



EL DORADO COUNTY
GRAND JURY 2022-2023



Building Projects - Can You Help Me, PLEASE?

Case #22-23 GJ03

June 30, 2023

GLOSSARY

BOS	Board of Supervisors
CC&Rs	Codes, Covenants, and Restrictions
EDC	El Dorado County
Grand Jury	2022-2023 Civil Grand Jury
Ombudsman	Planning and Building (P&B) Ombudsman
P&B Department	Planning and Building Department includes Building Services, Planning Services, Tahoe Planning and Storm water, Economic Development, Commercial Cannabis, Airports & Cemeteries, and Code Enforcement.
TRAKiT	TRAKiT Workflow Software from Central Square which enables agencies to automate the management of project development, permitting, code compliance, citizen issues, and business/occupational licenses through its applications.
Simple permits	Permits limited to projects that do not require submittal of detailed plans and specifications and subsequent review by Building Services.
Complex permits	Permits that require approvals from more than one (1) EDC department, including external departments, such as a local fire district or school district.

EL DORADO COUNTY 2022–2023 GRAND JURY

Building Projects – Can You Help Me? ... PLEASE?

Case #22-23 GJ03

SUMMARY

The 2022-2023 Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) learned of delays for building projects encountered by El Dorado County (EDC) residents which prompted an investigation into Building Services and its processes and procedures.

For simple permits, such as replacing a water heater or a reroof, the Grand Jury found that licensed contractors can apply and pay for a permit online, while homeowners could not. Homeowners need to apply in person at Building Services.

For complex permits, which the Grand Jury defined as permits that require approvals from multiple agencies, i.e., Environmental Management, or a local fire district, Building Services does not assign an advocate to monitor the progress of a residential and/or a small business permit through the process. Currently, there is a Planning & Building (P&B) Ombudsman whose role is not clearly defined. S/he is simply available to answer questions, but does not resolve permit, planning, or building issues.

Following the permit application through the process is difficult because current county systems do not automatically document progress. There is little or no assistance or communication from the County, leaving homeowners to navigate the complex and unfamiliar maze of the building permit process on their own.

TRAKiT is the Workflow Software utilized by EDC departments to automate the management of project development, permitting, and code compliance. The TRAKiT contract was signed in January 2017 with implementation estimated to take 17 months. EDC encountered implementation issues delaying the final buy-off of the TRAKiT System until 2023, after more than six (6) years.

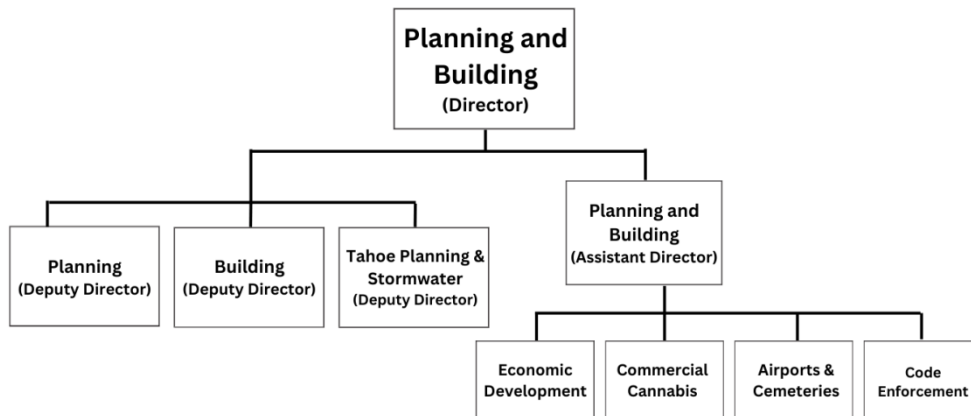
The TRAKiT software continues to contribute to the delays in the permitting process due to the fact that TRAKiT was not successfully implemented. Building Services had to create and is still using manual workarounds to keep the system operational. Additional dedicated resources from the EDC Information Technologies Department continue to be deployed to address ongoing deficiencies in the software. Due to time constraints, the Grand Jury was unable to complete the extensive research required to write a comprehensive report on TRAKiT.

The Grand Jury investigation focused on the following areas: mission statements, the permit process, permit process challenges, the role and duties of the Ombudsman, building inspections, home fire sprinkler inspections, performance measurements, and customer satisfaction.

