

Land Use Services Department Operational Overview:

Executive Summary:

The Land Use Services Department faces critical challenges, with a substantial backlog and operational inefficiencies. This comprehensive review was initiated to assess and improve the department's overall effectiveness:

1. **Background and Motivation:** The review began in response to concerns about the department's ability to manage an increasing workload and the effectiveness of its leadership and management strategies.
2. **Workload and Backlog:** A substantial backlog of tasks, exacerbated by past staffing reductions, staff turnover, and the varied effects of the pandemic, has severely impacted the department's operational capacity.
3. **Employee Perspectives and Management Challenges:** Insights from staff interviews and surveys revealed issues with workload distribution, communication gaps, and leadership direction. These findings point to the need for improved management practices and strategic planning.
4. **Strategic Staffing and Resource Utilization:** The review emphasizes the importance of strategic resource management. Simply increasing staff numbers without a clear plan and measurable goals may not effectively address the department's needs.
5. **Focus on Prioritization and Efficiency:** The department must prioritize addressing its current challenges, focusing on backlog reduction and improving operational efficiency. Leadership is key in guiding this process and fostering a culture of proactive problem-solving.

This executive summary provides a context for the detailed findings and recommendations to guide the Land Use Services Department toward improved operational efficiency and strategic effectiveness.

Process:

The process for this analysis involved a comprehensive and multi-layered approach, starting with the County Administrator's initial inquiry into the matters that are described herein:

1. **Employee Interviews with County Administration:** The County Administrator, Corporation Counsel, and Human Resources Generalist conducted a series of initial staff inquiries intended to highlight or uncover concerns about the Land Use Services Department's staffing, efficiency, and overall effectiveness. These interviews covered the various sub-areas of the department, revealing issues such as workload imbalances, inefficient management practices, software implementation errors, and communication gaps. These interviews provided critical insights into the department's operational challenges and staff morale. This led to the engagement of my firm.
2. **Employee Survey:** An employee survey was designed by BoldPath Consulting using insights obtained from conversations with county administration and the department head. The survey was then confidentially administered with all employees participating.
 - The Land Use Services Department Employee Survey reveals varied perspectives and insights among staff members. Key themes include a mixed understanding of strategic priorities, concerns about staffing levels, and inconsistencies in communication effectiveness. While some staff members feel informed and supported, others highlight challenges like workload distribution, decision-making clarity, and departmental leadership. Responses indicate a need for enhanced communication, better workload management, more transparent decision-making processes, and strengthened

leadership. These insights are vital in addressing the department's challenges and improving its operational effectiveness.

3. **Employee Interviews with Consultant:** Following the survey, onsite employee interviews were conducted with the consultant, allowing for an expansion of the information gained from the survey. The interviews mirrored much of what was ascertained by the County's management team interviews, and the findings from both laid the foundation for the remaining work.
4. **Follow-Up Meetings & Correspondence:** Besides the interviews, we have conducted virtual, in-person, and telephonic meetings with the appropriate county personnel. Additionally, I have received scores of pages of documents regarding the issues at hand, including many historical documents.

Findings:

1. **Certificates of Compliance:** The County's ordinance defines a Certificate of Compliance as *"An official written document ... which certifies that the use or structure complies with all applicable provisions of this Ordinance and the ... permit issued for that use or structure."* Simply put, the department has found itself in a troubling predicament regarding its ability to manage its workload.
 - Based on data from the past 11 years, the department issues roughly 625 zoning permits annually (minimum of 455 and maximum of 747).
 - Eventually, nearly all of those projects will require a final inspection to certify compliance.
 - The department averages about 190 certificates of compliance annually over the same 11-year span, but that number has tapered off significantly over the last four years.
 - Based on the most recent estimates provided by the department, between 5,000 and 6,000 certificates of compliance still need to be completed.
 - At the current staff levels and "average" levels of productivity, there is no hope for catching up; the department simply issues more permits than it can realistically close out with certificates of compliance.
 - While it's acknowledged that some certificates of compliance will always be outstanding due to project timelines extending across calendar years, this is expected to stabilize after the initial years. The department's continuous issuance of new permits should align with the closure of prior years' projects, creating a balanced cycle of ongoing permit finalization.
 - Proactive measures are essential in reversing the growing trend of this backlog to ensure departmental efficiency and compliance with regulations.
2. **Enforcement of Alleged Violations:** Similarly, the pursuit, investigation, and follow-up related to known violations and complaints is also troubling.
 - The best estimate provided by the department is that roughly 400 known violations and complaints are still awaiting investigation.
 - Furthermore, when the department begins chipping away at the compliance inspection backlog, it is to be expected that they will inevitably find many more violations.
 - Not only will this further burden the Land Use Services Department, but it will also impact the Corporation Counsel's Office with an inundation of work.
 - There will also be a number of practical and legal decisions that will need to be made, especially with those violations/certificates that have been on the books longer.

