

1. Abstract of the Program

One of the Service Tenets of Stafford County's Customer Service is "How can we make this work?" Stafford's Board of Supervisors answered that question by streamlining their building and development permit processes for residents and businesses and making it easier for them to track their construction projects. The goal was to remove impediments to doing business and to enable individuals to accomplish their dreams of starting a business or renovating their homes. Conceived as part of the Board of Supervisor's Economic Development priority for the community and their Economic Development 10-Point Plan to build a more business friendly environment in Stafford, the new center combined all the steps needed into one central location called the Community Development Services Center (CDSC). Employees were cross-trained to handle multiple transactions. Repetitive fees were cut and some fees were reduced. The CDSC, with a special emphasis on customer service, changed the culture of doing business in Stafford and made it much more business- friendly for citizens and businesses alike. Remarkably, the CDSC, a new service for citizens, was created at no additional cost to the county during a time of limited resources after the economic downturn. More importantly, the Board recognizes that successfully starting a business or even just improving one's home are quality of life issues. Allowing citizens and businesses to conduct business in an easier manner in Stafford County improves the quality of life of all citizens.

2. The Problem/Need for the Program

From 1990 to 2010, Stafford's population doubled from 61,236 to 128,961, and continued to grow with more than 134,000 citizens in 2012. The growth in population was accompanied by a housing boom and bust along with the economic downturn. Instead of being discouraged by the economic downturn, the Board of Supervisors approved an Economic Development 10-Point Plan to make Stafford more business friendly and to draw businesses that would provide family- sustaining wages. They appointed a Board subcommittee to work with staff to evaluate the County's development fees and review process. The goal was to remove obstacles to doing business and hindrances to homeowners who were trying to improve their homes.

The subcommittee, comprised of some board members and staff, examined how Stafford conducts business and discovered that the County's development process could be improved and streamlined. The goal was to direct customers to one office alone where employees could be cross trained to handle any inquiry. This in turn would speed up the turnaround time on permits. Tracking permits could be challenging and customers often had to visit numerous offices to find out the status of a project. Economic Development and Service Excellence are priorities of the Board, so the subcommittee worked with County staff for months to improve the process.

Description of the Program

The solution to the problem became the Community Development Services Center or CDSC. The objective of the CDSC was to streamline the permit application and development processes for customers and internal staff. Stafford wanted to increase the level of customer service and make things easier to draw more quality businesses to the county.

In 2010, the Board of Supervisor's Development Fees and Review Process Committee launched a short online customer survey aimed at developers and others who use Stafford's development services.

A separate subcommittee worked to evaluate the County's development fees and review processes. The extensive work by that committee changed the whole face of business transactions between Stafford and its development customers and formed the basis for the running of the CDSC. The subcommittee examined the cost of doing business in the County and made fees more comprehensive. They improved the transparency of the costs for services and allowed for providing an estimate up front so applicants could know the cost at the start of the process. They clarified the difference between major and minor development, allowing more projects to be classified as minor and exempt from the review process. The subcommittee adopted standards for time limits on when developers could submit plans for approval, allowing staff to clear out inactive projects and speed up approval time. They eliminated the requirement for preliminary site plans and stormwater management concept plans as they found them to be redundant.

County staff held meetings with local engineers, surveyors, builders and other partners to gain input on how to better provide services. A consultant met with internal staff to help with the transition to a new culture of doing business. The information gained led to the Board in 2011 approving the use of \$400,000 from savings generated by two departments, Public Works and Planning and Zoning, to renovate existing space and build the CDSC. Construction began in August 2012 and was completed in October 2012.

The clientele served are both internal and external. CDSC staff is trained in a professional customer service certification program. Center employees attended a six-month series of customer service classes that focused on attitude, commitment to the customer, grammar and enunciation, oral communication, telephone service, active listening skills, problem-solving techniques and exceeding customer expectations. This class was already planned for County staff as a whole and again, was an existing resource used to improve service.

This training, combined with the guidance of the consultant, has changed the whole face of customer service and how staff treats internal staff, and all the County's external stakeholders – citizens, architects, engineers, state and federal agencies, environmental groups and local building associations, etc. The staff knows how to handle any situation with a smile and helpful attitude. The goal is to handle everything for the customer at the CDSC, rather than send customers to different departments to obtain information or documents that they need for their project.

Having the center in one location in what used to be the Planning and Zoning and Public Works departments is extremely beneficial to customers. Instead of being shuttled from one department to another, customers can do all the work they need for their project at the CDSC. But the enhanced service is more than just about a centralized location. The renovated space combined with the new customer service philosophy provides for a much different customer service experience. Visitors enter the CDSC through glass double doors into a bright, cheerful environment where they are immediately greeted with a smile by staff. They receive personal attention from customer service representatives in individual cubicles equipped with chairs for each customer instead of standing at counters. The area is spacious and includes large tables for examining plans and computers for tracking information about a specific project.

Previously, the staffs of Public Works and Planning and Zoning were divided by a rabbit's warren of small, separate offices with walls. The simple act of removing the walls and combining customer service representatives into one location had a big impact on employees. Collaboration and support with each other became a priority when employees started sharing space.

