

REPORT

**City of Bellingham  
Permit Center Customer Satisfaction Survey  
Second Quarter 2008**

**September, 2008**

**Presented by  
Western Washington University's  
Small Business Development Center**

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

During the second quarter (April to June) of 2008, Western Washington University's College of Business and Economics' Small Business Development Center (SBDC) worked 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 2008.

This customer satisfaction survey was again conducted online, so researchers first needed to obtain email addresses for the individuals that used Permit Center services. Eighty-four (84) individuals completed the survey during this time period, resulting in a 29% response rate. This calculates to an 8% margin of error on the survey, which is an improvement from last quarter's report.

The findings of this follow-up customer satisfaction survey are compared to previous quarters' findings in order to inform the continuous quality improvement efforts of the Permit Center. The opportunity for respondents to request a copy of the results of this study was again offered. Twenty (20) respondents provided their email addresses at the end of the survey (24%) so that they could receive a memo of this study's key findings. The process for disseminating the results to survey participants needs to be discussed by the City.

Please note that several new survey items were developed for this quarter's survey. The results for these new items pertaining to transparency, complete review of applications before submitting them, and the single point of contact approach are included in this report (see pages 14 through 17).

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 to various open-ended questions.

Please note that some historical results have been dropped from the graphs due to space restrictions. In all cases, the baseline time period as well as the three most current time periods are shown.

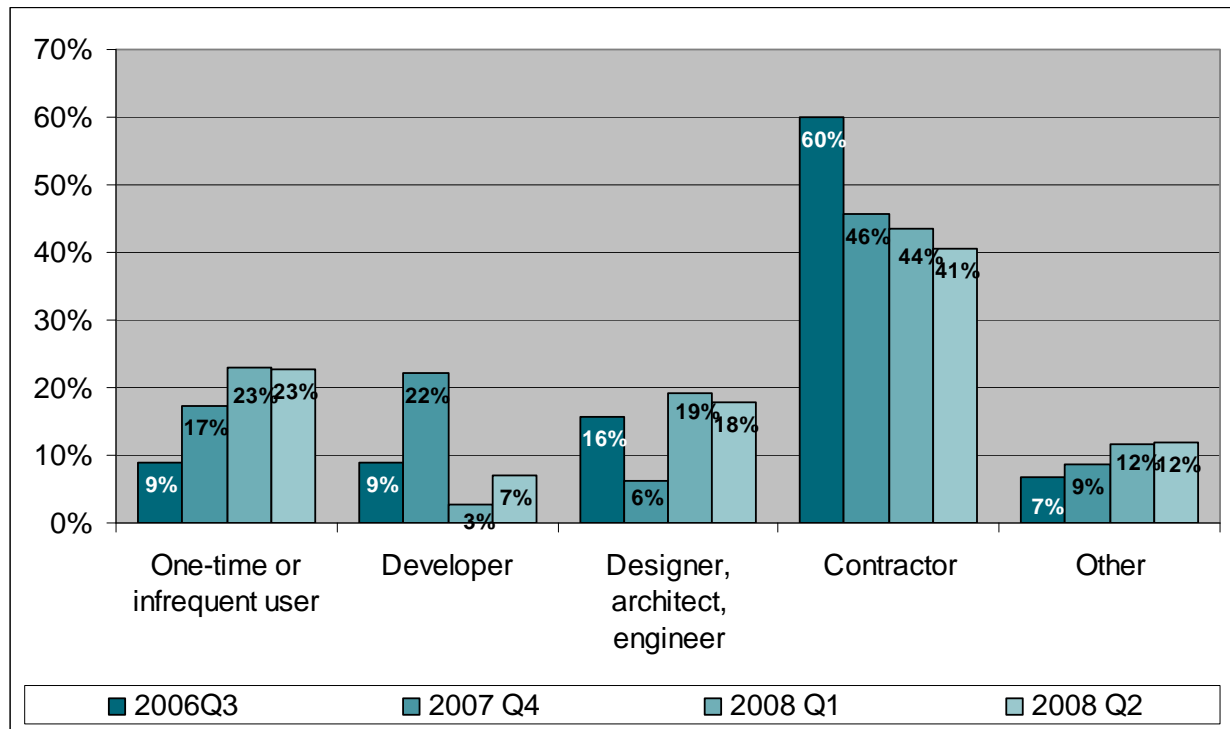
## TYPE OF CUSTOMERS

Customers of the Permit Center were first asked to describe the role that brought them to the Permit Center from April to June of 2008. As figure 1 indicates, the majority of respondents were contractors (41%) and one-time or infrequent users (23%).

There have not been any significant shifts in the distribution of Permit Center users in the past two quarters, although the relative proportion of respondents that are contractors continues to decrease.

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

(N=84 for current time period)



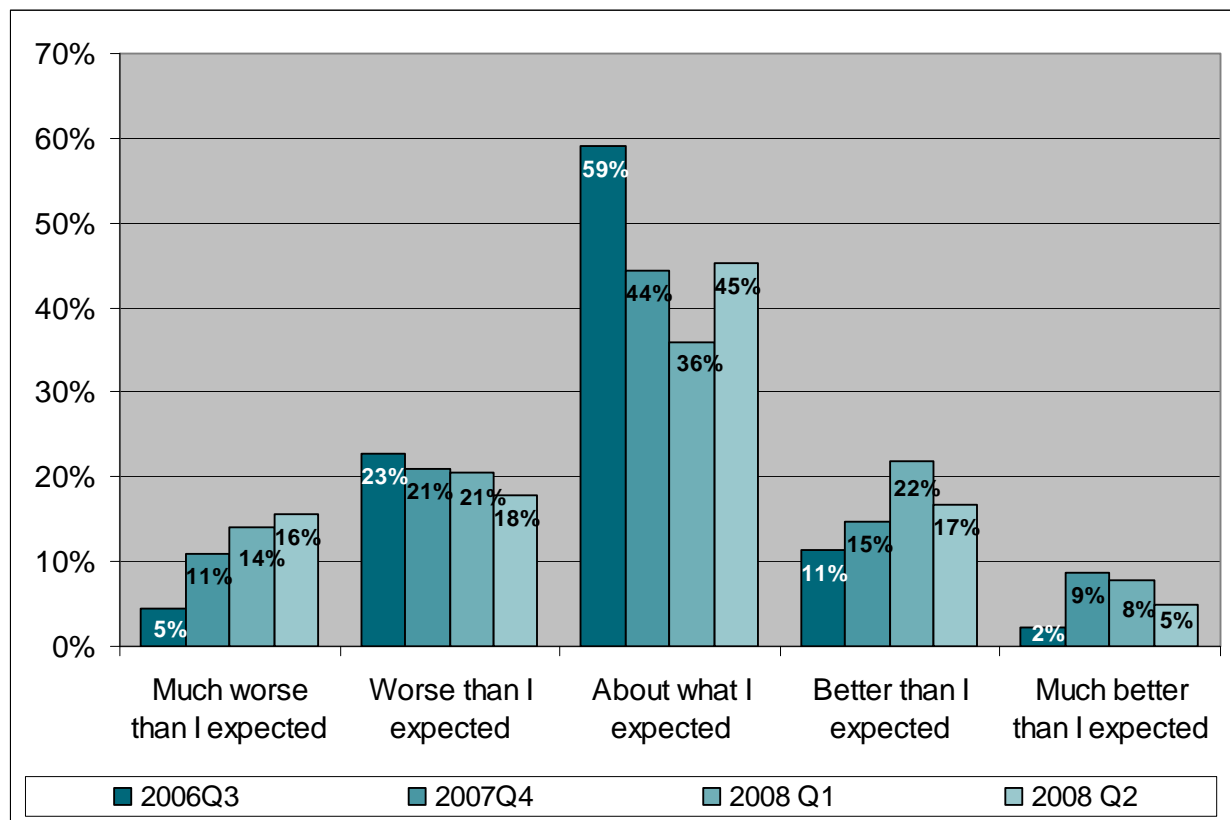
## OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Respondents were then asked about their overall experience with the Permit Center. Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents (67%) 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. Note, though, that there is a migration of respondents down from the two highest response categories into the middle category (*about what I expected*).

