

County Administrative Office



# **Community Development & Infrastructure – Planning Division: Operational Assessment of the Building Permit Process**

**Baker Tilly, Consultant  
County Administrative Office  
March 25, 2025**

# Discussion Overview

- I. Study Session Purpose
- II. Introduction of Baker Tilly Consultant Team & Presentation of Organizational Assessment
  1. Engagement Overview and Context
  2. Interview Themes - Employees & Customers
  3. Employee Survey Results
  4. Stakeholder Advisory Group Themes & Insights
  5. Baker Tilly Observations & Recommendations
- III. CAO & CDI Staff Next Steps
  1. 30/60/90 Early Actions
  2. 12-18 month Work Plan Development

# Study Session Purpose and Objectives

- ❑ Come to shared understanding of root causes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement
- ❑ Review early actions to improve customer experience and process efficiency and value
- ❑ Discuss key elements to be developed in long term workplan to address findings and implement recommendations
- ❑ Understand BOS priorities and expectations moving forward

# BAKER TILLY PRESENTATION



# **Santa Cruz County**

## *Building Permit Process Review*

March 25, 2025

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# Engagement Overview

## Project Phases



## Snapshot of Stakeholder Engagement

**15** Employees and Supervisors Interviewed

**8** Development Community Members Interviewed

**2** Stakeholder Advisory Group Meetings Held (13 Attendees)

**89** Employee Survey Responses

**9** Additional Stakeholder Interviews Completed



# Building in California / Santa Cruz County

- Strict building codes and regulations in California at state and local levels make process more challenging than other states
- California codes designed to protect against environmental factors such as earthquakes and other forms of soils subsidence, forest fires, on-site sewer systems and coastal erosion and other coastal regulations, all of which are present in Santa Cruz County
  - The overall regulatory environment generally impacts length of time to obtain permits
- In many cases Santa Cruz County “developers” are in fact first-time builders who have purchased a lot and are building their own home



# Prior Improvement Efforts Completed since 2020

- Created digital archive for discretionary permits
- Created automated aging reports
- Rebuilt residential building permit fee estimator
- Improved processes for re-roof permits
- Updated discretionary permit routing matrix
- Completed Environmental Planning and Professional Engineering Group process mapping
- Developed SB 13 (ADU) application submittal, review and processing procedures
- Developed handout explaining building inspections
- Installed kiosk for viewing records
- Created temporary occupancy form and procedures



# Prior Improvement Efforts Completed since 2020

- Digitized school fee forms
- Developed new procedures for zoning clearances
- Streamlined the sanitary landfill receipt/verification program
- Updated the emergency response plan
- Developed online permit/ discretionary application submittal processes
- Updated lists of required information
- Implemented improvements to streamline solar permit processes
- Implemented online appointment scheduler
- Overhauled website



# Employee Interview Themes



# Employee Interview Themes by Subject Area

## Staffing and Service Delivery

- Current staffing levels relative to workload and turnover are a concern within the Department
- There are difficulties hiring qualified candidates
  - Inability to hire a Building Official has been detrimental to operations
- Current workload metrics do not provide insight on how long plan checks take for individual employees
- There are concerns about productivity of some employees
- The department lacks a well-defined training program structure
- A cultural divide exists among more- and less-tenured staff



# Employee Interview Themes by Subject Area

## Technology and Tools

- Improvements have been made to online services and information post-COVID, but more are needed
- Customers appreciate online options, but there will always be a need for in-person interactions
- There are difficulties using the e-plan system portal from both customer and employee perspectives
  - Bookmarking and layering
- Customer and employee training/resources on the use of e-plan portal are lengthy and difficult to follow
- The absence of integrations with other systems in use is frustrating
- The Camino tool is under-utilized; it can be used to better screen initial applications



# Customer Interview Themes



# Round 1 Customer Interview Themes

## What works well? What doesn't work well?

- There is an apparent cultural divide among more/less tenured staff members
- The consolidation of CDI is positive, but division silos remain
- The online portal is an improvement, but it is perceived to be a way to manipulate the Permit Streamlining Act 30-day completeness determination response requirement for discretionary permits
- Comments on plan sets lack specificity and require time-consuming follow-up
- There are too many rounds of review
- There is a sense that reviews are sequential, not parallel
- There is a sense of “moving goalposts”
- Feelings are mixed on the effectiveness of third-party plan checkers
- Additional staffing would help improve cycle times



