

# *City of San Rafael*



## Permit Simplicity Initiative

### *Customer Service Assessment*

#### *Phase One Report*

MARIN BUILDERS ASSOCIATION AND ROBERT EYLER, MARIN ECONOMIC FORUM



# Introduction

Marin Builders Association, in partnership with the City of San Rafael, administrated a survey of clients at the city’s Planning and Building Department. Clients in general were either homeowners or contractors. As part of the Customer Satisfaction Assessment program, the Marin Builders Association collected key data analytics that provide insight into how the City of San Rafael’s Community Development Department functions.

## **Survey Yielded Nearly 20% Complete Response Rate Out of 1,006 Contacts**

We created and distributed the Customer Satisfaction Assessment survey (Attachment 1) to 409 “permit applicant” contacts that were provided and verified by city staff as well as 1,006 contacts from the Marin Builders Association membership list. In addition, a link to the survey was posted on the Marin Builders Association website which yielded 85 online surveys; 8 mail-in surveys and 17 surveys were collected directly from customers at City Hall. In all, 341 contacts replied to the survey, and 193 completed the survey in full. For reference, in 2016, 5,046 permits were issued. Approximately 90 percent of the permits were residential and 10 percent commercial.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected via the following methods:

- **Permit applicants** - addresses were pulled from permit applications from January thru June 2017.
- **Members and contacts of the Marin Builders Association** – addresses were pulled from database of association members.
- **Direct surveys at City Hall** – association intern hosted a table at the permit office during “over the counter” permit hours and collected responses from applicants directly.
- **Hard copy surveys** – distributed thru local building supply locations and to the association Board of Directors.
- **Focus Groups** – two focus groups were conducted by a professional facilitator in June 2018. One group consisted of building professionals. The second group consisted of residential and commercial permit applicants. The group sessions were 90 minutes in length. No compensation was provided to participants.

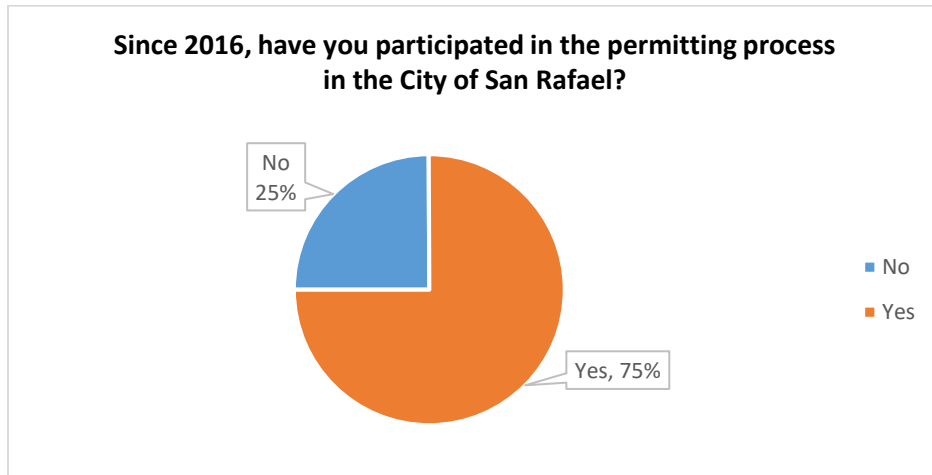
## **98.5% of Respondents Filed for Either Commercial or Residential Permits**

73.6 percent of respondents had applied for a residential permit and 24.9 percent had applied for a commercial permit, which anecdotally matches the actual flow of permit applicants/clients. That mix is shown in Question 2’s chart below.

