

## Attachment "C"

### DEPARTMENT OF BUILDING AND SAFETY Meeting of January 30, 2024

#### ATTENDEES

Department of Building and Safety: Ana Mae Yutan, Resource Management Bureau Chief; Emilio Rodriguez, Resource Management Assistant Bureau Chief; Tony Palaez, Budget and Administration Services Division Chief

Budget Advocates: Howard Katchen, Connie Acosta; Budget Representative: Leslie Weisberg; Stakeholders: Philip Armstrong, Stella Grey

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE CITY

- Proactively implement a mechanism for data sharing and tracking among the Department of Building and Safety, the Housing Department, City Planning, and other City departments for projects specifically including low-income units
- Ensure sufficient funding for Building and Safety to hire qualified professionals to staff all programs, and to provide relevant ongoing training in new technologies
- Enable expedited hiring procedures to fill urgent vacancies
- Fund the expansion of the Affordable Housing Tracking System to include all relevant data, especially with regards to low-income units, on a more timely basis
- Provide funds for Building and Safety to work with relevant departments and entities to integrate their requirements into the new LA City Permitting System
- Fund public engagement opportunities for organizations, businesses and residents to provide early, ongoing and meaningful input into the functionality, accessibility and implementation of the new LA City Permitting system
- Authorize funds for Building and Safety's Board of Commissioners to undergo training in the relevant codes and regulations

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE DEPARTMENT

- Implement and apply a performance metric for low-income housing units that is consistent with the definition of low-income housing units in the 2021-2029 Housing Element
- Integrate these performance metrics into the current Plan Check and Inspection System permitting system and the new LA City Permitting System
- Implement procedures for clearing low-income units with the Housing Department to ensure that identifying Housing Department project information is captured in the Plan Check and Inspection System
- Implement adequate metrics to ensure all stakeholder concerns are considered and addressed in and in transition to the new system
- Establish policies to verify permit applicants comply with relevant requirements by all governmental entities prior to approval to proceed
- Develop and disseminate, on its website and with an introductory package to applicants, step-by-step easy-to-comprehend directives on compliance

## **DISCUSSION**

The Los Angeles Department of Building and Services (LADBS or the Department) oversees planning and permits, renovations and new construction, inspections, complaints and code enforcement, property zoning and setbacks for the City of Los Angeles. It also deals with evolving codes, the need for improvements in its technological interfacing with the public, and the increased need for conservation and sustainability in our changing world.

Its mission statement is:

To protect the lives and safety of the residents and visitors of the City of Los Angeles and enhance the quality of life, housing, economic prosperity, and job creation citywide. Utilizing timely, cooperative, and transparent processes, the Department Advises, Guides, and Assists Customers to achieve compliance with the Building, Zoning, Plumbing, Mechanical, Electrical, Disabled Access, Energy, and Green codes and local and State law to Build Safe, Well, and Fast.

To that end, the Executive Summary to the proposed LADBS budget addressed the development of affordable housing and the creation of small businesses, providing innovative ways to increase equity and access to services, expanding delivery of affordable housing, as well as ensuring safety and compliance.

### Accountability and Transparency

LADBS has made the development of affordable housing a priority. According to the 2021-2029 Housing Element, this applies to any housing unit that has a formal covenant or other legal protection guaranteeing that unit can only be occupied by someone within a specific income range.

When requested, the LADBS Affordable Housing Section was not able to identify the status of the covenants for the 1,649 project submittals it had received because the LADBS and Housing Department (LAHD) records are in separate databases. This is further complicated when the two databases have different addresses for the same project, meaning the status of the covenants is unclear for approximately 40% of project submittals.

The Affordable Housing Tracking System needs to incorporate complete information on affordable housing projects, including those both subject to and outside the Mayor's Executive Directive 1, accessible to all appropriate parties, and with the status of entitlements, covenants, permitting, compliance, and all other applicable data continuously updated by LADBS, LAHD, and City Planning.

Since the actions (and inactions) of the Department continually impact large numbers of Angelenos in many ways, ongoing interaction with communities across the City is encouraged, and should be expanded to address proposed changes as soon as possible in the process to ensure that everyone's needs are addressed and money is not wasted pursuing dead-on-arrival functions or entire projects.

The Department is overseen by a Board of Commissioners which, among its duties, rule on appeals of decisions made by LADBS as well as make other, often highly technical decisions, including CEQA exemptions. Most commission members are not experts in the construction-related codes and regulations they are asked to evaluate. As they do not have the qualifications themselves, they rely on staff for decision-making.