Conversely, over one third of the respondents (34%) reported that their experience was *worse* or *much worse* than expected. While this is still the minority of customers, it remains a noticeable proportion that needs to be addressed through continued quality improvement efforts.

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

(N=84 for current time period)



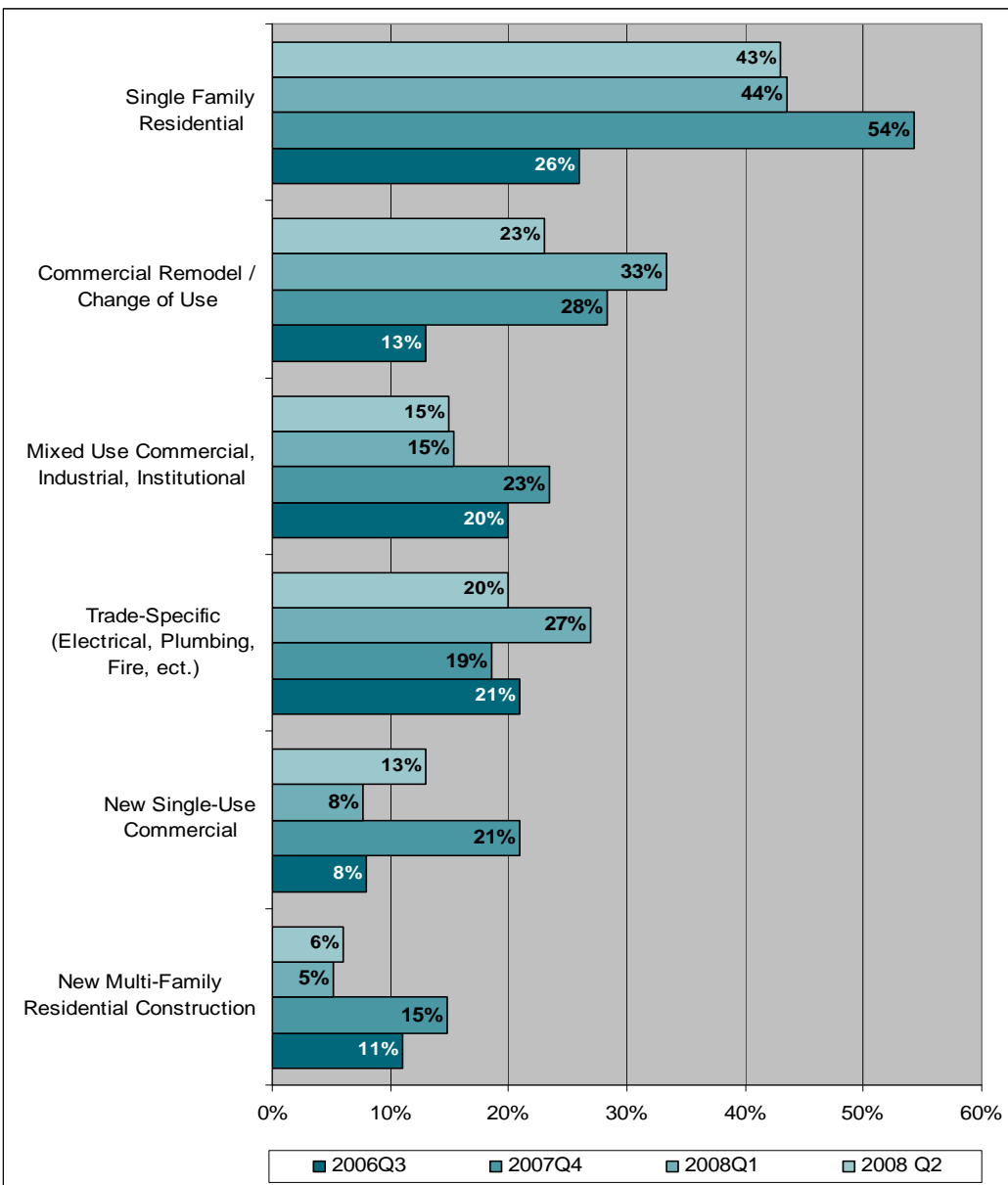
## PROJECT TYPES

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. Notable shifts in project types since last quarter include a relative decrease in the proportion of commercial remodeling and trade-specific permit applications, as well as a relative increase in the proportion of single-use commercial applications.

Please note that respondents could select more than one type of project, so the total number of projects (101) exceeds the total number of respondents (84).

**Figure 3. Distribution of Project Types**

(N=84 for current time period)



## PERMIT CENTER MATERIALS

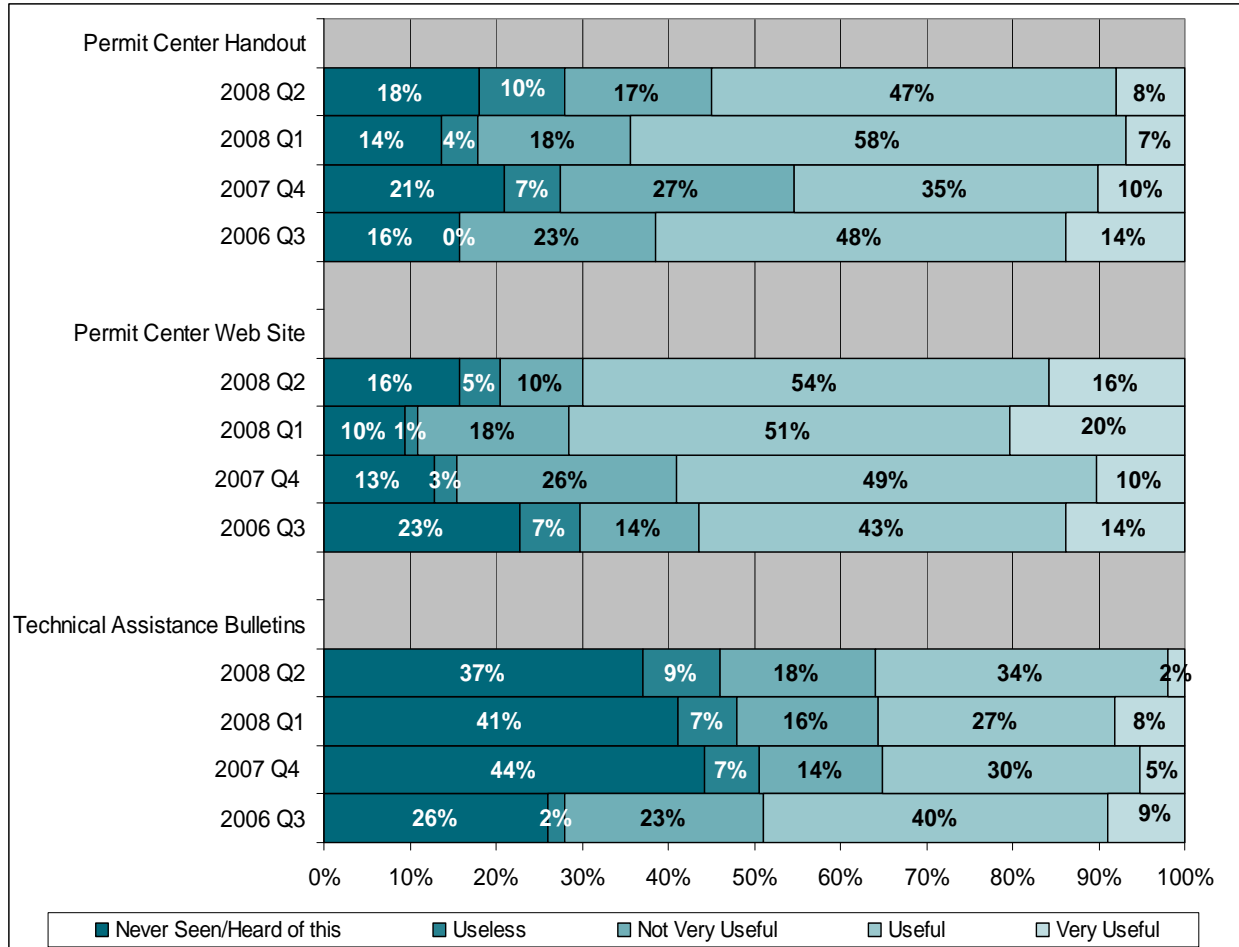
The first rating items on the survey asked respondents to indicate how useful the Permit Center support materials were. This included the Center’s website, handouts, and assistance bulletins.