# Survey Responses and Evaluation

## 75.1% of Respondents Have Engaged in the Permitting Process

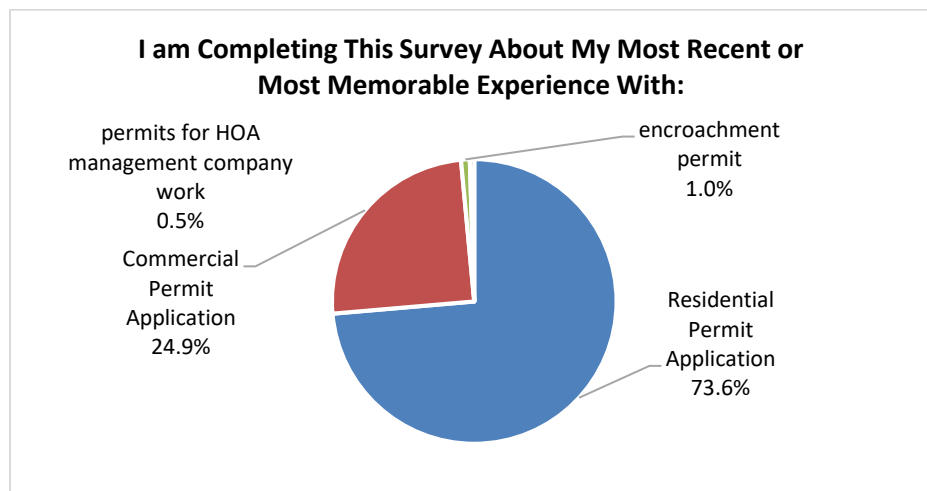
The first question in the survey was if the respondent had sought a permit in the City of San Rafael since 2016. 256 of the 341 respondents indicated they had an interaction with the permitting process in the last twelve months (approximately 75 percent, see Question 1 chart). The first question aimed to establish the number of survey respondents that could provide a recent answer to the additional questions in the survey and of the 1,006 on the mailing list, how many of those contacts had engaged in permitting in the last two years.



Question 1.

## 73.6% of Survey Respondents Filed for a Residential Permit Application

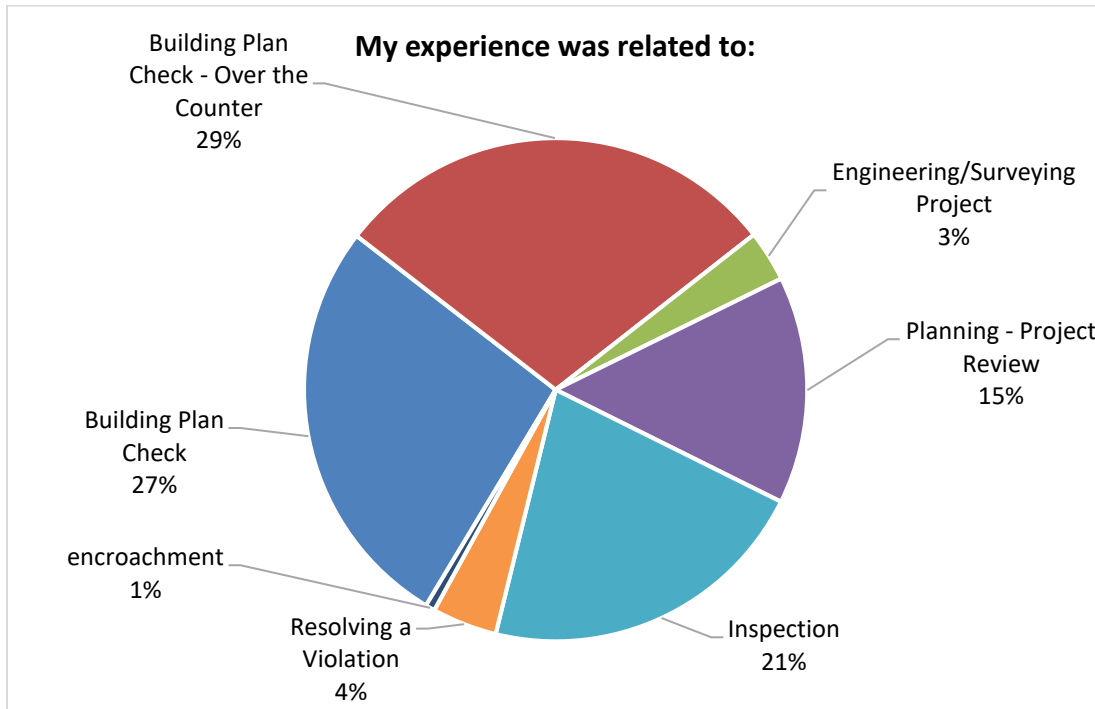
In Question 2, those that engaged in the permit process were asked to tell us what type of permit or what part of the process they engaged. The choices included: residential permit application; commercial permit application; encroachment permits; and permit for HOA-related work. The City of San Rafael suggested these were the most important categories.



Question 2.

