



INTRODUCTION

On an annual basis, the City of San José's Development Service Partners¹ (Partners) collectively respond to 160,000 phone inquiries at the Development Center, process 700 planning applications, issue 33,000 building permits, and conduct 190,000 field inspections. As part of its commitment to provide high quality services that meet the needs of its customers, the Development Services program has sought to measure customer satisfaction and gain insight into how services can be improved through several feedback mechanisms. In addition to informal verbal and written feedback, for several years the Program has attempted to measure customer satisfaction through unscientific mail and E-mail surveys made available to customers at several key milestones in the development process.

Although all of these feedback mechanisms are valuable sources of information for the Partners in that they provide timely and accurate information about the opinions of specific customers, they do not necessarily provide an accurate picture of the Development Services program customer base as a whole. For the most part, the methods rely on the customer to initiate the feedback. Consequently, the methods suffer from what is known as a self-selection bias—the Partners receives feedback only from those customers who are motivated enough to initiate the feedback process. Moreover, these customers tend to be those who are either very pleased or very displeased with the service they have received. Their collective opinions are thus not necessarily representative of the program's customer base as a whole.

The motivation for the current study was to design and employ a methodology that would avoid the self-selection bias noted above and thereby provide statistically reliable measures of customer satisfaction among the Program's customer base.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY Customers form their overall opinions about a product or service based on a number of specific factors. Collectively, these factors shape customer satisfaction—and therefore can also be thought of as *key drivers* of customer satisfaction. The first step to providing excellent customer service is thus to understand *which* factors shape customers' opinions about the services provided by the Development Services Partners, as well as how customers prioritize the factors/drivers when forming their opinions of the Partners' performance.

The research framework for this study was originally developed by True North in 2006 and proceeded in two phases. During the design stage of the study, True North discussed performance issues with City staff, reviewed past survey findings, and considered relevant findings from similar studies conducted with Development Services Departments from other cities to identify potential key drivers of customer satisfaction. Having identified the potential key drivers of customer satisfaction, True North subsequently designed two versions of a customer survey to measure customers' opinions and experiences on each of the key dimensions. Two versions of the questionnaire were created to accommodate the differences between ministerial and discretionary projects. As long as they comply with the Municipal Code, *ministerial* projects do not require a public hearing and are approved administratively by the City (e.g., electrical panel upgrade). In

1. The City's Development Services Partners include the Planning Division, Building Division, Public Works Department, and Bureau of Fire Prevention.

contrast, a *discretionary* project (e.g., conditional use permit, zoning change) requires a public hearing. Even if the project complies with the Municipal Code, the decision-makers still have some discretion in deciding whether to approve the project.

The questionnaires and interviewing protocol used for the 2008 study are nearly identical to those first employed in 2006. A total of 1,008 randomly selected customers who were associated with at least one permit between January 1, 2008 and December 31, 2008 participated in the study via telephone or online at a secure website hosted and managed by True North. Data were collected between January 27 and February 26, 2009. The telephone interviews averaged 13 minutes for ministerial customers, 14 minutes for discretionary customers. A full description of the methodology used for the survey is included later in this report (see *Questionnaires & Toplines* on page 75).

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE As noted above, this is not the first statistically reliable customer satisfaction study conducted for the Development Services Department. A similar study was first developed and administered in 2006 and again in 2007. Because there is a natural interest in tracking the Department's performance in meeting the evolving needs of its customers, where appropriate the results of the 2008 study are compared with the results of identical questions used in the 2006 and 2007 surveys. In such cases, True North conducted the appropriate tests of statistical significance to identify changes that likely reflect actual changes in customer opinion between 2007 and 2008—as opposed to being due to chance associated with selecting two samples independently and at random. Differences between the two studies are identified as *statistically significant* if we can be 95% confident that the differences reflect an actual change in customer opinion between the two studies. Statistically significant differences within response categories over time are denoted by the † symbol which appears in the figure next to the appropriate response value.

