

ORGANIZATION REVIEW OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT

College Station, Texas

by

ZUCKER SYSTEMS
Paul C. Zucker FAICP, President



1545 Hotel Circle South, Suite 300
San Diego, CA 92108
(619) 260-2680
www.zuckersystems.com
paul@zuckersystems.com

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

This study was designed as a brief review of the City’s Planning and Development Services Department and related functions. It was initiated by the Director of Planning and Development Services and the City Manager.

B. METHODOLOGY

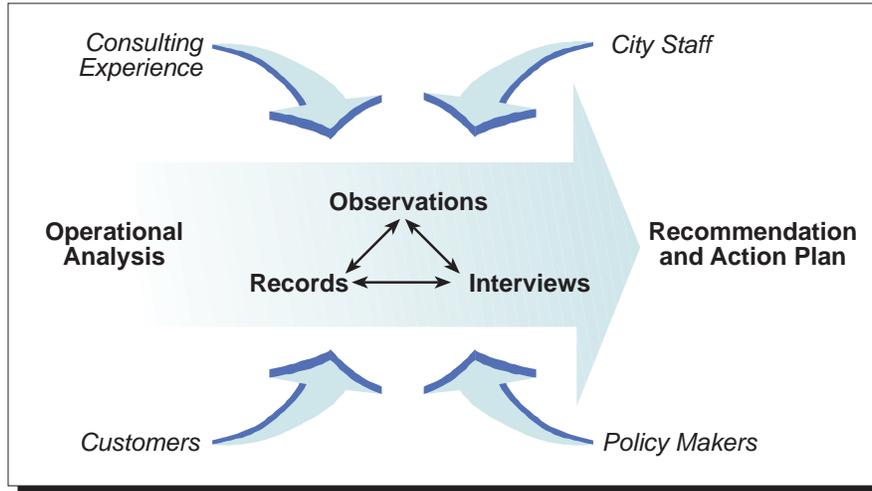
I used Zucker Systems proprietary well-tested, integrated methodology for this study, as shown in Figure 1. I brought our extensive experience to the study, worked closely with City staff, and solicited input and observations from customers and policy makers. The methodology is built on interrelating records, observations, and interviews. Each is necessary for valid studies. National research has shown that each one of these three—if relied upon exclusively—can be subject to substantial error. For example, record systems are often found to be as high as 50% in error, or the wrong things are measured. I used observations and interviews to verify records. Records and interviews were used to verify observations. Records and observations were used to verify interviews. Each group of people, shown in Figure 1, was an important part of the process.

The overall methodology while useful was constrained to some extent by a variety of factors including:

- The budget limited on-site work to three days.
- I was able to interview only one member of the City Council.
- Time did not allow interviews with the Director of Economic Development, City Attorney, Assistant City Attorney, recent planning staff who had resigned and one-on-one interviews with the planners.

Nevertheless, I believe the research was sufficient to make the observations included in this report.

**Figure 1
Methodology Overview**



Paul Zucker, President of Zucker Systems, spent three days in College Station on December 13, 14 and 15. Specific activities conducted for this study included the following:

Customer Input

- Two developer customer focus groups with a combined total of 16 people.
- Meeting with four members of the Blue Ribbon Committee.

Policy Maker Input

- Interview with the City Manager and Assistant City Manager.
- Interview with one member of the City Council.
- Interview with three Planning and Zoning Commission members.

Staff Input

- Several interviews with the Director of Planning and Development Services
- Group meeting with Public Works Director, Fire Chief and Utilities Director
- Group meeting with the Building Official and Development Coordinator
- Group meeting with two City Engineers
- Group meeting with Customer Service Representatives and Staff Assistants
- Group meeting with all the planners
- Interview with the Parks Director

- Training session for all staff of the Department of Planning and Development Services plus some staff from Public Works, Fire and Utilities
- Attended Development Briefing #3 meeting
- Various meetings with staff to discuss issues and processes

Meetings, Observations and Research

- Review of the permit system.
- Review of numerous forms, handouts, policies, files, and ordinances.
- Observation of staff at work.
- Observation of the permit center and reception area.
- Tour of the permit center and related offices.

C. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report includes 36 recommendations for improvements to the City’s development process. Five key issue areas are summarized below.

Issue 1. Consistency and Decision Making

Findings

The focus groups as well as the Blue Ribbon Committee commented on the lack of consistency and decision making in the development process. This has major impacts on development and the building of the community. The reasons for this lack of consistency appears to be:

- Out of date ordinances such as the Subdivision Ordinance, clear street standards, confusion on the rules on Oversize Participation, and needed clarifications to the UDO.
- The turnover of three top management positions in the Planning and Development Services Department.
- The need to clarify certain policy direction from both the City Council and City Manager.

Recommendations Pertaining To This Issue:

1. Have all Building Division staff certified, page 11.
3. Agree on approach to legal review, page 12.
11. Increase the interaction amongst departments, page 22.

22. Complete road standards, page 28.
23. Weekly training for planners, page 28.
24. Create a planning policy manual, page 28.
33. First round plan reviews to be comprehensive, page 32.
35. Clarify a variety of policy issues, page 34.
36. Revise Subdivision Ordinance including topics suggested in this report, page 35.

Issue 2. Relations With The Customer

Findings

The City needs to do a better job of relating to the development community. There is a feeling amongst the industry as well as some staff that it is an adversarial relation. The City needs to do a better good job of reaching out to its customers.

Recommendations Pertaining To This Issue:

4. Develop a community outreach and customer service program, page 13.
25. Conduct training sessions on economics of development, page 28.
30. Return all phone calls the same day received, page 31.
32. Provide opportunity for developers to meet with staff, page 32.
33. First round reviews to be comprehensive, page 32.

Issue 3. The Development Process

Findings

The development process needs to be improved for both staff and the customers. Customers feel they do not get a comprehensive review the first review and staff feel they need more time to conduct such a review. Additionally, customers feel they are kept at arms length in the process and that the pre-application is not as effective as it could be.

Recommendations Pertaining To This Issue:

3. Agree on approach to legal review, page 12.
11. Continue and increase interaction with other departments, page 22.

12. Designate a person responsible for coordination of all the City's development related activities, page 22.
16. Post building inspection results on the Internet, page 24.
21. Consider delegating conditional use permits to the Planning Commission, page 27.
22. Complete road standards, page 28.
23. Weekly staff training for planners, page 28.
24. Create a planning policy manual, page 28.
26. Adopt changes to the process, page 28.
27. Complete the Guide to Building and Development, page 30.
28. Review three Blue Ribbon Committee suggestions, page 30.
29. Delegate more park decisions to staff, page 31.
30. Return phone calls the same day, page 31.
31. Improve the pre-application process, page 32.

