

City of Columbia
Building and Property Maintenance Codes Review
By Ron Darden, UT-MTAS Municipal Management Consultant
September, 2007

Scope of Review

This study reviews the organization and operation of the City of Columbia's building and property maintenance division. Each member of the building codes staff was interviewed. The review does not include engineering, planning and GIS departments, although some reference is made to engineering in terms of time required for permit application reviews. The author relied on data and information provided by the building codes staff and compensation data from previous studies. The interpretation of the data is that of the author.

Adopted Codes

To provide for health, safety and aesthetic values, the city has adopted the following codes:

- International Building Code-Edition 2006
- International Residential Code-Edition 2006
- International Energy Conservation Code-Edition 2006
- International Plumbing Code-Edition 2006
- International Mechanical Code-Edition 2006
- International Fuel Gas Code-Edition 2006
- International Property Maintenance Code-Edition 2006
- International Fire Code-Edition 2006
- The National Electric Code

The city council has appointed a board of adjustments and appeals to hear appeals of the chief building official. Since property maintenance violations are mostly heard in city court, the court system effectively serves as the court of appeals.

Administration and Enforcement

The city has provided the following staff for the administration and enforcement of the various adopted codes within the building codes division:

- Chief building official-----1
- Building and property maintenance inspectors-----2
- Executive secretary-----1
- Secretary-----1

The building codes division is a division of the city engineering department. The engineering department provides drainage reviews and site plan reviews per city

requirements. The city's fire department reviews provisions and requirements of the fire code. The planning department reviews zoning requirements and issues sign permits and monitors and enforces sign maintenance issues. Utility reviews are made by city utility staff and the Columbia Utility Board.

In addition to these administrative and enforcement duties and responsibilities, the building codes division is responsible for municipal building and property maintenance. The chief building official reports directly to the city engineer. The executive secretary also reports to the city engineer and provides direct support to building and property maintenance.

The chief building official supervises the building inspectors and property maintenance personnel and the secretaries. The chief building official enforces the various enacted codes, issues permits, conducts plan reviews, issues notices of non compliance, takes remedial actions required for compliance, resolves conflicts between inspectors and builders, and coordinates required reviews by engineering, planning, fire services, and utilities and performs other duties as required. As a division director, his ability to coordinate with department directors is often somewhat limited in that issues affecting his division are sometimes resolved without his participation.

The executive secretary is responsible for permit applications, issuing approved permits, scheduling inspections, receiving complaints, responding to inquiries, preparing pay records, and administration of the building maintenance program as well as other assigned duties. The department secretary performs other duties and assists the executive secretary.

The two building inspectors conduct plan reviews, approve permits and inspect building, plumbing, mechanical, gas, and property maintenance. The inspectors notify citizens of non compliance with property maintenance standards and initiate required enforcement procedures. Approximately 43% of their time is devoted to property maintenance issues.

Recommendations

- Remove the building and property maintenance division from the engineering department. The chief building official should report to the city manager or a staff person who is in a position to coordinate activities of planning, zoning, engineering, sign control and GIS.
- Assign the executive secretary to the building codes division instead of the engineering department and have her report directly to the chief building official. The present reporting procedure is not conducive to effective management.
- Reassign the supervision and administration of the building and property maintenance program to another department that may be responsible for similar activities.

Permit Applications and Reviews

Building Permit Applications

Building permit applications are made at the office of the chief building official. Required reviews are routed to planning, engineering, fire services and utilities. Once the chief building official completes his review and receives approved reviews from other reviewers, the permit is issued. Most building code departments experience delays in receiving review comments and approvals. Although the author did not review planning, fire service and utility reviews, a review of 79 engineering reviews revealed the following:

- 34.2% of reviews were completed on the same day submitted.
- 52% of reviews were completed within 30 days of submittal.
- 21.5% of reviews were completed between 30-60 days.
- 13.7% of reviews required more than 60 days for review.
- The average number of days for review was 27.46 days.

