



City of North Port
NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES
DEPARTMENT



MEMORANDUM

TO: A. Jerome Fletcher II, ICMA-CM, MPA, City Manager

THROUGH: Jason Yarborough, ICMA-CM, Assistant City Manager

FROM: Alaina Ray, AICP, NDS Director *Alaina Ray*

SUBJECT: Building Division Staffing Levels

DATE: March 10, 2023

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide information regarding the dire staffing shortages within the Neighborhood Development Services' ("NDS") Building Division ("Division") and request consideration to send a mid-year budget amendment to the City Commission ("Commission") to approve additional positions and reallocate existing Building Funds to absorb the expenditures. This proposal does not impact the General Fund.

Permit and Inspection Data

North Port is currently the second fastest growing city in the United States. This growth in population is accompanied by a significant increase in both residential and non-residential construction. As such, the City's Building Division has seen a steady and sustained increase in permitting and inspection activity with no sign that this will slow in the foreseeable future.

The Division has experienced year-over-year increases in activity since at least 2017. Hurricane Ian did contribute to an increase in activity for the Division during the last quarter of 2022—primarily due to roofing permits. However, prior to the hurricane the Division was already on pace to break previous annual permit and inspection records. During 2022 the Division staff processed over 20,000 permits (Chart 1) and conducted over 80,000 inspections (Chart 2). If Hurricane Ian had not occurred, it is projected that the Division would have processed approximately 17,000 permits, which would still have been a significant increase over 2021.

In the first two months of 2023, new permits issued exceeded 5,000 and inspections exceeded 20,000. Even though roofing permits are anticipated to decline within the next few months, the continuing growth of the City will likely result in record-breaking numbers again in 2023, not including any potential impacts we may experience during the 2023 hurricane season.

