

# Friend or Foe?

## Struggling with Reputation at the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department

Released June 17, 2026

### SUMMARY

The Humboldt County Planning and Building Department serves all landowners who seek to improve their properties outside of city limits and within the County. Indirectly, the Department serves all Humboldt County residents. The job its staff does can either support a well-planned, thriving, and developing community or hinder it. If developers and builders find it too onerous and/or too expensive to build in Humboldt, they will build elsewhere, or perhaps not at all. Homeowners may forgo applying for permits when improving their property for the same reasons, reducing county revenue in the process.

If building falters in the County, housing becomes scarce or falls into disrepair. The local economy suffers as jobs in the building trades vanish. Skilled craftspeople that would have filled those jobs may leave the profession, leave the county, or both.

The experiences customers have when they interact with a governmental agency collectively become its reputation in the community, reflecting how well or how poorly its customers believe it performs. Even if an agency believes it is performing well, if it has a less-than-positive reputation, something is likely amiss.

With the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department, it appeared something was amiss. In response to public concerns, the 2025-2026 Civil Grand Jury conducted a targeted investigation into the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department.

Our investigation found that:

- By far, most of the problems the public experiences with the Department are rooted in its difficulty recruiting and retaining staff. Competitive pay cannot be offered because its budget is too low. With four unfilled positions, management should consider eliminating or combining positions. The Department could use the salary savings to increase pay for positions that are hard to recruit and difficult to retain.
- Management of customer complaints about the Department's operations or staff needs improving. Employing a complaint management system that archives complaints, responses, and resolutions would increase transparency. It would also improve the Department's public image and reputation, providing valuable customer feedback to evaluate and improve its operations and services.
- The Department should conduct customer surveys prior to making significant departmental changes that affect customers. This could improve both operations and its public image and reputation.
- In mid-2024, the Department reduced its public hours from approximately 38 hours per week to 22 hours per week, making it more difficult for its customers to access services.
- It is not easy to find hours of operation on the Department's website. Management and staff say that appointments are available during hours the Department is not open to the public, however this information couldn't be found anywhere on its website. Customers interviewed - including large developers, midsized contractors, and other permit applicants - were unaware of this option.

Although its budget may be inadequate, there are small simple changes the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department can make to improve its operations, and more importantly, its community reputation.

## BACKGROUND

The Humboldt County Planning and Building Department operates under the oversight of the Board of Supervisors, as established in the Humboldt County Code (HCC Section 247-1). The stated purpose of the Planning and Building Department is the “enforcement and administration of all laws, ordinances, and policies” regarding the processes of planning and building. All new development, construction, renovation, and remodeling outside city limits must go through the County Planning and Building Department.

The Department is primarily funded by revenues from licenses, permits, and service charges under a cost recovery funding model. In the last two years funding has fallen almost 10%,<sup>1</sup> while the Humboldt County General Fund contribution remained a constant 34%.<sup>2</sup>

The 2021-2022 Grand Jury issued a report about the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department's cannabis permitting process. The findings of that report included a number of issues with the online permit application software, Accela.<sup>3</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed a sampling of:

- Humboldt County Planning and Building Department management, mid-level, and former employees
- Building contractors from large and mid-level building construction companies

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<sup>1</sup> [2024-2025 Planning and Building Department budget](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Declining revenue; General Fund contribution to Department budget](#)

<sup>3</sup> [2021-2022 Grand Jury Cannabis Permitting Report: GJ Report - Cannabis Permitting](#)

- Community members and organizational representatives who have used the services of, or interfaced with, the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department
- Local government officials

The grand jury also

- Reviewed records, documents, departmental budgets, correspondence, and websites
- Compared staffing and public hours of select planning and building departments of rural California counties, similar to Humboldt County in population

## **DISCUSSION**

In response to community input and concerns about the County Planning and Building Department, this year's Grand Jury investigated the broader application process. This included the general efficiency of the permitting process, the consistency and accessibility of Departmental staff, and whether or not there were still issues with Accela.