Issue 4. Planning and Development Services Department Staff

Findings

The Planning and Development Services staff have trouble reacting to the changes in a short period of time and this is impacting both productivity and consistency. They felt the process used in the three resignations was troublesome and they are unclear in relation to the new direction for the Department.

Recommendations Pertaining To This Issue:

3. Agree on approach to legal review, page 12.
6. Resolve issues with Development Coordinator function, page 14.
7. Clarify leadership and transition issues in Planning and Development Services, page 15.
8. Explore options to creating a more open office space, page 15.
9. Review professional office appearance issues, page 16.
10. Review the organizational structure of the Department, page 21.

- 15. Review staff backgrounds and aim for diversity, page 23.
- 20. Discuss the Strategic Plan with the staff, page 26.
- 23. Weekly training for planners, page 28.
- 25. Create a planning policy manual, page 28.
- 27. Complete the Guide to Building and Development, page 30.

Issue 5. Prior Studies

Findings

The substantial work of the continuous improvement staff team (We Team Report) have not been clearly acted on. This can be demoralizing to staff and counter productive to the improvement efforts.

Recommendation Pertaining To This Issue:

- 34. Review implementation of the We Team Report, page 34.

II. CUSTOMERS

A. OVERVIEW

In today's environment, governmental performance is measured by customer satisfaction. In order to gain insight into College Station's performance, I conducted two focus groups of developer customers, met with members of the Blue Ribbon Committee, met with members of the Planning Commission and interviewed one City Council member.

The intent of this customer input was to elicit views and opinions on positive and negative aspects of activities and to seek ideas for change that will improve and enhance the process. However, as would be expected, the focus was on perceived problems.

In considering the results, the reader must bear in mind that, unlike documents and statistics, the views expressed by individuals are subjective and may reflect personal biases. Nonetheless, these views are at least as important as objective material because it is these people, with their feelings and prejudices, who work with or are often affected by City activities. A second important consideration is that in analyzing the material, it may not be as important to determine whether a particular response is "correct" as it is to simply accept a response. Tom Peters, the noted management consultant, has said that in relation to customer service, "Perception is everything." In other words, perception is reality to the person holding the perception.

B. FOCUS GROUPS

Two focus groups consisting of a total of 16 customers met for two hours each at a luncheon meeting on December 13 and 14. The focus groups were held at the Hilton Hotel. No City staff were present and the meetings were held in total confidence. Members included architects, brokers, builders, developers, engineers, land surveyors, and planners. Their comments are included below.

Positive Comments

The focus groups indicated that the City has a number of positive features including:

- Functions that are generally considered performing well include building, fire, utilities and water and sewer.
- The Planning and Zoning Commission is good.
- The Geographic Information System is considered good.
- The web site has been improved.

- The water and sewer standards have been very helpful.

Decisions

A considerable amount of discussion took place concerning the decision process. Comments included:

- Interpretations keep changing even though the statute does not.
- Developers believe they are always in an adversarial position – the enemy.
- Staff can't seem to make a decision and when they do they may be trumped by higher management.
- Part of the inconsistency may come from the high turnover of staff.
- There is a lack of common sense. Staff will just go by the book. Examples included requiring lights that simply lighted a pasture and requiring new water lines and fire hydrants when the proposal was to reduce three lots to two. There are professional level staff who don't make professional decisions.
- What is desired is open public debate.

Design Review Board

There was a problem with quorums but this seems to be corrected. The process is still real new. There is a concern that the Board will want to design your project.

Phone Calls

Planners don't return phone calls and seem to spend too much time in meetings.

Policies

The values and goals that are being expressed are not being transferred into the ordinances. Comments included:

- Since the UDO is a work in progress, interpretations should lean in favor of the developer.
- There should be a grandfather provision when new policies and ordinances are adopted.
- Some design presentations have been by the Economic Development Department but they should have been by the planners.
- Changes in fire flow policy did not have a public hearing.
- The City doesn't seem to be concerned with what the citizens want. The example given was the debate on the fire station location.

- The City appears to be anti-cul-de-sac.
- Rules on Oversize Participation need to be clarified.
- Rules on rural fire flow need to be clarified.

Pre-Development

Staff often comes unprepared. The meetings are often superficial and thus a waste of time. A clear response from staff is desired including saying no if they mean no. Only four pre-development meetings are scheduled each Monday and that may not be enough.

Processes

Numerous comments were made concerning processes including:

- The timelines are good but they are not always followed. The so called one week response doesn't happen.
- A big issue is incomplete first reviews. New comments keep being added on the 2nd and 3rd reviews.
- Staff seems to be more concerned about the process rather than the product.
- There is no team meeting with the developer and seldom any face to face contact.
- Sometimes the entire review time is taken when the response could have been made in a day or two.
- The forms keep changing.

Relation With The Industry

There is a lack of trust between the City and the development community. There are no routine or bi-monthly meetings with the industry.

Staff Issues

Some feel that both engineering and planning may be understaffed. Other issues suggested by the focus groups included:

- Desired is staff that will evaluate projects and make their best judgments – tell it like it is.
- There is a concern that the Director of Planning and Development Services will be a yes man to the City Manager.

- Sometimes staff reports or recommendations are changed all the way up to the meeting with no apparent explanation for the change communicated to the staff.
- Some feel that staff that resigned were competent.

C. BLUE RIBBON DEVELOPMENT REVIEW COMMITTEE

I spent considerable time reviewing the Committee's report and had a good meeting with four members of the Committee. Given the extensive work of the Committee they provided some background information that was not possible to obtain otherwise in my visit.

Since this report was aimed at the Planning and Development Services Department, I felt it would be particularly useful to query the planners about the report. In the final analysis, if things are to change, it will be these planners who must embrace the change. They had several comments of interest including:

- Some of the planners were not interviewed by the Committee, although the Committee said that the offer had been made to interview anyone who wanted an interview.
- The Blue Ribbon Committee wonder what, if any, changes have been made in light of the report, particularly as related to the City Attorney and City Manager comments.

The Committee's report and comments were used as input for the analysis of this report.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUES

A. BUILDING DIVISION

I was impressed with what I was told about the building function including:

- The community will be going to the International Code
- Inspections are made on a half day turnaround
- Inspectors are combination inspectors
- Single family plan check is one day and commercial five days
- Third party inspectors are used on steel and concrete
- Field computers are being used
- Forms and handouts are clear

All of the staff are not yet certified but I was told that this is being worked on. Additionally, there is no engineer on staff, and that's a problem for some developments or reviews.

- 1. *Recommendation:* The Building Division should continue to work to have all staff certified.**

- 2. *Recommendation:* The Building Division should decide if at some point in time a structural engineer should be added to the staff.**

B. CHANGE

The Planning and Development Services Department has undergone some dramatic changes and more are underway. Many staff are currently confused about the Departments direction and the future. In my staff interviews, they indicated they will accept change but are unclear as to the direction of the City and the Department. They want to be told what to do. While clear direction from the top is essential, good organizations also have change introduced by the staff. However, given the recent resignations and feelings about micro-management, staff will be reluctant to be aggressive in this area until they feel they are in a safe and supportive environment. This will take time.

