

HAWAII NEWS

Head of award-winning permitting agency says DPP can change, too

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The head of a Washington county permitting department that transformed itself into a nationally recognized exemplary agency says the same thing can happen at Honolulu's embattled Department of Planning and Permitting.

What's largely needed is a change in culture and attitude, said Dennis Hanberg, planning and public works director for Pierce County, Washington's second-largest county, which includes Tacoma.

The Honolulu City Council, in response to complaints about the length of time it takes to get a building permit, this month approved [Bill 64](#), requiring DPP to process building permits for one- and two-family dwellings within 60 days, a measure opposed by DPP officials.

Through a readjustment in staffing in Pierce County, first-time residential building permit reviews have dropped to about 15 days, down from about 35 days a year ago and about 60 days when he first began, Hanberg said.

In 2015 Pierce County won the Exemplary System Government Award from the Urban and Regional Information Systems Association.

Meanwhile his agency has been doing more volume despite a smaller staff that's gone from 168 in 2007 down to 120. About 85 of those "are working in some form of permitting," he said. The enforcement staff, however, has gone up. "Our (County) Council has made that a huge priority," Hanberg told builders and planners at the Building Industry Association of Hawaii annual housing summit last week.

On Wednesday, Council Zoning Chairwoman Kymberly Pine introduced Resolution 18-272 urging the administration of Mayor Kirk Caldwell to implement emergency procedures to fix permitting delays, "including transferring funds to pay for overtime, authorizing emergency hires, and other solutions."

"I am in full support of Mayor Caldwell taking emergency action to solve this crisis. We cannot allow any more of our residents to lose their jobs because of government's failure to process building permits in an efficient manner," Pine

said in a statement.

Pine said the resolution will be heard by the zoning committee Thursday, and Caldwell has until Dec. 3 to act on Bill 64.

Hanberg said many of the issues facing Honolulu's DPP are similar to the ones experienced by Pierce County's Planning and Land Services (PALS) Department when he was hired in 2011.

Employees complained that permit applications were submitted incompletely just so they could be in the wait queue, and that the agency was too short-staffed to cope with the work. Industry leaders wanted to know which agency employees he was going to fire first and complained that the county did not understand its issues.

"Create a culture that's timely and reliable," Hanberg said. "Decision-making in the review process — I want them to use judgment. No two properties are the same; many times you have to make a judgment as to what's going on in the code."

He said he's not suggesting that reviewers should be breaking the building code, but "understanding the code and looking for places where you can say, 'You know what? I have some latitude here. I can still do some understanding as to why the code still applies for this particular scenario.'"

Hired first as a consultant in 2010, and then as PALS deputy director, Hanberg said he was tasked by then-Pierce County Executive Pat McCarthy to make the department "the best permitting agency in the state."

The job involved a change in managerial philosophy, "not a checklist of items to change," he said.

The transformation also was accomplished through baby steps, not a dramatic and immediate overhaul, he said, and the notion that improvements need to happen continually, Hanberg said.

Such changes included updating software, revamping the agency's website, providing iPads and other new tools for inspectors and others in the field, and improving forms and handouts.

Some recommendations Hanberg shared are already in the works at DPP. Acting DPP Director Kathy Sokugawa, for instance, has urged the Honolulu City Council to fund updates in the agency's computer software.

Timothy Hiu, DPP deputy director, said many of the moves Hanberg made in Pierce County were done in Honolulu 20 years ago. The key issue DPP faces is "how do we maintain that innovation and sustainability," Hiu said. "We don't need to re-create the wheel. All we need to do is to interject new energy and emphasis on it, in my opinion."

Unique to Honolulu, he said, DPP has trouble hiring and retaining plan checkers and inspectors due to low unemployment. But on the mainland "you have a bigger pool of people that you can hire from, and we can't attract people because our housing is so high."

Pine said DPP needs to identify quickly the issues that are preventing it from being successful. "We are going to have an economic crisis soon caused by government," she said.

Customer service was a key message to PALS employees, who were told to stress "what they need to know, not what you want them to know," Hanberg said. One out-of-the-box idea: using Skype for video inspections.

Another was to shift the priority form of communicating with applicants to email rather than phone calls, he said. "We only handle half the phone calls we did when we started," he said. Meanwhile, due to a paperless permitting process, physical visits to the agency are down 55 percent. "What we focused on is emails first, phone calls second and person-to-person third," he said. "Not that we don't want you in our lobby, but we think that's the most efficient way we can do it."

Because so much of the application and review processes are done electronically, there are actually fewer employees than when the department overhaul began, Hanberg said.

PALS also eliminated its fax line.