ORGANIZATION OF REPORT This report is designed to meet the needs of readers who prefer a summary of the findings as well as those who are interested in the details of the results. For those who seek an overview of the findings, the sections titled *Just the Facts* and *Conclusions* are for you. They provide a summary of the most important factual findings of the survey in bullet-point format and a discussion of their implications. For the interested reader, this section is followed by a more detailed question-by-question discussion of the results from the survey by topic area (see *Table of Contents*), as well as a description of the methodology employed for collecting and analyzing the data. And, for the truly ambitious reader, the questionnaires used for the interviews are contained at the back of this report, a complete set of crosstabulations is contained in Appendix A, and a complete list of verbatim responses (gathered from Question 16 of the ministerial version and Question 15 of the discretionary version) is contained in Appendix B.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS True North thanks the staff at the City of San José who contributed their valuable input during the design stage of this study. Their expertise, insight and local knowledge improved the overall quality of the research presented here.

DISCLAIMER The statements and conclusions in this report are those of the authors (Dr. Timothy McLarney and Richard Sarles) at True North Research, Inc. and not necessarily those of the City of San José’s Development Services Partners. Any errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors.

ABOUT TRUE NORTH True North is a full-service survey research firm that is dedicated to providing public agencies with a clear understanding of the values, perceptions, priorities and concerns of their constituents and customers. Through designing and implementing scientific surveys, focus groups and one-on-one interviews, as well as expert interpretation of the findings, True North helps its clients to move with confidence when making strategic decisions in a variety of areas—such as planning, policy evaluation, performance management, organizational development, establishing fiscal priorities, and developing effective communication campaigns.

During their careers, Dr. McLarney (President) and Mr. Sarles (Principal Researcher) have designed and conducted 500 survey research studies for public agencies—including more than 300 studies for California municipalities and special districts.



JUST THE FACTS

The following is an outline of the main factual findings from the survey. For the reader's convenience, we have organized the findings according to the section titles used in the body of this report. Thus, if you would like to learn more about a particular finding, simply turn to the appropriate report section.

PROCESS, ROLE & PROJECT TYPE

- Forty-two percent (42%) of **ministerial**² customers surveyed were personally involved in all three stages of the permitting process on their most recent project—permit application and issuance, plan check, and building inspection. An additional 39% of customers were involved in two of the three stages, whereas a minority of customers (19%) were personally involved in just one of the key stages for their most recent project.
- Forty-two percent (42%) of **discretionary** customers surveyed were personally involved in all three stages of their most recent project—permit application, plan review and public hearing. An additional 43% of customers were involved in two of the three stages, whereas 15% of discretionary customers were personally involved in only one of the key stages on their most recent project.
- Over three-quarters (76%) of **discretionary** customers in 2008 reported that they personally worked with a Project Manager assigned by the City on their most recent project.
- When **ministerial** customers were asked to describe their role on their most recent project, 47% selected contractor, 24% mentioned owner, 23% chose agent or representative, 18% mentioned architect, 18% described their role as permit runner, 11% chose engineer, and 4% indicated that their role was something 'other' than the options previously mentioned.
- The most common role among **discretionary** customers was owner (33%), followed by architect (27%), and contractor (26%). Twenty-four percent (24%) described their role as an agent or representative, 14% as planner, 14% as an engineer, 14% served as a permit runner, and 5% indicated that their role was something other than the previously mentioned options.
- Among **ministerial** customers, 47% described their most recent project as commercial, 48% described it as residential in nature, 4% described it as mixed-use, and 1% were not sure.
- **Discretionary** customers were most likely to describe their most recent project as commercial (50%). Approximately 37% described their project as residential, 12% indicated that it was a mixed-use project, and 1% were not sure.
- When **ministerial** customers were asked to further describe the nature of their project, the dominant category among residential projects in 2008 was remodel or addition (51%), followed by new construction (13%). For *commercial* projects, half of ministerial customers described the project as a tenant improvement (50%) in 2008, whereas 16% selected new construction.

2. As long as they comply with the Municipal Code, *ministerial* projects do not require a public hearing and are approved administratively by the City (e.g., electrical panel upgrade). In contrast, a *discretionary* project requires a public hearing (e.g., conditional use permit, zoning change). Even if the project complies with the Municipal Code, the decision-makers still have some discretion in deciding whether to approve the project.