Figure 4 indicates that all three types of resources were found to be relatively useful to customers. There are no significant changes in the usefulness ratings provided by customers in the second quarter of 2008.

Awareness remains relatively low for each of these resources, especially for the technical assistance bulletins (more than a third of respondents were unaware of this resource). Continuing to focus on 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**

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



## COUNTER ASSISTANCE

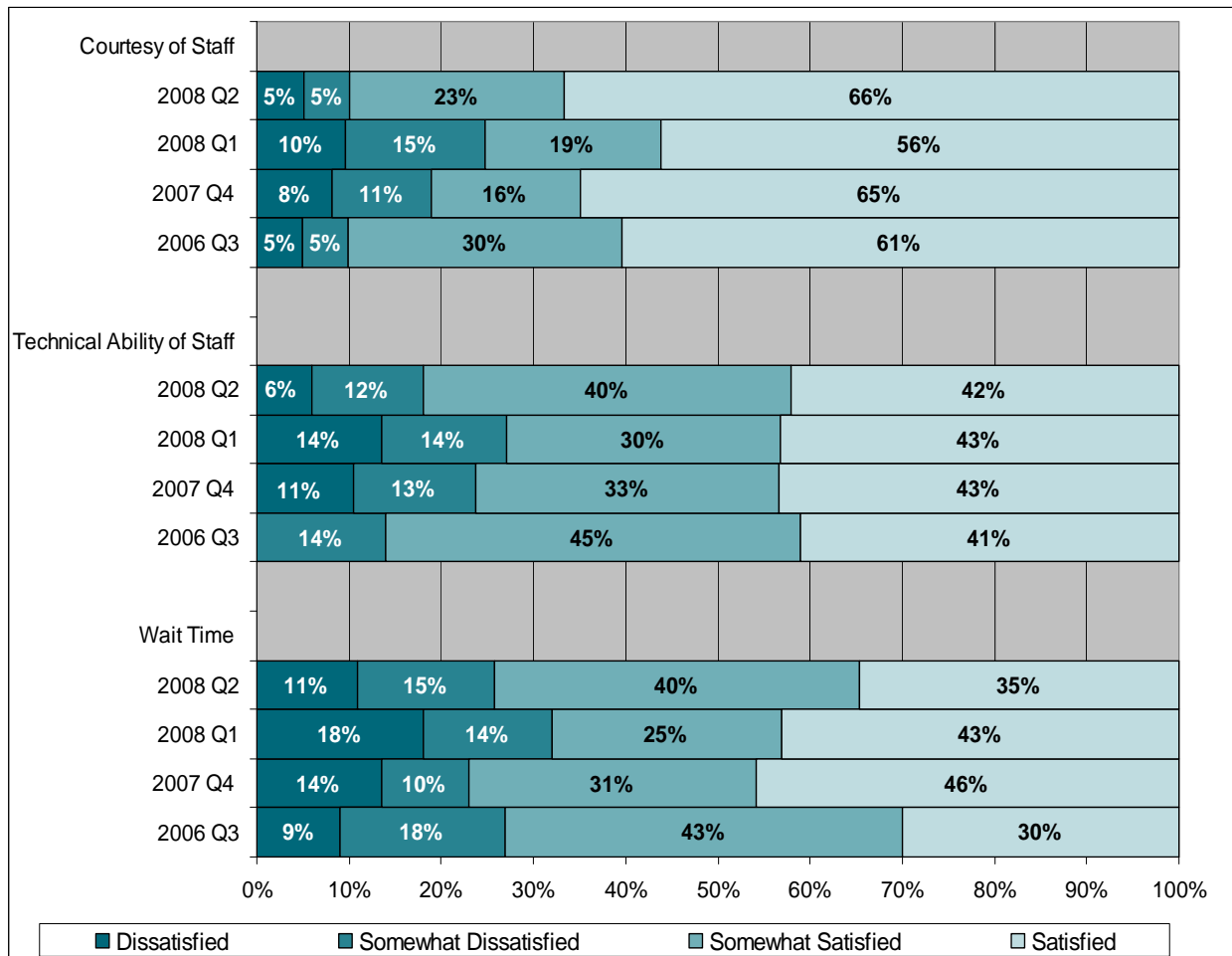
Respondents were then asked to indicate their satisfaction with the assistance they received from the Permit Center’s counter staff. Overall satisfaction with the counter staff was still high, with all three components showing an improvement since last quarter.

Wait time for the counter assistance remains the lowest rated aspect, although this component showed an improvement with 75% of respondents either *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* (up from 68%).

Courtesy of the counter staff does not appear to be an issue with customers’ overall satisfaction with the Permit Center.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



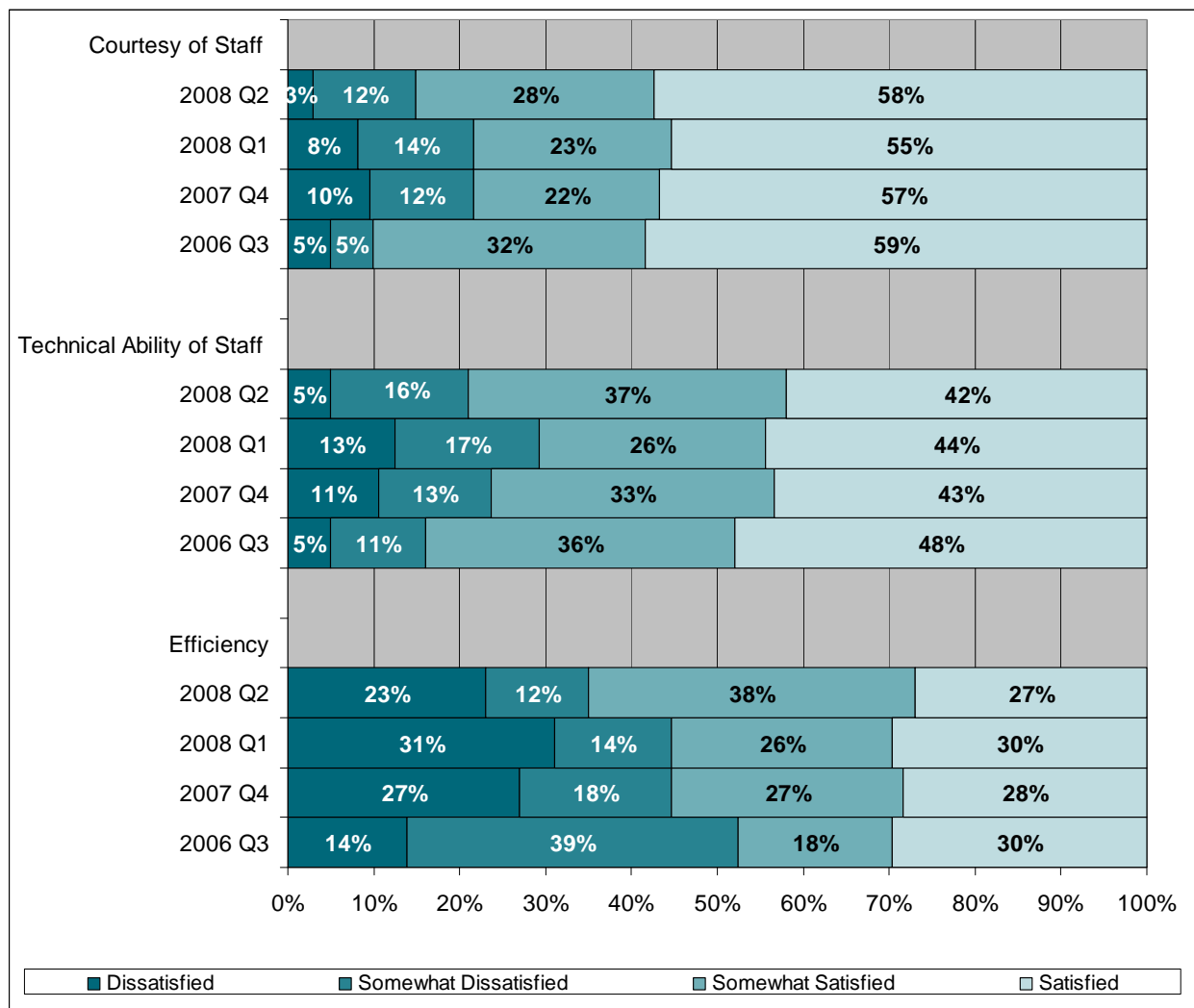
## PROCESSING APPLICATION

Permit Center customers were then asked to evaluate the application processing procedures. As figure 6 shows, the courtesy of staff was again the highest rated aspect of this particular process, although all three components showed an improvement since the first quarter of 2008.