No attempt was made to categorize delays caused by inadequate or incomplete submittals of required data to engineers or whether or not the engineering department is adequately staffed for such reviews. It is not uncommon for inadequate or incomplete submittals to require additional time for the review process.

Recommendations

- Establish time limits for engineering reviews once required submittals are adequate.
- Consider contracting engineering reviews to private consultants if necessary to reduce the time required for review.
- Consider city sponsored training for contractors, builders, architects, and engineers who pull city permits to inform them of required submittal requirements.
- Expedite permit review by granting permits with minimal requirements with instant application and issuance at the permit counter or on-line. Example: A simple residential room addition or a commercial alteration with no change of building use.

Sign Permits

Sign permits are issued by the planning department. The planning department monitors zoning and sign maintenance issues. Sign construction often involves electrical, structural, footings and foundations and such structures are required to be in compliance with the city's building code. The building codes apply to structures as well as buildings.

Recommendation

- Require that all sign permits be issued by a certified building official.

Zoning Permits

Zoning permit fees are collected on the building permit application. The planning division reviews the requirements for zoning. Unless a rezoning or variance is requested, many cities allow the building official to issue a building permit upon his inspection and interpretation of the approved zoning map.

Recommendation

- Allow the chief building official to interpret the approved zoning map and issue permits which do not involve a rezoning or an appeal without further planning department review.

Inspections and Builder Communications

The building official is responsible for performing required inspections. Building officials report that the city manager, the mayor, and the city council support enforcement efforts.

Inspectors do not use inspection check off sheets. Builders often complain about deficiencies that were not reported on previous inspections and they are subject to correcting such deficiencies. With an inspection check off sheet, the cost for correcting such deficiencies could be avoided or minimized.

Recommendation

- Require inspectors to use inspection check off sheets.

Building inspectors are available in the office for two hours during the morning and two hours in the afternoon for consultation with builders, architects, engineers and permit holders. During other periods of time secretaries receive the communication and relay the request or wait until the inspector is available. It is sometimes costly to builders to wait for long periods of time to resolve an interpretation of code requirements. City inspectors are furnished cell phones for communication purposes.

Recommendation

- Require inspectors to be available at all times during their work period to respond to specific builder questions relating to code requirements. Inspections should continue to be scheduled by assigned office staff.

Building Code Inspection Enforcement and Appeals

Building inspectors are authorized to issue stop work orders when code requirements are not met. Most inspection issues are resolved in consultation between the inspector and the chief building official. Builders who disagree with the chief building official's interpretation of the code requirements may appeal directly to the city's board of adjustments and appeals. If a permit holder refuses to comply with the chief building official or a decision of the appeals board, he may appeal the decision to the appropriate court. When necessary, the city may request that a court enforce the provisions of its building code.

Property Maintenance Enforcement

The building division staff enforces property maintenance codes. MTAS agrees with the use of city court to enforce property maintenance issues. Building inspectors are required to have a police officer issue a citation to city court for violations. The procedure for removing junked automobiles in city court is effective. The procedure of citing occupied property owners or tenants to city court for violating tall grass and weeds is also effective. A non occupied property, where notification is a problem, requires the city to take action to mow grass and weeds and upon non payment, place a lien on the property for recovery of costs. The city should carefully monitor the liens and release those that have been satisfied per the requirements of Tennessee law.

Recommendations

- When action is taken to remove dilapidated structures, MTAS recommends that the city proceed using the provisions of the state's slum clearance law, which grants an automatic lien to recover costs.
- Request that the city judge hold an environmental court to hear property maintenance issues and televise the sessions.
- Authorize inspectors to issue citations to city court for violations of the property maintenance codes. Request a police officer to arrest those who refuse the citation.
- Do not charge a demolition fee for a dilapidated structure. The city should remove as many obstacles to demolition as possible.

Number of Inspections and Cost and Revenue Analysis

During fiscal year 2006 the city issued 1702 permits including zoning permits.

