

REPORT

**City of Bellingham  
Permit Center Customer Satisfaction Survey  
2009 Quarter 3 and Quarter 4**

**February 2010**

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

During the last two quarters of 2009 (July to December), the Center for Economic Vitality in the College of Business and Economics at Western Washington University continued 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 December 2009.

This customer satisfaction survey was again conducted online, so researchers first needed to obtain email addresses for the individuals that used Permit Center services. Eight five (85) individuals completed the survey during the third quarter of 2009 (July to September) and another sixty two (62) completed the survey in the fourth quarter (October to December). This resulted in a total of 147 respondents for a 26.3% response rate. This calculates to a 6.95% margin of error on the survey.

Starting in January 2009 the survey is conducted quarterly; however, the data for two quarters is aggregated and reported semi-annually. 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.

This report uses the convention of *italicizing* any response option from the survey in an effort to fully convey the voice of the respondents' survey responses. Appendix A documents the verbatim comments made by respondents to various open-ended questions and Appendix B presents the full script of the online survey. Appendix C was added to this report to accommodate feedback that was emailed directly to the CEV staff. Any Permit Center staff identifiers were removed.

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.

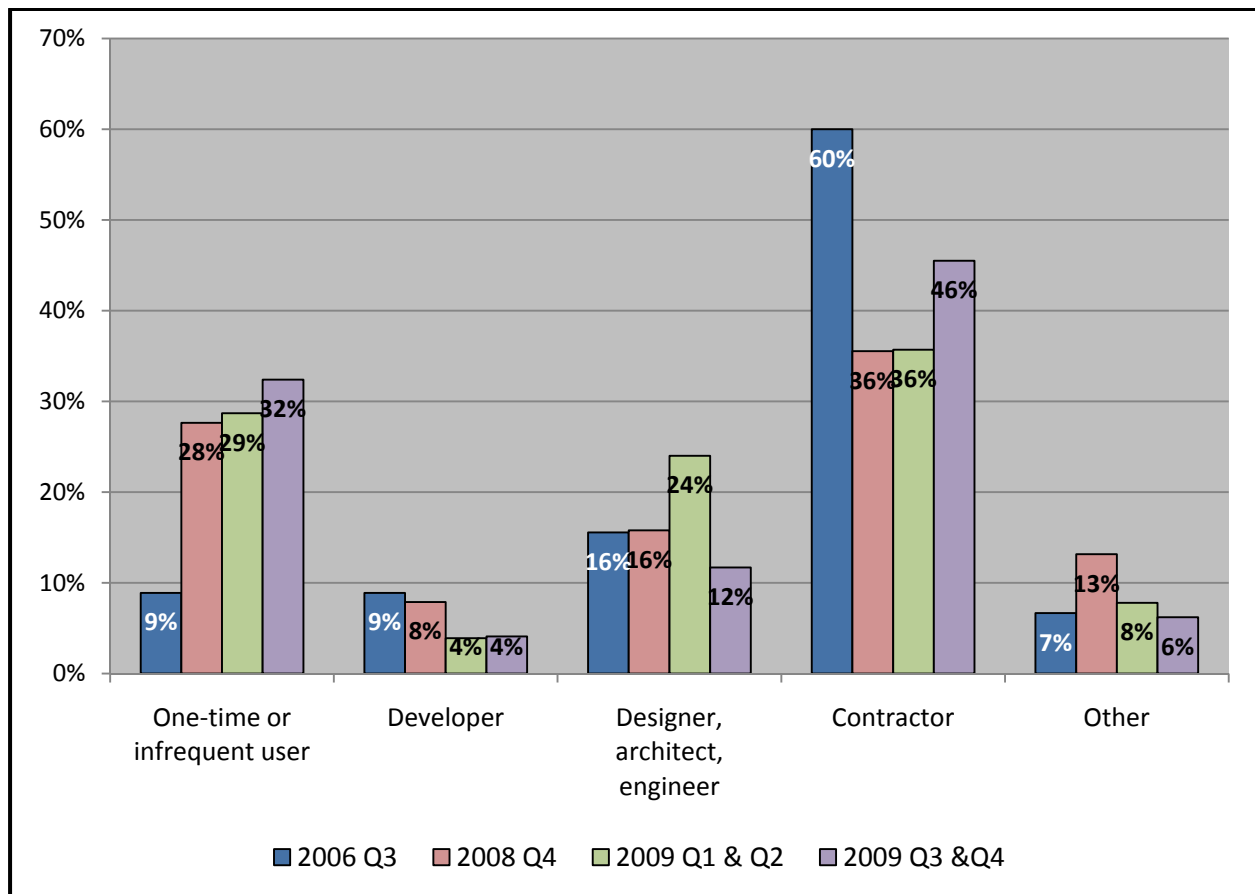
## TYPE OF CUSTOMERS

Customers of the Permit Center were first asked to describe the role that brought them to the Permit Center from July to December 2009. As figure 1 indicates, the majority of respondents were contractors (46%) and one-time or infrequent users (32%).

In the last half of 2009 there was a significant decrease in use by designers, architects and engineers. However, usage by developers stayed the same while usage by other users decreased slightly.

Customer types reported under other include: *contractor – first time using the C.O.B. permit center, development consultant, homeowner – frequent visits, local resident, new business, owner builder, property owner representative, realtor.*

**Figure 1. Distribution of Permit Center Customer Type**  
(N=145 for current time period)



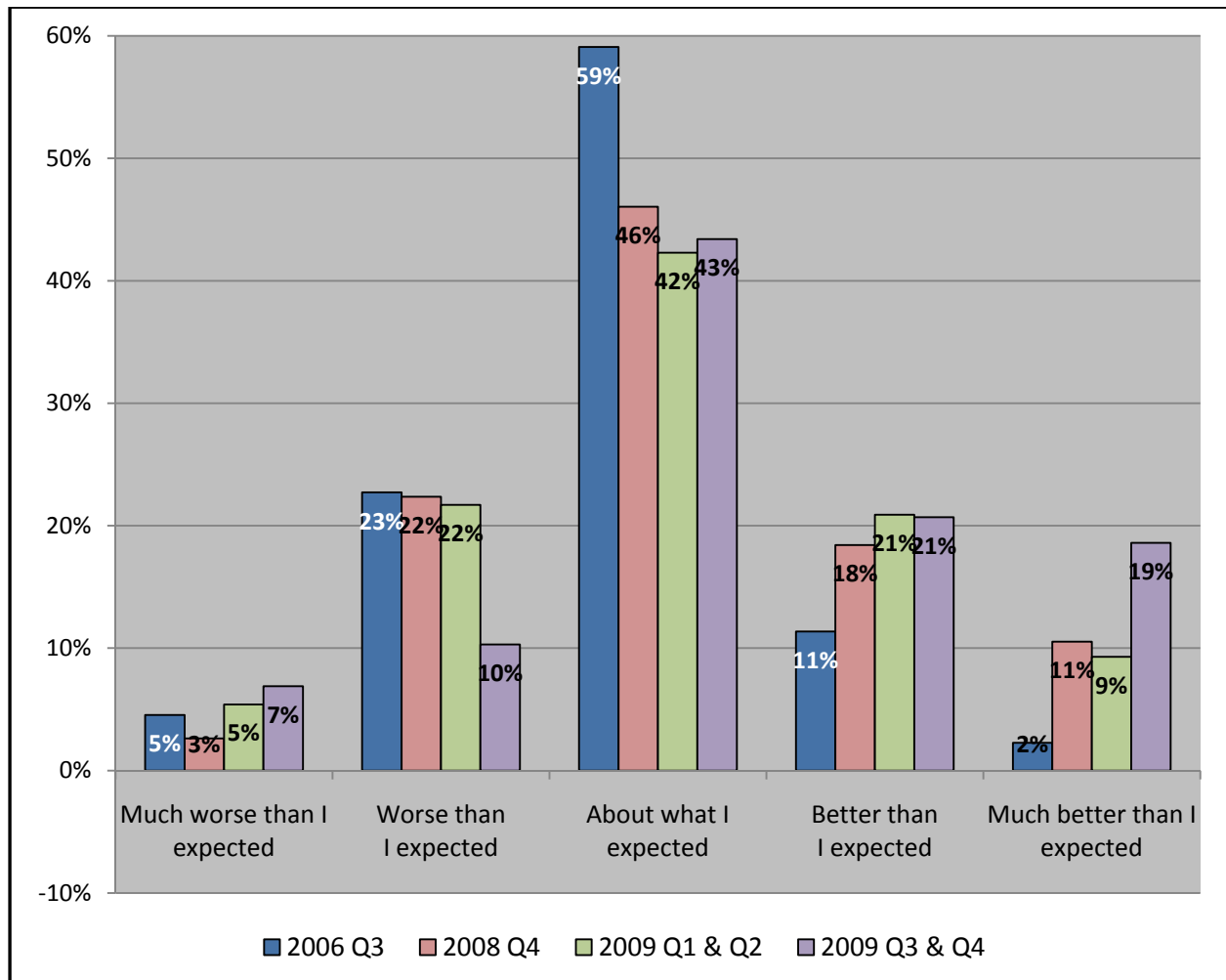
## OVERALL EXPERIENCE

Respondents were asked about their overall experience with the Permit Center. Figure 2 shows that during July to December 2009, 83% of respondents said that their experience was *about what I expected* or better. This is an increase over the 72% of respondents in the previous survey that reported the same level of satisfaction. Of particular note is that those who reported the experience being *much better than I expected* rose from 9% in the first half of 2009 to 19% by the last half of 2009.

Less than one fifth of the respondents (17%) reported that their experience was *worse or much worse* than expected during the last half of 2009. Those who felt their experience was *much worse than I expected* increased to 7% of respondents. While this is a small portion of the Permit Center’s clients, the number people reporting that the experience was *much worse* than they expected has grown every period since 2008.

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

(N=145 for current time period)



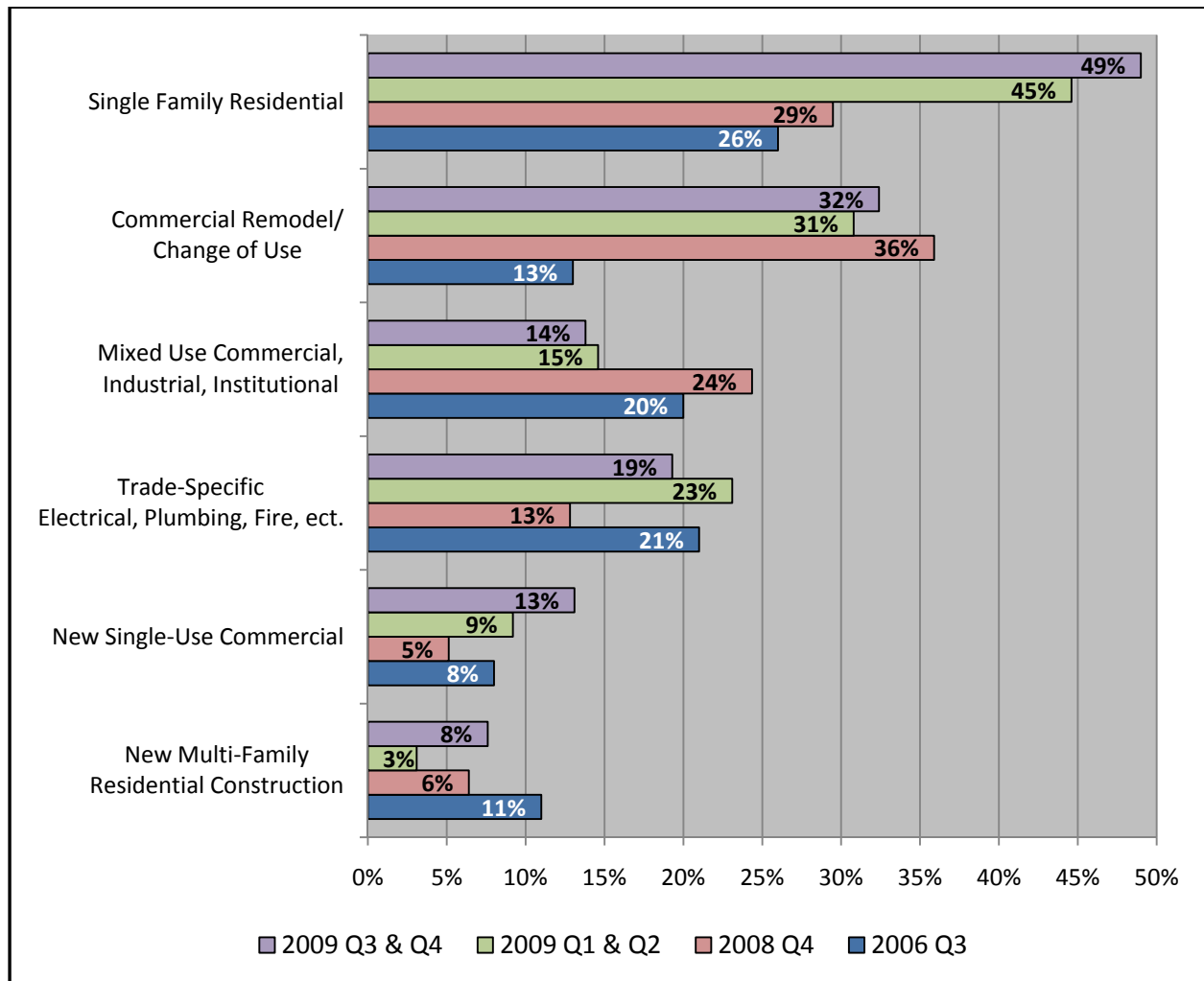
## PROJECT TYPES

Respondents were asked to indicate what kind of project brought them in contact with the Permit Center. As figure 3 shows, single-family residential remains the most common project type. Notable shifts in project types since last quarter include an increase in the number of new multi-family residential and new single-use commercial. There was a relative decrease in the proportion of trade specific permits.

