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Supes cut 2; save 2 in planning division

By Chris Daley | Democrat staff writer | April 18, 2010 10:43

Government involvement in the lives of citizens was the bedrock of a wide ranging discussion on El Dorado County's Development Services Department at last week's Board of Supervisors meeting. Issues included the fee structure for numerous building permits, the length of time required to secure a permit and how many staff the department needs to do myriad related tasks.

The item first hit the board agenda on April 6 when the Chief Administrative Office recommended laying off four department employees, two positions from the planning division and two from the building division. One of the planning jobs is currently vacant but the other is filled by a regular county employee, as are the two inspector positions. The move is part of the county's ongoing efforts to reduce costs and was projected to save \$340,000, according to CAO analyst Laura Schwartz.

After a brief presentation by building division director Larry Lohman and lengthy general discussion Tuesday, the board voted to eliminate the two planning positions and retain the building inspectors. The rationale for the latter was to prevent what Lohman described as the probable consequences of losing the inspectors.

"The most serious result is that it could extend the turn-around time for plan checking," Lohman told the board, adding that it could add one to two weeks to the current four-week "turn-around time."

Lohman further reminded the board that the department is operating with 51 allocated positions, only 50 percent of the staff it had in 2005. By comparison, in fiscal year '04-'05 the department issued 7,100 building permits. The number projected through FY '09-'10 is 2,900, according to its mid-year budget report.

While opinion varied regarding some of the specifics, supervisors were united in their concern and condemnation of much of the permit process. And that prompted calls for less government regulation and intrusion into people's affairs.

"Processing permits to do something on your private property takes too long and costs too much," Supervisor Jack Sweeney said, drawing applause from a number of the audience who were there to speak of their frustration with the process. "We need to find a way to reduce those costs and the time it takes. We need staff to help us find out how to cut costs and time."

Planning Services Director Roger Trout took some heat from the board but pushed back saying:

"I'm frustrated as well ... how do you fix some of these processes? Updating the zoning ordinances can help, and we're looking for ordinance changes. Small increments can help, and sure we're going to continue to streamline every week, but it's only a drop in the bucket."

Trout later told the board, "If you really want to do something for the community, have us get the plan checks done and back in a couple of weeks instead of a month."

Planning Services and the CAO's office have recommended that the board consider raising some of the department's fees in order to offset expenses, but supervisors apparently were not ready to take up that discussion Tuesday.

Taxpayer Association representative Art Marinaccio strongly urged that fees not be raised to stimulate the local economy. Instead he advised, "You need to reduce the impact of the General Plan on residents."

Some of the state-mandated items in the building code include such things as permits for installing a new water heater. That then requires at least a before-and-after inspection by the building division, Lohman pointed out.

The water heater became comic relief after Lohman showed a film from television's "Mythbusters" program. It detailed an experiment wherein a water heater is overpressurized and becomes a rocket that blows a little shack apart and rises hundreds of feet into the air. The message - inspections are necessary to community safety.

Lohman had also noted that while 14 inspection visits on the Western Slope and 22 at South Lake Tahoe are the average, last year one house at Tahoe required 49 inspector visits. The Western Slope "winner" was 42 inspections. He described a general inability to make much headway in that part of the process because the homeowner or builder, in effect, controls the building schedule and timelines.

What should or should not require inspections could not be answered, but there was general agreement that the county is not able to protect its residents from their own folly in many cases.

"Thousands of things in life are dangerous," Supervisor Ray Nutting said, citing his experience in the timber industry. "We can't protect life from everything. I don't know how the government can protect against all risks. Being alive is a risk."

Supervisor John Knight noted that if he hires a contractor "to do my roof, it's my responsibility to resolve a problem with that contractor."

"The fool is going to get burned," he suggested, noting that it shouldn't be the county's job to rescue the "fool."

Earlier Sweeney had suggested that there is no liability to the county "unless the county did something wrong."

"There's any number of things that we can't prevent. We can't stop homeowners from doing something wrong. I believe the job of the county is to seek compliance with codes and regulations. And we don't have the money to do things we did in the past."

Members of the audience unloaded on the department during the meeting's public forum session.

Randy Rossi, a winery developer in Somerset, told the board that in his travels he has heard that "El Dorado County's Planning Department is the worst in the state."

"There's a groundswell of constituents in the South County who are fed up and are not going to take it anymore," Rossi said. "The Planning Department is a bigger threat to our life and liberty than the Taliban or al Qaida," Rossi said and emphasized his own three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Robert Jones said he developed a vineyard in 1991 in the South County and is planning to make an additional investment of \$750,000 on his property but is so concerned about dealing with the county Planning Department that he's considering moving his operation to Amador County.

Local resident Bernard Carlson said, "There's too much government. Get out of the way of people trying to make a living."

E-mail Chris Daley at cdaley@mtdemocrat.net or call (530) 344-5063.

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