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury's investigation of the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department identified consistent concerns from the public. These concerns included:

- Multiple staffing issues
- Consistency in permitting decisions
- Poor communication
- Perception of unequal treatment
- Lack of a formal complaint process
- Making changes without considering customer input
- Length of time to complete the permitting process

- Difficulty using required permitting software Accela
- Complex and difficult to navigate processes
- Public hours

## **Staffing**

Recruitment, retention, and turnover of qualified staff are ongoing challenges for the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department, as they are for all Humboldt County departments. Although Department management believes the number of staff may be adequate, the relatively low pay draws inexperienced applicants who must be trained.

Once a planner is trained, they are often recruited by the state or into the private sector, where salaries are significantly higher. Caseloads and stress are lower. When planners leave, the Department loses institutional knowledge. One potential solution would be to evaluate currently unfilled positions to determine whether any may be eliminated, reduced, or consolidated with other positions. The budget savings could then be used to increase the salaries of positions that are more challenging to fill.

Another consequence of the high turnover is the lack of continuity of planners on a project. Many permit applicants described working with multiple consecutive planners on a single project. Turnover can result in inconsistent guidance and inconsistent application of regulations. The Grand Jury was told by some interviewees that they experienced added requirements late into the project. A number of applicants reported they were informed of new requirements *after* they believed the permit process had been completed.

## **Communication**

Communication has at times been inadequate. Some customers described examples of communications that lacked clear responses or consistency. The Grand Jury was told that emails and phone calls have not consistently been returned promptly. This

variability in staff responsiveness contributed to applicant confusion and a less than positive perception of the Department.

### **Perception of Unequal Treatment**

The Grand Jury heard from different sources that there is a perception of unfairness or disparity in that some rural communities appear to be treated less favorably than other areas of the county. We did not independently determine the validity of each complaint, but there was a consistency among unrelated interviewees demonstrating this perception about the Department. Whether or not a disparity actually exists, the perception itself can negatively impact the Department's reputation in the community.

Humboldt County operates in a complicated regulatory environment. Permit review may involve multiple agencies and regulations that applicants have difficulty understanding. Departmental staff may not always communicate clearly what steps are involved in more complicated permitting. In some cases, requirements aren't known (by the customer and even by the planner) until well into the process. Permit review may involve environmental and coastal regulations, wetlands, flood zones, housing mandates, historical preservation, local community services districts, and cannabis regulations. Permit applications sometimes need approval from several agencies, as well as the Planning Commission. Obtaining approval can become a multi-year process.

The Planning and Building Department has little control over these complexities, but more staff engagement could help applicants navigate the system, better understand the process, have a more positive experience, and hold a better opinion of the Department.

### **Complaints**

Public opposition to projects can delay or derail them. Sophisticated complainants who are legally and procedurally knowledgeable can cause the Department to conduct further inquiry into compliance with regulations. This results in disproportionate

scrutiny, consequently, projects that generate detailed or multiple complaints may undergo a higher level of review than other projects. This can give the impression that some complainants receive preferential attention. Staff at the Planning and Building Department state everyone is treated equally, no matter who the complaint comes from.

If a customer has a complaint about the department itself, it will be hard to be heard because there is no formal, easily found complaint procedure. The Planning and Building Department's website has a formal complaint procedure for code violations. However, there is apparently no standardized public grievance mechanism in place for complaints about the Department's operations or staff. Some customers choose to send their complaints to the Board of Supervisors. These then get passed on to the Planning Department Director.

A county-wide Customer Satisfaction Survey Form exists, a link to which is found on the bottom of the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department's homepage<sup>4</sup>. There are also a Planning and Building Department Customer Feedback Form<sup>5</sup> and a flyer describing the Planning and Building Department's Customer Feedback system. However, neither could be found by navigating the menu on the Department's webpage. They can only be found by conducting a word search on the County website.

The flyer for the Department's Customer Feedback System states:

“The Customer Feedback System is a process the Planning and Building Department uses to track and respond to the concerns of our customers ... Feedback is received by department staff, logged by the Director's Office, and assigned to a Manager to evaluate, investigate, and respond if appropriate. Feedback is analyzed for trends or patterns to determine if policy or process changes or staff training is needed.”