BACKGROUND

The Director of the P&B Department stated in a presentation to the Board of Supervisors (BOS) on September 27, 2022, that the P&B Department is responsible for processing a wide variety of permits through its various Divisions.

Below is the current organization chart for the P&B Department.



Both Planning Services and Building Services list the identical mission statement on their respective web pages which states: “Guide land use and development consistent with the General Plan, Building Codes, and related regulations, by providing accurate, timely, and courteous professional and technical services to our customers, to maintain the County’s unique quality of life, protect public safety and the environment and to promote economic vitality for current and future generations.”

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury reviewed the following:

- Building and Planning Services web page (<https://www.edcgov.us/Government/DevServices>) (Note: There is no Planning and Building Department web page.);

- Building Services web page (<https://www.edcgov.us/Building>);
- Planning Services web page (<https://www.edcgov.us/Planning>);
- El Dorado County 2022 Board Approved Strategic Plan;
- County Strategic Plan and Budget Policies, dated 2021;
- Board Policy A-13, adopted April 6, 1993, **Adopted April 6, 1993 – Revised November 15, 2022**;
- The El Dorado County Adopted General Plan (<https://edhapac.org/documents/el-dorado-county-adopted-general-plan>); (Note: On July 19, 2004, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors adopted a new General Plan for the County. The last amendment for the General Plan was December 10, 2019);
- Original TRAKiT Agreement for Services #472-S1611, for installation, integration, and training of TRAKiT, a Planning, Permitting and Parcel Management Software Solution;
- First Amendment to Agreement for Services #472-S1611;
- TRAKiT Memo to the BOS, subject: TRAKiT Implementation Schedule, dated April 24, 2018;
- The P&B Department’s “Permit Activity Status update” presentation, dated September 12, 2022, and presented to the BOS on September 27, 2022, agenda item 22-1640;
- The P&B Department’s report “Planning & Building Department – Permit Activity Status”, dated September 13, 2022, from the Director of the P&B Department;
- Permit Process flowchart (Appendix A);
- Licensed Contractors Trade Email Permit Program (Appendix B);
- Templates for a notice of expiring permit, expiring plan check application, and information letters sent to permit requesters; and
- Customer Service questionnaire.

The Grand Jury interviewed:

- P&B Department staff members;
- Staff members from other EDC Departments; and
- Permit requesters who interfaced with the P&B Department.

DISCUSSION

Mission Statements

A mission statement, per Merriam-Webster, is a document that states the purpose or goal of a business or organization. It is a short, written statement of why an organization exists, what its overall goal is, the goals of its operations, what kind of product(s) or service(s) it provides, its primary customers or markets, and its geographical region of operation.

The P&B Department does not list a mission statement on the EDC website. It does not have a webpage and is not listed in the EDC website list of departments.

Building Services and Planning Services report to the P&B Department. Both have separate web pages but list the same mission. However, Planning Services and Building Services each have different functions described, as follows:

- 1) Planning Services guides land use and development consistent with the General Plan.
- 2) Building Services issues building permits after ensuring all regulatory requirements are met; and provides inspection services as projects progress throughout the building process.

The Permit Process

For the purposes of the Grand Jury's investigation, permits were classified into two categories, simple and complex.

Simple permits include projects, such as replacing a water heater, or a reroof, and complex permits, include projects, such as building a home or a remodel.

Today, Building Services has an online permitting program to expedite the processing of simple permit requests from licensed contractors. The permit types that can be requested are listed at Appendix B.

Homeowners cannot utilize the online program, instead, they have to go to Building Services to request and pay for a simple permit. The P&B Department does not have an online process to verify the identity of the homeowner. In contrast, a contractor's identity can be verified by virtue of their business license. As a comparison, the City of Folsom allows its homeowners to apply and pay for simple permits online.

The permit process begins when a homeowner provides an intake package in person at Building Services. The intake person receives the package and conducts a preliminary review. If something is missing or incorrect, the homeowner will need to update their package to address the deficiency.

Once the complete package is received, Building Services inputs the information into the TRAKiT system. TRAKiT is the Workflow Software utilized by EDC departments to automate the management of project development, permitting, and code compliance. The package is then sent to the appropriate departments or agencies for review and approval.

