

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

Seattle Office of City Auditor – May 27, 2007

A copy of the Office of City Auditor’s full report regarding Seattle’s Code Enforcement can be obtained at the Auditor’s website at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits to Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or susan.cohen@seattle.gov.

Improving the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Seattle’s Code Enforcement

Audit Objectives

For this audit, we evaluated the effectiveness and efficiency of the code enforcement function for three codes enforced by Seattle’s Department of Planning and Development (DPD):

1. The Housing and Building Maintenance Code (Housing Code), which regulates conditions in rental housing units, maintenance standards for vacant buildings, and the abatement of unfit buildings and premises;
2. The Land Use Code, (zoning code), which regulates the use of a property and the location and numerous other characteristics of structures on a property; and
3. The Weeds and Vegetation Ordinance, which regulates overgrowth of weeds and vegetation from private property that create hazards by obstructing public rights of way, harboring rodents or other pests, or posing a potential fire hazard.



Typical junk storage violation
Source: DPD Housing/Zoning Inspector Ed Backmon

Conclusions in Brief

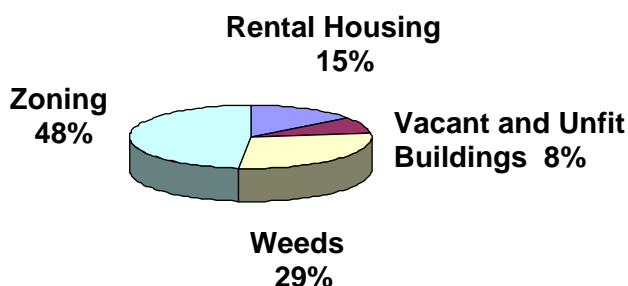
The Department of Planning and Development’s (DPD’s) enforcement of Housing and Land Use Code violations is generally adequate. Enforcement could be improved by 1) fine-tuning the electronic case management system, 2) improving the system for documenting conditions that apply to particular properties, and 3) engaging all units of DPD in responsibility for code enforcement.

We found that 85% of the service requests we reviewed were inspected within 30 days; however, a few rental housing cases waited too long for attention. Improving the electronic case management system should help ensure that no cases get overlooked for prolonged periods before coming to the attention of inspectors and/or their supervisors.

DPD could also improve the performance of its permit review units in supporting code compliance by simplifying, clarifying and/or expanding information on conditions imposed on particular properties as part of the permit process. This would help prevent those requirements from being overlooked in subsequent permit applications and thus inadvertently overriding earlier decisions.

These suggested improvements in the information systems that support the inspection and property-research functions would resolve many of the issues we identified in our review.

Types of DPD Code Enforcement Complaints



Report Conclusions

Listed below are the 13 audit conclusions we had based on our work. We have rated the conclusions as either Green: Working well, or effectiveness and efficiency is adequate; Yellow: Some improvement recommended; or Red: A serious concern that should be addressed

Conclusion 1 (Green): Priorities for response to complaints are clearly described in the Performance Standards and Workplace Expectations, and inspectors demonstrated an understanding.

Conclusion 2 (Green): Management is identifying and addressing problems in the area of training.

Conclusion 3 (Green): The DPD Code Compliance Division's response was adequate in the two case studies that were part of this review.

Conclusion 4 (Red): DPD lacks a viable system for tracking conditions that apply to a property based on previous DPD or quasi-judicial permit decisions.

Conclusion 5 (Red): DPD has no system for ensuring that conditions imposed in the Land Use review process are implemented in the construction and occupancy of a project.

Conclusion 6 (Red): Hansen system reports have incorrect data and summary reports did not consistently register some of the common enforcement "tools" used by inspectors such as verbal and written warnings.

Conclusion 7 (Yellow): Citation cases that have an unpaid default judgment (penalty) entered against the owner continue to register as open cases in the Hansen system, requiring inspectors and supervisors to mentally "filter out" these cases to get a true picture of the inspector's open cases.

Conclusion 8 (Yellow): Cases referred to the Law Department do not use the Hansen reports system to track progress. This leaves many cases appearing as if they are not being addressed, based on information visible in the Hansen reports and available to the public, whereas they are being actively prosecuted. This information does show in

the individual case report.

Conclusion 9 (Yellow): When multiple case numbers are opened for one property (because there are violations of multiple codes, e.g. Land Use, Housing and Weeds/Vegetation) it appears that over time some of these are cleared, but others get forgotten or are not cleared from the system.

Conclusion 10 (Yellow): While the vast majority of cases see a response from an inspector within 30 days of the complaint, some do not receive a timely response. This may be caused by limited resources for inspection.

Conclusion 11 (Yellow): Housing cases may not uniformly prioritized above others, as required by the guidelines.

Conclusion 12 (Yellow): Gaps in inspector response to due dates or scheduled inspection dates range from 3 months to 22 months. While the number of cases with such gaps was small (about ½%) this demonstrates a problem with some cases apparently dropping out of awareness of the inspector and/or management.

Conclusion 13 (Green): The processing of cases referred to the Law Department for legal action appears to be adequate.



Inoperable vehicle and junk storage violation
Source: DPD Housing/Zoning Inspector Ed Backmon