

## Metropolitan King County Council

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Jane Hague, *District 11*  
David W. Irons, *District 12*  
Christopher Vance, *District 13*



**Don Eklund**  
*King County Auditor*

516 Third Avenue, Room W1020  
Seattle, WA 98104-3272

(206) 296-1655  
TTY/TDD 296-1024

## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** October 3, 2000

**TO:** Metropolitan King County Councilmembers

**FROM:** Don Eklund, County Auditor

**SUBJECT:** Management Audit of King County Permit Processes and Practices

Attached for your review is the management audit of King County Permit Processes and Practices. The primary audit objectives were to review DDES's permit approval process for residential building permits, the timeliness of permit processing, and the significance of any issuance delays and permits backlogs. The audit also examines DDES's responsiveness to formal public disclosure requests.

The general audit conclusion was that DDES's average processing timeframes for residential permits frequently exceeded the code-established timelines in 1998 and 1999 due to high workload volumes, staffing practices, and budgetary constraints on staffing to peak workload. In addition, DDES's lengthy waiting times for permit appointments increased its permit processing times and effectively restricted the volume of new permit applications accepted. However, the audit found that DDES was highly responsive to formal public disclosure requests.

The Executive Response, included in its entirety in Appendix 4, indicates concurrence with the audit recommendations. It also provides an implementation schedule for the audit recommendations and indicates that DDES has taken immediate action on several items.

The Auditor's Office sincerely appreciates the cooperation received from DDES's management and staff.

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**MANAGEMENT AUDIT**

**KING COUNTY PERMIT  
PROCESSES AND PRACTICES**

Presented to  
the Metropolitan King County Council  
by the  
County Auditor's Office

Don Eklund, King County Auditor  
Susan Baugh, Principal Management Auditor

Report No. 2000-05

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## **Abbreviations**

DDES	Department of Development and Environmental Services
KCC	King County Code
RCW	Revised Code of Washington

# REPORT SUMMARY

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## **Introduction**

The management audit of King County's residential permit processes and practices was initiated at the request of the Metropolitan King County Council, and included in the council-adopted 1999 Auditor's Office work program. The audit was prompted by the council's interest in the evaluation of the Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES) management of permit approval and issuance processes for new residences and residential improvements. In addition, the council was interested in the review of permit backlogs and issuance delays for building permits, and in the review of DDES's responses to public disclosure requests.

## **Audit Objectives**

The primary audit objectives were to review DDES's permit approval process for residential building permits, the timeliness of permit processing, and the significance of any issuance delays and permits backlogs. DDES's responsiveness to formal public disclosure requests was also evaluated.

## **General Conclusions**

The general audit conclusion was that DDES's average processing timeframes for residential permits frequently exceeded the code-established timelines in 1998 and 1999 due to high workload volumes, staffing practices, and budgetary constraints on staffing to peak workload. In addition, DDES's lengthy waiting times for permit appointments increased its permit processing times and effectively restricted the volume of new permit applications accepted. However, the audit found that DDES was highly responsive to formal public disclosure requests as well as informal information requests.

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**SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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**FINDING 2-1 (Page 6)****DDES's Average Processing Timeframes Frequently Exceeded the Timelines Established for the Issuance of Residential Building Permits.**

The King County Code establishes a 90-day timeframe for processing new residential building permits from the date the application is deemed complete. The code-established timeframe for residential addition and improvement permits range between 15 and 40 days, depending upon the complexity of the construction, building site, and agencies involved in the permit review.

The audit analysis for the total permits processing time, regardless of authorized time exclusions, indicated that 43 percent of the 1998 and 1999 permits were completed on time. While 70 to 98 percent of the basic, basic accessory, basic revision and mobile permits were completed on time in 1998 and 1999, the processing time for 57 percent of the total residential permits exceeded the code timeframe. In 1998, only 59 percent of new residential permits, 58 percent of the accessory, and 50 percent of the addition permits were completed on time. In 1999, only 27 percent of the accessory, 43 percent of the addition, 52 percent of the addition improvement, and 54 percent of the new residential permits were completed on time.

Adjusted processing timeframes were also calculated for a sample of 1998 and 1999 residential permits by deducting time associated with code-authorized exclusions (e.g., time for applicants to prepare new information, obtain related permits, etc.). The adjusted timeframes for the 1998 accessory, addition, and new residential permits continued to exceed the code timelines, and the adjusted processing times for all 1999 sample

permit categories exceeded the code timelines with the exception of those for mobile permits.

An analysis of the 1999 sample permits processing delays confirmed that the DDES workload generally exceeded the available staffing resources. Some permits were delayed at multiple DDES routing stations, and others were “log-jammed” at specific routing stations such as sensitive areas and drainage reviews.

**The audit recommended** that DDES develop a workload model that reasonably estimates the volume of workload that can be processed at various routing stations within the code-established timelines. DDES should also provide historical production data to the council that documents the workload levels that can be processed with the code-established timelines. Code revisions should be considered that could extend deadlines up to 120 days, the Washington State code-established deadline, if workload levels consistently exceed DDES standard processing capacity.

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**FINDING 2-2 (Page 16) DDES’s Lengthy Waiting Times for Permit Appointments Increased Its Permit Processing Times and Effectively Restricted the Volume of New Permit Applications.**

DDES has established a standard for scheduling appointments for “intake” of new permit applications that ranges between two and four weeks of the date that DDES applicants request appointments. The average waiting times for a 1999 permit intake appointment for new residential, residential addition and remodeling permits was 44 days and 48 days, respectively, which exceeded the two- to four-week scheduling standard. The maximum waiting times for appointments during the five-month

period were 62 days for new residential permits and 66 days for addition and remodeling permits, which was double DDES's two- to four-week scheduling standard. The lengthy waiting time for permit appointments effectively increased the overall permit processing times, and effectively restricted the volume of new permit applicants received by DDES in 1999. DDES management identified 14 steps that were either implemented or planned to be implemented to address permit intake appointment delays.

**The audit recommended** that DDES management continue to implement improvements in the Permit Center to facilitate efficient intake processing. DDES should also inform the public about anticipated scheduling delays when permit applications are requested by applicants to facilitate more timely processing of new applications.

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**FINDING 2-3 (Page 19)**

**Competing DDES Customer Interests as Well as County Financial Policies and DDES Staffing Practices Limited Residential Permit Processing Efficiency.**

Permit applicants, a primary DDES customer group, are concerned with service efficiency, which is generally associated with the timeliness of permit processing. Environmentalists, other property owners, and community representatives are concerned with service quality or effectiveness, which is generally associated with the thoroughness of environmental and building plan reviews. However, service efficiency decreases as more complex land use and building construction policies are adopted to protect environmental and property owners' interests. New policies also impact development expenses as additional revenues are required to staff and coordinate extensive permit reviews.

An important objective of this audit was to identify the DDES permit backlog. DDES's definition of a backlog is permit work "in-shop" for which DDES does not have sufficient staffing resources to process within the code-mandated timeframes. DDES management recognizes that backlogs and logjams (delayed reviews at specific permit routing stations) occurred during 1998 and 1999, due, in part, to the DDES's staffing models, which are based on the total volume of work projected for the entire year. The annual staffing forecasts do not account for the peak volumes that occurred during the spring and summer months.

While DDES increased the total FTEs required to process permits in the 1999 budget and again later in 1999, sufficient resources were not available to process the total backlogged or log-jammed permits. This was important given that customer service and public perception improvements were one of the DDES Director's primary goal in 1999, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to improve customer service and public perception without addressing the both service efficiency and effectiveness issues.

### **County Financial Policies Rather Than Customer Service Goals Were the Driver of DDES's Operations**

The most influential factor in determining the efficiency and quality of DDES's permit function in 1999 was the available fee-generated revenues rather than customer service goals or applicant demand. The county's financial policies, which focus on retiring the long-term DDES debt and stabilizing the DDES fund, were not adequate to fund sufficient staff to process the 1998 and 1999 workload volumes. Unfortunately, precise information was not available on the staffing shortfall. The seriousness of the staffing shortfall, however, was reflected in the increased volume of work in-shop at the end of 1998 and

1999, data documenting consistent and lengthy delays at some routing stations, and the lengthy waiting times for permit application appointments throughout 1999. DDES's applicant's frustration with processing delays was confirmed by focus groups during a 1998 DDES Building Services Division reengineering process, and a total of 18 process improvements, 17 organizational efficiency improvements, and 20 customer service improvements were developed by DDES to address significant issues.

However, the newly implemented improvements will not address the systemic issues associated with insufficient resources, including staffing resources, to operate DDES services at a level that is consistent with applicant demand. A concerted effort will be required to balance DDES financial and customer service policies to identify the level of sustainable service that can be achieved within DDES's fee-generated resources.

**The audit recommended** that DDES management continue to clarify for county officials, staff and applicants the level of customer service that can be sustained with DDES fees and revenues so that service expectations are consistent with its operations. If the level of service is not acceptable to county decision makers, more DDES resources should be allocated to direct customer services and less to indirect activities.