Customer satisfaction with the efficiency of processing applications is at an all-time high this quarter (65% either *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied*), though it remains the lowest rated aspect of this particular Permit Center process.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)





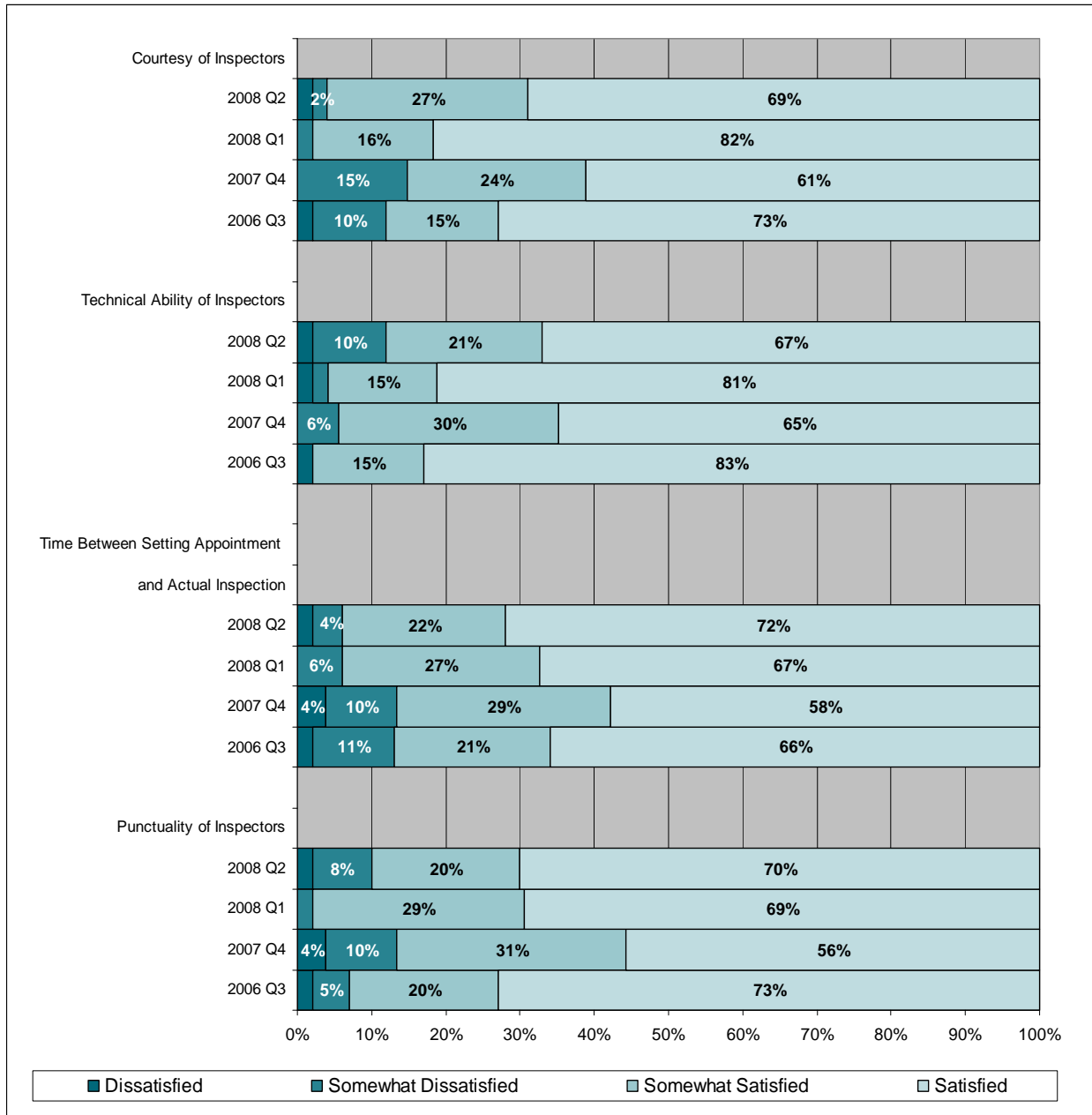
## INSPECTORS

The inspectors from the Permit Center were also evaluated by customers. Figure 7 shows that, while the inspectors are still the highest rated aspect, there are a couple notable shifts since last quarter.

The courtesy and technical ability of the inspectors decreased in the past quarter, while punctuality and the delay between setting the appointment and the actual inspection improved slightly. Overall, however, inspectors still received the highest rating by customers.

**Figure 7. Customer Satisfaction with Inspectors**

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



## CERTIFICATE OF OCCUPANCY PROCESS

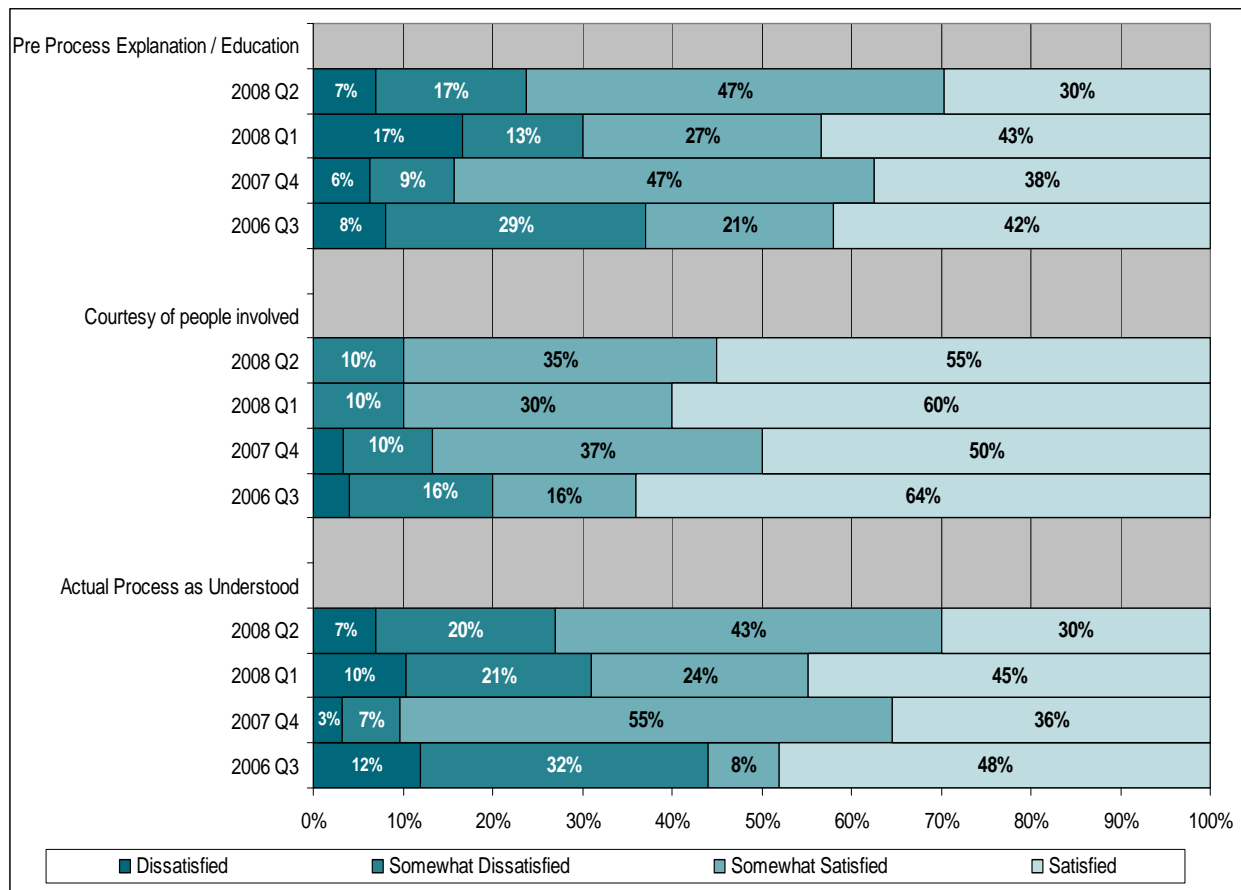
The Certificate of Occupancy process was also rated by customers. As figure 8 shows, there are mixed results and emerging trends in this area of the Permit Center's service.