**Building Plan Checks Comprise of 56% of Experiences with the Permitting Office**

Question 3 explored some of the simple stops in the permit process and why a client might come to the permit desk. Question 4 looks at the satisfaction level with the process specific to a timeline for permits.



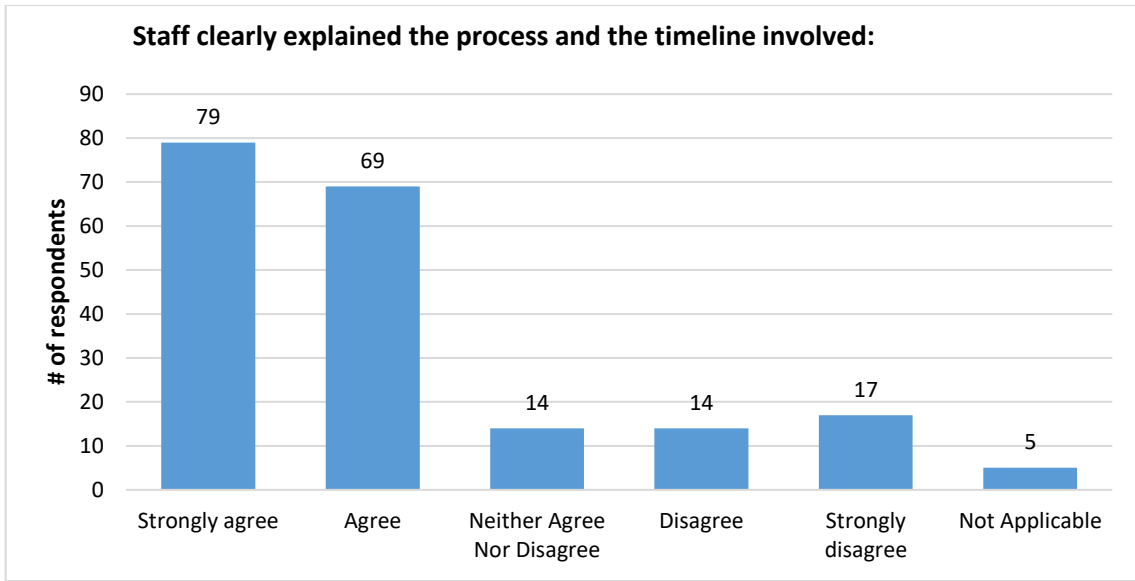
**Question 3.**

**Interactions with City of San Rafael are Associated to 98% of Respondents' Answers**

The next five figures show the raw data for all that answered the survey (198 respondents) and then breaks down the responses in terms of residential vs commercial permit pursuits. Since 98 percent of the responses were about these two interactions with the City of San Rafael staff, examining this second level of detail may help any planning going forward.

**City Staff Exudes a Successful Dynamic of Timeliness, Accuracy, and Consistency**

While Questions 4 through 7 seemed to provide a positive feel for the process for a large majority of the respondents, Question 8 tempers that general theme per the online services. Because not all the respondents used the online services, there are fewer substantive responses to Question 8; the proportions of the answers in the “excellent” and “fair” category point to a deeper look at how the online services are working for clients/applicants as well as the customer experience.



Residential Permit		Commercial Permit	
Strongly agree	58	Strongly agree	21
Agree	53	Agree	16
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	11	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	3
Disagree	13	Disagree	1
Strongly disagree	10	Strongly disagree	7
Not Applicable	3	Not Applicable	2
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

**Question 4.**

**Comments Related to Question 4:**

*I would like to see clear explanation online about how to apply for permits... detailed directions about what you can apply for OTC and where/when/how you can do this.*

