David Pilpel

Scott Sanchez, Planner
City Planning Department
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Re: More Comments and Suggested Outline for Universal Planning Notification (UPN) Project

7 July 2009

Dear Scott,

Further to our ongoing discussion on the subject project, attached are additional comments and a suggested outline for Thursday's Universal Planning Notification (UPN) Project Interested Persons meeting. I look forward to continued discussion on this topic and hope these additional comments and suggestions are helpful. As always, if you need to clarify or wish to discuss this matter further please call me at (415) 977-5578. Thanks again for your time and your work in this area.

Sincerely,

David Pilpel

attachment

City Planning UPN Memo for Thu 9 Jul 2009 090706

Outline
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1. Context
The Universal Planning Notification (UPN) Project is part of City Planning's Action Plan for 2008-2010. The Action Plan was endorsed by the Planning Commission in _ 2008 and contains a number of elements to improve the Department's operations. The UPN Project is intended to review existing practices and recommend a more consistent, simple, and less costly approach to notifying various audiences of applications, approvals, and other projects underway at City Planning. Department staff members are endeavoring to include a variety of constructive input from different sources into the UPN Project.

2. Background
The Department has already begun by cataloguing existing notification requirements driven by the Planning Code. A chart dated 5/5/09 listing 49 types of projects is available and on the website set up for the project, upn.sfplanning.org. A previous Interested Persons workshop was held Tue 19 May 2009 and attended by _ people. The Department sent out _ invitations for the second meeting on Thu 9 Jul 2009.

3. Principles
Again, the UPN Project is intended to review existing practices and recommend a more consistent, simple, and less costly approach to notifying various audiences of applications, approvals, and other projects underway at City Planning. It is connected to other activities underway, including Discretionary Review (DR) Reform and the new Integrated Permit Tracking System, but the UPN Project is also intended to have its own stand-alone benefits. It is not, however, intended to resolve or solve all issues that involve public process at City Planning. It will neither strengthen nor weaken Block Book Notations or section 311 requirements. It may, however, recommend clarifying or modifying Planning Code requirements and department procedures to make required notices more consistent, simple, and less costly.

There are various interests (property owners, project sponsors, neighbors, neighborhood organizations, citywide organizations, and others) that have perspectives on land use planning in San Francisco. They will not always agree on overall plans or specific projects. In fact, vigorous debate about the merits of a plan or project, the methods of analysis, and the desires of communities large and small makes for good city planning. To that end, meaningful public input, timely provided and informed by accurate and useful information about plans and projects, should be the shared goal and the process expectations of the various interests should be reasonably related to the complexity of a plan or project.

If people can get more easily the information they need to either understand the status of a plan or project and be satisfied or be able to advocate and articulate their specific concerns about that plan or project then the public interest is best served. For example, the Department would like to hear fewer expressions of frustration and requests for continuance and more expressions of concern about fenestration design and requests for data about traffic impacts.

4. Existing Practices

Again, the Department has already catalogued existing notification requirements driven by the Planning Code. Although this initial effort did not list the number of notices given annually by type staff intends to research approximate numbers and have that information available soon. The Department also publishes certain other notices in newspapers and on its website. While these practices currently vary, they all either meet or exceed applicable law and typically exceed notice practices in other communities. However, not all Department notice practices are codified and some lack documentation in Department training materials and checklists.

5. Analysis

Existing notice practices have evolved over time, often in response to perceived weaknesses in the Department's objectivity and neighborhood concerns about and opposition to change. This reactive approach to public notice has not fostered efforts towards collaboration and building consensus on contentious issues but has instead reinforced a culture of confrontation and mistrust. Instead of encouraging early and meaningful discussion about points of disagreement the trend has been toward increasing process, expanding and widening notice types and boundaries, and generally delaying decision-making without making efforts to bridge concerns. Further, while there is a desire to better use technology to post documents to the Department's web site and increase use of email there are copyright, privacy, public records, and technology issues that require further review and analysis.

6. Discussion

Areas to consider include the needs of various interests mentioned earlier, how to consider and balance those interests, how to get the most useful and accurate information to the correct audience at the earliest time, how to avoid getting too many notices that are not wanted, and how to best use technology to minimize overall costs while understanding that cost, familiarity with City Planning, and language, among other barriers, can limit the reach of technology. The Department is open to constructive input on all of these, and related, areas of discussion.

7. Next Steps

Department staff will review the issues discussed, further analyze existing practices, research the approximate number of notices given annually by type to further inform the discussion, revise the staff recommendation, discuss the revised staff recommendation internally, prepare further questions to focus future discussions on trade-offs, review technology issues, and plan on another Interested Persons meeting in 6-8 weeks. Notes from the Interested Persons meetings will be added to the UPN Project website soon. Anyone else interested in joining this discussion should contact Maria Oropeza to be added to the distribution list. Thank you all very much.