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<sup>4</sup> [Humboldt County Customer Satisfaction Form](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Planning and Building Dept Customer Feedback Form](#)

When the Grand Jury asked department management for records of complaints, responses, and resolutions to the complaints, we were told that there was no such documentation available. The Department's procedure is to send complaints to the Director, who handles them. This leads us to conclude that the Department's Customer Feedback System, as described, is not being used. Implementing a formal complaint procedure and archiving the complaints, responses, and resolutions would provide accountability, documentation, transparency, and management oversight.

### **Customer Input**

Operational changes affecting public access in rural communities can significantly impact applicants. There have been consequential changes in the Planning and Building Department without apparent public input. Interviewees expressed concern with changes made by the department, including computerization, changes to public open hours, and a perceived recent shift away from prioritizing service to the public. Soliciting customer input prior to making impactful changes could enhance the department's public image and increase customer confidence and trust. Customer surveys could be conducted in partnership with the contractor advocacy/networking organization Builders Exchange.<sup>6</sup>

### **Complex and Difficult to Navigate Process**

Multiple interviewees described the permitting process as lengthy and complex. Though some permits are simple and can be completed online without difficulty, others have multiple departmental requirements. All applicants are required to create an account through the Department's webpage, using the software Accela platform. Both applicants and departmental staff have described Accela as difficult to navigate and use. Staff at the Building and Planning Department are available to help, but limited public hours make the process more cumbersome and time-consuming.

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<sup>6</sup> [Humboldt Builders Exchange](#)

## **Public Hours**

In July, 2024, the Planning and Building Department reduced its in-person service hours to Monday through Thursday, 8:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., and closed on Fridays.

Management told the Grand Jury that it had tracked the times when customers came to the counter for assistance and it based the new hours on that data. Previously, the counter service was open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

Other Planning and Building departments in rural Northern California counties, including Del Norte, Mendocino, Nevada, and Siskiyou are all open to the public Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Trinity County is open to the public Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with appointments available to the public on Fridays.

The ratios between staffing levels and population were not significantly different between Humboldt County's Planning and Building Department and those of counties the Grand Jury surveyed, which are open to the public all day. These counties are open to the public 40 hours/week, but Humboldt County is only open 22 hours/week - a substantial difference (see table on next page).

Many of the interviewees - including contractors, permit applicants, county officials, and former staff members - noted that limited hours are problematic because they create scheduling difficulties for contractors, limit access for working people, and may require rural residents to make multiple long-distance trips to Eureka. Limited access to Departmental staff can extend processing times and delay or impede the completion of projects. Internet service in rural Humboldt County can be unreliable, making counter service crucial for this population.

County	Population <sup>*7</sup>	Number of Planning/Building Dept. Staff Members	Ratio Staff/Population	Planning/Building Dept. Public Business Hours
Humboldt	134,500	50 (+ 4 vacancies)	1/2,500	Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. - 2:00 p.m. appointments available during non-public business days and hours
Del Norte	27,000	9	1/3,000	Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Mendocino	90,000	45	1/2,000	Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Nevada	102,500	32	1/3,200	Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Shasta	181,500	unknown	–	Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Siskiyou	43,500	unknown	–	Monday - Friday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Trinity	16,000	unknown	–	Monday - Thursday 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. appointments available Friday

\* Rounded to the nearest 500

Many of the interviewees - including contractors, permit applicants, county officials, and former staff members - noted that limited hours are problematic because they create scheduling difficulties for contractors, limit access for working people, and may require rural residents to make multiple long-distance trips to Eureka. Limited access to Departmental staff can extend processing times and delay or impede the completion of projects. Internet service in rural Humboldt County can be unreliable, making counter service crucial for this population.

<sup>7</sup> [California Counties by Population](#)

Some Planning and Building Department staff told the Grand Jury that appointments are available on Fridays. The Grand Jury did not find this publicized anywhere, and interviewees were unaware of this option. Public hours are not found on the department's homepage. The only reference to hours was found on the Department's About Us webpage, which states:

“Effective July 1, 2024, the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department will reduce the in-person counter service hours. The new hours of operation for walk-in front counter service will be from 8:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday. There are no walk-in front counter service hours on Fridays.”

There is no mention that appointments can be made outside of these hours.

