



NAPA COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

2025-2026

FINAL REPORT

June 8, 2026

**Strengthening Napa's Planning Division: Technology,
Coordination, and Workforce Stability**

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
SUMMARY	3
BACKGROUND	3
METHODOLOGY	5
DISCUSSION	5
FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS	10
REQUIRED RESPONSES	14
INVITED RESPONSES	14
APPENDIX – 1	15
NAPA CITY PLANNING DIVISION STAFFING	15
APPENDIX – 2	16
NAPA CITY PLANNING APPLICATION PROCESS	16
APPENDIX – 3	17
NAPA CITY PLANNING BUDGETS	17
APPENDIX – 4	18
ENDNOTES	18

INTRODUCTION

The 2025-2026 Napa County Civil Grand Jury [Civil Grand Jury] reviewed the operations of the Napa City Planning Division [Planning Division] [see Appendix 1] to assess its organizational capacity, internal coordination, and effectiveness in delivering timely and consistent development services. The review identified systemic issues affecting cost recovery, cross departmental coordination, technology implementation, legal support, development activity on keystone properties, and workforce stability.

SUMMARY

The Civil Grand Jury finds that the Planning Division has faced operational challenges that limit its ability to deliver efficient and transparent development services. These challenges stem from outdated technology, inconsistent cost recovery practices, insufficient cross departmental coordination, reliance on outsourced legal services, and the lack of succession planning.

Addressing these issues will require coordinated action, investment in technology and staff development, and a commitment to improving internal processes. Implementing the recommendations will strengthen organizational capacity, enhance service delivery, and better position the City to meet current and future community needs.

BACKGROUND

The Civil Grand Jury received a complaint regarding senior-level turnover in the Planning Division. In addition, there is a public perception that there

are delays in processing building permits. Lastly, there was interest in the underlying reasons behind several high-profile downtown properties in the City of Napa that were damaged in the 2014 earthquake where reconstruction still has not begun.

The Planning Division plays a central role in managing land use applications, entitlement processes (the legal approvals that give the right to use or develop a property in a specific way), and long-range planning. Its work requires close coordination with multiple City divisions, including Public Works, Fire, Building, Finance, and external legal counsel [see Appendix 2]. Over time, the department has experienced significant turnover, inconsistent use of technology, and limited cross departmental engagement. Discretionary applications require judgement, potential public hearings, and possible California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review allowing agencies to approve, deny, or modify projects. On the other hand, Administrative Applications are based on objective, codified standards with no personal judgement, and are often processed quickly. The Civil Grand Jury examined departmental practices, staffing patterns, technology systems, and interdepartmental workflows. The review also considered the City's reliance on outsourced legal services, the status of undeveloped keystone properties, and the absence of succession planning. The findings and recommendations reflect opportunities to strengthen organizational effectiveness and improve outcomes for the community.

METHODOLOGY

The Civil Grand Jury investigated the Planning Division's efficiencies in processing applications.

The Civil Grand Jury conducted a series of interviews with members of the Napa City Planning Commission, City Administration, as well as with current and former Planning Division personnel. In addition, interviews were held with local developers to understand the private sector's experience of the application process. The Civil Grand Jury interviews were all conducted between September 2025 and February 2026, confidentially, and in accordance with State law¹.

Other information reviewed was obtained from public sources, including the Planning Division website² and the City of Napa website³. Included in the review were the FY2023 - FY2025 city budgets [see Appendix 3], the Planning Division budget, as well as other information on the website and other documents cited below in this report. Various news articles from the Times-Herald, the Napa Register, and the Press Democrat were also reviewed.

DISCUSSION

This investigation began as an inquiry into two areas of focus: Planning Division operations and high levels of employee turnover. The goal was to identify opportunities to reduce cycle times for granting land use entitlements and completing large projects. It was learned that most project applications (large and small) are administrative and approved within a 30-day state required timeframe, with very few exceptions. The

most significant impact to completing large development projects was leadership challenges and coordination with external departments. Some operational efficiencies and improvements were also identified.

- **Slow Progress on Key Initiatives:**

The Civil Grand Jury began by looking into several high-profile downtown Napa properties that have been fenced off for twelve years since the 2014 earthquake with no progress towards completion. For example, the City's Main Post Office building on Second at Franklin; it's only downtown supermarket (the former Safeway store) at Clay and Jefferson; and the First and Main vacant lot across from Starbucks. Through its investigations, the Civil Grand Jury determined that development of these properties in the City of Napa was not being held up by delays, staffing shortages or overly burdensome requirements from the Planning Division. In fact, the City's Administration desires to develop these properties to benefit the community and expand its revenue base but has few options to incentivize private development. Developing these sites should remain a high priority for the city. The lack of development can be directly associated with the developer or landowner.