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**FINDING 2-4 (Page 26) DDES Provided Timely Responses to 92 Percent of Formal Public Disclosure Requests; However, Only 54 Percent of Survey Respondents Were Generally Satisfied With DDES's Response. Some Survey Respondents Were Highly Complimentary of DDES's Record Section Performance.**

An audit survey was conducted on formal public disclosure requests to determine the public's perception of the timeliness and completeness of DDES's responses to requests. Ninety-two (92) percent of the survey respondents indicated that DDES responded to their requests within five business days, or sent a letter acknowledging their request and the date that the information would be provided. Fifty-four (54) percent of the survey respondents were also generally satisfied with DDES's responsiveness to their public disclosure request, but 38 percent of the respondents indicated that the information provided was incomplete and that they were dissatisfied by DDES's response.

Formal public disclosure requests represent a small percentage of DDES's information requests. The DDES Records Sections in the Building and Land Use Services Divisions receive numerous informal information and records requests from the public, such as requests for as-built drawings, plat maps, and drainage system plans. Although survey input was not solicited on informal requests, three survey respondents were highly complimentary of DDES's timely response and the courteous assistance provided by the Building and Land Use Record Sections' personnel.

**The audit recommended** that DDES ensure that information provided in response to formal disclosure requests is complete, or inform individuals that more information will be forthcoming if some relevant information is not immediately available.

# **AUDITOR'S MANDATE**

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The Management Audit of the King County Permit Processes and Practices was conducted by the County Auditor's Office pursuant to Section 250 of the King County Home Rule Charter and Chapter 2.20 of the King County Code. The audit was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards, with the exception of an external quality control review.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

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## **Background**

The management audit of King County's residential permit processes and practices was initiated at the request of the Metropolitan King County Council, and included in the council-adopted 1999 Auditor's Office work program. The audit was prompted by the council's interest in the evaluation of the Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES) management of permit approval and issuance processes for new residences and residential improvements. In addition, the council was interested in the review of permit backlogs and issuance delays for building permits, and in the review of DDES's responses to public disclosure requests.

### **DDES's Primary Function Is to Provide High Quality Development and Environmental Services in King County.**

DDES's mission is to serve, educate and protect our community through the implementation of King County's development and environmental regulations. DDES provides a range of services, including building and land use permit processing, comprehensive and current planning and education activities, building and land use inspections, fire investigations, and code enforcement services. In 1999, DDES was staffed by 336 employees, including the 145.5 employees (43 percent) assigned to the Building Services Division (please see Appendix 1 for the 1999 Building Services Division organization chart). DDES's annual operating budget was approximately \$31.5 million.

**Washington State and County Codes Require DDES to Provide Timely Permit Services.**

The Revised Code of Washington and King County Code mandate that DDES process applications for building permits in a timely and fair manner to ensure predictability. Both codes identify a 28-day timeframe for the initial review of building plans and the determination of the completeness of the permit applications. The Washington State Code establishes a timeframe of 120 days for issuance of building permits following the receipt of the completed application, and the King County Code establishes timeframes that range between 15 and 120 days following the receipt of the completed application.

**Audit Objectives**

The primary audit objectives were to review DDES's permit approval process for residential building permits, the timeliness of permit processing, and the significance of any issuance delays and permits backlogs. The audit also examines DDES's responsiveness to formal public disclosure requests.

**Audit Scope And Methodology**

The audit scope was limited to the review and evaluation of DDES's permit policies, procedures and practices in 1998 and 1999. The methodology included the review of Washington State and King County Codes; public information bulletins; permit intake schedules; permit records generated through the Permits Plus management information system; financial and staffing reports; and previous audits and studies pertaining to permit processing, correspondence, and other miscellaneous documents.

**Permit Sample Drawn and Public Disclosure Survey Developed During the Audit Process.**

A permit sample was randomly drawn during the audit process for an in-depth review of major single-family residential permits

processed during 1998 and 1999. The sample focuses on permits for new residential construction, additions and improvements that exceeded the established time guidelines to determine whether or not the processing delays associated with the sample permits were reasonable.

A public disclosure request survey was also conducted in October 1999 to obtain direct public input on the timeliness and completeness of DDES's response to formal requests for information. Questionnaires were developed and distributed to each of the 32 individuals who initiated formal public disclosure requests between 1997 and 1999. Information is also provided on the significant number of "informal" requests from the public for DDES documents.

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# 2 PERMIT PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

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This chapter reviews DDES’s performance in meeting the established county timelines for processing residential permits. The findings and analysis focus on DDES’s performance based on the timelines for processing residential permits in 1998 and 1999, and on the identification of challenges or barriers to efficient permit processing. In addition, the chapter contains information on DDES’s current efforts to improve residential permit processing in order to maintain consistent compliance with the county’s standards, and reviews DDES’s responsiveness to formal public disclosure requests.

**State and County  
Establish Standards to  
Promote Timely  
Permit Processing**

As noted in Chapter 1, the Revised Code of Washington and King County Code mandate that DDES process applications for building permits in a timely manner. Although Washington State standards establish a broad permit processing timeline at 120 days from the date the application is deemed complete, the county standards delineate processing timelines by permit categories. As shown in Exhibit A below, KCC 20.20.100 requires DDES to issue permits for new residences, additions and residential improvements within shorter timeframes.

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**Exhibit A  
King County Code  
Timelines for Residential Permits**

Type of Permit	Timeline
New Residential Building Permits	90 Days
Residential Remodels	40 Days
Residential Appurtenances (e.g., Decks and Garages)	15 Days
Residential Appurtenances Requiring Substantial Site Review	40 Days
Health Department Review	40 Days

Source: King County Code 20.20.100.

As shown in Exhibit A, the timeframe for new residential building permits is 90 days from the date the application is deemed complete. The timeframes for processing residential addition and improvement permits range between 15 and 40 days, depending upon the complexity of the construction, building site, and agencies involved in the permit review.

**FINDING 2-1**

**DDES'S AVERAGE PROCESSING TIMEFRAMES  
FREQUENTLY EXCEEDED THE TIMELINES  
ESTABLISHED FOR THE ISSUANCE OF RESIDENTIAL  
BUILDING PERMITS.**

Both the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) and King County Code (KCC) recognize that certain conditions or requirements may surface that result in unavoidable permit processing delays. Applicants may be required to submit plan revisions, studies, and additional information, or may be required to obtain other permits prior to obtaining a new building permit. Pursuant to KCC 20.20.100(1), DDES may exclude any period of time during which the applicant has been asked to submit additional information, or obtain other related permits, from the permit processing time. The excluded time periods are calculated from the date that applicants are advised that additional information or permits are required until the date that applicants are advised that the requirements have been satisfied, or fourteen days after new information has been provided (whichever is earlier).

**Two-Tiered Approach  
Used to Calculate  
1998 and 1999 Permit  
Processing  
Timeframes**

The audit analysis involved a two-tiered approach. First, the total time required to process all 1998 and 1999 permits was calculated by permit category, regardless of the code-authorized time exclusions. The average number of calendar days to process permits was then determined by permit category, along with the minimum and maximum processing days. Second, a

sample of permits<sup>1</sup> was drawn from each of the 1998 and 1999 residential permit categories, and the permit processing timeframes were then recalculated after deducting the time associated with exclusions authorized under KCC 20.20.100(1). Adjusted average, minimum and maximum processing times were then developed by permit category. (Please see Appendix 2 for a listing of the 1998 and 1999 sample permits.)

Exhibits B-1 and B-2 below display the total processing timelines by permit category, without authorized exclusions, for the 1998 and 1999 permits, respectively. Note that the actual processing time is very important to permit applicants, particularly professional developers, because lengthy processing timeframes can impact project financing.

**Exhibit B-1  
Timeframes for Completed 1998 Residential Permits**

Permit Type	Code Timeline (Days)	Number of Completed Permits	Number on Time	Percent on Time	Average Time (Days)	Minimum Time (Days)	Maximum Time (Days)
Accessory	15-40	434	176	41%	63	1	509
Addition	15-40	855	497	58%	45	1	466
Basic	90	1,274	1,243	98%	8	1	371
Mobile	90	213	183	86%	52	1	393
Residential	90	1,019	599	59%	95	1	500

**Source:** Department of Development and Environmental Services Permits Plus System Extract, 1999. Please note that all accessory and addition permits with processing times of 40 days or less were considered on time, because the actual 15- or 40-day timelines could not be readily determined from the information available on the Permits Plus System.

<sup>1</sup>A sample was drawn from completed permits that exceeded code-established timelines. However, the ten percent sample was drawn from a DDES report that expressed processing times in net work days rather than calendar days (i.e., weekends excluded).

**Average Time to Process the 1998 Accessory, Addition, and Residential Permits Exceeded Code Timelines**

As shown in Exhibit B-1, DDES completed 98 percent of the basic permits and 86 percent of the mobile permits within the required timeframe in 1998. The average processing timeframes were only 8 days for the basic permits and 52 days for the mobile permits. However, only 59 percent of new residential permits were completed within a 90-day timeframe, and only 58 percent of the accessory and 50 percent of the addition permits were completed within the established 15- or 40-day timeframe. The average length of time to process accessory, addition, and new residential building permits in 1998 also exceeded the processing timeframes established in KCC 20.20.100(1). Although some permits were processed within one day in all permit categories, a one-day timeframe was not common for new, custom residential permits.