The Department can better serve its customers and improve its public image by making it known to the public that appointments are available when the Department is closed to the public. It can do this by

- prominently and clearly displaying on its homepage the hours the department is open to the public;
- prominently advising on its homepage that appointments can be made during non-public business hours and how to do so; and
- publicizing in the media and elsewhere that appointments can be made during non-public business hours.

The Grand Jury recognizes that internal operational needs, reduced revenue, a smaller budget, and recruitment difficulties may have contributed to the 2024 decision to reduce public hours. It does not appear to the Grand Jury that staffing shortages are a likely factor. The November 2025 organizational chart (APPENDIX A) indicates that only four out of fifty-four positions in the Department are currently unfilled. Three of the vacancies comprise all Code Enforcement Officer positions.

## CONCLUSION

The Humboldt County Planning and Building Department provides necessary and valuable services to the community. All new development and construction, and much renovation and remodeling that happens within the County's jurisdiction (outside of any city limits) must go through the County Planning and Building Department. The effects of what the Department does, and how well it does it, ripple throughout the County - either positively or negatively.

Many of the Department's customers are developers and builders. They are business people. To remain in business, their businesses must be profitable. Project costs could increase to the point that it may not be profitable when they encounter too many hurdles such as:

- Excessive regulations
- Delays
- Difficulty accessing services
- Unwieldy requirements
- Burdensome and lengthy processes
- A shortage of experienced and trained Department staff

Developers and contractors interviewed by the Grand Jury said that there is a risk that developers and builders would likely stop doing business in the County's jurisdiction altogether. Houses won't get built. Institutional knowledge is diminished and skilled workers disappear.

Many of the Department's customers are everyday folk with a plan to build a garage, add a room, a shed, or other homeowner do-it-yourself projects. Navigating the permitting process for these folks who "don't know the ropes" is daunting, if not impossible.

The Department can improve its customer service and its public reputation by

- clearly posting public hours and stating that appointments can be made;
- expanding public hours;
- implementing its Customer Feedback System or instituting a new complaint management system that tracks and archives complaints, responses, and resolutions for departmental analysis and public transparency;
- conducting surveys or polls of its customer base prior to making major departmental changes that significantly impact its customers; and
- finding a creative way to increase pay scales for positions that are hard to recruit and retain.

With these improvements, customers can then better experience and appreciate all the good work done by the Planning and Building Department.

## **FINDINGS**

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

- F1:** Budgetary constraints on the County of Humboldt impact the ability for the County Planning and Building Department to successfully recruit and retain qualified staff. The resulting loss of experienced staff, turnover and longer vacancies make it difficult for the Department to adequately serve the public. **(R1)**
- F2:** Records of complaints are not being retained as prescribed by the County Planning and Building Department's Customer Feedback System. This results in reduced transparency, accountability, independent oversight, and missed operational improvements that could be possible by analyzing customer feedback for trends or patterns. **(R2, R3)**

- F3:** The County Planning and Building Department does not appear to have a procedure for surveying or polling its customers in advance of making impactful changes. This reduces the ability of the Department to use customer input to improve the Department's performance and reputation. **(R4)**
- F4:** The County Planning and Building Department's homepage does not prominently and clearly display its hours of operation. This reduces public access to services, extends processing times, and delays or impedes completion of projects. **(R5)**
- F5:** The County Planning and Building Department's homepage does not state that appointment times are available during non-public hours. This reduces public access to services, extends processing times, and delays or impedes completion of projects. **(R6)**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department Director to evaluate and report whether positions could be consolidated or currently vacant positions could be eliminated, allowing the resulting budget savings to be used to increase compensation for positions that are difficult to recruit for and retain. This report is to be completed and presented to the Board of Supervisors by January 1, 2027. **(F1)**
- R2:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department Director to reinstitute, maintain, and publicize the Department's Customer Feedback System. This system should be re-implemented by December 31, 2026. **(F2)**

