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## Whatcom County Permit Process Assessment

### Findings and Recommendations

### Summary

An assessment was conducted in 2005 to evaluate the processes used by Whatcom County to decide development permit applications and land use actions. This was done to identify ways to improve the predictability, efficiency and collaboration of County service.

The assessment revealed that the constraint of the system is frequently environmental design and review.

Eight strengths of the County including best-in-class onsite septic system review speed, onsite commercial tenant improvements, fire-access checks and expiration inspections were noted.

Fourteen improvement recommendations were offered. These included management reports, intake procedures and standards, project teams, development of generalists, tracking software enhancements, and web site changes, among others.

The next step is County selection of improvements from among the recommendation options, supported with implementation planning.

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## Introduction

In 2005, *The Latimore Company* (TLC) assessed the methods that Whatcom County used to process its development permit applications. This was done to determine the current level of service and to recommend any actions the County could take to improve in light of a plan to construct a “one stop” permit center. This occurred during a period of surging residential development in the County (Fig. 1).

WHATCOM COUNTY PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT SERVICES ISSUED - NEW RESIDENTIAL UNITS BY SUBAREA 6-YEAR HISTORY						
NEW SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCES	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
BIRCH BAY - LYNDEN	92	129	150	201	253	284
CHUCKANUT - LAKE SAMISH	49	70	49	49	20	22
CHERRY POINT - FERNDALE	45	41	48	73	49	51
ELIZA ISLAND	0	2	0	1	2	2
FOOTHILLS	42	29	31	43	64	118
LAKE WHATCOM	90	79	148	237	266	5
LUMMI ISLAND	17	17	17	23	23	20
LUMMI RESERVATION	3	2	6	3	14	77
LYNDEN - NOOKSACK VALLEY	79	76	102	95	91	311
POINT ROBERTS	15	20	10	23	23	39
SOURTH FORK VALLEY	3	3	1	3	7	4
URBAN FRINGE	85	57	89	132	129	110
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>525</b>	<b>651</b>	<b>883</b>	<b>941</b>	<b>1043</b>
<b>NEW SFR VALUES</b>	<b>\$ 72,879,035</b>	<b>\$ 68,840,253</b>	<b>\$ 101,060,963</b>	<b>\$ 155,516,913</b>	<b>\$ 170,063,548</b>	<b>\$ 217,303,144</b>

**Figure 1 - Building Permit Volumes (2000-05)**

The assessment occurred during a period of significant organizational and managerial change within the Planning & Development Services (PDS) department. The Land Use Services division received new management. New supervisory level positions were instituted over the Environmental, Land Use Review, Plans Examiner, and Fire & Counter functions. Several senior technical positions including the Planning division leader and SEPA administrator saw attrition. The IT administrator of the department’s permit tracking and cashing system left and later returned. Overall, the PDS team replaced or added well over 10% of its staff during the period, a very high level of change with associated training and learning curves.

The County was also reeling from a crash and corruption of its permit tracking and cashing system data at the peak of Summer 2004 volume. A team of three worked since to restore lost data and reconcile cash receipts to case review fees. This created a need to diagram review processes, which was capitalized upon for this assessment.

Meanwhile, the County was also in the midst of responding to numerous court challenges of its rural zoning policies and interpretation of various codes.

Whatcom County is historically a rural community with a resource-based economy, centered around the City and Port of Bellingham, which links the major urban centers of Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia with its I-5 corridor and network of border crossings.

Now, Whatcom County is a region in transition, growing in population and commerce from the north and south. Its urban growth areas are bustling with residential and associated commercial development. Resorts are thriving and expanding. Magazine articles abound. Large developers have taken note. The County is on the map.

This growth has challenged the County's permit system.

County development codes are layered onto 1960s constructs and only over the last few years have certain exemptions to develop outside the jurisdiction of the permit system been closed. Exemption lots require special handling and time-consuming innovation when building permits come in to protect environmentally sensitive areas (ESAs), design local traffic flow, and manage watershed stormwater cycles in arrears.

The County also administers a standalone urban growth area (UGA) in Birch Bay that marries a historically rural transportation system and an exceptional variety of shoreline and wetland ESAs with urban development intensity.

Lastly, the County saw a deluge of rushed building permit applications in the Lake Whatcom watershed in reaction to a moratorium that stretched the most overloaded elements of the review system, watershed and environmental review, well beyond capacity, and led to widespread single-family residential (SFR) review times in excess of 14 weeks and a demand for outside plan review.

### Scope: The Permit Process

The scope of this assessment (Fig. 2) is the range of development permit applications reviewed by the following functions:

- PDS
  - Land Use Services
  - Building Services
  - Administration
  - Code Enforcement
- PW
  - Engineering
  - Administration
- Health Department.

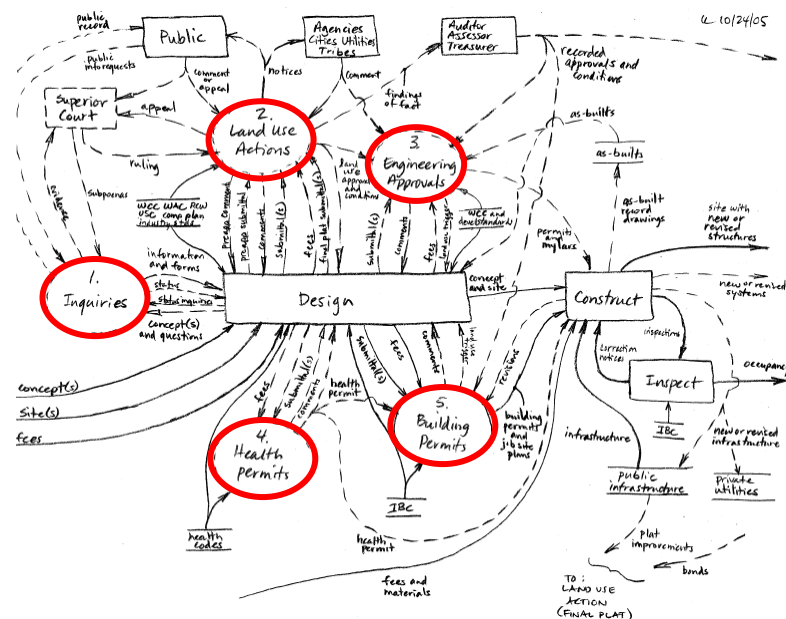


Figure 2 - Scope of Assessment

This covers the spectrum of:

- Inquiries
- Land use actions
- Engineering approvals
- Health permits, and
- Building permits

Beyond scope are:

- Long range planning (i.e. County comprehensive and shoreline management plans)
- Construction (applicant construction of structures, systems or frontage)
- Inspection (onsite or offsite improvements and building construction inspection)
- Details of interactions with outside agencies and the Assessor, Treasurer and Auditor
- Details of court appellate procedures

### ***The Latimore Company, LLC***

*The Latimore Company, LLC* (TLC) is a community government consulting firm located in nearby Snohomish County that is dedicated to improving the predictability, efficiency and collaboration of permit operations. TLC has consulted for 18 Western Washington jurisdictions on ways to improve permit system performance.

Its founder, Kurt Latimore, led the deployment and refinement of the Model Permit System (MPS), a package of administrative processes proven effective at streamlining permit application preparation and review, through the Economic Development Council of Snohomish County in 2003. This work was recipient of the Puget Sound Regional Council's *Vision 2020* award.

### ***The Theory of Constraints***

Underlying efficiency recommendations is Eliyahu Goldratt's *Theory of Constraints*. Goldratt, a physics professor, found that by modeling organizations and their objectives as physical systems (like gravity, water flow or electromagnetism) that the model predicted dramatic performance improvement was achievable. Organizations throughout the world are realizing these results. Its fundamental premise is that within any system is a constraint, rarely more than one, that generally remains consistent until changed by market forces or systematic change. Once we understand this constraint (a particular resource or skill), we aim our improvement efforts on it and elevate the performance of the entire system. In our assessment of county processes, task allocation and departmental capacity we identified the constraint and direct improvement recommendations accordingly.

## Major Permit Review Steps in Whatcom County

The major processing steps that land use or permit applications and the resulting construction pass through are:

- Design (applicant decisions, architecting, engineering and environmental consulting)
- 1. Inquiries (generally informal yet important counter inquiries and web site browsing)
- 2. Pre-App (pre-submittal technical collaboration and preparations for intake)
- 3. Intake (formal permit application submittal)
- 4. Review (jurisdiction scrutiny for code compliance and engineering feasibility)
- 5. Decision (payment of fees and receipt of permits and approved job-site plans)
- 6. Appeal (challenge of conclusions of law resulting from the permit process)
- Construction and Inspection (construction of structures and associated systems, inspected by the County for conformance to approved plans at pre-defined stages)
- Code Enforcement (actions to bring non-compliant development into compliance)

Thus, these steps form the basic structure of the process architecture (Fig. 3) that aligns with the broader region in its approach to development review and repeats as developments progress from land use approvals, through engineering and health approvals, to building permits and final approvals for occupancy and recording.

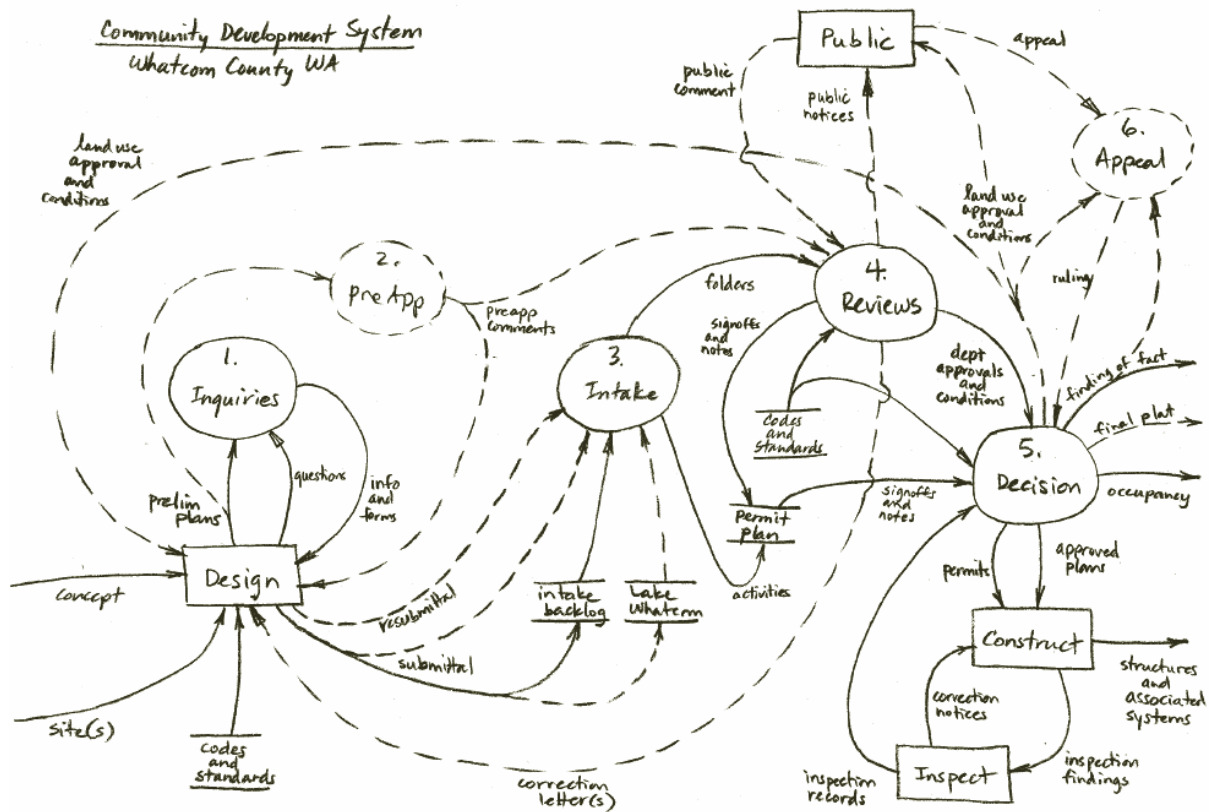


Figure 3 – Architecture of the Permit Review Process

## Assessment Approach

The assessment examined the process from a number of angles. First, the basic process and its variations were examined through the course of a number of staff interviews. These were with personnel identified by the management team with expertise across all reviewing functions, resulting in engagement of nearly all reviewing personnel in the Northwest and Girard facilities.