**DDES Established Several New Residential Permit Categories in 1999**

In May 1999, DDES established several new categories of residential building permits. The average processing timeframes for the newly established addition improvement, basic accessory, basic revision and dwelling permit categories may be somewhat understated in 1999, particularly for the more complex dwelling permits, because no permits were carried forward from prior years. Conversely, the average processing timeframes for the accessory, addition and residential permits include the volume of permits that were carried forward from 1998 or earlier years, and may be overstated. The processing timeframes for the 1999 residential building permits are displayed in Exhibit B-2 below.

**Exhibit B-2  
Timeframes for Completed 1999 Residential Permits**

Permit Type	Code Timeline (Days)	Number of Completed Permits	Number on Time	Percent on Time	Average Time (Days)	Minimum Time (Days)	Maximum Time (Days)
Accessory	15-40	194	52	27%	78	1	305
Addition	15-40	427	185	43%	52	1	359
Addition Improvement	15-40	388	201	52%	41	1	227
Basic	90	913	904	99%	4	1	262
Basic Accessory	15-40	20	14	70%	39	1	172
Basic Revision	15-40	171	132	77%	22	1	139
Dwelling	90	159	109	69%	82	1	245
Mobile	90	95	69	73%	62	1	314
Residential	90	389	212	54%	97	7	373

**Source:** Department of Development and Environmental Services Permits Plus System Extract, 1999. The mobile permit data was extracted from the 1999 DDES Permits Applications Report. Please note that all accessory and addition permits with processing times of 40 days or less were considered on time, because the actual 15- or 40-day timelines could not be readily determined from the information available on the Permits Plus System.

**Average Time to Process 1999 Accessory, Addition, Addition Improvement, and Residential Permits Exceeded Code Timelines**

As shown in Exhibit B-2 above, 99 percent of the basic, 70 percent of the basic accessory, 77 percent of the basic revision, and 73 percent of the mobile permits were completed on time. The average processing timeframe for the basic permits was only 4 days, which was noteworthy. However, only 27 percent of the accessory, 43 percent of the addition, and 52 percent of the addition improvement permits were completed on time. Sixty-nine (69) percent of the dwelling permits and 54 percent of the residential permits were completed on time. The average length of time to process the accessory, addition, addition improvement, and residential permits in 1999 exceeded the processing timeframes established in the County Code.

DDES adopted a standard practice, consistent with KCC 20.20.100(1), of turning off the “clock” in the Permits Plus System when the permit review process was delayed due

to requests for applicant information or other required permit processes. The adjusted timeframes for the 1998 and 1999 sample permits, with the allowable time exclusions authorized under KCC 20.20.100(1), are displayed in Exhibits C-1 and C-2 below.

**Exhibit C-1  
Adjusted Timeframes for Sample 1998 Residential Permits**

Permit Type	Code Timeline (Days)	Number of Sample Permits	Number on Time	Percent on Time	Average Time (Days)	Minimum Time (Days)	Maximum Time (Days)
Accessory	15-40	24	7	29%	46	8	81
Addition	15-40	37	20	54%	43	14	97
Basic	90	2	0	0%	109	102	116
Mobile	90	3	1	33%	121	52	160
Residential	90	26	13	50%	91	1	177

**Source:** Audit sample was drawn from the Department of Development and Environmental Services Permits Plus System Extract, 1999. Please note that the sample was selected and preliminary analysis completed when the net work day issue arose. Although the sample size was not expanded, the results were modified to reflect processing times in calendar rather than net work days, consistent with the County Code.

**Adjusted Average Processing Days Slightly Exceeded the Code Timelines for 1998 Accessory, Addition, and Residential Permits**

As noted in Exhibit C-1 above, only 29 percent of the accessory, 54 percent of the addition, and 50 percent of the residential sample permits were completed on time, even with the exclusions authorized under KCC 20.20.100(1). While the adjusted average days to process the sample accessory, addition and residential permits were less than the corresponding total average days for all the permits, as shown in Exhibit B-1, the adjusted average days continued to slightly exceed the code timelines for the three permit categories.

The adjusted average processing times for the sample basic and mobile permits were inconclusive given the small sample of these permits. The majority of 1998 basic and mobile permits were processed within the code timeline, unless delayed by complex site issues.

The adjusted timeframes for the 1999 sample permits, with the allowable time exclusions authorized under KCC 20.20.100(1), are displayed in Exhibit C-2 below.

**Exhibit C-2  
Adjusted Timeframes for Sample 1999 Residential Permits**

Permit Type	Code Timeline (Days)	Number of Sample Permits	Number on Time	Percent on Time	Average Time (Days)	Minimum Time (Days)	Maximum Time (Day)
Accessory	15-40	10	1	10%	58	3	101
Addition Improvement	15-40	20	5	25%	55	10	142
Addition	15-40	16	4	25%	64	6	230
Basic	90	1	0	0%	97	97	97
Basic Accessory	15-40	1	0	0%	59	59	59
Basic Revision	15-40	2	1	50%	41	35	46
Dwelling	90	12	7	58%	95	29	170
Mobile	90	2	1	50%	69	32	106
Residential	90	13	4	31%	119	40	224

**Source:** Audit sample was drawn from the Department of Development and Environmental Services Permits Plus System Extract, 1999. Please note that DDES expanded the number of permit categories in May 1999 with the implementation of the new Permits Plus System.

**Adjusted Average Processing Days Continued to Exceed the Code Timelines for the 1999 Sample Permits**

As shown in Exhibit C-2 above, the adjusted average processing times for the 1999 sample permits were higher than the County Code timelines in all categories with the exception of the mobile permit category. DDES has raised concerns about whether the county’s timelines for processing residential permits were reasonable, particularly given the broader 120-day timeline established in the Revised Code of Washington for all permit categories. If the County Code timeline was 120 days rather than 90 days for residential and 15-40 days for additions and improvements, the total and adjusted average processing times for all 1998 and 1999 permits would have been within the broader timeline.

**Sixty-One (61) Percent of the 1999 Sample Permits Contained Calendar Errors**

It should be noted that DDES’s 1999 Activity Reports indicated that 78 percent of all residential permits met the code timelines. However, DDES management information and reports were not consistently accurate based upon the sample permit analysis. Calendar information or timelines contained in the Permits Plus System were modified for 47 of 77 (61 percent) of the sample 1999 permits due to recording errors. Please note that the adjusted processing times shown in Exhibits C1 and C2 were calculated after the clock errors were corrected by a senior DDES supervisor. The high percentage of errors reflected DDES’s 1999 staffing limitations (including the reassignment of key staff and staff turnover), a high workload volume, and the Permits Plus System conversion constraints. These errors were significant because the DDES performance reports, including those submitted to the County Council and County Executive, are generated through the Permits Plus System.

Given that the adjusted processing times for numerous sample permit categories were beyond the established timelines in 1998 and 1999, we reviewed the 1999 sample permits to determine the cause of the delays. Exhibit D below displays the analysis of the permit processing delays.

<b>Exhibit D</b>		
<b>Analysis of Sample Permit Processing Delays</b>		
<b>Reasons for Permit Delays</b>	<b>Number of Permits Effected</b>	<b>Percent of Permits Effected</b>
<b>DDES Delays</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>48%</b>
General Volume of Workload	22	29%
Permit Center Workload and Staffing Issues	10	13%
Sensitive Areas Workload	5	6%
<b>Applicant Delays</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>30%</b>
Plan Revisions, Studies and Additional Information	23	30%
<b>Other Delays</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>22%</b>
Health Department	12	16%
Related Permits Required/Pending	5	6%
<b>Total Delays</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Department of Development and Environmental Services Permits Plus System Extract, 1999.

**DDES's 1999 Workload Accounted for 48 Percent of the Permit Processing Delays**

As shown in Exhibit D above, 48 percent of the permit delays were attributed to DDES's extremely high 1999 workload volumes. The general workload volume accounted for 29 percent of the DDES processing delays, which were spread across multiple routing stations (e.g., site engineering, plan review, etc.) routinely involved in the review and approval of building permits. Specific Permit Center workload and staffing issues accounted for 13 percent, and the sensitive areas/plan review workload accounted for 6 percent of the remaining DDES processing delays based on the documentation shown in the Permits Plus System.

Thirty (30) percent of the applicant-related processing delays in 1999 were associated with requests for plan revisions, studies or additional applicant information. Other factors accounted for the remaining 22 percent of the permits processing delays, including Health Department reviews (16 percent) and other permit requirements (6 percent). While the County Code provides longer processing timelines (i.e., 25 additional days) for permits requiring environmental health reviews and coordination, the health review function was also understaffed in 1998 and 1999. Although 16 percent of the sample permit delays were attributed exclusively to health reviews, lengthy health reviews were also a factor for the permits counted under the general volume of workload delays.

**Sample Permit Analysis Confirmed that 1999 Workload Volume Exceeded Staffing Resources**

The analysis of the sample permit processing delays confirmed that the 1999 workload volume generally exceeded the available staff resources. While DDES was unable to provide quantified information on its backlog in 1999, 32 permits (42 percent) were delayed across multiple routing stations and in the permit center

during the peak construction season, along with the five permits requiring sensitive area reviews. (See Finding 2-3 for additional information on DDES workload volumes and backlog.) Although DDES has developed a sophisticated permit tracking system, no routine permit management reports were available for line managers and supervisors to rapidly identify the volume of pending permits at each of the routing stations that exceeded the existing staffing resources based on the historical or estimated time required to process the permits. (Please see Appendix 3 for the processing timelines for the sample residential permit routing stations.)