Please note that respondents could select more than one type of project, so the total number of projects (196) exceeds the total number of respondents (n=145).

**Figure 3. Distribution of Project Types**

(Ns vary for each project type)



## PERMIT CENTER MATERIALS

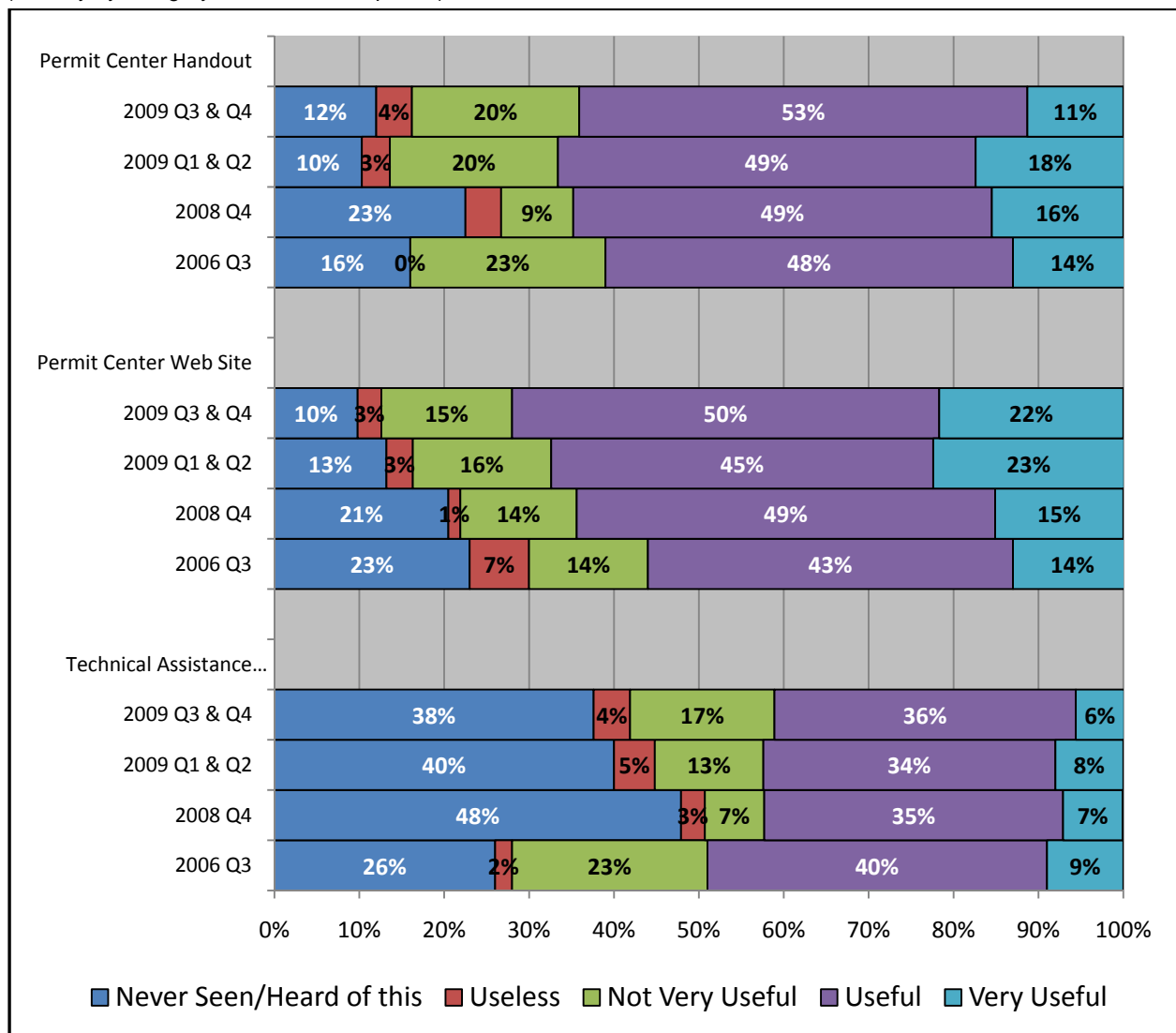
The first rating items on the survey asked respondents to indicate how useful the Permit Center support materials were. This included the Center’s website, handouts, and assistance bulletins.

Figure 4 shows that the percentage of customers that found the website, handouts, and technical assistance bulletins useful remained steady from the first to the last half of 2009.

Awareness of technical assistance bulletins continues to remain low, although it has improved. In the fourth quarter of 2008 48% of respondents were unaware of the bulletins. That number has improved to 38%. Continuing to focus on increasing the awareness of the well-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)



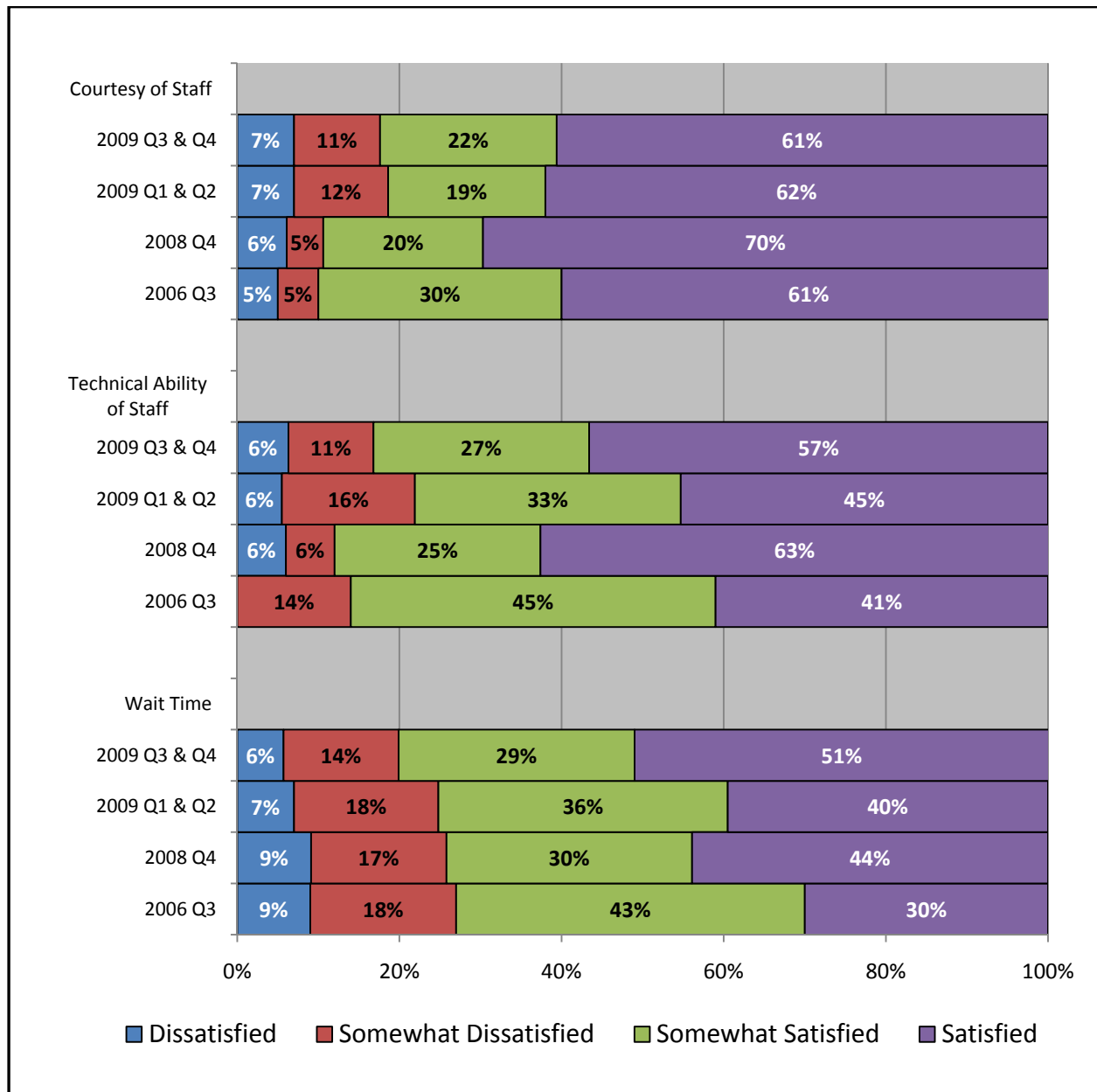
## COUNTER ASSISTANCE

Respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the assistance they received from the Permit Center’s counter staff. Respondents are most satisfied with the courtesy of the counter staff (61%).

The greatest improvement in respondent satisfaction was seen in technical ability of staff, which rose to 57% from 45% in the first half of 2009.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



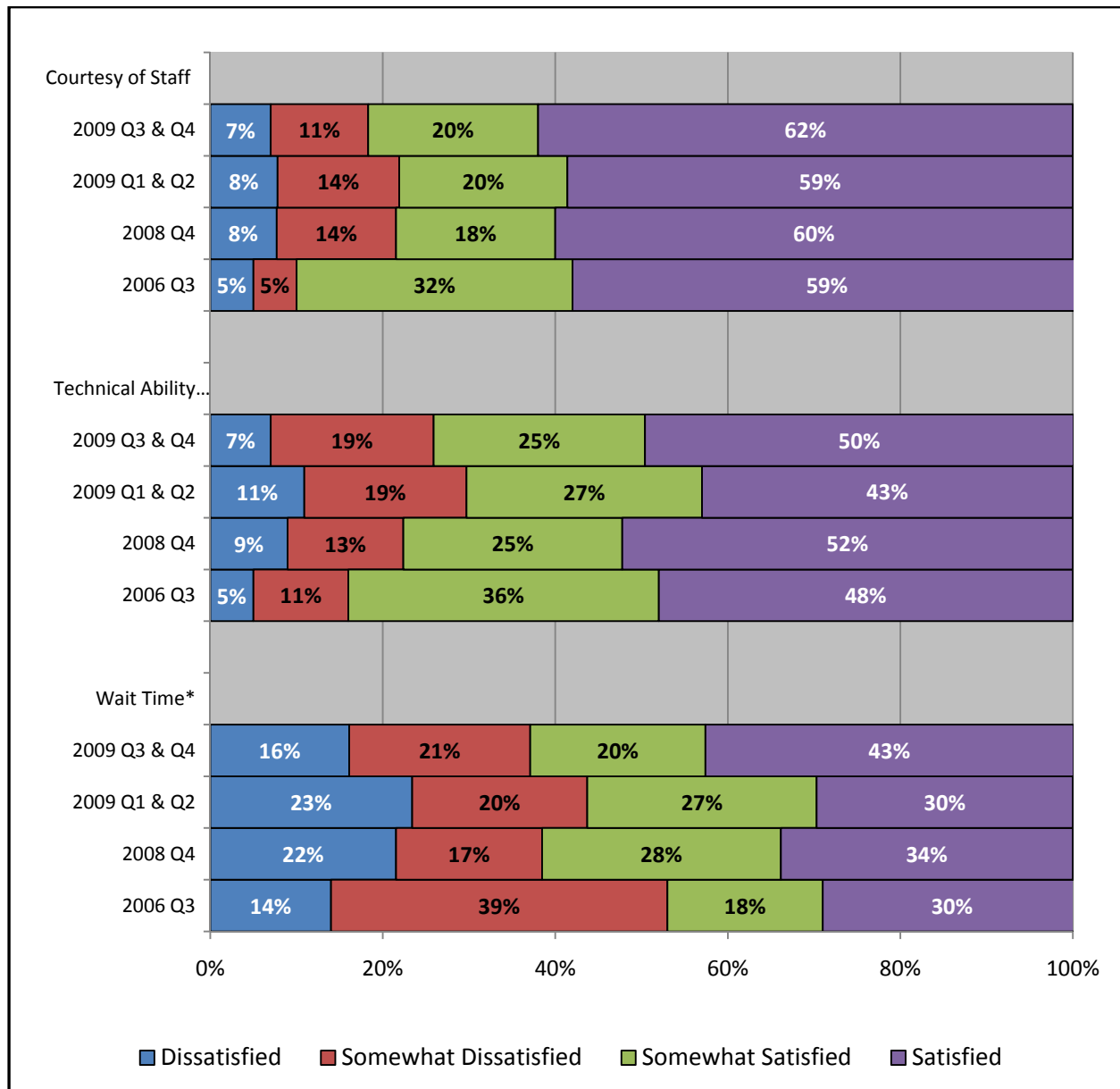
## PROCESSING APPLICATION

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.