The response to the recommendations of this report can be helpful. A continuation of the Development Briefings meetings, the clarification of the work program, policy clarification and staff training are all essential activities for the healing process.

C. CITY ATTORNEY'S OFFICE

In my interviews I encountered a lack of clarity by many as to the role of the City Attorney as related to non-legal policy issues. It should be noted that the Attorney is directly appointed by the City Council and in the final analysis the City Attorney's role is determined by the Council.

3. Recommendation:

- **The City Attorney and Development Services should agree on items that need legal review.**
- **The City Attorney and Development Services should develop an agreement on procedures and particularly reasonable timelines for legal reviews. Legal reviews, whenever possible, should take place in the early phases of a process, not the later phases.**

D. CUSTOMER RELATIONS

The City has undertaken a number of actions to improve customer relations. For example, the changes to the web site, the Planning and Development Services newsletter, the focus groups used for this study and occasional meetings with the industry like the recent meeting on Narrow Wall Bracing. However, there continues to be a perception by the community and industry that the City does a poor job of listening to its citizens. Improvement ideas could include:

- Holding routine monthly or bi-monthly meetings with the industry.
- Expanding the newsletter to include more planning information. The November issues didn't contain a single story about long rang planning or policy initiatives.
- Conducting a mail survey of customers.
- Using counter comment cards which solicit customer feedback and suggestions.
- Creating and using email lists of all builders, developers, architects, planners, community organizations and special interest groups active in the community.

- 4. Recommendation: The Planning and Development Services Department should examine the ideas outlined above and develop an expanded customer relations and community outreach program.**

E. ENGINEERS

I understand that the development review engineers were once in the Department of Planning and Development Services but have recently been moved to Public Works. However, the three staff are collocated within the Department of Planning and Development Services offices, participate in staff meetings, and are an integral part of the process. The Blue Ribbon Committee recommended that all engineering and Development Services personnel be brought together in one office.

I have seen this function work well located in one department as well as located in two departments. Likewise I have seen it work poorly in one or two departments. Given the relatively small size of the City's engineering staff, the current arrangement seems appropriate. If coordination becomes a problem, consideration could again be given to a merger.

- 5. Recommendation: The current system of having the engineers in Public Works should be continue and be reviewed for productivity and coordination issues in 12 months.**

F. DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR FUNCTION

The front counter and Staff Assistant functions appear to work quite well. The joint intake of building, engineering, fire and planning permits is a good approach. Possible issues based on my interviews include:

- Staff in the back often do not want to help customers out at the front counter.
- Some of the staff are demeaning to the Customer Service Reps. and Staff Assistants.
- Planners pull items out of the files and expect them to be refilled without proper notation of the appropriate file.
- There was inadequate training on the HTE upgrades.
- Additional training for any new Customer Service Reps. would be useful.
- The Development Coordinator may need to spend additional time on management functions and delegate work in order to do so.

- 6. Recommendation:** The Director, Development Coordinator and Development Coordinator staff should meet to discuss the issues outlined above and develop an action plan to address the issues.

G. FEES

The City approach to fees is a City Council policy decision. I would note that the planning and development fees are extremely low. Additionally, building fees are being set by building valuation. This system is being abandoned by many communities that are now calculating fees based on actual staff effort.

The trend throughout the country is to have fees pay full cost for the services. Under this system staff can be appropriately sized to the workload and do not have to compete with other government services for resources. Most developers are more than willing to pay for good public service as the permit fee is only a very small part of project cost. Reasonable timelines and consistent reviews are essential.

H. LEADERSHIP

The new Director of Planning and Development Services has a difficult challenge ahead. The challenge includes:

- To be successful the Director must build the trust and confidence of his staff. Many of the staff are currently not clear on the direction of the Department. Given the way the resignations were handled, some feel very insecure.
- To be successful the Director must retain the confidence of the City staff. This can be difficult since some feel that he is being directly told what to do by the City Manager. This issue can be helped if the City Manager can send signals that he wants a strong and professional planning function. Additionally:
 - ✓ It appears that some of the directions the City Manager wishes to take have not yet been memorialized either in City Council policy or ordinances. The City Manager should take the initiative in presenting these to the City Council. However, the Director also has the responsibility to interpret the City Managers direction for the staff.
 - ✓ The City Manager's involvement in development projects should take place at the early phases of any project, not the later phases. Staff should

periodically visit with the City Manager so they have a clear understanding of his concerns.

- ✓ The City Manager should make it clear to staff that he expects them to provide their professional recommendations on all items within the context of City policy direction. When the City Manager makes a recommendation or decision that differs from the staff recommendation, he should clearly note this decision as his own. .
- When organizations are in turmoil, they require an increase in communication. This is particularly true in this instance where the new Director is charged with setting a new direction and tone for the Department. However, I was told that the Director is burdened with meetings and is seldom in his office. In order to change the culture of the organization, he must be available to staff. In addition to delegating more meetings, it is essential that a supervisor for the planners be in place as soon as possible.

7. Recommendation: The Director of Planning and Development Services and the City Manager should review the above discussion and develop a plan to address transition issues.

I. OFFICE SPACE

The new Director has made a number of office space changes which I feel were useful including:

- Creating a conference room
- Changes to the front counter area
- Moving his office
- Removal of the door at the rear of the reception area.

Overall, the office presents a very closed feeling. Each staff member is in their own private office located off the corridor. While staff often likes the private work spaces, it does tend to inhibit communication. The Director is considering other changes that could open up some of the spaces. I generally favor this approach.

8. Recommendation: The Department should continue to explore changes to the office space to present a more open atmosphere.

I was told that the Department had a clean up day where staff was asked to remove certain things from their offices. Not having seen the offices, it is difficult for me to

respond. This appears to be a sore spot with staff who feel that it is no longer appropriate to enjoy one's office. However, this was not the intent of the Director.

The message here is not if the new rules are appropriate, but rather how they occurred. The topic of professional appearance in the Department including dress is a good topic for staff involvement.

- 9. *Recommendation:* The topic of professional appearance in the department should be a discussion topic for a future staff meeting or part of a staff retreat.**

J. ORGANIZATION

There are many different ways to organize a building and planning department and the new Director of Planning and Development Services recently made a number of changes in the Department. This current organization is shown in Figure 2. I believe that the way a department is organized should be tailored and personalized to meet the style, desires and skills of the director. As such, my observations are given as possible ideas to consider and not as specific recommendation. Three alternative organization charts are shown as Figures 2, 3, and 4. Possible issues follow.