OVERALL SATISFACTION

- Overall, four out of five **ministerial** customers (80%) in 2008 indicated that they were either very (48%) or somewhat (32%) satisfied with the service that they received from the Development Services Partners on their most recent project. Eighteen percent (18%) of respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the Partners' performance, and 1% were unsure.
- Approximately three-quarters of **discretionary** customers (75%) indicated that they were either very (32%) or somewhat (43%) satisfied with the service that they received on their most recent project in 2008. Less than one-quarter (24%) of respondents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the Partners' performance, and approximately 1% were unsure.

PERMIT APPLICATION & ISSUANCE

- Ninety percent (90%) of **ministerial** customers indicated that they were personally involved in the permit application and issuance stage on their most recent project.
- More than 85% of **ministerial** customers agreed that staff at the permit counter were courteous (93%), responsive (89%), accessible (89%), helpful (89%), knowledgeable (86%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (87%).
- The vast majority of **ministerial** customers also agreed that they received a clear explanation of the fees, taxes and deposits (78%), that the fees and taxes were assessed accurately (85%), and that the wait time at the permit counter before being assisted by staff was reasonable (87%).
- **Ministerial** customers were also generally satisfied with staff's efforts to communicate the process and steps needed to obtain a permit (78%), and provide clear, correct instructions about the documents needed to apply for a permit (81%).
- Overall, 85% of **ministerial** customers in 2008 indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received during the permit application stage on their most recent project.
- Eighty-nine percent (89%) of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were personally involved in the permit application stage on their most recent project.
- At least 80% of **discretionary** customers agreed that staff at the permit counter were courteous (96%), responsive (90%), helpful (89%), accessible (87%), knowledgeable (83%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (90%).
- More than eight-in-ten **discretionary** customers also agreed that the wait time at the permit counter before being assisted by staff was reasonable (87%), the process and steps needed to submit a permit application were clearly communicated (83%), and that he or she received clear and correct instructions about the documents needed to apply for a permit (82%).
- **Discretionary** customers were relatively less in agreement that fees were assessed accurately (73%) and that they received a clear explanation of the fees (72%).
- Overall, 86% of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received during the permit application stage on their most recent project.

PLAN CHECK & PLAN REVIEW

- Seventy-three percent (73%) of **ministerial** customers reported they were personally involved in the plan check stage of their most recent project.
- More than 80% of **ministerial** customers agreed that plan check staff were courteous (95%), knowledgeable (90%), responsive (87%), helpful (87%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (83%).
- A similarly high percentage of **ministerial** customers also agreed that plan check comments were clear and understandable (85%), were based on the code (83%), were consistent (80%), made sense for the project (80%), and the number of plan rechecks was reasonable (84%).
- When compared to the other performance dimensions tested, **ministerial** customers expressed slightly lower levels of satisfaction with the timing of plan correction requests (79%), the reasonableness of the turn-around time set by the City for plan check (79%), and the adequacy of communication between city staff about the project during plan check (77%).
- Overall, 82% of **ministerial** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received during the plan check stage.
- Eighty-six percent (86%) of **discretionary** customers reported they were personally involved in the plan review stage of their most recent project.
- More than seven-out-of-ten **discretionary** customers agreed that plan check staff were courteous (95%), helpful (82%), knowledgeable (81%), responsive (72%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (76%).
- Although at least two-thirds of **discretionary** customers also felt that plan review comments were clear and understandable (81%), were based on the code (70%), and the number of plan rechecks was reasonable (76%), fewer perceived that the comments and corrections made sense for the project (64%), and that the comments and corrections were consistent (69%).
- **Discretionary** customers expressed the lowest levels of satisfaction with the timing of plan correction requests (58%), the reasonableness of the turn-around time set by the City for plan review (64%), the City's performance in meeting the target date set for completing plan review (58%), and the adequacy of communication between city staff about the project during plan review (59%).
- Overall, 72% of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received during the plan review stage.

