

Planning, Zoning and Building Department:

Operational Review of Pre-Construction Permitting

(Project No. 02-M-05)

This document is the result of a collaboration between the Planning, Zoning and Building Department and the Office of Financial Management & Budget, Financial Management Division

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O F M B

<i>Executive Summary</i>	1
<hr/>	
<i>Background</i>	3
<hr/>	
<i>Factual Profile</i>	
<hr/>	
Overview: Building Division	4
The Permitting Process	9
Staffing Considerations	18
Workload Activity and Performance Levels	21
Comparison: Other Florida Permitting Agencies	25
<hr/>	
<i>Findings and Recommendations</i>	
<hr/>	
General Findings	26
Recommendations	35
Implementation Plan	44
<hr/>	
<i>Appendix</i>	46
<hr/>	

Executive Summary

Report Highlights . . .

Our review of the Pre-Construction Permitting Section found that permit processing time increased last fall and winter for a variety of operational reasons, some of which have been overcome. Processing time has improved since last winter, but there are opportunities to improve it further. In particular, the study team found that:

- Segregating type-1 permit applications at intake will improve process flow*
- Issuance of certain type-1 permits can be greatly streamlined*
- Use of overtime hours to compensate for large vacancy rates in staffing is expensive*
- The Section lacks the tools necessary to track its workload, processing performance and productivity*
- The Building Division has created a training unit, but it has not yet developed a structured training plan*

Few functions of local government have the impact on the community that ensuring the safety of buildings on the public does. Moreover, building construction annually accounts for nearly \$3 billion in economic activity and provides more than 32,000 direct jobs in this community.¹ So, when the process of approving permits for construction of new buildings is seen to be faltering—as it was during the latter months of 2001—it becomes a matter for concern from several perspectives.

In response to a request from county administration and the executive director of PZ&B, the Management and Program Analysis Section conducted a study of the permitting processes in use in Palm Beach County to identify opportunities for improvement to those processes and to examine the adequacy of the Building Division's resources to carry out its assigned mission. This report contains the results of that study, in the form of findings and recommendations. Denis J. Krajec was the lead analyst assigned to the project. Fieldwork for the project was conducted between March and August 2002, and a final draft of the report was distributed for comment in December 2002.

The study found no catastrophic flaws in the existing permitting process to cause permit issuance times to stretch to undesirable lengths during the last half of 2001 and early 2002. Rather, it found that numerous, lesser operational factors converged to produce that outcome. But without reliable reports of operating results, division management was not able to timely foresee the developing trend to intervene.

The division has developed a series of performance targets for initial review of construction applications. However, these targets have not been formally adopted, and there is no reporting tool that monitors actual performance for comparison with the target objectives. Similarly, there are no reports to alert managers that the inventory of active permit applications is growing and may portend greater workload demands or lengthening permit issuance cycle times, or both. Access to either of these types of data would warn managers of deteriorating conditions likely to affect overall performance.

To address the study team's findings and most important issues requiring action, the following specific recommendations are offered:

¹ Sources: (1) State Department of Revenue Certificate of Taxable Value (form DR-420) for "Current Year Net New Taxable Value" as of January 1, 2002; and (2) *Florida Statistical Abstract* 2002, University of Florida.

- The division should establish a separate type-1 permit center at the main office, and implement a number of process streamlining measures for type-1 permit applications that do not require any plans review
- The rotation of permit technician assignments at the main office should occur less frequently and have a duration of at least one week at a time.
- The division should develop its data reporting requirements to ensure that when the new e-PZB software application is installed, it will accommodate all of the information and process management needs of the division.
- The building division should fill some portion of its vacant authorized positions to reduce its dependence on the use of overtime at premium salary rates.
- All qualified residential plans examiners should be assigned specific subdivisions for which they would have plans review responsibilities.
- The Pre-construction Section should develop a structured training plan directed at each of its occupational groups, focusing on task skills and work habits.
- The division should evaluate its practice of performing optional full reviews of residential electrical, plumbing and mechanical plans and either discontinue the practice or convert it to a value-added service for applicants who want it, by establishing a fee schedule for those services.

Planning, Zoning and Building: Operational Review of Building Division Pre-Construction Permitting

A study to assess staffing adequacy, identify opportunities for improvement of the permitting process and provide guidance in the development of reasonable cycle times for permit applications handled by the Permitting Section

The purpose of this report is to provide county administration and department management with an assessment of the Building Division's pre-construction permitting process including identification of the operational circumstances that allowed average permit processing times to reach undesirable lengths. Florida statutes specifically address an acceptable time frame for the permitting of single-family dwellings from the filing of a complete application:

“A building permit for a single-family residential dwelling must be issued within 30 working days of application thereof unless unusual circumstances require a longer time for processing the application or unless the permit application fails to satisfy the Florida Building Code or the enforcement agency's laws or ordinances.” [Sec. 553.79 (13) F.S.]

The study focused solely on the Pre-construction Section of the Building Division (division). Evaluation of the operations of the division's Inspection Section was outside the scope of this study. The report provides an overview of the permitting process, section staffing, organization structure, management reporting, training, history of employee leave utilization, and reliance on overtime in the division. Study findings and recommendations relating to operational performance and enhancing the permitting process are presented in separate sections.

The methodology used in the study included all of the following:

- A review of the Planning, Zoning and Building Department (department) policies and procedures relating to the Building Division (division) was conducted.

- Palm Beach County amendments to the *Florida Building Code*, Section 553.79 F.S., “Permits; applications; issuance; inspections,” and Florida House Bill 1307 (approved by the Governor on May 30, 2002) were reviewed.
- Research to identify and locate documentation in support of workload activity; permitting cycle times and other performance indicators; staffing levels and turnover rates; lost productivity due to sick leave and vacation absences was conducted.
- Comparable permitting organizations in Florida were contacted and officials were interviewed either in-person or by telephone.
- On-site observations were made and interviews with staff and management of the county’s Building Division were conducted.
- Other research included a review of trade publications, literature published by related professional organizations, and information available on the Internet.

Factual Profile

OVERVIEW: BUILDING DIVISION

The Building Division was established in 1957. Its primary and essential functions involve the administration and enforcement of Palm Beach County’s building construction codes in order to ensure the public’s safety, health and general welfare. The division provides two primary functions— Permitting and Inspections. The stated mission, goals and objectives of the Building Division are:

“to provide a high level of building code, administration and enforcement for the preservation of life, safety and general welfare for the people of Palm Beach County. This is accomplished through the enactment of effective codes and standards which ensure the structural strength, sanitation, fire protection, adequate light and ventilation, and other essential elements of life safety attributed to the built environment.”

Additionally, division officials participate as members of the Building Code Advisory Board of Palm Beach County, whose mission is to advise the Board of County Commissioners on building construction matters and local Standard Building Code amendments. Local Palm Beach County Building Code amendments to the Florida Building Code augment statutory requirements providing for local enhancements that address environmental differences.² The division also provides staffing for the County’s Construction Board of Adjustment and Appeals, which hears appeals concerning interpretation and

² Florida Statutes Chapter 553, “Building Construction Standards.”

enforcement of administrative and technical codes, including consideration of code variances.

The Building Division provides these specific services to the public and building contractors:

- Building plans review and permit issuance
- Impact Fee calculations and assessments
- Impact, Radon, Solid Waste Authority, Fire-Rescue, Zoning, and Environmental Resource Management fee assessments
- Condemnation and unsafe building enforcement
- Field Inspections for permitted construction-in-process
- Electrical power releases
- Certificates of Occupancy and Completion issuance

The Building Division issues approximately 50,000 building permits annually. Revenue from permitting and inspection operations is collected from applicants to cover annual operating costs of the division.

Annual operating expenditures associated with Building Division operations were \$13,272,363 for fiscal year 2001³. Accounting is reflected in Special Revenue Fund 117. During the period from fiscal year 1990 through fiscal year 2001, the Division's cost per primary building permit issued increased 1.8 percent to \$344 per permit for fiscal year ending 2001.⁴

Pre-construction section

The Pre-construction Section is the part of the Building Division with principal responsibility for issuance of building permits in the unincorporated area of Palm Beach County and three of its municipalities. Building permits are issued for both new construction and remodeling of existing structures, as well as for maintenance of their plumbing, electrical and air conditioning systems. Every building permit issued by the county begins with the submission of an application filed with the Pre-construction Section. Pre-construction operations consist of permit application intake and zoning review, inter-agency coordination with other development review departments of the county, construction plans examination, and other functions associated with the issuance of building permits. Present staffing for the Pre-construction Section of the Building Division is 76 authorized positions⁵.

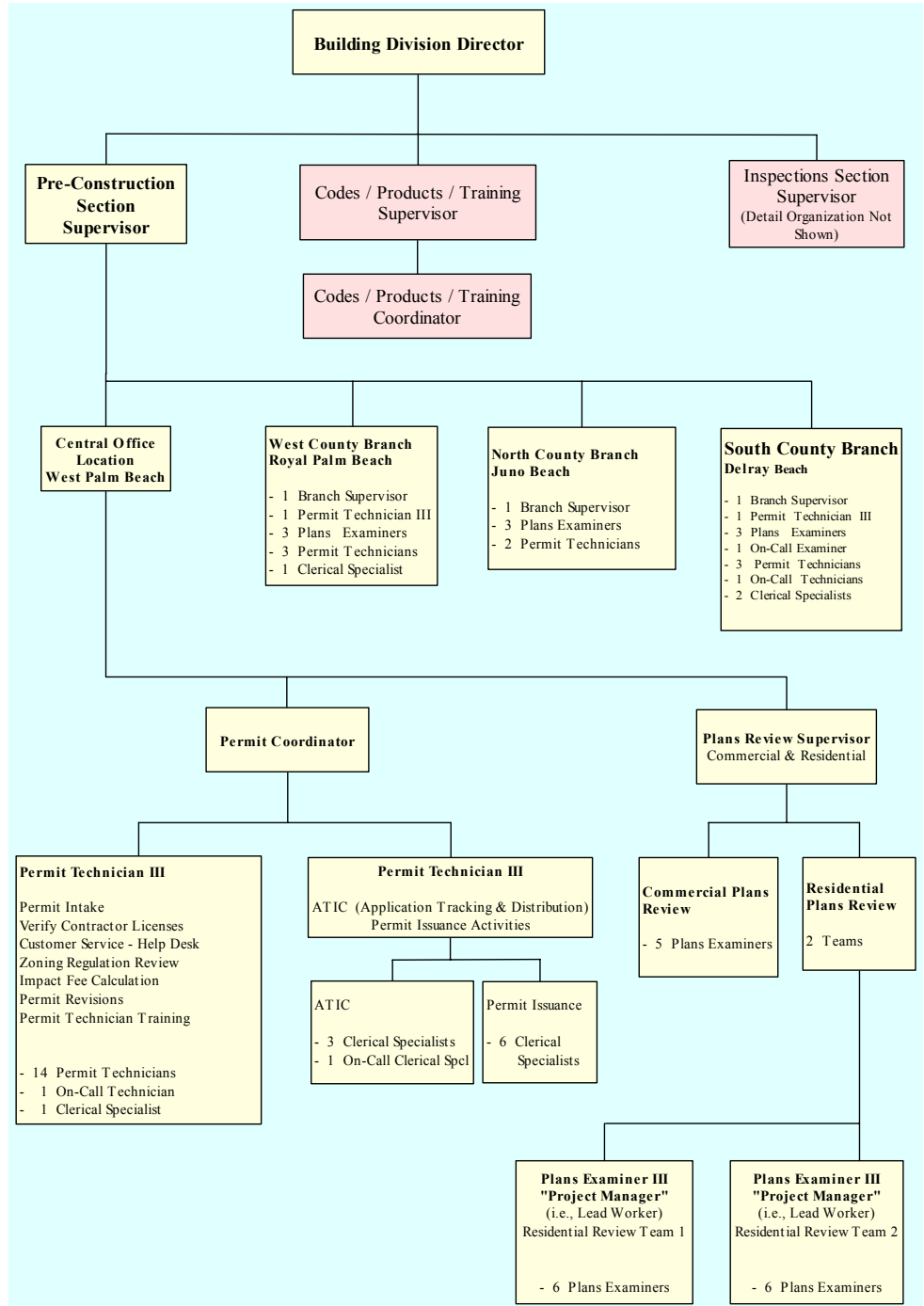
³ Source: PZ&B Building Division "Financial Recap" report produced by PZ&B Fiscal Section

⁴ Calculations related to the percentage increase in cost per building permit issued are unadjusted for inflation.