Building permits issued	555
Plumbing permits	266
Mechanical permits	258
Gas permits	163
Zoning permits	<u>460</u>
Total issued permits	1702

Note: Residential mechanical and gas permits are included with the building permit.

Using 235 work days per year, the division issued 7.24 permits per day. Revenues from these permits totaled \$321,624.50. Expenditures for the building code and property maintenance division totaled \$249,546.49. Revenue per permit was \$188.97 and expense per permit was \$146.62.

The division conducted 1,991 building permit inspections and 1,497 property maintenance inspections. 43% of inspections were for property maintenance issues. Because of the way inspections are counted, cost per inspection could not accurately be determined and are not presented. A framing, plumbing and mechanical inspection performed on one inspection visit is recorded as one inspection. Approximately 4 to 5 site visits per day are not counted as inspections. It would be beneficial to compare the costs per inspection for the city of Columbia with comparable cities.

The costs of permits in the city of Columbia are comparable to similar sized cities.

Recommendations

- When multiple code inspections are conducted on one visit, count an inspection for each code inspected. All site visits should be counted as inspections, but not as re-inspections.
- Establish clear cost and revenue centers for building and codes and for property maintenance in the city's accounting system. This is necessary for cost comparison purposes.

Computer Equipment and Software

The building division devotes considerable resources for issuing permits, tracking the review and permitting process, issuing notices, recording inspections, maintaining records, administration and responding to builder inquiries. For the most part, most of the activities of the building codes division are performed manually. Consideration may be in order to consider ways to provide the information more effectively and efficiently. Delays amount to added costs for builders and the use of manual procedures and process will only increase costs in the future. The city should consider upgrading software and providing adequate computer equipment for the staff. MTAS recommends the following:

Recommendations

- Provide inspectors with laptop computers capable of recording inspections, notes, and comments into a building codes data base.
- E-mail or fax review comments to builders, contractors, architects, and engineers without waiting for the completion of the review. Time is money to builders and there are no good reasons for waiting to inform them of compliance issues.
- Install a voice recognition system that allows contractors and builders to schedule inspections over the phone with an automated system.
- Provide builders, architects, engineers, and contractors with access to permit applications, review status, issuance status on demand via the Internet, telephone/fax, or e-mail.

Staff Classification, Compensation and Facilities

Staff compensation should be addressed in the city's pay classification plan. Appendix 1 presents staff compensation in comparable sized cities. The building codes staff classification needs to be updated. The secretaries should be classified as permit technicians or permit specialists because that more accurately describes their jobs. Some consideration needs to be given to compensate inspectors who attain additional inspection classifications that are beneficial to the city.

Physical facilities for building codes and storage may be inadequate. The conference table is in an open area and meetings often interrupt other office activities.

Recommendations

- Consider relocating the building division to an area with more space and that is more accessible to builders, architects, engineers, and permit holders.
- Develop classifications for inspectors who have multiple certifications.

- Re-classify division secretaries as permit technicians or permit specialists.

Customer Relations

Employees, who issue notices, write tickets, issue warnings, issue citations, testify in court, and enforce code requirements are often viewed negatively by affected citizens. Training and re-training in good public relations is often needed. Employees sometimes become hardened and insensitive to complaints and need to be reminded how to better respond to negative comments or actions.

Contractors, builders, architects, and engineers, who pull permits and strive to comply with city regulations, often have ideas or suggestions for improving the code process. They are more likely to “buy” into the city’s code enforcement program if they are consulted about how they are treated and improvements needed.

Recommendations

- Provide customer relations training for code enforcement staff.
- Conduct annual satisfaction and suggestion surveys of builders, contractors, architects, and engineers, who pull permits or oversee design and construction on permitted work, requesting information relating to their level of satisfaction and recommendations for improving the code enforcement program.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Remove the building and property maintenance division from the engineering department. The chief building official should report to the city manager or a staff person who is in a position to coordinate activities of planning, zoning, engineering, sign control and GIS.
2. Assign the executive secretary to the building codes division instead of the engineering department and have her report directly to the chief building official. The present reporting procedure is not conducive to effective management.
3. Reassign the supervision and administration of the building and property maintenance program to another department that may be more responsible for similar activities.
4. Establish time limits for engineering reviews once required submittals are adequate.
5. Consider contracting engineering reviews to private consultants if necessary to reduce the time required for review.

