



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

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PLANNING COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

Date: July 14, 2026

Subject

Study session on Permit Streamlining and Simplification for Small Home Upgrades City Work Program item.

Recommended Action

Review the outreach survey findings, discuss ongoing permit streamlining efforts, and provide input on priorities and potential next steps.

Discussion

Background

On March 18, 2025, the City Council approved the FY 2025–2027 City Work Program (CWP) priority items. At that meeting, Permit Streamlining and Simplification for Small Home Upgrades was identified as a Council priority goal. The CWP goal is identified as follows: “Develop a suite of improvements to (1) improve access to, and (2) speed the processing of permits for small home upgrades to; enhance compliance and improve overall efficiency. Improve turnaround times. Set SLAs for staff and outsourced reviewers, customer service KPI’s, templates to reduce back and forth, and internal staff expertise to reduce consulting expenses.”

In FY 2025-26, Community Development Department (CDD) staff began work on this CWP goal by evaluating opportunities for permit streamlining. In February 2026, staff conducted a benchmarking survey—a tool used to collect and compare data on processes, performance metrics, and practices across peer jurisdictions—related to residential permits to twelve Chief Building Officials (CBOs) throughout Santa Clara County. The resulting benchmarking survey data is to help inform decision-making and assess how Cupertino compares with surrounding jurisdictions and is discussed later.

Analysis

Understanding the Current Building Permit Process

CDD utilizes Accela as its permit management system and ProjectDox for electronic plan review to facilitate coordinated, multi-departmental review of building permit

applications. Upon submittal, applications are logged into Accela and routed through ProjectDox, where plans and supporting documents are distributed concurrently to the appropriate reviewing departments and agencies, including Building, Planning, Fire, Public Works, and the Cupertino Sanitary District.

Each reviewing agency conducts its review within ProjectDox, providing comments and correction notices directly within the system. Applicants respond to and upload revised materials through ProjectDox, enabling iterative review cycles until all agency approvals are obtained. Accela serves as the central tracking system for application status, conditions of approval, collection of permit fees, and permit issuance, ensuring transparency and coordination throughout the review process.

Typical review timelines for initial and subsequent building permit submittals are available on the City’s website. The ProjectDox system includes features that support the tracking of performance metrics for both plan reviewers and applicants, allowing for internal management of the review process. Staff has the ability to generate reports on plan review statistics, including workload, overdue tasks, and average turnaround times.

Permit review key performance indicators (KPI) targets for initial submittals and resubmittals are also published on the City’s website.¹ KPIs measure how actual review times compare to adopted target timelines, typically evaluated through metrics such as average turnaround time and the percentage of reviews completed within established timeframes. While the Building Division uses these KPI tracking tools for internal management purposes.