PROJECT MANAGER

- Seventy-six percent (76%) of **discretionary** customers indicated they personally worked with a Project Manager assigned by the City on their most recent project.
- At least 80% of **discretionary** customers agreed that the Project Manager was courteous (95%), helpful (87%), knowledgeable (86%), and responsive (80%).
- More than two-thirds of **discretionary** customers also agreed that the Project Manager communicated clearly regarding the process and steps needed to get to a public hearing (88%),

that once all of the documents were ready, the Project Manager scheduled the hearing within a reasonable amount of time (87%), the Project Manager provided reasonable estimates of the processing costs throughout the project (74%), and that the project comment letter was accurate and complete (79%).

- Overall, 78% of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received from the Project Manager on their most recent discretionary project.

PUBLIC HEARING

- Fifty-one percent (51%) of **discretionary** customers indicated they were personally involved in the public hearing stage on their most recent project.
- More than 90% of **discretionary** customers agreed that staff represented their project in a fair, professional manner (96%), that they were given adequate information by staff about how the public hearing process would go (94%), that the comment letter provided clear and correct instructions about the documents needed before a public hearing could be scheduled (93%), that the appeal process is fair and reasonable (92%), and that the decision-makers were fair in how they made their decisions (91%).
- Overall, 92% of **discretionary** customers said they were satisfied with the service they received during the public hearing stage.

BUILDING INSPECTIONS

- Sixty percent (60%) of **ministerial** customers indicated they were personally involved in the inspection stage on their most recent project.
- The vast majority of **ministerial** customers agreed that inspectors arrived on-time for scheduled appointments (91%) and were courteous (93%), knowledgeable (92%), helpful (90%), responsive (90%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (87%).
- Although more than eight out of ten **ministerial** customers agreed that written notices and corrections were clear and understandable (87%) and that inspectors only requested a change if it was required to meet code (85%), the levels of agreement were somewhat lower with respect to the perceived consistency of notices and corrections issued by different inspectors on the project (76%), the consistency of inspectors' comments with those of plan check staff (78%), and that changes were requested only if they made sense for the project (80%).
- Overall, 88% of ministerial customers agreed that they were satisfied with the service they received during the inspection stage of the process.

FIRE DEPARTMENT

- Thirty-six percent (36%) of **ministerial** customers surveyed indicated that they had received permit, project review, or inspection services from San José's Fire Department in the six months prior to the interview. The corresponding figure among **discretionary** customers was 48%.

- At least 90% of **ministerial** customers agreed that Fire Department staff were courteous (97%), knowledgeable (95%), helpful (95%), responsive (91%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (92%), and that wait time at the permit counter was reasonable (90%).
- At least 85% of **ministerial** customers also agreed that plan review comments and corrections were clear and understandable (89%), that process and steps needed to obtain a clearance or permit were clearly communicated by Fire Department staff (89%), that plan review comments and corrections were consistent (85%), and that the plan review process was completed by the target date (85%).
- When compared to the other dimensions tested, **ministerial** customers expressed slightly lower levels of satisfaction with respect to communication/coordination between Departments during plan review (76%) and the reasonableness of the turn-around time set for plan review (81%).
- Overall, 87% of **ministerial** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received from the Fire Department.
- At least 85% of **discretionary** customers agreed that Fire Department staff were courteous (96%), knowledgeable (92%), responsive (91%), helpful (87%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (89%).
- Although nearly nine out of ten **discretionary** customers also agreed that the wait time at the permit counter before being assisted by Fire Department staff was reasonable (89%) and that plan review comments and corrections were clear and understandable (89%), a smaller percentage agreed that plan review comments and corrections were consistent (79%), or that the plan review process was completed by the target date set by the Fire Department (84%).
- When compared to the other dimensions tested, **discretionary** customers were least satisfied with the communication/coordination between Departments during plan review (66%).
- Overall, 86% of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received from the Fire Department.

PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT

- Eighteen percent (18%) of **ministerial** customers surveyed indicated that they had received permit, project review, or inspection services from San José's Public Works Department in the six months prior to the interview. The corresponding figure among **discretionary** customers was 38%.
- At least 85% of **ministerial** customers agreed that Public Works staff were courteous (93%), knowledgeable (87%), helpful (86%), responsive (85%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (86%).
- At least three-quarters of **ministerial** customers also agreed that the wait time at the permit counter before being assisted by Public Works staff was reasonable (89%), that plan review comments and corrections were clear and understandable (83%), that plan review comments and corrections were consistent (83%), that the process and steps needed to obtain a clearance or permit were clearly communicated (77%), that the turn-around time set by the Public Works Department for plan review was reasonable (77%), that the plan review process was

completed by the target date set by the Public Works Department (83%), and that there was adequate communication/coordination between Departments during plan review (76%).

- Overall, 79% of **ministerial** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received from the Public Works Department on recent projects.
- At least three-quarters of **discretionary** customers agreed that Public Works staff were courteous (93%), knowledgeable (83%), helpful (81%), responsive (78%), and made an effort to understand their needs as a customer (82%).
- Most **discretionary** customers also agreed that the wait time at the permit counter before being assisted by Public Works staff was reasonable (85%), that plan review comments and corrections were clear and understandable (71%), and that the process and steps needed to obtain a clearance or permit were clearly communicated (68%).
- When compared to the other dimensions tested, **discretionary** customers expressed somewhat lower levels of satisfaction with respect to the Public Works Department's completion of the plan review process by the target date (62%), the communication/coordination between Departments during plan review (55%), the consistency of plan review comments and corrections (63%), and the reasonableness of the turn-around time set by the Department for plan review (67%).
- Overall, 71% of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were satisfied with the service they received from the Public Works Department on recent projects.

INFORMATION ACCESS

- More than three-quarters of **ministerial** customers indicated that they were either very satisfied (36%) or somewhat satisfied (44%) with the Partners' efforts to make information available to them through the Development Services website, brochures, and meetings.
- Approximately 64% of **ministerial** customers reported that they had visited the Development Services' website in the 12 months prior to the interview.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of **ministerial** customers who had visited the Development Services' website indicated that they were satisfied with the content of the site.
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of **discretionary** customers indicated that they were either very satisfied (31%) or somewhat satisfied (54%) with the Partners' efforts to make development services information available to them through the Development Services website, brochures, and meetings.
- Seventy percent (70%) of **discretionary** customers reported that they had visited the Development Services' website in the 12 months prior to the interview.
- Eighty-six percent (86%) of **discretionary** customers who had visited the Development Services website reported that they were satisfied with the content of the site.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- When **ministerial** customers were provided with an open-ended opportunity to suggest changes or improvements in the area of development services that they would most like the City to make, the most common response to this question among ministerial customers in

2008 was 'not sure' (21%), followed by no changes/everything is fine (18%). Among the specific improvements suggested, clarifying/standardizing/reducing fees (8%), improving online access to information (7%), and decreasing turnaround times (4%) were the top suggestions.

- When **discretionary** customers were provided with an open-ended opportunity to suggest changes or improvements in the area of development services that they would most like the City to make, the most common response was 'not sure' (15%), and no changes/everything is fine was the third most common response (10%). Among the specific improvements suggested, clarifying/standardizing/reducing fees (13%), improving intra-departmental communication (7%), and improving the responsiveness and attentiveness of department staff (7%) were the top suggestions.

PERCEPTIONS OF CITY

- At least three-quarters of **ministerial** customers generally agreed that the City of San José's Development Services Partners' care about their customers (81%), do an adequate job balancing the interests of developers with the interests of the communities that will be affected by a project (79%), and have improved customer service in the past 12 months (77%).
- Approximately two-thirds of **ministerial** customers perceived that the Partners' acknowledge a mistake when it has been made (72%), and do their best to fix a mistake when one occurs (65%).
- Approximately 82% of **discretionary** customers generally agreed that the City of San José's Development Services Partners' care about their customers.
- Approximately three-quarters of **discretionary** customers agreed that the Partners do an adequate job balancing the interests of developers with the interests of the communities that will be affected by a project (74%), and have improved customer service in the past 12 months (72%).
- The proportion of **discretionary** customers who felt that the Partners' acknowledge a mistake when it has been made (62%) and do their best to fix a mistake when one occurs (66%) was somewhat lower.