Required permit approvals are dependent on the specific project. Approvals are typically required from the following agencies:

- Building Services;
- Planning Services;
- Cameron Park Community Services District for Codes, Covenants, and Restrictions (CC&Rs) (where applicable);
- El Dorado Hills Community Services District for CC&Rs (where applicable);
- El Dorado Irrigation District or area governing water authority;
- Environmental Management;
- Department of Transportation;
- Local Fire District; and
- School District.

Once all approvals are received, Building Services will issue the building permit. See Appendix A for an overview of the permit process. After a permit is issued, inspections will be scheduled, as needed, throughout the building process.

Permit Process Challenges

Building Services may require other EDC agencies (as listed above) to review and approve specific parts of the application, depending on the type of permit requested. For example, new construction and home additions have a number of additional approvals outside of Building Services that must be received. Each agency is autonomous from other agencies leading to a lack of overall management and coordination resulting in delays. Additionally, Building Services does not monitor the permit process.

It was consistently stated by interviewees that they had difficulty figuring out where their request was in the permit process. Building Services does not have a dashboard tool that provides an overview of the status for each permit. Instead, determining the permit status requires searching manually through various permit layers, opening files, calculating days and is too time intensive to be useful. Building Services does not provide a single point of contact for homeowners.

A summary report has not been developed detailing the current status of permits in the system, as well as a lack of system alerts if a permit has stalled beyond an established timeline. If a customer was sent a letter asking for additional information, it is assumed that the customer received the letter. Building Services does not follow up nor is an alert triggered if additional information has not been received by a predetermined date.

Commercial contractors are assigned a planner. Homeowners do not have an assigned planner and therefore, do not have a champion for their project.

If the homeowner's permit encounters an issue and is stalled, it is up to the individual to determine where in the process it has stalled and who to contact. This approach requires an extended amount of time by the homeowner to determine how to navigate the P&B internal processes.

Role and Duties of the Ombudsman

The Ombudsman position currently exists in the P&B Department and reports to Economic Development. Some of the duties include assisting the public through the many layers of the planning and building process. The Ombudsman also is assigned additional duties within Economic Development including special projects.

From the Building and Planning Services web page <https://www.edcgov.us/Government/devservices/Pages/ombudsman.aspx> the Ombudsman position is defined as follows:

California's codes and regulations can be challenging for its citizens. El Dorado County understands that not everyone is familiar with the rules and processes that are involved. The ombudsman position was created to help our customers through these processes and to bring resolution to issues that may arise. The ombudsman acts as an advocate for the customer, answering questions and coordinating with various County organizations to make customer interactions as trouble-free as possible.

The Grand Jury investigation found the job description does not adequately reflect the Ombudsman's actual duties. While the Ombudsman answers questions and provides guidance on what agency or person to contact, the Ombudsman does not retain ongoing responsibility to ensure issues are resolved.

The Ombudsman position lacks a job description that accurately reflects their job responsibilities. Instead, the Ombudsman has the designation and job description of an Administrative Analyst II. The job description for an Administrative Analyst II, as listed on the EDC website, states, “provides an authoritative understanding of all departmental functions and professional activities and provides support to professional-level staff in the completion of their duties, in addition to completing complex clerical assignments including taking and transcribing meeting minutes and assisting in department-related projects and programs.”

The Grand Jury investigation found that the Ombudsman does not represent the customer as an advocate. The Ombudsman’s performance is not measured by whether the customer’s issue was resolved. The Ombudsman directs the customer to follow-up with the information provided versus retaining responsibility for the issue until resolution.

Building Inspections

Once the building permit is issued, inspections required by various departments can be scheduled. During Grand Jury interviews, multiple interviewees provided similar examples of inspectors examining the same property and finding different inspection issues. This was frustrating for the customer who corrected the initial inspections, only to have additional issues cited on reinspection. There were additional instances when subsequent inspectors arrived with incomplete information on their iPads. This requires the homeowner to relay prior information and bring those inspectors up to date on the previous inspections.