- **Planning Division Staffing Review:**

Within one year, the Planning Division saw the departure of two Senior Planners (long-time Napa City employees) to retirement, and the loss of the Planning Manager to a nearby community. In addition, the City's Community Development Director, which oversees the Planning Division, was vacant for approximately six months. An

Interim Director was hired from outside the Department and has subsequently been appointed as the permanent director. The two Senior Planners were scheduled to retire toward the end of 2025; however, recruiting their backfills was delayed until after their scheduled departures. One Senior Planner was retained as a post-retirement annuitant for a temporary period. City hiring practices and budget constraints do not permit the city to hire replacements for known staff retirements or upcoming staff departures until the vacancy occurs. This practice prevents adequate training, knowledge transfer, and smooth handoff of applications in process. The lack of a succession plan for key departures in the Planning Division was evident when the Community Resources & Development [CRD] Director, Planning Manager and two Senior Planners all left the city within one year. These vacancies put additional stress on the remaining staff members and impacted long-term strategic planning. Despite all these challenges, Planning Division staff did an excellent job keeping projects moving and minimizing the impact of these departures on city residents (applicants). Every member of the staff who was interviewed was very professional and dedicated to the highest level of service and assistance to provide solutions for land use applicants. The Planning Division currently is actively recruiting staff to fill the open positions.

▪ **Technology Review:**

The Planning Division has not utilized a software operating system to manage permitting and licensing activity. Research currently requires manual review of records and manually

compiling data to build management reporting and information requests. This process can be lengthy and requires significant staff time to complete. To address these issues, the City of Napa engaged Tyler Technologies in 2022 to implement its EnerGov⁴ system to enhance and improve end-to-end application processing and customer experience. As of the date of this report, over six years after the contract, the software has still not been deployed.

- **Approval Cycle Times:**

Despite the lack of an enterprise platform, city staff manually maintain spreadsheets that track certain key information about project applications. The Civil Grand Jury reviewed the cycle times of all discretionary applications for approval over the last year, which reflected average decision times of less than thirty days.

- **Reliance on outsourced legal services has resulted in delays and increased costs:**

Significant turnover and long-term vacancies in the City Attorney's office required the City to outsource all legal representation to a third-party law firm to act as the City's Counsel. This significantly increases the City's legal expenses, and it has an adverse effect on decision cycle times relating to open applications with the Planning Division. All the interviewees indicated that response times for legal requests were taking longer than in the past, occurring late in the process, and often reported that decisions were overly risk adverse, causing delays, additional expenses to the City of Napa and

applicants, and creating confusion and frustration on the part of staff and applicants. The City is aware of these issues and is actively recruiting an in-house City Attorney.

- **Cross Departmental Coordination:**

All the interviewees reported concerns with cross-departmental coordination, collaboration, and communication which could negatively impact cycle times and frustrate applicants. While all divisions involved in the approval process work within their legal mandates for response times, not every division shares the same priorities, decision-making, or sense of urgency.

There are opportunities to improve cross-functional cooperation in the entitlement process. EnerGov implementation can help with this, along with better alignment of priorities and shared sense of urgency.

- **Planning Division Cost Recovery:**

Planning recovery rates (charges for services) are reported to be approximately 60% of actual costs. Recovering more than this has been a challenge historically because the Planning Division lacks the tools for billing the applicants. Full recovery rates should be the goal and are expected to improve with the Energov implementation. [OBJ]

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cost Recovery – Inconsistent Project Billing Practices

Findings:

F1. The Planning Division's cost-recovery model is constrained by inconsistent project billing practices. The department relies on a manually updated spreadsheet to track active projects and historical information, increasing the risk of error and limiting transparency. Significant staff time is required for time-tracking and chargebacks, reducing operational efficiency.

F2. The Planning Division recovers only about 60% of its operational costs resulting in significant staff time going unreimbursed. This shortfall requires the General Fund to subsidize application review.

Recommendations:

R1. By December 31, 2026 the Planning Division should enhance its records management, time-tracking and billing capabilities in collaboration with the City's IT Division.

R2. By September 30, 2026 the CRD Director should designate a Project Lead to manage software system implementation, testing and release across CRD divisions. This will improve timeliness, on-budget delivery and ensure all user-defined requirements are built appropriately and working efficiently.

2. Cross-Department Coordination

Findings

F3. Coordination between the Planning Division and other City divisions to support an efficient entitlement review process needs to be strengthened. The lack of structured coordination mechanisms reduces accountability and predictability.