Assistant Director

The Assistant Director position is currently shown (Figure 2) as a direct report to the Director but also as a manager of all the functions. In a small organization such as Planning and Development Services, this often creates confusion as related to the functions of the Director and Assistant Director. If this organizational pattern is to be used, the two responsibilities should be clearly delineated. Additionally, under this structure the Assistant Director will not have adequate time to supervise the planners. Alternatives B and C place the Assistant Director directly in charge of a division of the Department. Under these alternatives the Assistant Director still is in charge of the entire Department during the Director's absence.

Building Official

The Building Official is a key position within the organization. The current organization (Figure 2) has this position reporting to the Assistant Director. Given the importance of the function, our normal approach is to have this position report directly to the Director (see Alternatives B and C).

Current and Long Range Planning

The Department had organized the current and long range planning functions in two sections. The new Director merged these functions with the thought that all planners would be trained to handle both functions. The planners seem to like this approach. This can be a good approach so long as staff have a clear work program and timelines. The traditional problem with this approach is that the long range planning suffers at the expense of current planning. I suggest this organization be tried to see if any problems of this type develop.

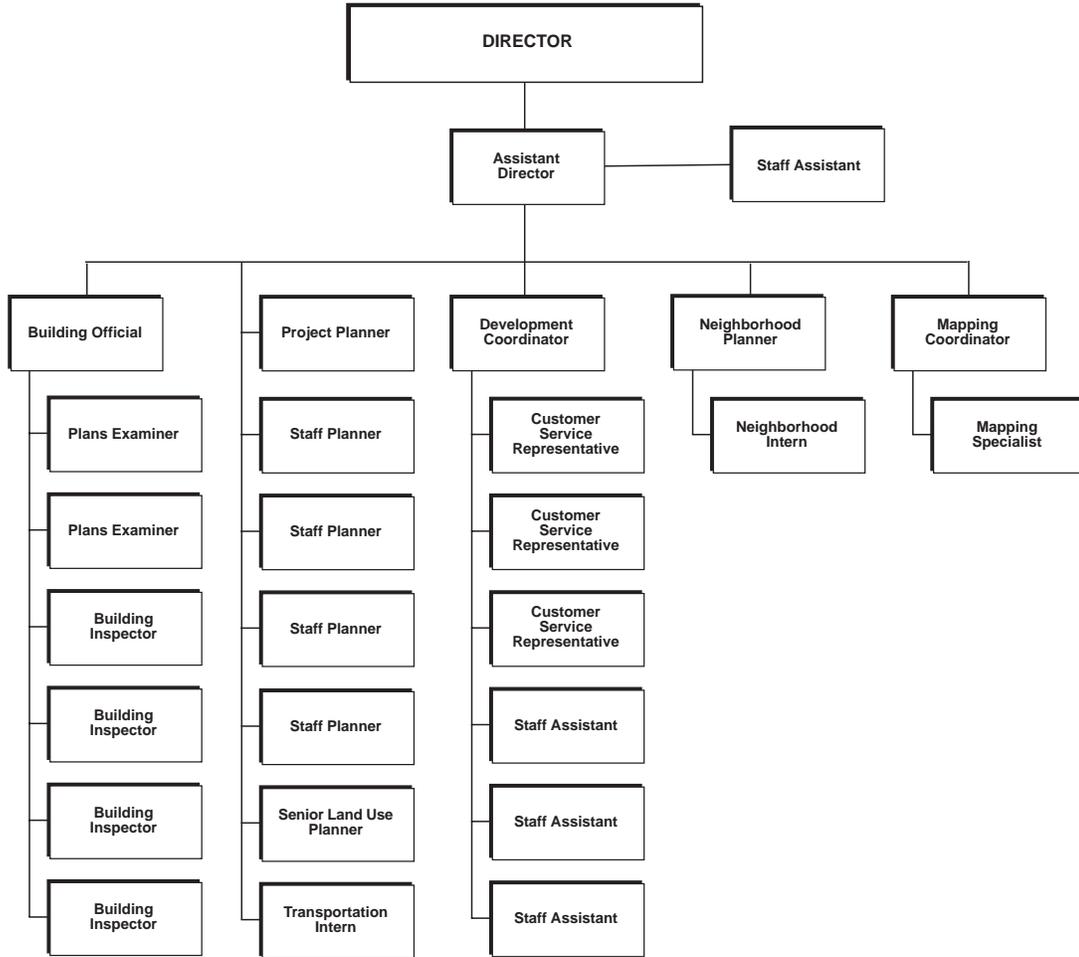
Development Coordinator

As shown in Figure 2, the Development Coordinator reports to the Assistant Director. This is workable so long as the Assistant Director does not have direct supervision over the seven planners. Another option would be to have this position report to the Building Official (Alternative C). The new Director also has proposed rotating the Staff Assistants. While I generally favor rotation programs it should be done with great care. It works best when staff welcomes the rotation and is accompanied by considerable training. Some of the Staff Assistants were not happy with the proposal. It may be useful to delay such a move until the Department has settled into the new organization.