Customer satisfaction with the wait time and technical ability of staff increased between the first half of 2009 and the last half of 2009. Wait time remains the lowest rated aspect of the processing procedure.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



\*In past surveys wait time was asked as efficiency. Starting in 2009 the wording was changed to wait time



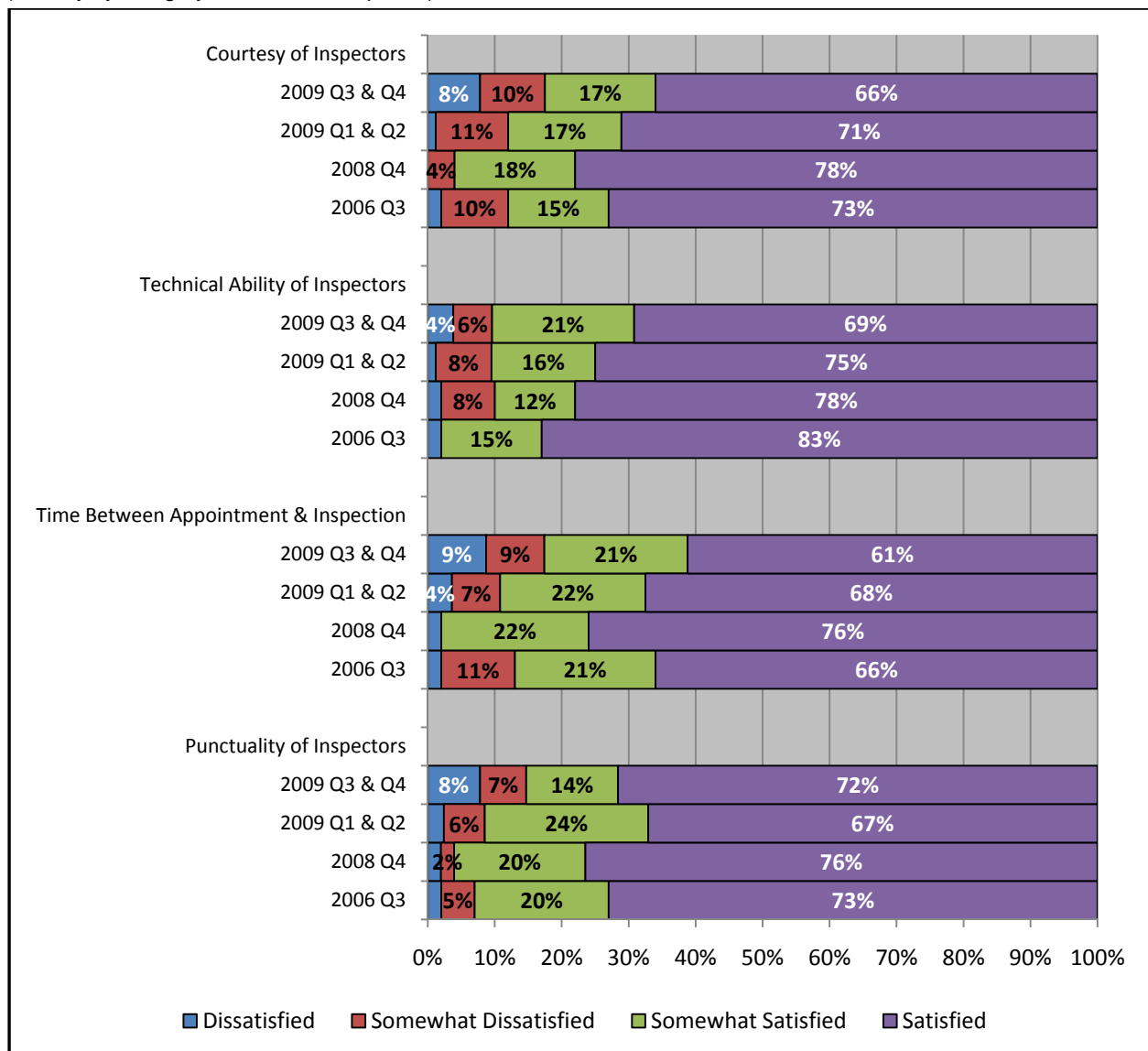
## INSPECTORS

The inspectors from the Permit Center were also evaluated by customers. Figure 7 shows that while satisfaction with inspectors is still rated highly, satisfaction declined over the last half of 2009.

The percentage of people reporting that they were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with the time between setting an appointment and the actual inspection decreased by 8%. This represents a decrease of 16% since the fourth quarter of 2008. Those that reported that they were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with the courtesy and punctuality of inspectors decreased by 5% in the last half of 2009.

**Figure 7. Customer Satisfaction with Inspectors**

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



## CERTIFICATE OF OCCUPANCY PROCESS

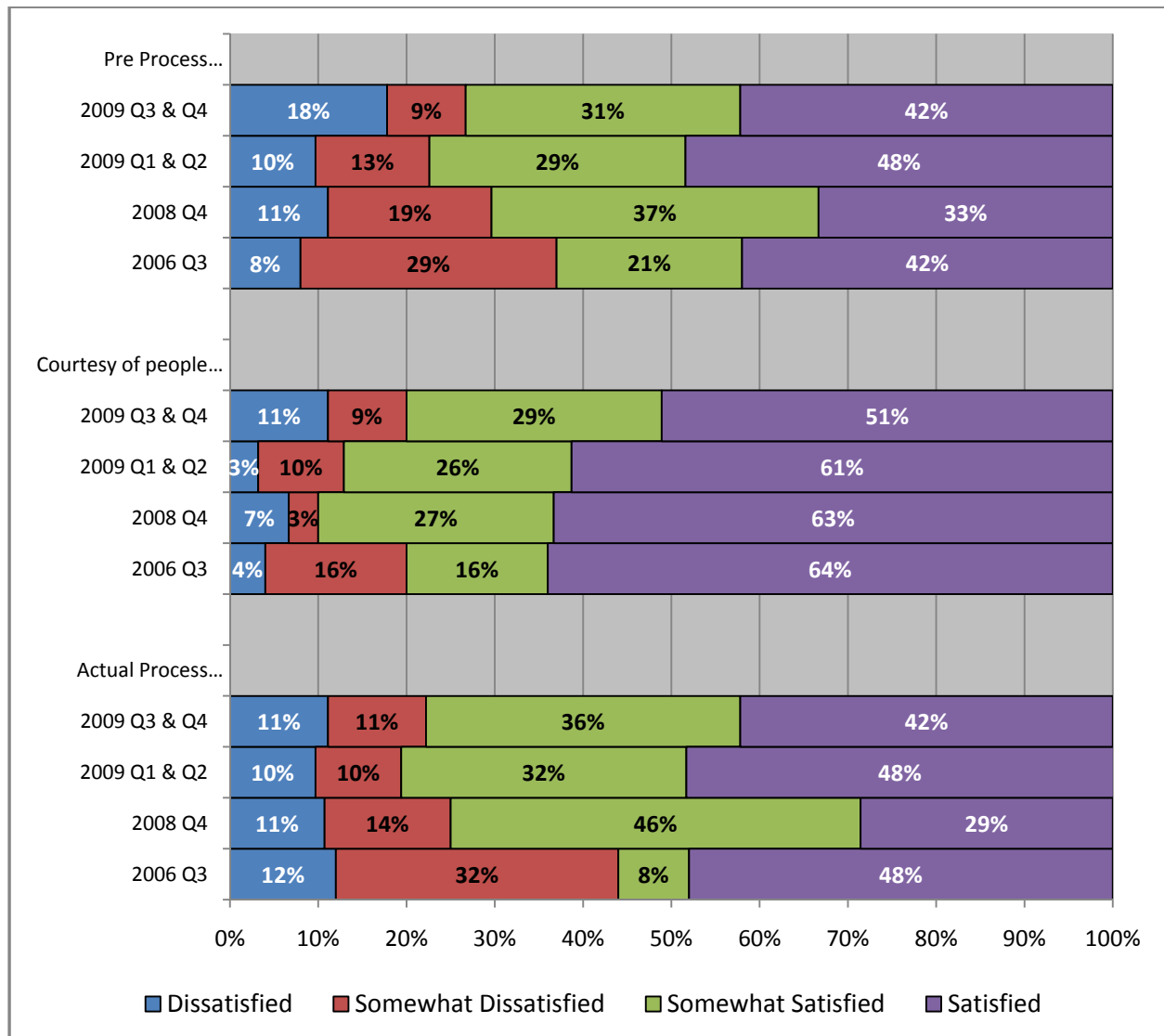
The Certificate of Occupancy process was also rated by customers. As figure 8 shows, the customer satisfaction rate fell from the first half of the year.

Respondents were the least satisfied with the pre-process explanation (73% *somewhat satisfied* or *satisfied*). The process actually being understood also decreased during this time period, with a 2% decrease in the number reporting *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied*. This was the smallest decrease in reported satisfaction for the certificate of occupancy process.

There was again a decrease in the satisfaction with the courtesy of people involved (80%, down from 87%). As figure 8 shows, satisfaction with the courtesy of the people involved, while showing the highest satisfaction, has continued to decrease since the fourth quarter of 2008.

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

(Ns vary by category for current time period)



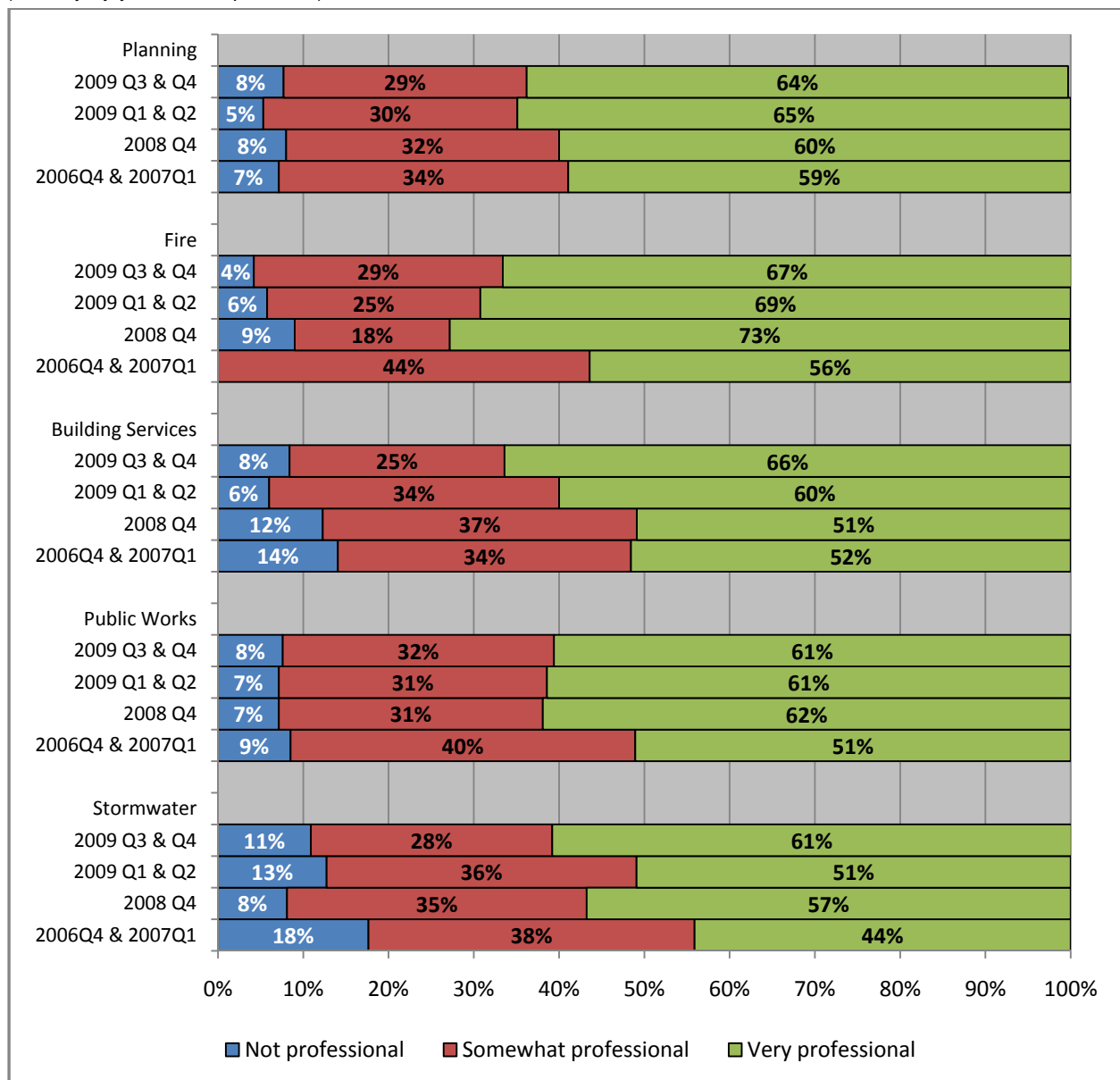
## PROFESSIONALISM

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, Planning and Building Services departments decreased slightly in the percentage of respondents selecting *somewhat professional* or *very professional* during the last two quarters of 2009. Fire, Public Works and Stormwater departments saw an increase in the percentage of people who reported *somewhat professional* or *very professional*.