Having staff from different departments working collaboratively in the CDSC has enabled them to build on the work done by the Board subcommittee on streamlining processes. Working together allows them to constantly see where development process steps can be condensed or streamlined to make things easier for the customer. Staff continues to look for ways to do things better and to act on those ideas in innovative ways. For example, zoning technicians are now helping to consolidate resources and accelerate the permit process by performing zoning and Chesapeake Bay reviews on permits. Another example is how proffer/condition and historic reviews are being flagged in the Hansen system. Previously, a permit would meet every requirement and still be denied because of proffer/condition and historic reviews, which were looked at late in the process. Now, those issues are indicated at the beginning of the process and staff know to investigate the issues before going any further.

Next, not only have customer service representatives have been trained in enhanced customer service skills, but they have been cross-trained to handle a wider variety of tasks than before. Staffs from Public Works and Planning and Zoning backgrounds now know how things work in departments other than their own. This enables them to assist a customer from start to finish. Having staff cross-trained in multiple jobs makes for a wiser use of resources.

Before the creation of the CDSC, customers visited several departments, interacting with many members of staff. Now, customers can walk into the CDSC, have one person oversee their case, and get the answers and assistance they need in a timely manner.

3. Responding to the Economic Downturn

When the economic downturn started hit Stafford in 2008, the population had surged and resources were limited. Faced with a more transient population with varying expectations of services, Stafford had to devise a creative approach to expand services at a time when many localities were faced with limited resources. The Board of Supervisors and staff examined

available resources and found a way to re-purpose them to build the CDSC. No new staff were hired for the center. Instead of being defeated by having less revenue, Stafford made the most of existing resources and found a way to increase services.

4. Use of Technology

Stafford County's website was used to obtain input from customers to devise the CDSC. For daily business, the CDSC uses existing computers and software. Internally, the County uses the Hansen computer program to input information for process and applications for development. Customers can use the Integrated Web Response system to access information on the progress of projects. The phones of customer service representatives are also plugged into the County's 311 system so they can assist with customer's development questions quickly.

5. The Cost of the Program

The first big consideration was a location for the CDSC. Stafford renovated an existing space by removing walls between several offices in the Public Works and Planning and Zoning Departments. Removing these walls did not cost the County money.

For the construction of the center, the Board of Supervisors authorized a total of \$400,000. The money came from existing funds resulting from savings in the FY2010 budgets of Public Works and Planning and Zoning.

Existing employees were reclassified to staff the new center. Because the employees were cross-trained to do even more tasks than before, an even bigger rate of return was realized.

The equipment used in the center was the existing equipment already used by employees.

Any county could build their own CDSC by examining their resources and utilizing them in different ways.

6. The Results/Success of the Program

The Board of Supervisors adopted an Economic Ten-Point Plan in 2010 and used that plan as a road map to create a more business friendly community. Economic Development and

Service Excellence encompassed by an overall theme of Fiscal Responsibility and Reducing the Tax Burden are priorities of the Board for the community. The Ten-Point Plan resulted in the creation of the Community Development Services Center. Other by-products of the plan include a cut in real estate taxes, the elimination of the Business, Professional and Occupational (BPOL) tax, the establishment of a Business Advisory Committee, the opening of a classroom in Stafford's Technology and Research Center, and a business retention team whose goal is to help Stafford businesses maintain their successes. All these efforts are paying off. According to recent figures from the Virginia Employment Commission, from 2006-2011, Stafford County had the seventh highest business growth rate in Virginia and the second highest job growth rate. In the last two years, both Fitch Rating Services and Standard and Poor's upgraded Stafford's bond rating to AA.

The work of the Board subcommittee tasked with examining development fees and the review processes eliminated repetitive and burdensome requirements on citizens and businesses. Their efforts resulted in a much more streamlined system that is easily understood by customers.

The opening of the CDSC has improved the average approval time for permits across the board. While each permit has a specific process and differing evaluation times, staff see an improvement in the speed of the process overall. Customer frustration has eased. Many customers have complimented staff on the actual physical space. The Board of Supervisors wanted customers to have a functional and pleasant place to do business as part of their emphasis on being business-friendly. Comments from the customers indicate the CDSC is successful in that. In addition, the staff of the CDSC is professionally trained and can handle any situation or question. Their priority is to get the answer for a citizen and to walk them through what they need to do to make their project successful.

Perhaps the biggest result of the opening of the CDSC is an intangible one – helping to make people's dreams come true. Streamlining the process and removing as many obstacles to success as possible allows people to achieve their dreams whether those dreams are to build a new business in Stafford or renovate their home for an expanding family.

7. Worthiness of an Award

The CDSC is deserving of an achievement award because it is an innovative and cost-effective approach to meeting an important need in the County. Citizens and businesses needed a faster way to move through Stafford's development process. The CDSC accomplishes that by centralizing tasks in one location with more employees with broader abilities. The CDSC is cost-effective as it was built with existing funds and uses cross-training to enhance the value of employees. By literally tearing down the barriers between departments, the CDSC has promoted intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration resulting in a better product for the customers. Stafford used an innovative approach to building the CDSC by utilizing existing resources and examining its own processes to come up with a system that works best for its citizens. Stafford abides by certain principles of responsible, accountable government. Among the tenets of those principles is using innovative practices to run government efficiently and having a balanced budget. The center was created within the context of staying within the parameters of Stafford's principles of responsible and accountable government. The Board of Supervisors established certain priorities they adhere to in governing Stafford County: fiscal responsibility and reducing the tax burden; education; public safety; infrastructure, economic development; and service excellence. These priorities inform everything the Board does. Providing an excellent new service, while being fiscally responsible and avoiding more tax burdens on taxpayers, is every day business for Stafford County.