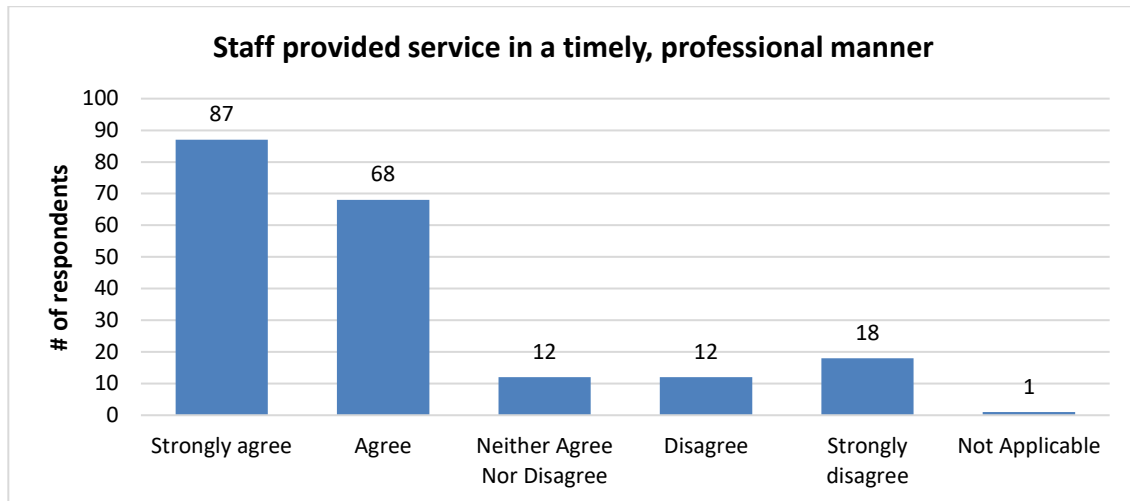
*Inspections were great! Wonderful experience...Permit process was more challenging for kitchen remodel. It took over 5 visits to the counter, which means time off from work.*

*My main problem I experience is that I don't know exactly what will be expected of me when I go to apply for a permit. i.e. Difference between over-the-counter requirements and when I need a full set of plans, etc.*

**City of San Rafael Staff Provides Timely Service and Accurate Feedback Consistently**

Another anecdote about the permitting counters across Marin County, and many other municipalities beyond San Rafael, is the direct interaction with staff when at city hall. Question 5 is about the timeliness of the process, and somewhat about the way in which staff engaged with the client; Question

6 is more focused on the consistency and accuracy of feedback from staff once the plans and permit details are in place.



Residential Permit		Commercial Permit	
Strongly agree	65	Strongly agree	22
Agree	53	Agree	15
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	8	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	4
Disagree	10	Disagree	2
Strongly disagree	11	Strongly disagree	7
Not Applicable	1		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

**Question 5.**

**Comments Related to Question 5:**

*Some have advised to either avoid attempting to get permits (& just do the work hoping to not get caught & willing to pay penalties if caught) or expect an overly prolonged & delayed process...*

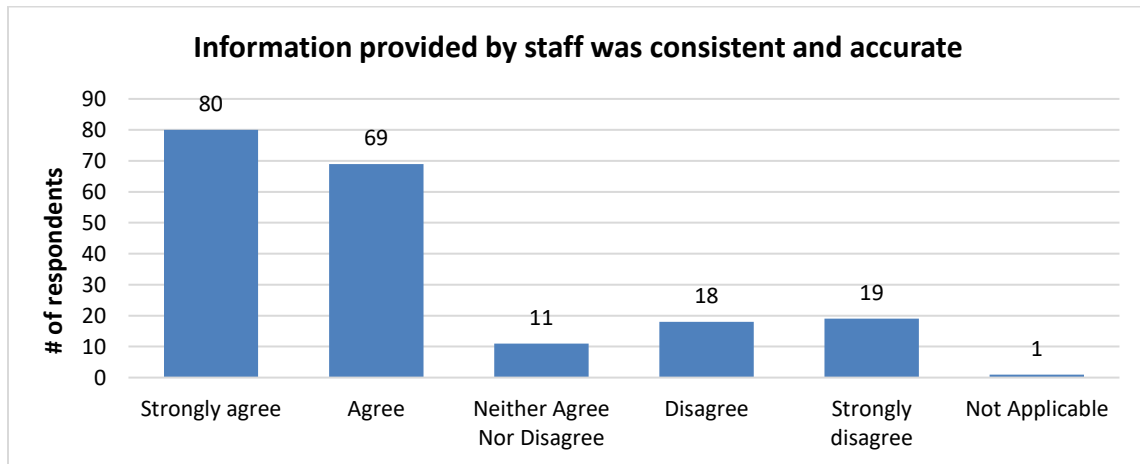
*Hours for helping the general public (over-the-counter) with building permits should be extended... Also, a very helpful sample drawing (with symbols) is handed out (at the counter). Can it be made available online?*