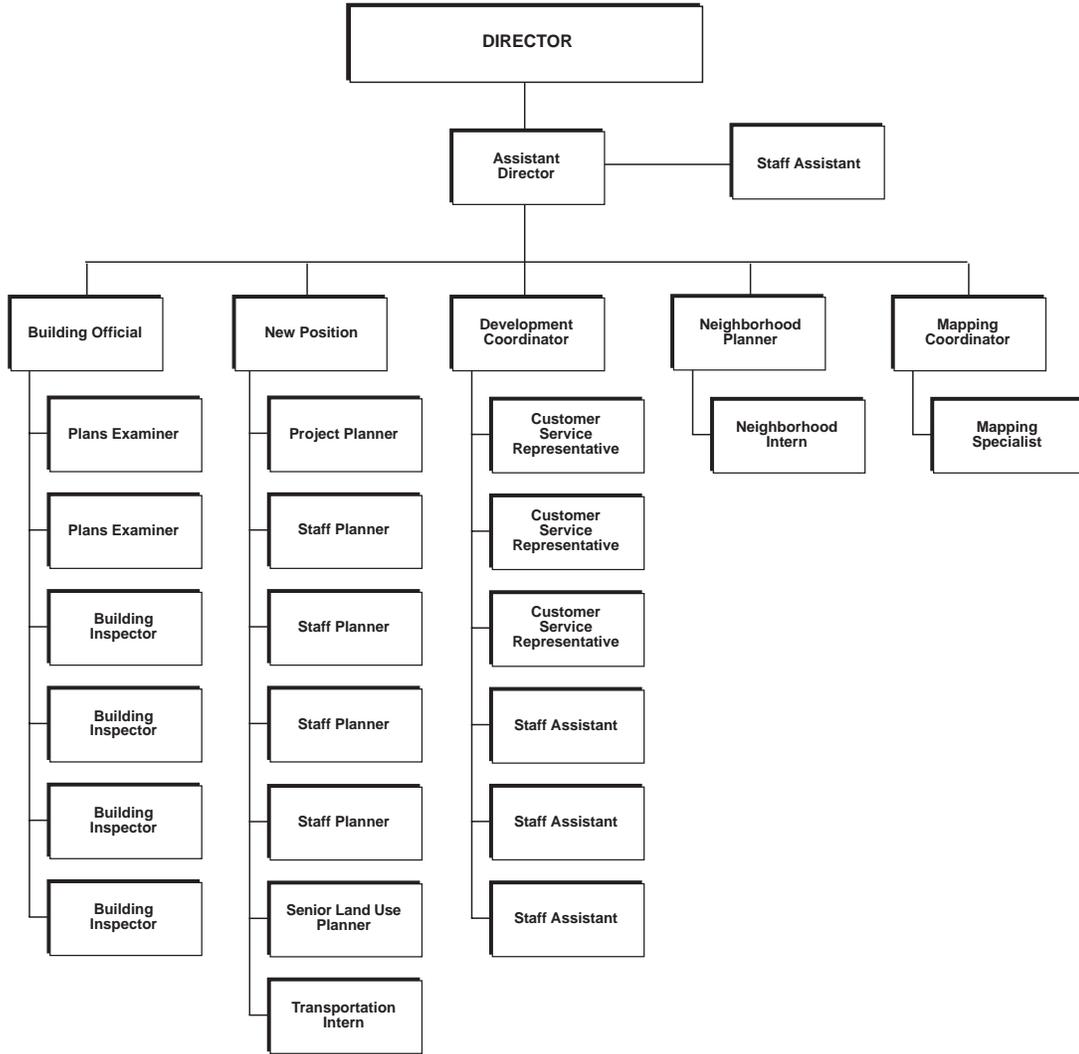
Supervision and Management of Planners

Under the current organization there are seven positions in the planning section. These positions are currently managed by the Director, pending the hiring of the Assistant Director. Under the new organization they will be managed by the Assistant Director. However, the Assistant Director also is shown as managing the remainder of the Departments staff. This span of control is too great. The seven planners alone could justify a full-time or perhaps a working supervisor. The solution is to either add another position (Alternative A, Figure 3) or have the Assistant Director primarily manage just this unit (Alternatives B, Figure 4 and Alternative C, Figure 5).