- R3:** If the existing Customer Feedback System is not reinstated, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors should direct the Planning and Building Department Director to implement a new complaint management system, and inform the public of its existence and how to access it. This system should be implemented by March 31, 2027. **(F2)**
- R4:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department Director to create and implement a method to survey or poll customers prior to implementing departmental changes that significantly impact the community, by no later than March 31, 2027. **(F3)**
- R5:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department Director to update the Department’s homepage to prominently display public hours, by no later than December 31, 2026. **(F4)**
- R6:** The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct the Planning and Building Department Director to update the Department’s homepage to prominently inform the public it can schedule appointments to occur during non-public hours, by no later than December 31, 2026. **(F5)**

## **RESPONSES**

Pursuant to California Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05, each entity or individual named below must respond to the enumerated Findings and Recommendations within specific statutory guidelines.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- The respondent agrees with the finding; or
- The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action; or
- The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation; or
- The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency where applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the Grand Jury report; or
- The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor.

**REQUIRED RESPONSE – WITHIN 90 DAYS**

The Humboldt County Board of Supervisors

**(All findings, all recommendations)**

**INVITED RESPONSE**

The Director of the Humboldt County Planning and Building Department

**(All findings, all recommendations)**

**Responses are to be sent to both:**

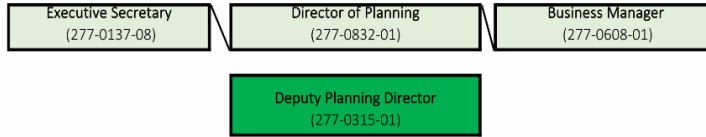
The Honorable Judge Timothy A. Canning  
California Superior Court for Humboldt County  
825 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Eureka, CA 95501

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury  
PO Box 657; Eureka, CA 95502 A

*Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.*

# APPENDIX A - Humboldt County Planning and Building Department roster (11-18-25)

Positions Summary  
 Filled: 50  
 Vacant: 4  
 Total: 54  
 Updated: 11.18.25



Permit Coordination Permit Manager (262-0336-01)	Building Inspections Chief Building Official (262-0838-01)	Code Enforcement	Planning Planning Manager (277-0681-02)	Long Range Planning Planning Manager (282-0681-01)	Business and Operations Deputy Planning Director (277-0315-01)	Business Team Business Manager (277-0608-01)
Counter Team Senior Planner (277-0660-06) Senior Permit Specialist (262-0326-01) Permit Technician (262-0325-01) Permit Technician (262-0325-02) Permit Technician (262-0325-03) Permit Technician (262-0325-04) Permit Technician (262-0325-05) Associate Planner (277-0333-05)	Plan Check Team Plan Checker (262-0327-01) Plan Checker (262-0327-02) Building Inspector Team Senior Building Inspector (262-0332-02) Building Inspector (262-0308-04) Building Inspector (262-0308-02) Building Inspector (262-0308-03)	Traditional Team Investigator (269-0413-01) Investigator (269-0413-02) Investigator (269-0413-03) Investigator (269-0413-04) Associate Planner (277-0333-09) VACANT Code Compliance Officer (269-0343-02) Code Compliance Officer (269-0343-03) Code Compliance Officer (269-0343-06)	Current Planning Team Senior Planner (277-0660-01) Senior Planner (277-0660-05) Vacant-Associate Planner (277-0330-10) Associate Planner (277-0333-12) Associate Planner (277-0333-07) Associate Planner (277-0333-14) Associate Planner Underfill (282-0333-U2) Inspections Team Senior Planner (277-0660-04) Associate Planner (277-0333-04) Associate Planner (277-0333-08) Assistant Planner (277-0333-15)	Long Range Team Associate Planner (282-0330-02) Associate Planner (277-0330-03) Associate Planner (277-0333-01) Senior Planner (282-0660-02) Underfilled as Associate Planner Housing and Grants Team Program Coordinator (282-1425-01) Administrative Analyst (282-0626-01)	Production Tools Tm GS Coordinator (277-0338-01) Dept. Information Svc Supvsr (277-0759-01) Administrative Analyst M/C (277-0605-01)	Business Team Administrative Analyst (277-0626-02) Fiscal Assistant (277-0177-01)
OA Team Executive Secretary (277-0163-01) Legal Office Assistant (277-0178-01) Office Assistant 262-0178-EH						