The rating of the courtesy of the people involved in the process (90% *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied*) remained flat but still very positive.

There were improvements in the ratings of the pre-process explanation (77%, up from 70%) and the process actually being understood by customers (73%, up from 69%). Conversely, though, there are about a quarter of the respondents that are consistently dissatisfied with this process.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



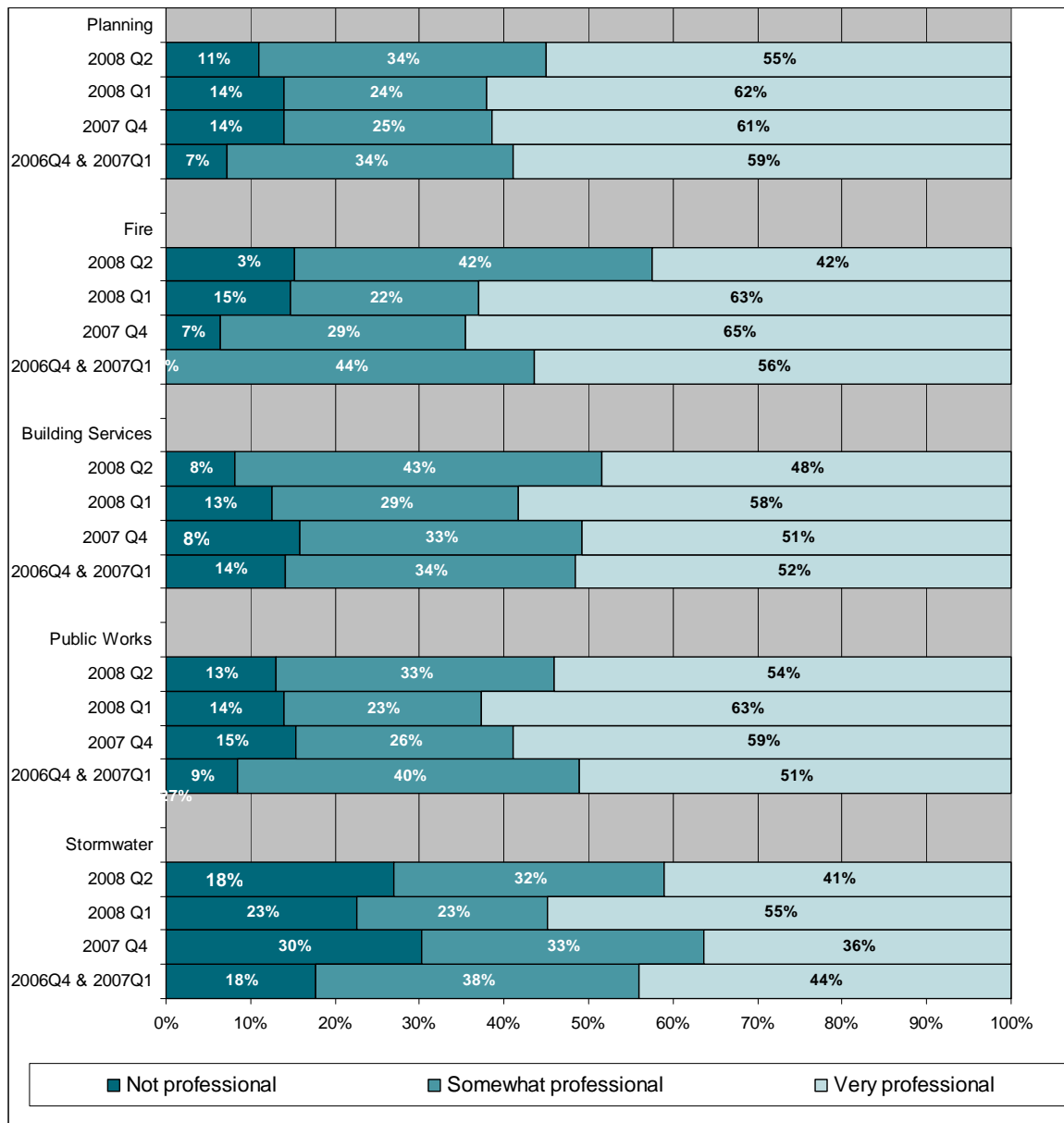
## PROFESSIONALISM

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 certain level of professionalism in every department, although each department showed a decrease in ratings since last quarter. Fire and Stormwater departments showed the largest regression in ratings during the second quarter of 2008.

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

(Ns vary by year and department)



## PRE-APPLICATION MEETINGS

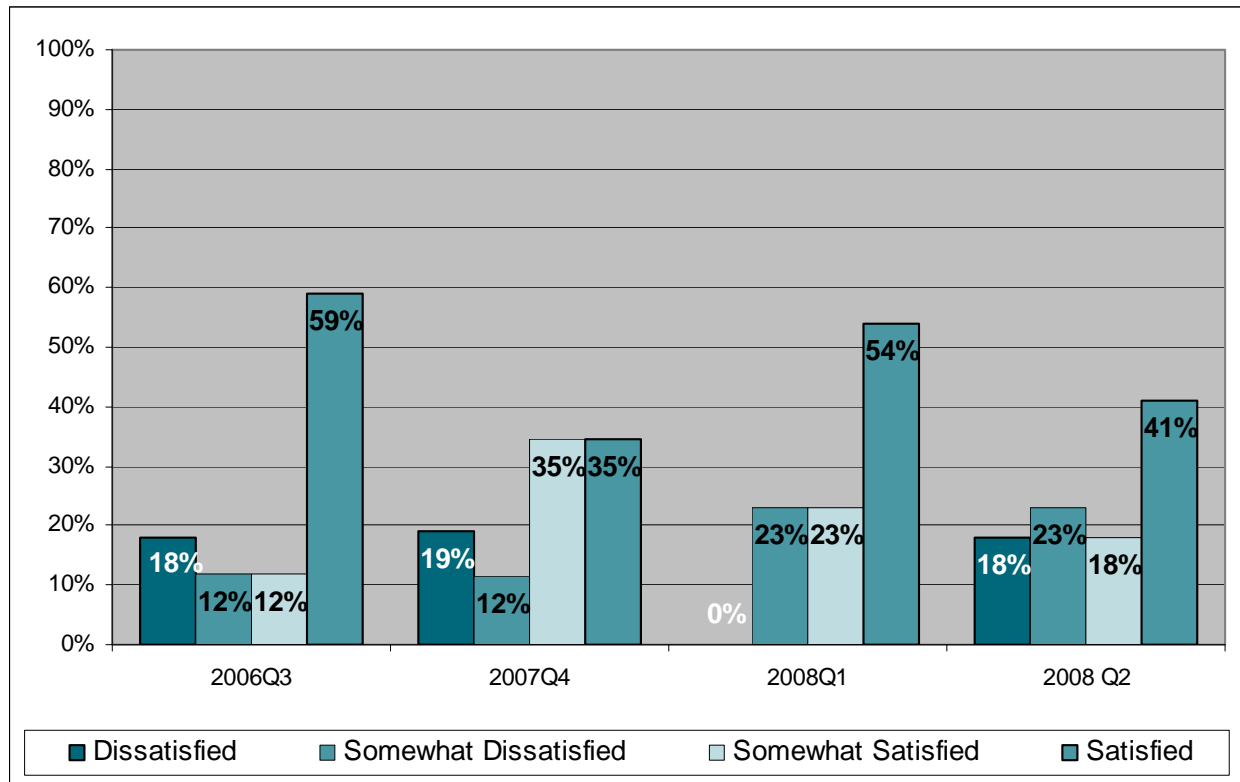
Respondents that had participated in a pre-application meeting (17) were asked to evaluate the process. As figure 10 shows, the percentage of *satisfied* customers (41% down from 54%) decreased in the last quarter.