Home Fire Sprinkler Inspections

Prior to 2018, Building Services was responsible for conducting home fire sprinkler inspections. This inspection typically occurred at the same time as the framing inspection. Currently, three (3) fire districts (El Dorado Hills, Garden Valley, and Meeks Bay) have taken the responsibility from Building Services to conduct home fire sprinkler inspections. This has resulted in additional costs and a duplication of effort which previously had been carried out as part of the Building Services framing inspection.

If the fire district conducts the inspection, they have the responsibility to input the information into the TRAKiT system. There is a status field and a date field. The status field would be changed to COMPLETED and the date field should be updated with the completion date. Currently, the system does not require the completion date to be entered. A completion date would allow for metrics to monitor how long it took from the request date to when the inspection was completed.

Performance Measurements

Benchmarks have not been established for an estimated time to get through planning and building projects. It is understood that there are many factors, such as reviews, approvals, and inspections, that are different for each permit. However, without an established benchmark by permit type, the P&B Department does not have a gauge with which to measure performance levels.

The Grand Jury reviewed the permit activity status presentation given to the BOS by the Director of the P&B Department on September 27, 2022. The presentation and accompanying documents reflected total activity only. It did not include data showing the status of timelines for processing permits by type. Examples include time to complete an additional dwelling unit, build a barn, or get a water heater permit. The presentation did not include any metrics.

The P&B Department's report "Planning & Building Department – Permit Activity Status" given to the BOS on September 27, 2022, by the Director of the P&B Department, states, "Staff does not track turn-around time. However, we are currently considering what data can be collected to better analyze the permit process so we can begin to identify common pain points, duplicative processes and opportunities for efficiencies and enhance communication that will assist applicants in getting through the process successfully."

Customer Satisfaction

The Building Services mission includes a customer service component that reads, "by providing accurate, timely, and courteous professional and technical services to our customers." At the bottom of the Building Services web page, there is a link to a customer satisfaction questionnaire (<https://www.edcgov.us/Government/devservices/Webforms/Pages/Development-Services-Customer-Service-Questionnaire.aspx>) but the link actually takes you to a Customer Service Questionnaire, not a Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire. There are also paper copies available in the Building Services lobby.

The Customer Service Questionnaire only measures a single point in time activity of how well the request was addressed. Whereas a Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire would measure how well the customers' expectations were met throughout the entire process.

Completed Customer Service Questionnaires are forwarded to the Director of the P&B Department and the appropriate manager by the Ombudsman. Except for the surveys, the P&B Department does not have a formalized Customer Satisfaction Program. A complaint process has not been established, nor has a summary of complaints been developed for complaints received, along with the action(s) taken. Metrics have not been established to measure improvement.

In conclusion, the Grand Jury found the P&B Department, as a customer facing organization, should be doing more to help customers through the planning and building processes. Improvement begins by establishing benchmarks for measurements within Building Services to proactively track projects and designate a resource empowered to address customers' issues. The P&B Department should create an ongoing program to measure customer satisfaction throughout the process and use this information to determine ways to make it easier and faster to complete a customer's project. Finally, while the Grand Jury was not able to complete its TRAKiT investigation, it is apparent there are many serious shortcomings within the system making it harder for the P&B Department to do its job.

FINDINGS

- F1 A mission statement does not exist for the P&B Department. Building Services and Planning Services each have separate web pages but list the same mission statement; however, they each have different and distinct functions.
- F2 Only commercial contractors can apply and pay for a simple permit online. Homeowners are unable to apply and pay for a simple permit online.
- F3 Commercial contractors have one point of contact throughout the process and homeowners do not. The P&B Department does not assign personnel the responsibility to manage complex permits through the permit process.
- F4 A permit status dashboard providing transparency has not been developed for projects.
- F5 There is an Ombudsman position, assigned to Economic Development, available to assist customers through the many layers of the permit process. The Ombudsman is also assigned additional duties within Economic Development including special projects. A job description, reflecting the actual responsibilities of the Ombudsman, has not been developed – instead, an Administrative Analyst II job description is being used.
- F6 As part of the inspection process, Building Services sometimes assigns a different inspector to conduct follow-up inspections to determine if the required corrective actions were completed.
- F7 Building Services conducts inspections for new fire sprinkler systems for homes as part of framing inspections. Three (3) fire districts no longer use Building Services but instead, conduct their own inspections at a higher cost to the homeowner.