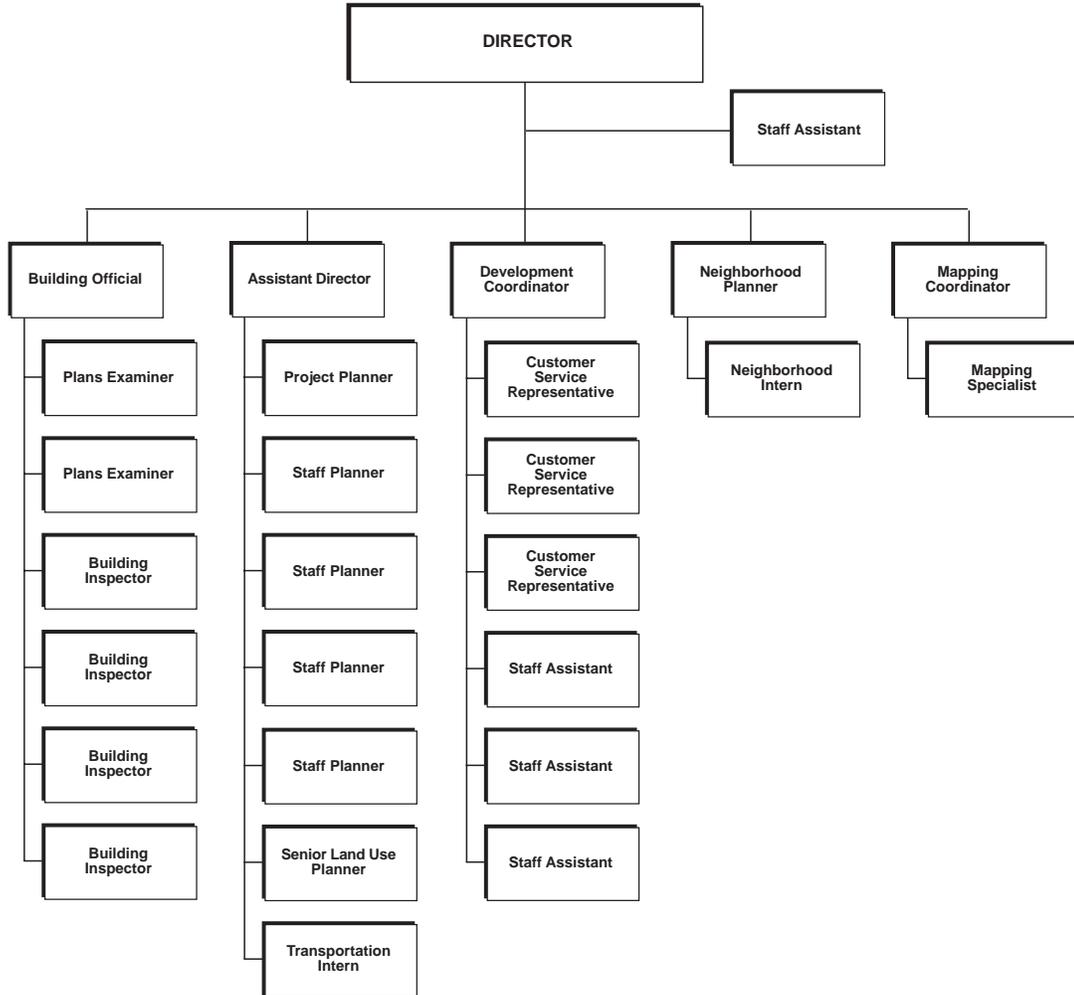
**Figure 2
Existing Organization**



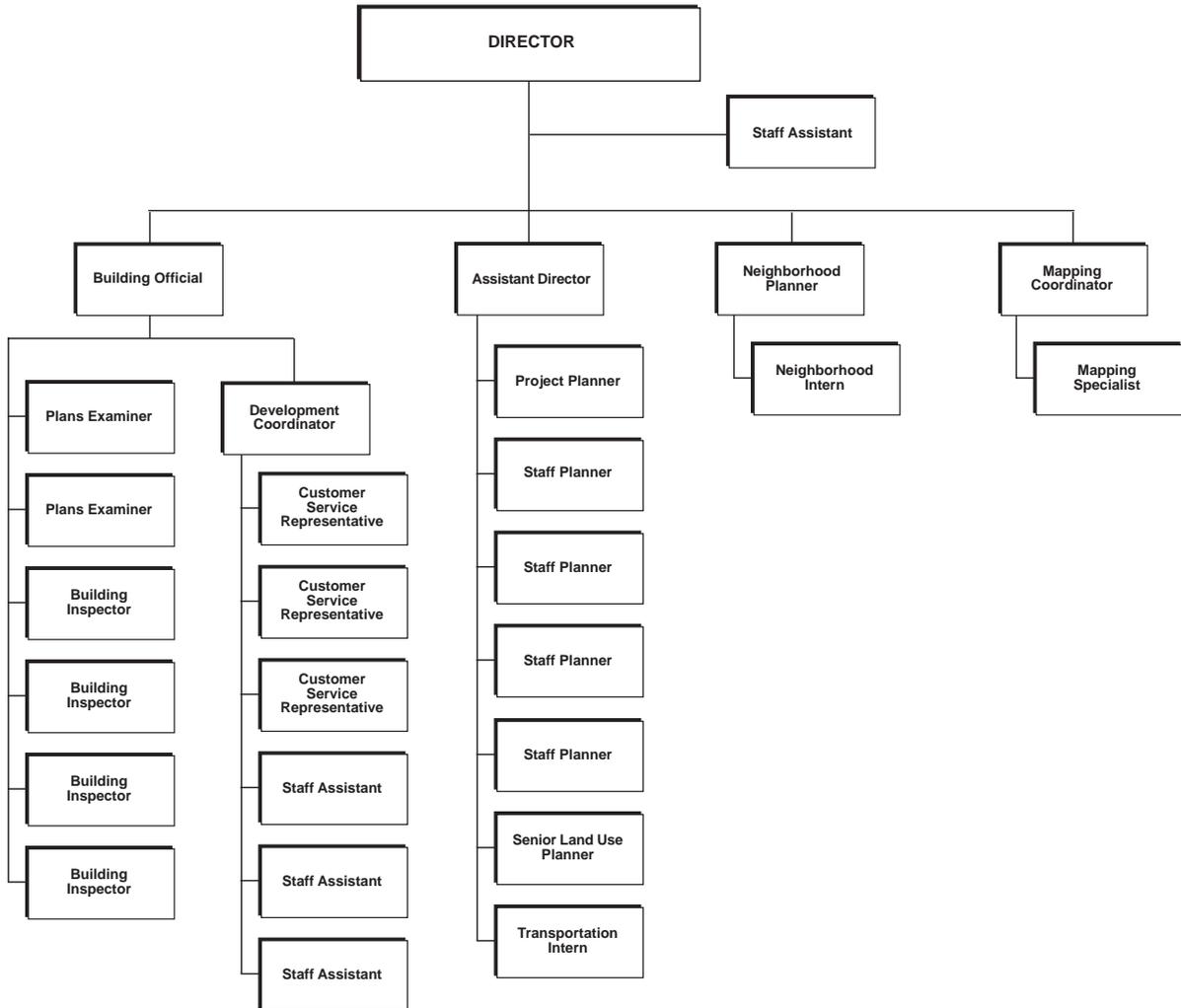
**Figure 3
Organization Alternative A**



**Figure 4
Organization Alternative B**



**Figure 5
Organization Alternative C**



10. Recommendation: The Director of Planning and Development Services should review the organizational alternatives described above.

K. OTHER DEPARTMENTS

A community is developed by a team working together. That team includes the developer, the City staff and the citizens. The customers view the city as a whole and neither the developer or the citizens are particularly interested in individual departments. All they know is that the city is or isn't doing something they want it to do.

Although Planning and Development Services is the focal point for much of the City's development activities, the review of projects often involves many others including economic development, engineering, fire, parks, utilities, City manager, City attorney and others. What is always needed is a team approach by these participants.

The City Manager has begun meetings of all City staff in a meeting called, Development Briefings. This is an excellent approach. This large group should meet at least once a month. Additionally it may be appropriate to form a number of smaller sub-groups to work on specific activities.

It was also useful to have all the related function participate in the training session I conducted. Similar joint training sessions may be appropriate for other topics in the future.

In additions to these activities that are spearheaded by the City Manager, I often find it useful to have one department head specifically charged with coordination of all the development related functions. Since Planning and Development Services is the focal point for these activities, the Director of this program is generally the person to be so charged.

11. Recommendation: The current activities underway aimed at increasing interaction with other departments should be continued.

12. Recommendation: The City Manager should designate a person responsible for coordination of all the City's development related activities. This should likely be the Director of Planning and Community Development.

L. PLANNING COMMISSION

The Planning Commission appears to work well. They normally get their material on Friday or Saturday before the meeting and are satisfied by the presentations and participation of planners and engineers. Their expenses are paid if they go to planning

conferences which they find helpful, however some more methodical training would be useful. Some states are now requiring mandatory planning commissioner training. The Commission is also working on Rules of Procedure which is a good idea.

A national problem with planning commissions is that they spend all their time on development activities and too little time on planning. Recently College Station's Commission began to discuss a preliminary Plan of Work for 2004-2005. This is an excellent approach which should be encouraged and carefully coordinated with the City's Strategic Plan described elsewhere in this report.

13. Recommendation: The Department should hold discussions with the Planning Commission in relation to development of a methodical training program.

14. Recommendation: The Department should encourage the Planning Commission in their pursuit of a Plan of Work and coordinate this Plan with the City's Strategic Plan.

M. STAFF DIVERSITY

The Blue Ribbon Committee suggested that there is a need to increase diversity within the Planning and Development Services Department with regard to employee educational backgrounds and work experiences in other cities or the private sector. I have seen this issue impact many planning departments that are located within cities that have a planning program in their local university. I did not review the background of all the staff, but concur with the thrust of this recommendation.

15. Recommendation: Planners should be recruited using a national recruitment. The new Director of Planning and Development Services should complete a review of current staff backgrounds and prepare an approach for diversity.

N. STAFFING LEVELS

The customer focus groups indicated that they believe both planning and engineering may be understaffed. Additional analysis would be necessary to make this determination. I would note:

- Evidently it is only recently that engineering has been fully staffed with three positions. Once all three positions are fully trained it should be possible to

examine if staffing is sufficient. My preliminary impression is that this staffing should be sufficient.

- It is hard to analyze planning staff until a more detailed work program is prepared. It will also be easier to complete an analysis once supervision is in place. My preliminary reaction is that the staff level may be sufficient. Planners are currently processing 80 cases per year which is within industry norms.

O. TECHNOLOGY

E-government

The national trend for the development functions is the use of e-government applications. I was not able to examine these in detail but have noted that improvements could be made to the web site, the permitting system, field computers and various e-government applications. Features of contemporary systems include:

- A comprehensive and easy to use web-site that includes organizations charts, employees names, phone numbers and email addresses, up-to-date forms and handouts, all policies and plans, GIS access, use of credit cards, ability to submit applications by email, use of electronic plan submittal, direct reports from field computers in relation to inspection results, status of all projects, up-to-date agendas and minutes.