F4. The absence of an interdepartmental project tracking system prevents a unified view of active applications. Interdepartmental review timelines are not formally established, resulting in inconsistent turnaround times.

Recommendations

By December 31, 2026, the Planning Division should:

R4. Implement a department-wide project tracking system where status of projects are updated at least bi-weekly or monthly.

R5. Establish formal interdepartmental review timelines for entitlement applications.

R6. Engage with their partner departments to ensure shared ownership of a streamlined entitlement process.

R7. Leverage technology to improve turnaround times and strengthen cross-departmental cooperation.

3. Succession Planning and Workforce Stability

Findings

F5. The City experiences high turnover within the Planning Division and lacks a formal succession planning framework. The lack of succession planning results in gaps in institutional knowledge, and limited cross-training hinders continuity during staff transitions.

Recommendations

By December 31, 2026 the City of Napa should:

R8. Develop and implement a formal succession planning program.

R9. Identify key positions and establish pathways for internal staff development.

R10. Create and maintain comprehensive documentation of core processes.

R11. Implement cross-training across critical functions.

4. Fenced-off Key City Center Properties

Findings

F6. In general, developers may extend entitlements up to three additional times without demonstrating progress totaling 6 years. Repeated extensions allow properties to remain vacant or undeveloped for extended periods.

F7. Entitlement practices may inadvertently incentivize long-term vacancy.

Recommendations

R12. By December 31, 2026 the Planning Division should evaluate entitlement extension policies to promote timely project initiation.

R13. By December 31, 2026 the CRD Director should establish periodic reviews of keystone properties to ensure regular review of undeveloped properties to encourage movement.

R14. By December 31, 2026 City of Napa should evaluate options to accelerate keystone property development.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following responses are required, pursuant to Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05:

From the following governing boards within 90 days:

The Napa City Council

INVITED RESPONSES

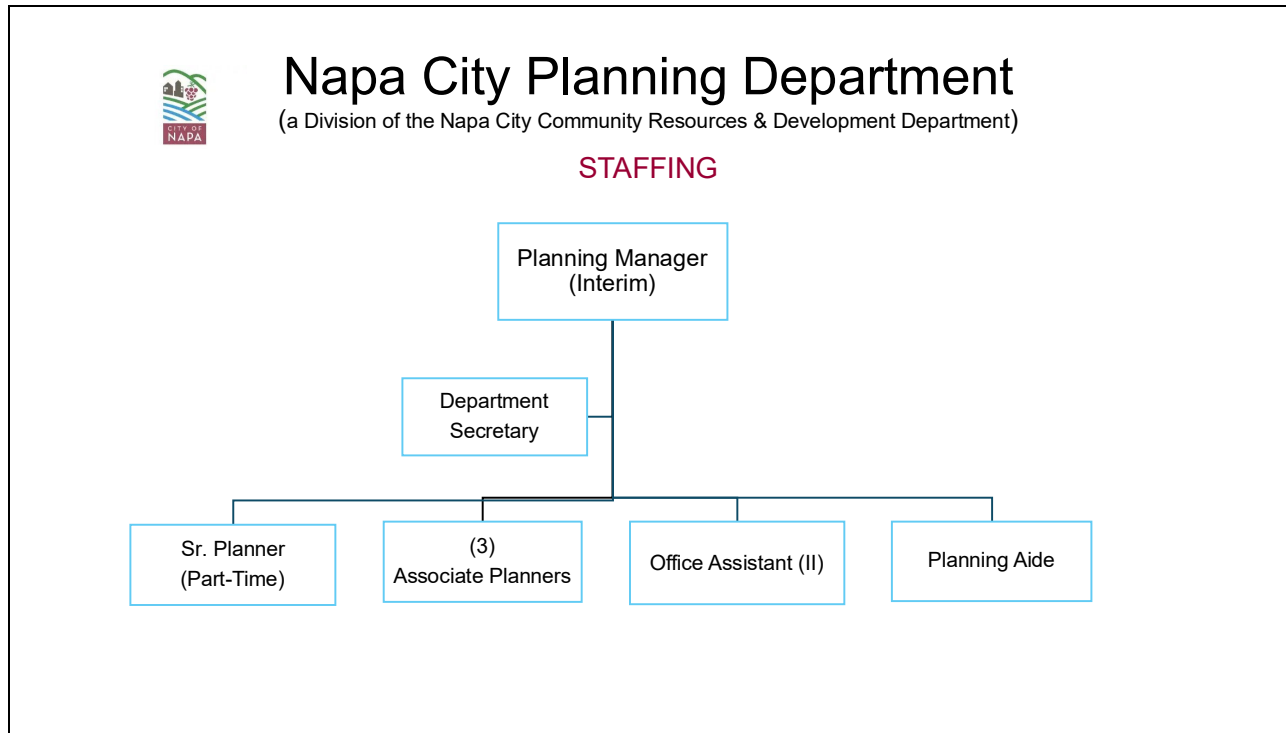
Responses are invited from the following within 90 days:

- City Manager – All Findings and Recommendations.
- Community Resources and Development Director – All Findings and Recommendations.

