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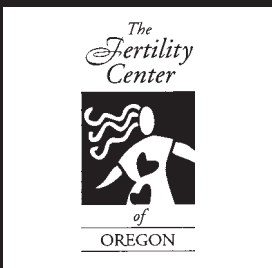
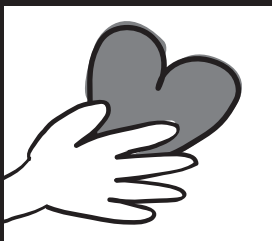
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True Customers

Who should the city work for,
developers or citizens?

The city recently paid \$25,000 for a report that focuses on better serving developers as the city's "customers."

"Governmental performance is measured by customer satisfaction," says the 49-page report by San Diego consultant Paul Zucker. "The community perception is that Eugene is a hard place to get things done, i.e., it is anti-business."

Zucker offered dozens of recommendations on how the city could speed permits to developers and be more "flexible" in enforcing laws designed to protect the environment, quality of life and public safety. "Planners should take a problem solving role rather than a regulatory role" toward developers, Zucker said. The end goal should be "standing around the completed project singing Kumbaya."

But at a recent council meeting to review the report, no one sang Kumbaya. Councilor Betty Taylor said the city should focus on citizens, not developers, as its true customers. "What are planners for?" Taylor asked. "Are they there to satisfy the needs of the community, or are they there to satisfy developers as quickly as possible?"

Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey, elected with record-breaking donations from developers, said the city should do more to serve developers. "We have a problem on this council that somehow developers are bad and other people aren't," Torrey said.

But Councilor Bonny Bettman responded, "Nobody thinks developers are bad. The question is how much they should dominate the process."

Zucker acknowledged Taylor's concerns. "There's a danger to say the customer is the developer," he told the council. "Many of the customers are residents, businesses, persons in this city who simply want to carry on with their life."

But Zucker's report focuses heavily on developers rather than citizens as the city's customers. In writing the report, Zucker met with only five citizens or homeowners, but met with 16 people representing the development industry.

The small portion of the report devoted to citizen concerns notes that they feel community interests are underrepresented in the planning department, city staff do not return calls or provide information when asked, staff spend too much time with developers, the city has failed to comply with state requirements to protect natural habitats, and citizens were not part of earlier customer service efforts.

The Zucker report comes on the heels of a \$22,000 business climate survey this spring that also focused on developer concerns to the exclusion of the broader community. The survey found that at least some businesses view Eugene as anti-business. But the unscientific study had only a 19 percent response rate and couldn't conclude that a majority of local businesses were critical of the city climate.

That some developers don't like popular regulations is nothing new in Eugene. In 1996, the city's comprehensive Growth Management Study found citizens favored more regulations to protect water quality and natural habitats by scores of 70 or more out of

100. The Chamber of Commerce gave such new environmental regulations a zero priority.

Zucker said "increasing flexibility" in the planning code was his top recommendation, but councilors questioned how that could be done.

Councilor Scott Meisner noted that developers had just successfully appealed the city's updated land use code by arguing that it was too vague and didn't include clear and objective standards.

Councilor Nancy Nathanson said the city should have taken a different, outcome-based approach to regulating development during its massive code update over the past five years. "It's too bad we spent so many months and years and dollars getting to this."

'Nobody thinks developers are bad. The question is how much they should dominate the process.'

— Bonny Bettman

Zucker noted that the city's land use code update project had failed in one of its major goals. "The original intent of a new code was to streamline and simplify. However, the result has been the opposite."

But overhauling the code at this point would be a "huge project," Councilor David Kelly said. "Where are the staff resources to do that?"

The Zucker report noted that many citizens and developers felt that the planning department was understaffed. But the report did not analyze whether the staffing level was adequate compared to other cities or to the work load.

"I don't know that we could ever fully staff the requirements of our code," said city Planning and Development Director Tom Coyle. He said the department needs twice as many planners.

One source of funding for more planners may be to stop subsidizing permits for developers. The Zucker report noted that developer application fees cover only about half the staff cost of reviewing the applications. "In a time of staff shortage, it may be useful to look at this situation," the report said.

Bettman faulted the study for focusing on complaints from developers rather than an analysis of what the optimum staffing level for the department would be.

Councilor Taylor said the city could have better spent its money on an independent performance audit of the planning department's efficiency rather than paying Zucker \$8,000 a day for his three-day visit to the city.

In all, Zucker found Eugene's Planning Department "generally well run" with staff "a cut above what we normally see."

Zucker didn't have the same thing to say about the quality of local developers. He noted that it was "unusual" for them to submit complete applications for building permits. Last year, for example, only four out of 13 subdivision applicants and three out of 35 partition applicants provided complete applications for their permits.

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