# Round 1 Customer Interview Themes

## Suggested Improvements

- Create ombudsman position(s) to ensure one point of contact
- Improve pre-planning process
- A “one bite at the apple” approach is needed
- Increase the number of over-the-counter permits with discretion to issue with “conditions for final”
- Submit one set of plans rather than separate sets based on different agency requirements



# Round 2 Customer Interview Themes

## Fire Impacted and Other Stakeholders

- There is consensus that Environmental Health is most significant challenge
  - Septic system replacement is biggest issue to clear before a building permit can be considered
  - Close second is fire access requirements, followed by geologic hazard hurdles
- Stakeholders understand that rebuilding under the circumstances is complex and acknowledge early streamlining efforts
- However, process is not seen as collaborative or designed achieve best, positive results for impacted entities
  - Lingering “culture of no” persists



# Round 2 Customer Interview Themes

## Fire Impacted and Other Stakeholders

- There is an apparent cultural divide between longer- and short-tenured employees and an appreciation for newer leadership
  - However, process is disheartening, frustrating, and highly bureaucratic
- There is a perception of differing interpretations of code requirements depending on who you talk to (or when)
- There is a perception of a lack of empowerment for making decisions for fear of making the wrong decision



# Employee Survey Results



# Employee Survey Overview

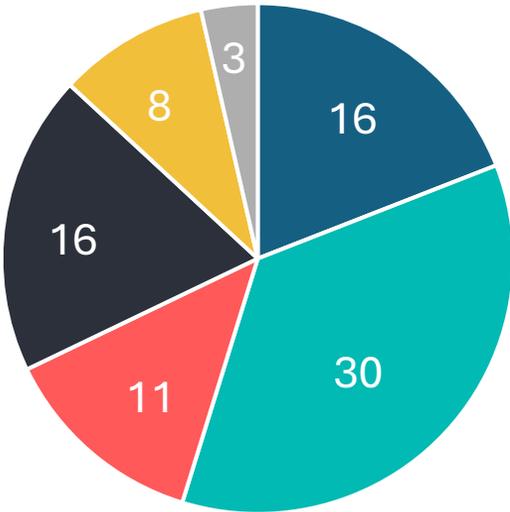
## Approach

- County employees have varying levels of responsibility in the building permit process.
- Respondents indicated whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree and were allowed to answer don't know/not applicable (NA).
- Demographic background for context included the respondents' tenure with the City, department, type of position, employment status, and workdays in the office or remote.

## Snapshot of Responses

**89** Responses

- Planning Department
- Unified Permit Center
- PW/Administrative Services Division
- PW/Special Services Division
- PW/Roads and Transportation Division
- Other



## Snapshot of Survey

**8** Categories

**43** Statements

1. Communication and collaboration
2. Policies and procedures
3. Service delivery
4. Customer service
5. Materials, tools, equipment and technology
6. Staffing and workload
7. Training
8. Areas of improvement

# Employee Survey Insights

## Disconnected Responses

### Communication and Collaboration

- Majority of respondents believe communication across divisions within department is good
- However, one-third of respondents disagree or strongly disagree that intradepartmental communication is good, with similar response rate for collaboration and coordination

### Policies and Procedures

- 80% of respondents indicated awareness of administrative policies and operational procedures pertaining to their jobs with nearly 70% indicating that division procedures are clear
- However, a majority of respondents indicated that they were unaware if division policies and procedures exist



# Employee Survey Insights

## Disconnected Responses

### Customer Service and Service Delivery

- 90% of respondents feel their division delivers high-quality services
- 92% of respondents believe their division provides good customer service
  
- However, most respondents indicated they were largely unaware if customer satisfaction is being measured



# Employee Survey Insights

## Disconnected Responses

### Customer Service and Service Delivery

- 75% of respondents feel customer needs are a top priority in their division

However,

- 65% are unaware if customers are given enough information at the start of their engagement with the building permit process
- More than 60% do not know how many rounds of plan check comments are provided prior to approval
- Nearly 60% do not know if building plan reviews are completed on time
- 40% disagree or do not know if information provided on the department website meets customer needs



# Employee Survey Insights

## Key Takeaways

- The disconnect about cross-division communication, collaboration and coordination that is occurring requires attention to determine where gaps exist.
- There is a need for written administrative policies and operational procedures at the division level.
- While it is commendable that staff take pride in delivering high-quality services, without customer satisfaction metrics results and outcomes are unknown.
- The lack of awareness of meeting customer expectations and needs in a timely fashion or whether building plan reviews are completed within established timeframes further indicates the need for performance metrics.
- The absence of clarity as to whether customers are provided enough information at the beginning of the application process suggests the need to enhance pre-submittal assistance.