- Implementing a systematic approach to manage the expected increase in violation cases will be crucial to maintaining departmental integrity and responsiveness.
3. **Software Implementation Challenges:** The transition to the Muncity system in 2021, replacing the AS400 and associated software, was an urgent and critical step for the department. While initial implementation challenges were expected, the ongoing issues extend beyond typical teething problems of a new system.
- Notably, the application of Muncity to the sanitarian function and the management of historical data have been significant hurdles.
 - It's important to note that these continuing challenges are partly due to the complex nature of historical data, scanning needs, and other data-management issues.
 - Furthermore, it's become apparent via interviews that there has been a lack of ownership of the implementation process, suggesting that more proactive engagement might have mitigated some of these issues.
 - Therefore, while software issues were a part of the problem, they should not be seen as the sole cause of operational inefficiencies.
4. **Data Reporting & Transparency:** The Land Use Services Department has faced significant data reporting and transparency issues. This lack of clarity has severely limited the County's understanding of the department's challenges and the urgency required to address them. This has impeded well-informed decision-making in areas such as staffing, resource allocation, and strategic planning, crucial for the department's improvement.
- There are also concerns regarding the tracking and reporting of performance and progress, which have become less transparent over the years. Previously, data was regularly reported in annual reports, but this practice has ceased, leading to difficulty obtaining accurate and consistent information.
 - When information has been requested in the past, responses have often been inconsistent, inaccurate, and vague. This inconsistency in responses hampers the ability to assess and address the department's operational challenges accurately.
 - Enhanced data reporting would enable better strategic decisions, facilitating more effective management of departmental challenges.
5. **Cross-Training:** The 2017 merger of departments aimed to foster cross-trained employees across front office and field staff, particularly in Zoning and Sanitary roles. However, the expected benefits of cross-training have not materialized fully.
- While the immediate efficacy of cross-trained field staff remains debatable, the original intent of the 2017 merger was to move in this direction.
 - Factors such as departmental turnover and the impact of the pandemic have hindered progress in this area.
 - This shortfall in cross-training indicates possible gaps in commitment and effective strategy execution.
 - Successful cross-training could result in a more versatile and adaptable workforce capable of addressing diverse departmental needs effectively.
6. **Future Turnover:** The imminent possibility of significant turnover, with at least five near-future retirements in an eleven-person department, presents a critical strategic threat.
- This scenario could lead to the loss of over 150 years of collective service, knowledge, and experience.

- Such a rapid departure of seasoned staff poses a serious risk to the department's continuity and program efficacy.
- Implementing a robust succession planning strategy is vital to mitigate the risks associated with this potential loss of expertise and to ensure departmental continuity.

Recommendations:

Addressing the significant workload and backlog in the Land Use Services Department is the primary focus of these recommendations. A strategic plan with specific, measurable objectives is crucial to tackle this challenge. This plan, once developed, should encompass clear goals for backlog reduction and require regular progress updates to ensure transparency and accountability. Its approval by the County Administrator and Resource Planning Committee is essential before any staffing expansion or departmental strategy changes. The following recommendations are designed to systematically address these issues, fostering a department capable of effectively meeting current and future challenges.