*At the plan desk you can get a wide range of opinions which can be confusing...Consistent and solid information (via a simple guide) would be helpful.*

*Current timeframes and structure of inspection (setting appointments) makes it really hard for an owner/builder with a 9-5 to progress at a good pace.*

**Comments Related to Question 5 (cont.):**

*Although the staff were perfectly fine folks, courteous and professional, it is the fees involved that I find particularly disagreeable. Especially a permit for replacing your water heater?! The fees are horribly expensive...*



<b>Residential Permit</b>		<b>Commercial Permit</b>	
Strongly agree	63	Strongly agree	17
Agree	50	Agree	19
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	9	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	2
Disagree	11	Disagree	7
Strongly disagree	14	Strongly disagree	5
Not Applicable	1		
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

**Question 6.**

**Comments Related to Question 6:**

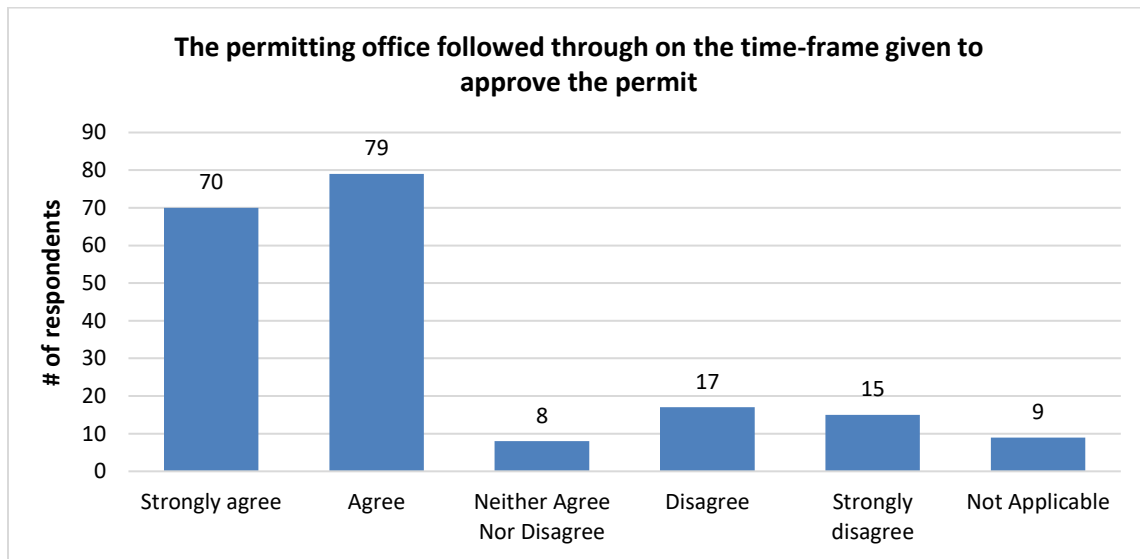
*The City of San Rafael staff are in a league of their own. We always have a positive experience and have been in business for 20+ years and the City of San Rafael service exceeds all nearby cities/the county. Thank you for your excellent, timely service!*

**Comments Related to Question 6 (cont.):**

*The City staff was very, very good. My main complaint is that the City uses an outside plan checking agency in San Diego. That plan checker was not experienced and asked for weird things. For example—he asked for cut-sheets for simple stuff—like spring-loaded hinges—not for the plan check...Also: the City can't find an outside plan checker in Northern California?*

**75% of Respondents Agreed Upon the City of San Rafael's Timeliness in Approving Permits**

Time and cost are related. Due to interest rates, time can have costs that have interest payments associated and quickly increase the cost to both developers and their clients. Question 7 shows the survey respondents in terms of their opinion on the time taken to approve the permit. Where previous questions were more focused on the timeliness of comments, Question 7 is about the final product in the process. Question 8 looks at the perception of quality specific to the online services. Not all respondents used online services.



