

Mayor to Take Run at Speeding Permit Process

DEVELOPMENT: Business groups approve but want to see more from Garcetti.

By **HOWARD FINE** Staff Reporter

“Good as far as it goes, but not far enough.”

That’s how local developers and business leaders greeted L.A. Mayor **Eric Garcetti**’s announcement last week that he plans to renew long-founding efforts to streamline the city’s cumbersome development permit process.

Garcetti ordered both the Building and Safety and Planning department to consolidate several key functions. He also ordered the two departments – along with the city’s Engineering, Fire and Transportation departments – to assign staff to development service centers at city offices in downtown and Van Nuys. In addition, the mayor said that new development service centers could open in West Los Angeles and South Los Angeles.

The aim is to speed approvals for development projects and especially to avoid or resolve conflicting interpretations of city codes.

“We must raise expectations for a smooth and predictable entitlement process with straightforward zoning answers,” Garcetti said in his announcement.

When he took office last summer, Garcetti halted a merger of Building and Safety and Planning that his predecessor, **Antonio Villaraigosa**, tried to rush through before leaving office. Garcetti said last week that he decided on a more targeted approach rather than just merging the departments for the sake of it.

It’s important to improve the process while the economy is favorable to new projects, said **Gary Toebben**, chief executive of the **Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce**.

“Now that development projects are starting



Goldsmith



Kahan

to come to City Hall again, we have a window open for opportunities to bring investment into our city,” he said. “We must act before that window closes again.”

But Toebben and others said additional steps are needed, such as adding planners. During the budget crisis, several city planners were let go; now that project activity has picked up, the department is short-staffed and backlogs are mounting.

“There’s nothing wrong with consolidating functions between departments, but the biggest delays are getting projects through the planning process,” said **Dale Goldsmith**, managing partner at **Armbruster Goldsmith & Delvac** in Brentwood. “There are tons of environmental impact reports that have been submitted, but not a lot of city planners to read those EIRs.”

One developer said the expanded service centers should include representatives of other departments beyond those Garcetti is adding, especially the Department of Water & Power.

“The most vexing problem for developers is the DWP,” said **Ken Kahan**, founder and president of **California Landmark Group** in West Los Angeles.

Kahan said that he’s faced numerous delays on his projects because of issues that arise in siting power transformers and making sure they integrate into the buildings.

“Sure, we can solve this problem, but we

have to deal with the DWP as a standalone entity, often after everything else is approved,” Kahan said. “They should be included in these development service centers.”

Kahan, who just finished apartment projects in Hollywood and Brentwood, said having all these city departments represented at the development service centers would also help prevent permits getting punted from one agency to another, a common problem now.

“This happens all the time, and it means that in order to get anything done in a timely manner, we’ve got to hire consultants at extra cost to keep pushing the project along.”

After he announced the service center expansion plans, Garcetti’s office also released a city-commissioned report by **Matrix Consulting Group** of Mountain View with recommendations for further permit streamlining. The recommendations include establishment of an online tracking system for permits.

Other business leaders say that while they welcome Garcetti’s latest moves, they are concerned that momentum for development permit reform will fade with time, as has happened repeatedly in the past.

Starting with the administration of **Richard Riordan** 20 years ago, each mayor has promised development permit reform, unveiling one plan after another to little effect.

For example, shortly after taking office, Villaraigosa unveiled a “12-to-2” plan, calling for the reduction of departments that must sign off on permits from 12 to just two. But that plan faltered amid bureaucratic turf wars.

In 2010, Villaraigosa’s new jobs czar, **Austin Beutner**, proposed a more massive permitting overhaul, promising to make getting a permit as easy as ordering shoes over **Zappos**. But Beutner left office a year later to run for mayor with work barely begun on his overhaul. His successor, **Matt Karatz**,

sought to consolidate and align permit expirations so developers wouldn’t have to go back repeatedly to get new permits and entitlements. Then, just months before leaving office, Villaraigosa proposed the merger between Building and Safety and Planning. Toebben said Garcetti might be able to take advantage of an environment more favorable to change.

“The big problems have always been the reluctance of the bureaucracy to move quickly and the lack of follow-through from the mayor’s office,” Toebben said. “This time, it appears that the mayor has the cooperation of the two general managers, **Raymond Chan** of Building and Safety and **Michael LoGrande** of Planning.”

Another business leader also said she is hopeful.

“There have been far too many attempts at streamlining, even though it’s not rocket science,” said **Carol Schatz**, chief executive of the **Central City Association**, which primarily represents downtown business interests. “But because Mayor Garcetti’s approach is more targeted and surgical, it stands a better chance of succeeding than some of those past efforts.”

However, Schatz said that developers have other concerns, too, including reform of the city’s antiquated zoning code, which is currently in progress. And some issues are beyond Garcetti’s control, such as reform of the California Environmental Quality Act.

Another local business leader is reserving judgment until he sees more details on how Garcetti’s orders will be implemented.

“In concept, we’re all on board; expanding these development service centers would seem to be the right way to go,” said **Stuart Waldman**, chief executive of the **Valley Industry and Commerce Association**. “But until we actually see the details and we know who is in charge of making this happen, we can’t say how well it would work.”

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