**DDES Applicants Were Not Consistently Notified, in Writing, of New Information Request and Permit Delays**

KCC20.20.100(1c) indicates that DDES is responsible for providing written notice to applicants when permit timelines will be exceeded. However, DDES did not routinely provide written notice to applications of permit delays due to workload volumes and staffing limitations, and was often pressed to find time to respond to applicants' telephone inquiries regarding information requests or the status of permits. Furthermore, due to staffing constraints, DDES staff did not consistently notify applicants, in writing, when plan revisions and additional information was required. This was a particular concern due to DDES's policy of turning the "clock" off when additional information is requested from permit applicants. It is not appropriate to turn off the clock if the applicants are not properly notified of the new information requirements. Furthermore, when the clock is turned off, DDES staff are responsible for ensuring that permit applicants have sufficient opportunity to obtain information or clarification of the new requirements in a timely manner.

In addition, DDES staff did not consistently process plan revisions and new information submitted by applicants in a timely manner. The King County Code provides a 14-day

**DDES Did Not Consistently Process Plan Revisions and New Information in a Timely Manner**

timeframe for the review of revised plans and other new information. However, an analysis of plan revisions submitted by permit applicants in 1999 indicated that only 51 percent of the plan revisions were reviewed by DDES staff within the 14-day review period authorized by the County Code.<sup>2</sup> Again, DDES management was aware of the routing delays, which they attributed to unusually high workload volumes and staffing constraints in the Permit Center.

In summary, the permit processing timelines in 1998 and 1999 exceeded the code timelines for many residential permit categories. Although the County Code timelines were an important incentive for DDES management and staff to process permits in an equitable and timely manner, the timelines were not frequently attained in 1998 and 1999 given the workload volume and DDES’s staffing practices. (Please see Finding 2-3 and relevant recommendations regarding financial management & staffing practices.)

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2-1-1** DDES should develop a workload model that reasonably estimates the volume of workload that can be processed at various routing stations within the County Code established timelines.
  
- 2-1-2** DDES should provide historical production data to council staff that documents the workload levels that can be processed within the code-established timelines. Code revisions should be considered that extend deadlines up to 120 days if workload levels consistently exceed DDES’s standard processing capacity.

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<sup>2</sup>Note that the 14-day period did not include staff review time, only the documented lapse time between the date the revised plans were received and the date the plans were routed to appropriate plan review staff.

- 2-1-3** DDES management and staff should ensure that applicants are properly notified of requirements prior to turning off the permit clock, and that the clock is consistently turned back on after 14 days unless DDES applicants are properly notified that insufficient information was provided.
  
- 2-1-4** DDES should ensure that accurate and complete information is consistently entered in the Permits Plus System and routing system, so that accurate workload analyses and management reports can be generated in a timely manner.

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**FINDING 2-2**

**DDES’S LENGTHY WAITING TIMES FOR PERMIT APPOINTMENTS INCREASED ITS PERMIT PROCESSING TIMES AND EFFECTIVELY RESTRICTED THE VOLUME OF NEW PERMIT APPLICATIONS ACCEPTED.**

**DDES Established a Two- to Four-Week Standard for Scheduling Permit Intake Appointments**

DDES has established a standard for scheduling appointments for “intake” of new permit applications that ranges between two and four weeks of the date that DDES applicants request appointments. Although DDES has not historically monitored the availability of appointment slots in relation to the two- to four-week standard, the Building Services Division began tracking requests for permit appointments in 1999 due to the high volume of requests. In fact, as documented in the *Building Services Division Weekly Alerts*, the applicant demand for intake appointments for new residential and residential addition and remodel permits consistently outpaced DDES’s available appointment slots in 1999. While the delayed intake appointments were described in a narrative format until July 1999, actual calendar dates were recorded in *the Building Services Division Weekly Alerts* between August and December of 1999. Exhibit E below displays the average waiting times, expressed in calendar days, for new residential, addition and

remodeling appointments requested between August and December of 1999.

Exhibit E Timeframes for Residential Permit Appointments		
Type of Permit	New Residential Construction	Residential Addition and Remodel
Average Wait Time	44 Days	48 Days
Minimum Wait Time	25 Days	13 Days
Maximum Wait Time	62 Days	66 Days

**Source:** King County Department of Development and Environmental Services *Building Services Division Weekly Alerts*, August-December 1999.

**Average 1999 Waiting Times for Residential, Addition, and Remodeling Permits Appointments Were Three Times Longer Than the DDES Scheduling Standard**

As shown in Exhibit E above, the minimum waiting times for permit intake appointments for new residential, addition, and remodeling permits were within the two- to four-week appointment standard during the last five months of 1999. However, the average waiting times for a permit intake appointment for new residential, residential addition and remodeling permits was 44 days and 48 days, respectively, which exceeded the two- to four-week scheduling standard.

The maximum waiting times during the five-month period were 62 days for new residential permits and 66 days for addition and remodeling permits, which was double the DDES’s two- to four-week scheduling standard. The lengthy waiting time for permit appointments effectively increased the overall processing times for these building permits in 1999.

Two factors contributed to the lengthy waiting times for permit appointments in 1999. First, developers applied for a higher than projected number of building permits, particularly in the newly incorporated city of Sammamish. Second, an unusually high volume of turnover—50 percent or eight full-time positions—occurred within a nine-month period among the permit and zoning technicians who staffed the DDES Permit

Center during 1999.

**DDES Implemented  
Numerous Initiatives  
to Accelerate the  
Permit Intake Process**

In a November 1999 memorandum to the County Council Environmental Quality Panel Members, the DDES Director outlined 14 steps that were either implemented or planned to be implemented to address permit intake appointment delays. The improvements ranged from increasing Permit Center staff and appointment slots to procedural revisions to accelerate the permit intake processing time.

The lengthy waiting times for permit appointments in 1999 effectively restricted the volume of new permit applicants received by DDES. Given the volume of processing delays for the residential permits accepted by DDES in 1999, the practice of limiting intake appointments for new residential, addition and remodeling permits was reasonable.

Finally, it is interesting to note that DDES Residential Building Permit Process Bulletin #12 instructs applicants to complete all forms and permit requirements identified in *Obtaining a Residential Building Permit Bulletin #9* prior to making an appointment to submit an application. It may be a disservice to DDES applicants, however, to wait to schedule appointments until permit applications are fully complete unless DDES is able to schedule appointments within two weeks of the requested date.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**2-2-1**

DDES management should continue to implement improvements in the Permit Center, as outlined in its November 1999 memorandum, to facilitate efficient intake processing.

- 2-2-2** DDES should inform the public about anticipated scheduling delays when permit applications are mailed to or picked up by applicants to facilitate more timely processing of permit applications. For example, DDES may want to encourage DDES experienced applicants to schedule intake appointments when the permit applications are 95 percent complete.
- 

**FINDING 2-3****COMPETING DDES CUSTOMER INTERESTS AS WELL AS COUNTY FINANCIAL POLICIES AND DDES STAFFING PRACTICES LIMITED RESIDENTIAL PERMIT PROCESSING EFFICIENCY.**

Permit applicants, a primary DDES customer group, are concerned with service efficiency. Because permit applicants, including developers, generally associate service efficiency with the timeliness of permit processing, applicants' perceptions will not be significantly altered without corresponding improvements in permit processing times. Accurate workload data and staffing analysis are essential to improve service efficiency in permit processing efforts.

Service quality is the common factor that influences the perceptions of environmentalists, other property owners, and community representatives. These important DDES customers are concerned primarily with service effectiveness rather than efficiency, particularly the thoroughness of environmental and building plan reviews. However, service efficiency decreases as more complex land use and building construction policies are adopted to protect environmental and property owners' interests. New policies also impact project expenses as additional revenues are required to staff and coordinate extensive permit reviews. Again, accurate workload data and staffing analyses are essential to implement significant service effectiveness improvements in

**DDES Acknowledged That Backlogs and Logjams Occurred During Review of Residential Permits**

permit processing while maintaining service efficiency.

An important objective of this audit was to identify the DDES permit backlog. DDES's definition of a backlog is permit work "in-shop" for which DDES does not have sufficient staffing resources to process within the code-mandated timeframes. DDES management recognizes that backlogs exist at certain points throughout the year due, in part, to the DDES's staffing models, which are based on the total volume of work projected for the entire year. The annual staffing forecasts do not account for the peak volumes that occurred during the spring and summer months, which reached 120% of the forecast permit workload volumes in 1999. While the total work in-shop could not be completed during the peak period, DDES management claimed that the total volume of work would be completed later in the year, when the volume of new permit applications decreased.

DDES management also acknowledged that "logjams" occurred at routing stations in which residential permits were processed, such as the drainage and sensitive area review stations. Recognizing the need to address these logjams, DDES increased the number of FTEs in drainage and sensitive area reviews in the 1999 budget, and again for sensitive area reviews in 1999. However, DDES indicated that sufficient resources were not available to process the total backlogged or logjammed permits, which was important given that customer service and public perception improvements were one of the DDES Director's primary goal in 1999. It is difficult, if not impossible, to improve customer service and public perception without addressing the both service efficiency and effectiveness issues.