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

(Ns vary by year and department)



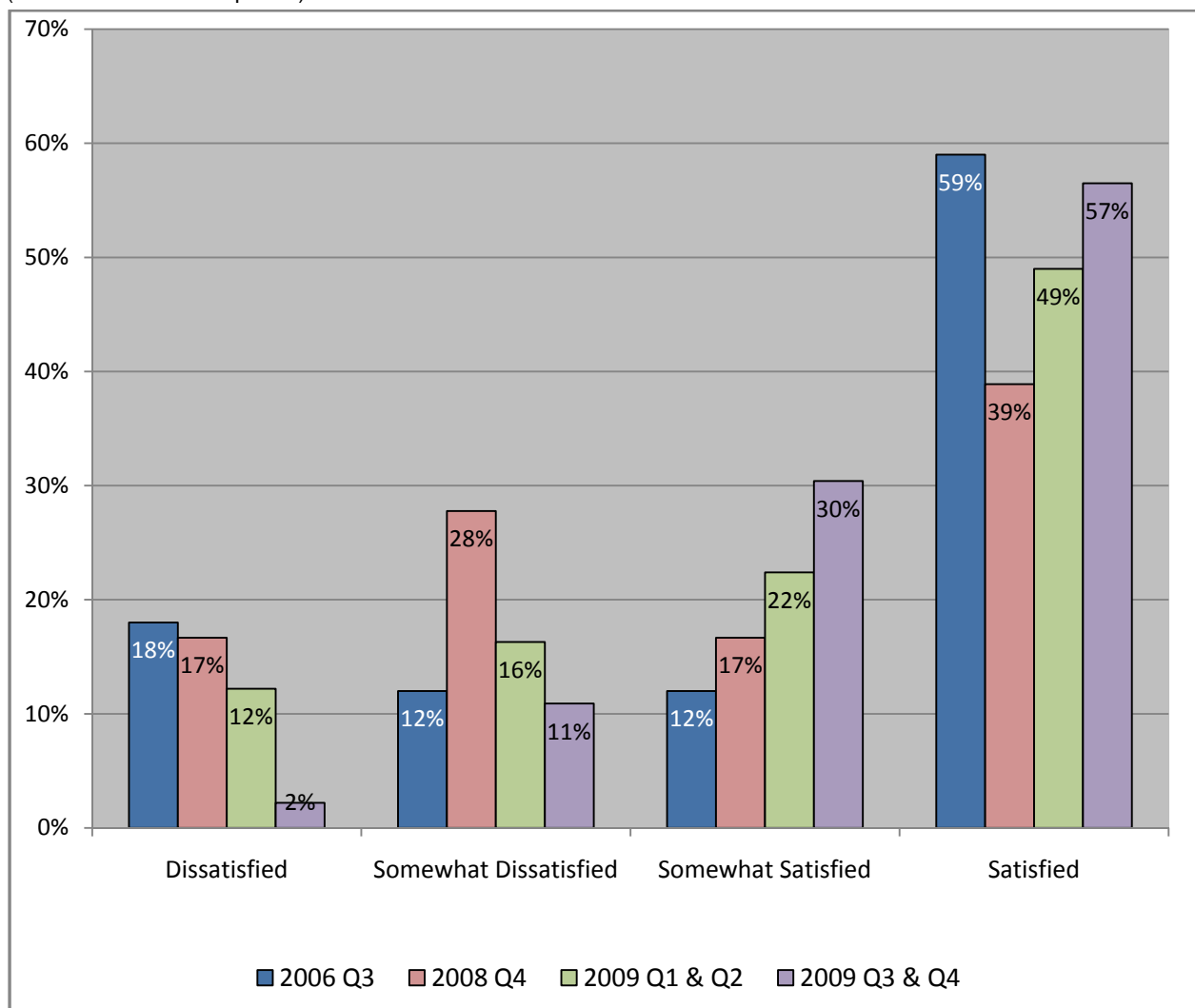
## PRE-APPLICATION MEETINGS

Respondents that participated in a pre-application meeting (n=46) were asked to evaluate the process. As figure 10 shows, the percentage of *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* customers increased again in the last half of 2009. Respondents that reported being either *somewhat dissatisfied* or *dissatisfied* decreased by 15% in the last half of 2009.

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

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

(N=46 for current time period)



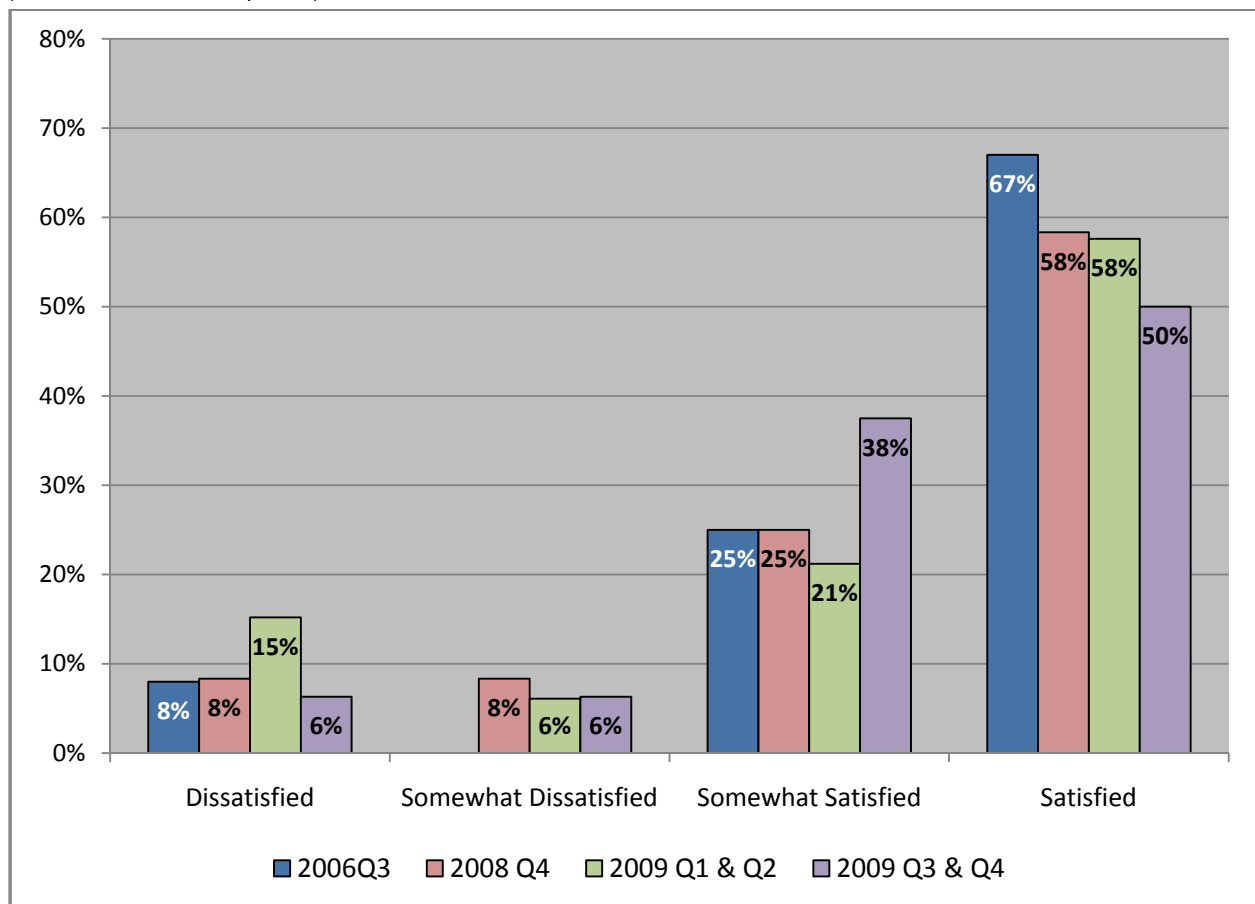
## PRE-CONSTRUCTION MEETINGS

Respondents that participated in a pre-construction meeting were also asked to evaluate the process. As figure 11 shows, those who report that they are *satisfied* continued to fall. However, those that reported that they were *somewhat satisfied* rose 17% from the first half of 2009. There was a 9% decrease in those reporting that they were *dissatisfied*.

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 A of this report.

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

(N=32 for current time period)



## SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT

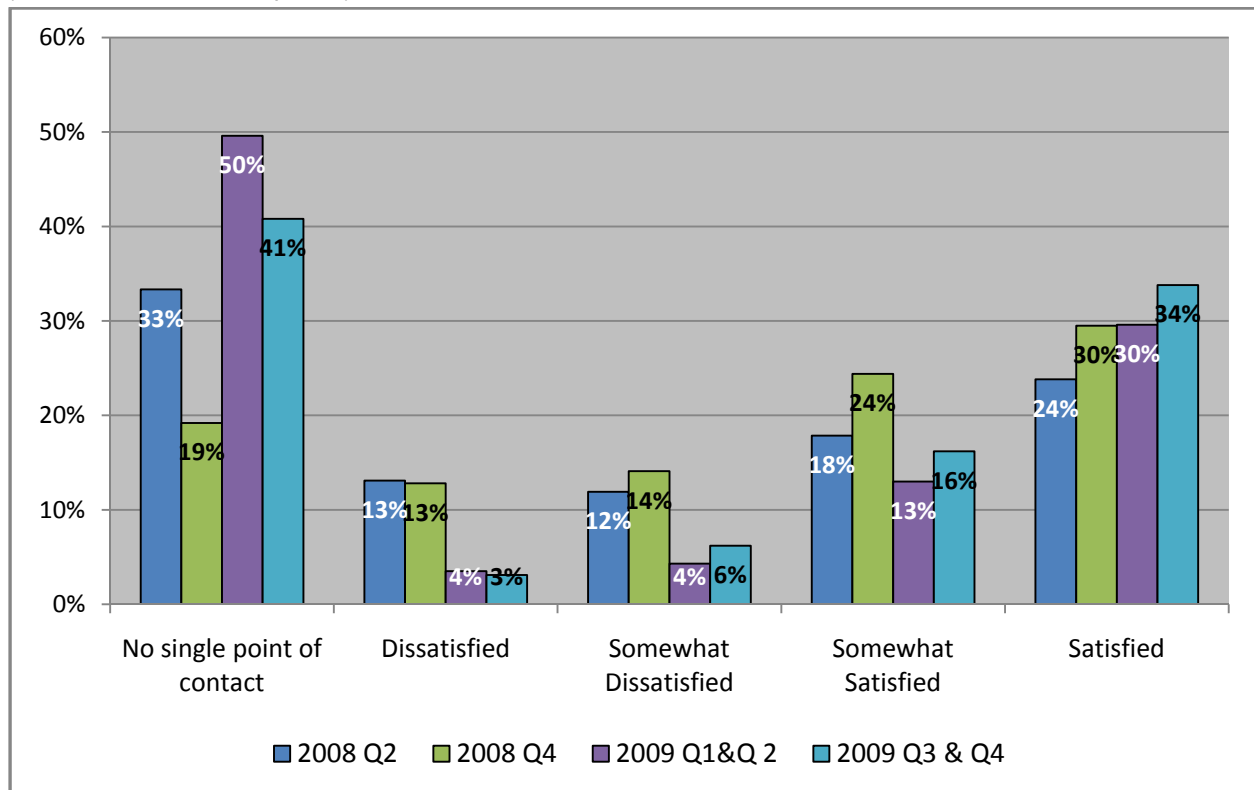
Respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the Permit Center’s ‘single point of contact’ approach. As figure 12 indicates, the percentage of respondents who were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* rose 7% in the last half of 2009.

The percentage of respondents who reported that they did not have a single point of contact decreased to 41% in the last half of 2009 indicating that awareness of this service continues to remain low.

When the *no single point of contact* responses are removed from the analysis, 84% of the remaining respondents reported that they were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied*. This matches the number reported in the first half of 2009.

