

Department of Building Inspection

DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING INSPECTION

SUMMARY

In 1995 the building inspection function was removed from the Department of Public Works (DPW) and became a separate department, the Department of Building Inspection (DBI). In its first two years it has concentrated on streamlining its functions to reduce the time for issuing construction permits. It has also revised its procedures for conducting inspections and permit review to better serve the public. The 1996-1997 San Francisco Civil Grand Jury's review of DBI leads us to conclude that DBI has made outstanding progress in these efforts.

The Civil Grand Jury focused on the construction permit approval process. In the past the Bureau of Building Inspection (BBI) had been criticized because of the time it took to issue construction or remodeling permits. We found that permit processing time has been substantially reduced. Currently, 75% of permits are issued the same day requested; another 15% take a week; 5% take a month; and 5% up to three months. The longer delays usually are the result of requirements for public hearings prior to approval. Some are delayed where several City departments must make inspections. This process will be streamlined in 1997 with the intent of cutting the time for multiple reviews in half.

In the past a permit applicant has had to deal with each department (inspection, planning, etc.) that had responsibility for reviewing various aspects of the construction proposal. (Appendix A shows each department with inspection responsibilities.) As a result of our discussions with DBI employees, a new procedure is being installed which will establish a single contact for all aspects of the application. A single coordinator for the permit process will significantly reduce the time required for approval where several departments are involved.

METHODS

The Grand Jury interviewed employees of various City departments and reviewed documents, including those listed in Appendix B.

BACKGROUND

In 1994, the City Charter was changed and the BBI was removed from the DPW and a new building inspection commission was created. The DBI became operational in 1995.

In October 1989 the Board of Supervisors' Budget Analyst presented an audit highly critical of the problems associated with the building permit process. The basic permit evaluation was backlogged with up to 3000 permit applications. It took 30 to 60 days for staff to even look at the applications and there was a poor inventory control system for tracking applications. At the mayor's request, the Mayor's Fiscal Advisory Committee (MFAC) conducted a study of the permit process. As a result, changes were made and the process was improved.

DBI reports to a seven-member commission, the Building Inspection Commission (BIC), which is the policy making and supervisory body mandated by the City Charter. The Commission is responsible for overseeing the effective, efficient, and fair enforcement of the City's building, housing, plumbing, electrical, and mechanical codes.

An organizational chart of DBI is attached as Appendix C.

In recent years several events have changed the emphasis of DBI and increased its workload.

As a result of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, new standards were established for unreinforced masonry buildings (UMB). Owners must be notified of potential hazards and must seismically upgrade UMB structures to meet the new standards. This has resulted in a review of over 2000 buildings, their assessment as to seismic risk and their eventual upgrading. Much remains to be done to bring old buildings up to current standards. In addition, the State has mandated a standardized emergency management system. Some 265 City inspectors, engineers, and architects have been trained in procedures for post-earthquake city evaluation of buildings.

Another event which increased DBI's workload was the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which required buildings to make "reasonable accommodations" for known physical or mental limitations of employees and customers. DBI is responsible for seeing that buildings are in compliance. An Access Appeals Commission, appointed by the BIC, is in place to hear appeals to be exempted from compliance where unreasonable hardship may result in meeting access requirements.

When complaints of lack of access are made DBI must take action to inspect the premises, require modifications, if necessary, and issue notices of violations where appropriate. DBI is addressing the problem of the backlog of complaints by instituting new review procedures and increasing the inspectors assigned to this area.

[Appendix D](#) shows the procedure for handling complaints.

Permit Application Review

Building permits are initiated through the DBI. Most permits are for residential remodeling and usually are processed at the time the person requests a permit or within one week. If a permit requires approval of the Planning, Fire, Water, or Health Department, processing will take longer.

New construction, demolition and reconstruction must be approved by the Planning Department and done in accordance with zoning district guidelines. Public hearings are required. The process takes at least 30 days for notice and review. Any demolition must be reviewed by the State Air and Water Quality board which has responsibility for the proper removal of hazardous waste, such as asbestos.

The City departments having responsibility for various aspects of construction and their duties are set out in [Appendix A](#).

Findings

- Approximately 50,000 permits are issued each year. Currently, 80% of residential permits and 50% of commercial permits are issued "over the counter" (same day). DBI's goal is to increase "over the counter" permitting to 85% for residential and 60% for commercial. This rate has improved appreciably since DBI was reorganized.
- If an application requires approval by other City departments it is referred to DBI for appropriate review. Building Inspection coordinates with the other departments but there has not been a formal procedure to track these permits.