**County Financial Policies Rather Than Customer Service Goals Were the Driver of DDES's Operations**

However, the most influential factor in determining the efficiency and quality of DDES's permit function in 1999 was the available fee-generated revenues rather than customer service goals or applicant demand. The County's financial policies, which required retiring the long-term DDES debt and stabilizing the DDES fund, also require fee support for DDES permit staffing and operations.

The County's financial policies and DDES's business practices created significant tension within the development community during both 1998 and 1999. Despite DDES's genuine efforts to provide service efficiency and effectiveness, applicants were frustrated with delays in scheduling permit appointments and in processing residential permits with the available staffing resources.

The County's financial policies and DDES's business practices also created some internal confusion as first-line supervisors and staff attempted to justify higher staffing levels to meet the service demands and reduce the workload pressure on staff. Some supervisors focused on the DDES staffing model as the source of the tension, because the model was used as a guide by DDES upper management to established budget and staffing levels, which also had to be balanced against the financial resources available to the DDES. DDES's staffing model conservatively forecasted staffing needs based on prior years' data, which reflected less stringent policy requirements and less complex development projects.<sup>3</sup> DDES line supervisors spent considerable time developing elaborate justifications for increased staffing resources to meet the increased workload demands. One creative supervisor developed a unique staffing model for his section in an effort to secure more staffing resources to process the permit

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<sup>3</sup>The DDES staffing model, which projects annual staffing allocations based on annual market projections and historical DDES production data, does not take seasonal workload fluctuations into account. The model assumes that DDES workload is flat over the annual period. In addition, the staffing model does not take into account the increased time associated with newly adopted and complex permit requirements, such as the drainage manual, or the increasing complexity of building sites under development each year in King County. The model also does not consider the increased staff time required to process more applicant requests for progress reports and complaints associated with lengthy processing times.

workload. However, the staffing model was a tool, which was sometimes modified, to maintain the county's financial management practices for DDES.

Despite higher fee schedules and revenues, DDES was unable to allocate a sufficient number of staff to consistently process the 1998 and 1999 building permit workload in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, precise information was not available on the staffing shortfall. The seriousness of the staffing shortfall, however, was reflected in the increased volume of work in-shop at the end of 1998 and 1999, data documenting consistent and lengthy delays at some routing stations, and the lengthy waiting times for permit application appointments throughout 1999.

**DDES Focus Group  
Results Confirm  
Concerns About DDES  
Delays and Customer  
Service Attitude**

DDES's applicant's frustration was confirmed by focus groups during a 1998 DDES Building Services Division reengineering process, conducted in conjunction with a private reengineering consultant. Examples of significant focus group concerns, which confirm our earlier audit findings, include:

- Long processing cycle times and bottlenecks in specialty reviews such as sensitive area and SEPA.
- DDES attitude; clients are merely tolerated.
- Lengthy time to obtain a permit intake appointment.
- Plan revisions and supplemental information remains in the Permit Center too long prior to routing to plan reviewers.
- Absence of individual or group accountability for the whole process; applications are handed off from staff to staff with little inter-unit coordination or prioritization.
- Slow turnaround in DDES returning phone calls.
- Project status communications needs to be improved.

**Eighteen (18) Process, 17 Organizational Efficiency, and 20 Customer Service Improvements Were Developed to Address Significant DDES Operational Issues**

DDES's Building Services Division has attempted to identify service efficiencies based on the focus group information and through a multi-year, benchmarking process. A total of 18 process improvements, 17 organizational efficiency improvements, and 20 customer service improvements were developed to address significant issues. In late 1999 and early 2000, the Building Services Division began to implement the improvements.

Examples of improvements that have been fully or almost fully implemented include:

- Permit technicians were reassigned to plan review to improve the efficiency of the flow of applications from review to review.
- A project manager was recently hired to help expedite complex permits through better coordination of multiple reviews, faster decision making and resolution of code conflicts, and improved communications between DDES applicants and other personnel.
- Both projects and staff were reassigned based upon the workload volumes. For example, Land Use Services staff was reassigned to assist in the drainage review of commercial permits.
- The Subject-to-Field-Approval Program was enhanced to increase the same-day approvals of simple permit applications.
- Customer information was improved, such as displaying design standards.

DDES management also increased the number of FTEs allocated to various routing stations through the annual budget process. For example, significant processing delays were experienced in the Building Services Division Site Engineering and Planning Section in 1998 and early 1999, so three additional FTEs were budgeted in 1999 and 2000 to expedite site reviews for residential permits.

However, the newly implemented improvements will not address

the systemic issues associated with insufficient resources, including staffing resources, to operate DDES services at a level that is consistent with applicant demand. A concerted effort will be required to balance DDES financial and customer service policies to identify the level of sustainable service that can be achieved within DDES's fee-generated resources.

**DDES Goals, Objectives and Performance Measures Were Not Useful in Its Day-to-Day Operations.**

DDES established 17 goals, 34 objectives, and 36 performance measures for the sections in the Building Services Division. Four overarching goals, that cross multiple sections in the Building Services Division, included:

- Deliver services through a customer-oriented organization and improve customer satisfaction.
- Move responsibility and decision-making authority to line staff interacting with customers.
- Develop and maintain a skilled workforce to process building permits.
- Improve division work processes that have the greatest potential gain for customer services.

These goals could not be consistently achieved given the workload and staffing levels in 1998 and 1999. Furthermore, the 34 objectives established by DDES to guide the accomplishment of the goals in each section were generally non-specific, open-ended, and not particularly relevant to DDES's 1998 and 1999 operations. In addition, the 36 performance measures established to measure DDES's progress toward reaching the goals were largely non-specific and only one measure was quantified.

**DDES’s Goals, Objectives, and Performance Measures Were Too Broad to Promote Accountability**

For example, streamlining permitting and inspection processes was one objective identified under the DDES Building Services Division Manager’s goal of improving division work processes, and the “average time to schedule intake appointments” was identified as the performance measure. Theoretically, DDES could have “achieved” this objective with any type of permit process improvement in 1999, because the stated objective was too broad to promote accountability for discrete process enhancements. The performance measure associated with the objective was also not quantified to evaluate DDES’s progress related to the average time to schedule intake appointments in 1999, so any improvement could signal success even though DDES was unable to meet its time standards for scheduling residential intake appointments throughout 1999. DDES applicants’ perceptions were that DDES’s performance deteriorated rather than improved.

DDES management acknowledged that only two organization-wide objectives were consistently monitored in 1999: 1) maintaining compliance with the established code timelines for permit processing, and 2) maintaining 65 percent billable time for production personnel. However, the Building Services Division did not identify 65 percent billable time rate as a 1999 objective and did not maintain consistent compliance with the code timelines for processing residential permits.

While continuous improvement of county systems and processes is highly desirable and DDES is implementing numerous process improvements, the results will be difficult to measure without specific objectives and milestones. DDES could better serve its customers by focusing on fewer but more specific goals, objectives, and measures that support its overarching financial and customer service policies.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2-3-1** DDES management should continue to clarify for county officials, staff and applicants the level of customer service that can be sustained with DDES fees and revenues so that service expectations are consistent with its operations. If the level of service is not acceptable to county decision-makers, more DDES resources should be allocated to direct customer services and less to indirect activities.
- 2-3-2** DDES management should continue to refine its goals, objectives, and performance measures so that they are useful in the management of its operations and consistently reflect the agency mission and practices once the primary goals and objectives are accomplished.

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**FINDING 2-4**

**DDES PROVIDED TIMELY RESPONSES TO 92 PERCENT OF ITS FORMAL PUBLIC DISCLOSURE REQUESTS, HOWEVER, ONLY 54 PERCENT OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS WERE GENERALLY SATISFIED WITH DDES'S RESPONSE. SOME SURVEY RESPONDENTS WERE HIGHLY COMPLIMENTARY OF DDES'S RECORD SECTION PERFORMANCE.**

During the audit process, the Auditor's Office conducted a survey on formal public disclosure requests to determine the public's perception of the timeliness and completeness of DDES's responses to requests. Thirty-two (32) surveys were mailed to individuals that initiated public disclosure requests between 1997 and 1999. Follow-up calls were made within two weeks after the scheduled completion date to encourage survey respondents to return the survey forms.

Thirteen (13) or 41 percent of the surveys were completed and returned to the Auditor’s Office. The numerical results of the survey responses are summarized in Exhibit F below.

<b>Exhibit F Public Disclosure Survey Results</b>				
Survey Questions	Yes	No	Don't Know	Not Applicable
RCW 4.17.320 requires public agencies to respond promptly to disclosure requests. Did DDES provide requested records within five business days of the receipt of your request?	3 (23%)	9 (69%)	1 (8%)	0
If the records were not immediately available, did DDES send a letter to you acknowledging your request and indicating when the records would be available to you?	9 (69%)	3 (23%)	0	1 (8%)
Did the timeframe for receipt of the records seem reasonable?	8 (62%)	3 (23%)	1 (8%)	1 (8%)
Were the documents complete?	7 (54%)	5 (38%)	0	1 (8%)
Were you denied access to any documents without reasonable explanation?	3 (23%)	10 (77%)	0	0
If your disclosure request was denied, did DDES provide a written explanation of the reason(s) why your public disclosure request was denied?	1 (8%)	3 (23%)	2 (15%)	7 (54%)
If clarification of your public disclosure request was required, did DDES's request seem reasonable?	3 (23%)	2 (15%)	0	8 (62%)
Were you generally satisfied with DDES's response to your public disclosure request?	7 (54%)	5 (38%)	0	1 (8%)

**Source:** King County Auditor’s Office Survey, 1999.

**DDES Responded to 92 Percent of Request Within Five Business Days or Sent Letter Acknowledging Request**

Based on the survey results shown in Exhibit F above, 92 percent of the survey respondents indicated that DDES responded to their requests within five business days, or sent a letter acknowledging their request and the date that the information would be provided. Fifty-four (54) percent of the survey respondents were also generally satisfied with DDES’s responsiveness to their public disclosure request.