Their perspectives were supplemented with measurements, feedback from applicants, observation of applicant/county interactions, anecdotal comments, walk-through observations and examination of the current organizational structure, roles and stability.

The assessment process included biweekly presentation of the evolving process models and findings to the management team for validation and to spur further inputs and ideas.

## Baseline Performance

A picture of the current practices used by Whatcom County to review and decide applications has been assembled. This consists of a series of County developed process models, system-level data flows, measurements of current performance, and applicant feedback.

## Baseline Process

Today's process in Whatcom County is depicted a network of process models that operate within the context of Figs. 4 and 5.

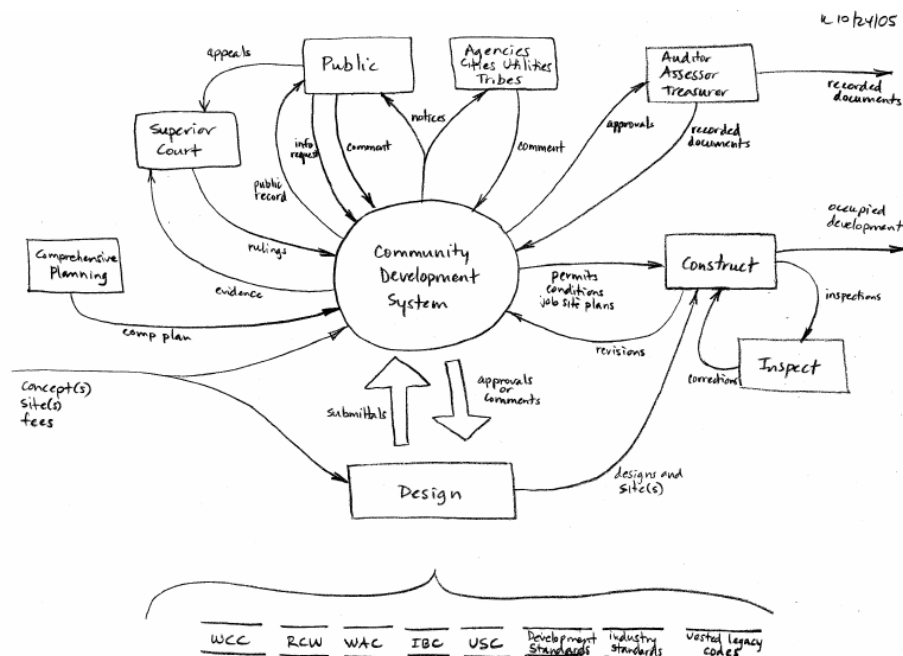


Figure 4 - System Model

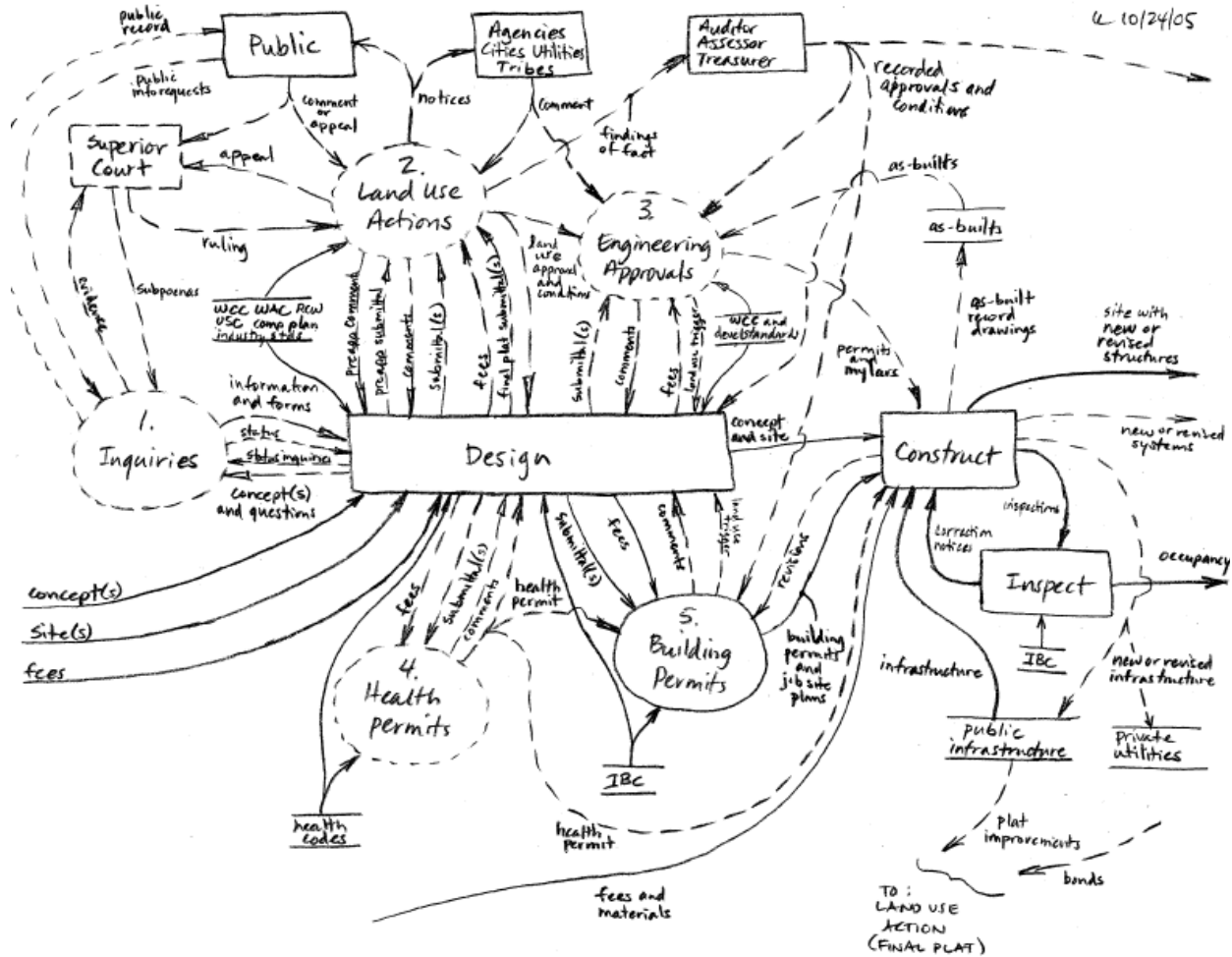


Figure 5 - System Model (expanded detail)

## Baseline Measurements

2005 Whatcom County review times were sampled for:

- New single-family-residential (SFR) homes and commercial buildings (Figs. 6-11),
- Boundary-line adjustments (Fig. 12a/b),
- Short plats (Fig. 13a/b), and
- Long plats (Fig. 14a/b).

Comparative regional results (Figs. 11, 12b, 13b, 14b) are included for context.

### No CAO or Watershed Review (Bldg Only)

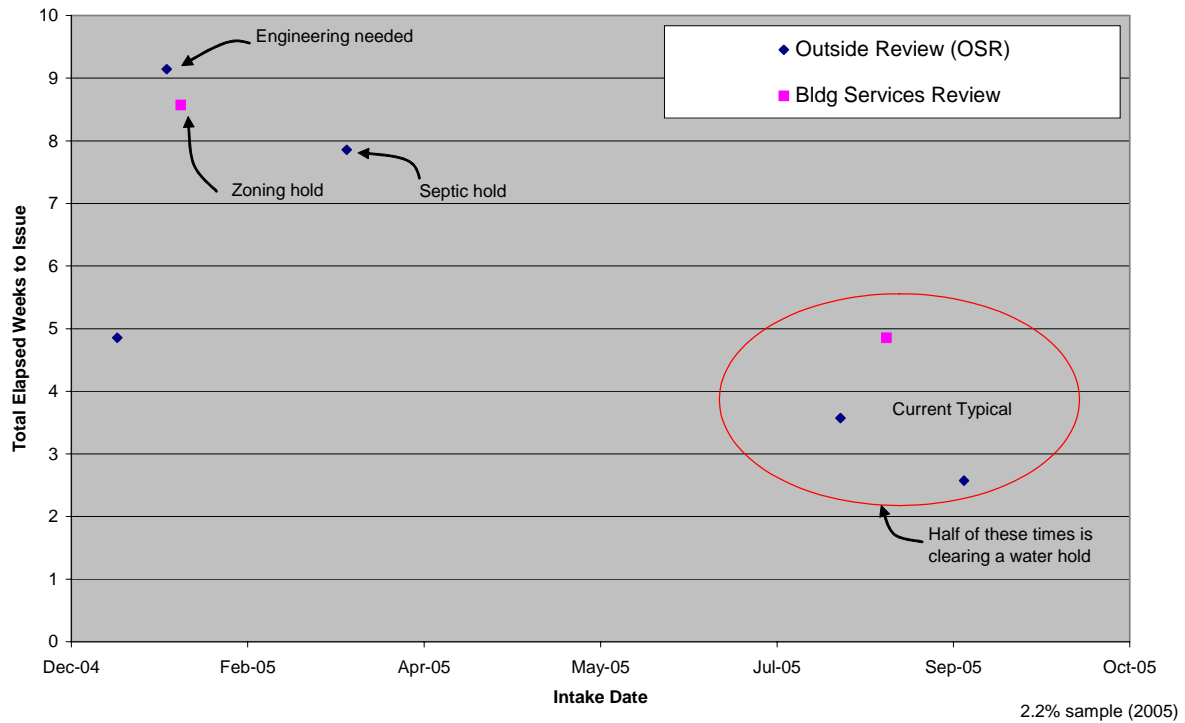


Figure 6 - Whatcom County SFR Processing Times (If no Environmental Review)