Field Computers

Building has wireless field computers but results are not yet posted on the Internet.

16. Recommendation: Examine the technology and feasibility of having building inspection results automatically posted on the Internet.

Files

Staff is underway on converting files to laser fiche. While this is better than paper files, a better and more contemporary approach is to migrate directly to optical scanning and electronic files. This has major advantages for staff access to files on their desk top computers.

17. Recommendation: Explore the feasibility of optical scanning of files.

GIS

The City has a good GIS system and certain data can be accessed on the Internet. Overall this appears to be a good program. Planning and Development Services has equipment and staff to support their needs.

Meeting Minutes

Staff Assistants in Planning and Development Services take minutes for a variety of committees such as the Planning Commission. The Assistant attends the meeting, takes hand notes and then later listens to the tape of the meeting to prepare the minutes. This is a time consuming and labor intensive process. A better approach is to use a lap top or regular computer during the course of the meeting so by the end of the meeting the minutes are close to complete. This may require purchasing additional equipment and will require some training for staff to become proficient with the new system.

18. *Recommendation:* Take minutes on a computer during the course of various meetings and purchase equipment as necessary for this function.

Permitting System

The departments use the HTE permitting system. This can be a cumbersome and complex system and as such all staff do not appropriately use the system. Additionally other possible features are not being used. For example, Engineering is tracking permits using an Excel spread sheet which may duplicate a possible feature available in HTE.

19. *Recommendation:* A private consultant should be hired to help staff explore additional features that could be included in the HTE system.

P. WORK PROGRAM

The development activities in the Department are set by the number of applications that are submitted. However, the remainder of the staff functions need the guidance of a work program. In order to have the planners working on both current planning projects and long range projects, a work program is essential. The Department does have an extensive work program which is part of the City's Strategic Plan. This is an excellent approach. It can be strengthened by:

- The work program should include the amount of labor that is estimated for each work task. It may also be helpful to include target dates for completion of each task.
- Department staff does not appear to be adequately acquainted with the program nor do they understand each persons role in relation to the program.

20. *Recommendation:* The Department should develop additional details for the Strategic Plan and discuss with all staff the importance of the Strategic Plan and their role in it.

IV. PROCESS ISSUES

A. CONDITIONAL USE PERMITS

Conditional Use Permits currently must be acted on by the City Council. Consideration might be given to having all or some of these acted on by the Planning Commission in order to streamline the process.

21. *Recommendation:* The City should consider the desirability of having conditional use permits acted on by the Planning Commission.

B. CONSISTENCY AND PREDICTABILITY

Both developers and citizens want consistency and predictability in the process. While everyone tends to agree with this direction, several items should be considered in this regard including:

- While there needs to be general consistency, it should not be at the expense of making common sense judgments on specific developments. The building codes, UDO and even engineering standards always need some interpretation and provide some flexibility.
- The new water and sewer standards have been very helpful on this topic. Similar work should be undertaken for road standards and perhaps other topics.
- The UDO is relatively new and will need to undergo additional review.
- There appears to be some confusion among staff concerning the direction of the City at the City Council and City Manager level. Communication here may be essential if consistency and predictability are to be achieved. This is particularly true in regards to economic development issues. The City has a good Strategic Plan but it may not be well understood by staff.
- The Planning and Development Services has a policy manual that is clearly out of date. As the new Director, City Manager and City Attorney make interpretations, these should be codified in a new policy manual. The old manual should be reviewed for relevance, but it is likely that most of it should be discarded.
- An extensive training program is necessary for the planning staff. I suggest one hour a week be devoted to walking through the entire UDO. One approach would be to assign a section to a planner who would lead the training session. Agreements on interpretations would be agreed to at the end of each session.

- 22. Recommendation:** The road standards should be completed at an early date, similar to those undertaken for water and sewer.
- 23. Recommendation:** There should be weekly staff training for planners. This training should methodically review the UDO and also discuss the application of common sense interpretations.
- 24. Recommendation:** A new policy manual should be created for Planning and Development Services.

Both customers and the Blue Ribbon Committee indicated that employees need to develop a better understanding of the economic impact of their decision process on the city, community and private sector. This is a national problem with government staff. Most planners do not receive education on this topic in the university planning programs nor do they have experience in this area. I have had good success in involving the developers working in the local community in this regard.

- 25. Recommendation:** Several private developers and business leaders (banker, lawyers, etc.) working within College Station should be asked to conduct several training sessions for City staff on the economics of development.

C. DECOMPRESS TIME FRAME FOR DEVELOPMENT REVIEW.

The stated timelines for development review are quite good and are consistent with many other communities in Texas. However, the developers indicate that these timelines are in name only and are often not met. Perhaps even more importantly, staff feel that they often do not get complete applications and the developers feel that they get incomplete first reviews with additional comments being added as the project cycles several times.

The stated review times for most processes today is five working days. While some staff feel this is sufficient, others do not. It appears that an added issue is when should reviews occur by the City Attorney, City Manager, or Economic Development Director. The developer may be proceeding nicely with the staff reviews, only to feel blindsided late in the process.

26. Recommendation: Consideration should be given to the following process changes:

- The submittal requirements for each type of application should be reviewed and clarified as necessary. Projects should be screened against the submittal requirements either at time of application or within the same or next day of submittal.
- Projects should be triaged. This means that simple projects can proceed faster than more complex projects. Separate timelines should be established for each type of project.
- Consideration should be given to changing the current five day review time for most projects to either 7 or 10 days. The time for subsequent cycles or reviews should be at 5 days or less where feasible.
- Should any reviews be desired by the City Attorney, City Manager, or Economic Development Director, such reviews should optimally be included in the first cycle only. The Planning and Community Development Director needs to be sensitive as to when these reviews are necessary.

D. GUIDE TO BUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Department is working on a Guide to Building and Development. This is an excellent effort which should be completed at an early date. A quick review of the document included these comments:

- There is no section for pre-application except the reference on page 11.
- It would be useful to include detailed flow charts.
- The document should be formatted so that sub-sections can be used as handouts where a customer may not be interested in the entire document.
- The information should be posted on the web site.
- Page 3, indicated that “although various processes can be started simultaneously, the process is designed to run in sequence.” This statement is confusing. I support concurrent processes whenever possible.
- Page 4, the meaning of economic development should be clarified.
- The chart on Page 5 is excellent.
- Page 9, “designated design district” should be defined.

- Page 9, allowing staff to approve minor changes is excellent. It may be helpful to define minor changes.
- Page 9, the “Administrator” should be defined. Who is it?
- Page 11, the “ETJ” should be defined. Or reference Page 14.
- Page 11, what does “determined to be complete” mean?
- Page 22, allowing a 10% adjustment by the Administrator is excellent.
- Page 26, what is the “Planning Division?” It is not shown on the organization chart.