To be more effective in oversight and to provide proactive direction for the Department, members of the LADBS Board of Commissioners should undergo mandatory training in the relevant codes and regulations when they are appointed and as needed but not less than yearly thereafter given the rapidly evolving technologies and requirements affecting building and safety. This is especially urgent given that the Commission is often an appellant's last resort and decisions rendered are final.

### Organization

Society today, including commercial enterprises and how everyone transacts business, has evolved considerably in recent years making it difficult to track and enforce many regulations.

In recent years unpermitted commercial scale operations on premises of residential rental properties have proliferated across Los Angeles threatening health and safety for residents and visitors alike as well as income for the City. Greater emphasis must be placed on continuous inspections and enforcement and adequate funding must be provided to support it.

LADBS policies currently do not require verification of compliance by permit applicants with various governmental entity requirements. This must change.

Before permits are issued, applicants must submit to Plan Check documentation of all necessary LAFD and/or AQMD compliances, confirmation of asbestos clearance, Urban Forestry Division evaluations of protected trees on the lot, and Department of Public Works determinations on street impacts.

For this to be effective, funds must be allocated not only to LADBS but to other relevant agencies to consistently upgrade performance metrics and develop systems to update such information in real time to ensure proactive compliance with all applicable regulations.

In 2022-23, the Electronic Plan Review Los Angeles (ePlanLA) system was updated to expedite permitting and clearances of temporary shelters and Affordable Housing pursuant to City and State-mandated requirements.

ePlanLA allows customers to submit electronic plans and pay Plan Check fees online. Plan Check engineers review and approve or reject plans online.

Moving the processing of commonplace procedures and payments online will increase efficiency, expedite workflows, and reduce costs.

## Technology

Technology should be used to simplify and increase efficiency of operations.

The Department is replacing its online Plan Check and Inspection System (PCIS), implemented in 1995/96, with a new system that will be used by LADBS and will allow for integration of other City departments' systems with it to provide access to information related to project review, clearances, and inspections.

Work on the new system is expected to begin at the end of this fiscal year or early in the next. In the meantime, the existing PCIS requires updating to allow LADBS and system users to function effectively until the transition is complete.

The proposed LA City Permitting System will be used by City employees as well as by the public.

Ongoing and increased engagement with organizations, businesses and residents is essential to provide meaningful input into necessary interim upgrades to the PCIS and, more importantly, early enough for the proposed new system to clarify and resolve accessibility challenges, avoid dysfunction, and allow for a smooth implementation.

## Challenges

A department is only as good as its personnel, from leadership through middle management to the skilled frontline workers.

Modernizing operations is significantly dependent on technology, an area in which the Department has experienced high employee turnover due to poaching by other departments and jurisdictions compounded by retirements and loss of institutional memory, and currently lacks trained and skilled staff to effectively carry out its obligations.

Moreover, delays in the City's hiring system has resulted in the failure to fill high priority positions including programmers and other qualified professionals to staff all programs.

Additionally, with the ever-increasing reliance on rapidly developing new technologies, stratagems and funds are urgently needed to provide relevant and ongoing training to new and existing employees.

Other priority issues for LADBS include:

- the Mayor's Directives on the homeless and affordable housing crisis
- enhancement of safety and security, and improving mobility at and for Los Angeles airports
- maintenance and updating of ePlanLA, the virtual interface for BuildLA which allows 24/7 access to all construction and land development-related services including zoning, entitlement, plan check, and permitting

- ongoing soft story retrofits to assure City commercial and residential buildings are safe and can withstand major earthquakes
- supporting the virtual online Inspection Counter with personnel to consult on residential and commercial building projects as well as provide assistance in navigating the development, inspection, and permitting processes for a wide gamut of building amenities

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The LADBS is a massive and complex department charged with a wide variety of important functions. Any opportunity to streamline procedures and improve timely accountability at all levels, both within and without, should be assessed and, where justified, incorporated.

Our recommendations are aimed at implementing more effective policies to support this with the enhancement of the new LA City Permitting System, so the Department can effectively work with the Mayor and other departments to expand affordable housing.

Additionally, we suggest funding allocations for public engagement and proactive communication with relevant entities both for improvements of the existing systems and to proactively ensure new ones are the best that they can be. In particular, we strongly recommend that LADBS implement specific procedures and metrics for permitting low-income housing units and integrating LAHD clearances into existing and future permitting systems.

Furthermore, we recommend the Mayor's office mandate training for LADBS commissioners and establish mechanisms for data sharing among relevant departments and agencies. By implementing these recommendations, we can enhance accountability, transparency, and efficiency within the permitting process, ultimately contributing to a safer Los Angeles.