

CITY OF VENTURA  
**CITY MEMORANDUM**

**Date: June 23, 2009**

**To: Rick Cole**

**From: Kelly Flanders**

**Subject: Customer Service Focus Group**

Group Participants:

David Armstrong, Dawn Dyer, Jim Friedman, Dale Jaedtke, Rick Nyznyk, Martha Picciotti, Steve Perlman, Michael Silacci, Harvey Champlin (by e-mail)

Facilitator: Kelly Flanders

Customer service skills are critical to maintaining and developing positive customer relations. Because of the complex interplay of factors and components contributing to customer service, it is imperative to take a holistic view of the many variables operating together.

Participants in the Customer Service Focus Group identified underlying issues, causes, and solutions relating to the City of Ventura. Group members discussed their experience with the City and defined common areas of agreement.

**CUSTOMER SERVICE**

Overwhelmingly, cultural attitude was distinguished as a major contributor to unsatisfactory customer service. The group assessed a lack of sensitivity to the needs of the customer. The common experience has been that there is not a desire to help the customer. In fact, the obstruction is a mind-set wherein staff portrays a “you figure it out and we’ll tell you if it’s wrong” arrogance.

Honesty, integrity and ownership are the cornerstones of creating trust with the customer. One of the most important things a staff member can do for the customer is offer a sense of caring, form a cooperative alliance, advocate for the customer, and think creatively or outside of the box to solve problems. There are many important areas of customer service that are difficult to measure. Yet these human factors create a perception of the organization. A responsible work ethic and “starting at yes” effort is exceedingly important in achieving a high level of customer satisfaction.

The City operates similar to a bureaucratic monopoly in that staff exhibits manner, which portray that Ventura, is the only game in town and that a developer or businessperson has nowhere to go if staff does not respond to their needs. There is little incentive to provide high levels of customer service with this type of mentality and it is unacceptable to let this city-monopoly way of thinking create an environment of incompetence.

It was noted that indifference exists throughout the organization. Cultural attitude was described as something that starts from the top of the organization. In fact, the origin begins with leadership; leadership permeates the culture and when managers and directors do not foster cooperative partnerships, it is doubtful that employees will provide effective service. The City Clerk's Office and the Finance & Technology Department received high praises for their customer service, as did Assistant Planner Veronica Ledesma.

Low morale has also been observed at the City. In the past, there have been key staff members who have left the City because they were not empowered. Customers need staff that is willing to take risks to find solutions. The turnover in staff results in a loss of history and knowledge.

Direct measures of customer service such as business hours and telephone service were not of significant importance to this group, although it is important for calls to be returned in a timely manner. Less direct measures and perceptions were of higher value.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY**

City staff is accountable to the customer. Employees need to be highly trained; there is no substitute for knowledge. Accountability includes liability for information that is communicated. If a staff member does not know the answer, it is much better to say, "I don't know" and then follow-up by finding the answer. False information creates mistrust. If staff does not understand the rules or process, it is hardly reasonable to expect the customer to understand the rules and process.

The group appealed for a comprehensive response to applications as timing is crucial. The process can be frustrating when staff successively informs the customer of additional information or documents that are needed. This "hurdle effect" does not create a seamless experience; customers require reliability and continuity. In addition, it is imperative that staff follows through in a timely manner. Responding to a deadline the day before a document is due on a recurring basis is discourteous; a professional should consider telephoning the customer to communicate status or delay.

Staff should be accessible to the customer. Canceling a meeting with the customer because of a staff meeting is not acceptable especially when developers are on a flight to attend the meeting. Established service standards

with timeframes to communicate with the customer are vital and should be enforced.

Moving a project forward should not require assistance from a higher authority like a director, councilmember or city manager; nor should the higher authority curb the process. It was reported that the City did not recognize a community charrette because a consultant hosted it.

## **SYSTEMS**

Part of the group discussion included concerns that City institutional systems are not in place. It was agreed that there is a lack of clarity and consistency on behalf of many City processes.