⁵ Palm Beach County *Department Complement Report* (report no. CBD200R01).

FIGURE 1

Current Table of Organization of
the PZ&B Building Division/Pre-Construction Section



Application and permitting services are available at any one of three branch offices located around the county and at the main facility located in the PZ&B building in West Palm Beach. Branch offices are located in Juno Beach (North), Royal Palm Beach (West), and Delray Beach (South). Operating hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. Supervisory and managerial staff coverage is typically available until 5:00 p.m. daily.

Branch offices review and process one- and two-unit single-family residential construction permit applications, and they can accept, but will not process locally, permit applications for non-residential construction, violations or government projects. Although applicants are encouraged to personally submit applications involving these exceptions at the main office, exceptions received at branch offices will be forwarded to the main facility for processing.

Non-residential construction plans review and permitting activities occur only at the main office on Southern Boulevard. All modifications to construction plans-in-process and significant revisions to issued building permits are handled by the office that originally accepted the permit application.

Customer service is provided by all Section employees assigned to the front counter at the main office location and branch offices; however, a plans examiner and permit technician at the main office are formally assigned customer service duties on a daily rotational basis. Branch office personnel participate in this function as necessary based on their availability and respective areas of expertise. The main office also provides two customer service telephone numbers that are staffed by the permit technician and plans examiner assigned to customer service. Unanswered telephone calls are intercepted by a voice messaging system for later response by the assigned permit technician or plans examiner.

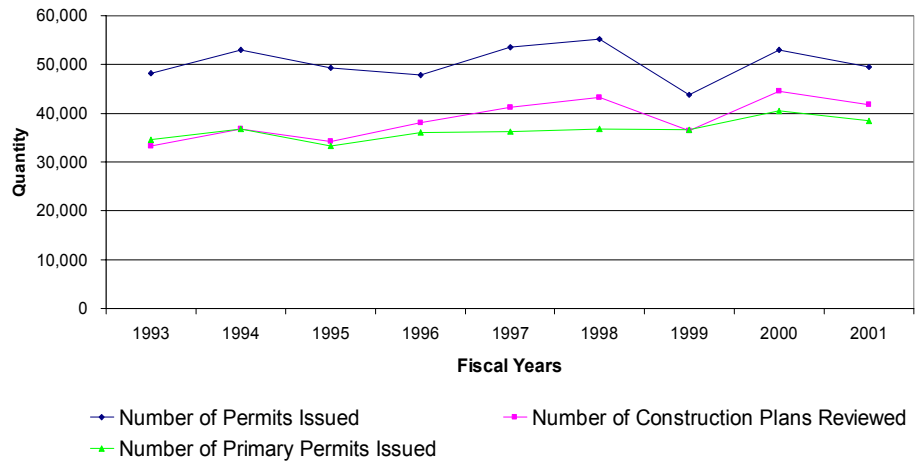
While the Permitting Section primarily serves the construction permitting needs of unincorporated Palm Beach County, it also provides construction plans review, permitting and county impact fee assessment services for some of the county's smaller municipalities. Plans review and permitting are performed for Gulfstream, Juno Beach and Ocean Ridge. Impact fee assessment services are provided for the municipalities of Atlantis, Cloud Lake, Glen Ridge, Gulfstream, Haverhill, Hypoluxo, Juno Beach, Jupiter Inlet Colony, Lake Worth, Lantana, Manalapan, Ocean Ridge, Palm Beach, Palm Beach Shores, Riviera Beach, and West Palm Beach. Because municipal impact fee assessment activities do not culminate in the issuance of county building permits, and existing reports generated by the PZ&B computer system are not programmed to differentiate municipal permit issuance, the magnitude of staff effort associated with these activities is not readily segregated or reported as output performance of the division.

The following graph depicts the volume of permitting and related plans review activities from fiscal year 1993 through fiscal year 2001. Over the course of that

nine year period, the number of permits issued annually by the Building Division increased 2.7 percent, while the number of primary permits issued increased by 11.4 percent, and the number of construction plans reviewed increased by 26.0 percent.⁶

FIGURE 2

**Selected Permitting Activity History
(Fiscal Year 1993 – Fiscal Year 2001)**



Source: *County Administrator's Quarterly Report*.

The greatest portion of staff effort in the building permit issuance process is devoted to the review activities associated with primary permits. Primary permits are permits issued generally for the overall construction of a building or structure; sub-permits may also be issued in connection with that same building or structure, for work on component pieces such as air conditioning, electrical, and plumbing. The review activities required for all of these permits are performed by the permit technicians and plans examiners of the division's Pre-construction Section.

⁶ Sources: (1) Total number of building permits issued and construction plans reviewed was obtained from the *County Administrator's Semiannual Report*; (2) number of primary permits issued was obtained from the PZ&B Building Division "Financial Recap" report. The difference between the total number of permits issued and the number of primary permits issued is principally accounted for by sub-permits. Sub-permits are separate permits that are associated with primary permits for approved construction projects such as single-family dwellings. Sub-permits are normally issued to qualified licensed contractors who provide specialized electrical, plumbing and mechanical (i.e., air conditioning) services to facilitate completion of plans approved under a primary permit.

THE PERMITTING PROCESS

Permitting is governed by Florida Statutes Section 553.79. Building permits result from a sometimes-lengthy process involving information verification and plans review that begins at the point of permit application. Two types of review are involved: a review of zoning conformity and a structural review. Reviews for zoning conformity are conducted by permit technicians to ensure that planned construction conforms to requirements of Article 6 of the Palm Beach County *Unified Land Development Code*. The structural, plumbing, electrical, and mechanical (air conditioning) plan reviews that occur during the permitting process ensure that proposed construction complies with the requirements of the Florida Building Code (Section 553.73 F.S.) and Palm Beach County Amendments to the Florida Building Code.⁷ Plumbing and mechanical plan reviews are not required for residential construction (type-5), while local county amendments to the Code require only a minimal review of electrical plans as they relate to riser diagrams and placement of electrical boxes.

In general, permit applications are processed in their order of intake. Occasionally, applicants may request priority processing. If approved, such “Rush Permit Requests” will re-prioritize an application, placing it ahead of others in-process. Approvals for such requests can be granted only by the division director or Pre-construction Section supervisor. Circumstances considered grounds for approval of “rush” status include emergencies involving health and safety issues, financial hardship or excessive delays caused by government.

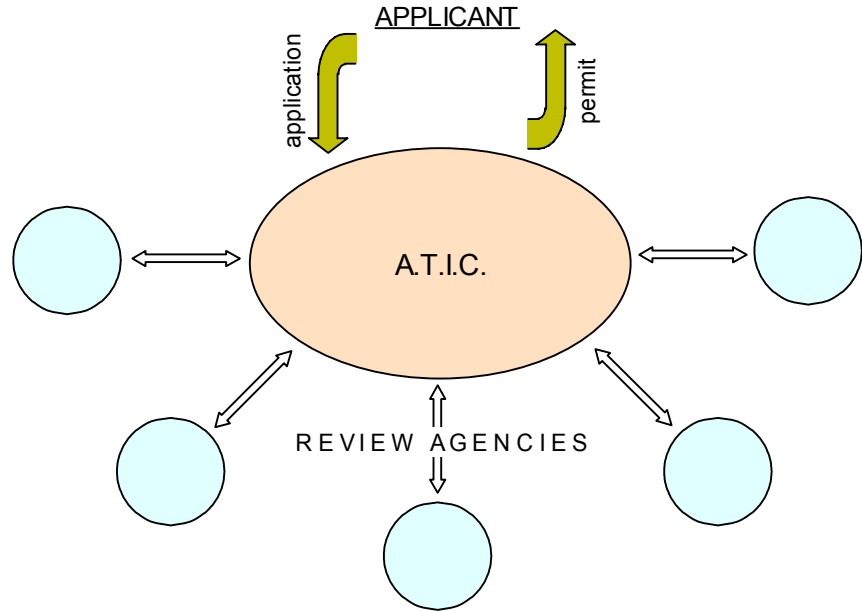
Overview

The permitting process begins with acceptance of an application and required support documentation at the “intake” counter. From there, the application will be processed or distributed for review as necessary by a centralized distribution operation known as Application Tracking and Inventory Control (ATIC). Some of the simpler permit applications do not require any plan review, while others will require distribution to as many as ten organizations for review and approval. If reviews are required, ATIC staff handles the distribution and monitoring of review status throughout the permitting process. This is the “One-Stop” permitting concept established several years ago to accommodate building permit applicants. The number of organizational approvals, as well as the scope of each review, is predicated on the scale and complexity of the proposed construction. During the process, applicants are notified of problems and questions by telephone, and application review status information is available on the Internet.

⁷ Palm Beach County Amendments to the Florida Building Code represent local enhancements to the Florida Building Code that reflect additional local regulation and/or regional differences in construction practice. Amendments become part of the County Code by ordinance and typically occur in response to modifications of the Florida Building Code at the state level.

FIGURE 3

The Building Permit Application Process in Brief



Pertinent application information, review notations and assessed permit fees are captured on the department’s computer system. Data input occurs throughout the permitting process and is performed by numerous staff members representing the various organizations involved at every stage of review and approval. The system is integrated with other functional areas within the department, including Fiscal, Planning and Zoning. It serves as the primary tool for monitoring progress of the permit application throughout the permitting process. Finally, organizations outside of the PZ&B Department, such as the Health Department, have CRT terminal access to the system for the purpose of applying their review comments and approvals.

The same level of review is given to permit applications and construction plans at either the main office or branch locations. Internal movement and distribution of applications and associated plans are less formal at branch locations where staff employees sit in close proximity to each other. Due to the configuration of the work environment and the lower volume of permit applications, staff at branch locations can monitor permit applications in progress by visual identification and physical count methods. The PZ&B computer system is fully available to branch locations and is used to control the permitting process, storing permit information, monitoring review status and issuing building permits. Supervision of the branch permitting process is provided by a Branch Supervisor and a Permit Technician III. Together, they allocate work daily and monitor employee performance. Any re-allocation of

permit application workload from a branch office to the main office requires prior authorization of the Pre-construction Section supervisor.