### Incidence of WS and CAO Reviews

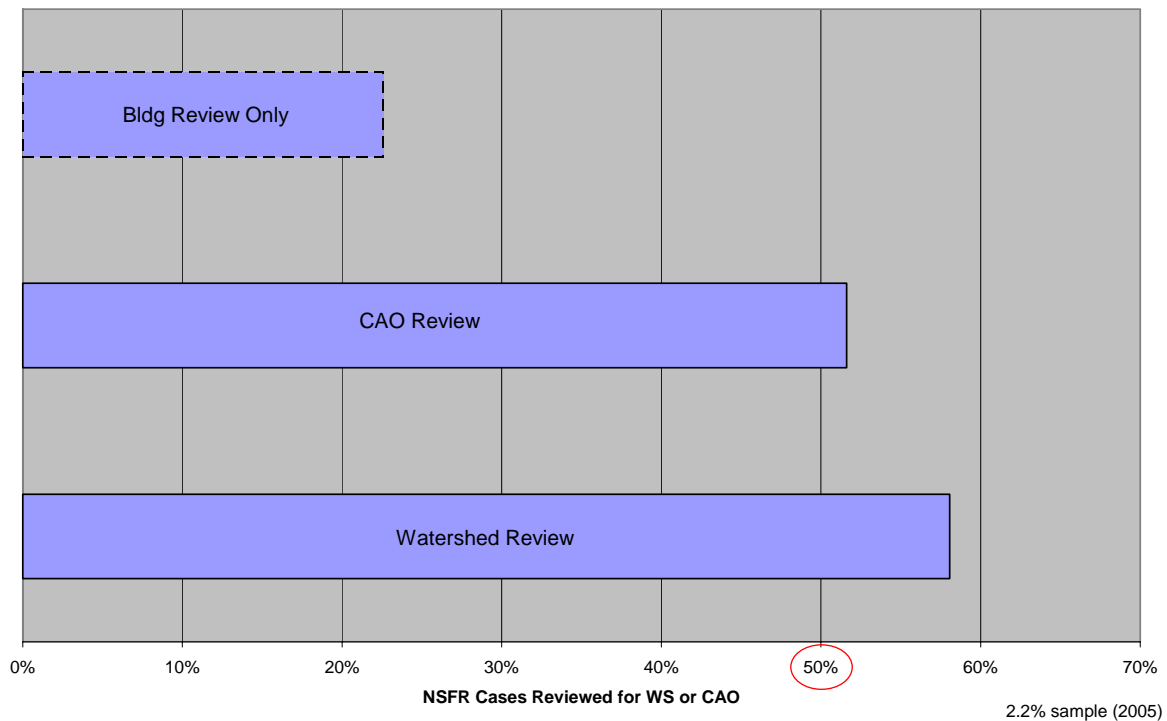
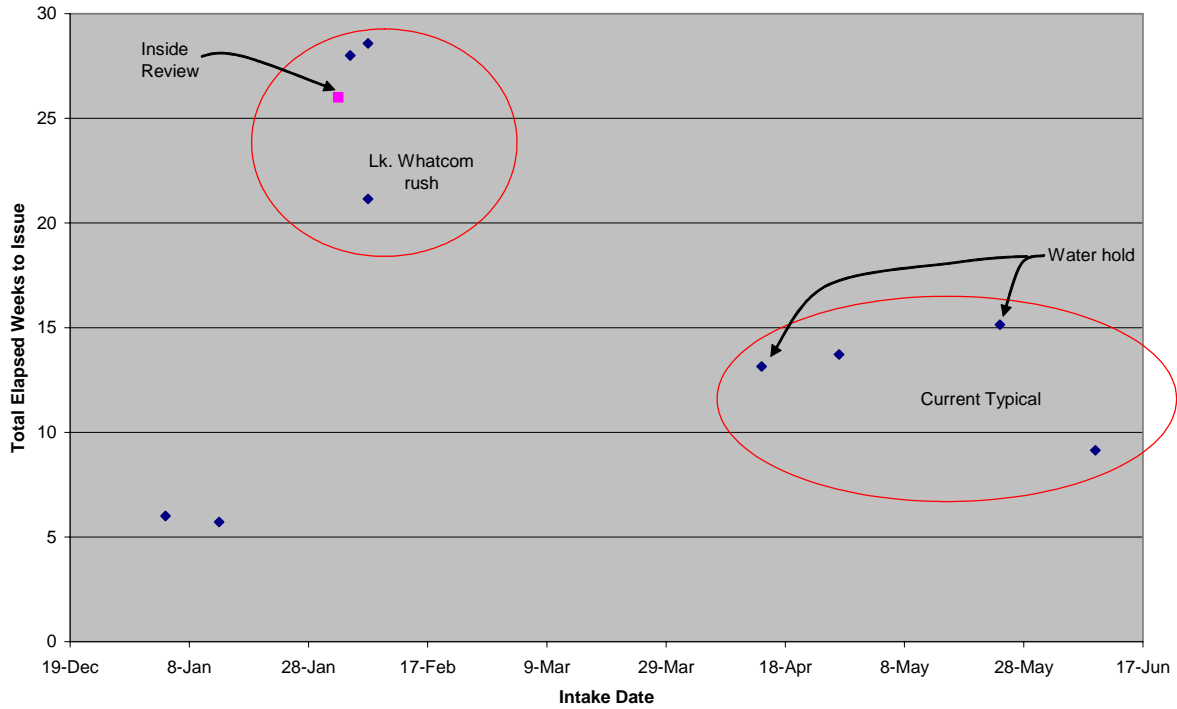


Figure 7 - Building Permits Requiring Environmental Review

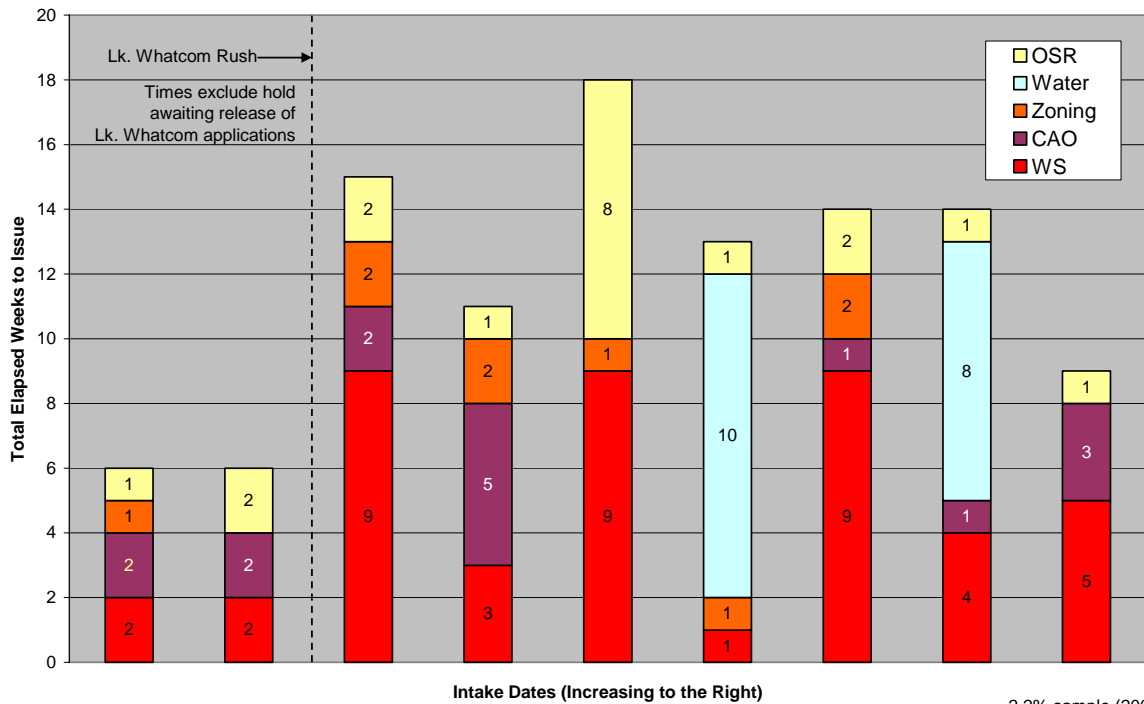
### Bldg with CAO and Watershed Reviews



2.2% sample (2005)

Figure 8 - Whatcom County SFR Processing Times (With Environmental Review)

### Sample SFR Task Times (Watershed, CAO and OSR)



2.2% sample (2005)

Figure 9 – Key Task Times (SFR Review)