27. Recommendation: The Guide to Building and Development should be given a high priority for completion. The items listed above should be clarified.

E. MISCELLANEOUS ISSUES

The Blue Ribbon Committee had suggestions in the following three areas:

- Obtain as-build plans within 30 days of issuance of certificate of completion.
- Correct “no man’s land” problem between easement and 5’ perimeter of building.
- Improve management and oversight of issuance of “slab only” permits.

I was unable to deal with the specifics of these three issues but they all appear to warrant staff’s attention.

28. Recommendation: Planning and Development Services should take the lead in making certain the following issues have been addressed:

- Obtain as-build plans within 30 days of issuance of certificate of completion.
- Correct “no man’s land” problem between easement and 5’ perimeter of building.
- Improve management and oversight of issuance of “slab only” permits.

F. ON-CALL PLANNERS

The current system is to rotate all nine planners to be on call at the counter. This is a good system which I support.

G. PARKS

The City appears to have an outstanding approach to park dedication or fees. Generally the question of land dedication or fees must go to the City Council or Parks Advisory Board. However, this may hold up the approval process for a project. It appears that a criteria could be set to allow many of these decisions to be made by staff.

29. *Recommendation:* Consideration should be given to delegating more decisions on park dedication or fees to staff. It would also be useful to include a Parks Department staff liaison in development review for this purpose.

H. PHONE CALLS

Applicants complain about the problem of staff not returning phone calls. Although many staff indicate the intent is to return phone calls in 24 hours, this does not always happen. I prefer a system of returning all phone calls the same day received. Under this system, no staff leaves for the evening until they have returned all phone call.

30. *Recommendation:* Adopt a policy that all staff involved in the development process return all phone calls the same day received.

I. PRE-APPLICATION

Pre-application conferences can be a very useful function for both staff and the development community. However, according to both staff and the focus groups the current system leaves much to be desired. The deadline for pre-application is Wednesday at noon. On Thursday there is a pre-meeting with related staff for a quick review of the submittal. The pre-application meeting is held on Monday. Up to four meetings are scheduled with an hour allocated for each meeting. Various related staff attend the meeting although some attendance is evidently spotty. Notes are taken for the file by the Development Coordinator but are not seen by the applicant. The leadership for the meeting is not always clear nor is the role of the planner. A number of alternatives could be used to improve the effectiveness of this meeting. Ideas include:

- The filing deadline could be moved to Monday to increase the amount of staff time for review.
- One person should clearly be designated as the chairperson of the meeting. Currently this might be the Development Coordinator but eventually might be whoever supervises the planners.

- A specific planner should be designated the project manager for each application. This planner should assure that all reviewers complete a good review and will also be the assigned planner once the application is received.
- The notes for the meeting should be completed by the project manager planner rather than the Development Coordinator. These notes should be distributed to all participants and the applicant shortly after the meeting.
- The chairperson of the meeting should monitor attendance and discuss problems with department directors.
- All reviews should be as comprehensive and detailed as possible. This will of course depend on the quality of the submission. While some standard responses are useful, such as clarity on the process, all staff should focus on what are often referred to as “killer issues.” These are issues that may not make the project feasible or acceptable.
- Sometimes at the meeting, I was told that staff have different editions of the UDO. This is a serious issue that should be corrected.
- To help with setting policy direction, it would be helpful for the Director of Planning and Development to monitor a number of these meetings.

31. *Recommendation:* The normal attendees at the pre-application meeting should meet to discuss and agree on improving the process. The ideas listed above should be part of that discussion. The Director of Planning and Development Services should lead the discussion.

J. STANDARD PROCESS

Developers complain that it is difficult to obtain face time with staff and discuss issues. Many communities have an inter-department meeting attended by both the department reviewers and the applicants. I highly favor such a meeting.

32. *Recommendation:* Provide an opportunity for the developer to meet to review comments or discuss the project.

Developers complain that first round reviews are not comprehensive and new items are added in subsequent reviews. This should not occur and first round reviews should be comprehensive.

33. *Recommendation:* Re-emphasize to all staff that first round reviews are to be comprehensive and new items are not to be added in subsequent reviews unless the project changes.

K. WE TEAM REPORT

In July 2003 College Station management initiated a Continuous Improvement Team to review the development process, identify shortcomings in the process and make recommendations for improvement. Nine staff crossing over several departments were assigned to the team. A report was issued in August 2003 and included 20 specific recommendations. I was surprised to learn that many staff had not heard of this effort nor had the Blue Ribbon Committee.

It is not clear what, if anything, occurred to implement these recommendations. I received the document too late in my study to comment on the specific recommendations. The approach of using staff in continuous improvement activities is a good one. However, to be effective, it is critical that management react to all recommendations in a timely basis.

34. *Recommendation:* The City Manager should provide a specific action plan and response to all recommendations of the We Team. He may wish to task the new Director of Planning and Development with providing recommendations in this regard.

V. POLICY ISSUES

A. POLICY CONFUSION

Whenever there is a lack of policy or confusion on policy it has an impact on the development processes. Some of these issues have been discussed elsewhere in this report. Issues of interest include:

- In many communities, subdivisions must comply with the Comprehensive Plan. It appears that this would require an ordinance amendment in College Station.
- There appears to be need for clarification in the City's Oversize Participation Policy.
- All the plans and ordinances do not necessarily reflect the vision of the City Council or City Manager.
- When land is annexed, it comes into the City as agriculture. Some communities find it is preferable to bring land in under a specific zoning category.
- There is some discussion in relation to doing away with the preliminary subdivision plat and changing requirements for final plats. As indicated elsewhere in this report, I believe this direction may present problems for the City.

35. *Recommendation:* The Planning and Development Services Department should take the lead in addressing the policy issues outlined above.

B. SUBDIVISION ORDINANCE

The assigning of the Public Works Director to the task of revising the subdivision ordinance full time is an excellent action. While I could not review the progress I do note a few concerns based on my interviews.

- The development community and the planners must be carefully be involved in review and comment on all aspects of this effort. As noted elsewhere, the industry is generally suspect of the City and feels that their opinions are often not welcomed. Stakeholders should be brought in at the earliest possible stages of ordinance formation.
- Evidently there has been some discussion about allowing plats to become final without complete construction drawings, construction, or bonding of the improvements. Based on our experience around the country, I believe this

would be a mistake and can lead to numerous implementation as well as legal problems.

- There has been some discussion in relation to eliminating the preliminary map process and going directly to final map. Again, I would not recommend this process. Policy reviews and discussions should take place at the preliminary stage before heavy engineering costs are incurred.

36. *Recommendation:* The revision of the subdivision ordinance should proceed post haste and consider the points outlined above.