The Process in Detail

Building permits issued as a result of the permit application and plans review process are categorized into nine types defined by Building Division policy. Table 1 gives an overview of the nine permit types. Permits are issued as either primary permits or sub-permits. Sub-permits are associated with primary permits already issued for construction projects, such as single-family dwellings. Sub-permits are issued to qualified licensed contractors who perform specialized services for the completion of some component of the overall construction

TABLE 1

Permit Types and Target Issuance Times

Permit Type	Desired Initial Review (Workdays)	Description or Example
1	1 – 2 Days	Air Conditioning, Water Heater, Re-roofing
2	1 – 3 Days	Door Window Replacement, Fire Alarm System, Shed, Pool Deck
3	3 – 5 Days	Residential Alterations (1 & 2 Unit): Structural Additions, Garage, Pool, Docks, Interior Alterations
4	5 – 10 Days	Non-Residential and 3 or More Unit Residential Alterations: Structural Additions, Fire Sprinkler Systems, Pool, Storm Shutters
5	10 – 20 Days	Residential 1 & 2 Units: Single Family Dwelling Construction
6	15 – 20 Days	Non-Residential Construction, Mid to High-rise Multi-family dwellings or Multi-Family Dwellings of 3 or more units
7	No Stated Times	Violations
8	5 – 15 Days	Marine Structures: Commercial Docks and Ramps, Multi-Unit Residential Docks and Ramps, Seawalls
9	ASAP All Are "Rush"	Government Projects

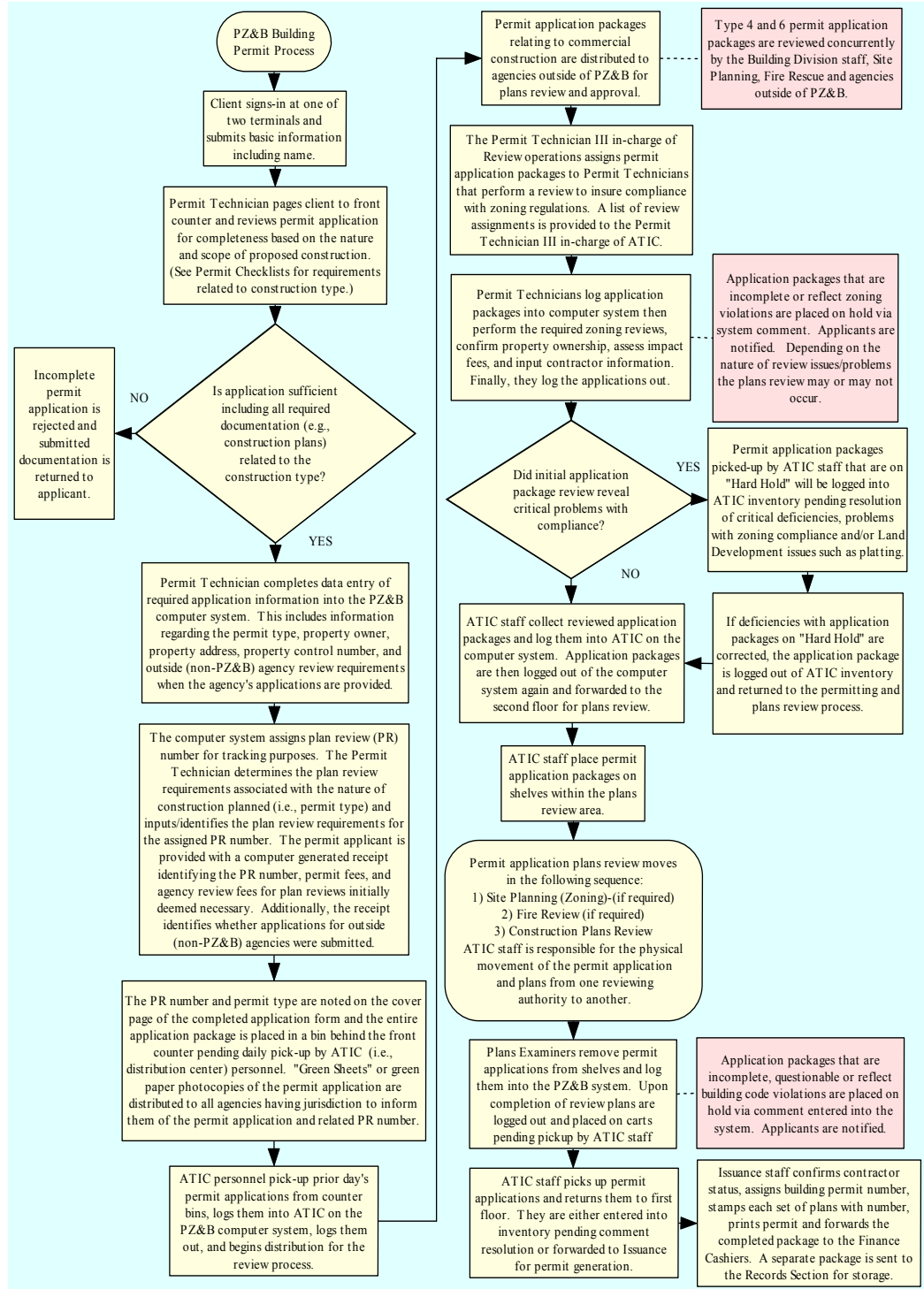
Source: PBC Building Division.

project, such as electrical, plumbing and mechanical work. Issuance of sub-permits generally requires minimal effort involving only verification that the applicant possesses appropriate, valid contractor licenses and the association of the contractor with specific specialized services necessary to complete construction plans already covered by a valid primary permit.

The following page charts the principal stages of the permitting process at the main office location and is indicative of the activities conducted at branch offices, with the exception of the Application Tracking & Inventory Control operation, absent at branch office locations.

FIGURE 4

Detail of Permitting Process



Individuals applying for a building permit enter the first floor lobby of the PZ&B building and enter their names at either of two Building Division computer terminals. The computer notes the time of sign-in and places the applicant's name in a queue that is displayed at the permitting intake counter. Applicants are handled in the order of sign-in and are summoned to the intake counter by announcements over a public address system. A permit technician then asks the applicant several questions to determine the precise nature of the work to be permitted. The application form (Appendix 1) is reviewed to ensure that it contains all relevant information and that all required supporting documentation is available to accompany the application through the review process. At a minimum, such documentation typically includes two sets of surveys and two sets of building construction plans.

Once the application and accompanying documentation are determined to be complete, the permit technician enters the following information into the computer:

- Master Plan [Y/N]
- Concurrent Submission [Y/N] (non-residential /commercial only)
- Number of Units
- Estimated Value of Project or Construction
- Type of Application (see Table 1 page 11)
- City Code if Applicable (e.g., Juno Beach = 028)
- Application Permit Request Number (drop down reference – e.g. 4341 refers to single family residential new construction)

After the required information is entered, the computer calculates the basic application fees and generates a sequential Plan Review number (PR number) that becomes the primary identifier for tracking the application throughout the permitting process.

While the applicant is still with the permit technician, the technician establishes the appropriate reviews associated with the type of permit under consideration. The PZ&B computer system automatically identifies and flags the following reviews:

- Rapid Application Processing (RAP) – front counter intake operations
- Application Tracking & Inventory Control (ATIC) – distribution
- Permit Technician Review of Zoning Issues (Article 6 of the ULDC)
- Building or Structural Plan Review
- Permit Issuance
- Finance Cashiering Operations

Additional reviews are imposed by the permit technician based on the permit type and any other unique circumstances that may be known at this point in the application process. The following list identifies reviews that could be imposed:

- Site Planning (Zoning Division on 4th Floor of PZ&B Building)

- Fire-Rescue
- Monitoring (special restrictions or conditions) – PZ&B Administration
- Addressing (un-platted land or temporary addresses) PZ&B Administration
- Environmental Resource Management Department
- Landscaping (PZ&B Zoning Division)
- Health Department
- Land Development (Engineering Department)

After the appropriate review types are determined and noted on the computer screen, the technician prints the screen for the applicant's information. Additionally, an application receipt identifying the assigned Plan Review number, agency review requirements, and the total review fees assessed to-date is printed. At this point, applicants are required to pay half of the Building Division's assessed fees or the permit application will not proceed further. Fee payments are accepted and processed by the PZ&B cashiering function operated by the Fiscal Section of the PZ&B Administrative Division.

All newly accepted permit applications are placed in containers behind the intake counter. Each container holds a separate permit type. With the exception of type-1 applications, all other applications remain in their respective containers until removed by ATIC staff the following morning. Once applications are removed by the ATIC staff, control over the movement of an application, its plans and other supporting documentation, will be handled by this central distribution group for the remainder of the process.

Type-1 Permit Applications

By their nature, type-1 permit projects do not involve complicated or extensive construction and often involve only water heater or air conditioner replacement. For that reason, some type-1 permit applications do not involve plan review requirements. As a result, type-1 permit applications follow a different processing path than other permit application types. The goal is to issue type-1 building permits within 24 hours of application.

Applications for type-1 permits are processed by permit technicians assigned exclusively to type-1 permit application processing. This process does not utilize the tracking and distribution services of ATIC staff. Technicians access the application information by PR number reference and electronically sign-in the application for review. They perform the zoning reviews intended to insure compliance with the Unified Land Development Code. They also input contractor and/or owner information, property location and the Property Control Number into the computer, and electronically sign-out the application. Provided plan review is not required and no issues have been identified, the technician gives final review approval on-the-spot. These applications are then forwarded directly to the Issuance staff to assign permit numbers and forward issued permits on to the cashiers. Issued permits will be held at the cashier's

office until all required fees have been paid and the permit is picked up by the applicant. Alternatively, if issues have been identified or plans review is required, the permit application is forwarded to plans examiners on the second floor of the building who are assigned to conduct only type-1 plans reviews.

Types 2 Through 9 Permit Applications

The day after initial intake of new applications for permit types 2 through 9, ATIC staff logs-in the applications on the computer using the Plans Review (PR) tracking numbers as references. Distribution of application packets destined for agencies outside the division is made at this point, and ATIC staff logs-out and distributes permit application packets. The Permit Technician III in-charge of review operations receives delivery of packets destined for internal review and determines the assignment of permit application packets to junior-grade permit technicians who are responsible for zoning conformity review. Immediately following, a record of the permit application packet assignments identified by PR number and the permit technician assigned the respective review is provided to the Permit Technician III in-charge of ATIC.

Permit applications for permit types 4 and 6 relate to non-residential modifications and new construction, respectively. These applications require pre-permitting approval by some or all of the following agencies that do not utilize the Building Division Permitting Section application packet for their review processes. In these instances, Permitting staff merely monitors on-line application approval status relative to these agencies.

- Monitoring (special restrictions or conditions) – PZ&B Administration
- Addressing (un-platted land or temporary addresses) PZ&B Administration
- Environmental Resource Management Department
- Landscaping (PZ&B Zoning Division)
- Health Department
- Land Development (Engineering Department)

A concurrent review process is employed for permit types 4 and 6. Applicants are required to submit separate customized packages at application intake for the Permitting Section as well as for the other agencies listed above, except the Health Department. One-way transmittal of respective application packets to other agencies is handled by ATIC staff. Packets for other agencies include the application required by the agency, a “Green Sheet”⁸ and supporting documentation, as necessary. Typically, these packets will be retained by those agencies. Health Department applications are submitted directly to that organization by the applicant. Health Department officials and designated staff at the aforementioned agencies have terminal access to the PZ&B computer system and indicate their approval of permit application materials on-line.

⁸ A “Green Sheet” is a green paper photocopy of the completed Building Division’s pre-construction permit application.

ATIC staff is responsible for monitoring the status of all required approvals throughout the permit application process.

Permit technicians who review these application packets sign-in the packets on the computer using the PR numbers as references. Their review activities and data input responsibilities are much the same as those previously described for type-1 permits. The differences are that permit technicians assigned to these reviews are generally more experienced or possess a higher classification, the proposed construction is more complex and the permit applications may require assessment of county impact fees. If necessary, impact fees for new construction and structural additions are calculated and input by the permit technician. With the exception of the concurrent review process employed for permit application types 4 and 6 (i.e., non-residential construction), permit application review packets move through the stages of the review process on a sequential—rather than concurrent—basis.

Upon completion of their reviews, permit technicians enter their comments and approvals, allowing further processing to occur, or they may place the permit on hold, preventing further processing until some specific condition is met. The permit applications are then returned to containers within the review area for periodic pick-up by ATIC staff. ATIC staff will again log-in the applications and log them out to the next agency requiring review and approval. Permit application packets are distributed by ATIC staff for additional internal reviews in the following sequence, depending on the required reviews identified at intake.

- Site Planning (Zoning Division on 4th Floor of PZ&B Building)
- Fire-Rescue
- Construction Plans Review

Upon delivery of the permit application packet by ATIC staff to each successive agency, the processes of signing-in and signing-out the permit application are the same as previously described. Similarly, approvals and review comments are entered on computer. Each agency reviews the information contained in the permit application packet from the perspective of its own professional discipline. Plans examiners review construction plans against requirements of the Florida Building Code and county amendments to that code.