- In the case of a demolition permit, the contractor must represent that it has contacted the State Air and Water Quality Board. Residential demolition permits are not issued until plans for the replacement structure are submitted and approved. However, reports from the State showing compliance with air and water quality requirements are not sent to the DBI.

Recommendations

1. Permitting

DBI should continue to work with other departments to implement its planned process for applicants to have a single contact to determine the status of permit requests. This "one-stop permit center" will allow the permit applicant to deal with one person until the permit is issued rather than the current process of dealing with four to five persons from various City reviewing agencies.

Similarly, DBI should pursue and implement the planned new process to have departments review an application simultaneously rather than passing an application from one department to the next. Under the old system, approval could take at least four months. Under the new system, approval time should be cut in half.

2. Demolitions

Where permits for building demolitions are made, DBI should require that approved reports from the State Air and Water Quality Board be filed with DBI before final approval of the demolition is given. This will insure that the state's requirements have been met.

REQUESTED RESPONSES

Mayor

Board of Supervisors

Department of Building Inspection

Building Inspection Commission

APPENDICES

A. Departmental Responsibilities

B. Information Reviewed

C. Department Directory

D. Complaint Process

APPENDIX A

Department of Building Inspection (DBI)

DBI is responsible for safeguarding life, limb, health, property, public welfare and public safety through the implementation and enforcement of building, housing, plumbing, electrical, mechanical, and disability access codes concerning the design and construction of buildings and structures within the City.

DBI has approximately 200 employees. Its annual budget is about \$20 million. About \$17 million is covered by charges for services and \$3 million for licenses and fines. Thus, it is a self-funding department.

Department of City Planning (DCP)

Through a plan review process, DCP is responsible for ensuring that all proposed construction, demolition, signs and uses are in conformance with the planning code and ensures that designs and environmental factors are in accordance with all applicable laws and policies.

Fire Department (SFFD)

SFFD is responsible for ensuring that all proposed construction and alteration projects relating to residential, assembly, hazardous, institutional occupancies and high rise buildings are in compliance with state laws and regulations. This includes the removal of petroleum underground storage tanks.

Department of Public Health (DPH)

DPH is responsible for ensuring that proposed food establishments, laundromats, and massage parlors are in compliance with the health code.

Department of Public Works (DPW)

DPW is responsible for ensuring that all proposed construction projects comply with the applicable street use and mapping regulations. Projects are reviewed for street and sidewalk use, curb cuts, infringement of sidewalks by signs and other items that may affect the appropriate use of streets and sidewalks.

APPENDIX B

BUILDING INSPECTION DEPARTMENT LIST OF INFORMATION REVIEWED

1. 1981 Review of Building Permit Process
2. October 1989 Budget Analyst Report to the Board of Supervisors
3. Organization Chart
4. 1995 Highlights -- 1996 Work Plan
5. 1996 Quarterly Newsletters
6. Planning Department Building Permit Application Packet
7. Meeting Agenda
8. Building Inspection Permit Brochures
9. Permit Processing Timetable
10. Monthly Internal Reports on Backlog
11. General Checklist for Contractors on Requirements
12. Management Information Systems

APPENDIX C

DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING INSPECTION

1660 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 (415) 558-6088

BUILDING INSPECTION COMMISSION (BIC)
6TH FLOOR 558-6164 Office
558-6225 Fax

Bobbie Sue Hood - President
Eileen Hansen - Vice President Roy Guinnane
Robert Davis Jaime Sanbonmatsu
Sigmund Frieman Armando Vasquez
Maria Gracia Banico, Secretary - 558-6164

DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING INSPECTION (DBI)
DIRECTOR'S OFFICE - 6TH FLOOR 558-6225 Fax

Frank Y. Chiu, Director - 558-6131
James Hutchinson, Deputy Director, Permit Services - 558-6142
William Wong, Deputy Director, Inspection Services - 558-6139
Patty Perez, Secretary - 558-6131

ACCESS APPEALS COMMISSION (AAC)
6TH FLOOR 558-6014 Office
558-6225 Fax

Walter Park, President
Enid Lim - Vice President
Rosilyn Baltimore
Terry Nancy Hogan
Linton Stables, III
Laurence Kornfield, Secretary

ABATEMENT APPEALS BOARD (AAB) - 558-6139 Office
William Wong, Department Representative - 558-6225 Fax

BOARD OF EXAMINERS (BOE) - 558-6135 Office
Wing Lau, Department Representative - 558-6041 Fax

BUILDING CODE ADVISORY COMMITTEE (BCAC) - 558-6004 Office
Alan Tokugawa, Department Representative 558-6208 Fax

UNREINFORCED MASONRY BUILDINGS APPEALS BOARD (UMB) - 558-6157 Office
Hanson Tom, Department Representative - 558-6041 Fax

ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES (ADM) - 3RD FLOOR
Paulette Hooey, Manager 558-6237 - Office 558-6207 - Fax
Provides support to the Department in the areas of personnel, payroll, fiscal management, purchasing, employee services, and related data collection.

