

Overview and Impact Report



A 10 Year Review From
Damian J. Cote
Building Commissioner

Introduction

Over the past ten years the Building Department has undergone a major transformation. Our dedicated employees and volunteers have come together to change the efficiency of the department and the impact it has.

This past March 19th marked my ten-year anniversary as Building Commissioner for the City. It has been an honor and privilege to lead our team of professionals in the Building Department.

Within this period our staff has taken on a steady increase in permitting while adjusting to constant changes to the codes and laws we oversee. While performing these essential duties we have also addressed several life safety emergencies.

In March of 2012 many areas within the department were identified as needing improvement. Public access to records and applying for permits was an immediate task at hand. All the issues initially identified have been corrected by the implementation of key initiatives.



Progress and Success

Ten years later I am proud of the exceptional progress that we have made. Together the staff has transformed the Building Department into a highly efficient unit. Working with less staff to produce more results. All major areas initially identified have seen notable progress.

This report is an overview of what we have achieved; what we are doing; and where we are headed in the future.

Fiscal Responsibility

The last 10 years have consistently shown a steady increase in permit fee revenue for the city. The increase in permits and the workload of the staff has been dealt with by expert management resulting in no shortfalls. We have reversed from creating a deficit to providing a modest surplus of funds to the city.

This has been accomplished through long-term budget planning. Financial success of any department and therefore the city cannot look only at a single year's budget. The last 10 years have focused on streamlining operations to reduce costs. Countless analyses were completed to compare outcomes. Those that demonstrated savings were initiated and actualized.



Identifying an average spending of over \$400,000. Annually to address blight, a creative solution was implemented. Creation of an in-house property maintenance and demolition team (active 2017-2022) allowed for the preservation of properties and expedited clean up of blight at a fraction of the cost of publicly procured services.

Public Service

It may come as a surprise to some, but the primary “customer” of the building department is not an individual with a request, but rather the city as-a-whole. This includes all the people who exist as soon as they cross the border into the city limits without exception.

Changing the negative stereotype of Holyoke’s building inspectors and building department has taken years of hard work. While it is impossible to appease every citizen in the world, we have made great progress in creating an office that is seen as a community partner.

Change was not easy. Improved public relations in the department were only made possible by working countless extra hours, staff spending money out-of-pocket, and taking on work well outside our job descriptions. Over the last 10 years simple to very complex changes were made in how we operate the office.

“...This is the kind of attitude and service that reflects a building department that is conducive to construction and improvement in our housing stock and will reflect well for the city. If this word gets out, you can be sure there will be more private investment in this city which will bode well for all concerned. Thank you and the building department for the excellent service”

Email excerpt from Greg Virgilio of Virgilio Property Management Inc. to Damian Cote, Building Commissioner 2019.

Department Organization

The organization of the department has been the key to reaching our goals using the smallest possible expenditure of resources. It has contributed to higher productivity at no additional cost.

While Holyoke was already using an online permitting system, a more robust

platform was adopted for online permitting and issue management. This along with an in-house built digital file system now used by multiple departments has reduced the need for repetitive labor hours. The review time for applications has been reduced significantly and inspections available most often the same day as requested.

“... I really appreciate you taking the time to talk through the challenge with us, and help us develop a design solution that meets the intent of the code. I have always found you to be responsive and well versed in the requirements of the building code. I appreciate your collaborative approach to working with architects.”

Aelan B. Tierney, AIA, LEED AP
President, Kuhn Riddle Architects
Email Excerpt to Damian Cote, Building Commissioner, 2022.

Before covid-19 brought with it remote work and closure to the city hall, the building department was already equipped to handle all work remotely. All the staff were already in possession and trained to use laptops with mobile capability to complete 100% of their work in the field. There was no disruption during these years to the continuity of operations.



Blight Reduction

In the last ten years we have made momentous progress in reducing blight. The greatest satisfaction comes when someone that has not visited the city in a while comes into the office and tells us about how much the urban landscape has changed for the better.

On December 10, 2015, the problem property group was branded by the building commissioner. This group has met monthly since this date to increase interdepartmental communications and teamwork toward the common goal.

Investment in Holyoke

The Building Department is the City of Holyoke's office of public safety. From building a shed to a skyscraper we oversee the entire process until the last nail is driven. After most structures are built, we periodically inspect for life safety, fire protection, egress, and proper use for the life of the structure.