6. Consider city sponsored training for contractors, builders, architects, and engineers who pull city permits to inform them of required submittal requirements.
7. Expedite permit review by granting permits with minimal requirements with instant application and issuance at the permit counter or on-line. Example: A simple residential room addition or a commercial alteration with no change of building use.
8. Require that all sign permits be issued by a certified building official.
9. Allow the chief building official to interpret the approved zoning map and issue permits which do not involve a rezoning or an appeal without further planning department review.
10. Require inspectors to use inspection check off sheets.
11. Require inspectors to be available at all times during their work period to respond to specific builder questions relating to code requirements.
12. When action is taken to remove dilapidated structures, MTAS recommends that the city proceed using the provisions of the state's slum clearance law, which grants an almost automatic lien to recover costs.
13. Request that the city judge hold an environmental court to hear property maintenance issues and televise the sessions.
14. Authorize inspectors to issue citations to city court for violations of the property maintenance codes. Request a police officer to arrest those who refuse the citation.
15. Do not charge a demolition fee for a dilapidated structure. The city should remove as many obstacles to demolition as possible.
16. When multiple code inspections are conducted on one visit, count an inspection for each code inspected. All site visits should be counted as inspections, but not as re-inspections.
17. Establish clear cost and revenue centers for building codes and for property maintenance codes in the city's accounting system. This is necessary for cost comparison purposes.
18. Provide inspectors with laptop computers capable of recording inspections, notes, and comments into a building codes data base.

19. E-mail or fax review comments to builders, contractors, architects, and engineers without waiting for the completion of the review. Time is money to builders and there are no good reasons for waiting to inform them of non compliance issues.
20. Install a voice recognition system that allows contractors and builders to schedule inspections over the phone with an automated system. The system will permit the scheduling of inspections after hours.
21. Provide builders, architects, engineers, and contractors with access to permit applications, review status, issuance status on demand via the Internet, telephone/fax, or e-mail.
22. Consider relocating the building division to an area with more space and that is more accessible to builders, architects, engineers, and permit holders.
23. Develop classifications for inspectors who have multiple certifications.
24. Re-classify division secretaries as permit technicians or permit specialists.
25. Provide customer relations training for code enforcement staff.
26. Conduct annual satisfaction and suggestion surveys of builders, contractors, architects, and engineers, who pull permits or oversee design and construction on permitted work, requesting information relating to their level of satisfaction and recommendations for improving the code enforcement program.

Appendix 1

**City of Columbia Codes Study-
Salary Data**

City	Bldg. Off.	Bldg. Insp.	Plumbing	Plan Rev.	Admin. Asst.	Prop. Maint.
					Permit. Spec.	
Gallatin	\$43,906-	\$35,859-	\$37,669-	\$39,562-	\$30,950-	\$34,133-
	\$69,633	\$53,227	\$37,669	\$58,760	\$45,906	\$50,669
(current)	\$57,060					
Hendersonville	\$43,000-	\$37,000	\$37,000-		\$30,000-	
	\$65,000	\$56,000	\$56,000		\$60,000	
LaVergne	\$44,597	\$34,210-	\$34,210-		\$28,663	
		\$36,293	\$36,293			
Lebanon	\$53,602	\$29,723	\$29,723	\$38,899		
Columbia	\$48,634	\$39,738	\$39,738	Bldg. Of	\$26,436-	\$36,358

The median expected salary for a typical building inspector in the United States is \$45,300. The median salary in Tennessee is \$42,611. Murfreesboro’s median is between \$37,177 and \$48,093. Pay can be dramatically affected by compensable factors such as employer size industry, employee credentials, years of experience, the market and other factors.