



**Snohomish County
Permit Customer Satisfaction Survey**

2003 Baseline Survey Results

Prepared for:

Snohomish County Planning and Development Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The Snohomish County Department of Planning and Development Services, in an effort to establish a baseline measurement of customer opinions and perceptions of service PDS, contracted Gilmore Research Group to survey a statistically representative sample of permit applicants about key issues in the process and in the delivery of services. The survey was designed to measure satisfaction with service through September 2003, prior to the October launch of improvement efforts developed in response to a County Performance Audit and business consultation provided by the Demarche Group in 2002.

This report presents the findings of two important customer segments. Given the classification, “professional/trades permit customers” are permit customers who work in the construction trade or who are consultants to the construction trade and are involved in a large number of permits with Snohomish County. Classified as “resident/non-trades permit customers,” are Snohomish County residents, property owners, and other low volume permit customers.

The Executive Summary of this report presents the key findings that address the primary objectives of the study. An important part of these findings are the “main contributors” or the “key drivers” to overall satisfaction. Additional information about each subject is provided in the section headed, “Detailed Findings.”

Questions concerning this research study should be directed to the Executive Director for Snohomish County Planning and Development Services, (425) 388-3424, or Kathryn Kleber, Vice President, Gilmore Research Group, (206) 726.5555 ext. 104, kkleber@gilmore-research.com.

Key Findings

The following section is focused on overall satisfaction, the attributes that most contribute to satisfaction, and the level of success achieved by PDS in gaining high satisfaction ratings on the attributes.

Knowledge of the Permit Process

- 32% of all permit customers rated themselves very knowledgeable about county code and permit requirements; 52% rated themselves neither knowledgeable nor unknowledgeable.
- 44% of professional/trades permit customers (working in the construction trade) rated themselves very knowledgeable about Snohomish County's code and permit requirements.
- 20% of resident/non-trades permit customers rated themselves very knowledgeable, and 24% rated themselves not at all knowledgeable about county code and permit requirements.

PDS Goal Evaluation

- 46% of all respondents were satisfied with the achievement level of the combined goals of PDS to *"provide permit customers with the highest level of customer service while ensuring that its permitting authority and processes appropriately address regulatory "health, safety and welfare" issues."*
- 7% were dissatisfied with PDS' achievement of this combined goal.
- Satisfaction with achievement of the goal was higher among resident/non-trades permit customers than among professional/trades permit customers (54% satisfied, compared to 38%, respectively).
- Work performance attributes of office staff and field inspector services proved to be the strongest contributors to overall satisfaction with PDS' achievement of the combined goal. These attributes were:
 - Meeting customers needs in a timely manner

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- Presenting consistent and reliable direction
- Also contributing to permit customers overall satisfaction with PDS' achievement of the combined goal is the need to provide management reviews to ensure accuracy of the department's work.

Satisfaction with PDS Office Staff

- 64% of resident/non-trades permit customers were satisfied overall with customer service provided by the PDS office staff; 7% were dissatisfied.
- Satisfaction scores of resident/non-trades permit customers were higher for nearly all office staff customer service attributes than for any of the permit process attributes.
- 4 key contributors to overall satisfaction with PDS office staff were identified for resident/non-trades customers. All 4 received high ratings for customer satisfaction. In order, these were:
 - Providing helpful information
 - Treating customers with courtesy and respect
 - Following through on what they promise to do
 - Presenting consistent and reliable direction
- 55% of all professional/trades permit customers were satisfied overall with customer service provided by the PDS office staff; 6% were dissatisfied.
- 4 key contributors to overall satisfaction with PDS office staff were identified for professional/trades customers. In order, these were:
 - Meeting customer needs in a timely manner
 - Providing helpful information
 - Treating customers with courtesy and respect
 - Being knowledgeable about all aspects of the permitting process
- Professional/trades permit customers gave high satisfaction ratings for 3 out of the 4 drivers, but gave lower satisfaction ratings for the most important of the four, "meeting customer needs in a timely manner."