### New Commercial

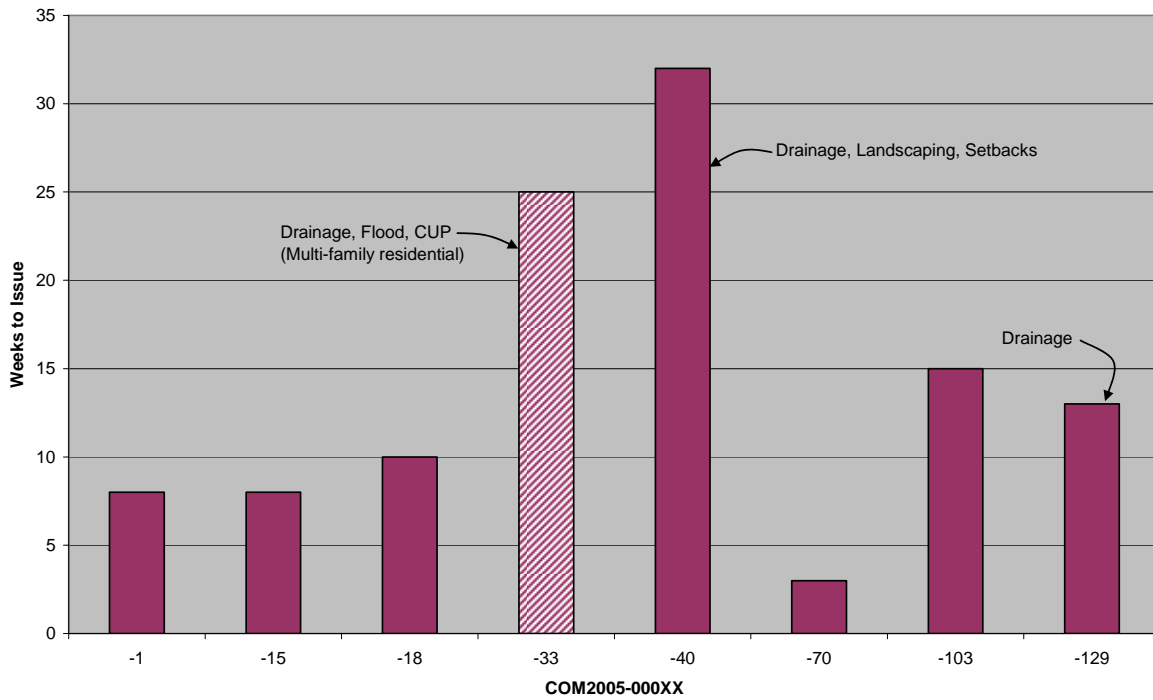


Figure 10 – New Commercial Plan Review

### Building Permit Turnaround Times (2005) - New SFR and New Commercial

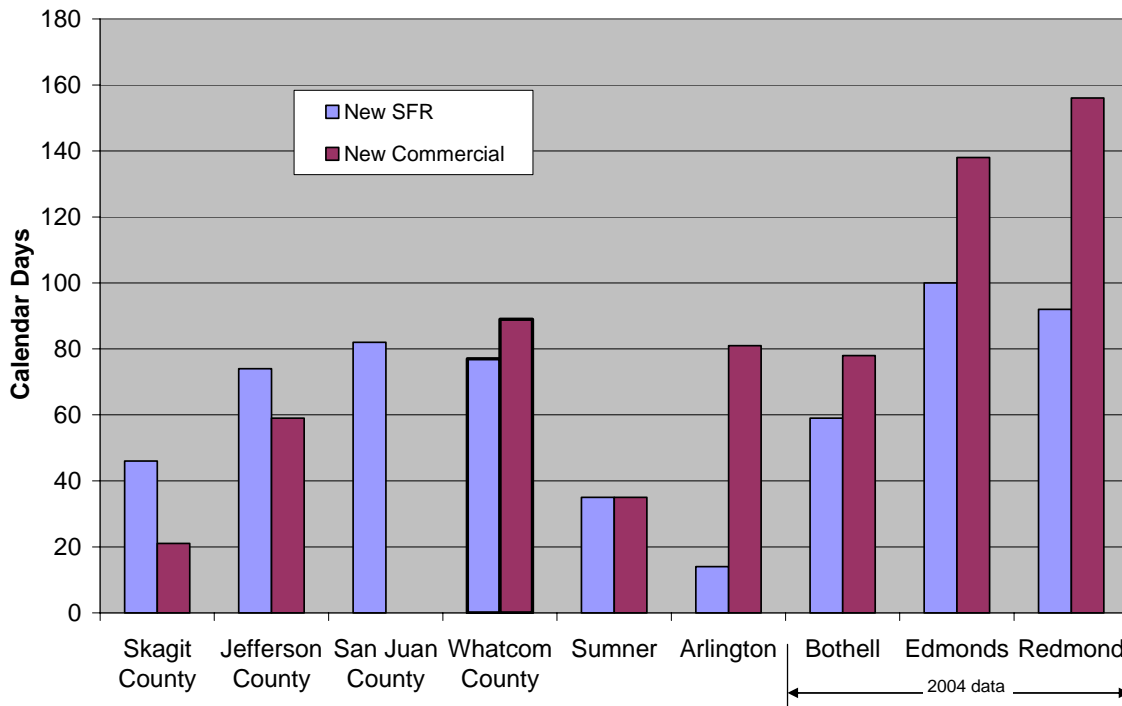
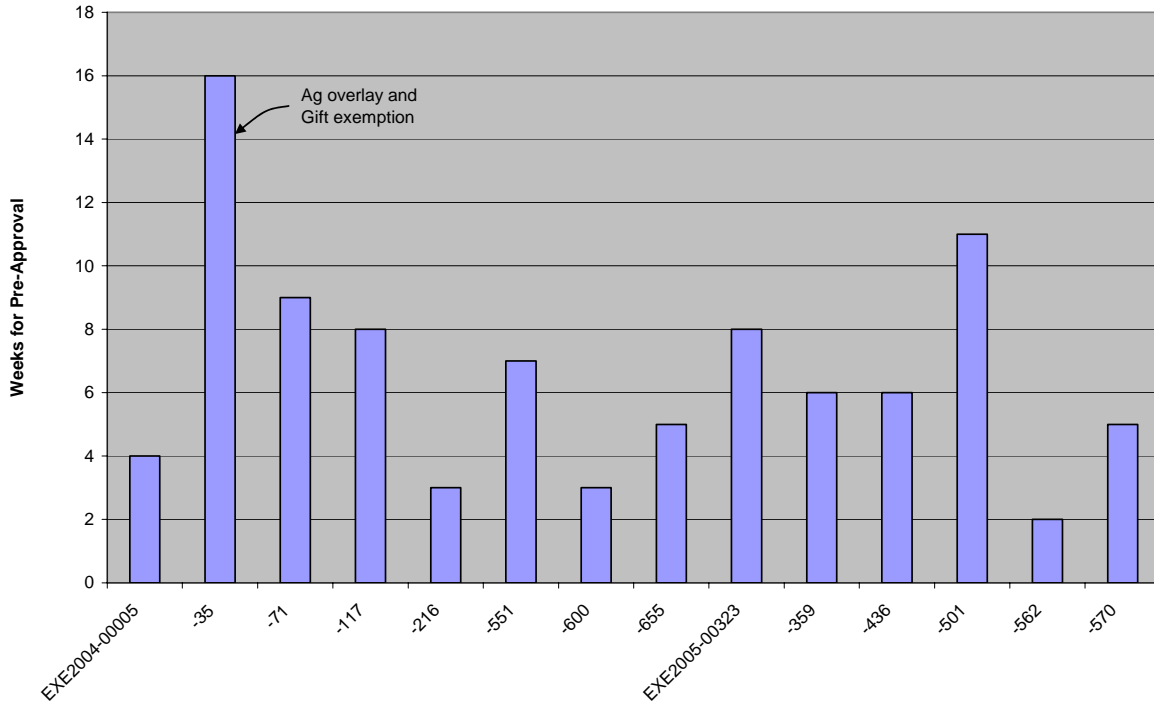
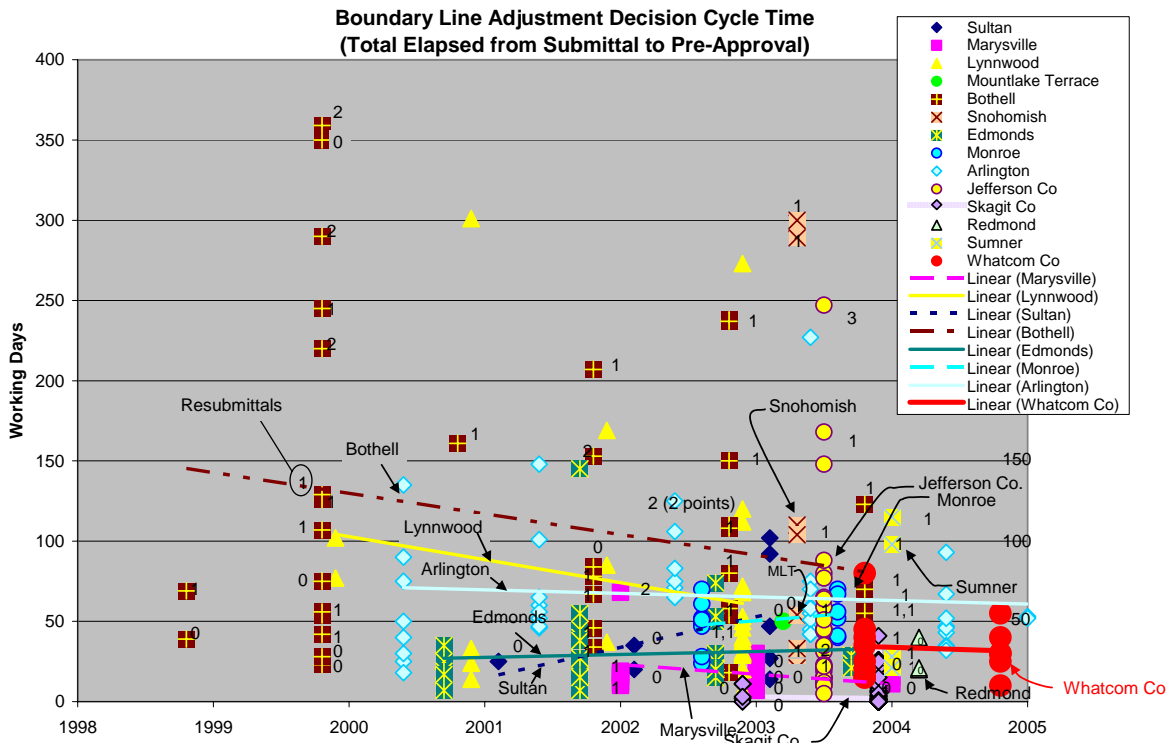


Figure 11 – Regional New SFR and Commercial Building Permit Times

### Boundary Line Adjustments



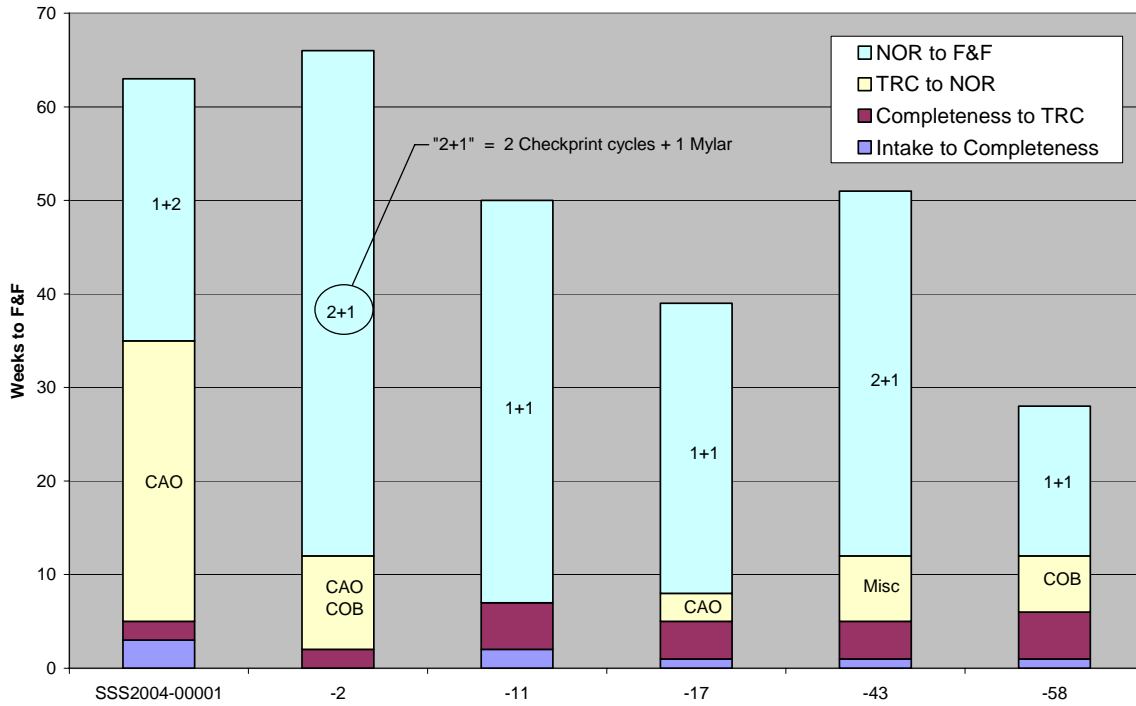
**Figure 12a – Sample BLA Processing Times**