CHART 1. Building Division Permits Issued 2017 - 2022

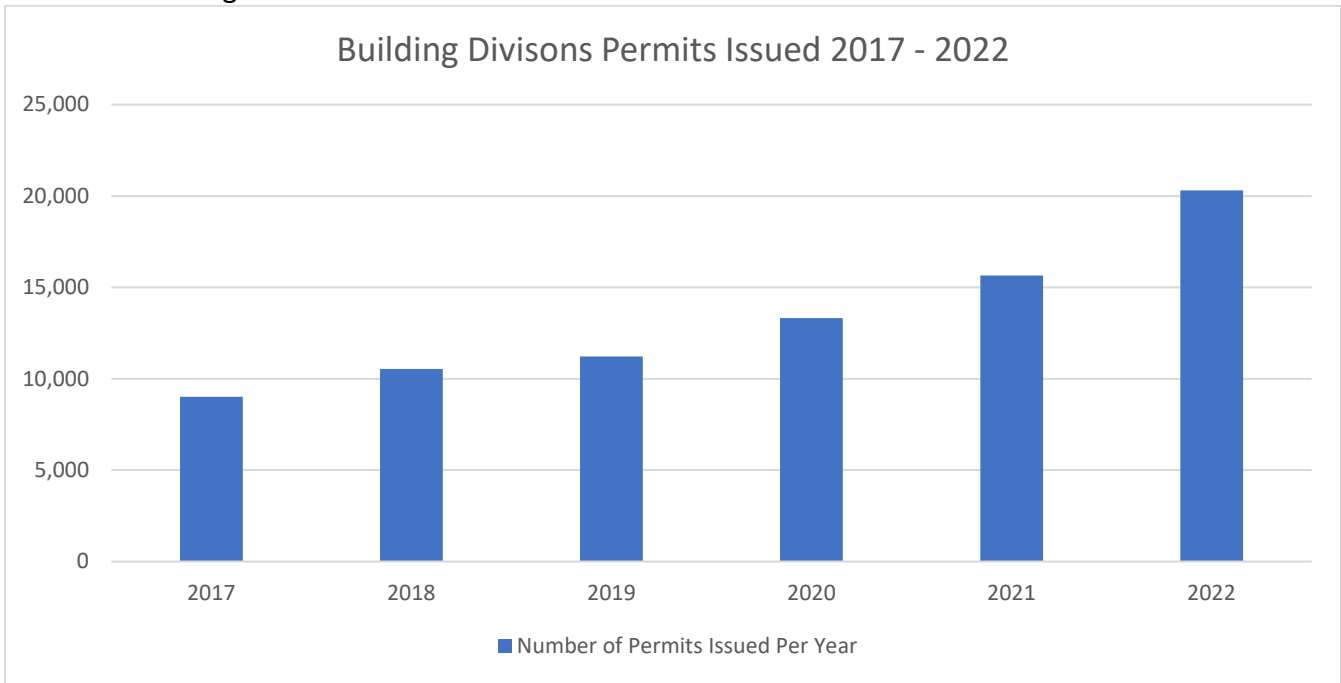
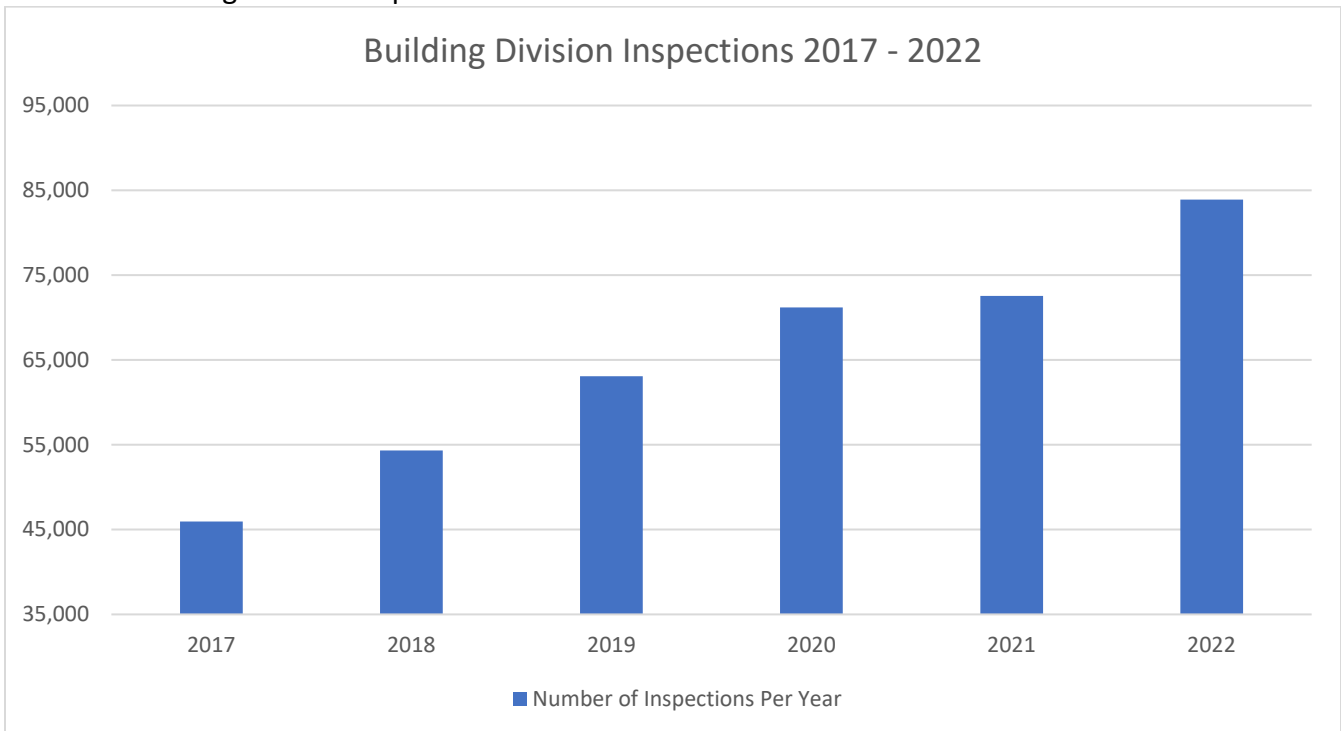