However, 38 percent of the survey respondents indicated that the information provided was incomplete and that they were dissatisfied by DDES’s response. In fact, several of the dissatisfied respondents expressed a high degree of frustration, and commented on “missing” documents that were later discovered by DDES. One respondent indicated that he filed a lawsuit against DDES due to a missing document.

Nevertheless, seven (54 percent) were generally satisfied with DDES's response to their public disclosure requests.

**Some Survey  
Respondents Were  
Highly Complimentary  
of DDES Records  
Section Personnel**

It should be noted that formal public disclosure requests represent a small percentage of the requests received by DDES for building and land use information. The DDES Records Sections in the Building Services and Land Use Services Divisions receive numerous informal information and records requests from the public, such as requests for as-built drawings, plat maps, and drainage system plans. DDES receives informal public information requests daily, by telephone, fax, e-mail, or on a walk-in basis. Although it was impossible to determine the precise volume of the informal requests from current records, an estimated average of 15 requests were made daily based on a limited log sample from the Building Services and Land Use Services Divisions. Although survey input was not solicited on informal information requests, three survey respondents were highly complimentary of DDES's timely response to such requests and the courteous assistance provided by the Building and Land Use Record Sections' personnel.

In addition, the DDES Public Information Officer receives frequent information requests from the public via the agency's web site. These inquiries range from copies of county ordinances and archived public notices to requests for permit data and relevant costs. During November 1999, the Public Information Office received 101 inquiries on the DDES web site.

In summary, DDES receives a substantial number of information requests annually, yet only a small percentage of the information requests are initiated as formal public disclosure requests. DDES's responses to formal public disclosure and informal information requests was generally timely based upon the survey results. However, only 54 percent of the survey respondents were satisfied with the completeness of DDES's response.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2-4-1** DDES should ensure that information provided in response to all formal public disclosure requests is complete, or that individuals are informed that more information will be forthcoming if some relevant information is not immediately available.
  
  - 2-4-2** DDES should continue to provide high quality information and records services in response to informal requests from DDES customers and the general public.
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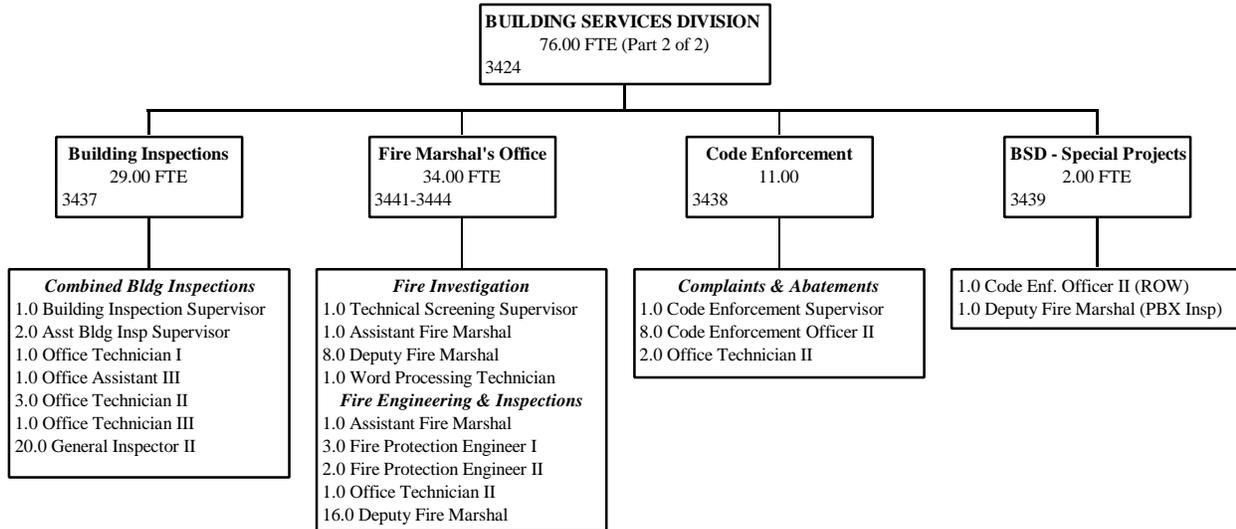
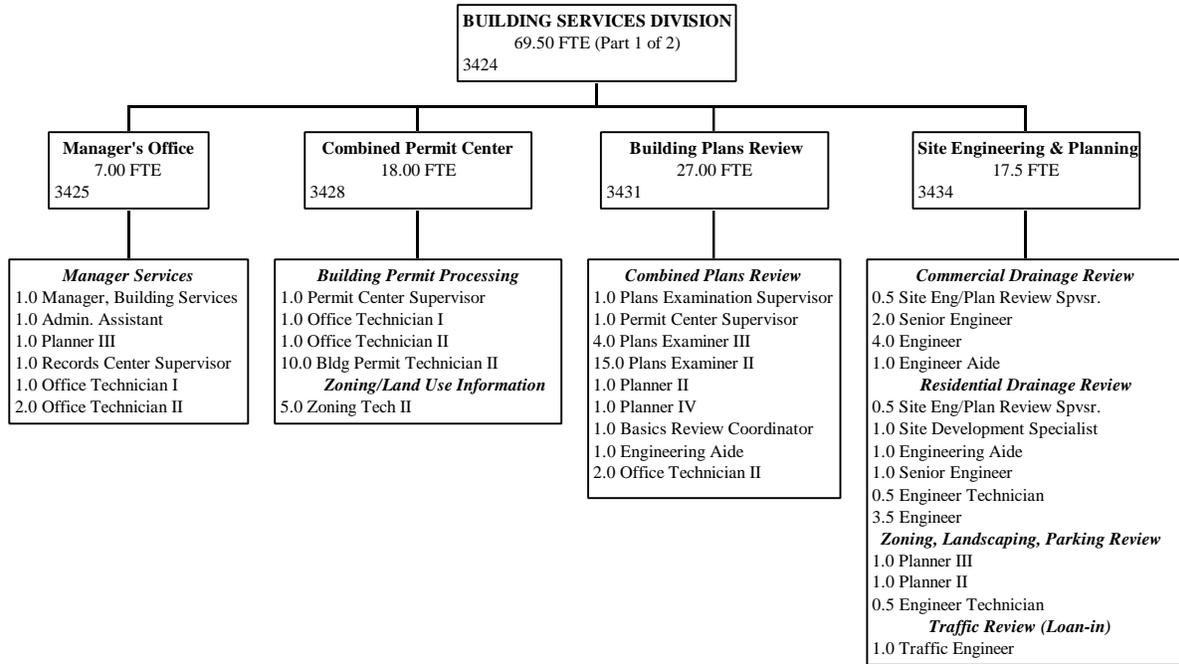
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## **APPENDICES**

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# APPENDIX 1

## 1999 BUILDING SERVICES DIVISION ORGANIZATION CHART



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## APPENDIX 2

### LISTING OF 1998 SAMPLE PERMITS

Permit #	Type
B98A0238	ACCESSRY
B98A2796	ACCESSRY
B98A0345	ACCESSRY
B98A1118	ACCESSRY
B98A1613	ACCESSRY
B98A0124	ACCESSRY
B98A1186	ACCESSRY
B98A0789	ACCESSRY
B98A0108	ACCESSRY
B98A1093	ACCESSRY
B98A0671	ACCESSRY
B98A0369	ACCESSRY
B98A2140	ACCESSRY
B98A2656	ACCESSRY
B98A0800	ACCESSRY
B98A0783	ACCESSRY
B98A0553	ACCESSRY
B98A1017	ACCESSRY
B98A0183	ACCESSRY
B98A1212	ACCESSRY
B98A1010	ACCESSRY
B98A1926	ACCESSRY
B98A4722	ACCESSRY
B98A1269	ACCESSRY
B98A4223	ADDITION
B98A0589	ADDITION
B98A0588	ADDITION
B98A2706	ADDITION
B98A2477	ADDITION
B98A1293	ADDITION
B98A1296	ADDITION
B98A1359	ADDITION
B98A0654	ADDITION
B98A3468	ADDITION
B98A0261	ADDITION
B98A2501	ADDITION
B98A2699	ADDITION
B98A1094	ADDITION
B98A0956	ADDITION
B98A1876	ADDITION
B98A2055	ADDITION
B98A0570	ADDITION
B98A3114	ADDITION
B98A1132	ADDITION
B98A0989	ADDITION
B98A2672	ADDITION