**Figure 12b – Regional BLA Processing Times**

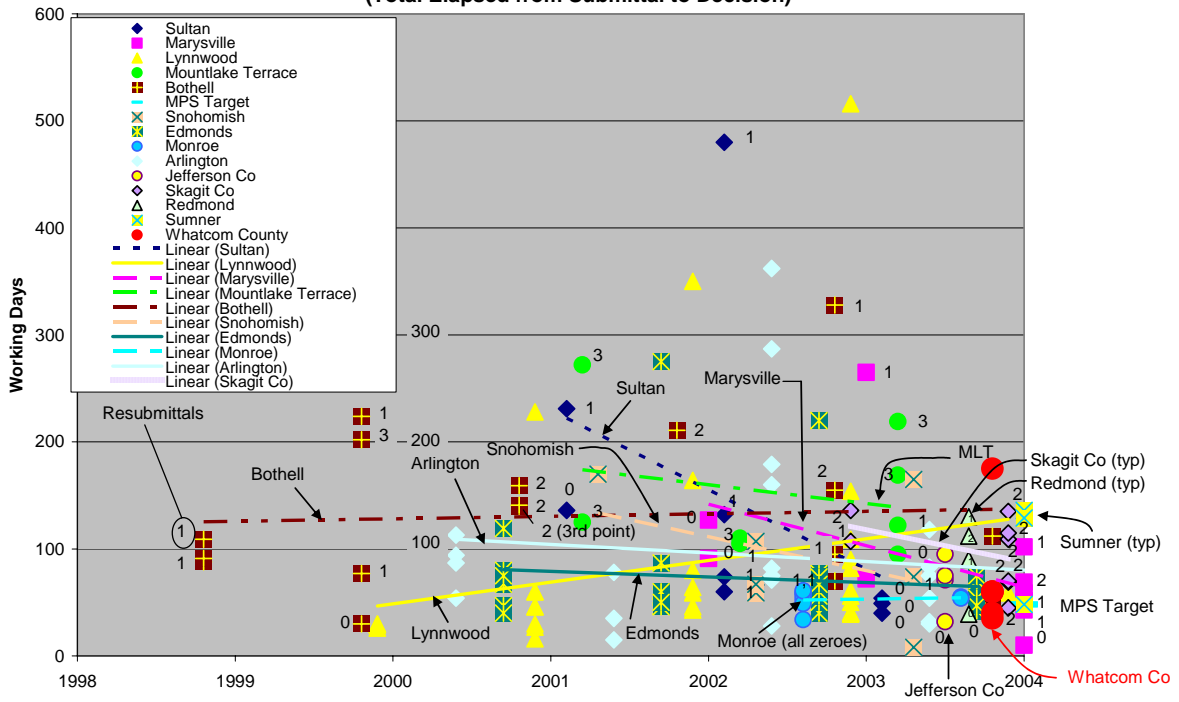
**Short Plats**

COB - City of Bellingham coordination



**Figure 13a – Sample Short Plat Processing Times**

**Short Plat Decision Cycle Time  
Preliminary Subdivision Approval  
(Total Elapsed from Submittal to Decision)**



**Figure 13b – Sample Short Plat Processing Times**

### Long Plats

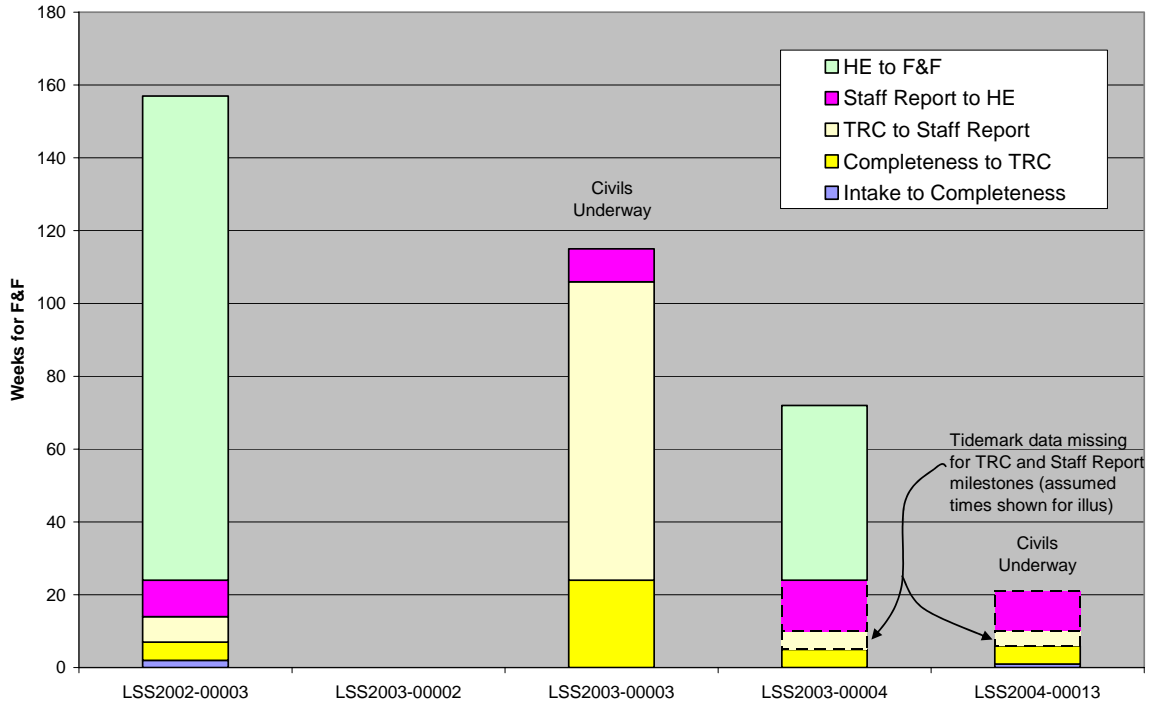


Figure 14a – Sample Long Plat Processing Times

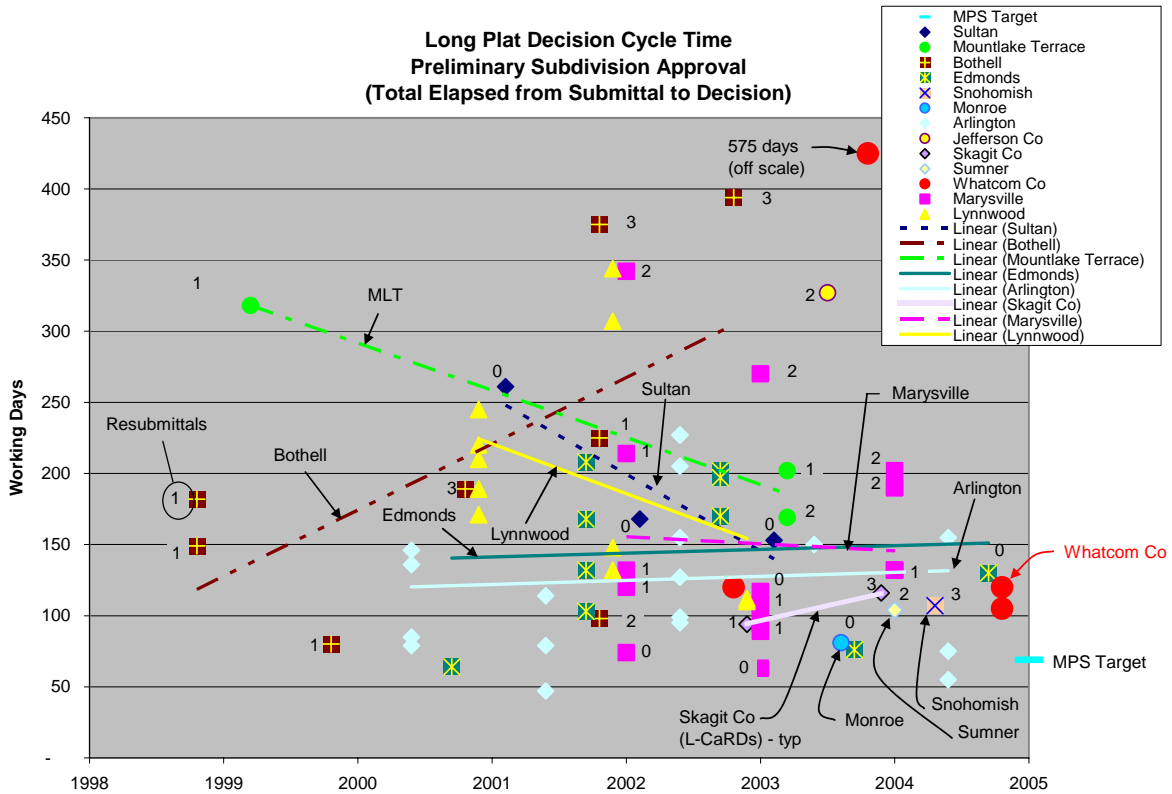


Figure 14b – Regional Plat Processing Times

## ***Applicant Feedback***

Individual-project and professional applicants provided feedback on their experiences with the Whatcom permit system. Their comments are melded into the findings and recommendations that follow. We thank these contributors for their support of the assessment, collaborative approach, and insightful feedback.

Other themes in applicant feedback were:

- Satisfaction with the front counter crew
- Many like the appointment system (with an intake on demand option)
- County and City of Bellingham coordination for UGA projects is a challenge
- Pre-app value is small when all the parties involved aren't prepared
- Engineering is overloaded.

Some additional specifics:

- Frustration that development standard alternatives were rejected
- Apparent softness in improvement requirements
- A feeling that progress would halt if not hounded.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

System characteristics were analyzed using the *Theory of Constraints*, resulting in a series of findings and recommendations for ways the County could raise the performance of its permitting system.

### ***Strengths***

First, we note particular strengths of the current Whatcom County system.

### **Management Team**

The current management team is deeply committed to good development, disciplined about weekly group meetings, personnel development, and prioritizes improved system management. In fact, PW listed a system assessment as its top priority ASR. Strategic thinking is apparent. This is a solid foundation for the recommended system improvement.

### **Personnel**

Many permit system personnel have years of experience in their specialties and with the County. This has built effective work relationships that carry the day when the process needs bolstering. Many show extraordinary dedication to the County, driven by a deep personal ethic for service, professionalism and public safety. The counter team is complimented by many applicants for its helpfulness and courtesy. Some workgroups add rotating breakfasts to weekly meetings, barbeques to summer lunches, and seasonal décor to the hallways, all indications of a positive workplace of engaged employees.

Productivity has been rising dramatically as development volumes rose. Most departments are only now adding personnel.

### **First One-Stop Improvements**

Applicants and staff are pleased with the recent lobby reconfiguration and expansion. Space is greater, proximity of the Engineering and PDS counters is apparent, and the number of separate entries is reduced, improving the sense of cohesiveness at the front door of the process.

### **Award-Winning Depth of Review**

Whatcom County has received awards for its archeological rigor and attracts State attention as a good pilot-project site for certain grants.

### **Best-in-Class Services**

Further, Whatcom County boasts four best-in-class features.

### **Onsite Septic Permits**

Most onsite septic system applications are decided in 2 days, some on the day of submittal. This is the fastest speed TLC has encountered in the region. Moreover, this high quality review includes a site visit and experienced reviewers with designs certified by a licensed septic designer. Similar approvals can take over a month elsewhere. Whatcom County can be proud.

### **Commercial Tenant Improvements**

The dream of many regional commercial applicants is to be able to meet with an inspector on their site and gain approval of their remodeling plans real-time. Whatcom County has achieved this with an outstanding inspector, good preparation and rigorous documentation of the field decisions in the County systems. Well done.

### **Fire access**

The review process includes an access review for long driveways to ensure that a fire truck could successfully serve an emergency call. This is coordinated across the fire marshal and PW.

### **Expiry**

Most regional jurisdictions have provisions to expire inactive building permits. This removes inactive projects from tracking systems that would otherwise languish and signal action that cannot be conducted. In practice, many jurisdictions don't exercise this provision and if they do, a culminating letter is sent to the permit holder to contact the County if they wish to extend their timeline; if there's no response, the permit is closed out administratively.

Whatcom County adds a final step that boosts system quality. Expirations trigger a last inspection. If the inspector finds that construction has gone beyond required inspection points, an enforcement case is opened (albeit subject to code enforcement capacity which was limited for a time). Non-compliant development is minimized with this prudent check in the system.

## Improvement Recommendations

TLC recommends 14 improvements, prioritized from highest benefit in the first recommendation. These begin with management reports to better oversee system operation.