Cupertino’s Building Permit Metrics Current Conditions

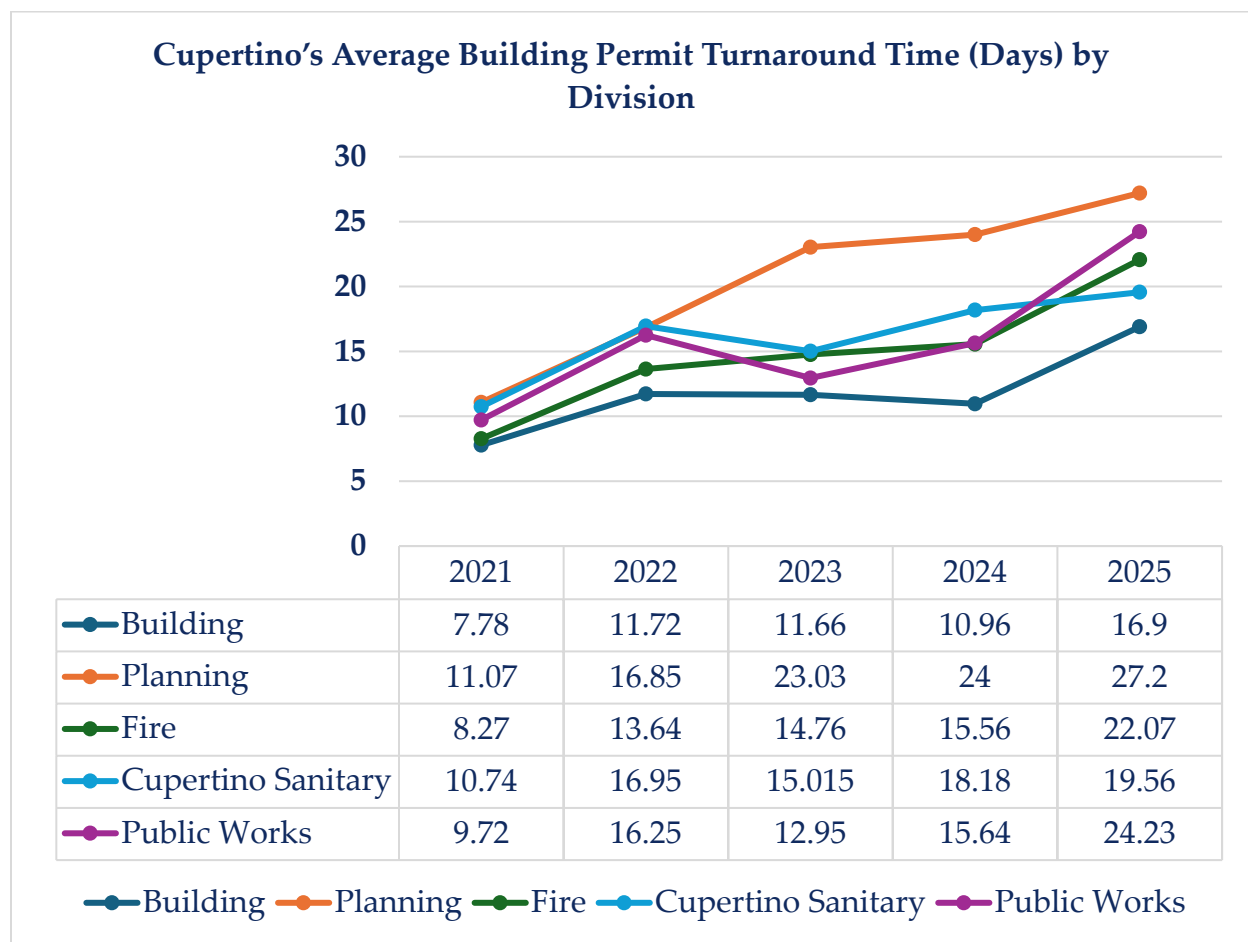
Reports from ProjectDox show that residential building permit applications increased by 48% between 2021 and 2025, reflecting sustained demand for home improvement projects. The chart below illustrates recent trends in residential permit volume and departmental review activity.

Year	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026 (Jan-May)
Res. Permits Received	1908	1941	2302	2324	2828	988

Average turnaround times, measured in days, are also provided for all (residential and commercial) building permit reviews below. Building permit review requires coordinated input from Building, Planning, Fire, Sanitary, and Public Works. These figures should be understood in context, as Cupertino Sanitary District and Santa Clara County Fire Department are contracted service providers. The Building Division also

¹ Permit Timeline KPI Targets, available under the “Permit Timelines” dropdown:
<https://www.cupertino.gov/Your-City/Departments/Community-Development/Building/Permits>

relies on two contract plan review consultants to maintain turnaround times during peak times of the year. The figure below combines average turnaround times by division, measured in days, reflecting the increase in residential building permits received.



Current Available Service Features

CDD currently provides a range of permit support services to assist applicants throughout the process. These include over-the-counter same-day plan review for eligible projects, as well as the option to schedule pre-submittal meetings to help identify issues early and reduce review cycles. Applicants can access detailed checklists and handouts for certain permit types on our website, along with permitting system guides to help navigate application submission. The department also offers electronic plan submittal and review, replacing traditional paper-based processes, and provides email notifications and online permit status tracking.

Additional support is available through walk-in counter services, and staff are responsive and accessible to answer questions and provide assistance. The department utilizes Zendesk, which is a customer service platform to manage the intake of plan submittals and inquiries. When an inquiry comes in, a ticket is automatically generated, assigned,

and monitored by staff, ensuring consistent follow-up, accountability, and records of interactions across the department.

Current Streamlining Efforts Underway

The City is actively advancing permitting streamlining efforts through technology and process improvements. These efforts include:

- a. Exploring AI-supported application prescreening and plan review in coordination with IT to help identify potential issues earlier in the process,
- b. Expanding staff training and the use of Microsoft Copilot to improve internal efficiency and consistency, and
- c. Developing clear, standardized plan review checklists for small residential remodel permits to simplify submittal requirements with the goal of reducing review cycles.
- d. The Building Division currently offers residential instant online permits for electrical panel upgrades, furnace replacements, reroofing, installation of electrical vehicle charging equipment, solar permits with use of SolarApp+, temporary power poles, siding replacements, water heater replacements, and whole house re-piping.
- e. Developing instant online permits for additional minor residential projects, such as, kitchen remodels, bathroom remodels, HVAC changeout permits, and heat pumps.
- f. Collaborating with IT on the updating of the current online permit portal to improve the use and functionality of the portal to expand the ability to submit all types of building permit applications.
- g. The IT Department is in the process of executing the capability to allow e-checks as an option for payment of permit fees.