**Figure 12. Satisfaction with Single Point of Contact Approach**

(N=130 for current time period)



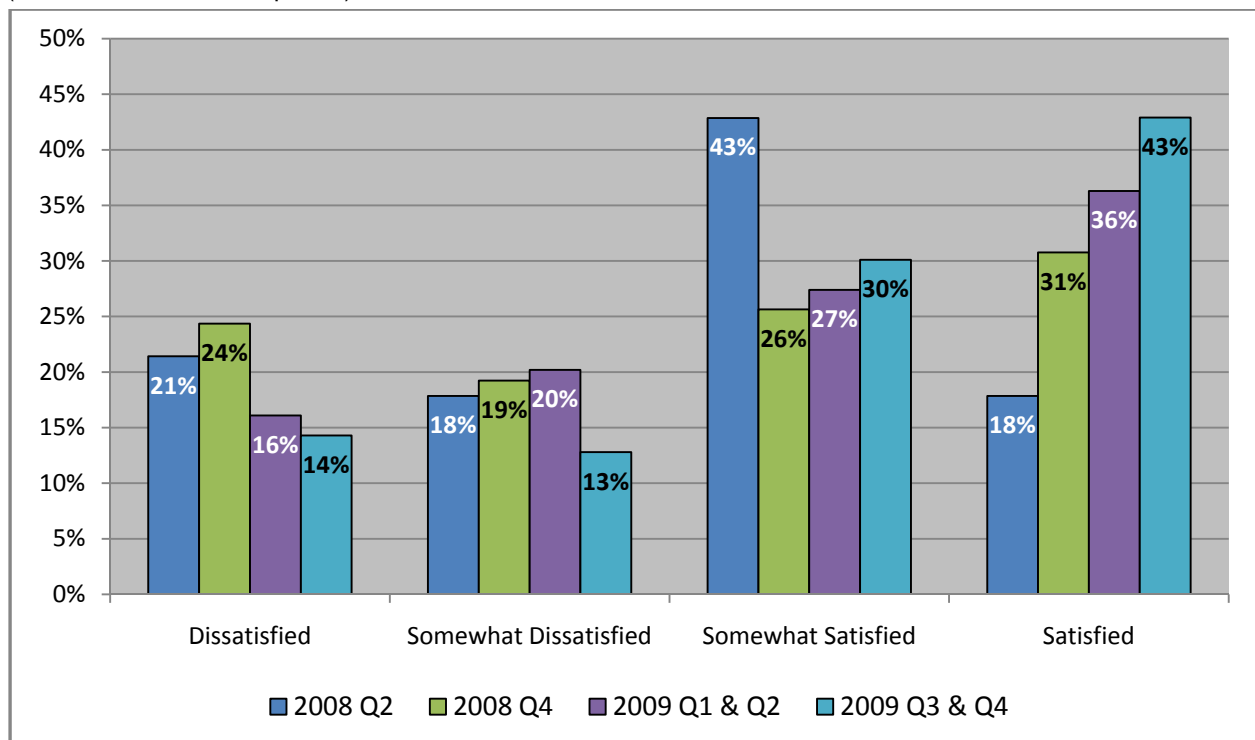
## TRANSPARENCY OF PROCESS AND TIMELINES

Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with the Permit Center’s emphasis on transparency of the process and timelines.

As figure 13 indicates, the percentage of respondents who reported that they were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* rose 10% in the last half of 2009 (73% vs. 63%). Slightly more than one quarter (27%) of respondents were *dissatisfied* or *somewhat dissatisfied* with the transparency of the Permit Center.

**Figure 13. Satisfaction with Transparency**

(N=133 for current time period)



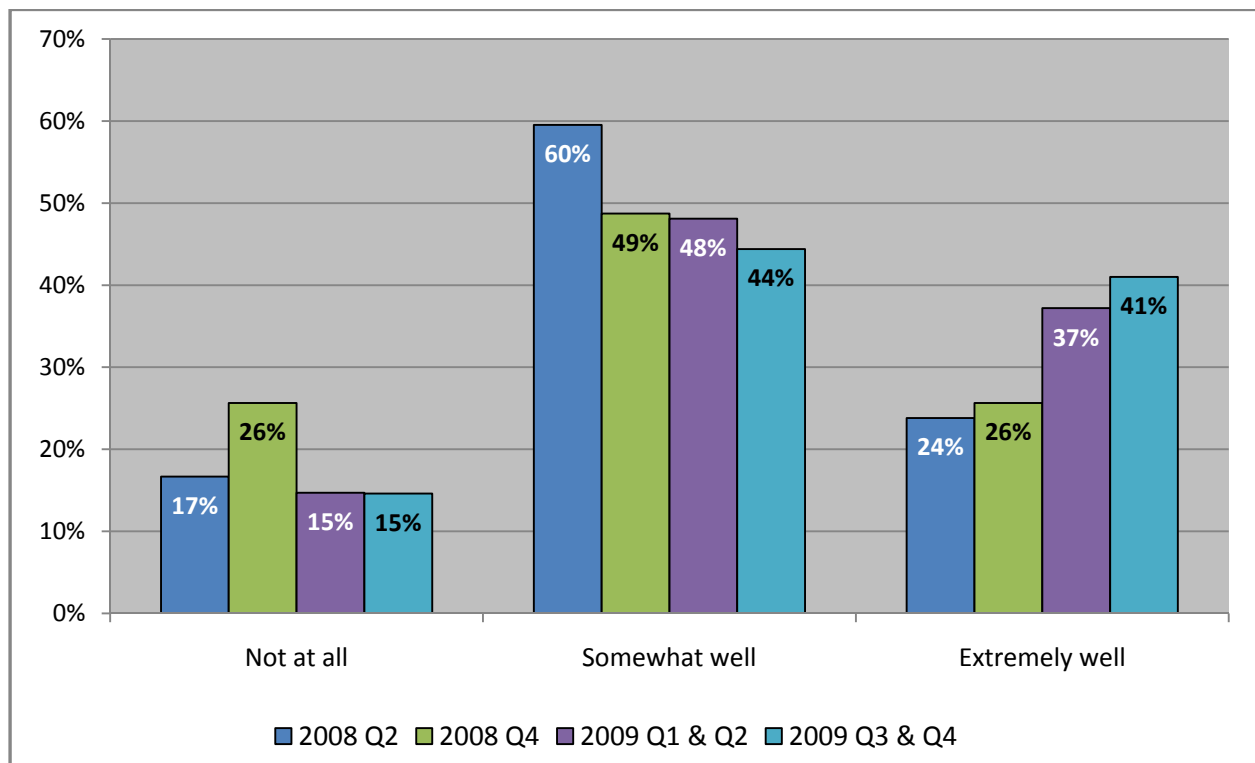
## COMMUNICATION ABOUT PERMIT REVIEWS

Customers were asked about how well they were kept informed by the Permit Center about any permit reviews that were needed and how long the review would take.

As figure 14 indicates, the majority of respondents (85%) were either *extremely* or *somewhat well* informed by the Permit Center staff. Those who reported not being informed at all stayed the same as the first half of 2009 at 15%.

**Figure 14. Communication about Delays**

(N=144 for current time period)





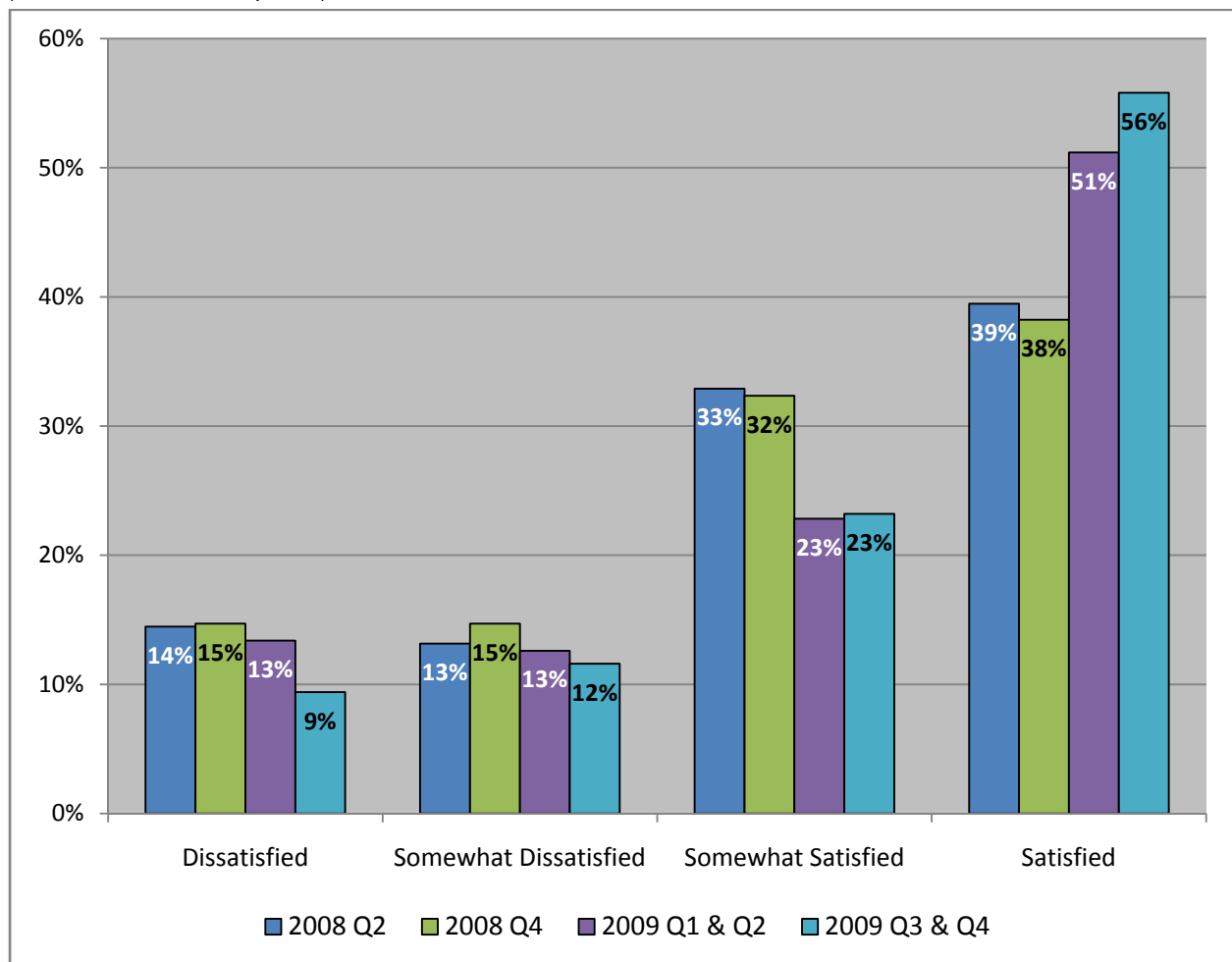
## COMPLETENESS OF APPLICATION REVIEW

Respondents were also asked about their satisfaction with how completely Permit Center staff reviewed their application before it was submitted.

As figure 15 indicates, the majority of respondents (79%) were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with the level of review completeness by Permit Center staff. Fewer (21% down from 26%) respondents were *dissatisfied* or *somewhat dissatisfied* with this process.

**Figure 15. Level of Completeness in Application Review**

(N=138 for current time period)



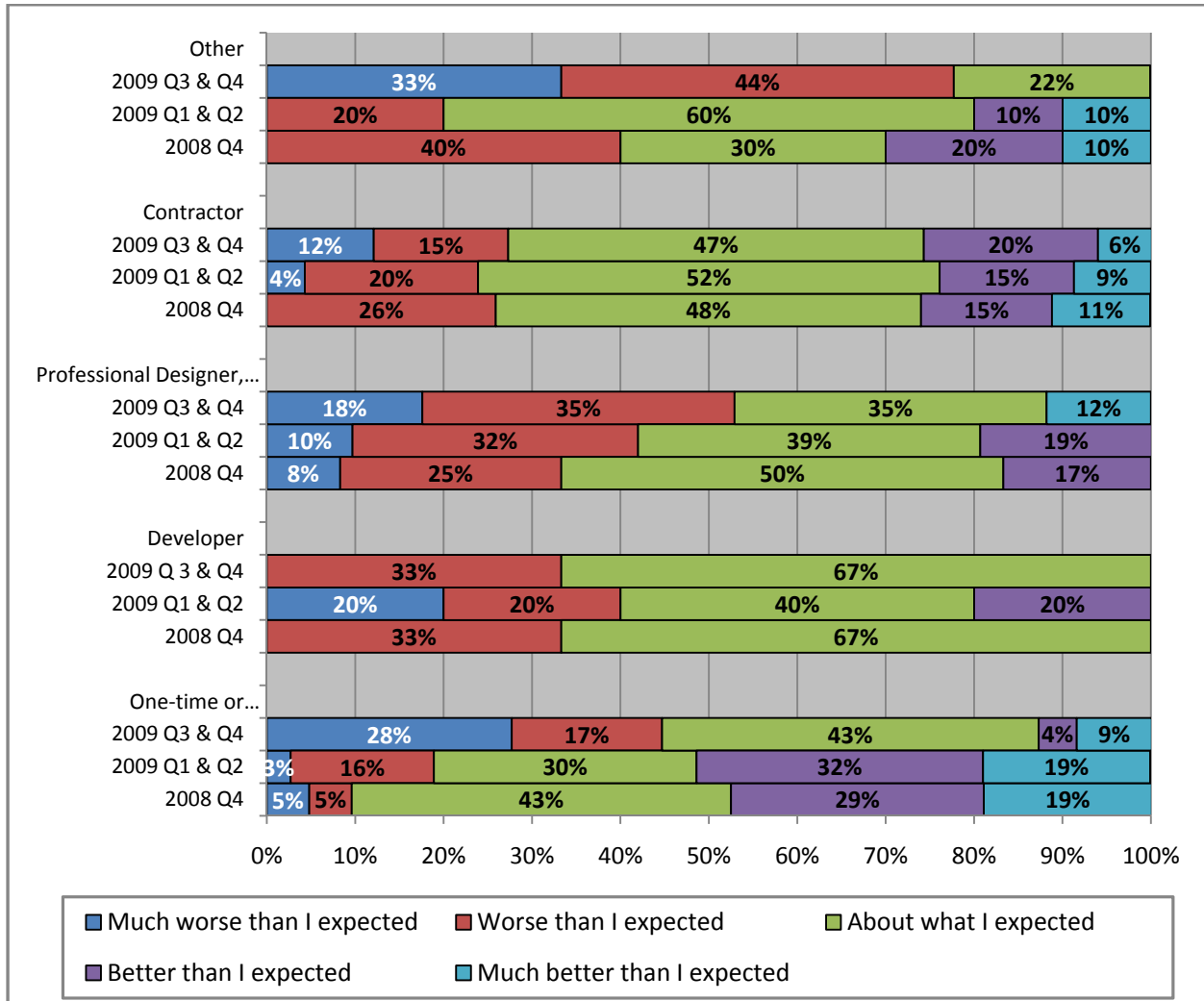
## CROSS TABULATION: USER TYPE AND OVERALL EXPERIENCE

By cross tabulating the data from Figure 1 and Figure 2, it is possible to match the customer type with the overall experience they had with the permit center.