### 1. Management Reports

Foremost, the permit system management team needs to have timely measurements of current system performance complemented with regular analyses of trends and progression toward goals.

The management process consists of three elements (Fig. 15), each of which governs production (conversion of applications into permits) from a different aspect. Reports are recommended to improve the basis of decision-making around these three aspects.

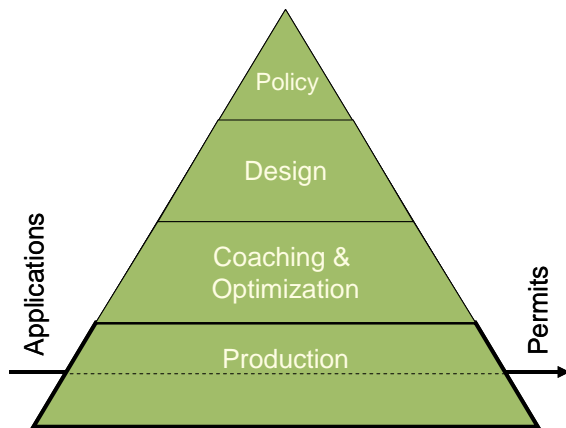


Figure 15 - Management Process

### Weekly Reports

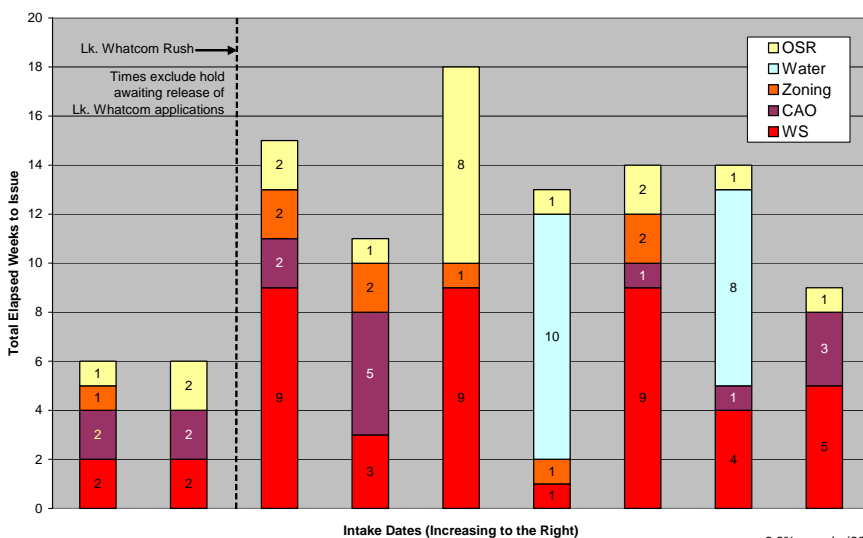
The team needs a weekly barometer of how the system is currently operating. Measurements would include indicators of key task times, the number of permits under review, backlog and aging. This will enable leaders to determine the constraint of current operation across departments and decide whether to intervene with revised priorities across the departments, reallocated resources or additional capacity.

This provides real-time trends for *coaching*

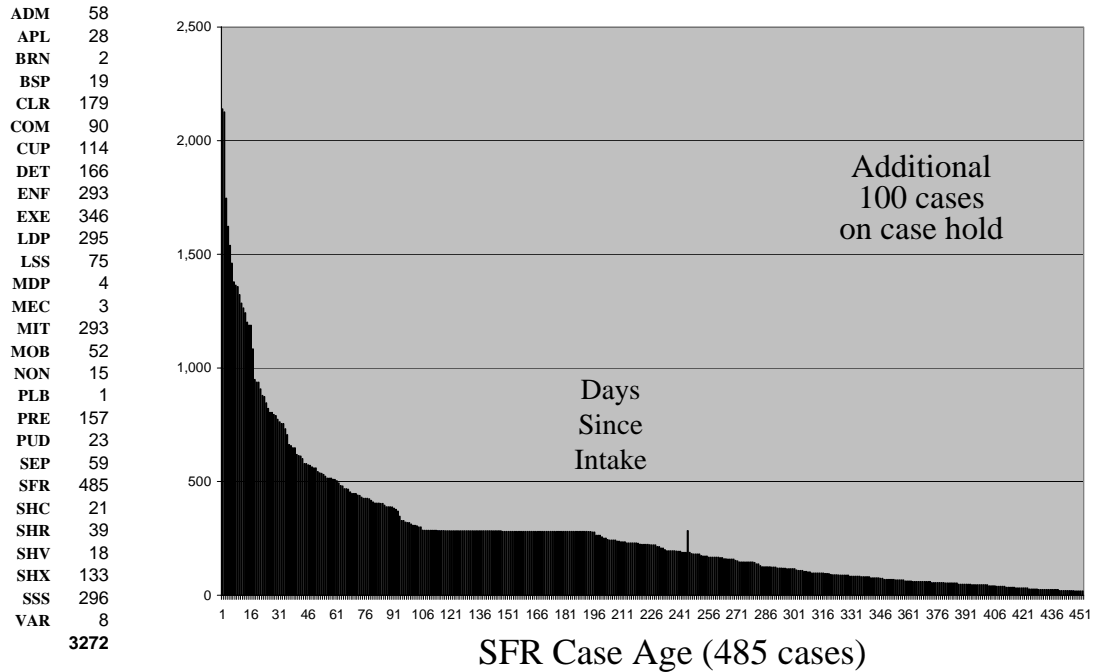
*and optimization*, the supervisory-level mentoring and guidance of the personnel conducting the ongoing technical reviews.

Weekly is the right frequency for these determinations. Monthly measurement leaves the team chasing lagging indicators while desktop backlogs may be detrimentally

Sample SFR Task Times (Watershed, CAO and OSR)



concentrating. Daily sampling is too aggressive, doesn't yield enough trend data for the management to work with, and may lead to decisions that subtract from system performance. We want the process to govern daily workflow with a minimum of management interventions.



## Quarterly Reports

In addition to weekly reports that support supervisory level optimization, TLC recommends quarterly reports that focus on system *design*. These are followed with quarterly meetings that are all-hands to the extent possible and explore how the system is performing relative to its goals, how the makeup and nature applications may be changing (such as a swing from short plats to larger subdivisions or an up-tick in commercial permits), and how the design of the system is serving these needs. The permit coordinator plays a central role in these sessions and in collection and reduction of data for them.

Sample system design parameters that could be evaluated quarterly are:

- Whether certain permit sequences (such as if water approvals should precede building permit applications or not) should be realigned,
- Whether certain tasks should be consolidated, conducted in parallel or series,
- Whether a functional group would be more effective under a different organizational structure, or
- Whether pattern issues arise from particular codes.

## Annual Reports

Annual reports focus on *policy*. They examine how the system operated over the year, the mission of the system, how results compare with goals, and what policy-level changes would

be beneficial (such as code amendments, comprehensive and capital-improvement plans, revised targets, or departmental staffing levels).

Parameters include:

- Quality of the resultant development relative to comprehensive planning objectives
- Quality of the process (predictability, repeatability, consistency, public notice)
- Cost of the system (operating budgets, permit and review fees, requisite site studies, concurrency of the regional infrastructure and methods of payment)
- Delivery (timelines, denial and resubmittal rates, application and issuance methods)
- Safety (incidence of failed structures or systems, ESA protection, enforcement cases)
- Morale (decorum, applicant and reviewer satisfaction, stability, progression, equity).

## 2. Intake on Demand

Whatcom County uses an appointment-based system for SFR building permit intake. In this approach, applicants phone in for the next-available Tuesday or Thursday appointment on the calendar. At this appointment, the applicant (or his or her representative) submits the plans and any associated studies. In an enhancement, applicants can request to be placed on a cancellations list to be notified on the fly if an earlier appointment becomes available. The appointments provide a list for technicians who prepare for the next day’s appointments by researching parcels, ESA maps and assessor data to see what reviews might arise from each intake. The system also provides for a real-time screening of the site plan by a plans examiner while the counter technician enters applicant data and review-initiating activities into the tracking system and processes fee receipts. This screening informs the applicant of apparent deficiencies or whether additional engineering is anticipated that will need to be provided before downstream plan check can begin (Fig. 16).

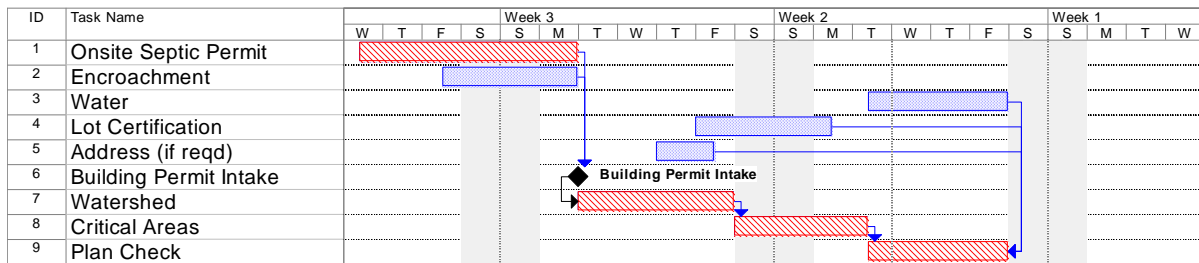


Figure 16 - Current Permit Sequence

Many applicants commented that they like the appointment system. It provides their team (and clients) with a date to coordinate efforts around and avoids lobby waits. For these, addition of an appointment tool on the County web site is recommended that would allow applicants to self-select open appointment slots and revise them up to the point technicians begin intake preparations.

But, during surges in application volume, such as what occurred during the Lake Whatcom rush, appointment backlog soars: to 6 months in the spring and summer of 2005. In this situation, some made appointments just to get a place in line. There were many no-shows,

which impacted those who were ready. This has settled down to 3 months at year's end. The cancellation list is thinning out too.

This effectively adds 12 to 26 weeks of delay to applicants who are ready to submit. Therefore, TLC recommends reallocating a counter technician to intake on demand. This would allow an applicant to submit on a drop-in basis while preserving the appointment option for those preferring it. A quarterly report could assess the right mix of appointment vs. drop-in technician capacity. For those dropping in, an enhancement could be use of the new computer terminal in the lobby to self-enter the applicant's name, application type and parcel number (if there's a wait) to launch an automated report of the research the technician would normally do the day prior. There is often several minutes of queries and run time for this prep.

Special drop-in options or accelerated appointment slots could be considered as well for smaller SFR additions, accessory structures or the like.

However, the County should continue its practice of metering release of applications into the review stream, as it did for the Lake Whatcom rush. Performance is strongly sensitive to work-in-progress. If an excessive number of applications enter review at one time, administrative effort to keep track of towering desktop files saps capacity, increases multi-tasking by increasing the likelihood that reviewers begin skipping back and forth between aging applications, and reduces timeline predictability as applications increasingly are worked out of normal sequence.

### **3. Concurrency**

A number of interviews indicated that development is straining regional transportation and other infrastructure, particularly within the Birch Bay UGA. The County is studying a concurrency ordinance in response. Such an ordinance would allow the County to collect impact fees proportional to a development's demand on regional transportation, stormwater and other systems. These fees would fund capital and road improvement projects at economies of scale and allow prioritization in a way that is difficult to achieve with site-based mitigation alone.