- F8 The permit status presentation only provided a summary of permit activity. It did not provide slides with data detailing the quantity or timelines for processing permits by permit type.
- F9 A customer satisfaction program does not exist. Customer Service Questionnaires that are received by the P&B Department are collected by the Ombudsman who then distributes them to the Director and the department manager. A summary of complaints is not captured, and follow-up has not been established. Paper Customer Service Questionnaires are dropped in a box in the Building Services Lobby.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1 The P&B Department should develop a mission statement and refine the mission statements for both Building Services and Planning Services to more accurately reflect their respective missions. This recommendation should be completed by December 31, 2023.
- R2 Building Services should expand the current simple permit program to allow homeowners to request and pay for simple permits online. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R3 The P&B Department should assign a single point of contact to act as the advocate for each complex permit request to champion the project through the permit and building process. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R4 Building Services should create tools, such as a dashboard to provide transparency of permits in its system and document the approvals and inspections (by date) requested and the current status. Criteria should be established for triggering alerts when approvals or inspections stall. Update the system to require an inspection completion date. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R5 The P&B department should work with Human Resources to create a job description for the Ombudsman position commensurate with the actual duties. This would include empowering the Ombudsman to be responsible for addressing and spearheading the resolution of issues and complaints. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R6 When possible, Building Services should strive to send the same inspector to conduct the follow-up inspection. If a different inspector is assigned to follow-up on corrections, the initial inspector should review the file with them. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.

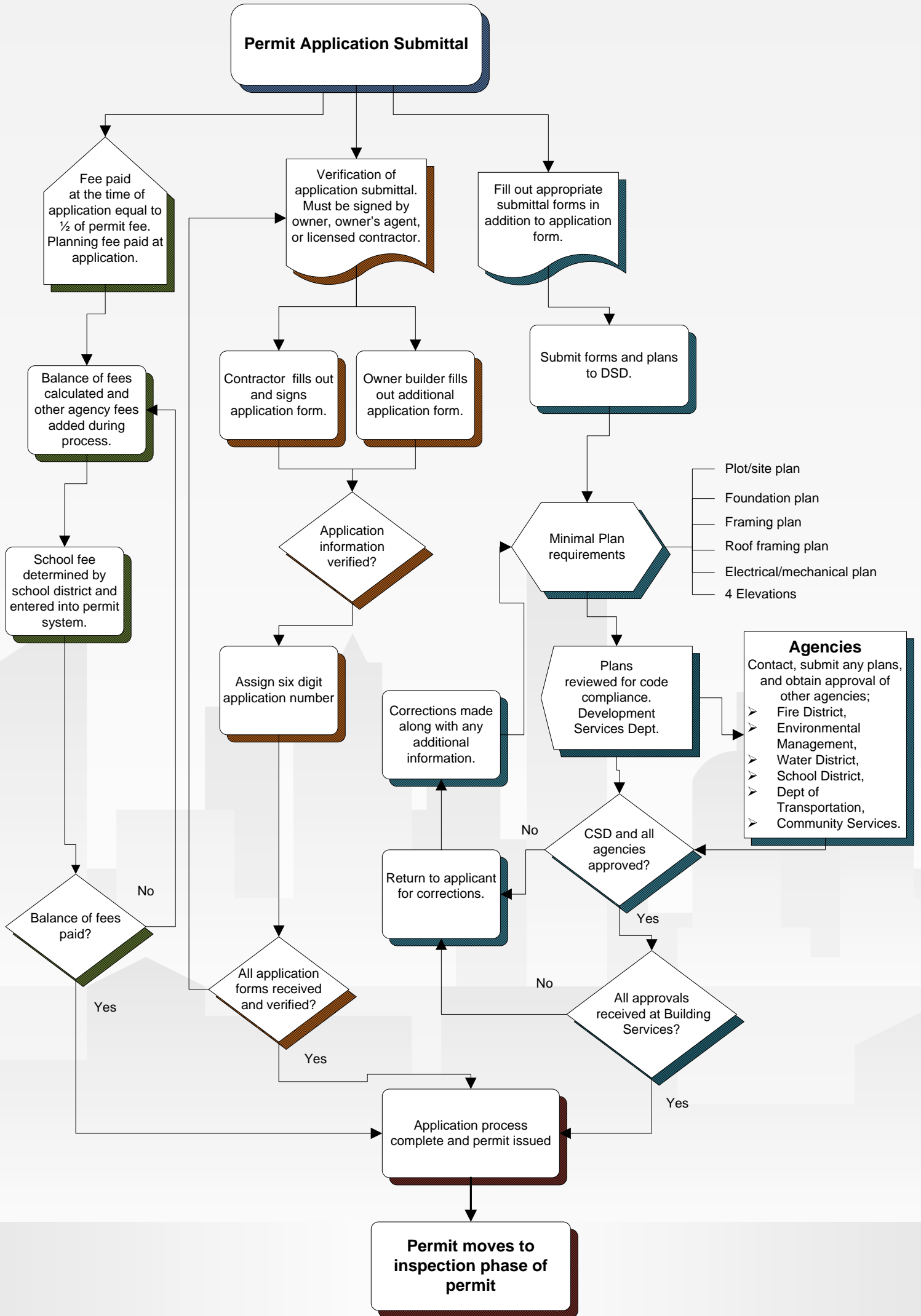
- R7 Building Services should review the home fire sprinkler inspection process for efficiency purposes and revisit returning the responsibility for all home fire sprinkler inspections to Building Services. Recommendation to be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R8 The P&B Department should establish a set of benchmarks by permit type for the time expected to get through planning and building projects. A quarterly report should be created detailing the overall activity of and status of timelines for processing permits for project types against established benchmarks. This recommendation is to be implemented by December 31, 2023.
- R9 The P&B Department should develop a customer satisfaction survey program to include customer surveys. A customer survey would be sent directly to the homeowner when the building permit is approved and again, when the building project is finalized. Summarize the responses and take action as needed. This recommendation should be implemented by December 31, 2023.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