The City needs to work towards cooperative department planning so that customers don't get bounced around between divisions to decipher who can help; and sometimes-even staff cannot substantiate departmental responsibilities. Community Development, Public Works, Fire Department, Police Department, City Attorney's Office, City Manager's Office and Finance & Technology need to facilitate the process and support the customer by answering questions and collectively find creative solutions to make progress. A system where a developer can get input from all the agencies responsible up front rather than along the way would alleviate miscommunication and time delays.

Timely and efficient process management is key. The City is perceived as having a hodge-podge of programs and processes with no time limits; the Housing Approval Program, for example, is interim until codes are in place. In addition, there are reservations about the neighborhood codes; each one has its own requirements and it will be difficult for staff to be up to speed on administrative compositions of each code. The Planning Process Flow Chart is not of use as it does not outline or ensure a timeframe; and the Pre-Application process can last indefinitely before going to CEQA.

Furthermore, there are significant implementation challenges when attempting to incorporate theory-based ideas with reality. The City consistently makes planning and land use decisions based on philosophical goals, "text-book" planning guidelines (often new-urbanism), or city-desired priorities, without considering the economic impacts and the project viability. Forcing projects to include lofty ideals like subterranean parking or LEEDS certification does not always work, given that there are other restrictions and parameters the project must conform to, financial market and lending requirements; the technical difficulties and costs of subterranean parking on small projects in an area with high water table; or loading up an affordable housing project with costly top-of-the-line LEED or other environmental standards. Ultimately, if the city approves projects that are too expensive or too risky to be built, we all lose, as the planning process for those projects was a waste of time and resources.

## ECONOMIC SUMMIT ACTION ITEMS

<b>Planning Process/Customer Service Focus Group</b>			
#	<i>ACTION ITEM</i>	<i>TIMEFRAME</i>	<i>BREAKOUT SESSION</i>
1.7	Strategic planning (See notes)	5 Year	#1 City's Bottom Line
1.10	Make the planning process more friendly to development	5 Year	#1 City's Bottom Line
2.1	Create a Policy to Link Economics to the Planning process	90 Day	#2 Smart Growth
4.10	Make recommendations to City re. process, code enforcement, permit fees, and zoning (research same of other cities within County for comparison).	1 Year	#4 Retention/Expansion
4.15	Monitor recommendations made to City re. process, code enforcement, permit fees, and zoning	5 Year	#4 Retention/Expansion
5.1	Implement Customer Service Training for City Staff that is designed to create a business friendly environment at City Hall from top to bottom	90 Day	#5 Business Climate
5.2	Improve Permitting Process - Survey all business permit applicants regarding process and outcome, Review and implement best practices, Create Flow Chart	90 Day	#5 Business Climate
5.3	Create a one year moratorium on all fees for new businesses relocating to Ventura	90 Day	#5 Business Climate

The Action Items generated from the Economic Summit were programmed on a 90-day, 1-year or 5 year strategy. The group reiterated that this may not be feasible to achieve in the allotted timeframe but all of the items should at least be started.

The fundamentals of items 1.10, 5.1 and 5.2 relate to customer service and are reviewed in the next segment "Change".

2.1; since development has an impact on our local economy, it was stressed that decisions in the planning process should not be made in a vacuum.

4.10 and 4.15; research how other cities function

5.3; if customer service was improved this action item may not be needed

Fees were not of high importance, although the group voiced frustration in that hold-ups in the process are costly. However, the escalation of fees is a problem as the city attempts to increase revenue.

### **CHANGE**

In efforts to make improvement, the group suggested the following:

- Leadership starts from the top; ensure *all* city staff demonstrate quality customer service and that leaders provide a comprehensible process
- Provide customer service training for staff
- Accountability of staff by way of performance reviews; merit based
- Sensitivity to the project and the economic and practical impacts

- Timeframe; ensure limits to the City process
- Provide a forum to give the customer a voice; either through a suggestion box, survey or other means

While this information should not be considered a representative sample of public opinion and is not statistically representative of the larger community, the group consisted of frequent customers and long-time relations with the City.