Birch Bay would benefit further by participating in the proposed Dept of Ecology pilot project to model the area's ecological systems to understand and preserve the function of its high-value wetlands and other watershed features. This science could then underlie project development and permit review to reduce CAO iteration and improve the development and environmental results.

Applicants have to understand how to apply this model to their projects. This increases the importance of pre-submittal collaboration so these considerations are incorporated into submittal site plans and that associated costs and constraints are predictable up front. The County will need capacity to conduct site visits and exercise these models in preparation for the pre-app meeting, a rigor often compromised in 2005 due to a lack of capacity, particularly in engineering. Pre-app meetings should be required for certain project types,

such as discretionary permits and short plats, to structure how this collaboration occurs and to reduce post-submittal iteration.

#### **4. Management Major Project Reviews**

TLC recommends that the management team convene on a monthly basis to examine a one-page synopsis of certain development projects at selected points. The objective of this effort is to study how development regulations are playing out on selected project types and how approvals, conditions and permits along the way evolve into results on the ground. Managers would use insight gleaned across projects to recalibrate the system if needed to implement the comprehensive plan more effectively or uniformly, or enhance the plan itself.

The points in time could be SEPA determination, the first civils checkprint, and final inspection. These are major milestones of the land use, civils and building permit phases.

The management team may elect to intervene from time to time in a given project, but the primary purpose of this review is to gauge the quality of the results and evolution of the permit system at its key decision points. Correspondingly, the County should resist deferring project decisions in deference to the project review calendar.

#### **5. Project Teams**

The current system design relies on a series of functional specialists who review development proposals for compliance with the development regulations of their specialty. A typical SFR building permit application in 2005 underwent a zoning check, a watershed check, a critical areas check, a water availability check, a lot certification, and a plan check, most of these sequentially, prior to issuance. A typical plat was determined complete by the planner, routed for critical areas review, watershed if needed, SEPA determination, water and septic suitability, lot certification, and engineering, with conclusions discussed at a technical review committee (TRC) meeting with the applicant prior to issuance of a notice of review or staff report for the hearings examiner.

Each of these reviews was by a specialist within the respective function, often an individual with limited backup, who individually determines which projects to work on a daily basis. For certain land use actions, such as plats, a planner/facilitator tracks status and cajoles to keep projects from falling outside of codified timelines. In areas that aren't facilitated, the sequential desk-to-desk progression and list of incomplete activities in the tracking software are the primary prioritization tools.

For high-volume, similarly sized projects like SFR building permits, a good tracking system and a clever review sequence works. However, for larger or unusual projects, for organizations that have experienced personnel, a project team structure is superior.

In a project team, specialists that are typically involved in the review across functions are assigned to a team that either bands and disbands with the project or is a standing team that processes multiple applications. The team manages priorities across its specialists so that

delay between processing steps is minimized and quality is more readily observed. Teams serve as the TRC body for their projects and carry their projects through conclusion of the civils phase (signed mylars). Teams could compare performance and techniques at quarterlies to propagate best practices.

The project team leader would brief the management project review team on his or her team's projects. We would predict that the management team would find that it takes fewer people to present comprehensive project synopses under a project team structure than with the current functional model.

Organizationally, the County could consider moving Engineering Development Section to PDS from PW to facilitate this teaming. The development standards would continue to be set by PW in collaboration with these teams like comprehensive plans are managed today by the Planning division for alignment with long-range planning, capital-improvement and permit processing assumptions.

Along with project teams, TLC recommends that Environmental Health personnel collocate with the rest of the system reviewers in the proposed one-stop permit center. The Health Department would continue to set review policy.

## **6. Diligence**

Particularly with the large amount of development activity in Whatcom County today, the public relies on the permit system to provide consistent notices, windows for public comment, and procedural accuracy in public interactions. This appears to be working well in the County. Continued diligence is encouraged as well as online status to retain and enhance public confidence.

Sharp increases in community development can raise fears of traffic congestion, drainage pattern changes or loss of local character. If notices and comment periods are perceived to be unreliable, activist monitoring and public information requests soar, which is inefficient for everyone. Information requests place a great burden on permit system to collect, copy, and send broadly requested information. The County's absence of a records center further complicates such inquiries.

The County is currently experiencing increasing tensions in Birch Bay.

## **7. Generalists**

Performance could be improved if cross training and broadening of assignments were used to expand specialist skill-sets to produce generalists. Generalists can process a wider variety of application types and can test those applications for a broader range of code requirements. Generalists refer extraordinary cases to specialists for detailed treatment and confer with peers for guidance when encountering new variables or development techniques.

Generalists are prized by applicants at the inquiry and pre-app phases to help them detect and evaluate sensitivities of proposed site plans to the spectrum of zoning, health, environmental, building, engineering, state and federal codes.

A currently proposed series of internal classes is highly recommended to reinforce this approach. The excellent hiring and development of the front counter personnel into generalists is right on track as well.

The new SKEP process complements the development of generalists. Some personnel reported that the traditional system necessitated job reclassification in order to develop new skill sets, though experimentation within certain supervisory functions has been encouraged.

One initial possibility is creation of critical area/watershed generalists, who would review all applications falling within ESA map areas for the range of critical area and watershed features, conferring with technical specialists as needed. This would consolidate the longest sequential tasks for many permit reviews (Figs. 9 and 16)

Another opportunity is delegation of SEPA reviews to project planners. Each planner would review, interpret and propose determinations and any mitigation. The County's SEPA Administrator would then review and approve the proposed determination to manage consistency and mentor progressively sophisticated analyses.

The County will need to ensure that equity exists between similar job classifications as historically separate functions converge. Some reported a sense of inequity in the current system.

## **8. Tidemark and Records Management**

The County has used Tidemark *Permit Plan* as its permit tracking system for PDS and certain PW application types since 2000. Health and other PW permits and bonds are managed with spreadsheets or alternatives, though water approval is signed off by the Health Department in the Tidemark system.

Tidemark is one of two leading commercial permit tracking systems in the region, the other being *Permits Plus*, both sold by the same company now, Accela. Tools are provided in both systems for significant expansion and customization of features, such as online tracking, document attachment, advanced management reporting, user access controls, and unique case types. Neighboring Skagit and Jefferson Counties have developed highly sophisticated systems. Whatcom County has done a good job with its version though could get much more out of the tool with improved user habits, expanded departmental scope, online connectivity, database stability, automatic notification, and enhanced configuration management.

The Tidemark administrator has faced a full-time task to restore corrupted data from summer 2004, debug production screens for real-time permit issuance, manage internal lists of contractor license expirations and Assessor Office parcel numbers, and whittle records down

for required census reporting. While the data recovery and associated database conversion upgrade is now waning, recommended enhancements will require full-time development and testing to complete alongside daily production support needs. User enhancement requests will also need to be prioritized by the management team, optionally with recommendations from a user group, to focus efforts on the most urgently needed system improvements. In addition, a significant user-training program will be needed to standardize technique, which is crucial for effective management reporting, online status tracking and coordination of parallel review steps.

The County would complement Tidemark improvements with its current plan to establish a records center. In a records center, paper files are stored and managed with a checkout system. Reviewers would retrieve the files they need to complete a review and return articles once complete. This step could be facilitated with clerks. The benefits are increased certainty where project materials are, what the latest version is, and eased determination of status in response to applicant or management inquiries. A standard for the content and structure of paper files and the corresponding tracking system database trims duplicate information and omissions. Space for a records center in the current facility is an issue. Skagit County established an excellent records center in their new permit center.

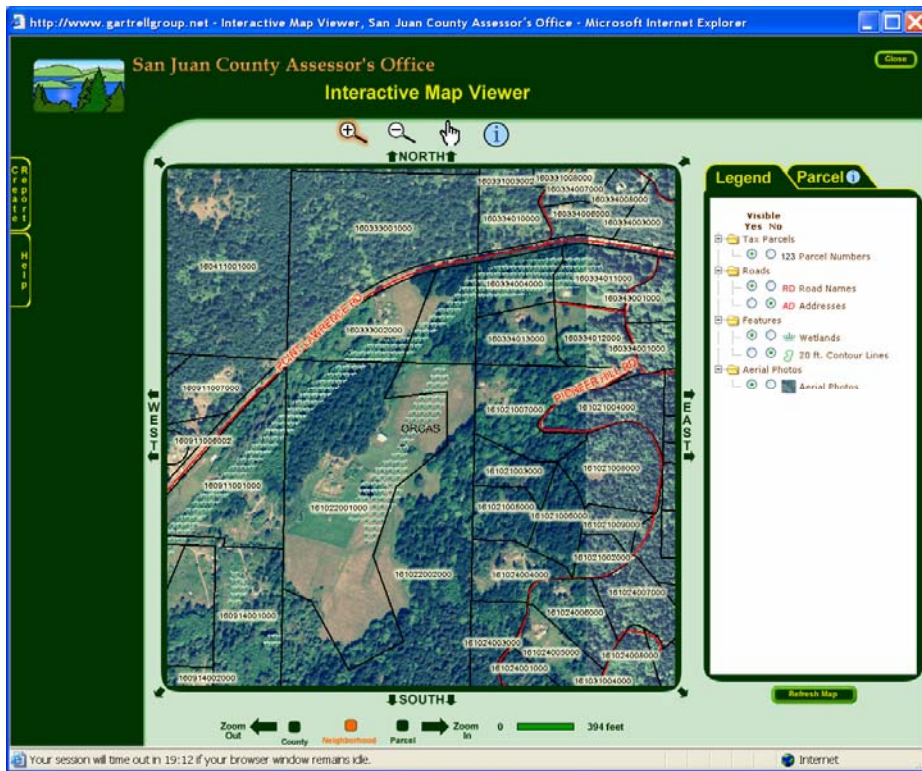
## **9. Web Site**

Online status tracking is recommended, whereby applicants can query permit numbers to determine where their applications are in the review process. This transparency boosts confidence in the system and helps gauge completion dates, much as online tracking provides today for express mail carriers. This requires methodical implementation and standardized reviewer technique for online results to be useful: an online status that doesn't change for protracted periods of time or one that changes to an ambiguous status will only invite status phone calls that the online system obviates when working correctly.

Beyond online tracking, the web site should contain all the application forms and handouts that the County maintains, in a format that applicants can download and complete electronically. Some forms are online today; many are not.

