

From: [Gallacher, Kirsten CD](#)
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Subject: Project Backlog
Date: Friday, August 9, 2024 1:49:00 PM
Attachments: [image001.png](#)
[image002.png](#)

Dear Laguna Beach Neighbor and (/or) Planning or Building applicant –

I am sorry to address you so formally, but we have gotten a lot of emails of late about the backlog that exists in Community Development. I've been here about three months, and we have made modest progress with it – but not enough. We appointed a new Director of Community Development (David Contreras), and David and I and the Community Development team are working collaboratively and directly to try to address the backlog that pre-dated both of us. Getting ahead of it, even as more applications come in, isn't easy.

I'm not here to complain but I will try and explain:

- We have a complex code and a long review process. We have added important legal reviews (these are essential) and tried to up our game in terms of the quality of our application review process, especially when a project involves an appeal.
- We have a significant number of applications in – as well as permitted projects under active construction (if you live in town, this is pretty clear to you).
- Our counter staff feels a bit beaten and beat up, so are our senior and associate planners. We have a hard time recruiting people, and a hard time keeping them here once they start work and see what they have to deal with. It's not easy to work in Laguna. It's easier to work in so many other cities, and therefore easy to lose people. This past week, one of our permit techs had to leave the counter in tears because of the way she was treated by the person across the counter.
- A lot of us are new. Me, the new CD Director, and a lot of the staff. Getting up to speed isn't easy.
- We are behind in our technology that would otherwise help us. Our new software

system is coming, but it won't solve all the issues, and the "go live" date is several weeks away.

- We have a lot of good and important "advanced planning" efforts that the Community and Council want to see (and I do too – they're important!). But with the backlog, we may need to reprioritize those other efforts and assign more staff time to residential and commercial current planning applications.

I could go on, but I won't. I will go through some of the solutions we're trying to implement:

1. City Council approved more resources for some surge staffing. These will likely be contractors as well as in-house staff. We are actively trying to get those folks in place. We also will be looking at authorizing more overtime to help get application review back on track.
2. As noted, we're working on re-prioritizing the long-term planning projects so that higher level staff hold those a bit and assist in addressing the application backlog.
3. We are working on streamlining aspects of our procedures and our code – as well as providing a longer-term comprehensive update to the Zoning Code – and will ask the community and Council to approve some changes that still protect what makes Laguna special but also may speed things up by moving more things to administrative and other low-level review. These ideas will come to the public in the form of a City Council workshop, possibly in September.
4. We're discussing a short catch-up period where we don't take in any new applications – to try to have staff focus solely on the backlog with no new inputs.
5. I'm interested in hearing from retirees and others who might be able to come back and assist in addressing the backlog on a short-term basis.
6. Our IT team is implementing the new [Energov system](#) as promptly as it can.

My plea (more like pleas) to you is this:

- Please be kind to and respectful of our counter staff. They are working to the best of their ability and are not responsible for the backlog. They are good folks worthy of your kind and collaborative interactions.
- If you have a question about where your application is, please send that to me and to David Contreras via email. Again, send the email to both of us. Oftentimes we'll follow up on that first (before a voice-mail). We are both happy to try to figure out what's holding your project up. We won't always have good news but at least you'll hear something back.
- Soon we'll be working with you and others (via the Workshop) and possibly as a user group to try and troubleshoot problems as well as to talk about code changes. We need and would appreciate your candid and thoughtful participation in that.
- Importantly, give me feedback on this and any other CD subject. I've gotten lots of suggestions and I appreciate every one.

I sincerely hope this period will pass, and that we'll get ahead of this. Right now, we're fixing the plane as it's flying (and it's not flying too terribly high up). This remains a very challenging problem professionally for me and for all of the Laguna Beach staff team. I continue to appreciate your patience.

Sincerely,



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