# Employee Survey Insights

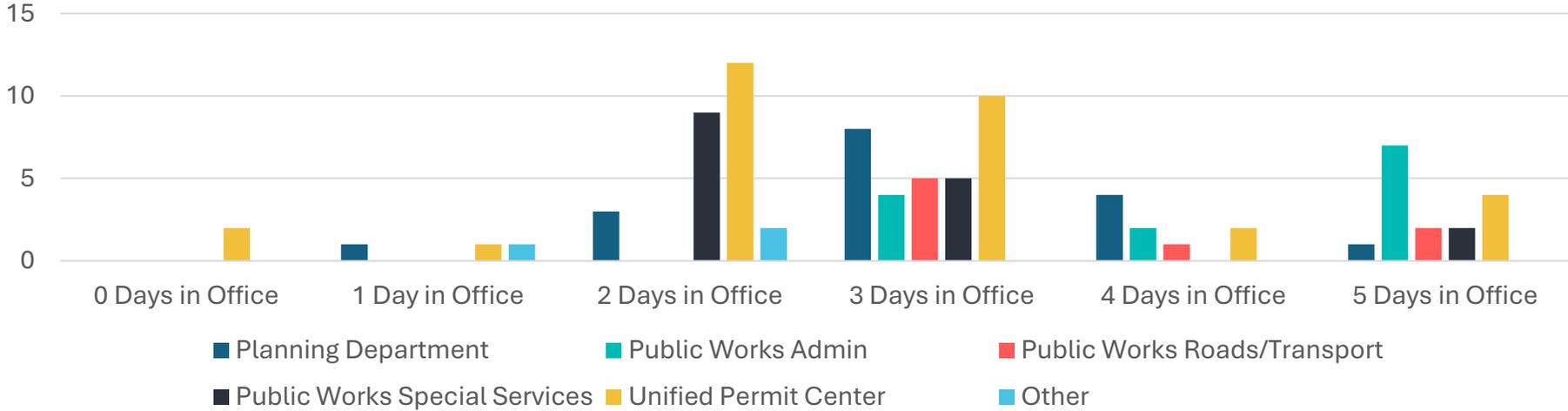
## Areas for Improvement (Top five highlighted in blue)

Answer Choices	Response
Adequate staffing levels, including support staff	39 (50%)
Better public information and guidelines for applicants	25 (32%)
A comprehensive application pre-screen process	25 (32%)
Better interdepartmental communication	25 (32%)
A comprehensive project tracking system across departments, divisions, and agencies	24 (31%)
Improved internal communication	29 (23%)
Offer more over the counter/administrative approvals (e.g., water heaters, decks, etc.)	27 (21%)
Better handouts and public information available on the website	26 (20%)
Comprehensive planning and building code updates to ensure applicability and clarity	17 (13%)
Improved customer service to the public	17 (13%)
Assign planners as project managers, empowered to move project review in a timely manner, and facilitate problem solving when project issues arise	15 (12%)
Improved communication with applicants	13 (10%)
Better division of assignments among team members	12 (9%)
A review process structure accountable to a problem-solving project manager	10 (8%)
Training on the use of performance measures and data reports	9 (7%)
Expand Bluebeam offerings	3 (2%)