Staff also continue to monitor and adjust to changes in State law, as new housing and permitting requirements directly impact local review timelines, application requirements, and the City's responsibility to streamline residential permit processing across divisions.

Other Considerations

Timely permit processing is also significantly dependent on the applicant, particularly the qualified design professionals retained for project development. The completeness, accuracy, and code compliance of submitted plans are directly tied to the expertise of the project design team. Retaining experienced and knowledgeable professionals is essential to minimizing review cycles and facilitating efficient approvals. While the City endeavors to provide clear guidance and coordinate effectively with applicants, it can only control its portion of the review process. Delays most frequently occur during the applicant's submittal and resubmittal phases.

Common causes of repeat plan check cycles include:

- a. Inadequate familiarity with applicable codes and local requirements
- b. Incomplete or inconsistent application materials
- c. Insufficient or non-responsive correction responses
- d. Limitations or usability challenges associated with permitting software systems

Benchmarking Methodology

As mentioned previously, a benchmarking survey was conducted with local jurisdictions focusing on the following information:

- a. Permitting Programs Used and Metric Reporting
- b. Turnaround Times - Expected vs. Actual
- c. Permit and Staffing Volumes
- d. Review Process and Business Support Features
- e. Response Times - Applicant and Staff
- f. Service Level Agreements (SLA) & Key Performance Indicators (KPI)
- g. Efficiency Factors

Survey responses were received from six of twelve Santa Clara County City Building Departments/Divisions, which have been included as Attachment 1. Cities were encouraged to provide candid responses in this analysis and have, accordingly, been assigned anonymous identifiers for presentation purposes. This benchmarking effort is designed to identify trends, best practices, and opportunities for improvement rather than to evaluate and rank specific cities.

Data Limitations Disclaimer

Some limitations may exist in the data. Definitions of a ‘small home remodel’ may vary among jurisdictions, and not all cities track permit activity using the same classifications. In some cases, jurisdictions were unable to separate permit volumes by specific permit types, while others maintain more detailed tracking systems. As a result, this data should be interpreted with caution. However, the survey data remains useful for identifying general trends and providing reasonable comparisons related to permit volumes, staffing, and turnaround times, which support the overall findings presented in this report.

Benchmarking Findings

A review of peer city survey responses indicates that:

- All jurisdictions, including Cupertino, provide detailed checklists and handouts for small home remodel permits.
- Only one city publicly reports KPIs.
- Permitting platforms vary across jurisdictions, though three cities use Accela.
- The average response times are generally consistent among all agencies.

- Notably, Cupertino is processing a higher volume of permits with fewer staff compared to peer cities.
- Across jurisdictions, the most common causes of repeat plan submittals include applicants' unfamiliarity with code requirements and incomplete applications.
- Five of seven cities (including Cupertino) have implemented transparency measures by making permitting turnaround metrics publicly available.
- While most cities experienced a decline in small home remodel (SHR) permit activity between FY23-24, Cupertino saw an increase in such activity.

Benchmarking with Peer Cities: Volume, Staffing & Review Times (FY24-25)				
City	Total SHR Permits	Total Full-Time Reviewers	Consultant Support	Avg. First Round Review (Days)
Cupertino	2144	2	Yes	19
City 2	60	2	No	21
City 3	3115	7	Yes	40
City 4	419	9	Yes	21
City 5	152	5	Yes	30
City 6	179	5	No	20
City 7	737	11	No	20

Ideas and Potential Next Steps

To further streamline permits for small residential projects, staff recommend targeted measures focused on improving submittal quality and refining internal processes. Because these projects are often prepared by homeowners and less experienced design teams, clear, standardized guidance—such as checklists and templates—should be prioritized to reduce incomplete applications. Staff should continue internal process improvements to streamline routine reviews, eliminate redundancies, and expand ministerial or over-the-counter approvals where feasible. Additionally, targeted clarification of commonly misunderstood residential requirements will improve consistency and reduce repeat corrections. Focused outreach, including homeowner and small contractor resources, can further improve applicant preparedness. Collectively, these actions address the primary sources of delay by improving initial submittals and reducing unnecessary review cycles without adding new administrative layers.

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Attachments:

1 – Local Permitting Outreach Survey