

RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY REPORT

Report Title: Friend or Foe? Struggling with Reputation at the Humboldt County
Planning & Building Department

Report Date: June 17, 2026

Response by: Humboldt County Board of Supervisors

FINDINGS

The county partially agrees with the findings numbered 1, 3, 4 and 5.

The county disagrees with Finding 2.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations numbered 3, 5 and 6 have been implemented.

Recommendations 1, 2 and 4 will not be implemented.

Date: 9/11/26

Signed: 

Number of pages attached: 5



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

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INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
FROM: COUNTY ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE
SUBJECT: RESPONSE TO "FRIEND OR FOE? STRUGGLING WITH REPUTATION AT THE HUMBOLDT COUNTY PLANNING & BUILDING DEPARTMENT"
DATE: SEPTEMBER 1, 2026

In the Grand Jury Report, "*Friend or Foe? Struggling with Reputation at the Humboldt County Planning & Building Department*," the Grand Jury has requested that the Board of Supervisors respond to Findings 1 through 5 and Recommendations 1 through 6. The County Administrative Office is proposing the following response as detailed below.

FINDINGS

Finding 1: *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)*

Partially agree. While the county agrees budgetary constraints impact the ability of the Planning & Building Department to successfully recruit and retain qualified staff, it should be acknowledged that staff in the Planning & Building Department work hard to provide the best service possible to the public.

Finding 2: *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)*

Disagree. The Planning & Building Department designed and used its "Customer Feedback System" to collect, track and analyze the department's customer service data until 2019. This system included procedures for evaluating, investigating and responding to the feedback. In addition, the data was analyzed for trends or patterns to determine if policies or procedures needed revising.

The use of the Planning & Building Department's Customer Feedback System was discontinued as a direct result of a recommendation made by the Civil Grand Jury in its 2019-20 report titled "Suggestions and Feedback Gladly Accepted: County of Humboldt Citizen Feedback Procedure." In this report, the Civil Grand Jury recommended all county departments be required to use a new "Customer Satisfaction Survey" and the county, as a whole, including the Planning & Building Department, switched to using the Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2019.

The Customer Satisfaction Survey is currently available as a link found at the bottom of every page on the county's website, allowing the public to submit comments. Comments are submitted and are forwarded by the Information Technology Division's Webmaster to the appropriate department for follow-up. These records are retained by the County Administrative Office's Information Technology Division and the department associated with the customer feedback received.

Finding 3: *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)*

Partially agree. The Planning & Building Department does not have a formal procedure for surveying or polling its customers before making impactful changes. Recent changes to services, such as reduced walk-in counter hours, were only approved by the Board of Supervisors in 2024 after the department presented data on customer contact types and frequencies and surveyed comparable jurisdictions within a 250-mile radius of Humboldt County. Additionally, those proposed changes to public hours were presented, discussed and approved by the Board of Supervisors at a publicly-noticed meeting on June 11, 2024. These changes were communicated publicly via press release, on the county's website and social media, and covered by the local press.

Finding 4: *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)*

Partially agree. The Board of Supervisors acknowledges this finding may have been correct at the time this report was written, however the Planning & Building Department has since updated the department's home web page to include this information. The Board thanks the Civil Grand Jury for bringing this matter to the Planning & Building Department's attention.

Finding 5: *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)*

Partially agree. The Board of Supervisors acknowledges this finding may have been correct at the time this report was written, however the Planning & Building Department's home web page currently includes this information. The Board thanks the Civil Grand Jury for bringing this matter to the Planning & Building Department's attention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: *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)*

This recommendation will not be implemented. The Planning & Building Department takes on high volumes of complex, often time-sensitive work and consistently produces exceptional work product. The Planning & Building Department is continually evaluating positions to determine maximum efficiency in relation to its budget and workload.

It should be noted that the Planning & Building Department is largely funded by revenues from permits under a cost recovery funding model. Therefore, predicting future workloads is part of the decision of whether to hold a vacant position unfilled. There are consequences to overstaffing, for example, if there is a reduction in permit activity, a key revenue source is also reduced, yet staff still need to be paid. Alternately, if permit activity increases and there is not a vacant position to fill, the time required to process permits will increase. Having a vacant but budgeted position does not signal that the position is not needed and can be eliminated. Instead, it affords the department the flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances.

The Director of Planning & Building and the Director of Human Resources have confirmed the issue of staff recruitment and retention largely affects the Planning & Building Department's planner positions. This department does not experience the same level of staff turnover in other positions.

Additionally, increasing staff salaries is a complicated effort and often requires a study conducted by a consultant under the direction of the Human Resources Department.

Recommendation 2: *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)*

This recommendation will not be implemented. As noted in the response to Finding 2, the use of the Planning & Building Department's Customer Feedback System was discontinued as a direct result of a recommendation made by the Civil Grand Jury in its 2019-20 report titled "Suggestions and Feedback Gladly Accepted: County of Humboldt Citizen Feedback Procedure." In this report, the Civil Grand Jury recommended all county

departments be required to use a new “Customer Satisfaction Survey” and the county, as a whole, including the Planning & Building Department, switched to using the Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2019.

The Customer Satisfaction Survey is currently available as a link found at the bottom of every page on the county’s website, allowing the public to submit comments. Comments are submitted and are forwarded by the Information Technology Division’s Webmaster to the appropriate department for follow-up. These records are retained by the County Administrative Office’s Information Technology Division and the department associated with the customer feedback received.

Recommendation 3: *If the existing Customer Feedback System is not reinstituted, 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)*

This recommendation has been implemented. As previously noted, this recommendation was implemented in 2019 following a recommendation by the Civil Grand Jury in its 2019-20 report titled “Suggestions and Feedback Gladly Accepted: County of Humboldt Citizen Feedback Procedure.” In this report, the Civil Grand Jury recommended all county departments be required to use a new “Customer Satisfaction Survey” and the county, as a whole, including the Planning & Building Department, switched to using the Customer Satisfaction Survey in 2019.

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Recommendation 4: *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)*

This recommendation not be implemented as written. However, the Director of Planning & Building has confirmed that the department will implement a method to poll customers, such as conducting a community survey prior to implementing departmental changes that could significantly have impact on its customer service capabilities. This method will be implemented on an as-needed basis as staff capacity and budget allow. The County Administrative Office will assist with distributing any such surveys or polls through press releases, social media and other channels as needed.

It should be noted that some matters, such as public office hours, are determined by the Board of Supervisors. Pursuant to California Government Code Section 24260, “county officers shall keep their offices open for the transaction of business during such hours and on such days as are fixed by the board of supervisors by

ordinance or resolution.” Regarding the Planning & Building Department, and as noted in the response to Finding 3, the Board of Supervisors have approved service changes in the past, such as reduced public hours, after the department presented data on customer contact types and frequencies and surveyed comparable jurisdictions within a 250-mile radius of Humboldt County. Most recently, proposed changes to public hours were presented, discussed and approved by the Board of Supervisors at a publicly-noticed meeting on June 11, 2024. This method may be utilized again in the future.

Recommendation 5: *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)*

This recommendation has been implemented. The Planning & Building Department’s home web page currently provides this information.

Recommendation 6: *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)*

This recommendation has been implemented. The Planning & Building Department’s home web page also provides this information.