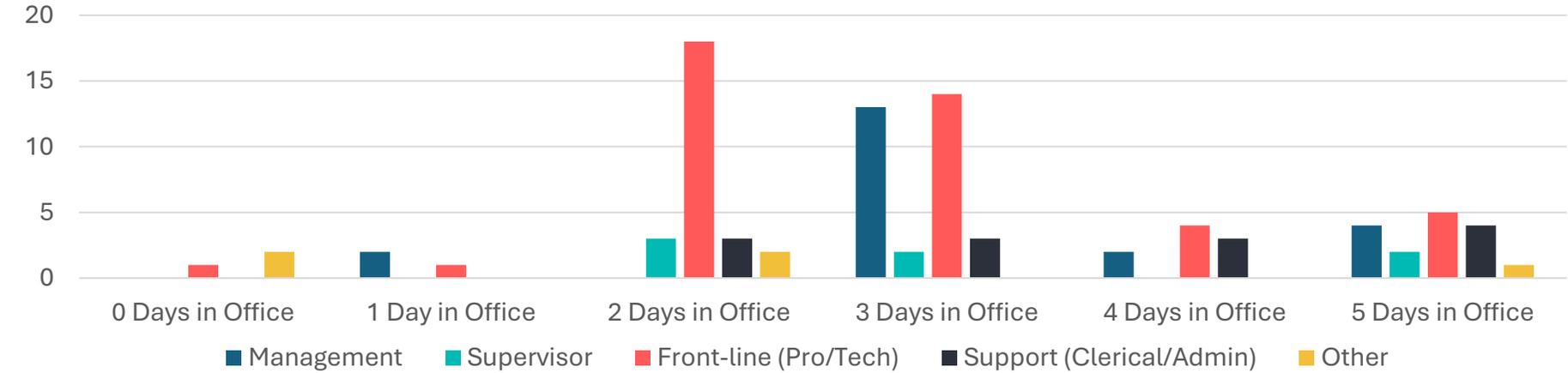


# In-Office Workdays

## Responses by Department/Division



## Responses by Position



## Responses by Days

Days in Office	Total Responses
0	3 (3%)
1	3 (3%)
2	26 (29%)
3	32 (36%)
4	9 (10%)
5	16 (18%)



# Stakeholder Advisory Group



# Stakeholder Advisory Group Themes

## Themes Communicated by Permit Applicants

- The County has a **good e-plan system** in comparison to other agencies
- **File formatting issues for online submittals** seem to be more prevalent in the County than in other jurisdictions
- Application forms are **confusing**, and better **instruction/assistance** by the County would be appreciated
- Applicants are sometimes **not sure** who their permit tech is
- Contact information seems to **disappear** from the County's website
- Email conversations are **not consistently occurring** or are **lacking in content**
- **Processing time** following initial email receipt of submittal is **not optimal**, but better than some jurisdictions



# Stakeholder Advisory Group Themes

## Themes Communicated by Permit Applicants

- Environmental Health is a **big roadblock** throughout all processes, resulting in lost time and money (projects with septic systems can take 2 years or more to break ground)
- There is a huge level of **variability** in review comments provided by plan checkers and third-party consultants
- Use of **third-party consultants** is **appreciated**
- **Different systems** are used for ministerial and discretionary permit processes
- Use of **third-party consultants** for plan checking **varies** based on turn times
- Permit **applications** are **assigned without regard** to individual workload/complexity of project



# Stakeholder Advisory Group Insights

## Suggested Improvements

- Maximize counter assistance/time/availability beyond the current appointment process, especially for first-timers
- Provide more specific comments for the first technical review
- Ensure the same permit tech receives a resubmittal
- For one-time users, there should be a stable of consultants to help with e-plan
- Update the checklist for environmental clearance for clarity
- Ensure the aging report is shared with applicants
- Use online chat functionality for improved communication



# Key Observations

- **A cultural divide exists** among more and less tenured staff, both in staff's perspective and the general public's perception.
- While process improvements have been made over the last several years, there is a sense among County leaders, elected officials, and the development community that a **legacy “Culture of No”** is rooted in planning and building processes.
- **Cultural change** can be achieved by **adopting a “Service Excellence Model,”** investing in training, workload management, communication, coordination, and implementing tools to measure progress.



# Key Observations

- **Geologic and other environmental factors (e.g., biotic) significantly complicate** residential and commercial construction in unincorporated Santa Cruz County.
- **Ancillary requirements and processes** (e.g., Environmental Health approval for septic systems, Fire regulations pertaining to access and other factors, etc.) to the building permit review process are also complex and impact the length of time to get permission to build.
- **Therefore, robust pre-application processes** for building permits would benefit all process stakeholders.