The following are the recommendations:

1. **Staffing:** The department must strategically expand its team to address current workload challenges and prepare for future changes. The proposed addition of two Zoning Administrators (ZAs) should include:
 - Both new hires are expected to have or develop expertise in Private Onsite Wastewater Treatment Systems (POWTS), with one primarily focusing on zoning backlogs initially.
 - The plan is to eventually cross-train all field staff, including existing and new ZAs, in line with the broader objective of creating a versatile, multi-skilled team for overall departmental agility and responsiveness.
 - This staffing expansion aims to bolster the department's capacity to manage current workloads effectively and ensure continuity and adaptability in the face of future staffing changes.
 - Encourage existing staff to embrace expanded or new roles/duties, fostering a collaborative and innovative approach to workload management.
 - Reassessing the Senior Zoning Administrator's supervisory duties to clarify leadership roles and efficiently utilize the department head's available time for strategic departmental management.
2. **Certificates of Compliance (CoC):** Thoughtful and innovative strategies are needed to streamline and expedite the process of issuing certificates, focusing on a more dynamic and responsive approach to the current backlog. Given the enormity of the problem, the department must review and consider all of its options open-mindedly.
 - Create a tiered system for prioritizing CoCs, utilizing innovative solutions like aerial photography.
 - Streamline CoC processes, focusing on efficiency to manage and reduce the backlog effectively.
3. **Enforcement:** There also needs to be a focus on refining enforcement procedures, ensuring that they are effective and adaptable to the evolving nature of zoning and compliance issues.
 - Establish a systematic approach for prioritizing and managing violations, focusing on urgent and significant cases.
 - Ensure close collaboration with legal counsel for compliant and effective handling of complex cases.
4. **Software:** With the software development/adaptation challenges out of the way, the focus must shift to fully implementing and utilizing the software.

- Rigorously addressing the application challenges of the Muncipity system, particularly its integration with the sanitarian function.
 - Implementing a comprehensive review and optimization process to ensure the software effectively meets the specific operational needs of the department.
 - Establishing a clear protocol for managing and updating historical data to prevent future complications.
 - Encouraging proactive engagement and ownership of the software implementation process to foster smoother transitions and more effective problem-solving.
5. **Data Reporting:** The importance of reliable and robust data practices in fostering a culture of transparency and accountability cannot be understated and is pivotal for informed decision-making and strategic planning.
- Improve data reporting for better transparency and informed decision-making. Ensure consistent and innovative tracking and reporting of departmental progress.
 - Develop a set of metrics and data that can be tracked and reported to key decision-makers.
6. **Cross-Training:** The emphasis must be on cultivating a multifaceted team equipped with diverse skills to meet the department's diverse challenges and fostering a more collaborative and agile work environment.
- Reinvigorate cross-training initiatives to develop a versatile and adaptable workforce, addressing varied and fluctuating departmental needs.
 - While each employee may have specialized roles and differing daily workloads, the willingness of staff members to step in and assist with backlogs should be harnessed.
 - Establish a clear plan for cross-training, identifying areas where employees from different functional areas can contribute to backlog reduction efforts.
7. **Prioritization and Departmental Focus:** The department's primary focus should be addressing the backlog and implementing software and training effectively. While normal operations will continue, and unforeseen issues may arise, the urgency of these tasks requires consistent attention and a proactive approach.
- Cultivate a department-wide mentality that prioritizes reducing the backlog, streamlining processes, and embracing change. Regardless of their role, every team member should be prepared to contribute to addressing these critical issues.
 - Recognize that while immediate matters may occasionally demand attention, the primary focus must remain on overcoming the current challenges. This requires a balance between addressing day-to-day tasks and dedicating efforts to long-term improvements.
 - Develop a strategy that allows for flexible handling of emergent situations without losing sight of the primary objectives related to the backlog, software implementation, and staff development.
8. **Leadership and Innovation Culture:** A shift in leadership approach and departmental culture is imperative to navigate the department's challenges successfully. This shift must center on fostering innovation and adaptability within the team.
- The department head must lead by example, promoting a culture where staff are encouraged to think creatively and propose solutions rather than focusing on barriers. This involves an open-minded approach to considering and implementing ideas from all levels of the department.