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=17 for current time period)



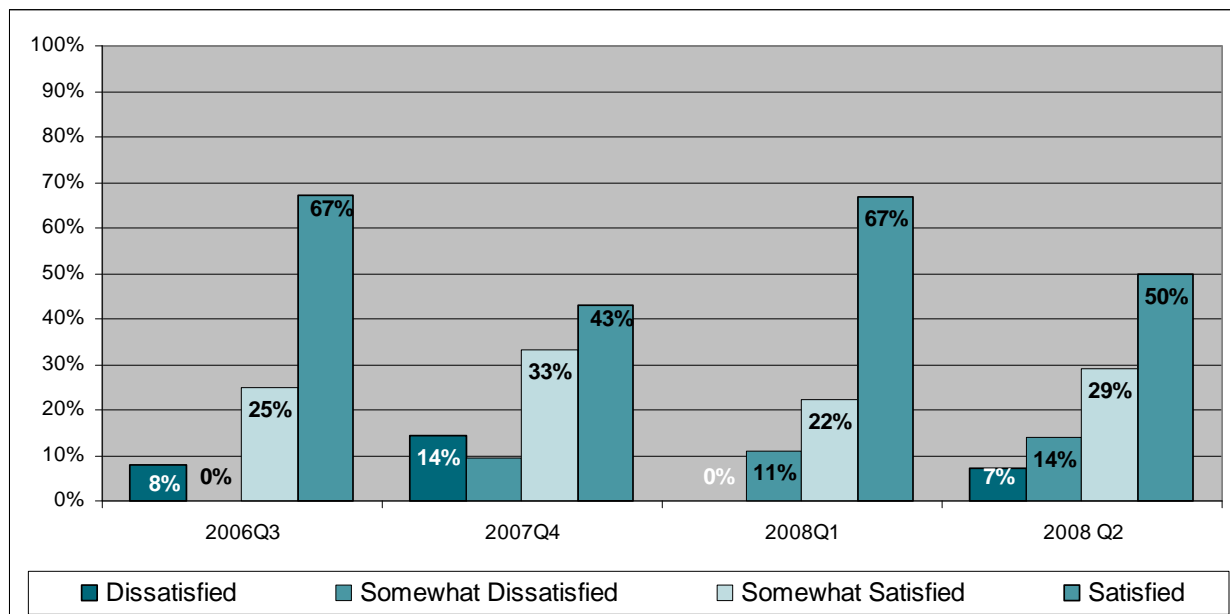
## PRE-CONSTRUCTION MEETINGS

Respondents that had participated in a pre-construction meeting (14) were also asked to evaluate the process. As figure 11 shows, there is quite a bit of variability in customers' satisfaction from quarter to quarter, with an overall decrease from 89% in the first quarter to 79% in the second quarter of this year.

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=14 for current time period)



## SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT

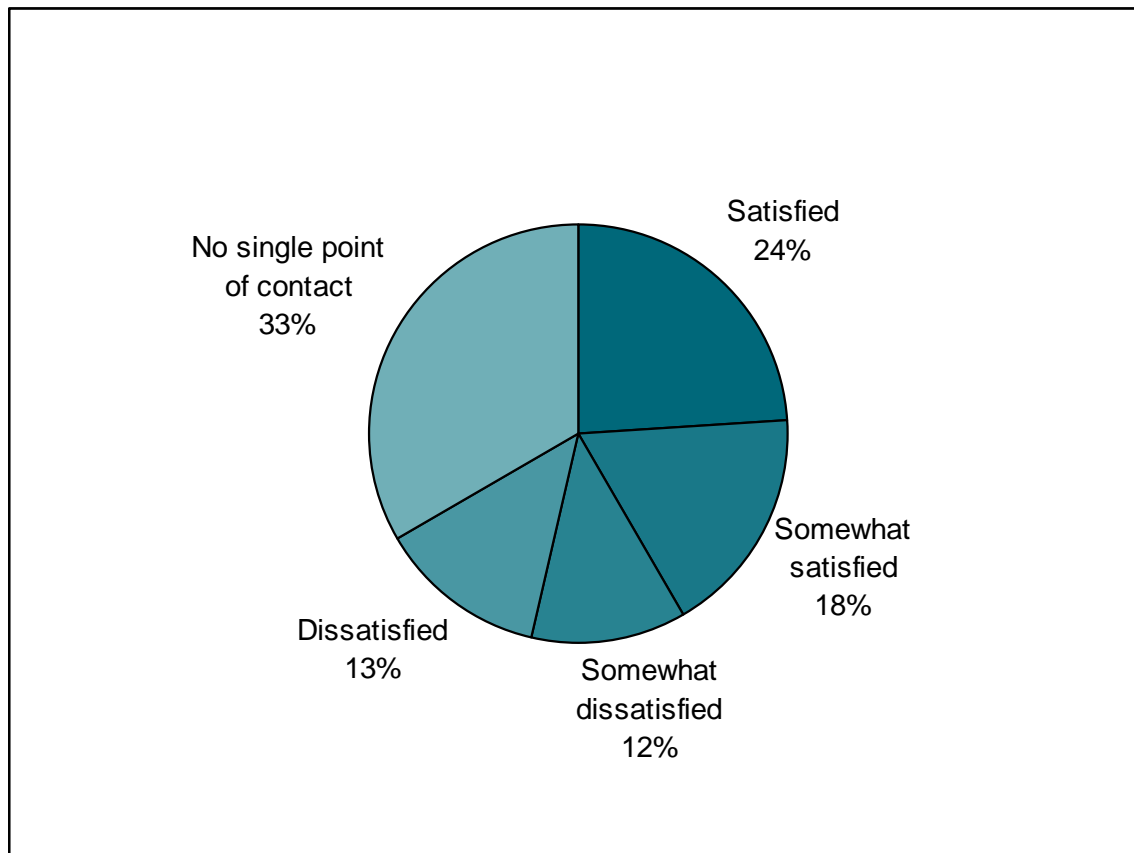
For the first time in the second quarter of 2008, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the Permit Center's new 'single point of contact' approach.

As figure 12 indicates, 42% of respondents were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with their experience with this new process. One fourth (25%) of respondents were dissatisfied.

Interestingly, one-third (33%) of the respondents reported that they did not have a single point of contact. Whether this is reality or not does not matter to the end user of Permit Center services. What does matter was that the customers either did not have a single point of contact or did not know that they did. Future effort should be made by staff to emphasize the new approach so that awareness is not an impediment to customer satisfaction.

When the *no single point of contact* responses are removed from the analysis, 63% of the remaining respondents were satisfied and 37% were dissatisfied with the new approach.