Permit application packets requiring construction plans review are delivered to specific areas of the second floor according to the type of plans to be reviewed. An area has been set aside along one wall where a matrix of shelving has been erected to hold residential permit application packets of varying types and for specific high volume contractors and developers. Non-residential permit applications for type-4 and type-6 permits are delivered to an area near the office of the Plans Review Supervisor (Commercial). That particular Plans Review Supervisor is responsible for the allocation of plan reviews relative to non-residential permit applications.

All plans examiners know which plans they are qualified to review based on the state licenses they possess. Furthermore, the twelve plans examiners assigned to residential plans review at the main office have been divided into two teams, each responsible for general plans review as well as the review of application plans for specific high volume production builders. Residential plans review work is not specifically assigned by a supervisor but rather plans remain on the second floor shelves pending review by the next available qualified plans examiner. A residential project manager heads each of the two residential teams and acts as liaison to contractors and developers regarding review issues.

Besides the usual sign-in, plan review comments, approval and sign-out routines performed, plans examiners are required to complete data input of information required on the following computer screens:

- PZSR and PZS3 – Monitoring Supplemental Permit Requirements
- PZFB – Building Review Fee Assessment - Either Original Estimate or Revised Valuation
- PZDA – Drop-Down “Flood Zone Codes” (e.g., A, A7, AO, etc.)
- PZDA – Drop-down “Class Code Table” Box (e.g., Single Family, Duplex, etc.)
- PZDA – Drop-down “Action Codes” Box (e.g., Construction, Addition, etc.)

Following completion of reviews by plans examiners, application construction plans are returned to the same general areas on the second floor, from where ATIC staff periodically pick-up and return them to the ATIC inventory on the main floor. Once all required plan review approvals have been entered, ATIC staff forwards the application and plans to the Issuance group. ATIC retains in inventory all applications and plans that are on hold or that still lack necessary approvals.

Issuance staff reviews to ensure all required information has been entered into the computer and that it is in agreement with the information contained in the application. When all requirements for issuance have been met, staff issues the next sequential building permit number, stamps each page of the approved plans with the building permit number and prints the building permit. Except where type-1 building permits are involved, all applicants should receive a telephone call advising them that their permits are ready for pickup. Applicants can also check on the status of pending applications at any time on the PZ&B Internet website. Finally, the original building permit and approved plans are sent to a cashier on the main floor pending payment of any remaining fees. A copy of the building permit is sent to the PZ&B Records group for filing.

STAFFING CONSIDERATIONS

The Pre-Construction Section currently has an authorized staffing complement of 76 full-time positions. This number has increased by eleven positions since the end of fiscal year 2000, although vacant positions routinely account for approximately 15 percent of the authorized workforce. Over the last thirteen calendar quarters, the number of authorized staff positions actually filled has averaged 84.1 percent, as depicted in Figure 5.

TABLE 2

**Pre-Construction Section
Authorized Staff Position Allocation**

Position Classification	September 1999	September 2000	September 2001	July 2002
Pre-Construction Supervisor	1	1	1	1
Permit Coordinator	1	1	1	1
Plans Review Supv (Commercial/Resid.)	1	1	1	1
Branch Supervisor	1	1	2	3
Plans Examiner III	0	0	17	21
Plans Examiner II	18	20	8	5
Plans Examiner I	8	6	3	2
Permit Technician III	3	3	3	4
Permit Technician II	11	11	11	9
Permit Technician I	10	10	12	14
Code, Product, Training Supervisor	0	0	0	1
Code, Product, Training Coordinator	1	1	2	1
Clerical Specialist	4	5	6	13
Data Entry Clerk	6	5	7	0
Total Authorized Positions	65	65	74[§]	76

Source: Department Complement Report CBD200R01

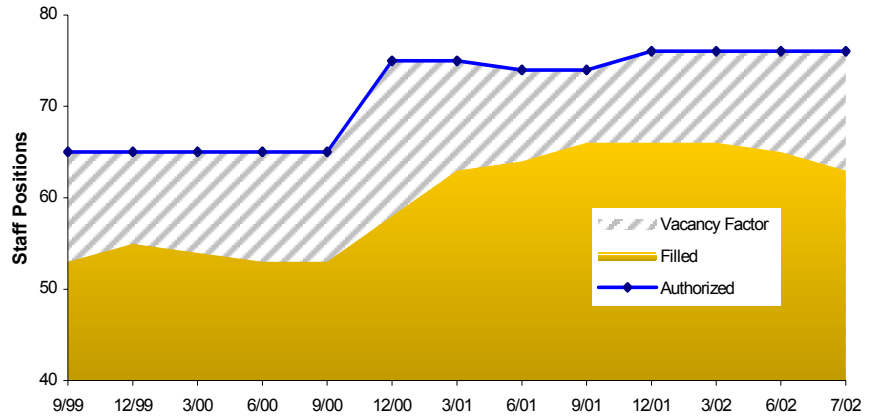
§ Nine positions added for opening of the new Western branch office

Staff turnover for the entire Building Division averaged 6.2 percent annually over the five-year period ending September 30, 2001. The Pre-Construction Section lost 22 employees during the five-year period while Inspections lost 27 employees. A review of classifications of employees lost by Pre-construction during the period revealed no concentrations among any particular occupation or classification, and there appeared to be no discernable pattern or trend among those who left employment during that time.

In contrast, utilization of overtime by the Building Division has been more than double the countywide average since fiscal year 1998. Overtime currently accounts for approximately 4.5 percent of total divisional productive hours. Its usage persists as an apparent means of offsetting shortages in productivity caused by the Section’s inability to maintain full staffing of approved positions

FIGURE 5

**Pre-Construction Section
Recent Staffing Complement and Position Vacancy History**



Source: Department Complement Report CBD200R01.

and because of increased sick leave utilization during recent years. For over two-and-one-half years, since January 2000, typical overtime authorized division-wide during any bi-weekly pay period has exceeded 500 hours. This amounts to a functional equivalent of 6.25 full-time positions, at an annual cost to the division of approximately \$420,000. Figures 6 and 7 show overtime utilization as a percentage of regular staff hours worked and as total hours worked per pay period, respectively.

FIGURE 6

**Overtime Utilization of Building Division Compared With Countywide
(Fiscal Year 1997 - Fiscal Year 2002)**

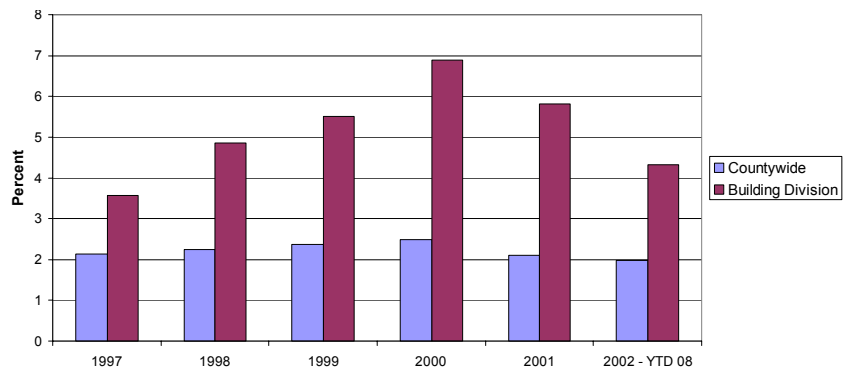
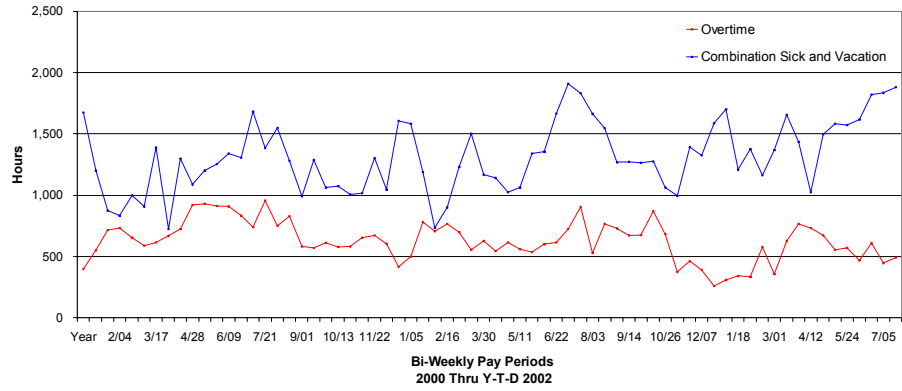


FIGURE 7

**History of Overtime Hours Utilized
(Calendar Year 2000 – Calendar Year 2002)**

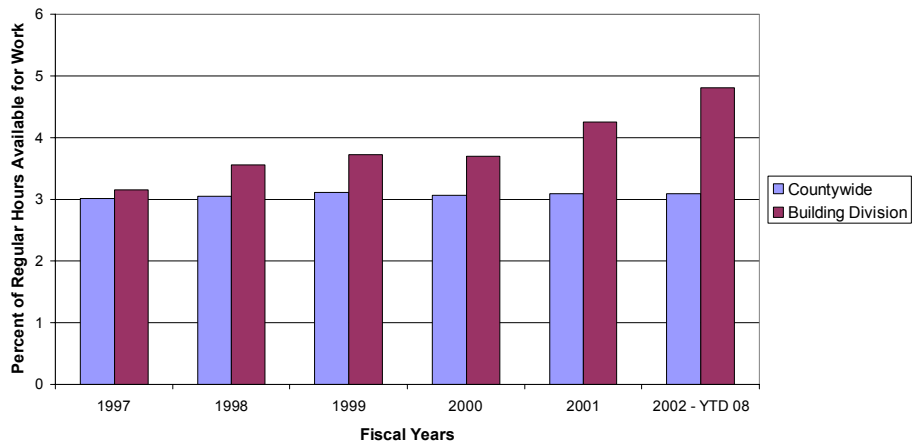


Note: Bi-weekly average expenditures = \$16,158; annual average = \$420,110.

Sick leave utilization by Building Division staff has been increasing as a percent of regular hours available for work since fiscal year 1999-2000. The graph in Figure 8 compares the Building Division’s usage of sick leave with the countywide average.

FIGURE 8

**History of Sick Leave Usage
(Fiscal Year 1997 – Fiscal Year 2002)**



Source: Finance Department report no. ZOT4510B

During the course of this study, the project consultant observed that permit technicians and clerical specialists at the main office were assigned to separate groups of three teams each, designated red, white and blue, respectively. The three teams of clerical specialists rotated between ATIC and Issuance duties monthly, while the three teams of permit technicians were on daily rotations to the application intake and customer assistance counters. By the end of fieldwork for this project, the teams had been dissolved and the rotation of clerical staff had been abandoned, in favor of more permanent assignments in ATIC and Issuance. Permit technicians, however, continue with their daily rotation to the intake and customer assistance counters based on an established schedule.

In-house Training

Officially, the responsibility for training in the Building Division rests with a newly-created Codes, Products and Training Section comprising three employees: a supervisor, coordinator and an engineering assistant. Thus far, the focus of the new section has been on information dissemination more than on employee development. To-date, a formalized training curriculum has not yet been developed, although the section serves as an information and referral service by investigating and disseminating updates on issues dealing with Building Code changes, construction materials ratings and specifications, and on controversial topics involving construction plans and zoning reviews. Such information is publicized through e-mails, memoranda and discussions during staff meetings. Formal task training aimed at improving job performance occurs only on a sporadic basis. What functional skills employees learn in connection with their position responsibilities they learn through observation and other forms of informal on-the-job training.

WORKLOAD ACTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE LEVELS

The primary output of the Pre-construction Section is the building permit, which represents the end product of a sometimes-lengthy application process involving information verification and plans review. Because staff resources expended on this process vary significantly with the scale and complexity of proposed construction, the volume of building permits issued is, by itself, insufficient for establishing the investment of staff effort, the effectiveness of the plans review or the efficiency of performance. Currently, periodic internal reports provide information regarding the quantities and types of primary permits issued, the corresponding average total elapsed times between the dates of application and permit issuance, and the quantities of permit application plans reviewed, by type, for each individual staff member.