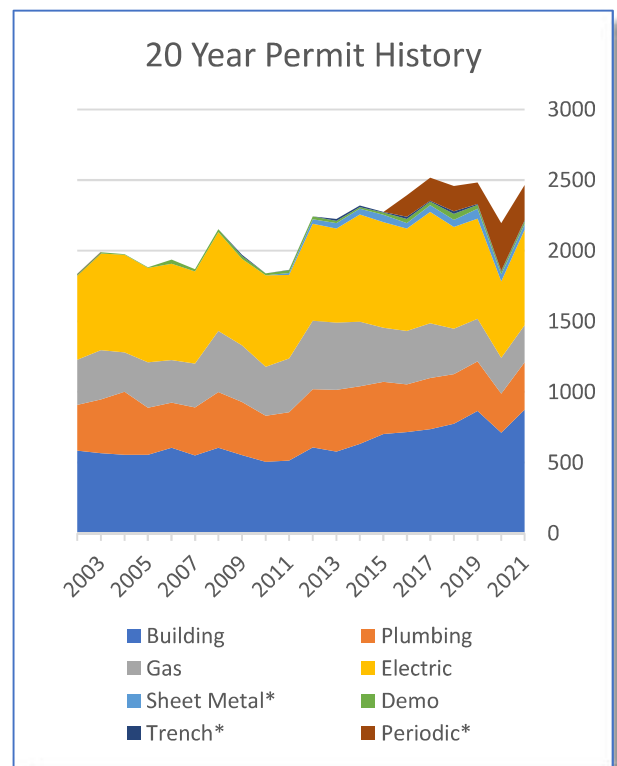


There really is no price anyone can place on a human life. Our staff ensures the safety, security, and stability of every structure where we live, work, and play. We are the best preventive measure against losses from fire, water, snow, and wind.

While it is difficult to assign a value to losses we *prevent*, the city has some control over home insurance costs for the citizens. The building department was evaluated by the ISO (Insurance Services Office) in 2012. This independent organization measured specifically for code adoption, education/certification, and staffing levels to name a few. The classification rating is from 1 to 10 with number 1 being the best and 10 being the worst.

The evaluation led to a change from a 9 to a 5. This change has a direct impact on insurance cost for any structure issued a certificate of occupancy after 2012. In this regard, investment in the building department in an investment in the City of Holyoke.

Over the last ten years the city has seen a 22% (average) increase in the number of annual building permits issued. This can be contributed in part to a positive change in the level of customer service the department provides.



"I have worked with numerous municipalities on other projects and your building department has raised the bar. The City of Holyoke should be very proud of the building department they have assembled. I look forward to working with them in the future."

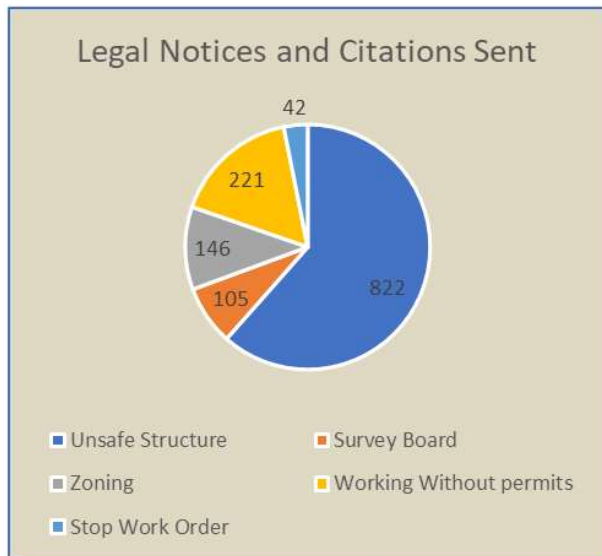
Jeff Vaine,
Amerco Real Estate

Code Enforcement

The process of code enforcement is complex and time consuming. The Massachusetts State Building Code and City of Holyoke Zoning Ordinance are some of the laws interpreted and applied by the staff of the building department.

Within the last ten years the department has worked with the Office of Community Development to leverage Community Development Block Grant funding. This federal funding was used to employ full time code officials, secure structures, and remove structures that were unsafe.

During this period, over 275 fines were written as a result of non-compliance with warnings. The monetary value of these fines was approximately \$75,000.



Mission Statement

"To improve the quality of life for the people of Holyoke by advancing public

health and safety through effective building code enforcement"

The staff of the Building Department oversees the construction of every structure and use of all land within the 22.8 square miles of the city. This includes over 10,000 parcels of land. These individuals are essential, qualified, and dedicated professionals that ensure the public's safety as first preventers.

BUILDING OFFICIALS; WHO WE ARE

WHAT WE DO

There are only 577 active Building Officials in the Commonwealth

32% of Massachusetts communities are covered by a single Building Official

95.3% of Massachusetts Building Officials are on call as part of their employment

24/7 EMERGENCY SERVICE

CALLS FOR SERVICE INCLUDE:
Active Fires
Structural Collapse
Catastrophic Flooding
Heavy Wind Damage
Seismic Events
Vehicle Strikes

BUILDING OFFICIALS ARE: FIRST RESPONDERS;
A person who is among those responsible for going immediately to the scene of an accident or emergency to provide assistance.