Satisfaction with PDS Field Inspectors

- 68% of resident/non-trades permit customers reported having had interaction with Planning Department field inspectors.
- 71% of resident/non-trades permit customers who had contact with field inspectors were satisfied overall with their customer service; 4% were dissatisfied.
- Resident/non-trades permit customers gave field inspectors among the highest satisfaction ratings they assigned.
- 3 main contributors to overall satisfaction with PDS field inspectors were identified for resident/non-trades customers. All 3 received high ratings for customer satisfaction. In order, these were:
 - Treating customers with courtesy and respect
 - Being accessible and responsive
 - Being knowledgeable about all aspects of the permitting process

- 64% of professional/trades permit customers reported having had interaction with Planning Department field inspectors.
- 67% of professional/trades permit customers who had contact with field inspectors were satisfied overall with their customer service; 6% were dissatisfied.
- Professional/trades permit customers gave field inspectors among the highest satisfaction ratings they assigned, although these were somewhat lower than those given by resident/non-trades permit customers.
- 3 main contributors to overall satisfaction with PDS field inspectors were identified for professional/trades permit customers. All 3 received high ratings for customer satisfaction. In order, these were:
 - Presenting consistent and reliable direction
 - Treating customers with courtesy and respect
 - Meeting customer needs in a timely manner

Satisfaction With The SFR Permit Process

- Overall satisfaction with the SFR permit process was higher among resident/non-trades permit customers than among professional/trades permit customers (43%, compared to 37%, respectively).
- Results showed that the strongest contributors to overall satisfaction with the SFR permit process related to process timing, for both professional/trades and resident/non-trades permit customers:
 - “The amount of time required for office visits” was the most important contributor to overall satisfaction for resident/non-trades permit customers
 - “The time between the application and issuance of the permit” was identified as the most important contributor to overall satisfaction for professional/trades permit customers
- 5 key contributors to overall satisfaction with the SFR permitting process were identified for resident/non-trades permit customers. In order, these were:
 - The amount of time required for office visits
 - The site review process
 - Satisfaction at the time the plans were submitted for review
 - The amount of time between the application process and the issuance of the permit
 - Clarity of forms and instructions
- 3 of the 5 key contributors listed above received lower ratings for overall satisfaction among resident/non-trades permit customers than other aspects of the SFR permitting process. They were:
 - The amount of time required for office visits
 - The amount of time between the application process and the issuance of the permit
 - Clarity of forms and instructions

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- 4 key contributors to overall satisfaction with the SFR permitting process were identified for professional/trades permit customers. In order, these were:
 - The amount of time between the application process and the issuance of the permit
 - The structural plan review process
 - The amount of time required for office visits
 - The permit pick-up process
- 2 of the 4 key contributors listed above received lower ratings for overall satisfaction among professional/trades permit customers than other aspects of the SFR permitting process. These two time-sensitive attributes were:
 - The amount of time required for an office visit
 - The amount of time between the application process and the issuance of the permit

Satisfaction With The Commercial Building Permit Process

- 21% of professional/trades permit customers were satisfied overall with the commercial building permit process; 15% were dissatisfied; 59% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 4 key contributors to overall satisfaction with the commercial building permit process were identified for professional/trades permit customers. In order, these were:
 - Satisfaction at the time plans were submitted
 - The site plan review
 - Clarity of forms and instructions
 - The structural plan review
- 3 of the 4 key contributors received lower ratings for overall satisfaction among professional/trades permit customers than other aspects of the commercial building permitting process. These were:

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- The site plan review
- Clarity of forms and instructions
- The structural plan review

Satisfaction With The Land Use Permit Process

- 14% of professional/trades permit customers were satisfied overall with the land use permit process; 24% were dissatisfied and 55% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.
- 11 attributes of the land use permitting process were tested for customer satisfaction. Results showed that these attributes received some of the lowest satisfaction ratings given in the survey.
- 3 key contributors to overall satisfaction with the land use permit process were identified for professional/trades permit customers. In order, these were:
 - The amount of time between the permit application and the preliminary approval
 - The preliminary approval process including the determination of completeness
 - The amount of time required for office visits
- The amount of time between application and preliminary approval is the most important contributor to overall satisfaction with the process, and it is the lowest rated of 11 attributes tested.
- Both of the remaining key contributors (“the preliminary approval process including the determination of completeness,” and “the amount of time required for office visits”) also received low satisfaction scores.

Interaction With Other Government Agencies

- Professional/trades permit customers were more likely to have had multi-agency involvement than resident/non-trades permit customers (61% compared to 44%, respectively).