CHART 2. Building Division Inspections 2017 - 2022

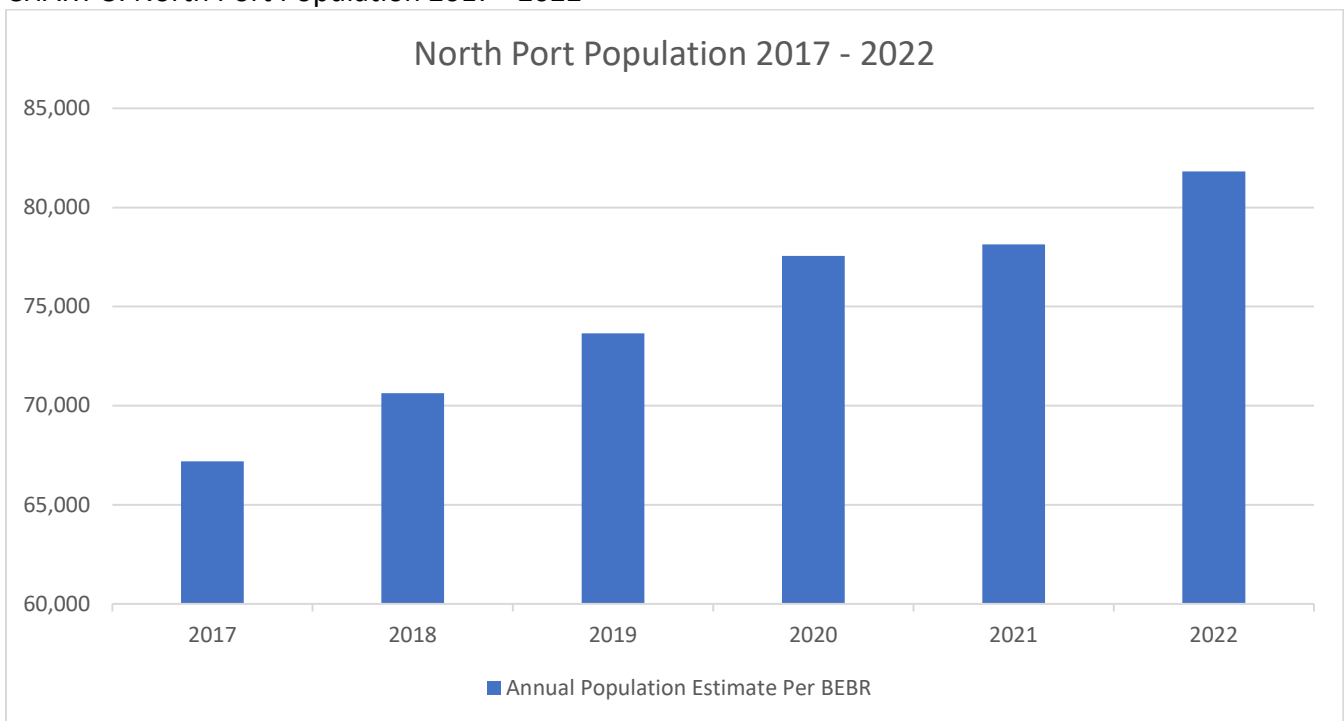


Population Growth

The City’s population has steadily increased (Chart 3) with an average annual growth rate of 2.23 percent. However, North Port’s current growth rate exceeds the average, with an increase in 2022 of 5.5 percent. If the annual population growth for the next five years trends to the 2.23 percent average, North Port could have a population of approximately 91,000 by 2028. However, if the growth rate remains closer to its current rate of 5.5 percent, the population could exceed 100,000 during the same period.

This population increase correlates to additional housing units, and the City is currently issuing Certificates of Occupancy for approximately 1,300 new single-family homes annually. The City has also issued Certificates of Occupancy for 48 new multi-family buildings (each building contains multiple units) during the last two years, with projections anticipated to exceed that number during 2023.