There is a high level of interest among local developers and builders on maintenance of an acceptable length of time between permit application and permit issuance (i.e., permit turnaround time). While there are no universally

accepted turnaround times identified by the building industry, division management seeks to maintain processing times that are acceptable to the local construction industry. The only state mandated time standard for permitting is for single-family residential dwellings, that is, type-5 permits. Section 553.79 (13), Florida Statutes, essentially requires that such building permits be issued within 30 working days from application, excluding any time needed to make corrections and/or modifications to the original application plans.

Published data regarding the Building Division’s permitting operation was reviewed in order to identify program workload and performance. Available reports provide information in two broad categories—one that monitors the quantities of permits issued by permit type, and the other that reflects the number of plan reviews conducted. The former category is intended to address permit volumes and throughput times as workload measures, while the latter represents an effort to monitor employee performance by tabulating the number of plans reviewed by each employee. In each case, the few available computerized reports provided insufficient data to fully analyze section performance, whether from a workload, turnaround time or employee performance perspective. Manual compilation of the missing information was not an option due to the high permit volumes and complexities of the data involved.

Generally speaking, periodic Pre-construction Section reports relating to application volumes, permit issuance and turnaround times were confusing in their intent, and contained data that were contradictory from one report to the next. The project consultant met frequently with representatives of the PZ&B Information Technology Services (ITS) Section in an effort to understand exactly what data was being reported and to assess its accuracy. After some effort by ITS staff, the project consultant attained a degree of confidence in the weekly report PZB130R2 which identifies the total number of primary building permits issued by permit type, including gross average turnaround times.⁹ Gross average turnaround time would not be the most useful tool for evaluating operational efficiency of the permitting process because it includes holidays, weekends and accumulated time awaiting applicant responses to correct submittal deficiencies. In other words, some portion of the time represented by that statistic is for non-work days and for time lost due to applicant error. The current computerized permit tracking system cannot accurately report average turnaround times *net* of applicant-caused delays.

Other portions of report PZB130R2 do present workload and performance data which are more useful. The numbers of primary permits issued during a recent one-year period, and the distribution of those permits by type, are shown in

⁹ “Gross average turnaround time” is the arithmetic mean of the sum of the number of days between the date of application intake and date of permit issuance for all permits issued during a given period of time. It includes holidays, weekends and time accumulated waiting for applicant corrections to application deficiencies.

Table 3, along with the gross average turnaround times for permits issued during the month of April 2002. Because permit types 1 through 6 tend to increase in complexity, the table offers some insights into the composition of productive output by not only quantity, but by difficulty as well.

In the absence of systematic computerized reporting, an estimate of net processing time was recently made by the section supervisor, employing a manual calculation that relied on data sampling methodology. As of mid-July 2002, that calculation estimated that net turnaround time for residential permitting—type-5 permits only—stood at 24 days as of that point in time.¹⁰ By contrast, the gross average turnaround time for the same two-week period of July was 63 days, according to departmental report no. PZB130R2.

TABLE 3

Primary Permits Issued Over a Twelve Month Period

Permit Type	Primary Permits Issued – Total for 12 Month Period	Percent of Total Permits Issued	Average Gross Turnaround Time During April 2002
1	21,748	58.59%	6
2	6,859	18.48%	34
3	3,044	8.20%	37
4	962	2.59%	43
5	3,980	10.72%	67
6	130	0.35%	103
7	215	0.58%	39
8	33	0.09%	0
9	149	0.40%	16
Totals	37,120	100.00%	

Source: Report no. PZB130R2 for the 12-month period ended April 2002.

Assessment of county impact fees relating to municipal building permit applications and the processing of county building permit revisions represent two workload responsibilities that are not reflected in the division’s management reporting.¹¹ During July 2002 alone, permit technicians assessed county impact

¹⁰ “Net average turnaround time” represents the number of days during which a permit application and its accompanying construction plans were “active” within the permitting process. It represents the arithmetic mean number of days from the date of application intake to the date that either building permits were issued or some action by Building Division staff prevented issuance of the permits, less holidays and weekend time. Application or construction plan deficiencies will result in a delay in permit issuance until such time as the applicant remedies the deficiencies.

¹¹ Permit revisions are required when material changes are proposed to construction plans for which a building permit has already been issued. Permit revisions are tracked by the PZ&B computer system utilizing the same PR number issued at permit application intake.

fees on 151 construction plans (annualized at 1,800±) relating to municipal building permit applications. Similarly, more than 1,400 county building permit revisions were processed year-to-date July 2002 by both permit technicians and plans examiners. The work effort associated with those two activities goes largely unreported.

Municipal building permit applicants requiring the calculation of county impact fees are issued PR numbers, but no county building permits are issued. Thus, because most management information reports focus on the output of building permits (and reliable reports on the intake volume do not exist at all), the numbers of these assessment applications—and the work effort they represent—are not evident. One report provided monthly to the office of the Impact Fee Coordinator, PZB270R1, reflects the type and dollar amount of county impact fees assessed during the month by municipality, impact fee zone and PR number. However, it neither summarizes the total number of PRs nor gives workload credit to the permit technicians who performed the assessments.

Building permit revision intake, distribution and manual tracking activities are performed by staff of ATIC. All plan review revisions and permit revisions are noted in the computerized permit record under the same PR numbers issued to the *original* applications, but the entries exist only as text annotations, and not as separately identifiable activities. This causes the management information reports to effectively ignore the workload and output efforts associated with plan revisions. The only computerized evidence of the building permit revisions is found on notation screens associated with the original PR numbers. For the same reason, revision plan reviews are not reflected on monthly employee performance reports for either permit technicians or plans examiners. Thus, while reports such as PZB183U1 do reflect the quantity of reviews by permit type and relative value of construction (and both may reflect relative complexity), they appear to credit technicians and plans examiners with only one review per PR number, even when numerous applicant modifications and/or corrections may have occurred during the permitting process.

Monthly reports reflecting employee performance in terms of the number of plans reviewed derive their data from the respective PZ&B computer system employee sign-on identifications. The reports reflect the cumulative total number of plans reviewed by permit type, a total of all reviews conducted and a cumulative dollar valuation of the associated construction for each employee. Review activities for all employees are presented on a couple of pages and do not provide any historical perspective for developing a conclusion regarding trends in employee performance over time. Finally, the reports do not reflect plans review activity associated with post-issuance construction plan changes to permits (i.e., permit revisions).

COMPARISON OF PERMITTING: OTHER FLORIDA COUNTIES AND MUNICIPALITIES

The City of Hollywood and Orange County building permit operations were initially included in the scope of this study. Hollywood was chosen because of the level of automation associated with its on-line plans review process while Orange County was chosen because it is considered comparable to Palm Beach County. Based on input from the county’s Building Official, the initial comparables scheduled for inclusion in this study were expanded and telephone surveys were conducted of officials representing permitting operations in Polk County, Duval County/City of Jacksonville, and City of Orlando. The project consultant visited the City of Hollywood and conducted on-site staff interviews.

The following table presents the information collected from the telephone survey. As one sees, the information varies so widely that no conclusions can be reached regarding the relationship of staffing permit volumes. Achieving sufficient knowledge to address those issues would require a more in-depth understanding of the respective processes, extent of plans review, and assigned responsibilities of staff for each of the jurisdictions involved.

TABLE 4

**Summary of Permitting Operations
at Selected Florida Jurisdictions
(Fiscal Year 2001)**

Activity/Performance Measure	Palm Beach County	Orange County	City of Hollywood	Polk County	Duval County	City of Orlando
Total No. of Permits	49,486	73,300	17,126	4,662	80,000	18,419
Primary Permits	38,532	20,000	n/a	4,662	20,000	5,872
Construction Plans Reviewed	41,859	3,600	n/a	n/a	20,000	5,872
Net Turnaround Time: SFD	n/a	20 Days	10 Days	1 Day	Several Weeks	2 Days
# Clerical Specialists	13	n/a	Numerous	n/a	2	n/a
Permit Techs	27	40	n/a	13	6	10
Plans Examiners	32	16	13	6	8	12

Several years ago, Orange County officials utilized the Palm Beach County Building Division’s permitting operation as a basis for modifying their own. Their operation is very similar to that of Palm Beach County except that their permit technicians are employees of their Zoning Division. Intake, distribution and approval monitoring services are performed by Orange County for both their own permitting operation as well as for outside agencies that require approval of various aspects of proposed construction plans. Among the

Differences in organization, permitting practices, local adopted codes, and record-keeping around the state make agency-to-agency comparisons minimally useful.

jurisdictions surveyed, only Palm Beach County, Orange County and the City of Orlando provide these services on behalf of external agencies. The other jurisdictions allowed intake of permit applications and related construction plans but applicants were informed verbally and in writing that permits would not be issued until all approvals by outside agencies had been obtained.

Although not required by the Florida Building Code for construction of single family dwellings for one and two families, only Polk County and the City of Orlando did not perform plans review of electrical, plumbing and mechanical (i.e., air conditioning) work associated with construction. All remaining jurisdictions admitted to some degree of plans review for electrical, plumbing and mechanical work. For some jurisdictions, the reviews were required by local amendments to the Florida Building Code, while for others it was more a matter of tradition. Palm Beach County’s local amendments to the Florida Building Code do require plans review of minimal information relating to proposed electrical work, but the division will conduct plans review of proposed electrical, plumbing and mechanical work to the extent they are included in the applicants’ submittals.

Findings and Recommendations

This part of the report is divided into three sections—General Findings, Recommendations, and Implementation Plan. As appropriate, analyses of the issues are included in each of these sections. We begin by summarizing the essential conclusions reached by the study team as a result of our work on behalf of the department.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The preceding sections of this report have described the current organization and permitting process of the Building Division’s Pre-construction Section, its workload, performance and available staffing. Through a process of on-site observations, interviews with employees and managers, and a review of available documentary data, the study team offers its assessment of the staffing adequacy, opportunities for improvement in the permitting process and guidance regarding reasonable cycle times for permit applications handled by the section.

The essential conclusions we have reached are that: 1) the volume of permits issued each year has remained generally static over the past decade while the number of plans reviewed increased; 2) the long permit processing times experienced during the latter half of 2001 and early 2002 were less the result of systemic deficiencies with the existing permitting process than they were the result of numerous individual situations; 3) the permitting process can be improved by segregating type-1 applications at intake; 4) certain staffing practices of the section are not cost effective; 5) current reports produced in the

division provide management inadequate information about application volumes, process delays and staff efforts in permitting activities; and, 6) training programs directed at increasing the functional performance of employees are needed.

The following specific findings describe the study team's conclusions in detail, and are the bases for recommendations that follow later in the next section of the report.

