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June 3rd, 2026

Honorable Daniel Lurie
Mayor of San Francisco
City Hall
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place, Room 200
San Francisco, CA 94102

Re
San Francisco Permit Center
OpenGov - Software

Dear Mayor Lurie,

I have been a licensed general, plumbing, and electrical contractor since 1975 and hold an Associate Degree in Building Inspection. Throughout that time, I have been a customer of the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) and its predecessor agencies, giving me more than five decades of firsthand experience navigating San Francisco's permitting system.

To my knowledge, San Francisco is the only jurisdiction that has historically allowed certain permits to be issued over the counter. The current administration is proposing to eliminate over-the-counter permitting entirely and replace it with a fully online process.

At present, trade permits may be obtained either online or over the counter. For these permit types, the process is generally straightforward and efficient. In fact, trade permits issued through the current system are approved instantly. However, testing of the new OpenGov platform indicates that this level of efficiency will be lost. Under the new system, trade permits are no longer issued immediately. Similarly, permits for doors, windows, siding, fire alarm systems, and sprinkler systems must now be processed online. While some applications are approved within a few days, the process is no longer instantaneous and may take significantly longer than applicants have historically experienced.

Many property owners, homeowners, and design professionals already struggle with online permitting platforms, particularly when they are unfamiliar with permitting requirements, digital workflows, or software systems.

Requiring all applicants to use an online-only process creates additional barriers and can lead to delays, confusion, and increased reliance on City staff for assistance.

For simple permits that do not require plans, an online process may be appropriate. However, permits involving drawings present a very different challenge. These applications often require review and coordination among multiple departments and reviewers. Under the current system, permits can be reviewed within a matter of days, with comments issued promptly when revisions are necessary. Permits involving plans, however, are rarely approved in less than three to four weeks, if not longer.

Data from OpenGov appears to validate these concerns. While permits for doors, windows, and siding are sometimes issued within a couple of days, my observation is that many of these expedited approvals are likely the result of applicants encountering difficulties navigating the OpenGov system and subsequently seeking assistance at the Permit Center. In these cases, staff help applicants complete and submit their applications online, which I believe contribute to the faster processing times. Nevertheless, many permits take considerably longer, with some approvals exceeding 40 days.

The data for sprinkler and fire alarm permits is even more concerning. Although a small number are issued within a week, the majority require between seven and 47 days for approval. These timelines represent a significant departure from the efficiency that applicants have historically experienced and raise important questions about whether the new system is achieving its intended goal of streamlining permit issuance.

Over-the-counter permitting offers significant practical and economic advantages. It allows the City to collect permit fees immediately and enables contractors and property owners to begin work without unnecessary delay. Faster permit issuance accelerates construction activity, supports local businesses, and helps projects move from planning to completion more efficiently.

Tenant improvement (TI) projects in high-rise buildings provide a particularly important example. These projects often involve multiple sets of drawings and extensive review requirements. Because the plans are frequently based on existing as-built conditions, the review process can be complex. Requiring all such permits to be processed exclusively online risks creating avoidable delays that can disrupt construction schedules, postpone tenant occupancy, and increase project costs. For commercial projects, time is often a critical factor, and permitting delays can have significant financial consequences for both tenants and property owners.

Another significant drawback of eliminating over-the-counter permitting is the loss of direct interaction between applicants and reviewers. At the permit counter, applicants can ask questions, clarify requirements, and resolve issues in real time. This face-to-face communication often prevents misunderstandings and allows projects to move forward quickly.

In contrast, online-only systems rely heavily on electronic correspondence, where simple questions and clarifications can take days or even weeks to resolve. Some departments already experience lengthy review times for issues that previously could have been addressed in a matter of minutes at the counter.

In summary, while online permitting may be appropriate for straightforward applications, eliminating over-the-counter permitting entirely introduces significant risks. It threatens to lengthen approval timelines, reduce opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving, increase uncertainty for applicants, and slow construction activity throughout the city. Before making such a fundamental change, San Francisco should carefully consider whether the benefits of convenience outweigh the potential costs to efficiency, economic activity, and customer service.

On another note, I understand that the current DBI Permit Tracking System will be discontinued; however, OpenGov does not appear to provide an equivalent permit-tracking function. Please refer to the sample DBI permit, which includes critical information such as the permit status, assigned personnel, comments, and, most importantly, the required special inspections. For a permit to be finalized, all required special inspections must be completed and properly documented. Without access to this information, it is impossible to determine which special inspections are required for a given permit. Each special inspection is identified by a specific code that does not appear on the construction drawings, even though the drawings reference the required inspections.

I consider this a significant issue. If the required special inspections are not readily accessible and identifiable, there is no reliable way to verify compliance, and DBI will be unable to finalize the permit. Ensuring continued access to special inspection requirements and records is therefore essential to the permit closeout process.

Attached to this letter is the chart from the data that was gathered from OpenGov, a sample OpenGov permit, and a DBI sample permit.

I feel that OpenGov lacks the level of transparency that is necessary for effective permit tracking and management.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "H. Karnilowicz", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Henry Karnilowicz

CC:

San Francisco Board of Supervisors

Randy Shaw, Executive Director, Tenderloin Housing Clinic

San Francisco Chronicle