CHART 3. North Port Population 2017 - 2022



Hurricane Impacts and Mitigation Measures

After hurricane Ian, the Division was heavily impacted by response and recovery efforts. Division staff is responsible for damage assessment citywide and immediately began efforts to inspect damaged structures. Additionally, the Division serves as the compliance arm for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regarding structures within the Special Flood Hazard Areas, which required certain staff to be dedicated exclusively to working with FEMA and impacted property owners.

The Division’s response and recovery efforts, combined with the scope of the hurricane’s impacts, necessitated swift action to ensure the Division’s ability to continue to provide services to our community. As such, the NDS leadership team initiated and/or implemented measures to ensure residents and businesses were able to begin repairs expeditiously, while maintaining a high level of customer service and ensuring the health, safety, and welfare of the public through the application of

the Florida Building Code. These mitigation measures included waiving certain permit and inspection requirements and requisition of third-party services.

Inspection Loads

Approximately half of the Plans Reviewer/Inspector positions are dedicated to reviewing plans and permits and half for field inspections. On a typical day, the Division has approximately eight inspectors in the field. This means that, on average, each field inspector is responsible for approximately 45 inspections per day. The Insurance Services Office (ISO) Building Code Effectiveness Grading Schedule recommends 10 inspections per day, per inspector, though most local jurisdictions average around 20 – 25 (<https://www.isomitigation.com/>). An excessive number of daily inspections significantly reduces the amount of time inspectors can dedicate to each inspection and increases the potential for mistakes and/or omissions. Additionally, the inspectors must work extensive overtime, which increases payroll costs. The Division has incurred approximately \$220,000 in overtime expenses over the last five fiscal years because of staff shortages. This also results in employee burnout, thus increasing turnover and making recruitment more difficult.

Even with the above mitigation measures and anticipated reduction in roof permits, the permit and inspection activity is anticipated to remain at unsustainable levels without additional Division staffing. Utilizing third-party plan review and inspection services is a short-term, stopgap measure but it is not a long-term solution, especially for inspection services as their capacity to provide these services is limited.

Staffing Needs

Staff has analyzed the needs across the Building Division to address immediate significant concerns, in addition to consideration of industry Best Practices. It should be noted that the staffing levels within the Division have been allowed to stagnate for many years, despite the unprecedented growth within the City over the last decade. This stagnation has reached a crisis point, workloads are unmanageable with existing staffing levels, and immediate action to rectify this issue is critical to the continuation of services. The hurricane exacerbated the workload issue, but the City’s population growth and building rate trajectory has been leading to this inevitable point for several years and the hurricane recovery only accelerated the concerns. Table 1, below, provides a list of positions that are critical to the Division’s ability to ensure compliance with State-mandated requirements. Details regarding the need for each position is also provided below.

Table 1. Building Division Position Request

POSITION	NUMBER REQUESTED	SALARY AND BENEFITS
Deputy Building Official	1	\$100,050
Building Inspector	4	\$78,540
Electrical Inspector	1	\$78,540
Mechanical Inspector	1	\$78,540
Development Technician	2	\$62,080
TOTALS	9	\$695,450

Deputy Building Official

North Port has only one employee—the Chief Building Official—who holds a Building Official license through the State of Florida. Florida Statutes require that all jurisdictions maintain at least one person who possesses this license. Without a Building Official, the City cannot issue permits or Certificates of Occupancy. Due to the importance of this role, it is common for jurisdictions of North Port's size to have both a Chief Building Official and a Deputy Building Official. Both the City of Venice and the City of Sarasota have Deputy Building Officials, though neither approaches North Port's population or growth rate. Due to the current lack of redundancy, the Building Official routinely works significantly beyond normal working hours at an unsustainable and unreasonable level.

The hurricane exposed North Port's weakness in this area when it became necessary for the Building Official to assume sole responsibility for reviewing damage assessments for those homes affected by FEMA's 50% Rule. During this time, the Building Official was unavailable for anything other than the most critical non-hurricane related issues.

Outside of emergency recovery, a Deputy Building Official position will ensure that builders and contractors do not have to wait for Certificates of Occupancy to be signed if the Building Official is out of the office due to illness, vacation, or other circumstance. This position would also ensure uninterrupted continuance of operations in future critical situations.