During FY 2002, permitting turnaround time was adversely affected by the convergence of numerous operational conditions during the same general period of time

The study team found no catastrophic flaws in the existing permitting process to cause permit issuance times to stretch to undesirable lengths during the first half of fiscal year 2002. Rather, we found that numerous, lesser operational factors converged to produce that outcome. The study team found that each of the following circumstances occurred at about the same time in the fall and winter of 2001 and had the dual effects of increasing permit application inventories while at the same time slowing permit issuance rates:

- County development impact fees increased on October 1, 2001. Past rate increases resulted in higher application volume just before the new rates took effect;
- Changes to the Florida Building Code became effective on March 1, 2002 triggering some increase in new permit applications by those desiring to have constructions plans reviewed in accordance with old code standards;
- The number of filled staff positions in the Pre-construction Section was 10 positions, approximately 13 percent, below the full staff complement authorized at the time;
- Overtime utilization was lower than usual while, at the same time, absences for vacation and sick leave were unusually high in the period between early November 2001 and the end of March 2002 (ref. Figure 7 page 20);
- Approximately 60 "Rush Permit Requests" were approved and entered into process during this six-month period. While this was not an unusual number of such requests, the staff effort required of priority processing causes delays to applications already in process and contributes to longer turnaround times for applications which must follow the normal process;
- Permit Technician IIIs—the first line supervisory staff in the permit technician classification series—were unsure of their supervisory roles with respect to managing daily operations, assigning work and monitoring employee performance;
- The October 2001 opening of the west county branch office in Royal Palm Beach temporarily diverted existing human resources. Work

assignments and applications in-process suffered during this period as staff assignments were frequently modified and work was re-routed in an attempt to follow employees to new locations. Two experienced permit technicians from the main office were reassigned to the west county office. Adding to the confusion, five of the entry level permit technicians assigned to the main office had less than one year of pertinent experience;

- Branch office staff transferred permit applications to the main office for processing whenever, in their opinion, processing backlogs became sizeable. Transfers often occurred without the prior authorization of the Pre-construction Section supervisor or the Permit Coordinator, and without notifying ATIC. This resulted in the temporary loss of tracking control, imposition of unanticipated workload on main office staff and the need to make reactionary management decisions;
- ATIC and Issuance staff were rotated among various job functions on a monthly basis. This monthly rotation was not universally accepted by the staff and led to a degree of confusion and even some animosity as employees periodically switched duties, responsibilities and workloads. A similar daily rotation by teams of permit technicians moving between zoning review responsibilities and application intake at the front counter further contributed to the “musical chairs” work environment. Any efficiency improvements which might be gained from job specialization and continuity were lost in that environment;
- Computerized reports available to division management provided insufficient information about application intake volumes, net turnaround times and the age of permit applications in-process to be of much value in providing advance warning of deteriorating operational conditions;
- The resolution of several personnel issues involving division and section management consumed staff time and distracted employees from fully focusing on daily operational duties.

Permit issuance turnaround time has improved since last winter, and there are opportunities to improve it further.

Review agencies outside the building division affect permit processing times

Some portion of the 50,000 permits issued annually in the county requires review and approval by as many as ten departments and agencies. The building division initially accepts permit application packets for those departments and agencies (except those for the Health Department) and, thereafter, coordinates all review approvals—including those required by other county departments and outside agencies—before the process is completed and the required permits can finally be issued by the division. Approval delays by those other departments and outside agencies slow the issuance of these permits and increase inventories of applications-in-process. The division is unable to systematically pinpoint these delays; no departmental reports currently provide detailed information regarding components of turnaround time attributable to other departments or

There is no reliable means of internal notification that all application reviews have been completed, and that the permit is ready for issuance.

outside agencies. When issuance of a permit is delayed awaiting approval by a department or agency outside of Pre-construction control, the application-in-process becomes part of ATIC inventory and remains there until the last of the approvals is received. But even then, the application may not be expeditiously forwarded on to the Issuance group, because ATIC has not devised a reliable means of internal notification that all outside reviews have been completed. Applicants have come to ATIC to inquire about the status of their permits to discover that their applications could have been moved on to Issuance but were not detected in inventory. This was directly observed by the study consultant. All of these delays are included in what gets reported as the gross average turnaround time for permit issuance.

Completely separating the intake and handling of type-1 permits from all other permits will remove a process impediment and should improve application intake for all permit types

At present, applications for all permit types are received for initial processing at the same public intake counter at the main office of PZ&B. From that point on, type-1 permits are handled differently from other permit types, because of their less complicated nature and fewer reviews. This is an appropriate operational distinction to make, but it does not go far enough. During the 12-months ended April 2002, type-1 permits accounted for nearly 60% of all permit applications handled by the Pre-construction section. There were 3½ times as many type-1 applications handled during that time as the next closest category of permit. Separating the intake of type-1 applications would remove the largest group of applicants from the queue and speed the line for other applicants. Applicants seeking type-1 permits should be served by a separate intake group, dealing with staff specifically trained and focused on the narrower issues common to this group of permits. Both applicant groups should benefit from that change.

Processing of subdivision building permits for production homebuilders can be improved

Production homebuilders often build dozens of the same model houses at each subdivision. This allows developers to take advantage of economies of scale and efficiency from standardization. It also allows for more efficient review and approval of subdivision permit applications, although the division has not fully capitalized on the efficiencies possible.

Each subdivision may have a half-dozen or more different house models for which master plans are submitted for structural review and approval. Once the master plans are approved, individual permits are often little more than copies of the master plans, occasionally with minor variations for amenities, such as reconfigured driveways, enclosed lanais, optional fireplaces, and the like. For that reason, processing subdivision building permits has the potential for a high degree of efficiency, once the initial master plans have been reviewed and approved. Indeed, the division follows the industry practice of reviewing master plans in order to reduce the subsequent plans review required of each individual

permit. However, accountability for the review of the individual permit applications is not vested in the same plans examiner who conducted the initial master plan reviews. Anyone in the assigned group of residential examiners is free to review each separate permit application as he or she gets to it. The better practice would be for the individual plans examiner who conducted the review of the master plan to process the copies. By making small revisions in its review procedures, as recommended later in this report, the division can realize the full value of efficiencies available from the standardization of plans.

Florida law allows permit applicants to use the services of private architectural and engineering providers for plans review and certain inspections

As an alternative to waiting for building division staff to conduct plans reviews and selected inspections, Section 553.791 Florida Statutes (Appendix 2), allows for the contracting of private providers, defined as either engineers licensed under chapter 471 or architects licensed under chapter 481 of the Florida Statutes. Applicants have this option available to them if permit issuance times stretch beyond acceptable limits. The law provides that in instances involving the use of private contractors for plans review, the local building official must issue a building permit within 30 business days of permit application or give the applicant written notice of specific plan features that do not comply with applicable codes. In the case of inspections, the building official has two business days after receipt of a request to issue a certificate of occupancy or provide notice to the applicant identifying specific deficiencies. In either case, the use of an outside engineer or architect only provides insurance that either the building permit or certificate of occupancy will be issued within prescribed times, barring any non-compliant plan features or construction deficiencies. However, in its current form, the law may not be much of a benefit as an alternative review method. In particular, the law requires that all non-structural permitting approvals by other review agencies, for such things as zoning conformity, fire regulations, and environmental and health requirements, be obtained by the private provider as a *prerequisite* to applying for a building permit. Hence, unless the applicant first provided the building division all of the approvals from those outside agencies before filing for a building permit, the statutory issuance times would not apply.

The division conducts reviews of residential electrical, plumbing and mechanical plans even though such reviews are not required

Residential plumbing and mechanical plans are not required to be examined at all, and only a minimal examination of electrical plans is required by the local amendments to the Florida Building Code. Nevertheless, the Pre-construction section has historically undertaken full reviews of such plans, and continues the tradition of reviewing all residential electrical, plumbing and mechanical plans to the extent they are submitted with applications. This creates an unknown, but unnecessary, workload that is not required by either the Florida Building Code or county amendments to that code.

The building division lacks the tools it needs to effectively monitor workload and program performance, and to make fully informed staffing decisions

The division’s existing management reports are not adequate to meet minimum standards of performance monitoring and internal controls. In particular, the study team found significant limitations in three separate areas:

- Application intake volume versus permit output, average time to completion of the initial plans review, net average permitting turnaround time and employee performance are all factors to be weighed against desired goals or objectives in order to draw conclusions regarding the adequacy of service delivery. At present, none of this information is readily available and the only published performance objectives are the desired average turnaround times for completion of the initial plans reviews associated with most permit types. Because actual results are not available for comparison with these objectives, section management cannot reasonably determine the attainment of stated goals for any given period of time. The existing, informal performance objectives should be formalized and adopted, subject to review as better data become available.

Appendix 3 to this report contains a set of charts of weekly gross average turnaround times associated with the various building permit types for a 79-week period from January 21, 2001 through July 21, 2002. The charts are included for reference only to show trends in permit application cycle times from intake to issuance. As we have previously commented, gross average turnaround time is not the most useful measure of operational efficiency of the process because it includes holidays, weekends and accumulated time waiting for applicant responses to correct submittal deficiencies. A more meaningful statistic is *net* average turnaround time showing the time required by the process itself, without the time distortions of application errors and deficiencies. However, the computerized permit tracking system cannot currently report turnaround times net of such applicant-caused delays, and manual calculations would be prohibitively cumbersome (and unreliable) to make on a regular basis.

- Employee performance data are incomplete for analysis purposes and are presented in a form that conveys large amounts of raw data that must first be distilled to be useful. Permit applications vary widely as to complexity, so measuring only the quantity of reviews completed by each employee cannot give a complete picture of employee performance. Existing report formats result in a compilation of incomplete data rather than in readily usable management information for evaluating staff performance.

Monthly report “PZB183U1” (Appendix 4) reflects the cumulative total number of plans reviewed by permit type, a total of all reviews conducted and a cumulative dollar valuation of the associated construction for each employee. Monthly review activities for all employees are presented on relatively few pages that do not provide any historical perspective for readily

detecting performance trends over time. This is especially true for the work of the permit technicians; data on the number of plan reviews conducted by plans examiners are slightly more detailed. But individual plan review types (building, plumbing, electrical and mechanical) must still be compiled manually to arrive at the total number of plans reviewed by each plans examiner. The report also does not reflect the number of repeat plan reviews brought about by modifications to applications in-process, or re-reviews necessitated by applicant requests for significant post-issuance construction plan changes (i.e., permit revisions). Finally, staff effort associated with the assessment of county impact fees related to construction within municipalities is not captured. Assessment of county impact fees relating to municipal building permit applications and the processing of county building permit revisions represent two significant workload responsibilities that are not reflected in periodic management reporting. In its current state, report “PZB183U1” is not useful for evaluating workload distribution or individual employee performance.

- There are no reliable means of monitoring permit inventories. The inventory of applications-in-process is a good leading indicator of permit turnaround times, and reports on the inventory of building permit applications-in-process can assist management to take timely action. Excessive inventory buildup should be one of the first warning signs for managers and supervisors to base preventive actions on, avoiding the need for reactive decision-making to recover from cycle times have already increased to unacceptable lengths.

Currently, information regarding the composition of permit applications-in-process (i.e., inventory) can only be obtained through manual efforts, and periodic reports that provide information on the characteristics of the inventory do not exist at all. Even basic inferences regarding inventory cannot be drawn by comparing application intake and permit output because the report showing permit application intake volume data (PZB181R1) presents confusing, erroneous and contradictory information.

In each of these examples, the missing management tools not only limit the division’s early ability to anticipate workload and performance changes while intervention is still possible, but they also deprive management of an important body of operational intelligence that can point to opportunities for process improvements.

The proposed e-PZB computer application can help the permitting process if the division develops clear requirements for data capture, process flow, and management information reporting in advance of system design and installation

The proposed e-PZB program is presently scheduled for implementation in 2004. Intended to be an enterprise-wide resource planning system, e-PZB has the potential for bringing together important operational, management, and

regulatory information across organizational lines in a manner that could benefit all PZ&B department functions. According to the ISS project manager on this application, the programming team is scheduled to begin design work in April 2003, at which time such issues as data capture, process flow, and reporting requirements will be decided, in consultation with division management.¹²

There may be a tendency on the part of some to imagine that installation of a new computer program is all that is necessary to overcome existing data and management information deficiencies. With a custom-built application such as *e-PZB*, this will not be the case. For effective implementation of the program, it is vital that users provide the design team detailed requirements for what data must be captured, where those data come from, how they are to be captured into the system (keyed or uploaded from transportable media), what data access is required (at a centralized point or distributed), what data audits are required before transfer to the permanent database, how users expect to interface with the system, and what, when and how data are to be reported and to whom.

Some of the data deficiencies the study team found are primarily limitations of data reporting, but there are also data capture issues which the new computer system must overcome. Inherently, the manner in which the existing system treats re-reviews of plans in process and post-issuance permit revisions understates workload and masks production time lost due to applicant-caused errors and project changes. In the design of the *e-PZB* permitting module, these shortcomings can be remedied. However, division management must first examine the process implications associated with making those changes to avoid unintended consequences. Post-issuance permit revisions, in particular, have process implications to consider. For example, simply assigning new plan review numbers to revisions to issued permits could (1) mistakenly trigger new impact fee demands; (2) cause loss of tracking control over the underlying permit; (3) create an inventory of issued permits erroneously awaiting certificates of occupancy.