As figure 16 indicates, one-time or infrequent users had the greatest decrease in the percentage of respondents selecting *better than I expected* or *much better than I expected* for the last half of 2009 (13% vs. 51%). Contractors reported the highest satisfaction with 26% rating the experience as *better than I expected* or *much better than I expected*.

Only developers showed a decrease in the percentage of respondents reporting that the experience was *much worse* or *worse* than they expected (33%, down from 40%). Seventy-seven percent of other users reported that the experience was *much worse* or *worse* than they expected.

**Figure 16. User Type and Overall Experience with the Permit Center**  
(N=145 for the current time period)



## CROSS TABULATION: USER TYPE AND SINGLE POINT OF CONTACT

By cross tabulating the data from Figure 1 and Figure 12, the customer type was matched with their response to the question, “How satisfied were you with the Permit Center’s new ‘single point of contact’ approach with your project manager?”

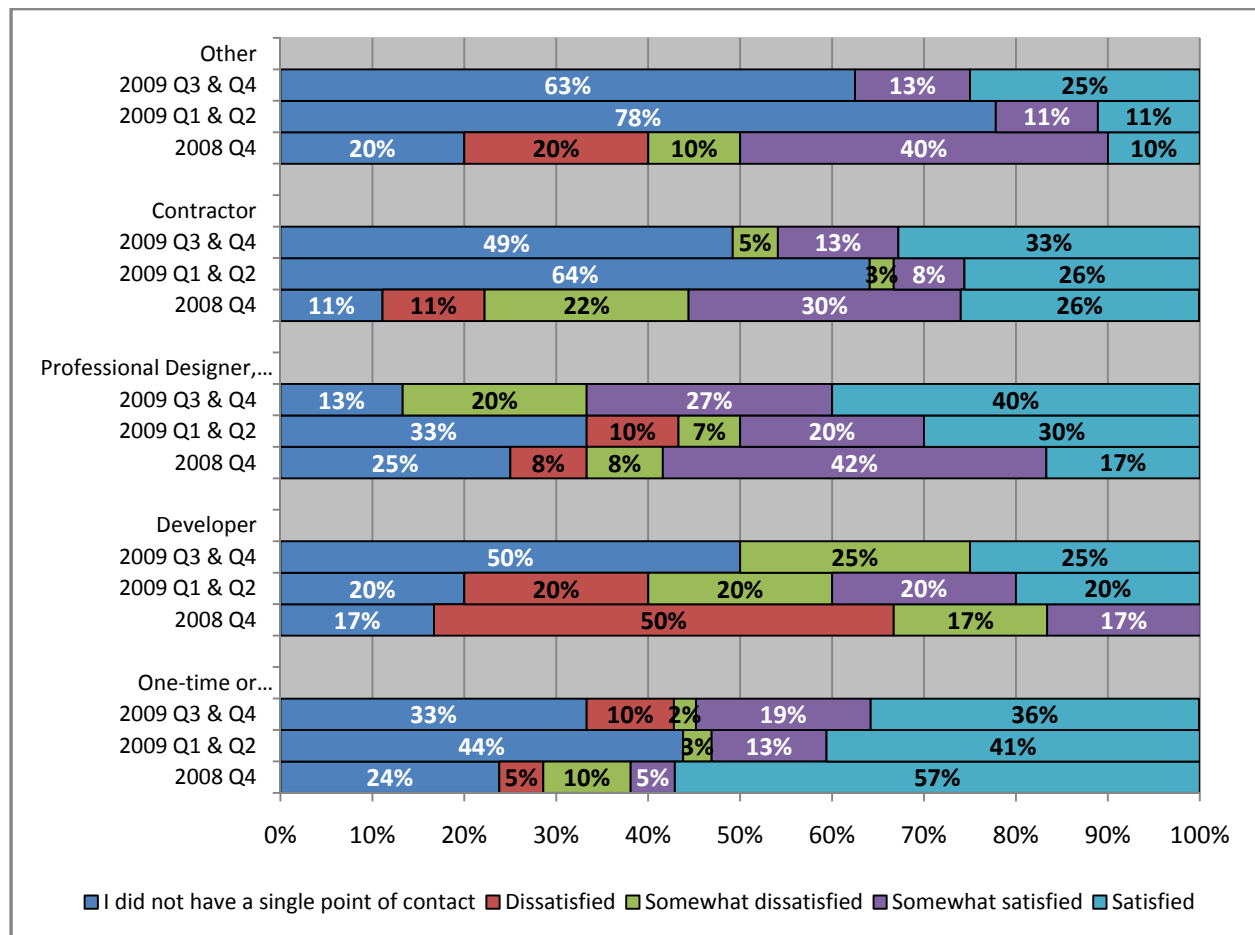
As figure 17 indicates, professional designers, architects and engineers have the highest satisfaction rate with the single point of contact (40% *satisfied*). Developers showed the greatest decrease in respondents who were *dissatisfied*, 0% down from 20%.

Awareness of the single point of contact amongst user types continues to be an area for improvement, although some improvements have been made. Contractors (49%), developers (50%) and other users (63%) show the highest rates of not being aware of a single point of contact.

When the single point of contact is removed from the data, one-time or infrequent users who reported that they were *satisfied* dropped to 54%, down from 72%. However, the percentage of other users who reported that they were *satisfied* rose to 66%, up from 50%.

**Figure 17. User Type and Single Point of Contact**

(N=130 for the current time period)



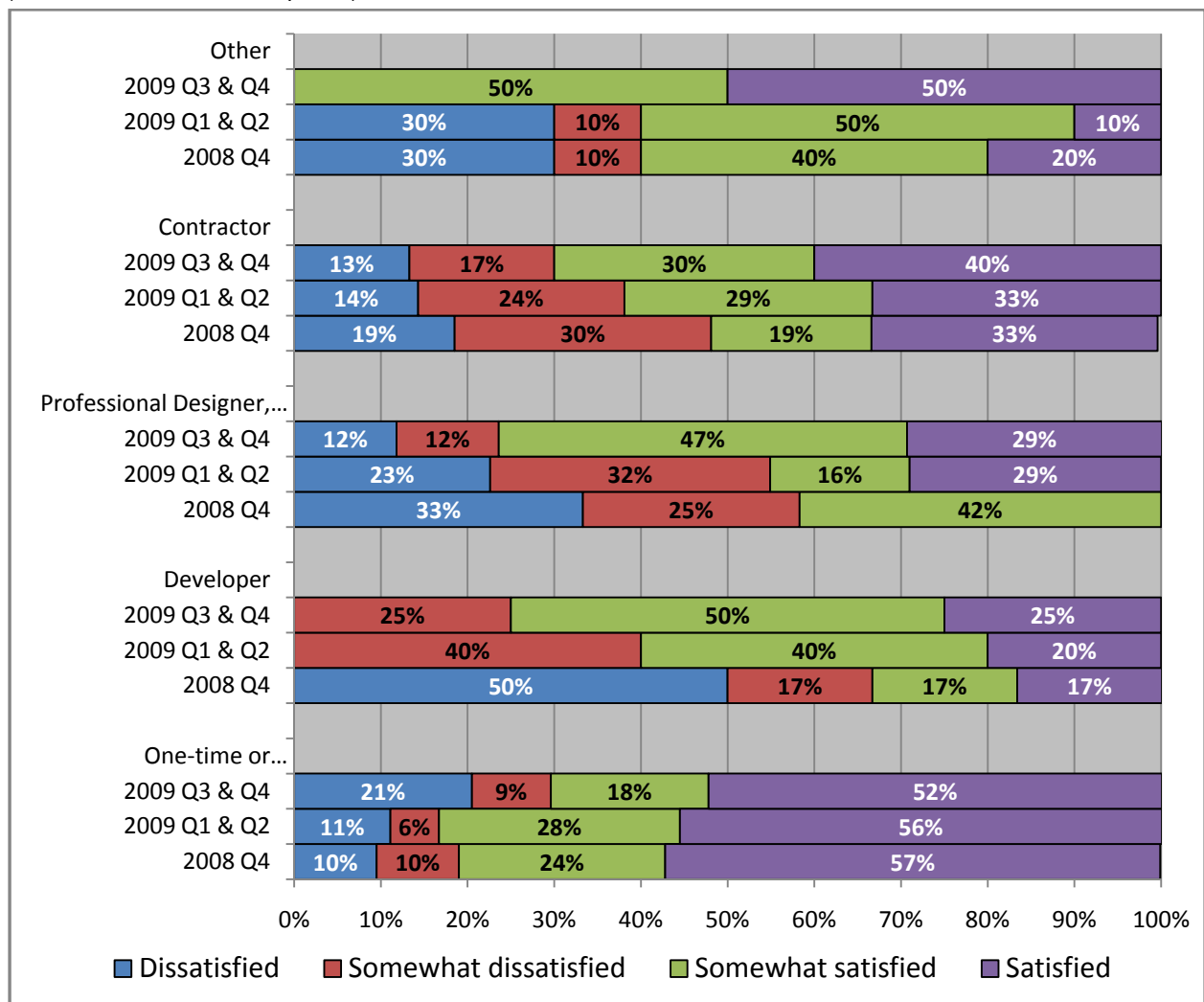
## CROSS TABULATION: USER TYPE AND TRANSPARENCY

By cross tabulating the data from Figure 1 and Figure 13, the customer type was matched with their response to the question, “How satisfied were you with the transparency of the Permit Center’s process and timelines?”

As figure 18 indicates, other users have the highest satisfaction rate with the transparency of the process and timelines with 100% reporting that they were *somewhat satisfied* or *satisfied*. Contractors and one-time or infrequent users reported the lowest satisfaction with 30% responding that they were either *somewhat dissatisfied* or *dissatisfied* with transparency.