The following response is required in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.

County Board of Supervisors – All Findings and All Recommendations

Development Services



Appendix B - Single Permit Examples

Licensed Contractors Trade Email Permit Program

El Dorado County has implemented an Email Permit Program for appropriately licensed contractors. This program is for processing residential and commercial permit applications in an expedited manner and to comply with the El Dorado County Public Health Officer directive restricting activities in response to COVID-19 Outbreak and the State of California Executive Department Executive Order N-33-20 as a result of the threat of COVID-19. The program is limited to projects that do not require submittal of detailed plans and specifications and subsequent review by Building and Planning.

The Email Permit Program is limited to the following types of permits:

- **Residential Electrical**
 - Service Panel
 - Subpanel
 - Alteration/Repair
 - Replace Service Panel
 - Replace Subpanel
 - Electric Vehicle Charging Station
- **Re-roofs:**
 - Remove/Replace
 - Partial
 - Overlay
- **Residential replacement of existing mechanical equipment such as:**
 - Electric HVAC
 - Gas HVAC
 - Duct
 - Furnace
 - Replace A/C Coil & Condenser
 - Whole House Fan
 - Alteration/Repair
 - Wall Heaters
- **Residential replacement of plumbing systems:**
 - Alteration/Repair
 - Water Heater Electric
 - Water Heater Gas
 - Re-Pipe
- **Residential Installation of additional gas appliances*** (where gas is already supplied to dwelling):
 - Furnaces, stoves, fireplaces, wall heaters, water heaters, etc.

*Note: Installation of new gas appliances requires the following documentation:

 - A spec sheet on new gas appliance
 - Gas piping schematic of existing gas piping system, new piping, meter size (if natural gas) pipe sizes, lengths and new/existing gas appliances with Btu/hr.

***Requirements to participate in this program:**

- Appropriate California licensed contractor
- Current El Dorado County Business license
Registered eTrakit user <https://edc-trk.aspgov.com/etrakit>
- Official El Dorado County Building permit application filled out in its entirety
<https://www.edcgov.us/Government/building/Pages/forms.aspx>
- Permit supporting documents
- Email application and supporting documents, email to: epermit@edcgov.us add Project address to the subject line.

If you have any questions, please call the main Building Services line at 530-621-5315.

*By using this program you agree to abide to the guidelines as outlined throughout. Failure to abide by these guidelines will result in the rejection of your application and/or permit. We want to thank you again for using this system and hope you find the program beneficial. Please note, a vender service charge will apply for online payment of fees.