BUILDING OFFICIALS ADMINISTER:
Massachusetts General Law, State Building Codes, Federal Regulations, and Local Laws

Building Officials are required to be certified first by pre-approval from the State. Following approval all Building officials must pass a multitude of exams.

The 577 active Building Officials of Massachusetts work to Prevent:

Dangers to life and limb from falls (in 2018 there were 37,455 deaths from falls in the US)

Dangers to life and limb from drowning (in 2018 there were 3,710 deaths from accidental drowning in the US)

Building Officials also:
Periodically inspect between one and five years, nearly all commercial, industrial, and residential uses to ensure that minimum safety requirements are met.

BUILDING OFFICIAL INCLUDES:
PLANS REVIEWER, PERMIT ADMINISTRATOR, BUILDING INSPECTOR, FIRE PROTECTION INSPECTOR, HVAC INSPECTOR, ACCESSIBILITY OFFICER, APPEALS OFFICER, FIRST RESPONDER, CODE CONSULTANT, ZONING OFFICER, FLOOD PLAIN ADMINISTRATOR, OFFICE MANAGER, INVESTIGATOR, PROCUREMENT OFFICER, COURT REPRESENTATIVE, PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICER, BUILDING SUPERVISOR, ESSENTIAL WORKER, INSPECTOR OF BUILDINGS, ENFORCEMENT OFFICER, REPAIR

Merriam-Webster

Conclusion

The last ten years have proven to be highly successful within the building department. We have taken on an unprecedented amount of work providing for a safer, healthier, and more valued City. There is much more work to be done to maintain and improve services to ensure public safety. There is no finish line to reach, only further progress to make.

Year by Year Items of Note

March 19, 2012 – August, 2022

2012

- Change in flat rate vehicle use stipend to a per mile reimbursement. This has saved the city \$15,000.00 since the change.
- Complete review and amendment to the fee schedule. This was based on a comprehensive study which yielded slight decreases and increases. The fees are some of the lowest in the state after this change.
- Reconfiguring of the main lobby to make the user experience as easy as possible.

2013

- Expansion of our office hours to start at 730am every day until 430pm and stay open late until 6pm on Wednesdays. This was implemented at no additional cost to the city. Offering after hours and weekend inspections, our office serves contractors and the working public 365 days of the year since.
- Implementation of uniforms for inspection staff. This has been appreciated out in the field where identification is necessary.
- A higher level of Spanish proficiency. Learning a second language can take a lifetime, however, we are making steady progress to better serve the public.
- Negotiations with vendor for permitting software to reduce annual cost of license. This has saved the city \$25,000.00 since the change took place.

2014

- Start digital archive if 100 years of permit applications, correspondence, plans, specifications, and related documents. This has saved countless hours of time in the recall process.
- Creation of the "building records" as a digital file cabinet for the entire City to use. This has led to highly efficient communication channels between departments.

2015

- Polycarbonate board up (clear materials) designed for implementation.
- Planning strategy to address blight in City.

2016

- Organized and started the Problem Property Group. This is a group of department heads and city professionals who meet once a month to tackle the most problematic properties in the City. This group has collectively contributed to the reduction of blight throughout the city by making efficient and sound decisions.
- Substantially completed the digital archives of our documents
- Adoption of municipal liens

2017

- Started the property management and demolition team. This year only the working supervisor is employed and we have seen savings of \$60,000 for the first year.
- Initiated and overseen over 20 receiverships since 2016 together with the BOH and Law Departments.
- Initiated and overseen over 20 rehabilitation plans for properties by way of enforcement.

2018

- Property maintenance and demolition team is implemented.
- Initiated and overseen over 20 receiverships since 2016 together with the BOH and Law Departments.
- Initiated and overseen over 20 rehabilitation plans for properties by way of enforcement.

- FEMA employs building commissioner for relief after hurricane Irma and Maria.

2019

- New software for online permitting in place and onboarding/ training started.
- All staff in the department provided with mobile inspection devices and trained to handle all work in the field
- Building Commissioner becomes Certified flood Plain Manager. Participates in FEMA flood discovery process.

2020

- Covid 19 is here, and most non-essential offices are closed. The building department is fully open for business and continues in full service with no delay.
- Taking in the work of the Sealer of Weights and Measures to ensure the city collects all fees due for services provided by the state.
- Property preservation group continues to meet throughout covid

2021

- Covid 19 is still here, and most non-essential offices are closed. The building department is fully open for business continues in full service with no delay.
- Scanning and archiving electrical permits and applications back to 1900.
- All application types available online

2022

- Covid 19 is here, and most non-essential offices are closed. The building department is fully open for business and continues in full service with no delay.
- Creation of "zoning official" position. This individual will be dedicated to enforcement of the zoning ordinance including special permits under the direction of the building commissioner

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