, it's a wonderfully streamlined process and you can get your permit in less than 3 weeks and in some cases in 3 days! In Bellingham your lucky if you can get a permit in 8 to 10 weeks! Nothing is ever signed off before 30 days in the on-line system. Phone calls and e-mails are rarely returned within 3 working days and usually you have to call or e-mail 2 or 3 times to get a response at all. I fully recommend that Bellingham adapt the basic program in Snohomish county where you apply on line, e-mail the site plan and in 3 day you get a call back saying your permits are ready and here are your fees.
- We are incredibly frustrated with the inefficiency and overall service we received. We drove up from Skagit County 5 times to acquire one electrical permit for a commercial project. They did not explain in detail what was needed so we had to keep going back. We were treated rudely by the receptionist. We felt as though we were a nuisance to her ( the first time we were there) and we just feel that doing business in Whatcom County is more of a hassle than anything. Doing business and getting permits in Skagit County is really efficient and easy. We have had no problems whatsoever in Skagit County.
- Your Plan Check staff are pre-madona's. I have been paying thousands of dollars more for engineering on Bellingham projects because the engineer spend so many hours on petty requirements. In fact last week when I asked my engineer to do a project in your city he refused,

saying he would no longer do Bellingham projects because of the pettiness. As a designer I also find that it costs many more hours to make things perfect for this staff. They need to accept the required information in less than their concept of the perfect format.

- The whole system is for the benefit of staff rather than customers.
- It seems a municipality of B'ham's size should have other systems in place to accommodate expedited reviews of simple TI permits vs. new, large construction. Should not need to go through the same detailed review process to install a sink or basic wall in a commercial space that we go through for a 20,000 sf commercial building. It's a waste of time and money on everyone's part.
- I have observed very detailed long conversations between customers & XXXXX from Planning, that seemed more appropriate as a pre application meeting review, while at least 6 others waited for planning attention, this has happened a few times while I was in the waiting area.
- the biggest issue is having permits sit with one area of review while, others could be looking at it. Incentivising the dept staff that time is critical and being efficient does not place their jobs in "danger" getting caught off guard with unexpected issues is distressing to the submitter/client relationship
- It would help if the permit process was online. I could not get my electrical permit because the mechanical permit had not been obtained by others involved in the project. It is a simple addition of equipment to an existing business, and other government entities would not require a mechanical permit. You are over zealous in your efforts. Safety is important, but you seem to be requiring permits just in order to charge more money. How can anyone do business in your city?
- The permit center is structured to handle developers who have blueprints for new construction. Homeowners normally don't have access to blueprints or detailed plans of their existing structures. Please make it easier for homeowners. Consider photos when plans are not available.
- I am frustrated and angry when I hear of major companies like Aluminum Chambered Boats and Hardware Sales moving to the County simply to avoid the City of Bellingham's processes. This has to stop. The City's processes are inadvertently (I hope) creating more sprawl and more demand on infrastructure, contrary to the goals of the GMA. There needs to be an expedited permit process - Here are 3 ideas: 1)Outside plan review is much more timely - allow it. 2)Plans examiners should simply mark up final plans, rather than requiring endless re-submittals. 3)Expedite plans that bear a licensed architect's seal - they have all the liability, anyway.
- The staff was very helpful and non stress. I only wish the County was as easy to deal with. Your people seem to like working with the public and are interested in solving problems for the customer. Keep up the good work !
- IF NOTES ARE PUT ON PERMITS THEY NEED TO BE READ!! THE NOTES ARE THERE FOR A REASON. IF NOT READ IT COSTS CONTRACTORS MONEY, THE CITY MUST NOT CARE AS LONG AS IT DOESN'T COST THE CITY ANYTHING.