



PLACER COUNTY GRAND JURY

PLACER LAND USE SYSTEM (PLUS)

**A Follow up to the Audit of the
Community Development Resource Agency**

Report Date: May 31, 2011

Placer Land Use System (PLUS)

Summary

The 2010-2011 Grand Jury, as suggested by the previous Grand Jury, elected to review the results of the 2009 Community Development Resource Agency (CDRA) audit and the 2010 follow-up CDRA audit by the Placer County Auditor-Controller. The Grand Jury found that the financial and management control deficiencies noted in the first audit were essentially corrected prior to the follow-up audit. There were no material deficiencies noted by the follow-up audit. It was, however, identified that the lack of consistent utilization of the Placer Land Use System (PLUS) computer application by CDRA still existed.

The Grand Jury has three recommendations. The first two are to emphasize the role of the PLUS Steering Committee in being pro-active in establishing goals to achieve consistency in the use of PLUS within the County. The third is to modify and expand the role of the PLUS users group.

Background

Placer County Board of Supervisors established the Community Development Resource Agency (CDRA) as an umbrella agency to include the land development departments of Planning, Building, and Engineering and Surveying. The Board's goal, and the Agency's charter, is to provide high-quality, consistent, and prompt land-development services in the County's unincorporated area for residents and developers.

The CDRA has focused on continued improvement in the permit and application review processes, coordination among all County land-use departments and divisions, and overall customer service.

A need for a comprehensive computer application to support land use in the county was identified in 2002. In 2003, Placer County purchased a software package to expedite its land use management practices. The Board of Supervisors approved the purchase of this system. The memorandum to the Supervisors in support of the procurement stated the automated system would assist in the management and processing of land development, code enforcement, and permit issuing functions, as well as a tool for the public to request services. This computer application was named the Placer Land Use System (PLUS) by Placer County.

In 2009, an audit of CDRA was undertaken at the request of the Placer County Executive Officer to evaluate CDRA operations. This audit found and documented numerous discrepancies, including the utilization of the PLUS application. As a result, a subsequent follow-up audit was conducted in the first half of 2010 to assess compliance with the first audit's findings and recommendations.

The 2010–2011 Grand Jury chose to investigate the results of these audits, as suggested by the 2009-2010 Grand Jury.

Investigation Methods

Members of the Grand Jury interviewed seven individuals with varying levels of responsibility in CDRA with a set of questions specifically designed for their function in the organization. Additional interviews were held with other County personnel.

Members conducted a site visit to view the PLUS application in operation at the customer service counter.

Members also reviewed the proposed PLUS Policy Manual and the two audit reports done by the Placer County Auditor-Controller.

Facts

- Financial control discrepancies, identified in the 2009 Audit, were significantly improved prior to the follow-up audit performed in 2010.
- There continues to be inconsistent use of PLUS throughout CDRA, contrary to the recommendation in the audit of 2009.
- PLUS contains data that may be useful to other Placer County organizations.
- Security issues with the PLUS application, identified in the 2009 Audit, have been addressed.
- The current system entry of customer data is manually intensive.
- Performance measures/metrics, although potentially available, are not used to a significant extent.
- PLUS is a mature product with limited vendor support for any future changes or enhancements.
- An updated Policy Manual for the PLUS application is currently in the management review cycle and has been for over four months.
- The Policy Manual contains a PLUS Training Plan as a direct result of the 2009 Audit findings regarding lack of consistency in PLUS use.
- As of late March 2011, the Policy Manual has not been approved.

- There is no strong, universal CDRA management direction regarding consistent and timely updating of the PLUS data by various CDRA organizations.

Findings

- F1. In the Audit of 2009, CDRA was apprised of numerous financial control issues. The Auditor-Controller, in the follow-up Audit, indicated that all control issues had been addressed, and the few remaining issues were of no material importance.
- F2. The Grand Jury finds that two organizations (Permitting and Front Counter Services) within CDRA have embraced the use of PLUS. Other functions within CDRA still view it as a system that staff ultimately has to enter data into, but is not an integral part of their operations. If the data in PLUS is perceived to be accurate and complete, customer service can be more efficient, accurate, and timely in addressing organizational goals.
- F3. The inconsistent application of PLUS in CDRA is not due to training, but to a lack of management commitment that PLUS is an integral part of the operation and therefore a responsibility within every job.
- F4. The updated policy manual identifies a PLUS Steering Committee comprised of senior level management within CDRA. The management review of the Policy Manual has been in process for over four months and is still not complete.
- F5. There is little attention paid to the use of performance data collected by the PLUS system. No one interviewed could identify the use of the reports that are generated by PLUS to validate the operations of the department or division.
- F6. The only group that seems to be mindful of any performance measure need is the front counter operations that uses a software application external to PLUS, QFlow, to track customer queue time.
- F7. There has been a change in the function of the PLUS users group since it was formed. Originally a major activity of the PLUS users group was to answer the question 'how do I do that?'. The primary focus was to identify bugs in the underlying software. Currently the focus of the users group is to discuss and provide guidance into the use of PLUS to enhance CDRA operations.
- F8. PLUS is a mature software application. While the vendor has not made any commitments or published any dates with regard to the end of support of the PLUS system, it is anticipated that this will happen in the foreseeable future. Basic safeguards for CDRA are in place, such as escrow storage for source code protection, and the fact that the system is of sufficient age that very few errors are now being found and they are not of general significance.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends:

- R1. The PLUS Steering Committee establishes goals to ensure that all employees use the PLUS application as the Policy document dictates.
- R2. The PLUS Steering Committee completes the Policy Manual management review and approval process.
- R3. The PLUS Users Group be redirected, and possibly reconstituted, to accomplish the following tasks:
- Devise a method of measuring the efficiency of operations supported by PLUS to provide management with a tool to evaluate the effectiveness of their actions.
 - Develop a plan for a comprehensive PLUS training and education program.
 - Develop a plan to increase the overall utilization and value of the PLUS application to the county.
 - Start planning for the eventual replacement of the PLUS application. Even though there is no indication of near-term support termination, planning for a major upgrade to a system that is integral to operations is nominally a multi-year task.

Request for Response

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Due by August 31, 2011

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