The current rotation of permit technician assignments at the main office could be made more effective by reducing rotation frequency

The practice of rotating staff through various assignments appears to be appropriate for the work of the permit technicians. Rotation helps in cross-training this important group of staff, at the same time that it limits the amount of time that individuals are required to perform less desirable aspects of the permitting process, giving everyone the opportunity to gain experience in the more challenging and rewarding aspects of the job. As it is presently practiced, the rotation of technicians is designed to limit to one day the amount of time spent at the public counter before returning to on-going duties involving plan reviews. Individual technicians may then spend several consecutive days

¹² Source: Personal interview with Fernando Cevallos, July 26, 2002.

performing these review activities before once again returning to the public counter for one day.

There are good reasons to increase the rotation time spent performing customer service and/or intake duties at the public counter. From the perspective of the customer, a longer rotation would bring a welcome measure of continuity to customers who are returning within a day or two of original submittal to correct a deficiency, only to find new staff who are unfamiliar with their issues. Beyond that, although public counter duty is not highly sought-after among the staff, there are techniques for excelling at direct customer contact that cannot be effectively learned and developed without some amount of practice.

Use of overtime to overcome the section’s continuing vacancy factor is a needlessly expensive staffing strategy

Sustained use of significant amounts of overtime while approved vacancies are available to be filled is not cost effective or desirable as a long-term strategy. Use of overtime by the building division is more than twice the countywide average, typically exceeding 500 hours during most bi-weekly pay periods (ref., Figures 6 & 7). Overtime regularly contributes approximately 4.5 percent of total productive hours in the division and amounts to almost 6.25 full time equivalents, costing nearly \$420,000 annually. A graph of overtime utilization for the past three years reveals some cyclical fluctuation, but baseline use suggests the need to hire additional staff rather than continue a heavy reliance on time purchased at premium salary rates. Even if advanced starting salaries were necessary to attract candidates with suitable experience and credentials, hiring more plans examiners could save money.

As of July 2002, the building division had 190 authorized positions, 23 of which were vacant. The Pre-construction Section accounted for 76 authorized positions and 13 vacancies. Concerning those vacancies, division management has cited some difficulties hiring experienced and licensed plans examiners, particularly during times when the regional economy has been robust and local building construction strong. That view is shared to a limited extent at the Employee Relations and Personnel Department, although compensation studies of the local market have recently concluded that the division’s salary structure is competitive.¹³ One factor in particular suggests to us that staffing-up to a higher level should be possible. During fiscal year 2001 nine positions were added to the Pre-construction complement, primarily to provide staffing for the west county branch office when it opened in October 2001. The Pre-construction vacancy rate of approximately 15% in the year preceding the addition of those nine positions was nearly the same as it has been in the subsequent two years. This gives the appearance of a built-in vacancy factor in division staffing.

¹³ Source: Personal interview with Larry Lunder, Compensation Manager, PBC Employee Relations & Personnel Department, June 3, 2002.

The division has recently established a dedicated structure to meet the training needs of the organization, but it has yet to develop a formalized program of skills training

Within the past year, a new Codes, Products and Training Section (training section) was established in the building division. The new section has three employees, including two subject-matter experts in the construction trades. None of the employees brings a background specifically as a trainer. To date, the focus of the training staff has been on construction topics more than on employee and occupational development. Typically, the training section has researched and disseminated information about issues dealing with Building Code changes and construction material ratings and specifications, and on potentially controversial topics relating to construction plans and zoning reviews. Information is publicized in the form of internal e-mails, memoranda and discussions during staff meetings. Formal training aimed at developing good job performance, teaching work habits and skills tailored to the needs of specific occupational groups occurs only sporadically. Most Pre-construction employees still learn what they do about the necessary aspects of functional performance of their positions only through observation and by trial.

Pre-construction section employees have ready access to both checklists and a library of subject matter documentation, including the county's zoning code. Despite availability of these resources, the project consultant observed frequent interaction among permit technicians to resolve application questions and zoning compliance issues. One senior-level technician, in particular, was regularly sought out by others for on-the-spot interpretations and guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that the division establish a separate type-1 permit center at the main office, and implement a number of process streamlining measures for type-1 permit applications that do not require any plans reviews

Type-1 permits account for nearly sixty percent of the entire permit volume handled annually by the division, and any methods of processing these applications more efficiently would free staff resources for addressing more complicated, time-consuming applications to improve permitting turnaround times and consumer satisfaction.

Type-1 permits are already handled differently from other permit categories because of their uncomplicated nature and limited review requirements. But they continue to be received for initial processing at the same public intake counter along with all other permits. We believe that this creates unnecessary delay for all applicants that can be immediately remedied by the establishment of a separate intake/processing center for the 60% of transactions that involve a large number of applicants, but a relatively small amount of work in each

instance. This concept has been discussed within the department in the past, without action. It deserves to be implemented as soon as possible.

Initial staffing should consist of the 4-member team proposed by the division: one plans examiner, two permit technicians and one clerical support staff. As the unit gains practical experience, staffing adjustments can be made based on an analysis of application volume and desired turnaround times. The type-1 permit center could be established at the east end of the lobby to the left of the main doors to the building. Currently this space is occupied by an information counter, document sales and security station. Other locations may also be available, but we recommend that there be ample physical separation between the new type-1 intake center and the existing intake counter in order to minimize confusion and reduce congestion in the lobby.

At the same time, several initiatives aimed at streamlining the issuance process were discussed with the consulting team. Among those that strike us as sensible to implement is the advance sale of blocks of type-1 permitting stickers for use by high volume contractors on small maintenance projects which do not require any plan reviews, such as water heater or air conditioner replacements. A sticker permit program would eliminate the need by both contractors and division staff to complete and process hundreds of permit applications each year, and would reduce customer traffic at the public intake counter. Under the program, eligible contractors would purchase blocks of pre-numbered permit stickers, similar to books of postage stamps, from the division. With each installation of a water heater or air conditioning unit, a permit sticker would be affixed to the unit, and the property owner's name and situs address would be recorded in the book of stickers for audit by the division. We propose that the division conduct random sampling of contractors as a means of fulfilling inspection requirements for type-1 sticker permitting. Any finding of sub-standard work would disqualify the offending contractor from further use of the stickers and require him to return to the conventional permitting method.

On-line Internet permitting—including taking on-line payments—is also recommended for implementation as soon as practicable. On-line Internet permitting for type-1 projects would only be available for those construction projects that do not require plans review. The program would be contingent on the availability of on-line payment processing (e.g., credit card) capabilities which do not presently exist in the department. At a minimum, that functionality will be built into the programming of the proposed e-PZB system.

Similarly, there may be merit in a preliminary proposal to eliminate permit requirements for type-II projects. This group of projects includes such things as driveway re-paving, fencing, and small accessory enclosures and planters. None of these activities requires plan reviews by the Florida Building Code or local amendments to it. At present, these activities are routinely permitted following zoning conformity checks, but plans are not reviewed and the installations are

not field-inspected. The division should conduct an analysis of the quantity, workload and revenue associated with such permits to determine the suitability of discontinuing the practice of requiring permits for this category of activities. Regardless of how the division decides to handle these activities in the future, it should prepare an informational brochure addressing ULDC requirements for zoning and setbacks.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the rotation of permit technician assignments at the main office occur less frequently and have a duration of at least one week at a time

Daily rotation onto the customer service and intake counters is counterproductive and should be lengthened to rotations of one week at a minimum. One day is too short a duration to develop proficient customer service skills, and it contributes to a lack of continuity in dealing with customers. Counter duty is not generally a sought-after assignment, but there may be individual employees who enjoy the customer contact and would be willing to volunteer for such duty on a longer-term basis. Those individuals should be given first priority. Similarly, permit technicians with specialized skills in demand (e.g., impact fee assessment and commercial zoning review) could be excluded from rotation or be rotated less frequently than other staff. This will reduce the impact of staff rotation on permit application processing of the most complex construction project proposals. By making these changes, a rotation of at least one week on, four weeks off would be possible. Employees assigned to the proposed new type-1 center would not be part of the rotation pool.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that the division develop its data reporting requirements to ensure that when the new e-PZB computer system is installed, it will accommodate all of the management information needs of the division

The division has adopted a number of performance goals relating to its Pre-construction permitting program. Seven of the nine permit types have desired target times for completing initial application reviews, ranging from 1-2 days for type-1 permits, up to 10-20 days for permit types 5 and 6.¹⁴ However, the division does not currently have the management information reporting tools to gauge how well its actual performance compares with its expectations. Just setting performance expectations without measuring and reporting the division's progress toward meeting those expectations is of limited value. According to the ISS project manager, the e-PZB permitting module is scheduled to begin design in April 2003. By that time, division management must be ready to describe these requirements in detail to the design team and to know how, when, and where the relevant data will be captured and reported. At a

¹⁴ The targets refer to the time required to complete the initial application review in each instance. That review would either result in unconditional approval, followed by permit issuance, or it would identify errors and other deficiencies which would be returned to the applicant for modification. Types 7 and 9 have no stated target times. [See also Table 1 on page 11]

minimum, the study team recommends that management reporting include each of the following, for any user-defined date or period:

- **Average time (and minimum/maximum times) from application intake to completion of initial review, by permit type.** This is the statistic the division needs for determining compliance with its own adopted performance targets and with the 30-day statutory residential permitting turnaround requirements. If there are no application deficiencies, permitting should occur shortly after completion of this initial round of zoning compliance and construction plans reviews. This performance indicator is among the most important in terms of expediting permit application turnaround times. Because it measures only time spent in internal review, it is an important diagnostic tool to assess process efficiency. Increases in this performance indicator would necessarily point to some internal condition, from insufficient staffing or staff training, to unresolved issues of technical interpretation, lapses of inter-organizational coordination, technology deficiencies and other problems with the permitting process itself. These are all things that managers can correct, provided the information is available to them.
- **Net average time (and minimum/maximum times) from application intake to permit issuance, excluding holidays, weekends, and accumulated time awaiting applicant responses to correct submittal deficiencies, by permit type.** Like the report above, these data reflect the efficiency of the permitting process itself, free of most time distortions of application errors and deficiencies. It represents the time invested by staff to achieve permit issuance. The difference between this indicator and the average time to complete the first round of reviews (above) is the time necessary to bring applications and related construction plans into compliance after initial review and comments, plus the time required to move an approved application through the division's issuance group. Significant differences between the two indicators could suggest a number of possible explanations, including (1) lack of applicant understanding; (2) deficient plan submittals; (3) slow staff recognition of resolved review comments and re-entry of the application back into the process; and (4) slow processing by other functional areas within Pre-construction Section, such as ATIC and Issuance.
- **Gross average time (and minimum/maximum times) from application intake to permit issuance, including all times excluded above in the calculation of net time, by permit type.** This statistic tracks the total absolute time between application intake and permit issuance. As a measure of program performance, gross time is not a particularly useful statistic inasmuch as it includes outside factors over which the division has no control. But as a measure of the amount of time that applicants wait between filing for, and receiving, their permits, it provides insights into how customers may view the responsiveness of the permitting

program. It also gives management important operational intelligence regarding the length of time that applications remain in the system for any reason. Differences between this statistic and the first two (above) represent issuance delays attributable to external causes rather than to processing delays. If there were no deficiencies in an applicant's original submittal, the difference between these statistics should be minimal. In contrast, long gross average turnaround times would indicate such problems as poor communication between the applicant and Pre-construction staff, and even deliberate applicant delays. Applicants occasionally choose to delay responses to review comments in order to delay payment of permit and impact fees, and let the building division effectively provide inventory service for partially completed applications that can then be activated on short notice as business conditions dictate. Production homebuilders, in particular, find it possible to avoid paying pending fee increases by bulk filing for permits that they will retrieve only over the course of many months as market conditions warrant. From that perspective, a lengthy average gross turnaround time may actually reflect, in part, a business service the division provides, for which it could nonetheless find itself criticized by the very beneficiaries of that service.