Residential Permit		Commercial Permit	
Strongly agree	52	Strongly agree	18
Agree	64	Agree	15
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	6	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	2
Disagree	12	Disagree	5
Strongly disagree	8	Strongly disagree	7
Not Applicable	6	Not Applicable	3
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

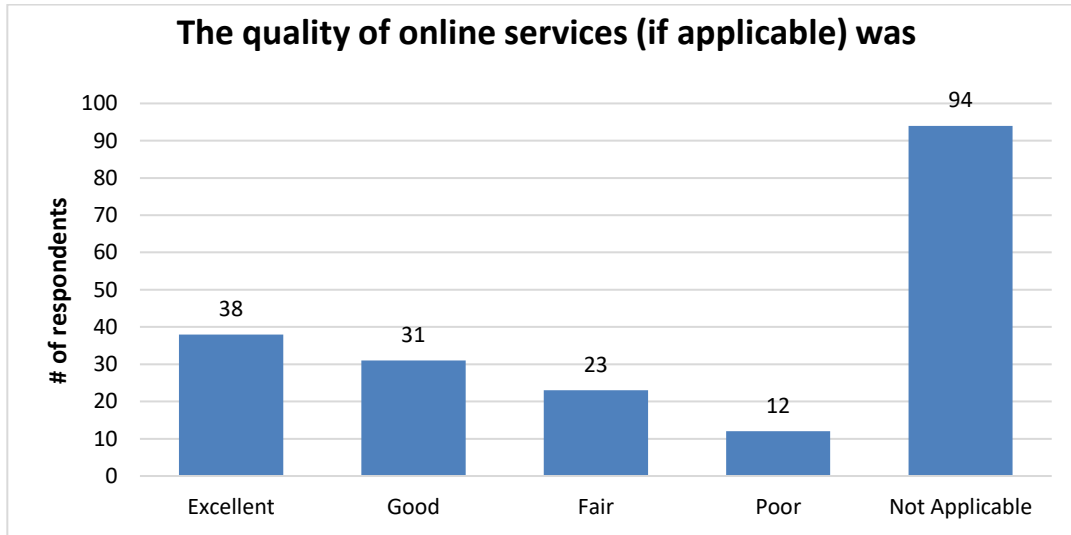
Question 7.



**Comments Related to Question 7:**

*The time frame should be within at least 2 hours.*

*Timeframe to approve my larger project was exceptionally long. Limited online access to info.*



<b>Residential Permit</b>		<b>Commercial Permit</b>	
Excellent	28	Excellent	10
Good	21	Good	10
Fair	19	Fair	4
Poor	11	Poor	1
Not Applicable	69	Not Applicable	25
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

**Question 8.**

**Comments Related to Question 8:**

*The Bldg. Dept. permit process works well - especially over the counter.*

*DO NOT DIGITIZE APPLICATIONS! But, would LOVE to see online permitting for basic permits.*

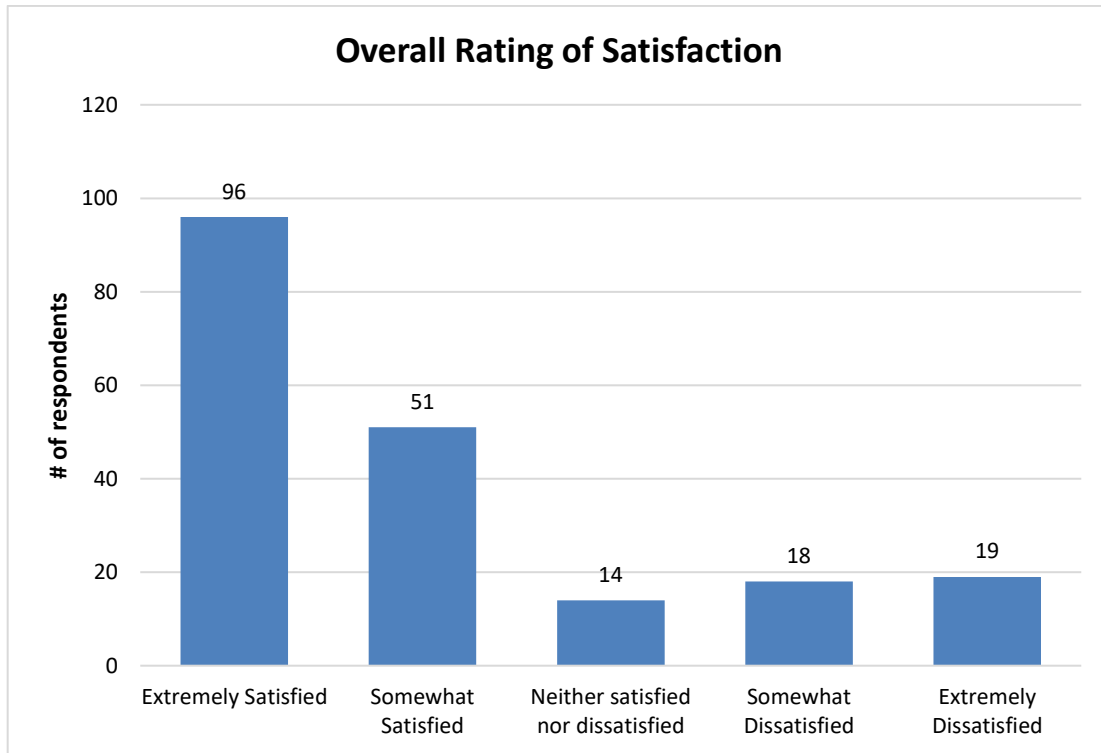
*Your system works the best in the county of Marin, Sonoma, SF, Alameda, etc.*