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- Overall, 81% of customers said their permit applications required them to interact with the Snohomish County Health District; 60% were involved with the Department of Public Works; 52% said they worked with the County Assessor, Auditor or Treasurer's Office.
- Overall satisfaction with PDS support during interaction with other government agencies was higher among resident/non-trades permit customers than among professional/trades permit customers (43% and 30%, respectively).

Meeting Customer Expectations

- 19% of resident/non-trades permit customers said Snohomish County Planning and Development Services falls short of their expectations; 24% said PDS exceeds their expectations.
- 30% of professional/trades permit customers said PDS falls short of their expectations; 15% said PDS exceeds their expectations.
- Those who said the department exceeded their expectations most often attributed it to good service they felt they'd received. They also said the permit process was prompt for them, and the contact staff seemed knowledgeable.
- Those who said the department fell short of their expectations most often attributed it to the process, which they felt took too long. They also discussed problems in understaffing, lack of customer service skills, failure to lend help when it's needed, and inconsistent information.

Perceived Changes in Ongoing Customer Service During the Year Past

- 47% of respondents who had ongoing permitting experiences during the year past said service had improved; 7% said it declined and 34% said it stayed the same.

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- Those who said service had improved most often attributed improvements in customer service and in speeding up the permit process. Some also discussed a positive change in the culture of the department.

Value Received in View of Permit Costs

- 46% said they thought PDS services were of value in view of the permit costs (14% said they received a lot of value); 42% said services were not of value (23% said they were of no value).

Online Services

- More than half of all respondents are likely to use the three proposed online permit services.
- 56% of both target markets would use the Internet to schedule an appointment.
- Resident/non-trades permit customers are slightly more likely than professional/trades permit customers to use the Internet to apply and pay for a permit for their next project (56% compared to 47%).
- Resident/non-trades permit customers are slightly more likely than professional/trades permit customers order an inspection and see the results when it is done (61% compared to 52%).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Satisfaction With PDS is Highest for Office Staff and Field Inspectors

Snohomish County Department of Planning and Development Services' greatest asset and ability to accomplish high customer satisfaction standards lies in the people who work within the department. Regardless of the type of permit or level of experience, customers provided their highest ratings of satisfaction to the aspects of customer service delivered by PDS office staff and field inspectors.

- 64% of resident/non-trades and 55% of professional/trades permit customers gave satisfied ratings for overall customer service from the office staff
- 72% of resident/non-trades and 67% of professional/trades permit customers gave satisfied ratings for overall customer service from the field inspectors

Attributes for Office Staff and Field Inspectors' are Stronger Indicators of Customer Satisfaction Than Permit Process Attributes

When evaluating satisfaction with customers overall SFR, commercial and land use permit experience including the process, the office staff and the field inspectors, the key contributing attributes of service satisfaction involved the customer service provided by office staff and field inspectors. This was true for resident/non-trades and professional/trades permit customers.

Ratings of Satisfaction with the Various Permit Processes Were Low. The More Complex the Permit Processes The Lower The Customer Satisfaction.

- 43% of resident/non-trades and 37% of professional/trades permit customers indicated they were satisfied overall with the SFR permit process.
- 21% of permit customers indicated they were satisfied overall with the commercial permit process.

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- 14% of permit customers indicated they were satisfied overall with the land use permit process.

The Key Indicators To Satisfaction With The Permit Processes Revolve Around Time.

- Resident/non-trades permit customers consider the key indicator to satisfaction with the SFR permit process to be the amount of time required for office visits, while professional/trades permit customers consider the amount of time between application and issuance paramount.
- Commercial permit customers consider the level of satisfaction at the time the plans were submitted to be most critical.
- Land use permit customers consider the time between permit application and preliminary approval to have the greatest impact on satisfaction.

Each of these attributes was classified high in importance and low in performance in this baseline study.

Professional/Trades Permit Customers Consistently Provided Lower Ratings than Resident/Non-Trades Customers.

The time and efficiency demands of professional/trades permit customers are evident in the more critical ratings they provide for each step of the permit process. They are more knowledgeable, demand accurate and consistent information, and want speed and efficiency even through the most complicated permit processes. They are also more critical of PDS staff's knowledge and responsiveness than resident/non-trades permit customers who require and receive assistance as first time permit applicants.

Satisfaction with PDS Support During Interaction with Other Government Agencies is Moderate.

Six out of 10 professional/trades customers have interaction with other government agencies during the permit process and only 43% are satisfied with

PDS support during multiple agency interaction. While fewer resident/non-trades permit customers interact with other agencies (44%) a smaller percent feel that PDS is helpful in that process (30%).