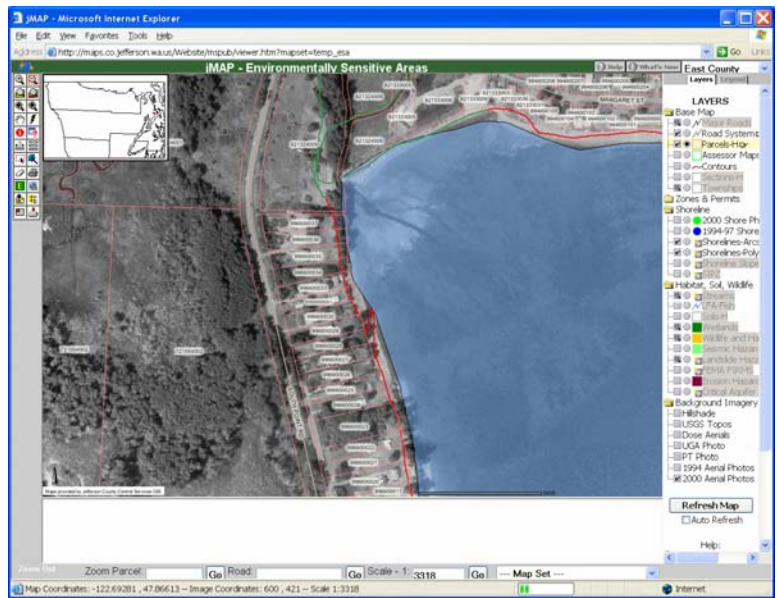
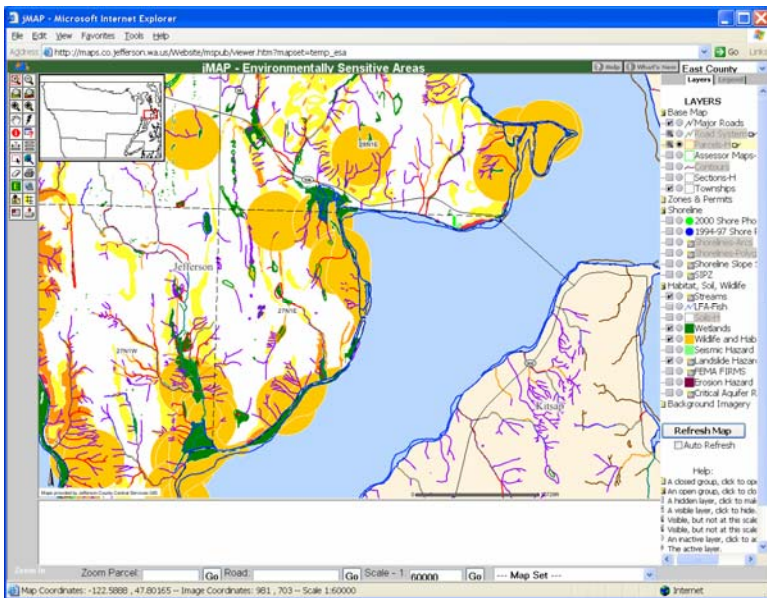
The County currently posts most of its development standards and images of its standard road sections and other details, which is good practice. But, some are not yet online. A convenient enhancement the County could consider is also posting CAD-ready details that could be "pasted" onto applicant drawings (such as the common *AutoCAD* transfer file format). This could improve the use of County standards and facilitate applicant drafting.

Another area for improvement online is posting of more ESA maps, particularly with the recent CAO changes. Applicants should be able to clearly identify their parcel or parcels and be able to determine what the County records indicate for ESAs onsite and nearby.



This way, applicants can prepare stronger initial applications and capitalize on pre-app collaboration more precisely, rather than learning of constraints sporadically through the course of application iterations. Some ESA data, such as locations of potential archeological remains, is restricted by agreement with the

State. But, if the maps are thorough in allowable respects, preferably in a GIS format, applicants can learn a lot about project feasibility (or a potential real estate transaction) from their living rooms.



Whatcom County currently publishes some maps in Adobe Acrobat format.

## **10. Environmental Intake Standards**

The area of greatest uncertainty and iteration in the sampled permit records was environmental treatments. Thus, the watershed and critical areas reviews dominated the majority of building permit timelines and were the source of significant iteration as developers and reviewers worked to avoid or mitigate the effects of impervious surfaces, stormwater facilities, road encroachment, and structures on wetlands, slopes and watershed quality.

Improved ESA maps and concurrency discussions up-front in the process could establish better what substantiating documents will be needed to approve a project and thus become required elements of the application submittal. This avoids starts and stops during the review process to wait for the applicant to produce wetland delineations, habitat management or geotechnical reports by surprise.

TLC is currently testing a new system with Jefferson County that categorizes parcels into four types based on proximity of ESAs. Each category has its own intake requirements to improve review efficiency and help applicants and prospective buyers better quantify the risk of ESA constraints on their development visions before the first dollar. This could be considered here.

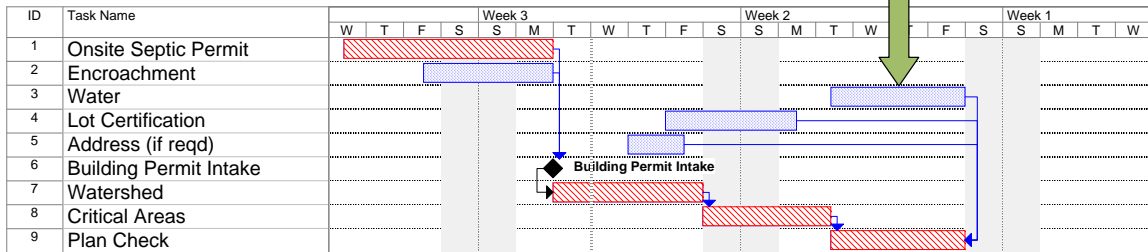
## **11. Permit Sequence and Dependencies**

Permit system efficiency is largely governed by the rigor of intake standards, as indicated for environmental reviews in the last section. It's also sensitive to the time sequencing of the individual permits generally required for each project.

In Fig. 17, the current sequence for SFR building permits is shown with notional timelines. The critical path (shown in red, hatched bars) begins with onsite septic approval, followed by watershed and critical areas review, culminating with plan check for the structures. One of the variables that can shift the critical path is demonstration of onsite water availability. This is allowed to occur late in the process, but must be approved before a building permit can be issued. Thus, the County may hold an application that is otherwise ready to issue, but it can't because it's on hold for a water application or a water availability problem at the site. Many of the oldest permits in the tracking system that remain un-issued from when Tidemark use began are due to water hold.

Many jurisdictions, such as Skagit and Jefferson Counties, require water applications be filed as a prerequisite of submitting for building permits. Jefferson County goes further requiring that water be approved prior to building permit submittal. This removes the administrative complexity of managing "ready, but not ready to issue" permits, which can expire in the system (but rarely do in practice regionally) while everyone waits for applicant follow-through during the right weather conditions, with improved technology or sampling, or at impasse if water cannot be approved. Wells will become an increasing factor in rural development as WRIA aquifer management falls under greater regional scrutiny.

## Current sequence



## Start/start water application

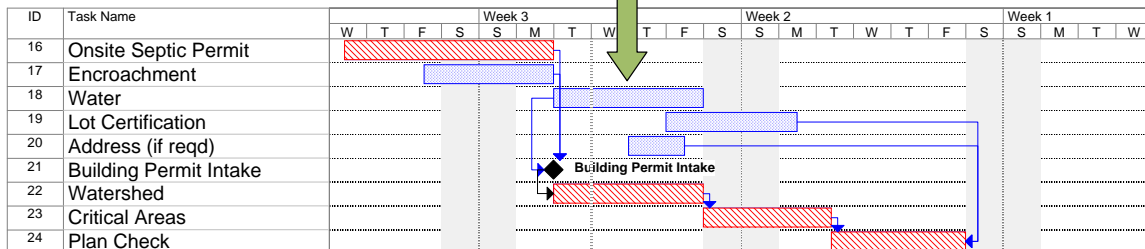


Figure 17 - Current Permit Sequence

The County began in October to require encroachment permit approval or waivers prior to building permit submittal. This was to counteract a growing trend of late-breaking problems in grading and County road access due to increasing development outside of the prime dry and flat lots that once abounded. This is good practice, given the development trends. The County could consider revising the sequence to require encroachment permit application rather than approval as a prerequisite of building permit intake, which would reduce one trip to the permit center for many applicants. The County should also consider embedding the encroachment waiver into the building permit submittal process so that inspectors remain abreast of development that they will encounter in the field without a separate permit step and fee for many applicants.

## 12. Assistance Center

The County is considering construction of a one-stop permit center. One very useful feature would be an assistance center whose purpose would be to help applicants understand the myriad of codes that may shape their developments. They could also get help gauging the quality and readiness of their submittals prior to intake. The assistance center would be staffed with experienced generalists who are skilled at recognizing and teaching prospective applicants about interdependencies of the various codes such as well protection, landscaping, ADA access, building codes, environmental buffers, and zoning on a given site plan.

The fundamental challenge of the development permit process is its complexity.

The region has addressed this complexity by decomposing development review into functional codes (like health, building and zoning codes), each with respective review specialists, applicant consultants, and permit types. Thus, now the challenge is sewing it all back together in the context of a specific development proposal—that always pushes the max for economic value. Few individuals can do this now, as one applicant lamented as he bounced along the process.

Project teams, pre-app collaboration, assistance centers, concurrency and generalists all take aim at this fundamental challenge.

### **13. Closed-loop Recording**

One awkward gap in the current subdivision process is the recording of approved plats with the County Auditor and subsequent designation of the new parcels in the Assessor's maps and *AS400* database. This is due largely because it's dependent on when the applicant chooses to record the plat, which changes the tax status and valuation of the property, but is the green light for the County to accept building permit applications on the new parcels.

After recording, the Assessor designates new parcel numbers. The permit system needs these new numbers before it can accept building permit applications. This is standard across the region.

Between all these steps, weeks or months can pass before the recording and parcel numbers get back to the permit team. Conversely, a developer could hand-carry an approved plat to Bellingham, have it recorded, drive immediately back to the permit center to submit building permit applications, and face very busy technicians as they scramble to obtain parcel numbers with interdivisional heroics.

The County could consider having the permit center transmit approved plats to the Auditor directly under a streamlined process that addresses excise taxes, recording standards, mapping, parcel number generation and import of new parcel numbers into AS400 and Tidemark.

### **14. Leverage Site Visits**

As shown on the current permit sequence, onsite septic system design approval is required before building permit submittal. This creates an opportunity to capitalize on these first eyes in the field.

Septic design approval requires an onsite inspection to validate the septic designer's soil log interpretations and again at two key stages of drainfield construction. Thus, a Health Dept sanitarian will have been onsite before many building permits are submitted. The system could capitalize on this by adding field notes of wetland indicators or other potential ESAs (or none observed) to the Tidemark system. In this way, intake technicians could more reliably determine when environmental review activities should be initiated.

## **Conclusion**

The Whatcom County permit system boasts four best-in-class characteristics alongside personnel and technical strengths. A series of 14 improvements are recommended to enhance system performance. Some require investment such as Tidemark, web site, and increased engineering capacity. However, most can be implemented with existing resources under good project management with receptive participants.

The constraint of the process for many is reconciliation of environmental factors. Consolidation of the various environmental reviews into a generalist review could replace currently sequential steps for many projects. Leveraging onsite septic site visits, thorough posting of ESA map data for efficient up-front use by applicants, judicious, researched and adequately staffed pre-apps, concurrency tools, project teams, weekly management reporting of trends, and an assistance center would all help improve clarity and reduce this iteration.

The team has a history of innovation to fill process gaps, is experienced, possesses a desire across the organization for improvement, and has a strong management team. This positions the system in a strong position to implement recommendations.

## ***Next Steps***

The next step is a County decision of how it wishes to proceed with these recommendations. In support of this, an implementation plan should be developed that scopes levels of effort, taps key personnel for critical tasks, and establishes timelines.

The Latimore Company offers to assemble this plan with the management team and oversee this transition.

## ***Thank you***

The Latimore Company thanks the County and applicant participants for their excellent contributions to this assessment. TLC very much appreciates this opportunity to serve Whatcom County and offer these recommendations. We would be delighted to continue into implementation.

Regards,

Kurt Latimore  
Member of *The Latimore Company, LLC*