Inspectors (Building, Electrical, Mechanical)

As discussed in detail above, the inspection workload is unsustainable and far beyond professional industry standards. Continuing to operate at this level could not only jeopardize the public health, safety, and welfare, but most certainly result in staff turnover.

Based on past, current, and forecasted trends there is an immediate need for four building (structural) inspectors, one electrical inspector, and one mechanical inspector. This would bring us into the range of 20 – 25 inspections per day in alignment with our neighboring jurisdictions and would ensure inspectors are able to dedicate sufficient time to each inspection.

Development Technicians

The Division's Development Technicians are primarily responsible for intake and processing of all permit applications, data entry into the City's permit software system, and providing information to customers both in-person and by phone. Currently, the Division has four Permit Technicians who provide service at the Permit Counter in City Hall to an average of 450 in-person customers each week.

Before seeing a Development Technician at the Permit Counter, customers check in through the City's online queuing system on their smart phone, computer, or at the kiosk in the lobby of City Hall. On average, each customer waits in the lobby for approximately 27 minutes for a Development Technician to become available. When just one Development Technician is out due to illness or vacation the wait-time for customers increases dramatically and it is not uncommon for waits to exceed one hour.

As part of the processing for both in-person and online permits, Development Technicians must ensure that all required documents are included, forms signed, and contractor licenses are on file and current. Once this process is complete the permits are routed for review by the Plans Reviewers. However, due

to the sheer volume of permits submitted it often takes five business days or longer before the permit is ready to be routed to a Plans Reviewer. This delays contractors and prolongs the construction process.

As mentioned previously, the Division's transition to the Accela permitting system should ultimately reduce the number of people who will choose to visit the Division in person. However, based on the experience of other municipal Building departments that have transitioned to the software, it is anticipated that as the number of online permit submittals increase there will be a corresponding increase in phone calls. Therefore, it is not expected that the need for these positions would be negated by the implementation of the new permit system.

Additional Costs

The Division would need to procure six vehicles for necessary fieldwork related to the requested positions. These vehicles would likely be trucks with 4-wheel drive. At an estimated cost of \$35,000 each, the total expenditure would be approximately \$210,000. Some additional costs would be incurred for laptops, monitors, cellular phones, and other necessary equipment needed for these positions.

Funding

The City's Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) currently lists a Wellen Park General Government Building project, with funding partially comprised of Building Fund monies of approximately \$1,655,400. The Building Division has been moving to an operational system where inspectors do not spend time in the office and conduct business from their trucks, thus reducing the office space needed. This has eliminated the need for field inspectors to have a separate office in Wellen Park. Additionally, the Division anticipates its new permitting software program, Accela, to be operational in 2024 and the need for contractors or property owners to visit the Division in person will be greatly reduced.

Based on Division operations and discussions with the Wellen Park developer and other departments, the proposed General Government Building should not be needed during the current CIP timeline. The City is currently conducting preliminary discussions with Wellen Park regarding amendments to the post-annexation agreement, and there is an understanding that the construction timeline of this facility could be renegotiated to a year beyond the current CIP horizon.

As such, it is requested that the \$1,655,400 of Building Fund monies currently allocated to this project be released back to the Building Fund's budget. Approximately \$1 million of this funding would be utilized to provide 100 percent of the salary and benefit costs of the requested employees and to procure vehicles and other necessary equipment for these positions. The remainder would be placed in budgetary line items to ensure sufficient funds for overtime expenses, third-party building services, and reserves. The Building Division is also out of space, so a portion of the funds would be allocated to reconfiguration and procurement of space-saving modular workstations.

The FY 22-23 Adjusted Budget projected Building Permitting revenues of \$5,106,250 (not including other miscellaneous fees and Fund Balance). As of March 1, 2023, the Building Fund is on target to exceed \$7 million in revenues for FY 22-23. Based on pre-hurricane permit activity, annual revenues exceeding \$7 million are likely to continue in subsequent years due to the recent building fee increases and sustained permit activity for new development. Therefore, there is no forecasted budgetary shortage in subsequent years to maintain these requested positions.