BUILDING INSPECTION DIVISION (BID) - 3RD FLOOR
Joan MacQuarrie, Chief Bldg Inspector 558-6096 - Office 558-6261 - Fax
Inspects for compliance with Building Code requirements for building permits and responds to complaints on residential and commercial buildings.

CENTRAL PERMIT BUREAU (CPB) - 1ST/2ND FLOOR
Teresa Hansell, Manager 558-6070 - Office 558-6170 - Fax
Issues building, plumbing and electrical permits; collects fees for processing applications for DBI and other City agencies.

CODE ENFORCEMENT DIVISION (CED) - 3RD FLOOR

Rafael Torres-Gil, Sr Bldg Inspector 558-6454 - Office 558-6474 - Fax

Responsible for abatement of code violation cases referred from the Building, Plumbing, and Electrical divisions. Performs complete physical inspections of buildings and issues inspection reports of violations.

Revised 07/25/96

COMMERCIAL PLAN CHECK (CPC) - 2ND FLOOR

Wing Lau, Chief Building Inspector 558-6133 - Office 558-6041 - Fax

Screens, reviews, and approves commercial tenant improvement applications for compliance with Building, Mechanical, Energy codes and Disabled Access regulations.

CUSTOMER SERVICES DIVISION (CSD) - 1ST FLOOR

Peter Burns, Manager 558-6088 - Office 558-6401 - Fax

Answers general and code questions; gives permit status and information; processes Board of Permit Appeals requests.

DISABLED ACCESS DIVISION (DAD) - 6TH FLOOR

Carla Johnson, Acting Sr. Bldg. Insp. 558-6014 - Office 558-6225 - Fax

Responsible for the intake and resolution of all complaints filed by the public regarding disabled access citywide.

EARTHQUAKE PREPAREDNESS SECTION - 3RD FLOOR

Zan Turner, Coordinator 558-6104 - Office 558-6261 - Fax

Provides planning, training, and coordination of earthquake preparedness and other disasters.

ELECTRICAL INSPECTION DIVISION (EID) - 3RD FLOOR

Steven Young, Chief Electrical Insp. 558-6030 - Office 558-6178 - Fax

Provides public safety by enforcing municipal and State regulations and codes relative to construction, alteration, and installation of electrical equipment and systems.

HOUSING INSPECTION DIVISION (HIS) - 6TH FLOOR

Lesley Stansfield, Acting Manager 558-6220 - Office 558-6249 - Fax

Inspects for code compliance in residential housing under building permits or as a result of complaints and frequently inspects apartments and hotels.

MAJOR PROJECTS/UMB'S - 2ND FLOOR

Hanson Tom, Building Plans Engineer 558-6133 - Office 558-6041 - Fax

Reviews applications and plans for compliance with Building, Mechanical, Housing, Energy codes, and Disabled Access regulations.

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SYSTEMS (MIS) - 6TH FLOOR

James Albert, Manager 558-6227 - Office 558-6249 - Fax

Provides automated data capture, data management, and report dissemination throughout the Department.

PLUMBING INSPECTION DIVISION (PID) - 3RD FLOOR

Thomas Lehane, Chief Plumbing Insp. 558-6054 - Office 558-6178 - Fax
Provides public safety by enforcing municipal and State regulations and codes relative to construction, alteration, and installation of plumbing equipment and systems.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT (RMD) - 1ST/2ND FLOOR

Michael Rodman, Manager 558-6080 - Office 558-6402 - Fax
Management, processing, and updating of all microfilm services and residential records.

RESIDENTIAL PLAN CHECK (RPC) - 2ND FLOOR

Jeffrey Ma, Acting Manager 558-6133 - Office 558-6041 - Fax
Screens, reviews, and approves residential applications and plans for compliance with Building, Mechanical, Housing, Energy codes, and Disabled Access regulations.