**Figure 18. User Type and Transparency**

(N=133 for the current time period)



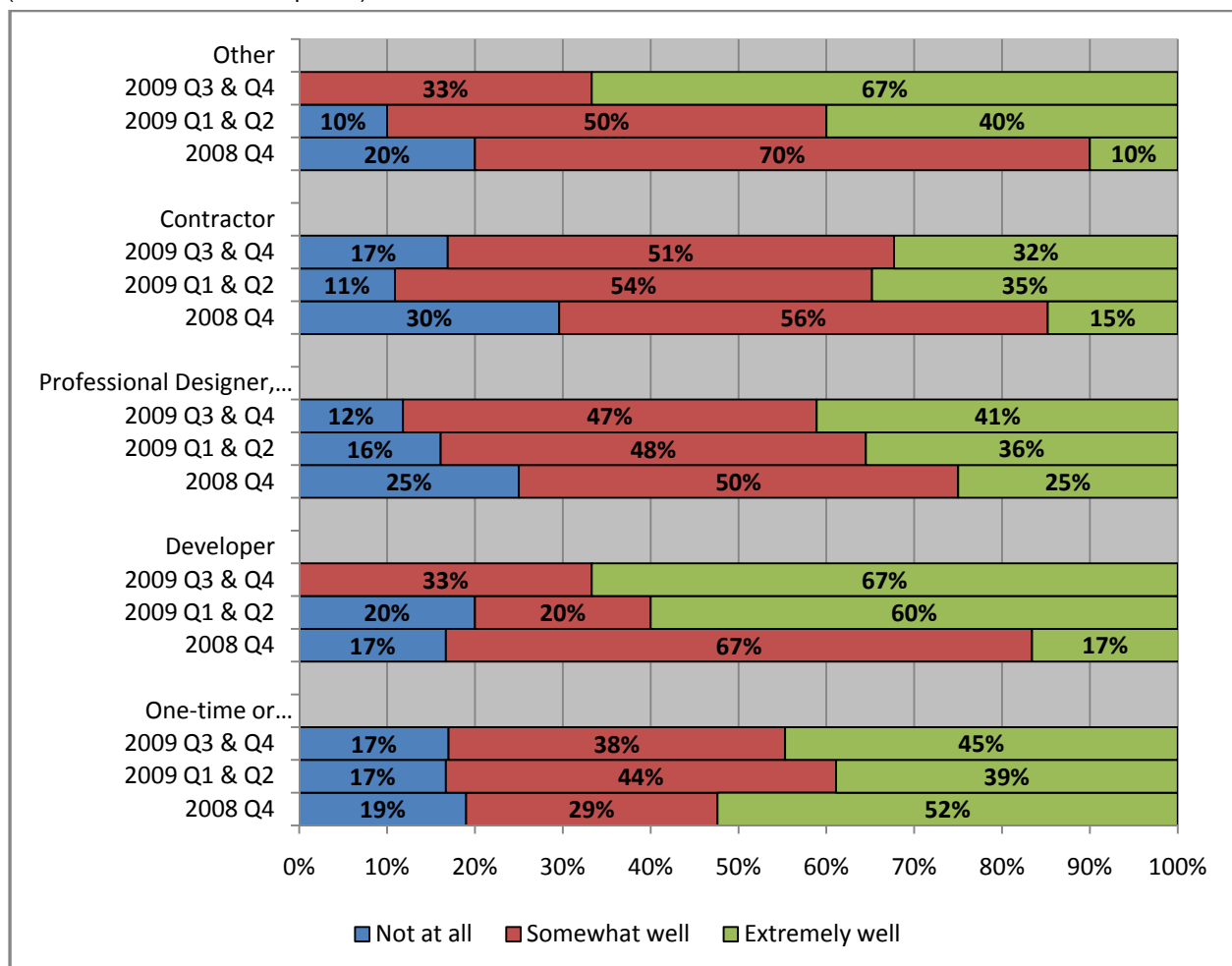
## CROSS TABULATION: USER TYPE AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT DELAYS

By cross tabulating the data from Figure 1 and Figure 14, the customer type was matched with their response to the question, “How well were you informed about what kind of permit review was needed for your application and how long it would take?”

As figure 19 indicates, developers and other users felt the most informed about which type of permit they needed and how long it would take with 67% reporting that they were *extremely well* informed. Contractors again had the lowest proportion of respondents who felt *extremely well* informed (32%) and are the only category of user to show an increase in the percentage reporting that they were *not at all* informed about delays (17%, up from 11%).

**Figure 19 User Type and Communication about Delays**

(N=144 for the current time period)



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As indicated by the survey results from the last two quarters of 2009, customer satisfaction with the City of Bellingham's Permit Center increased. Users continue to rate the professionalism of the departments that they work with highly. However, their satisfaction with inspectors has decreased slightly in the last two quarters of 2009.

Discussions regarding improvements should try to identify what processes, procedures, or personnel have changed that would lead to the decreasing ratings by customers. For instance, the satisfaction with the courtesy of staff decreased in all areas except for application processing. The greatest decreases in satisfaction were among other and one-time or infrequent users, which represent the second largest group of users (38%) following contractors (46%). Pre-construction and pre-application meetings continue to be rated highly by all users.

Contractors, who are the largest percentage of respondents, remain the most satisfied customers. This could be due to the fact that because they are frequent users they have more knowledge of the processes and policies of the Permit Center than other users. Awareness of the single point of contact remains low for most types of users. All users of the Permit Center, except for one-time or infrequent users, reported an increase in their satisfaction with the transparency of the Center.

The improvement efforts should focus first on the groups with notably decreased customer satisfaction. Customer comments in Appendix A could serve to guide these improvement efforts.

## APPENDIX A: VERBATIM CUSTOMER COMMENTS

### Question 13: If you participated in a pre-application meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective?

- All departments must be prepared. Public Works seems to be less prepared than others.
- Because I did not understand or know all the requirements...I have had many extra expenses and delays...Fire, Critical area info etc... Just because I am a beginner and inexperienced...I need more hand holding than a pro
- Did not have one
- did participate
- does not apply
- for me it was a good job.
- Give correct information... you know... that key information that the plans examiners are going to hold you to. It's very frustrating when 4 key people from the city all tell you different and opposing things and then the plans examiner tells you their version. It's a typical outcome in government though, the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing or saying or even why. When jobs are stalled, hindered, stopped and even prevented by government's meddling and intervention, it inevitably hurts workers and we are all begging for an answer to the question of if we really need to bog the system down with such inefficiencies! How many people avoid permits altogether because they already know what the likely outcome will be. People just really desire freedom even at the cost of incompliance? Maybe if the system wasn't so broken people would use it more frequently. How much revenue is lost due to the simple fact that the system could be much more efficient? Do we need to privatize the permit process to achieve this level of customer satisfaction? Most likely, Yes!
- Have the same person review the plans
- I actually attended a prepp last year and they didn't mention quite a few things that they should have.
- less restrictions, more productivity!
- No very knowledgeable staff
- none, it was very clear.
- Only one person seems to know the answers and all others defer to that person. Makes it useless to talk to anyone else, because (*identifying information removed*) makes the final call.
- Personnel were very knowledgeable, but process too complicated for most people to go thru
- Return all phone messages the same day
- Seems that only questions asked by applicant are answered. I would prefer a more in-depth analysis by staff prior to meeting. Public works needs to be clearer on stormwater and road improvements.
- The pre apps could be a good thing, the problem is after you respond to the comments letter, more questions are triggered. This would still be ok if it didn't just sit on someones desk for weeks at a time. Before you know it 2-3 months has passed before it can be submitted with out fear that after the review process finally starts it will be kicked back and have to start all over again. Then you wait again for the next architectural board to meet. OOPS someone forgot to get it on the next meeting. Oh well, we will just reschedule them for next month. That process is a joke, we almost lost our client because of that, they were ready to pull the plug and just forget trying to improve there building. They had enough of the whole thing. after all that, the permit was issued in just

over 30 days. Total duration for a simple remodel is questionable. Too answer your question of useful suggestions. Shorten the initial process by assigning someone to see it moves along quickly, this keeps people from thinking the building department doesn't work hard. I know they do, its the process.

- Treat people with respect and kindness. Most of the staff that I have worked with has been rude and condensending.

**Question 15: If you participated in a pre-construction meeting, do you have any suggestions to make these meetings more effective?**

- Did not have one
- did not participate
- It usually is fine.
- n/a
- same as above
- the construction process in Bellingham is too complicated for the average person or contractor.
- this was good

**Question 18: Please provide any additional comments you would like to share with us regarding your experiences with the City of Bellingham Permit Center**

- Customers should be able to pay for permits with credit cards. It is much more efficient for all. Charge credit card fees back to customers and provide the convenience!\_x000D\_2. We worked with an inspector that was so overwhelmed by his workload that he was consistently 2- 3 days late for inspections and usally showed up with a poor attitude towards his job. This is unacctable. City employees need to be educated as to who their "customers" are!
- A simple conceret block wall in the watershead. Total lack of communication and coordination between countless silly little inspections. I was the applicant that did it 100% right. You put a requirement on the Permit to sweep and flush the street and then shut me down for hosing down the sriveway. ABSOLUTELY STUPID. Your inspectors looked silly tryin to find any dirt in the runoff from the previously swept clean driveway. Lt me try it again--the driveway was swept spotlessly clean, You shut me down from then washing it with a hose. I followed your orders but they violated both your permit and the code. Your inspectors were totally out of line on a project I did perfectly. Ask them.
- Appreciate: working on sustainability w/ our comm., updates via list serve, over counter service Don't Appreciate: delinquent returning calls/emails.
- As an electrical contractor involved in a significant number of small remodel type jobs, I would request consideration of the Class B type permit process modeled by Washington L+I. I regularly charge my customers \$75.00 for very trivial inspections that under L+I would be a \$10.00 fee, with a one in three chance of a visit by an inspector. Many home owners today both work, and a special effort is needed for the inspection. The inspector comes, looks at something like the grounding on a switch, but since the wiring is fished in and hidden, quickly signs the paper and leaves--a significant cost, a frustrating time debit for working home owners, and an obviously trivial process that appears as primarily a tax revenue source. Actually, Bellingham's electtrical inspectors have been courteous, seasoned and efficient, but the full inspection process for very minor circuit modifications seems overblown



- As an infrequent user of your services I haven't had many experiences with the COB Permit Center, but they've all been good to very good. Thanks. I know it's not always an easy or simple job.
- Counter assistance was generally courteous and friendly. Subsequent application review and communication of results reflects decisions based on political agendas and ignorance rather than objective criteria. The City's usual dictatorial approach to dealing with citizens was not unexpected.
- Customer Service Desk seems understaffed.
- Depts work very well with each other\_x000D\_getting things done
- For one of our permits, depending on who greeted me at the counter, I found that the items required for the completion and submittal of our plans varied. My lesson learned was to ask for the same person for plans review and corrections for resubmital. In general most items worked very well. I did find it frustrating however when I was required to go through storm water review for a job that had several interior corrections and nothing more. A does not apply box would save your limited resources in a time of cutbacks.
- Front line staff is nice and friendly as could be.
- Generally not forthcoming with necessary information. The applicant needs to frequently prod City officials to move a project forward, however small it might be. Directions are not clear. Attitude displayed at the counter can be combative and smug.
- Having applied for several permits, both business and residential, We know firsthand that the city permit center is just another tax collecting agency. Some inspectors could care less if the job was really done right. 9 times out of 10, they don't even fully look at the job or peek into the spots they should to really do a proficient inspection. It's really all about the money and the government jobs that it creates. It's sad to say but that's the feeling and perception many of us living in Bellingham have so far. Recent lawsuits against the city and judgments that the city repay builders/developers for having overcharged for permit fees is quite frankly appalling, yet it's something that has been going on for at least 7 years. Impact fees, hook-up fees, park fees, school fees, storm water fees, traffic fees. I teach my children that NOTHING is FREE, not even the AIR we breathe. Thanks to you guys at the permit center for doing your part to make that a reality! The permit center is one more nail in the coffin of freedom. That's been our honest to God experience. Thanks for the chance to voice our honest opinions and share what our experiences have been.
- I am 3 months into a permit process to get a simple kitchen and bathroom remodel. I still don't have a permit. I still have not heard a response on my building permit application. The critical areas component of my process has actually moved faster and they are on separate tracks. Since demo has already occurred (they told me the permit would take 2 weeks) I cannot refinance my property and this has caused financial hardship and its such a simple project. Something needs to change down there big time. And I even believe in the process in general, its just totally ineffective, the staff does not even understand how it works. The idea (as stated on the permit center website that permits take 1-2 days for their target review) is laughable on its face.
- I am a single family residential owner and was attempting to obtain a permit to build a small extension for an existing deck off the back of my house. My house is near a rather steep slope and the project was to occur within 50 ft of this slope (geohazard buffer zone). After 3 months of delays, inconsistent interpretations of the BMC within the Planning Dept and the final decision that I would need to spend \$3000 for permits in order to build a \$1500 deck addition, I have abandoned the project. I am extremely dissatisfied with my interaction with the Planning and Permitting office.

