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Development Reform Effort Tries to Overcome Hurdles, Including Past Failures and the Departure of a Key Advocate

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Published: Friday, April 29, 2011 4:16 PM PDT

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Everyone knows that getting a construction project approved in Los Angeles is a difficult and often maddening task. Land-use professionals even have a name for the expensive, time consuming trip as they tote blueprints and other materials from counter to counter at the departments of Building and Safety, Planning, Water and Power and others: They call it the Suitcase Tour of Los Angeles.

The hurdles are legion: too many departments have a say in the process; there's a "culture of no" inside the Department of Building and Safety, critics say; one entity will approve a certain proposal, only to have another disallow it.

There is also a history of failed efforts to repair the system. The most recent came in 2008, when Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and City Council President Eric Garcetti proposed a plan called "12-to-2," because it would have consolidated the dozen departments involved in the entitlement and permitting processes down to two. [It went nowhere.](#)

It was against this background that First Deputy Mayor Austin Beutner last fall announced a plan to hire a team of expert consultants to fix the problem once and for all. [The enthusiasm was immediate.](#) After watching a November presentation, President and CEO Gary Toebben, the CEO of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce, hailed it as the "most exciting change" he has seen at City Hall in the four and a half years since he had arrived in Los Angeles.

Six months later, followers of the effort to fix the system see pros and cons. On the one hand, a consultant hired by the city has begun tackling the issues and is orchestrating a plan with actual implementation points. On the other hand, there are cost concerns, and some worry that Beutner's impending departure to run for mayor will leave the effort without the City Hall champion any major upgrade needs.

Quick Fixes

The key step in the current attempt at development reform came in December, when the city awarded a \$600,000 contract to the firms KH Consulting Group and Woolpert. The contract, comprised of \$500,000 in city money and another \$100,000 that Beutner raised from the private sector, runs through July 1.

One of the first things Gayla Kraetsch Hartsough, president of KH Consulting, encountered were the mounds of old city studies, audits and memos explaining workflows, code discrepancies and all kinds of flaws in the system. There were 100 such documents. They included a tome of municipal-ese known as the Garcia Report, commissioned in 1995 by former Mayor Richard Riordan. It had some good ideas, she said, but like the efforts before and after, it never stuck.

Sixteen years later, Kraetsch Hartsough says there are some fixes in plain sight. For example, there should be a committee of managers that can decide how to immediately resolve conflicts that arise when planning guidelines clash with zoning rules.



City officials are four months into a new effort to streamline Los Angeles' Byzantine permitting process. Numerous previous development reform efforts have failed to gain traction.

Today, when the policies of two different city agencies clash, it can tie up a project indefinitely. The Department of Transportation, for instance, may insist that a developer allow space for an extra street lane because a project will generate additional traffic. A city planner considering the same application may point out that the development is in an area tagged for pedestrian friendly streetscapes, and insist that the sidewalk be widened.

In the long term, the zoning code — largely untouched since 1946 — and community plans need to be overhauled and harmonized, she said. In the short term, a committee of department managers can address these conflicts as soon as they arise, Kraetsch Hartsough said.

But if potential solutions are in sight, devising these fixes may not be the consultants' biggest challenge. Past efforts have shown that the real hurdle is implementation: How to ensure that the plan doesn't get a bureaucratic burial in a filing cabinet grave.

Chris Martin, of the Downtown-based architecture firm AC Martin Partners, was among a group of business leaders that convened in January to meet the consultant team and offer early feedback. He felt like he had been there before — almost 40 years earlier.

"I can remember going to one of these meetings in 1974 and the issue was then called one-stop permitting," Martin said. "If you map it out over history, it looks like a sine wave. The problem gets so bad and they try to fix it, and it goes away for a little while and then they try and fix it again."

Meaningful Change

If one refers to the KH-Woolpert effort as a study, Kraetsch Hartsough corrects them.

"It's not a study," she said. "It's a strategic plan."

The difference, she added, is that a strategic plan focuses on implementation. Come July 1, the group will deliver a report with quarterly implementation goals spread over a three-year period.

"The idea behind this is we facilitate, we challenge, we show best practices, but we help them develop what they can do in a three-year period to bring about meaningful change," she said.

When the KH-Woolpert contract expires, the work will be carried out by nine teams. There's a communications team, for example, and another group focused on organization, staffing and facilities. The teams include department heads and lower level staffers who have been identified as potential leaders.

Involving a cross-section of city workers is part of an effort to change the culture of the bureaucracy. The city could be armed with the best report and have transparent and sound ideas for improvement, but that's not enough, Kraetsch Hartsough said.

"This will only succeed if the departments and enough of the management staff believe we're building a better world and this is a world they want to be a part of," she said. "If they see it as an imposition, or this is going to take away from my job, it's not going to happen."

There are other challenges, among them the city's precarious financial situation. The consultants' plan will hinge in part on the city developing a new website that allows users to submit plans and track projects online. But technology is expensive and it is unclear whether the city has the funds to develop a comprehensive new web platform.

Leadership Question

One of the biggest concerns over the reform plan has nothing to do with the actual changes proposed. Instead, it involves the man who proposed it — Beutner will soon step down to run for mayor in 2013.

"One of the questions being asked in the business community is how the report will be implemented once Austin leaves City Hall," said Toebben of the chamber. "He had authority over 13 departments. It's unclear how much authority his successor will have."

As Beutner prepares to depart, Villaraigosa's office has Matthew Karetz running point on development reform. A former developer who worked for KB Home and Caruso Affiliated, he was hired around the same time as

Beutner.

Karetz said that Beutner's departure won't slow the effort because the momentum has already shifted to the department heads, who will be the ones charged with implementing the consultants' plan anyway. What differentiates this effort from previous attempts like 12-to-2, he and others said, is that those department heads, including relatively new additions such as Bud Ovrom at Building and Safety and Michael LoGrande at Planning, are on board with the vision.

Joel Miller, a principal with Psomas, a Downtown-based engineering and consulting firm, said that Beutner's impending departure could be detrimental to the reform effort. But he agreed that leadership is also coming from Ovrom and LoGrande.

"They're relatively new GMs and they really want to see the implementation of these changes," Miller said.

So does the Central City Association, the Downtown business advocacy group that is one of the loudest proponents of development reform. Carol Schatz, the organization's president and CEO, said the CCA will take an active role in pushing the initiative.

"We're going to be all over the city about this and I don't think the city can afford to let this drop again," said Schatz. "Because it's going to be a real black eye for the mayor again if it does."

City officials say that some progress has already occurred. Early next month, staffers from the departments of Water and Power and Planning and the Bureau of Engineering will move into the Building and Safety building at Figueroa Plaza, so applicants can access those four agencies under one roof, Karetz said. The suitcase tour of Los Angeles will soon have three fewer stops.

Still, success won't be immediate, nor will it be perfect, Karetz said. "It is not going to be one finished product that we're going to place in a gift bag and hand-deliver it one day at a press conference," Karetz said. "It's an ongoing process with lots of pieces."

The consultant team expects to present a draft to the City Council's Planning and Land Use Management Committee in early June. The final study is due for completion by July 1.

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