Reports issued by The Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of The Civil Grand Jury do not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to The Civil Grand Jury.

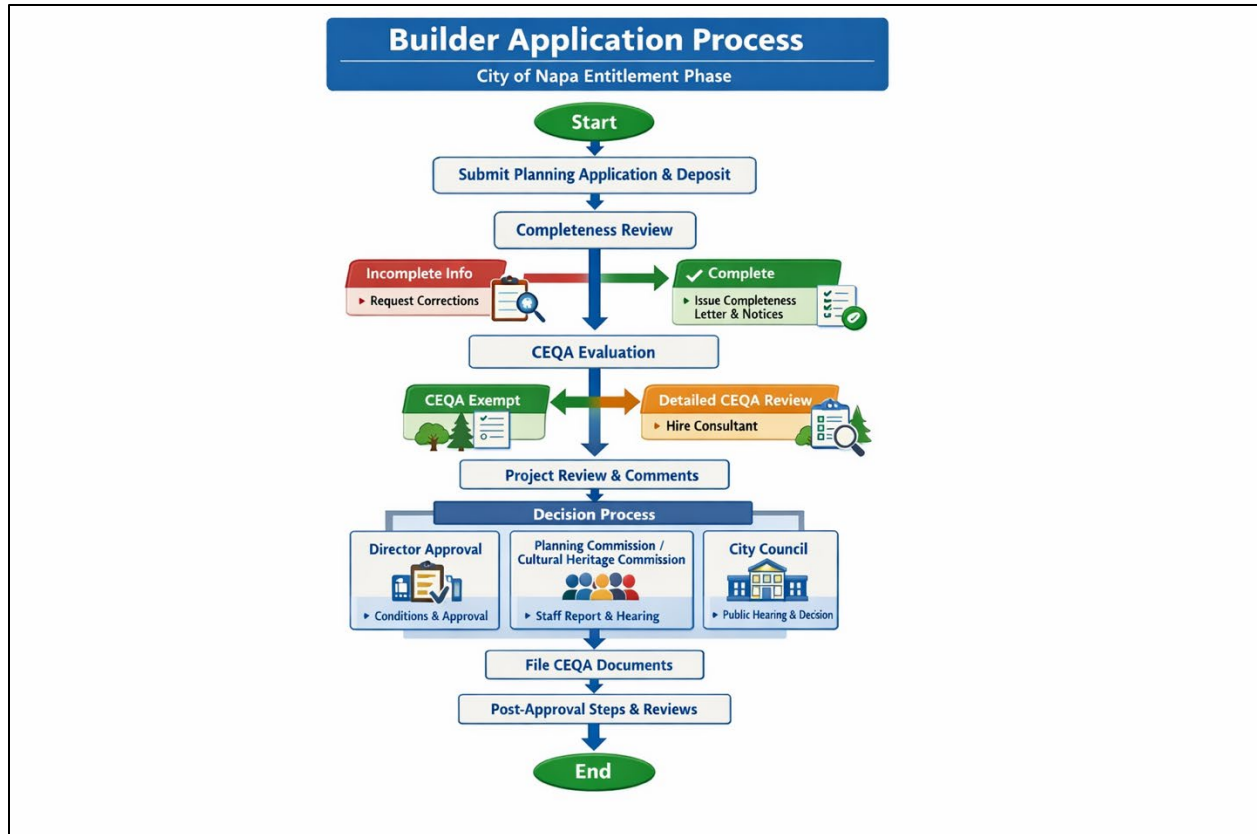
APPENDIX – 1

NAPA CITY PLANNING DIVISION STAFFING



APPENDIX – 2

NAPA CITY PLANNING APPLICATION PROCESS



APPENDIX – 3

NAPA CITY PLANNING BUDGETS

Link to: [Napa City Planning Division Budgets](#)

APPENDIX – 4

ENDNOTES

¹ **California Penal Code §911**

² <https://www.cityofnapa.org/247/Planning-Division>

³ [Napa, CA | Official Website](#)

⁴ <https://www.tylertech.com/solutions/public-administration/civic-services/community-development-solutions>