*The over the counter process is very arduous for a home owner as the available times are extremely limited and require taking time off work to physically come to the office. An online submission process would be way easier.*

*Over the counter hours are too few, which causes extreme congestion.*

**74% of Respondents Were Satisfied Regarding their Experience with the Permit Process**

Questions 9 and 10 are related and are about overall satisfaction from two angles. The first is a classic look at customer satisfaction. What is the satisfaction level of the client overall? Question 10 takes that one step further. Much like a net promoter score or an analog, Question 10 asks how likely the client would be to recommend the process to another applicant. Notice there are over 50 respondents that give a 5 or less to Question 10 and are either neutral or dissatisfied on Question 9. The significance of these neutral or less-satisfied respondents simply suggest that there is improvement to be done.



Residential Permit		Commercial Permit	
Extremely Satisfied	76	Extremely Satisfied	20
Somewhat Satisfied	34	Somewhat Satisfied	17
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	12	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	2
Somewhat Dissatisfied	11	Somewhat Dissatisfied	7
Extremely Dissatisfied	15	Extremely Dissatisfied	4
<b>Totals</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>Totals</b>	<b>50</b>

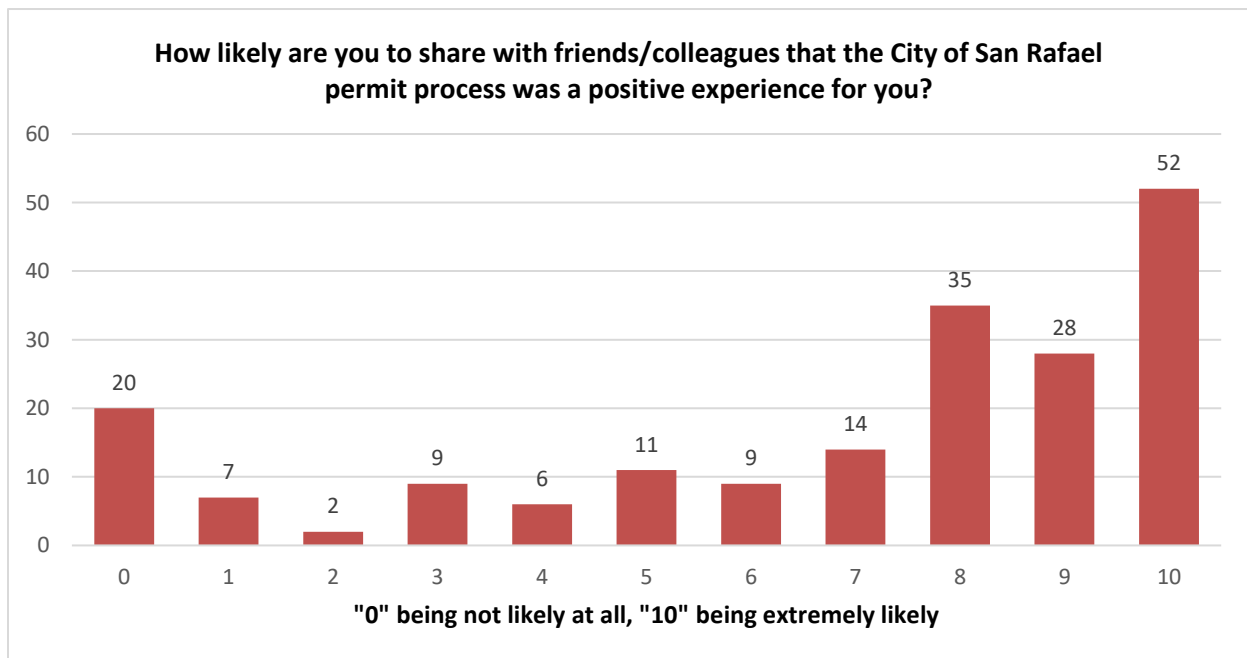
Question 9.