**Figure 12. Satisfaction with Single Point of Contact Approach**  
(N=84 for current time period)

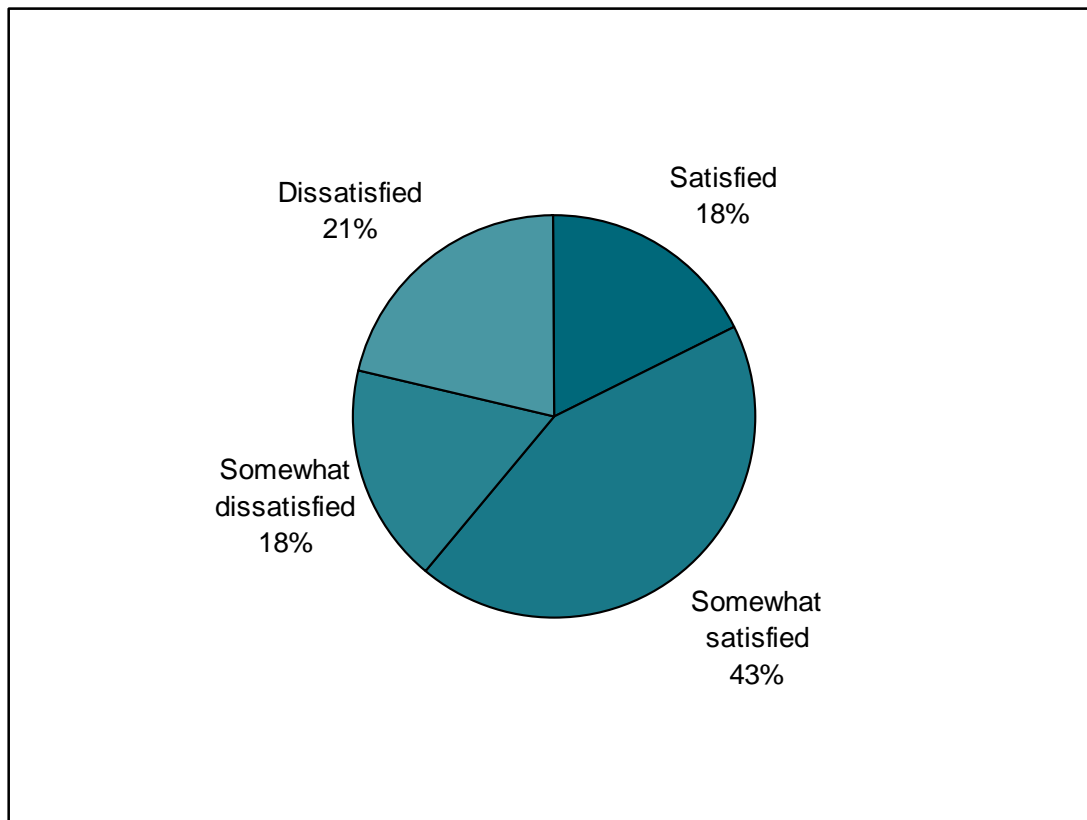


## TRANSPARENCY OF PROCESS AND TIMELINES

Also for the first time in the second quarter of 2008, respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the Permit Center's new emphasis on transparency of the process and timelines.

As figure 13 indicates, almost two-thirds (61%) of respondents were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with this new emphasis. The remaining proportion (39%) was dissatisfied with the level of transparency in the Permit Center.

**Figure 13. Satisfaction with Transparency**  
(N=84 for current time period)

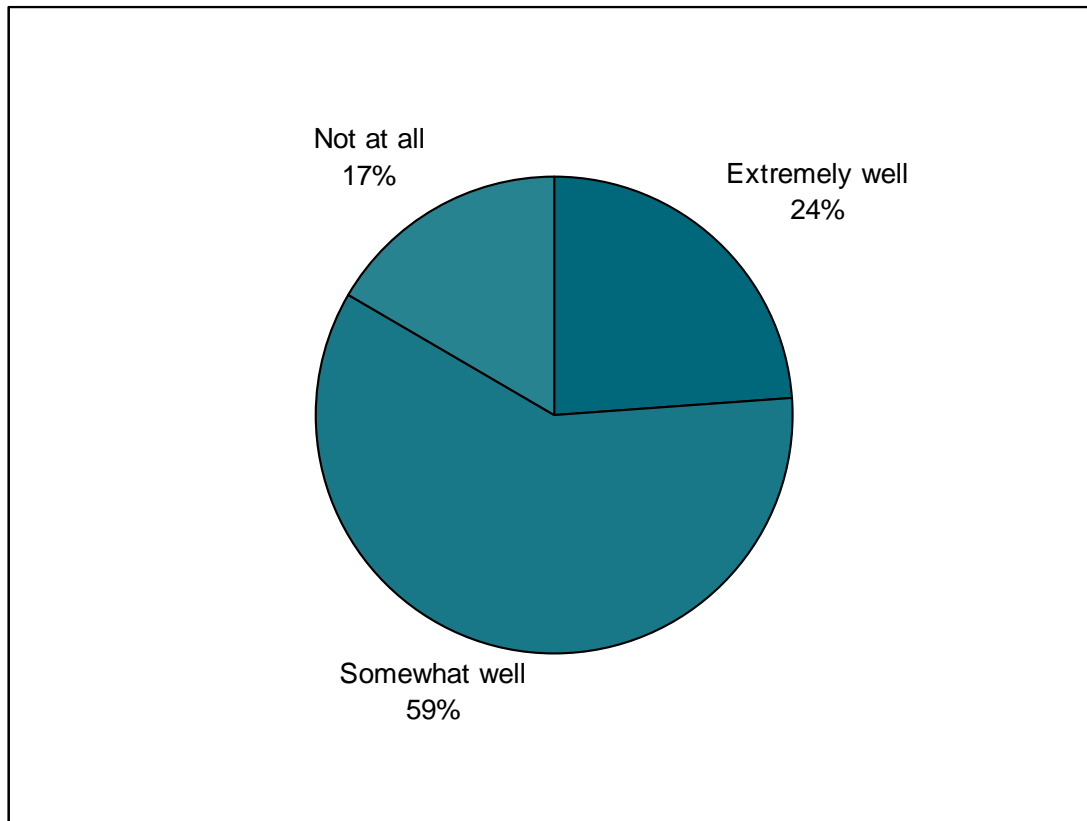


## COMMUNICATION ABOUT DELAYS

Respondents were asked for the first time this quarter about how well they were kept informed by the Permit Center about any delays in their application process.

As figure 14 indicates, the vast majority of respondents (83%) were either *extremely* or *somewhat well* informed by the Permit Center staff. Only a small proportion (17%) reported that they were *not at all* kept informed about delays in their application process.

**Figure 14. Communication about Delays**  
(N=84 for current time period)





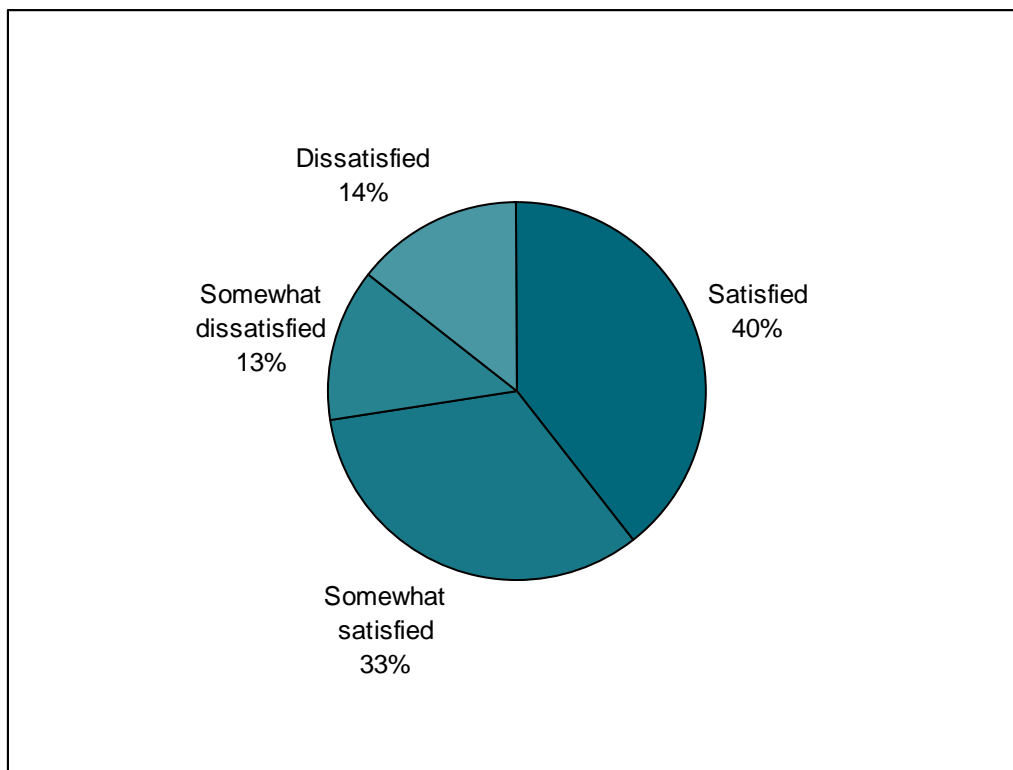
## COMMUNICATION ABOUT DELAYS

Respondents were also asked for the first time this quarter about how satisfied they were with how completely Permit Center staff reviewed their application before it was submitted.

As figure 15 indicates, almost three-fourths of the respondents (73%) were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with the level of review completeness by Permit Center staff. Only about a quarter (27%) were dissatisfied with this process.