Permit #	Type
B98A0856	ADDITION
B98A0489	ADDITION
B98A2838	ADDITION
B98A3464	ADDITION
B98A4285	ADDITION
B98A1442	ADDITION
B98A2444	ADDITION
B98A4600	ADDITION
B98A2036	ADDITION
B98A2259	ADDITION
B98A3734	ADDITION
B98A2294	ADDITION
B98A2321	ADDITION
B98A1487	ADDITION
B98A1950	ADDITION
B98R0811	BASIC
B98R0184	BASIC
B98R0637	MOBILE
B98R0530	MOBILE
B98R1187	MOBILE
B98R1443	NEWRES
B98R0345	NEWRES
B98R1343	NEWRES
B98R1963	NEWRES
B98R0655	NEWRES
B98R2158	NEWRES
B98R2109	NEWRES
B98R0983	NEWRES
B98R0385	NEWRES
B98R0353	NEWRES
B98R0526	NEWRES
B98R2623	NEWRES
B98R1412	NEWRES
B98R0407	NEWRES
B98R1234	NEWRES
B98R1179	NEWRES
B98R0564	NEWRES
B98R0747	NEWRES
B98R1716	NEWRES
B98R1881	NEWRES
B98R1929	NEWRES
B98R2502	NEWRES
B98R1846	NEWRES
B98R2512	NEWRES
B98R1098	NEWRES
B98R2108	NEWRES

## APPENDIX 2 (Continued)

### LISTING OF 1999 SAMPLE PERMITS

Permit #	Type
B99A1073	ACCESSRY
B99A0526	ACCESSRY
B99A1011	ACCESSRY
B99A0399	ACCESSRY
B99A1044	ACCESSRY
B99A1979	ACCESSRY
B99A0432	ACCESSRY
B99A1100	ACCESSRY
B99A0934	ACCESSRY
B99A1796	ACCESSRY
B99M3748	ADDIMPRV
B99M3279	ADDIMPRV
B99M3061	ADDIMPRV
B99M3209	ADDIMPRV
B99M3007	ADDIMPRV
B99M3317	ADDIMPRV
B99M3743	ADDIMPRV
B99M3136	ADDIMPRV
B99M3443	ADDIMPRV
B99M3134	ADDIMPRV
B99M3290	ADDIMPRV
B99M3015	ADDIMPRV
B99M3497	ADDIMPRV
B99M3834	ADDIMPRV
B99M3802	ADDIMPRV
B99M3603	ADDIMPRV
B99M3957	ADDIMPRV
B99M3903	ADDIMPRV
B99M3924	ADDIMPRV
B99A1592	ADDITION
B99A0959	ADDITION
B99A0570	ADDITION
B99A0913	ADDITION
B99A1912	ADDITION
B99A1894	ADDITION
B99A0561	ADDITION
B99A0316	ADDITION
B99A1790	ADDITION

Permit #	Type
B99A1843	ADDITION
B99A0165	ADDITION
B99A1947	ADDITION
B99A0211	ADDITION
B99A0247	ADDITION
B99A0856	ADDITION
B99A1220	ADDITION
B99Q3188	B-REVSN
B99Q3129	B-REVSN
B99M3081	BASICACC
B99R0953	BASIC
B99L3589	DWELLING
B99L3532	DWELLING
B99L3473	DWELLING
B99L3520	DWELLING
B99L3707	DWELLING
B99L3758	DWELLING
B99L3289	DWELLING
B99L3414	DWELLING
B99L3357	DWELLING
B99L3386	DWELLING
B99L3441	DWELLING
B99L3106	DWELLING
B99R0545	NEWRES
B99R0923	NEWRES
B99R0696	NEWRES
B99R0831	NEWRES
B99R0778	NEWRES
B99R0115	NEWRES
B99R0652	NEWRES
B99R0103	NEWRES
B99R0147	NEWRES
B99R0504	NEWRES
B99R0653	NEWRES
B99R1150	NEWRES
B99R1210	NEWRES
B99L3571	MOBILE
B99L3903	MOBILE

### APPENDIX 3

#### ROUTING STATION PROCESSING TIMELINES

SUB-TYPE	STATION	AVERAGE	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM		
<b>ACCESSORY</b>	WCI XX	Waiting Customer Info	69	6	311	
	RSDSXX	Residential Sens Area Review	39	0	70	
	BRTRXX	Building Permit Tech Routing	35	0	106	
	GEO XX	Geotechnical Review	25	11	38	
	HEALXX	Health	22	0	67	
	FDCKXX	Field Check and Plotting	17	0	32	
	PLTRXX	Plotter	15	3	27	
	2BLBXX	Review Bldg Team B	10	8	11	
	RENGXX	Commercial Drainage Engr	9	0	29	
	RQBNXX	Residential Quick Ck Bin (15 Days or 40 Days)	9	0	64	
	PTEKXX	Permit Technician	8	0	75	
	BLDAXX	Bldg Plan Review Team A	8	0	37	
	2RNGXX	Review Drainage (Res)	7	1	12	
	ADDRXX	Addressing	4	4	4	
	BLDBXX	Bldg Plan Review Team B	3	0	6	
	2BLAXX	Review Bldg Team	1	0	2	
	FFLOXX	Fire Flow/Access	1	1	1	
	SHORXX	Shorelines Review	1	1	1	
	<b>ADDITION</b>	2BL XX	Review Bldg Plan	69	22	116
		WETLXX	Wetlands Review	47	26	69
		WCI XX	Waiting Customer Info	40	0	360
BRTRXX		Building Permit Tech Routing	33	1	265	
GEO XX		Geotechnical Review	31	0	54	
RSDSXX		Residential Sens Area Review	27	3	77	
HEALXX		Health	26	0	77	
PLTRXX		Plotter	24	8	33	
FFLOXX		Fire Flow/Access	20	13	26	
SHORXX		Shorelines Review	12	10	14	
FDCKXX		Field Check and Plotting	8	0	24	
BLDBXX		Bldg Plan Review Team B	6	0	58	
RQBNXX		Residential Quick Ck Bin (15 Days or 40 Days)	6	0	26	
ADDRXX		Addressing	5	5	5	
BLDAXX		Bldg Plan Review Team A	5	0	11	
2BLBXX		Review Bldg Team B	5	0	24	
PTEKXX		Permit Technician	4	0	22	
RENGXX		Commercial Drainage Engr	3	0	18	
2BLAXX		Review Bldg Team	3	3	3	
2RNGXX		Review Drainage (Res)	3	0	9	
BLD XX		Bldg Plan Review (No Team Assgnd)	1	0	4	
<b>BASIC</b>	GRADXX	Grading Plan Review	89	89	89	
	WCI XX	Waiting Customer Info	51	17	82	
	RSDSXX	Residential Sens Area Review	32	7	32	
	RENGXX	Commercial Drainage Engr	30	20	40	
	GEO XX	Geotechnical Review	25	11	38	
	WETLXX	Wetlands Review	25	21	28	
	PLTRXX	Plotter	20	11	28	
	FDCKXX	Field Check and Plotting	16	0	32	
	2RNGXX	Review Drainage (Res)	14	0	41	
	HEALXX	Health	10	10	10	

## APPENDIX 3 (Continued)

### ROUTING STATION PROCESSING TIMELINES

SUB-TYPE	STATION	AVERAGE	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
	PTEKXX Permit Technician	8	0	12
	FFLOXX Fire Flow/Access	5	2	8
	ADDRXX Addressing	2	0	4
	PTEK Permit Technician	0	0	0
<b>MOBILE</b>	GRADXX Grading Plan Review	197	197	197
	BRTRXX Building Permit Tech Routing	147	81	208
	HEALXX Health	80	2	158
	WETLXX Wetlands Review	76	76	76
	WCI XX Waiting Customer Info	47	32	47
	RENGXX Commercial Drainage Engr	43	0	112
	RSDSXX Residential Sens Area Review	40	17	81
	GEO XX Geotechnical Review	37	12	62
	PLTRXX Plotter	30	27	34
	FDCKXX Field Check and Plotting	29	17	40
	FFLOXX Fire Flow/Access	5	1	12
	2RNGXX Review Drainage (Res)	3	3	3
	PTEKXX Permit Technician	2	0	7
	ADDRXX Addressing	1	0	3
	SHORXX Shorelines Review	1	1	1
<b>NEWRES</b>	RSDSXX Residential Sens Area Review	95	24	323
	GRADXX Grading Plan Review	72	0	256
	WETLXX Wetlands Review	54	0	208
	WCI XX Waiting Customer Info	53	0	219
	HEALXX Health	33	0	104
	GEO XX Geotechnical Review	30	0	70
	PLTRXX Plotter	22	0	33
	2BLAXX Review Bldg Team	19	0	60
	RBINXX Residential Plan Bin (90 Days)	18	0	54
	RENGXX Commercial Drainage Engr	18	0	108
	BLDBXX Bldg Plan Review Team B	17	0	121
	BLDAXX Bldg Plan Review Team A	14	0	48
	2RNGXX Review Drainage (Res)	13	0	50
	FFLOXX Fire Flow/Access	12	0	93
	FDCKXX Field Check and Plotting	11	0	39
	PTEKXX Permit Technician	11	0	179
	RQBNXX Residential Quick Ck Bin (15 Days or 40 Days)	8	8	8
	BLD XX Bldg Plan Review (No Team Assgnd)	7	0	18
	ADDRXX Addressing	2	0	8
	FINAXX Finance-Review for Fees	1	0	6
	SHORXX Shorelines Review	1	1	1
	BRTRXX Building Permit Tech Routing	1	0	11
	BRTR Building Permit Tech Routing	0	0	0
	FINA Finance-Review for Fees	0	0	0

## APPENDIX 4

### EXECUTIVE RESPONSE



King County Executive  
RON SIMS

**RECEIVED**

AUG 17 2000

KING COUNTY AUDITOR

August 17, 2000

Don Eklund  
King County Auditor  
516 Third Avenue, Room W1020  
Seattle, WA 98104-3272

Dear Mr. Eklund:

Thank you for the draft report titled "Management Audit: King County Permit Processes and Practices." I wish to extend my appreciation to you and your staff for the review and analysis of King County's residential permit processes and DDES's responsiveness to formal public disclosure requests. The audit featured a high degree of collaborative effort between your staff and the staff of the Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES).