# Key Observations

- Policy updates are needed to **ensure clarity and consistency** in applying building code requirements.
- **Improvements** associated with **building permit applications** are **needed**, specifically in the thoroughness and clarity of comments and a reduction in the number of reviews per submittal for both the **intake** and **plan review** processes.
- **Opportunities exist** across the building permit cycle to introduce flexibility, facilitate cohesion and consistency, and increase discretion.

# Recommendations for Improvement

1. **Consult with County Counsel** on updating County regulations to enhance permitting efficiency and provide clarity on interpretation authority. (Implementation will establish a clear policy basis for making meaningful process improvement and will require code updates and/or training/instruction from County Counsel for clarity.)
2. Develop and implement a **customer service training program** and publicly report-out performance metrics (including customer satisfaction) and standards to drive a new era of service excellence by the County organization.



# Recommendations for Improvement

3. Develop and implement a **robust pre-application process** for building permits (including refining existing applications and submittal checklists, additional in-person assistance, pre-qualified referrals, how-to videos and user guides, providing pre-development site reviews, etc.) to assist all applicants, from large developers to homeowners and “do-it-yourselfers”.
4. Conduct **process mapping** to identify specific areas where bottlenecks and inefficiencies are occurring in the building permitting process and identify improvements and ask: What operational barriers impede our ability to provide an exceptional experience with the process?<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Unleashing Excellence by Dennis Snow



# Recommendations for Improvement

5. **Ensure administrative policies and operational procedures** pertaining to all aspects of building permitting (i.e., application and intake, plans distribution and review, building permit approval and issuance, inspection and closeout) are clear and documented and consistently applied.
6. **Enhance communication and coordination** within and outside of the Community Development and Infrastructure Department through quarterly meetings of an advisory committee comprised of CDI customers and staff (to **problem solve** and **innovate**), daily publishing “aging reports” for status of all building permit applications, establishing a standing bi-weekly or monthly communication (e.g., rotating banner on CDI webpage, newsletter, list serve, etc.) to convey new requirements, changes to applications, interpretations, and other pertinent news that affects building in the County, etc.
7. Further **refine the CDI website**, including web pages and quick links for the Unified Permit Center and Building Permits and Safety. Additional enhancements will make it easier for applicants to find information and access the services necessary for their projects.



# Recommendations for Improvement

- 8. Identify and pursue** opportunities to enhance collaboration across **important building permit-dependent services** and processes such as septic system approval, fire requirements and review, soils, geotechnical and biotic reporting, etc., including further consolidation of development related functions under CDI.
- 9. Pursue** (including training and staff support) **integrated technology solutions** (including AI-assisted plan review) with the functionality needed to effectively allow for coordination and communication by all involved in the building permit review process (i.e., customers, County staff, etc.). Doing so will improve transparency, customer experience and operational efficiency (e.g., reducing manual processes and the number of system solutions currently used).



# Recommendations for Improvement

- 10. Ensure initial plan reviews** thoroughly address all deficiencies to **facilitate a “one bite at the apple approach”** to minimize third routings.
- 11. Add two Building Permit Techs** (one of whom may function as an ombudsman) to increase efficiency (i.e., more timely plan review), enhance customer service (e.g., quickly resolving intake requirements or plan review issues) and facilitate innovate (i.e., improve processes, simplify/clarify applications, undertake training, etc.).

\*Additional staffing needs for plan review capacity can be assessed once improvements are implemented and progress measured.



# Recommendations for Improvement

12. **Ensure** that appropriate CDI management staff has and exercises **organizational authority** to review comments on *all* third routings for consistency with best practices for customer service excellence and conformance to the standards envisioned by state law.
13. **Develop** a detailed **action plan** to facilitate the implementation of recommended improvements for review by the County Administrative Officer.