While it is not realistic to make every single customer satisfied with this process, it is possible to focus energy on increasing the proportion of customers that fall into the highest satisfaction category.

**Figure 15. Level of Completeness in Application Review**  
(N=84 for current time period)



## ■ CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated by survey results from the first quarter of 2008, customer satisfaction with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center has remained relatively high but flat (although there are notable exceptions to this general statement). For instance, the efficiency of the application processing showed a noteworthy improvement in the past quarter, while the professionalism of the Fire and Stormwater departments decreased sharply in the current time period.

Internal discussions should try to identify what processes, procedures, or personnel have changed that would lead to the stagnant and sometimes decreasing ratings by customers. The introduction of the single point of contact approach and the emphasis on transparency seem to be a positive step in the right direction from the perspective of the customers.

Ultimately, customer satisfaction with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center is still relatively positive, although the opportunities for improvement are readily available. The new processes in the Permit Center (e.g., transparency, single point of contact) are helping improve the customer experience, although the awareness and effectiveness of these processes should be the subject of continual quality improvement discussions. The changes have not gone unnoticed by customers, one of which explicitly stated, "Great improvement to the system."

The improvement efforts should focus first on the notably decreased customer ratings in areas. Tweaks to the newly introduced procedures and points of emphasis should also maintain center stage. It is imperative that the Permit Center actively and strategically address the comments and concerns made by its customers. Strong effort is obviously being made by staff; it now seems that a more focused approach would most benefit customers and staff alike.

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY SCRIPT

Thank you for participating in the City of Bellingham's Permit Center's listening and feedback 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 2008?

- 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

QX. How satisfied were you with the Permit Center's new 'single point of contact' approach with your project manager?

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- I did not have a single point of contact

QY. How satisfied were you with the transparency of the Permit Center's process and timelines?

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

Q3. Which description best fits your project(s) from April to June of 2008? (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.)

QZ. How well were you informed about what kind of permit review was needed for your application and how long it would take?

- Extremely well
- Somewhat well
- Not at all

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 2008.

QA. How well your application was reviewed for completeness by staff before you turned it in?

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Not applicable

Q5. General counter assistance

(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 section will measure the effectiveness of those departments during your interaction with the Permit Center between January to March of 2008.

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. (open-ended)

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

## 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?**

- no meeting was needed
- make sure ALL that need to attend do
- Let the person know up front what kinds of difficulties in their project might be more specifically.
- Internal staff bickering between departments at meeting. The departments do not appear to in any way to want to work together, let alone be in the same room
- I would recommend that a pre-application meeting be offered at the beginning of the process. This was not offered to me and I wasted over 4 weeks going back and forth with the planning department before they would even accept my application. I eventually
- i have already made my comments to XXXXX XXXXX
- I believe that these meetings take valuable time away from each department. Instead of sitting at these meetings and waiting their turn to review they could be at their desk processing permits.
- I asked for a pre app meeting but was told I really didn't need one. WRONG.

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

- no meeting was needed
- My contractor attended and I am certain it went fine as I didn't hear anything negative back.
- make sure all that need to attend do

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

- When there is a Problem Planning needs to let the Applicant Know and respond to our E-Mails where it stans. You have to take the time to go down there to see what is going on when a simple E-Mail or Call would have left the Applicant knowing what was need
- When staff working on a particular phase were gone or on vacation, the whole process came to a halt.
- When inspections are phoned in, quite frequently a message is left for a phone call to be returned by the inspector to arrange access to the facility being inspected; however, I was informed just the other day that the inspectors do not receive the message
- We are a residential remodeling firm. I find the requirement to show construction entrances, elevations and site plans for interior remodels a waste of time and money. I find a disconnect with requirements and their actual useful function
- very rigid rules. arrigant staff, no flexablility. do not want to get anything approved. only meet deadlines.
- XXXXX XXXXX was great - very knowledgeable and helpful. On my second visit she was not available and the man who helped me was very rude. Luckily XXXXX got everything through and I did not have to deal with him again.
- This was a very simple Tenant Improvement in a new building, all fire & safty issues were already done and it has been 40 days and I am still waiting for a permit.
- There appears to be a major divide between management and staff creating a power struggle that is affecting efficiency. This will ultimate hurt the City in revenues as more and more people decide it is not worth the hassle to build in Bellingham
- The process of aquiring a building permit for the remodelling of a bathroom is very complicated and overwhelming to the average non-professional permit seeker. It appears to me to require considerable knowledge and skill.
- The process always seems to take longer than other similar sized jurisdictions. It would be great to have a faster service option.

- The permitting process is very slow and holds up a lot of other people trying to make a livelihood in the construction industry, we feel this is very inconsiderate. Also, we feel that the permitting center waste too much time with revisions.
- The online inspection request is great, even though the website has layout problems in itself. I do miss the call in the morning about the approximate time of an inspection
- The Fire Marshal's office is out of touch with the building permit process. We adn the building dept staff can never just call them and get a quick answer because they always away from thier phone.
- The entire staff has been so poorly trained in a negative, cant do, wont help, environment that leads all the way back to the senior planner, XXXXX XXXXX!!!! The planning dept. and her staff needs to be broken up and scrutinized
- The electrical permit is extensive and confusing. The original set of requirements was overwhelming. As of August 1st, the new requirements are excessive. We believe that the poor performance of some electrical firms has created a penalty
- Some of the rules seem very arbitrary or no longer pertinent to today's buildings. Updating some of the rules, being more practical with approaches, and using statistics to help determine which rules are really relevant and which are not useful.
- So far I'm happy with the experience. I do wish it didnt cost so much but what can you do?
- Small electrical permits have went from \$25 in 2004 to \$105 today.L and I permits start at \$46. Why is it so expensive for a permit in Bellingham and with so much red tape? Why can't we get a permit on line like with L and I? Stop building a monument
- Overall a BRUTAL experience dealing with this Department. We would characterize this group as inexperienced, unprofessional and mostly incompetent with respect to all components of construction and understanding of city requirements.
- Over the 12 years that we have been in business I have dealt with all sorts of challenges but without hesitation, there is one challenge that is the greatest, The City of Bellingham Building Permit process.
- keep training and keep asking, thanks
- XXXXX XXXXX, Permit Clerk, is very curtious, knowledgeable, helpful and sets a standard that the rest of the staff should hope to aspire to.
- In order to facilitate the development of affordable and low-income housing (both for purchase and as rentals); a 'fast-tracked' permitting process should be implemented for projects that can verify service to populations below 50-60% AMI.
- I was impressed by the knowledge, courtesy, and helpfulness of the staff.
- I had a permit approved by all parties about 2 weeks ago except for planing who needed some corrections before they would aprove it. I have been in 2 times and called 3 times an have not received one call from this person. I don't know what is going on
- I feel the permit review process is slow, my perception is that a simple mechanical permit like a commercial equipment change out needs to touch alot of hands before it is issued. Something like this should be done with an appointment with a plans examiners
- I believe that the new system is not working. If you have a permit that is a 7 day turn around there should be a dept. for those reviews. If you have a undetermined week turn around you should have a dept. for that, then it could be reduced to a reasonable time
- I applied for a water main extension that had already been permitted for another contractor. The same engineer did the same drawing for the same line. It has been 7 weeks so far. This seems extreme to me and is very hard to explain to a client.
- I am a remodeling contractor and have recieved 2 permits from the city this year. Both permits were issued in a timely fashion and before the app. time frame stated at the counter at submittal. So my experience as been good
- Great improvement to the system. Counter people need to be granted some latitude and judgment. I had applications rejected for missing a single, non-consequential piece of paper that I could easily have faxed in upon arrival back at my office.
- GIRLS ON PERMIT CENTER FRONT DESK ARE AWESOME!!!!!!!!!!!! XXXXX AND XXXXX ALWAYS GO OUT OF THEIR WAY TO HELP WITH A SMILE ON THEIR FACE.

- efficient and pleasant
- Counter staff is not experienced enough to accept permit applications without time delay. They treat the professionals in the field of construction the same as they do the homeowner who has no experience.
- After coming down approximately six times I finally got my drawings excepted for review, waited six weeks, had corrections and now have to wait for the corrections to be approved. My project is as simple as it gets, I feel my time is not respected