

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 20, 2005

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 74 : IMPROVEMENTS IN CODE ENFORCEMENT

This memorandum is in response to Mayor Euille's request for additional information on what types of work has been done or is planned to improve Code Enforcement responsiveness and customer service.

Over the past year, the Code Enforcement Bureau has implemented or plans to implement specific measures aimed at improving service delivery, customer service and program management within the Code Enforcement Bureau and to the City. These measures include: (1) the implementation of quality control components; (2) enhancement of computer tracking programs; (3) reconfiguration of the Elevator Inspection Program; (4) planned implementation of wireless technology; (5) the assignment of a Permit Expediter; (6) the addition of a second walk-through Plans Examiner position; (7) the addition of a second Mechanical/Plumbing Engineer position; (8) staff training in gender and racial equality issues; (9) the addition of a customer satisfaction survey on the City's web page; (10) the implementation of a Fire Marshal on-call program; and (11) utilization of focus groups. Two additional measures are proposed as discretionary supplemental budget requests for FY 2006 : (12) reorganization of the Fire Prevention Section; and (13) the addition of a Records Manager position. These measures are detailed below.

(1) Quality Control Components

Code Enforcement has implemented quality control components within each of the inspection and customer service programs managed by Code Enforcement. Supervisors closely monitor these programs and evaluate performance data within each program in order to ensure that timely, responsive and quality service is delivered to the City. This is an on-going process which requires supervisors to adjust each program as the program demands change. These quality control components provide continued interaction between staff and the community in order to maintain a high level of customer satisfaction.

(2) Enhancements of Computer Tracking Programs

The Bureau has implemented several enhancements to the computer tracking programs utilized by Code Enforcement. The Complaint Tracking System has been modified to provide better management of complaints and improved oversight by supervisors in order to ensure that complaints are responded to and managed in a timely manner. In addition, data management has been improved pertaining to complaint statistical information. The statistical information is extracted and integrated into the City's GIS system to forecast trends so that field staff are better aligned to address issues and improve proactive activity in the City.

(3) Reconfiguration of the Elevator Inspection Program

The Elevator Inspection Program has been reconfigured to make the program more user friendly. The program has been integrated into the Permit Plan tracking system and the issuance of Elevator Certificates are now tied to inspection activity which reduces the amount of time involved in issuing certificates.

(4) Implementation of Wireless Technology

Code Enforcement is proceeding with the implementation of wireless technology which will enhance inspection services to the community. Part of this equipment and software was purchased in FY 2005 and implementation will occur in FY 2006. Wireless technology allows field staff to obtain and send live updates of inspection activity from the field. This technology expedites permit processing and the release of final inspections and certificates of occupancies. Reduction of time frames to update data associated with permit inspections allows more field based inspections to occur on a daily basis, as well as improved information transfer between the Bureau of Code Enforcement located at City Hall and field units.

(5) Permit Expediter

Code Enforcement has implemented several changes which have improved customer service at the front counter of the Bureau, including the assignment of an Engineering Aide as a Permit Expediter. The Expediter assists customers by reviewing their request; providing the proper forms; ensures the forms are properly filled out; provides permit process guidance; signs off on Business Licenses; verifies contractor license information; and assists with the routing of plans upon arrival from Planning and Zoning or Transportation and Environmental Services (T&ES). The Expediter provides an essential service to customers by reducing the amount of time each person spends during the permit application process due to incomplete or improperly completed paperwork. In addition, they provide customer guidance so that paperwork is routed by the customer properly to each department for review and approval.

(6) Additional Walk-Through Plans Examiner

Another change in Code Enforcement to improve customer service involves the addition of a second walk-through Plans Examiner. This has been accomplished by creating a three month rotating assignment for New Construction Inspectors. This assignment provides each inspector with an excellent opportunity to enhance their technical and customer service skills while adding additional capacity to the Walk Through Plans Program. The second examiner improves the level of service to customers who are working on small projects, such as home improvements, which do not require a full plan review from the Engineering Section. The Bureau receives a significant number of these small projects weekly. The presence of two walk through plans examiners allows for increased plan review with a reduction in the wait times for customers.