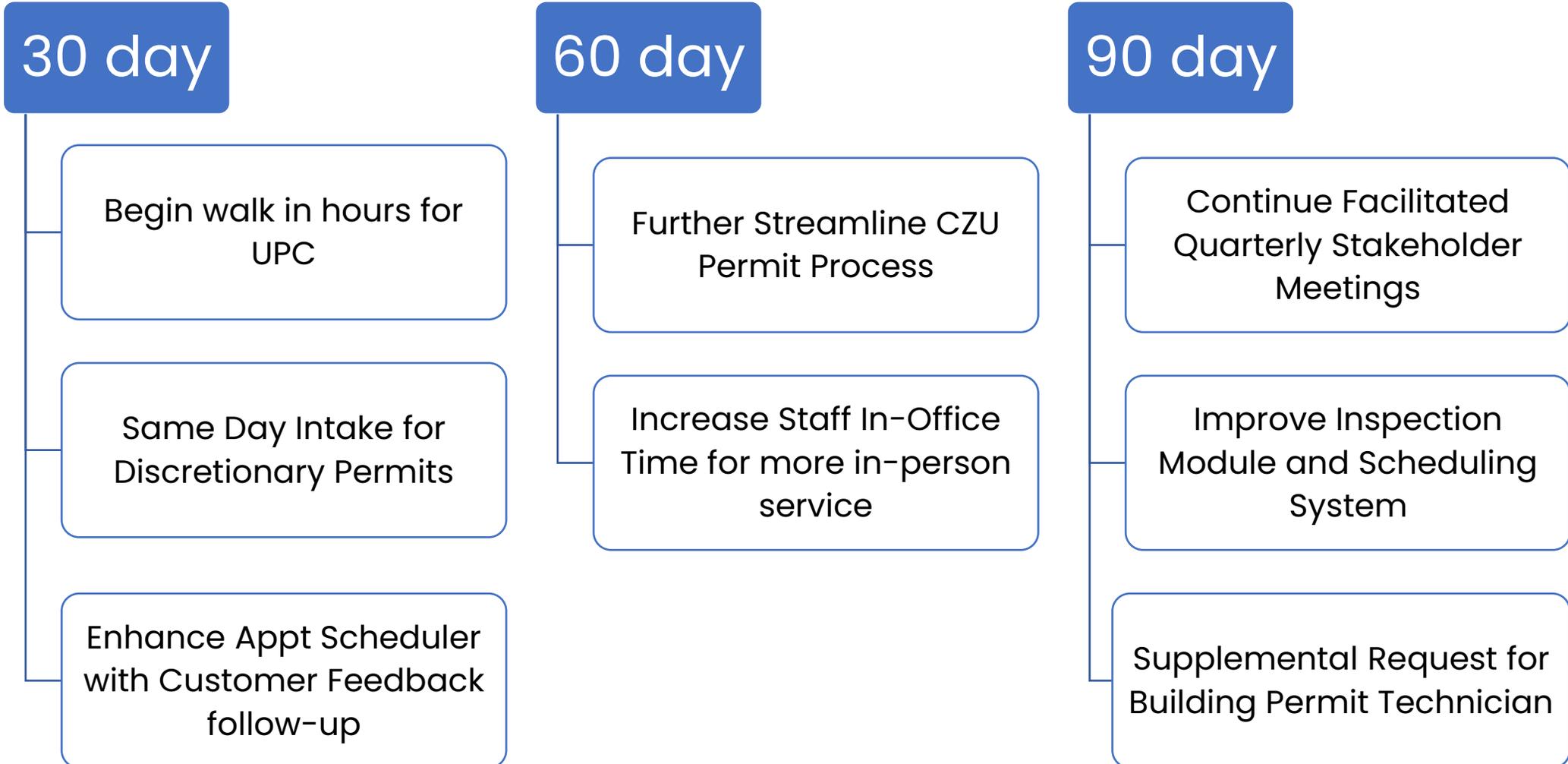
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**Thank you**

# Themes from Organizational Assessment County Response

- ❑ Organizational Culture
- ❑ Sources of Complexity
- ❑ Process Improvement &  
Documentation

# Early Actions 30/60/90 days



# Implementation Workplan Development

## Return to the Board end of June 2025

Develop **multi-year phased** implementation workplan to **identify projects, timelines, and recommended prioritization** to address:

- ❑ Process Improvement and Complexity:
  - County Code Modernization
  - Standardization of code interpretation as part of review process
  - Customer Feedback System & Customer Service Training
  - Tech/Process Integration project to integrate new tools (AI) for process improvement including pre application process
  
- ❑ Culture and Organizational Structure:
  - Consideration of Water and Septic related programs as part of UPC
  - Roles and authority of positions within Unified Permit Center
  - Improved coordination and communication across reviewing agencies
  
- ❑ Align current process improvement efforts to workplan to measure impact
  
- ❑ Workplan will be a collaborative effort of CAO, CDI/Planning, Baker Tilly



# Questions and Discussion

Thank You

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