



CITY OF MODESTO

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City To Rebuild Planning Program and Streamline Development Review Process

Modesto, CA – January 5, 2007 – Acting Community & Economic Development Director Jim Niskanen today announced the City has received a 52-page organizational assessment report entitled “*Organizational Assessment of the Development Review Permitting Process.*” The report, prepared by Citygate Associates, examines and makes recommendations regarding efficiency and effectiveness improvements for the City’s Planning Division and the overall development review permitting process. Citygate is a municipal government performance auditing firm located in Folsom, California.

“It’s a new year and the department will have a new director coming next week,” said Niskanen “We’re excited and hopeful about it all. The report is coming at a good time for the City”.

The City’s Planning program has suffered from leadership turnover, retirement, and budget cuts for the past several years. As pointed out in the Citygate report “...the City’s Planning program was hit by a *perfect storm*”.

The City commissioned the organizational assessment in September of last year. The objectives of the report were:

- To provide an independent, third party analysis of the policies, procedures, management and operations of the Planning Division, as it exists, and to design a creative strategy to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness, as needed.
- To discuss alternative operating models and make recommendations for changes in the Planning Division, if needed.
- To examine the development review permitting process model and make recommendations for changes, if needed.

“Fortunately, Citygate is telling us it’s more of a process and resource problem than a people problem” said Niskanen. “We’ve got work to do in the area of interdepartmental communication and coordination”.

Major recommendations in the report include:

- Breaking down the formal and informal walls between Planning, Building, Economic Development, Redevelopment, Engineering, the City Attorney, Traffic and Finance
- Flattening the Planning Division organizational structure and using squads and teams to increase responsiveness, flexibility and customer satisfaction
- Instituting “Unanticipated Service” practices to increase customer satisfaction
- Establishing a powerful Development Review Team (DR-Team) effective immediately
- Establishing a Development Services Fund for the Planning, Engineering and Building programs
- Establishing a long-term attraction, investment and retention program for planners
- Hiring two (2) Senior Planners, two (2) Assistant/Associate Planners and support staff
- Re-establishing the Deputy City Manager/Development Services position

In addition to the major recommendations listed above, the report includes 27 total recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the City’s development permitting process. The recommendations are set forth in a six-page Action Plan that contains the priority of each recommendation, the suggested implementation time frame, the anticipated benefits of each recommendation and the responsible implementation manager.

The rigorous data gathering process performed by Citygate included staff and managerial interviews, document review and discussions with customers to obtain their perspective on working with the Modesto’s development related departments. According to Citygate Partner Jay Corey, the level of cooperation, dialogue, and openness from City leadership, management, employees and customers during this process was exceptional. Corey volunteered, “We found a very strong commitment to public service among staff members... and a steady course of improvement already in place.” Corey had the opportunity to view activity from inside the City’s planning process as the Interim Planning Manager from July through December 2006.

“Since becoming Mayor,” said Mayor Jim Ridenour, “one of my top priorities was to find a way to improve the City’s development process. The Citygate report will bring all departments involved in the process together under one theme and one mission. The City now has meaningful and tangible recommendations for long term improvement.”

Councilmember Janice Keating, Chair of the Economic Development Committee noted that, “for a number of years the Economic Development Committee has been concerned with the lack of efficiency, timeliness and accountability in the development planning

process. Everyone involved in the process including the Council, the development community and staff has expressed frustration. I am happy to see that the Citygate report has clearly identified the bottlenecks in our process, but more importantly, it identifies solutions that will lead to much needed improvement.”

City Manager George Britton expressed his enthusiasm for the review, “I appreciate the fact that we have a third party validating what has been done and what remains to be done. Citygate’s value has been their ability to compare Modesto’s development processes to best practices and to make recommendations for ongoing improvements.”

Citygate Associates notes in their report that “... (they are) optimistic with regard to the outcomes that should result from this report. We believe the leadership team is dedicated to, and capable of, making the improvements detailed in the Action Plan. To be successful, they will need the active support of the City’s elected officials, both in terms of encouragement and the allocation of resources”.

The entire report will be presented to the City Council’s Economic Development Committee on Monday, January 8, 2007, at 5:30 p.m. in room 2005 on the second floor at Tenth Street Place. The report is available by [clicking here](#).