SPECIAL PROGRAMS:

Boiler Inspections, 3rd Floor - Thomas Lehane, Chief Plumbing Inspector 558-6054

Building Permit Status, 1st Floor - 1-800-4SF-BLDG

Reroofing Inspection, 3rd Floor - Joan MacQuarrie, Chief Bldg Inspector 558-6096

OTHER CITY OFFICES:

Bureau of Street Use & Mapping, 1st Floor 558-6060

City Planning Department 5th Floor 558-6378

APPENDIX D

PROPOSED COMPLAINT PRIORITY FORMAT

COMPLAINT HANDLING PROCEDURES

Currently, the Department of Building Inspection handles all complaints in the same manner unless a hazardous condition exists, such as lack of heat. All complaints are received and documented whether complainants identify themselves or not. The validity of the complaint is determined by inspection. It is sometimes difficult to prioritize a complaint because of language problems. The following prioritized complaint chart is to be used as a guideline for inspectors.

| | |
|------------|---|
| PRIORITY 1 | INSPECTION MADE WITHIN 48 HOURS |
| A | Structural failure/collapse - fire damage. |
| B | Lack of heat. |
| C | Sewage leak/gas leak. |
| D | Exposed electrical wiring/hazardous wiring. |
| E | Major roof leaks. |
| F | Broken elevators. |
| G | Rodent/vermin/insect infestation. |
| H | Lack of sprinklers/smoke detector system/fire extinguisher. |
| I | No sanitary facilities in residential units. |
| PRIORITY 2 | INSPECTION WITHIN 5 DAYS |
| A | Inadequate sanitary facilities. |
| B | Work started without permit. |
| C | Lack of egress. |
| D | Room sizes smaller than code allows. |
| E | Lack of proper cooking facilities in R occupancy. |
| F | Lack of hot water. |
| G | Security i.e., door and locks not working properly. |
| H | Lack of disability access. |
| PRIORITY 3 | INSPECTION WITHIN 2 WEEKS |

| | |
|------------|--|
| A | Hazardous wiring (not enough outlets) |
| B | Lack of sprinklers in garbage rooms and chutes. |
| C | Lack of required electrical illumination. |
| D | Faulty weather protection. |
| E | Dampness of habitable rooms. |
| F | Lack of adequate garbage and rubbish storage and removal facilities. |
| G | General lack of maintenance (painting, floor covering, etc.) |
| PRIORITY 4 | INSPECTION UP TO 4 WEEKS OR AS TIME PERMITS |

| | |
|---|---|
| A | Peepholes. |
| B | Storage in R3 occupancy. |
| C | Construction noise. |
| D | Lack of natural light. |
| E | Non-habitable units. |
| F | Cracks in plaster. |
| G | Minor odors. |
| H | Energy conservation. |
| I | Illegal use (Planning Code)(not life threatening) |

PROPOSED COMPLAINT PROCESS
(See Attached Flow Chart)

1. Complaints are received by D.B.I. staff and are directed to appropriate division: Housing, Building, Electrical, Plumbing, and Disability Access.
2. Inspector makes inspection and verifies complaint. If complaint is not valid, clear case records. If complaint is valid, inform property owners/lessees on ways to make corrections, i.e., How to file permits and if plans are necessary with appropriate written instructions. Writes Notice of Violation (N.O.V.) On site, specifies maximum time allowed to make corrections per the prioritized violation chart.
3. Senior Inspector is informed of action and reviews N.O.V. Determines if emergency order is required.
 4. If 1st notice is complied with, then case is abated.
5. When time has elapsed and corrections have not been made, then Inspector issues 2nd notice.
6. Chief Inspector of Division is notified and reviews case. If unable to reach a solution, then sends the case to the Director of D.B.I. for a Hearing.
 7. If 2nd N.O.V. is complied with, then case is abated.
8. If B.I.D., P.I.D. and E.I.D. cases have not been resolved at Chief's level, then case is now referred to Code Enforcement Division. C.E.D. prepares case for Director's Hearing.
9. Director has hearing and issues order of abatement if required. Develops cost assessment statement and mails to owner with instructions of A.A.B. (Abatement Appeals Board) process.
10. If building is brought into compliance with Director's order, then case is abated. If not in compliance, then case is referred to full Commission for review or at request of property owner to A.A.B. Hearing.
11. A.A.B./Commission Hearing Appeal is heard and decision is rendered. If appeal is denied and owner still refuses to comply then case is sent to full Commission.
12. C.E.D. presents all facts and findings to full Commission for review.
13. Commission reviews all cases with orders of abatement and decides on next course of

action, i.e., City Attorney referral, lien process, collection agency etc.

14. City Attorney takes legal action.

FLOWCHART OF COMPLAINT PROCESS