CONCLUSIONS

As noted in the *Introduction*, this study was designed to provide the City of San José's Development Services Partners with a statistically reliable understanding of customers' satisfaction, priorities and needs as they relate to services provided by the Program. In addition to providing the Partners with a means of measuring and tracking their performance, this study gathers information that can assist the Partners in making sound, strategic decisions in a variety of areas—including prioritizing service improvements and enhancements, planning, policy evaluation, staffing, training and budgeting.

Whereas subsequent sections of this report are devoted to conveying the detailed results of the survey, in this section we attempt to 'see the forest through the trees' and note how the collective results of the survey answer some of the key questions that motivated the research. The following conclusions are based on True North's interpretations of the 2008 survey results, comparisons to the 2006 and 2007 survey results, as well as the firm's experience conducting similar studies for Development Services Departments in other California municipalities.

HOW WELL IS DEVELOPMENT SERVICES PERFORMING OVERALL? Considering that the Development Services Partners have a *regulatory* relationship with their customers and that they must balance the interests of developers with the interests of the communities that will be affected by a project, the results of the study indicate that the Partners are performing quite well in what are often difficult circumstances. Moreover, the results clearly indicate that the Partners have improved their performance in nearly a dozen key service areas during the past year, as well as sustained *all* of the improvements that were made between 2006 and 2007.

In the baseline year of this study (2006), approximately three-quarters of ministerial customers and two-thirds of discretionary customers indicated that they were generally satisfied with the Partners' performance in meeting their needs on their most recent projects. Not only have the overall levels of satisfaction increased for both customer groups since 2006, the magnitude of the change and the *intensity* of satisfaction has increased significantly during this period. For example, the percentage of discretionary customers who were satisfied with the Partners' performance increased from 66% in 2006 to 75% in 2008, and the percentage of ministerial customers who reported being *very* satisfied has similarly grown from 39% to 48% during this period.

The vast majority of ministerial and discretionary customers also perceived that the Partners' have improved their customer service in the past year, gave high marks to the Partners' efforts to communicate and make information available to customers, and indicated that the Partners do an adequate job balancing the interests of developers with the interests of the communities that will be affected by a project.

Perhaps most importantly, the Department has continued along the path of improvement it embarked upon in 2007. In the 2007 study, the Department had improved its performance in 31 specific areas and declined in just three areas. Of the 12 specific service dimensions where customers noted a statistically significant difference in the Department's performance in 2008, 11 of the changes were in the positive direction (see Table 1).



TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF SERVICE DIMENSIONS WITH SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN 2008

Positive Performance Changes	
Discretionary	Overall satisfaction: Service during most recent discretionary project
	Overall satisfaction: Information availability, accessibility
	Agreement: Received clear, correct instructions about permit app docs (Permit Application Stage)
	Agreement: Plan review comments, corrections were consistent (Project Review Stage)
	Agreement: Plan review staff were helpful (Project Review Stage)
	Agreement: Process, steps to get to public hearing clearly communicated (Project Manager)
	Agreement: Project comment letter was accurate and complete (Project Manager)
	Agreement: Project manager scheduled hearing within reasonable time (Project Manager)
	Agreement: Comment letter provided clear instructions about docs needed (Public Hearing Process)
	Agreement: Overall, satisfied with public hearing stage (Public Hearing Process)
	Agreement: Turn-around time for plan review was reasonable (Fire Department Interaction)
Negative Performance Changes	
Discretionary	Agreement: The fees were assessed accurately (Permit Application Stage)

WHERE ARE THE PARTNERS PERFORMING PARTICULARLY WELL? Perhaps the most important recommendation—one that is occasionally overlooked in customer satisfaction research—is for the Partners to recognize the many things that they do well and to focus on continuing to perform at a high level in these areas. As noted throughout this report, customers were generally pleased with the Partners’ performance in many areas—especially the courtesy, knowledge, responsiveness and helpfulness exhibited by Development Services staff. The Partners are also clearly on a path of improvement since 2006. The top priority for the Partners should thus be to do what it takes to maintain the high quality of services in areas where customers have come to expect the Partners to perform well.