Meeting Customers Need in a Timely Manner, Presenting Consistent and Reliable Direction and Providing Management Reviews to Ensure Accuracy of the Department's Work Are Key Indicators of PDS' Goal Achievement.

Providing management reviews to ensure accuracy of the department's work became a key indicator of success when, in addition to providing a high level of service, customers considered the importance of PDS ensuring that the permitting authority and processes appropriately address regulatory "health, safety, and welfare."

Improvement In Permit Services Is Recognized by PDS Permit Customers.

Nearly half (47%) of permit customers credit PDS for improving customer service and making the permit process quicker and smoother during 2003. These service improvements were recognized before the additional changes implemented in October 2003. Still, 30% of professional/trades permit customers and 15% of resident/non-trades customers indicated that the Planning Department fell short of their expectations for quality customer service.

Welcomed Improvements Include Internet Access for Permit Applications and Payments, Appointment Scheduling and Inspection Orders and Results.

While resident/non-trades permit customers, usually needing SFR permits, were more interested in on-line application and inspection services than professional/trades permit customers, nearly half of all permit customers expressed interest in the three on-line services.

Recommendations For 2004 Goal Setting

The statistical rigor used to gather the 2003 PDS customer satisfaction measurement will serve as a valid and reliable baseline for tracking change over time.

Goals for increased satisfaction will be most beneficial if they are focused on the attributes determined to be key indicators of overall satisfaction with permit processes or personnel.

As PDS seeks to improve customer satisfaction ratings, specific action steps and dedicated resources should be documented for use in analysis of the measured change. This includes redistribution of resources that may slightly lower highly rated, but less important criteria. The combination of tracking and measurement will enable PDS to most effectively evaluate reorganization efforts and determine the relevant return on investment.

Setting moderate goals for change over the next year to 18 months is strongly advised. Statistically significant change will be measurable with 5-7 percentage point increases in ratings of satisfaction (6 or 7 on the seven-point scale). Short-term goals supported by well-defined action plans and tracked through periodic research will foster long-term success in building a customer service culture.

The following tables summarize attributes that were identified to have high importance and low satisfaction.

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SFR Permit Process Resident/non-trades permit customers	Satisfied Ratings of 6-7	Mean Score 7-point scale
Amount of time required for office visits	32%	4.5
Time between application and issuance	33%	4.5
Clarity of forms/instructions	40%	4.9
SFR Permit Process Professional/trades permit customers	Satisfied Ratings of 6-7	Mean Score 7-point scale
Amount of time required for office visits	32%	4.4
Time between application and issuance	34%	4.3

Commercial Permit Process Professional/trades permit customers	Satisfied Ratings of 6-7	Mean Score 7-point scale
Amount of time required for office visits	25%	4.2
Clarity of forms and instructions	19%	4.3
Site plan review	21%	4.3
Initial office meeting	33%	4.4
Structural plan review process	22%	4.5
Level of satisfaction at the time plans were submitted for review	40%	5.0

Land Use Permit Process Professional/trades permit customers	Satisfied Ratings of 6-7	Mean Score 7-point scale
Time between application and preliminary approval	9%	3.1
Environmental review and threshold determination	15%	3.6
Preliminary approval process & determination of completeness	23%	4.0
Amount of time required for office visit	26%	4.1
Clarity of forms/instructions	25%	4.2

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The majority of the attributes with 40% or less customer satisfaction involve the processes involved in getting a permit and not the customer service provided by staff. The following table reveals the four office staff customer service attributes identified to have high importance and low satisfaction among professional/trade permit customers.

Customer Service Permit Process Professional/trades permit customers	Satisfied Ratings of 6-7	Mean Score 7-point scale
Meeting needs in a timely manner	33%	4.3
Consistent and reliable direction	39%	4.6
Being accessible and responsive	41%	4.9
Communicating requirements clearly and thoroughly	42%	4.9

Additionally, maintaining high levels of satisfaction with the office staff and field inspector customer service attributes that most strongly influence satisfaction with the total permit experience will be key to continued improvement.

The next steps identified in building a customer service culture within Snohomish County’s Department of Planning and Development Services include the development of performance goals. Gilmore Research Group welcomes the ongoing opportunity to assist in representing the data in this design and implementation process. Additionally, survey research among indirect customers is proposed.