(7) Additional Mechanical/Plumbing Engineer

The Bureau has added a second Mechanical / Plumbing Engineer position to handle the large volume of plans submitted in this area of discipline and improve customer service. The Bureau is in the final stages of hiring an applicant for this position and once on board, it is anticipated that Code will realize an increase in the number of plumbing and mechanical plans reviewed while decreasing the plan review turn around time in this area.

(8) Staff Training

Code Enforcement has provided staff training in gender and racial equality issues in order to improve staff's sensitivity to these issues.

(9) Customer Satisfaction Survey

Code Enforcement has utilized information technology to distribute information and obtain customer feedback. The Bureau has provided a customer satisfaction survey on the City's web page under Code Enforcement. The survey allows citizens another opportunity to present concerns, issues, compliments and service ratings to the Bureau in order to adjust and improve programs administered by Code Enforcement. In addition to the customer survey, Code Enforcement utilizes the City's E-News service to electronically distribute important information about Code Enforcement policies, procedures and information of interest to citizens and developers.

(10) Fire Marshal On-Call Program

Code Enforcement has improved Fire Marshal response to investigations after normal business hours through a Fire Marshal on-call program. Each Deputy Fire Marshal rotates a week at a time in the on call program. The on-call fire marshal is available after hours, on weekends and holidays to respond to incidents when the normal duty fire marshal is unavailable or in instances of multiple or significant incidents. This program ensures that there are sufficient fire marshal resources available to respond to incidents in the City within a reasonable period of time at all hours of the day or night, 7 days a week.

(11) Focus Groups

Code Enforcement utilizes several focus groups in order to provide a conduit for industry and local governments to vet out problems and seek mutually beneficial solutions. The Builders Group meets every other month to discuss issues involving construction and development. The Group includes members from construction companies, developers, architects, trade contractors and Code Enforcement. A smaller focus group comprised of mechanical and plumbing contractors, designers and Code Enforcement meet bi-annually to discuss and resolve issues involving these trades. Code Officials from the Northern Virginia area jurisdictions meet quarterly to discuss policy and procedures. The purpose of this group is to strive to maintain consistent policy across the region pertaining to construction permits and inspection procedures.

The following two measures are proposed as discretionary supplemental budget requests for FY 2006:

(12) Proposed Reorganization Plan in the Fire Prevention Section

Code Enforcement has completed a work load analysis study of field service delivery. As a result of that study, the proposed budget includes funding of \$98,991 to support a reorganization plan within the Fire Prevention Section through the addition of one Deputy Fire Marshal and the upgrade of three Code Enforcement Inspectors to Deputy Fire Marshal positions. The reorganization proposal supports a realignment and consolidation of job duties and responsibilities of Fire Inspectors and Fire Marshals. The proposal recommends significant cross training and blending of job duties in order to effectively address community needs on a daily basis while assuming new duties related to environmental crimes and quality of life issues.

As environmental, quality of life and nuisance complaints have increased City-wide, staff have been challenged to address each of these issues in a timely and efficient manner. Upon implementation of this proposed plan, staff resources should increase through the cross training of staff. More resources can be dedicated to solving problems City-wide and providing for quality and timely inspections and proactive activities in order to meet the Quality of Life goals of the City.

(13) Proposed Records Manager

Finally, the budget includes a Records Manager position as part of the FY2006 Proposed budget. The Records Manager will provide crucial filing and digitizing of filed documents in order to properly manage the volume of records and official files stored at the Code Enforcement Bureau. The Records Manager will process requests for records and files; maintain the paper and digital filing systems; and oversee backlog file conversion of files stored in the City's Records Center since 1990. The task of converting legal records and plans to digital format is an essential function of government and aimed at improving customer service. This position will provide the Bureau with consistency in records management and processing of requests for official forms of information. In addition, this position will relieve the filing burden on the Engineering Aides so that they can focus more attention to customers at the front counter which will improve customer service. The Bureau of Code Enforcement will continue to strive to provide the best level of service to Code Enforcement customers and citizens of Alexandria.