For convenience, we have organized the following discussion according to the key drivers of customer satisfaction that are typically found among customers of Development Services Departments.³ The areas where the Partners are currently performing particularly well include accessibility, responsiveness, staff competency and sufficiency, and attitude/culture.

Accessibility When customers need assistance from Development Services, they want to have reasonable access by phone, fax, Internet, E-mail and/or in-person (as appropriate) to the information and/or staff member who can resolve their issues. In general, customers gave the Development Services staff high marks for accessibility.

Responsiveness Customers want Development Services staff to be responsive to their needs. Wait time is one of the key aspects of responsiveness and refers to the time that customers actively wait at the counter, on the phone, or at a project site to receive service from staff on a particular issue. Long waits times on the phone, in-person, or when expecting a response from staff are frustrating for customers and should be avoided. The concept of wait time applies not

3. True North has completed over 50 qualitative interviews and more than 9,000 survey interviews with customers of Development Services Departments in California. The key drivers of customer satisfaction discussed in this section are a subset of the most important drivers based on our collective experience working with San José’s Development Services Partners and similar departments in other cities.

only to the availability of personnel, but also to materials, records and decisions that must be made on a project for it to move forward.

The Department received mixed reviews with respect to responsiveness. On the positive side, the vast majority of customers indicated that the wait times at the permit application counter were reasonable, and ministerial customers gave increasingly high marks for responsiveness to inspectors, plan check staff, and to staff at the permit application counter. Among discretionary customers, however, a sizeable minority continued to indicated that staff could be more responsive, citing this as one of their top three desired improvements.

Staff Competency and Sufficiency The competency and number of staff directly affect many of the other factors identified in this report—such as communication, consistency and timeliness—so it is worth highlighting this factor as its own category. The bottom line is that customers expect Development Services to have a sufficient number of adequately trained staff who have the knowledge needed to help them resolve issues in an efficient manner.

Staff competency and sufficiency are areas where Development Services received consistently high marks. At least three-quarters of customers agreed that staff at the permit application, plan review *and* inspection stages were knowledgeable—and lack of staff was specifically mentioned as an issue by less than 3% of customers during the study. The significant improvement that ministerial customers perceived in the knowledge of staff at all three stages (permit counter, plan check, and inspections) in 2007 was also sustained in 2008.

Attitude/Culture A consistent theme of research among Development Services Departments is the importance that customers place on how they are treated by staff. The bottom line is that a good attitude on the part of staff appears to go a long way in terms of keeping a customer satisfied as they navigate what is a complex and, at times, frustrating process. Customers want to interact with staff who are professional, respectful of their time, are solution oriented as opposed to problem focused, and are helpful. From the top down, customers want a Development Services Program that is concerned about its customers' interests and acts accordingly.

In general, customers continued to hold very positive perceptions of Development Services staff with respect to their interest in serving customers' needs, their courtesy, and their helpfulness. This pattern was consistent across the three permitting stages, with permit counter, plan review and inspection staff all receiving very high marks. In the past year, moreover, discretionary customers noted a significant improvement in the helpfulness of plan review staff. The vast majority of customers also perceived that the Partners care about their customers.

WHERE SHOULD THE PARTNERS FOCUS ON IMPROVEMENT? In the spirit of constant improvement, the study identified aspects of the Partners' performance that could be enhanced or improved—if only from the perspective of a minority of customers. The key areas of improvement are with respect to communication, consistency, accountability, and timeliness of performance. Although these areas were also at the top of the list for improvement in 2006 and 2007, it should be noted that the Partners posted statistically significant improvements in each of the areas in the past year.

Communication There are many aspects of communication that appear to shape customers' perceptions of, and attitudes about, the Development Services Program. Customers desire communications that are clear, specific, thorough and correct. This applies to both staff-customer communications and communications between staff assigned to a project, as well as to verbal communications and written reports, comments and instructions. Customers also want regular communication (or at least the ability to obtain the information) regarding the status of projects as they move through the process. By communicating in this way, the Partners will enable customers to better navigate the submittal, review and inspection processes and avoid problems—such as late hits during plan review—that are costly in terms of time and money.