- It's essential for the department head to facilitate an environment where staff are empowered to contribute ideas. This approach leverages the collective expertise and insights of the team, driving innovative solutions that are more likely to be embraced and successfully implemented.
- The success of this cultural shift hinges on the department head's full commitment to fostering this change. A proactive engagement in nurturing a solutions-focused mindset will be a key determinant in the department's ability to overcome its current and future challenges.

Recommended Goals:

1. Backlog Reduction and Process Formalization:

- Goals: Collaboratively streamline and formalize processes involving all stakeholders within the next six months, including employees, administration, and corporation counsel. Aim to reduce the backlog by 15%-20% in the first year and develop a long-term (e.g., 3 to 5 years) plan for its elimination.
- Measurement: Engage all relevant stakeholders (e.g., employees, management, committee) in process formalization, ensuring transparency and accountability. Track backlog reduction with an expectation of increased progress in year two as staff become trained and more experienced. Regularly review progress in departmental/committee meetings, with a specific focus on milestones and challenges faced.

2. Software Implementation and Evaluation:

- Goal: Appoint a staff member to be accountable and serve as the dedicated software implementation manager within 30 days to oversee full software implementation, including historical data migration. Thoroughly assess the software's suitability for the department's needs within the next six months, including any possible recommended improvements in the name of efficiency.
- Measurement: Identify a software implementation manager responsible for the implementation process. Verify accurate historical data migration and assess the software's effectiveness in data reporting and reliability based on user feedback and performance metrics. Include software updates in monthly management meetings, and provide a committee update as milestones are met (or challenges arise).

3. Staff Training and Cross-Training Plan:

- Goal: Develop a comprehensive training and cross-training plan involving all staff, covering all aspects of the department's functions, within the next three months. Ensure that all staff members are fully trained and mentored in their roles, considering the planned retirement-based turnover in the next few years.
- Measurement: Implement a training and cross-training plan that includes feedback mechanisms and covers all essential areas of employee development, including readiness for anticipated retirements. Share said plan with the County Administrator and Human Resources for their review and input.

4. Enhanced Reporting and Transparency:

- Goal: Develop and implement an enhanced reporting approach within the next quarter to provide clear progress updates and identify real-time bottlenecks. Seek input from decision-makers on the effectiveness of the new reporting approach. Prioritize simplicity and consistency in reporting.
- Measurement: Implement the new reporting approach, incorporating feedback from decision-makers, to ensure its effectiveness in providing transparency and facilitating data-driven decisions.

Track the ability of the reporting approach to provide clear progress updates and identify bottlenecks while maintaining simplicity and consistency. Provide monthly/quarterly reports to the County Administrator and Resource Planning Committee on the agreed-upon data and metrics.

5. Leadership Clarity and Department Head's Role Goal:

- Goal: Clarify the role of the Senior Zoning Administrator to primarily focus on training, direction, and backlog reduction for at least the first 12 months. Clearly delineate the responsibilities of the department head and the Senior Zoning Administrator to optimize their contributions to addressing departmental issues, ensuring that creating the Senior Zoning Administrator role does not negatively impact the current workload or backlog.
- Measurement: Ensure that the roles of the department head and the Senior Zoning Administrator are well-defined and communicated to all relevant parties. Monitor the department head's effective utilization of their time to impact departmental challenges positively through the monthly meetings with the County Administrator.

6. Creative and Open-Minded Approaches to Problem-Solving:

- Goal: Cultivate a culture of creativity and open-minded problem-solving in revisiting departmental processes and approaches.
- Measurement: Encourage regular brainstorming sessions and evaluate the adoption of innovative solutions in department meetings. Monitor and discuss creative problem-solving initiatives and their outcomes. Track and report the implementation of new ideas and measure their impact on departmental efficiency to the County Administrator.

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