### 43% of Respondents had a Positive Experience they would Recommend to Others

Question 10 is the baseline of a “net promoter score” or NPS. The NPS is generally defined as the likelihood that a customer or client picked at random would recommend the service to another person. The NPS is best considered over time; one year’s worth of NPS data does not tell much about the past or the future, but a second year of asking this question to a similar population of potential respondents (customers or clients using the same service in the future) show how improvements may or may not be taking place in terms of positive feedback and “word-of-mouth” advertising for the City of San Rafael’s planning department. \* **The NPS is calculated by subtracting the percentage of respondents that were detractors (33% in this case) from the percentage that were promoters (42.9% in this case) for the NPS = 8.29. The range for NPA is 0 to 100; a result of 8.29 suggests there is some work to be done, even though the general survey feedback was positive.**

The following bullets are general rules to follow with net promoter scores:

- Answers 9 or 10 would most likely recommend the service (promoters);
- Answers 7 or 8 are neutral or “passives”; and
- Answers 0 and 6 most likely would not recommend the service (detractors).



**Question 10.**

## Conclusion

The goal of this ongoing project is to identify strategies for the City of San Rafael to help increase the amount of permitted construction and to decrease unpermitted construction through improvements to customer service and the permit processes. Respondents to this survey, in general, were pleased with the permit processes at the City of San Rafael. When dissatisfied, the speed of review, information flow, general efficiency, and costs were suggested to be major factors. Comments by respondents ranged from highly passionate about concerns (in very few cases the comments were not germane to the permit processes) to highly favorable about their experience with the process. Question 10 is likely where most of the work can be done; the idea that someone would recommend building in the City of San Rafael, using the permit process, was less positive than the respondent's personal experience. This is an area that should be tracked annually.

### ***Recommendations***

Recommendations provided here are all aimed at supporting best practices.

#### **Short-term (One Month to One year)**

1. Establish quarterly meetings for staff to focus on challenges with permit process. Include one to two applicants to reflect on their experiences.
2. Ask every applicant the Net Promoter Score (NPS) question (see Question 10 above).
3. Add a segmented Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page(s) on city website to act as an initial information source.
4. Extend hours for assisting the general public ('over-the-counter' permit hours).
5. Establish and monitor overarching goals of increasing the amount of permitted work and reducing the amount of unpermitted work by using residential resale reports.
6. Map applicant process to establish flows of permits.
7. Create an 'Applicant Guide' for prospective residential and commercial customers.
8. Continue public outreach and education (Coffee and Codes, Public and Group Presentations) about the permit process and process improvements.

#### **Medium-term (One to Three Years)**

1. Consider public service/customer service training for all City staff that interacts with the public on a regular basis.
2. Conduct third party independent personal interviews with staff to help determine any possible opportunities for system improvement.
3. Repeat this survey annually for five years, making changes as needed with the goal of increasing the NPS per the dual goal of increased permitted work and less unpermitted work.
  - a. Examine second levels of detail in survey to help any planning going forward.
4. Use the survey results versus residential resale statistics to measure growth and compare the amount of permitted work versus estimates of unpermitted work each year for the next five years.
5. Consider an ombudsperson position, online chat assistant, or telephone helpline to help applicants navigate the process.

6. Research and review available options for a local or regional plan-checking service (versus the current service used from San Diego).

**Long-term (Three to Five Years)**

1. Mechanize and place online as many processes as possible based on feedback
  - a. Ensure all plans that are outsourced are final checked by local plan examiners at the City of San Rafael.
2. Set goals for online and face-to-face applications to allow applicants to provide more materials without physically visiting San Rafael.
  - a. Initial results of survey suggest trends are pointing to the need for more online/digital services and tools for customers.
3. Track peer and aspirant municipalities to monitor comparable organizations for best practices.

### END OF REPORT ###