- **The number of application-related reviews conducted, including all application re-reviews, by employee, by permit type.** Management currently receives a monthly report showing some of these data, but without the number of plans re-reviews made necessary by applicant errors or revisions to original submittals. The absence of those data understates the true workload. The current management information system in use in the division does not presently have the capability to report such re-reviews as separate statistics.

Beyond that, the report would be more useful if management would establish output targets for individual employees based on their job classifications and the mix of other assigned responsibilities. The format of the report should also be modified to allow employees and their first-line supervisors to see their own performance over time, with trends evaluated at the work group level, rather than raw numbers for all division employees which cannot be evaluated for performance trends, except by considerable manual extraction and manipulation of the data. An example of the sort of trend analysis that would provide historical performance information to assist supervisors in assessing workload and output is presented as Appendix 5 to this report.

- **Turnaround times for agencies and departments outside the building division involved in the application approval process.** The Pre-construction Section takes responsibility for monitoring the status of all prerequisite approvals for permit issuance. Although this is not a state requirement, and other building permit agencies around the state do not universally follow that practice, it has been a feature of Palm Beach County's building permit "One Stop Shopping" concept for years. This creates the presumably beneficial condition by which customers are

relieved of the need to deal directly with separate agencies. At the same time, it imposes an oversight responsibility on Pre-construction permitting staff with outside agencies and departments over which the division has no control. The division's existing management information system does not identify the time that applications spend undergoing reviews in each of these external agencies, although those times are all reported as part of the overall performance statistics associated with the building division's permitting program. Periodic reporting of the average application approval turnaround times attributable to each of the outside agencies and departments would be useful both for customer relations purposes and to focus on opportunities to correct process impediments.

- **The status, age and characteristics of the inventory of applications in process.** Knowledge of this information can assist management with focusing faster and more accurately on the underlying problems that cause increasing inventories of applications-in-process. Over time, managerial focus on the reporting and analysis of operating inventory can assist in determining whether inventories reflect unusually high application intake, seasonal fluctuations, a change in the mix of complexity (i.e., permit types), the deteriorating quality of applications (indicator: frequency of plan review comments), unresolved zoning or plans review issues (indicator: high frequency of applications on hold with similar characteristics), or simply because the current system does not allow the deletion of plan review numbers. At a minimum, inventory reporting should include all the following information:
 1. The quantity, characteristics and status of the inventory of permit applications-in-process, both as summarized information and by detail. Detailed information should contain office location, permit type, PR number, characteristics (e.g., water heater replacement), status (e.g., pending review comment resolution) and date of last activity. Summaries should reveal office location and quantity of permit applications in process, by permit type.
 2. Exception information categorizing the age of permit applications in process more than 30 days since intake, by branch office location. Detailed reporting should break in-process application time into increments of 30 days and provide details within each time segment as to the quantity, permit types, PR numbers, characteristics, statuses and dates of last activity. Summary reports should provide information on the quantity and types of permit applications in-process for each age increment, by branch office location.
 3. The quantity and characteristics of permits issued, both as summarized information and by detail. Detailed information should contain location of issuing office, permit types, PR numbers and characteristics. Summaries should report office location and quantity of permits issued by permit type. These data might actually be

incorporated as part of the “Net Average Time” and “Gross Average Time” reports recommended earlier.

4. A “tickler” report of PRs that have received all required approvals and are ready for issuance. This should be a standard report produced daily to minimize processing time lost in inventory.
 5. Exception information identifying the permit applications in-process by branch office location that have taken longer than the respective target times for completion of the first round of zoning compliance and plans reviews. Detailed reporting should provide branch office location, permit types, PR numbers, characteristics, statuses and dates of last activity. Summary reports should provide application totals by branch office location and permit types.
 6. The number of permits issued and awaiting final payment of fees and/or pick-up. Detailed reports should provide information that identifies the inventory by branch office location, permit types, PR numbers and dates of last activity.
 7. Information regarding the quantity of open comments or “hard holds” initiated by permit technicians and plans reviewers. Reports should provide information by branch office location for each permit technician and plans examiner. Summary reports should identify the employee and numbers of permit applications-in-process by permit type that are either on “hard hold” or temporarily held pending resolution of open review comments initiated by the employee. Detailed reports identifying individual permit applications by office location, permit type, PR number, characteristics, status and date of last activity should be available on request.
- **Permitting and impact fee activities for municipalities.** The division presently conducts building plans reviews and permit issuance on behalf of several smaller municipalities in the county. The volume of applications taken, reviews conducted, and permits issued, should be reported regularly to division management and to the respective municipalities. If possible, these reports should incorporate the same features as described above for net and gross turnaround times and re-reviews. The incidence of impact fee calculations that do not result in the issuance of building permits should also be reported, by assigned technician.

Some of the foregoing will be only a matter of developing the appropriate report formats, frequencies and distribution lists for greatest effectiveness. Others will have operational process management and data collection implications that must be addressed before the reporting can take place. In the latter category, re-reviews of plans in-process and revisions to issued permits will both require a degree of operational integration and computer application design that is not present today.

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that the Building Division fill a portion of its vacant authorized positions to reduce its dependence on use of overtime at premium pay rates

The division has a history of dependence on the use of overtime to meet a sizable proportion of its total productive hours. In every year since 1997, the division has used between 2-3 times the average amounts of overtime used by the rest of the countywide workforce. The project team recognizes that the division's customer base is sensitive to the business cycle and that it is prudent of the division to maintain a small vacancy factor as a means of avoiding layoffs during future economic downturns. Nevertheless, in our judgment, a consistent 15% vacancy rate is excessive when the division is forced to partially compensate for those vacancies by the extensive use of overtime hours. When used in that manner, overtime becomes part of the baseline productive time, rather than as a technique for handling periods of peak activity or for temporary absences in the workforce. We recommend that the division reduce its 15% vacancy rate and hire some portion of the 6.25 FTEs it is currently "buying" at premium salary rates through the use of overtime hours. At present, the Pre-construction section has 13 vacant positions. Filling five or six examiner positions, say, even at the advanced starting salaries that may be required to attract certified, experienced candidates, would give better staff coverage, improve permit turnaround time, and save the division money.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that all qualified residential plans examiners be assigned specific subdivisions for which they would have exclusive plans review responsibility

In the course of this study, various procedural and organizational changes were made in the Pre-construction Section by management. One of those changes dealt with plans reviews for residential construction. Early on, residential plans examiners were organized into two loose-knit groups, each with assigned developers for which they were responsible for plans reviews. The two groups were subsequently dissolved and a new residential plans supervisor position was created to bring greater accountability to the assignment and review of residential plans. (A proposed organization chart is included as Appendix 6.)

Those changes strike us as beneficial, but they do not go far enough. The former group responsibility for specific large developers should be replaced by a series of specific assignments to individual examiners who meet minimum licensure requirements. These assignments could be made on a developer-by-developer basis, but we favor assignments on a subdivision basis.¹⁵ Thus, each eligible plans examiner would be the point of contact and reviewer for one or more subdivisions, responsible for completing not only the initial master plans but also each separate permit application thereafter. At the same time, the nominal practice of reviewing plans in their order of intake should be modified

¹⁵ The Pre-construction section will have to establish guidelines for minimum subdivision size to qualify as an assigned subdivision.

to the extent that, for examiners with assigned subdivisions, those subdivisions would take precedence over general residential applications awaiting review. In that way, the full benefit of the efficiency of standardized plans would be realized in shortened turnaround times. Whenever an individual plans examiner had no activity in his assigned subdivision(s), he would be expected to review other residential plans in inventory on a first in-first out basis, as at present.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that the permitting section develop a structured training plan for each of its occupational groups, focusing on task skills and work habits

The division does not yet have a structured training program to prepare employees to succeed in that environment. Permit technicians and clerical support staff, in particular, would benefit from a coherent in-service education program. Because many permit technicians and clerical staff are hired without previous experience in the construction industry or specific knowledge of the construction permitting process, self-directed access to written checklists and reference materials alone is not sufficient preparation to ensure effective service in this specialized field. Besides instruction in the use and interpretation of reference documents, employees must develop a basic proficiency working within the permitting process, dealing with typical questions and common issues, and learning techniques of problem resolution, handling difficult people and demanding situations. The division has made a beginning that should be completed.

The consulting team recommends that, as a start, an occupationally relevant core curriculum be developed for all technicians and clerical support personnel, along the lines suggested in Appendix 7. Future new employees should receive this as introductory training *before* being assigned to their workstations to learn (or mis-learn) by observation and trial. Existing staff in these two occupational groups should receive the same training on a scheduled basis over a period of time to minimize disruptions to their work.

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that the division evaluate its practice of performing optional full reviews of residential electrical, plumbing and mechanical plans, and either discontinue the practice or convert it to a value-added service for applicants who want it, by establishing a fee schedule for those services

The Pre-construction section has historically conducted full reviews of residential electrical, plumbing and mechanical plans, even though such reviews are not required by either the state or local building codes. The consulting team sought to quantify the amount of staff time devoted to that optional activity, without success. The current management information system does not segregate these tasks for ready analysis, and the division has not devised a means of estimating its effect on workload. We recommend that the division conduct a month-long time study involving all residential plans examiners to determine both the average amount of time spent on such reviews (so that an equitable fee

for services could be established) and the total work investment required by these optional activities to decide whether that time would be more beneficially spent by further reducing permit processing times. If requested, OFMB’s Financial Management Division is available to assist the Building Division.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

This final section of the report contains a suggested plan for the implementation of study recommendations. Where appropriate, it also contains an estimate of the costs and benefits associated with the individual recommendations. Some recommendations have cost implications; others result in cost savings. Still others represent opportunities to improve operational effectiveness or enhance service levels. Each recommendation is re-stated in Table 5 below, along with a summary of the estimated costs and/or savings, as well as anticipated service impacts. The recommendations are listed in the same order as they were discussed earlier in the report.

TABLE 5

Suggested Plan for the Implementation of Study Recommendations

Recommendation	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	Implementation Responsibility	Comments
1. Establish separate type-1 permit center; streamline process (page 35)	●	●	●	Division Director	1. Improved application intake flow 2. Eliminate hundreds of separate permit applications for minor projects 3. Added customer convenience of on-line filing and payment
2. Lengthen duration of assignment rotations (page 37)	●			Section Supervisor	1. Improved customer service quality 2. Improved customer service continuity
3. Develop data capture and reporting requirements (page 37)	●	●		Section Supervisor Division Director	1. Essential for compliance tracking 2. Improved internal controls 3. Improved process management 4. Improved community/industry relations 5. Timing is critical to meet e-PZB design schedule 6. Requires close coordination with PZB-ITS and ISS project managers
4. Reduce staffing vacancies and O/T usage (page 42)	●			Division Director	1. Better staff coverage for plans review 2. Improved permit turnaround time 3. Estimated overtime savings: \$75,000 4. Timing depends on recruitment schedule

(Continued on next page)

BUILDING DIVISION PRE-CONSTRUCTION PERMITTING

Recommendation	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-12 Months	Implementation Responsibility	Comments
5. Assign qualifying subdivisions to plans examiners (page 42)	●			Section Supervisor Residential Plans Supv	1. Improved productivity 2. Improved permit turnaround time 3. Improved coordination with production homebuilders 4. Modify first in-first out rule
6. Develop structured training plan (page 43)	●	●		Training Supervisor	1. Improved skills and work habits 2. Improved customer service 3. Improved productivity
7. Discontinue optional residential plans reviews (page 43)	●	●		Division Director	1. Conduct analysis of time savings 2. Improved permit turnaround time 3. Alternatively, begin charging for optional reviews