- I asked a very simple question for a potential garage design... what is the definition of square footage. Pretty basic. It took four people, the IRC, Wa state bldg. code, a big binder of policy files (not available to the public), and 45 mins. to tell me that Planning/zoning and building dept. are in disagreement and at this time there is no answer because the two depts. disagree. I wish I had a video tape of it, quite unbelievable and sadly true.
- I felt some discuss with how my situation was handled dealing with the occupancy permit. Landlord should have been brought to code before he could use it not me!
- I have given up on my project as every step I have taken has been a struggle and requires another 1000 dollars here or there. The permit costs have quadrupled since my experience six years ago. It seems in these times it would behoove the department to encourage local business instead of driving away possible projects. Trying to infill is a joke - my piece has more than enough land - but because it has an existing garage in very good condition on the piece I wanted to divide, they want me to tear it down and put it in the landfill - what sense does this make. This was only one of the many quirks that makes one wonder about the reasonableness of the requests from this department. Requiring studies for every step of the process on a small piece puts the project out of reach.
- I indicated dissatisfaction in some instance, but I want to clarify: the reviewer we worked with was polite and professional -- we just had one very bad experience with someone who was almost laughably rude. I did not get her name but she appears to be the *identifying information removed*. Also, we were kept waiting about 45-60 minutes and were unable to get information about how long it would take (after having been told it would only take a few minutes). Thanks!
- I think the 20 day review period is needs to be revised. Smaller projects need to go through quicker.
- I think you are doing a great job. The process is well explained on line and my projects have been processed on time, and sometimes earlier than expected. Your permit techs respond to questions in a timely manner and are very polite and professional.
- I WAS VERY IMPRESSED WITH THE WILLINGNESS OF ALL WHO HELPED ME ANSWER ALL MY QUESTIONS EVEN WHEN I ASKED THEM MORE THAN ONCE FOR CLARITY.
- In my last meeting with Building and Code they were very helpful.
- inspectors were very helpful
- It is all so slow
- It is obvious to me that the recent layoffs have had a positive impact - people are afraid of being laid off so they try harder. But old dogs can't learn new tricks, and there is still the elements of a "Power Trip" on the part of some employees. Public Works and Stormwater are some of the worst - they contradict themselves, they are inconsistent, etc.
- It takes too long to get a project from rezone to completion.
- It was a stressless process, Thank You!
- L&I inspectors don't require contractors to wait on the jobsite for two hours for the inspectors to show up. They also perform the inspection themselves. It is very costly to pay somebody to drive out to the jobsite and wait for an inspector to arrive. It is also very expensive to buy a permit based on the cost of the job. A lighting retrofit permit through L& I cost \$63.00. The same permit through the city of Bellingham can cost over \$500.00. We try not to bid work in Bellingham for that reason. One more thing. A permit through L&I takes about 10 minutes to acquire. The same permit in Bellingham can take up to an

hour. This adds to the cost of the project and makes doing work in Bellingham very undesirable!

- *Identifiers removed* were all wonderful to work with and great reps for the COB. Kudos and appreciation to them!!!!
- My interactions with staff members in the permit center have been almost universally satisfying, pleasant and effective. I wish to give special recognition to *Identifiers removed* all of whom set a very high standard for courtesy, professionalism and customer oriented service. I do, however, have other concerns and observations to share and find that my typed comments exceed the limit for this text box. Therefore I will send my comments as a PDF attachment to Jennifer Hill c/o jenn.hill@wwu.edu in the hope that these can be included in the survey results. Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback.\_x000D\_
- My project manager was not well informed and twisted the rules to suit his interpretation which in the end where deemed incorrect. But the delay was costly and very upsetting. My overall experience was extremely poor.
- On the 20th day, additional info was requested(required). This info could have been provided over the counter (or over the phone for that matter) and the void of information could have been filled within minutes. But instead it was deemed necessary that drawings be modified and engineering be supplemented. This cost the customer(the TAXPAYER) additional dollars but more damaging was the additional 20 days we waited for the new info to be processed. \_x000D\_We applied in mid-July and didn't get approval until mid-September. It is a single family dwelling on an infill lot in an established neighborhood! \_x000D\_What is the point of having a review "for completeness" upon submittal of the application, if in fact the only people capable of determining "completeness" are the examiners themselves?
- One employee in the building dept. went above and beyond to get and inspector out to our project making it possible to finish\_x000D\_a week earlier than planned. It was a great benefit to us, and even though I don't remember her name, we are very grateful.
- Online permit submittal and payment would be great (saves paper). Not all contractors are located in Bellingham and having to drive up there to just to drop off or pick up plans can be quite cumbersome. Being able to mail plans and a check (or online payment) is ideal and would save resources, we are willing to pay extra fee's for the return mail to save a trip to the permit center.
- Our permit was a very small add on to promote energy efficiency. At no time was anyone able to say you need these permits and need to submit these materials. The requirements were never defined from the outset. And it seemed like a ton of information was requested without need.I am concerned that the complexity for getting this simple permit means the economic drain this process has upon our city is the key impediment to economic vitality.
- Over all the center is fine and does a good job. What is difficult to understand is the amount of time it takes to process some of the permits such as tenant improvement construction. This type of work is small and fast track. The public sector appears not to realize the importants of expiditing the permitting process for these projects and the subtrades involved especially the Fire Alarm and the Fire Suppresion systems.
- Overall, I was happy with the process although I thought it was rediculous to go through for a small business owner who is only a tenant. Furthermore, I was EXTREMELY UNHAPPY with my traffic impact fee of over \$3k for 3 person company that is in an office park and only has like 1 person stopping by a day. This is tantamount to robbery in my opinion. No matter how else everything else went, this ridiculous charge is what sticks in my mind.

- Planning is the single most difficult department to engage with. Different planners provide different direction on the same code based issue. Planners are not responsive to voice or email contact. Several planners are unprofessional. The single overriding concern I have with planning is the timing of review. Very few permits get reviewed and approved in a timely fashion> Some reviews, such as on Lot Line Adjustments and Short Plats, take an extremely long time to get completed. I think that managers need to do a better job of insuring planning staff is meeting deadlines and providing professional service.
- Planning needs staff reminder to do a better job to return phone calls every day. It is rare to have staff pick up a phone call when it is made. It seems as though with less workload phone calls could be answered.
- seemed to take way to long for review of an extremely simple project!
- Thank you for the recent changes in the Retro-Fit / Replacement Window rules. These changes make my work easier to complete.
- thanks so much for all you do for the city.
- The City of Bellingham is doing a great job of providing a fast, clear, and concise permitting process. Thank you.
- The city requires too much from the homeowner. Requiring engineering without using basic construction knowledge. Too many rules. Old house owners should not have to bear societies mistakes - such as with lead.
- The permitting process was very smooth, you have a great staff! All of the info. given was very clear and usable and I felt heard. The parking services portion felt a little rough - I would like to pay either a deposit on a parking hood and the balance when I'm done, or pay when I'm done. Instead I have to pay for a whole month (or other period) and be reimbursed for the un-used balance. I then have to wait for my refund and receipt and have to make the extra step to figure out what to bill my customer.
- the process of applying for a permit is slow, time consuming, and at times frustrating.
- The single most significant cause of my dissatisfaction with the Permit Center is the ambiguousness of Building Codes. As a result of the Building Codes being unclear, I have experienced different interpretations by different people at the Permit Center. It is very frustrating proceeding with something (and spending lots of money on it) based on information you are given at the Permit Center to find out that your Permit is not approved because that information was incorrect. None of this would have happened if one sentence in the building code was written differently.
- The technical staff (*identifier removed*) were very knowledgeable and professional, eager to help and to make sure I understood everything. However, I experienced a large measure of dissatisfaction with the service provided by the clerical staff at time of the issuance of my permit.
- The twenty day (business days) wait between responses is too long and is abused (staff always waits exactly 20 days). I think triage (get the easy permits out quickly) would work better and if there are only a few response questions to be answered and are answered in a timely manner - get the permit issued. I'm confused about the term "point of contact". If this means that one staff member helps your permit through the system then I've missed this in the last six permits I've put through. Please explain.
- Too much expected for a minor home improvement
- Transparency is the latest business buzz word. Kind of like resonate was a few years ago. What exactly does it mean as it relates to process and timelines? Do you mean they stayed on schedule?
- Two hours waiting for an inspector to show is insane.
- watershed concerns: city/inspector paranoia re: erosion control requirements

- We are an out-of-town contractor, and whenever we attempt to contact the permit center for any help, they are discourteous to the point of rude, and the opposite of helpful. This has also occurred several times in the process of completing the small works roster for the city.
- We find the staff that answers the phone to be extremely unhelpful, and at times, plain rude.
- We had a very quick response time and the permit service was helpful in working out any problems. I was pleasantly surprised at their service compared to other cities we work with.
- We were not told when we reviewed the inspection process with staff that we would need a separate electrical inspection. This would have been helpful to know in advance.
- Went in two times before submitting for permit to make sure everything that was needed would be included. Still ended up getting a correction notice from both planning and building services! Also the costs are way too high and the process too extensive for simple remodels which is what we specialize in. Hopefully it will be realized that making the process easier and keeping the costs down on remodel permits will bring in more revenue than the current process. I lose a lot of jobs to people who would rather go with someone who does not get permits because of the hassle and the expense. You are making it harder and harder on those of us who try to follow the rules!
- When I received the notes regarding my review process, it stated that my project did not comply with a specific WA building code. The notes listed the code number, but not what the actual code said. I had to look up the code online to determine what I needed to do. It would be nice to have the actual code and explanation with the code number.
- when scheduling inspections on line, the "inspection window notification" link doesn't work (I just checked it), and there is nothing explaining why the automated notification call back works sometimes and not others (should we be using area codes? dashes between numbers? extensions? Yes, No, Maybe?). Also I've experienced no-shows on the part of inspectors and no call or explanation, even though I always put my phone number in the "instructions" field.
- Why does a 7 day permit always take 4 to 6 weeks? Every time we submit for a simple project that should be issued in the 7 day time frame, staff find an item or two for a correction notice dated on the 7th day. By the time we submit written compliance documentation a week or two passes and then the 7 day clock starts again. Our general experience with the corrections requested is that they could have been addressed with a 2 minute phone call. The bulk of our projects are small remodels.
- You make the permit process painful for both contractors and home owners. Simple projects are just as complicated to get the permits for as difficult ones. Decks, sheds, fences, awnings should be a 1 day permit process. There are several ladies that work at the front counter that are rude and unpleasant to work with. They seem rushed and not willing to be patient. *Identifier removed* is another story. No contractor I have ever talked to has ever had a good experience with him. I certainly have not. *Identifier removed* is kind and easy to work with, and so is *identifier removed*. I am sure that there are others that are nice and kind, but ,most are impatient and rude. This comes from many of my customers as well.
- Your permit fee's are the highest by 400% that I have encountered and then you tax me on the profit I make. That's wrong! So I pay your price for a permit and then you expect me to be a commercial jobsite for the inspection. Your inspector is very capable and does not need a babysitter. Your office personel have been excellent to deal with and I wish to express my thanks for that. On-line permit application would be a major plus, ya know like everywhere else in the state.

## APPENDIX B: 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.

1. Which description best fits you as a user of City of Bellingham Permit Center during (current time period)?

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

2. How have your recent experiences with the Permit Center compared 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

3. Which description best fits your project(s) from (current time period)? (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.)

4. 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

5. 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 (current time period).

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

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

7. 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

8. 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

9. 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

10. 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 (current time period).

11. 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

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

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

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

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

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

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

16. 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

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

- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied

18. 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 C: FEEDBACK EMAILED TO THE CENTER FOR ECONOMIC VITALITY

October 21, 2009

My interactions with staff members in the permit center have been almost universally satisfying, pleasant and effective. I wish to give special recognition to *identifiers removed*, all of whom set a very high standard for courtesy, professionalism and customer oriented service. There are more senior or long-standing members of the department who could learn much from these outstanding people.

Although permit processing timelines are adequately published and explained, I still find at least one element of processing difficult to accept. After a 20-day review period for my residential application, I received notice of several findings that required additional detail. None were of a nature that affected the early phases of construction, and each could have been resolved long before the end of the project. Starting a second 20-day review period for these items and delaying the start of my project by a calendar month results in material costs me (and surely other project owners), including: an additional month of rent, working further into the wet season, and additional interest charges for borrowed funds. If plan amendments and revisions submitted by a project owner can be reviewed within seven days as published, I fail to see why revisions stipulated by a reviewer during the application process cannot also be reviewed in seven days.

One day after the review deadline for my permit application, I received a telephone call from a senior reviewer with a specific question about my plans. During this telephone call, we determined that he did indeed have the information he was calling to request, and had simply not read far enough into the packet we had submitted. Upon finding this and without pausing to review it, he stated that I would receive a call within a couple hours confirming that my permit was approved. I am delighted that my permit was approved, but this experience raises serious doubts about the true nature of the review process. If I was receiving a call to discuss missing information in my application on the day after the end of the published review period, and if the reviewer was capable of summarily stating that my permit would be approved immediately after seeing that a sheet of paper was not missing from the packet, I am left wondering just how comprehensive the review process really is and whether my application simply sat in an inbox until the last day of the review period. I have no way of answering these questions myself and the answers might be embarrassing for the permit center.

I respectfully submit that some kind of meaningful feedback mechanism is required to keep the review process customer oriented and timely. Specifically, I suggest a "late charge" mechanism that is triggered by delays in permit issuance that are caused by permit center processes or operations. For example, for every day of delay after a 20-day review period that is caused by the department, a permit application would be credited one hour of review time (currently \$107). Following this approach, the department has meaningful incentive to achieve published review deadlines and perhaps even incentive to invest an hour of staff overtime to save a day of delay. With consideration to my question above about why revisions stipulated by a reviewer should require an additional 20-day review period, I suggest that a 7-day review period should apply in these cases and that a meaningful incentive for timeliness (a permit fee credit or "late charge") be applied. Economic incentives in the form of late charges have a long track record of successfully motivating timely payments of property taxes and other consumer obligations, so a "late charge" seems like a promising incentive for a municipal department.

I am glad to have the opportunity to provide feedback from my experiences with the permit center and close by repeating my appreciation for the outstanding department members mentioned above. I'm confident that the department will continue to strive for higher levels of service and efficiency, and to enjoy increased trust and pride among Bellingham residents.