With respect to communication, customers generally recognize that the Partners are doing an admirable job in making information available to customers via the Development Services website, brochures, and meetings. Overall, approximately three-quarters of customers indicated that they were satisfied with the Partners' performance in this respect, with discretionary customers noting a significant improvement in this area in 2008.

Communication was an area that discretionary customers identified a number of significant improvements in the Partners' performance during the past year (see Table 1). Said improvements were widespread, occurring in the permit application stage, the plan review stage, and by the Project Manager leading up to the public hearing. Despite statistically significant improvements in various aspects of communication during the past year, improving the clarity of staff-customer communications, as well as improving inter- and intra-departmental communication on specific projects, remain as priorities from the customers' perspective. It is worth noting that perceptions of staff's performance in communicating with customers or other staff members continue to be among the key factors that distinguished customers who were satisfied with the Partners' overall performance from those who were dissatisfied.

Consistency Customers desire a process that is fair and predictable, which requires consistency in both the structure and application of fees, rules, policies and procedures. Put simply, the same rules and procedures should apply to similar projects—they should not vary because of the individual staff members assigned to accept, review or inspect a project or due to political concerns. Inconsistent (and subjective) interpretations of codes and regulations should be avoided. Consistency between Development Services staff across stages of the permitting process is also important to keep projects on track.

Although most customers gave the Partners positive reviews with respect to consistency (and there was a statistically significant improvement in the perceived consistency of plan review comments and corrections among discretionary customers in 2008), some customers noted that they received inconsistent comments and corrections during plan review, as well as conflicting instructions for a given project between plan review and inspection staff, or between different inspectors. Concern regarding consistency (and coordination between departments that impacts consistency) continued to be particularly pronounced among discretionary customers and when customers were commenting on the plan review stage or projects that involved the Public Works Department. Setting and maintaining clear, consistent standards was among the top specific improvements sought by both ministerial and discretionary customers.

Accountability Customers want a Development Services Program that is accountable to them. So long as customers uphold their end of the deal, they feel that the Partners should uphold their end. This applies to processing projects according agreed-upon schedules, taking ownership of mistakes and fixing them in a proactive manner, and all types of decisions and actions.

The survey results indicate that this continues to be a priority area for improvement. Although most customers gave the Partners' positive reviews, a sizeable minority felt that the Partners often refuse to acknowledge a mistake they have made and/or do not do their best to fix the mistake. This pattern was especially pronounced among discretionary customers. Completing the plan review or plan check process by the target date set by the City was also consistently among the performance dimensions for which the Partners received the lowest satisfaction ratings. It is important to note, however, that the ability of the Partners to meet the original schedule is based, in part, on whether customers provide documents in a timely manner and the integrity of the plans they submit. Also, between 2007 and 2008, discretionary customers noted significant improvement in the turn-around time set by Fire Department staff for plan reviews.

Project Time Lines/Timeliness The adage "time is money" applies in force to customers of the Development Services Program. Accordingly, customers want the Partners to prepare and adhere to reasonable and quantifiable time lines. Staff actions that delay projects—such as miscommunication, inconsistencies and late hits—are especially frustrating for customers, as are processes that are unnecessarily bureaucratic and time-consuming.

The significant improvements that ministerial customers recognized in 2007 with respect to wait times at the permit counter, the timing of plan correction requests, and completing plan review according to the agreed-upon target date were maintained in 2008. Discretionary customers also recognized in 2008 that Project Managers have improved significantly in scheduling a public hearing on a project within a reasonable amount of time. These positive improvements notwithstanding, the study clearly indicates that customers would continue to appreciate anything the Partners' can do to further clarify and simplify the permitting process and thereby reduce the time it takes to complete their projects. This is especially true for discretionary customers during the plan review stage. In addition to streamlining the process were possible, many of the suggested improvements noted above in the areas of communication, consistency, as well as accountability—if taken—will positively impact the efficiency and timeliness of the permitting process.