King County is justifiably proud of the performance, management, and staff of DDES. They are charged with ensuring safe buildings, safe roads, and a quality environment. It is often a daunting and sometimes thankless task. In spite of that, outstanding work is performed. DDES has worked tirelessly to carry out the will of the Executive and the Council including the monumental task of retiring a \$20 million dollar debt in the last seven years.

DDES's vision is to be a regional leader promoting responsible development and environmental protection for quality communities, working together to innovate and achieve the best customer service. The recommendations contained in your report will be implemented in order to help achieve that vision. Enclosed are specific responses to the recommendations contained in the audit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ron Sims".

Ron Sims  
King County Executive

Enclosure

cc: Paul Tanaka, Deputy County Executive  
Greg Kipp, Director, Department of Development and Environmental Services (DDES)  
Pat Steel, Director, Office of Budget  
Dave Lawson, Manager, Executive Audit Services  
Michael Frawley, Manager, Administrative Services Division, DDES  
Chris Ricketts, Interim Manager, Building Services Division, DDES

## APPENDIX 4 (Continued)

### RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS OF DRAFT MANAGEMENT AUDIT: KING COUNTY PERMIT PROCESSES AND PRACTICES

**2-1-1 DDES should develop a workload model that reasonably estimates the volume of workload that can be processed at various routing stations within the County Code established timelines.**

The Executive agrees. DDES is charged with regulating the most volatile of the leading economic indicators, housing and development. Since 1996, it has been successfully managing the workload associated with the longest building boom in King County's history. During that period of time, it has increased its staff from 249 to 339, or 36 percent. That ramping up of highly trained and specialized staff was done in the context of a very tight labor market. Nonetheless, DDES's average review time for a large majority of the residential permits was within five days of the statutory time frames. As always, we are committed to improving upon that performance.

The difficulty, of course, is managing the peaks in service demands. DDES has successfully met the challenge of predicting volume demands. For example, the volume forecast for 1998 and 1999 were within 2 percent of the work received for the year. DDES staffing models are based on the overall workload forecasted for an entire year. The Department faces a significant challenge in providing higher levels of staffing during peak workload demands within the year, and a commensurate reduced level of staffing during the off-peak periods. Given the constraints of a tight labor market and Logan/Knox and Clark, it is difficult to hire "seasonal" engineers, inspectors, plan reviewers and sensitive area staff just for the peak periods, although DDES has had some limited success in this area. Two of DDES's values are, however, "innovation" and "teamwork." Through those values it is recognized that the Department can always do better and they will strive to do so through their constant updating and review of workload models. Implementation date: Second Quarter 2001.

**2-1-2 DDES should provide historical production data to Council staff that documents the workload levels that can be processed within the code established timelines. Code revisions should be considered that extend deadlines up to 120 days if workload levels consistently exceed DDES's standard processing capacity.**

The Executive agrees. DDES staff will supply to Council staff those documents that address workload levels. DDES staff will work with Council staff on the analysis of workload levels and that which can be processed within code established timelines.

Code revisions will be considered that extend timelines up to 120 days for those products whose workload levels consistently exceed DDES's standard capacity to meet King County statutory timelines. Implementation date: Second Quarter 2001.

## APPENDIX 4 (Continued)

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**2-1-3 DDES management and staff should ensure that applicants are properly notified of requirements prior to turning off the permit clock, and that the clock is consistently turned back on after 14 days unless DDES applicants are properly notified that insufficient information was provided.**

The Executive agrees. DDES management and staff are confident that most applicants were notified of the information needed to complete the Department's review, prior to turning off and turning on of the permit processing clock. It is recognized, however, that those notifications were not always documented. DDES management and staff are committed to ensuring that the clock is turned on and off appropriately, and that a written record of those notices is maintained. We will update procedures and train staff accordingly. Implementation date: Third Quarter 2000.

**2-1-4 DDES should ensure that accurate and complete information is consistently entered in the Permits Plus System and routing system, so that accurate workload analyses and management reports can be generated in a timely manner.**

The Executive agrees. It is recognized that the DDES staff does an exceptional job under huge volumes and tight timelines. There is a compelling need, however, for accurate and complete information to be entered into our record keeping systems. We will update procedures and train new and veteran staff accordingly. Implementation date: Third Quarter 2000.

**2-2-1 DDES management should continue to implement improvements in the Permit Center, as outlined in its November 1999 memorandum, to facilitate efficient intake processing.**

The Executive agrees. DDES management and staff have done an outstanding job in improving accurate and efficient intake processing. Customer complaints are down and satisfaction is up. DDES management, Permit Center supervision and Permit Center staff have met the challenge of improved customer service and will continue to make improvements in that area. Implementation date: Ongoing.

**2-2-2 DDES should inform the public about anticipated scheduling delays when permit applications are mailed to or picked up by applicants to facilitate more timely processing of permit applications. For example, DDES may want to encourage DDES experienced applicants to schedule intake appointments when the permit applications are 95 percent complete.**

The Executive agrees. As part of its overall permit processing intake improvements, DDES is emphasizing effective communication and feedback from its customers. The goal has been set and met to schedule appointments within two to four weeks of a request. If it appears as though

## APPENDIX 4 (Continued)

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the four-week standard may be breached, additional resources are brought to bear. If the situation develops where the four-week standard is breached in the future, DDES will, of course, so inform its customers.

With reference to experienced applicants, the Executive also agrees. Currently, DDES does encourage experienced applicants to schedule intake appointments in advance. The result has been a very efficient processing of a high volume of applications with those parties very experienced in the application process. Implementation date: Ongoing.

**2-3-1 DDES management should continue to clarify for county officials, staff and applicants the level of customer service that can be sustained with DDES fees and revenues so that service expectations are consistent with its operations. If the level of service is not acceptable to county decision-makers, more DDES resources should be allocated to direct customer services and less to indirect activities.**

The Executive agrees. DDES has consistently informed decision-makers of the limitations in its services brought on by its tight financial resources. DDES will continue to do so. DDES has also informed its staff year after year of the limitations of its ability to staff at a higher level despite the exceptional demands for service. That information will continue to flow to customers, decision-makers and staff.

DDES currently charges \$132 per hour for its services. Only 7 percent of that charge goes to expenses associated with its Director's office, its Division Manager's offices and its entire Administrative Services Division. Twelve percent is associated with operations and maintenance costs. When DDES "staffed up" by 90 positions to meet the demands of the 1990s, only 18 percent of the new positions were associated with support positions. Half of those support positions went to making improvements in telephone answering and Permit Center customer service improvements. The remaining 82% of staff increases were associated with direct service providers such as general inspectors, engineers, code enforcement officers, and site development specialists. The Department long ago slashed its overhead expenses and has made a point of keeping them low in order to keep within the twin demands of excellent customer service and tight financial constraints. With each budget year, however, the staff classification mix is reviewed in order to ensure that customer service is maximized and spending restrained. Implementation date: Immediate and ongoing.

**2-3-2 DDES management should continue to refine its goals, objectives, and performance measures so that they are useful in the management of its operations and consistently reflect the agency mission and practices once the primary goals and objectives are accomplished.**

The Executive agrees. DDES has been a leader in the development of business plans in the last five years. Those plans have been consistently improved and refined. A review of the most recent budget submitted will reveal that most of those goals established by DDES for the

## APPENDIX 4 (Continued)

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upcoming budget year have specific measurable performance expectations. DDES involved both its management and staff in establishing those performance measures. They will be holding themselves responsible for achieving all of its stated performance measures. Implementation date: Immediate and ongoing.

**2-4-1 DDES should ensure that information provided in response to all formal public disclosure requests is complete, or that individuals are informed that more information will be forthcoming if some relevant information is not immediately available.**

The Executive agrees. The Department's Communications Director has assumed the overall responsibility for public disclosure requests. The program she took over was performing at a high level. In spite of that, she has been making improvements throughout DDES's public disclosure program. The Department has benefited from a high degree of substantial, ongoing advice from the Office of the Prosecuting Attorney in creating a model public disclosure program. Information provided under public disclosure is complete and individuals are informed that more information will be forthcoming if some relevant information is not immediately available.

**2-4-2 DDES should continue to provide high quality information and records services in response to informal requests from DDES customers and the general public.**

The Executive agrees. DDES does an outstanding job in providing high quality information and record services to informal requests from DDES customers and the general public. DDES will continue to do so.

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