

Madera County Grand Jury Report 1415-03
Planning Division

The Planning Division provides many vital services to the citizens of Madera County. The wide scope of the division's functions range from implementing environmental projects, monitoring agricultural conservation, to providing assistance for affordable housing.

The Madera County Grand Jury, following a study of the Planning Division, has published a report of its findings. The Madera County Grand Jury found the division undergoing reorganization under the Community and Economic Development Department.

The findings of the Grand Jury are that the Planning Division is functioning in a positive manner under sound leadership. The division is focusing on making its services more accessible to the public, and improving customer service.



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Introduction:

The Planning Division was selected for investigation by the Grand Jury because it has been several years since it was last reviewed.

The Planning Division functions as the planning agency for the unincorporated area of Madera County. The Division is charged with the preparation of a comprehensive long-term General Plan for the land use and physical development of Madera County and for the execution of this plan.

The Planning Division is governed by the California Government Code Section 65103.

Facts:

1. The Planning Division prepares, reviews and revises the General Plan under the supervision of the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.
2. The Planning Division implements the General Plan through administration of specific zoning and subdivision ordinances.
3. The Planning Division is charged with annually reviewing the capital improvement programs of the city, county and public works projects of other local agencies for their consistency with the General Plan, pursuant to Article 7, Section 65400 of the California Government Code.
4. The Planning Division administers certain State of California Acts and regulations including the California Environmental Quality Act of 1970 (CEQA).
5. The Planning Division administers County Affordable Housing and Economic Development Programs and other community development grant programs.
6. The Planning Division forecasts revenue of \$1,270,000 towards the total operational needs of the Division.

Findings:

1. In 2014-2015 the Planning, Environmental Health and Fire Prevention Divisions were realigned under the Community and Economic Development Department. Prior to this time the Madera County Planning Department was part of the Madera County Resource Management Agency (RMA), a service agency that facilitated development for Madera County.
2. The reorganization of the Planning Division was initiated and implemented by the Board of Supervisors for economic and operational efficiency.
3. Some of the information on the Planning Division web page is outdated, inaccurate and does not reflect the Division's reorganization under the Community and Economic Development Department.
4. The Division's Procedure Manual and job descriptions were reviewed and are appropriate and well written.
5. Certain staffing positions remain unfilled due to employee turnover, the ongoing implementation of the department reorganization and allocated funding of designated positions.
6. Increased revenue from grants and planning services has substantially reduced the net cost to the County for the Planning Division operations.
7. Staff morale appears good. Issues include insufficient managerial and staff training, employee orientation and changes in work load. These problems are likely due to the reorganization. Recent staff promotions from within are positive.
8. Online programs for certain building permit requests and code enforcement complaints have been improved on the Division's website. The 311 Call Center can also be used in the application process.
9. The Division has reduced the waiting time for certain building permit approvals from 200 days to 60 days.
10. The Planning Division made several updates to the General Plan including:
 - a. updating of the airport plan,
 - b. zoning changes to water and agricultural provisions,
 - c. rewriting of local environmental and flood plans,
 - d. adding air quality and housing elements mandated by the State.

11. The downturn in the economy and building industry has affected staff workloads, resulting in fewer specific building permit requests and site plan reviews. At the same time there has been an increase in workloads for code enforcement staff resulting in more reactionary responses to critical requests.
12. The merging of the Planning Division and the Building Inspection Division has resulted in the need for additional clerical support.

Recommendations:

The Grand Jury recommends the Madera County Planning Division:

1. Update the Division's website to reflect new organizational structure and services available to the public.
2. Solicit recommendations from staff to improve teamwork, communication and work efficiencies.
3. Strengthen management skills of supervisors and evaluate performance levels.
4. Implement a practical and user friendly system to solicit, review and respond to customer complaints. Evaluate the usefulness of the current Comment Box located at the office counter.
5. Develop a public awareness program to educate the community on how to comply with building and land use regulations.
6. Implement an appointment system to facilitate access of the public to services of the department.
7. Hire additional clerical staff to support the planners.
8. Complete the implementation of the reorganization plan.

Respondents:

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