



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 6/11/2024

File #: 24-947

To: Board of Supervisors

From: Planning and Building Department

Agenda Section: Consent

Vote Requirement: Majority

SUBJECT:
Reduction of Walk-in-Service Hours for the Planning and Building Department

RECOMMENDATION(S):
That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Authorize the Planning and Building Department to reduce public counter hours to Monday through Thursday, from 8:30 am to 2 pm, and be closed on Fridays.

STRATEGIC PLAN:
This action supports the following areas of your Board's Strategic Plan.

Area of Focus: Workforce & Operational Excellence
Strategic Plan Category: 3001 - Support a well-trained workforce

DISCUSSION:
Executive Summary

The Board is being asked to allow the Planning and Building Department to limit the hours of counter availability to Monday through Thursday from 8:30 am to 2 pm and closing on Fridays. This allows staff with counter responsibilities to focus on processing permit applications and be responsive to the public via the telephone and email. This request comes in response to process changes that have been made and with the loss of a core staff counter team staff member. The amount of walk-in traffic has been decreasing, while communicating via phone and email has increased, and the department has started accepting applications electronically rather than at the counter. This change will reallocate staff time to provide increased levels of service by providing time to focus on processing applications.

Background.

The need and urgency for this change comes in response to staffing limitations. The department's front counter, phones and email activity is primarily staffed by permit technicians in addition to their other duties of initializing and processing permits. The department is actively choosing to reduce the work force through attrition. The department recently received a resignation from a permit technician who is moving to a higher paying job in another department. Another permit technician is on prolonged leave. Of the 6 permit technicians in the budget, the department will have 4 to start the fiscal year. It is important to develop a strategy to address the staffing limitations and continue quality customer service.

The department has traditionally been responsive to the public for over 40 hours a week, including during lunch hours. However,

with the availability of our online services, the demand for in-person services has decreased. The following table shows the average daily customers contacting the department by email, phone and at the counter:

CUSTOMER TRACKING			
Month	Email	Phone	Counter
Aug-23	56	65	31
Sep-23	56	38	30
Oct-23	56	47	26
Nov-23	66	44	25
Dec-23	51	32	22
Jan-24	62	31	19
Feb-24	56	38	22
Mar-24	55	42	28
Apr-24	64	41	25
May-24	61	34	28
Totals	58	41	26

These numbers are a daily average number of customer contacts for the months between August of 2023 and May of 2024. The average number of daily contacts during this period is 125. Most of these contacts are via email, and the second-highest by phone. Only 21% of the average daily contacts come at the front counter. The way people contact the county is changing. In decades past most all contacts were at the front counter, this paradigm has shifted. It would seem counterintuitive to improve customer service by limiting counter hours, but since most of the department's customer contacts do not occur at the counter refocusing staff attention to other work will serve to improve department performance.

By reducing the presence of counter staff, the department can allocate more time for staff to focus on incoming projects submitted online through the Accela portal. Managing the public-facing counter and working on online projects simultaneously has proven challenging due to erratic flow of customers at the counter. Dedicating staff time to these activities will allow staff to concentrate and reduce project turnaround time.

The department conducted a survey to see what other jurisdictions are doing, as Humboldt County could not be the only county experiencing budget limitations and changing customer engagement practices. The department contacted several jurisdictions within a 250-mile radius of Humboldt County. The results of this survey of both cities and counties are shown in Attachment 1. Of 26 cities that responded, 4 only engage with customers online, 2 only by appointment, 4 have limited daily hours, 10 are closed on Fridays, and 6 are closed during the lunch hour. The survey included 40 counties 11 of them are online only, 1 is by appointment only, 7 have limited hours 8 are closed on Fridays and 7 are closed during the lunch hours. Virtually all responding jurisdictions had some type of modified schedule.

The survey results do not show a clear pattern and do not show if jurisdictions are implementing more than one of the modified hour measures surveyed. In the Humboldt context the department understands the importance of providing in-person access so online-only is not viable. Requiring customers to schedule appointments would tend to discourage customer access and that is not the message. The department finds it important to be open during lunch for those who take their lunchtime to come talk to staff. Consolidating the hours of availability became the natural decision. The Board of Supervisors on June 3, 2024, authorized departments to close on Fridays with adequate notice. This request is to allow the counter hours to be reduced from 8:30 - 5:00 Monday through Friday to 8:30 to 2 M-Th. In staff's study of how many daily customers the department engaged, the numbers were not broken down by hour, but there is more traffic into the counter in the morning than in the later afternoon.

This change will be noticed with a press release, information at the counter and on the website, and notices to our regular customers. Staff proposes to begin on July 1, 2024.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

General fund and building permit fees from budget unit 1100262 cover the cost to fund the public-facing counter services.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

Employees will be paid regular salary with no impact on the budget.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

The Public Works Land Use Division shares counter services with the Planning and Building Department. The Public Works Land Use Division supports the request for new hours for the public-facing counter. However, the Public Works Land Use Division has expressed a desire to switch to appointment-only services due to the limited customer traffic received at this location. Currently, the Land Use Division is open Monday through Friday from 8 am to noon and from 1 pm to 5 pm. The division opens half an hour earlier than the Planning and Building Department and is closed during lunch hours. Combining the newly created hours for both departments would eliminate any conflicts, as the Planning and Building Department is the main point of contact for incoming customers for both divisions.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Board could choose to deny the request to reduce hours on Monday through Thursday and maintain the Friday closure with notice.

ATTACHMENTS:

1 - Customer and other jurisdictional tracking report

PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:

Meeting of: NA

File No.: NA