

Survey of California Building Department Jurisdictions on Feasibility of an Online Permitting System for Residential HVAC Installations

Summary

This document reports on a survey of California Building Department Jurisdictions about the feasibility of a statewide online permitting system (OPS) which would enable permit application and obtainment, as well as tracking of permits issued.

This information may be useful outside of the state of California to help policy makers and other HVAC and energy efficiency stakeholders gain insights into the factors that may impact setting up or improving an online permitting system.

Finalized: September 20, 2017

Use of this document

This document is one of five developed during 2017 to serve as initial guidance to HVAC industry stakeholders interested in pursuing a framework for online permitting.

It is based on an official [WHPA Work Product](#) of September 20, 2017 titled “2017 WHPA Online Permitting Jurisdictional Survey Results Memo.” This Work Product was developed by the WHPA Compliance Committee’s Online Permitting Working Group.

This document, and also the WHPA Work Product, may be used in part or whole at no charge. Attribution to the Western HVAC Performance Alliance is requested.

Background

California Energy Efficiency Strategic Plan

The issue of permitting and code compliance for Heating, Ventilating and Air Conditioning (HVAC) systems has been the subject of discussion within the regulatory policy arena for many years. The California Energy Efficiency Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) originally released in 2008 (and updated in 2011) identified that “less than 10 percent of HVAC systems obtain legally required pre-installation local building permits.”¹ The Strategic Plan established specific goals to facilitate the “consistent and effective compliance, enforcement, and verification of HVAC-related building and appliance standards”. One of these goals was to streamline the local government permitting system.

¹ California Energy Efficiency Strategic Plan, January 2011, page 54.

During 2017, and in prior years, the WHPA Compliance Committee and its Working Group have developed a series of Work Products to inform various elements of a permitting framework.

Memorandum – 2017 WHPA Online Permitting Jurisdiction Survey Results

Overview

The Western HVAC Performance Alliance (WHPA) Online Permitting Working Group (OPWG), with the assistance of WHPA Staff, developed, tested, and fielded an online survey with California’s building department jurisdictions. The WHPA’s objective was to assess the current status of individual jurisdictions’ online permitting systems (OPS) and assess the viability of a statewide OPS. This assessment was primarily interested in OPS for the purposes of increasing permitting of heating, ventilation, and air conditioning HVAC (mechanical permits) commonly referred to as “HVAC add-ons or replacements” or “changeouts.” Changeouts were defined as either: (1) alterations that include new/replacement HVAC components or (2) alterations that include entirely new or replacement HVAC systems (that is, all HVAC equipment and ducts are new/replaced).

Building Jurisdiction Sample Frame

The California Homebuilding Foundation’s (CHF) Construction Industry Research Board (CIRB) provided the WHPA with a list of contact names and email addresses for California’s Building Jurisdictions.

Respondents

The survey was fielded from May 1, 2017 to May 11, 2017. Three reminders to complete the survey were sent to California Building Jurisdiction representatives. A total of 59 building jurisdiction representatives responded to the survey of the 532 contacts provided by the CIRB, representing a response rate of 11%.

Survey Limitations

Given the low response rate, only descriptive statistics are reported. These results should be considered with caution and may not be representative of all building jurisdictions. It is also important to note that respondents are largely made up of permit technicians as opposed to building officials which may skew the results.

Key Findings

In this section, we overview the key findings from the detailed findings that follow in the next section.

- **Of the 65 building jurisdiction respondents, 31% (n=16) of respondents indicated their jurisdiction has an online permitting system (OPS).**
- **Sixteen respondents (35%) indicated they are unsure if their jurisdiction has plans to implement an online option. Thirty two percent indicated there are plans to implement this option, and fifteen (32%) indicated there are no plans to implement an online option.**
- **Of the 43 building jurisdiction respondents, 81% (n=35) of respondents indicated that if an “apply for permit system” were made available, they would expect personnel within the jurisdiction to fully embrace it.**
- **Five of the eight respondents indicated that only residential permits can be applied for using the OPS, while three indicated that both residential and commercial permits can be applied for using the OPS.**
- **Four out of eleven respondents indicated that the number of HVAC permits issued has increased because of the OPS.**
- **Overall, building department permit processors, other building department staff, contractors, and the general public have responded positively to the OPS, with 29 respondents giving ratings of 3 or 4 (very positive).**
- **The ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website was listed as the most desirable OPS feature to building department staff, with eight out of ten respondents rating this feature a score of 4 – very desirable.**
- **The ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website was listed as the most desirable feature to the general public, with the ability to look up requirements from a state code website listed as the second most preferred feature.**
- **Over half (59%) of respondents who answered this question indicated that it would be desirable for the State of California to provide a statewide “apply for permit system” that could be redirected to their jurisdictions website.**

Detailed Findings

In this section, we present responses to specific questions.

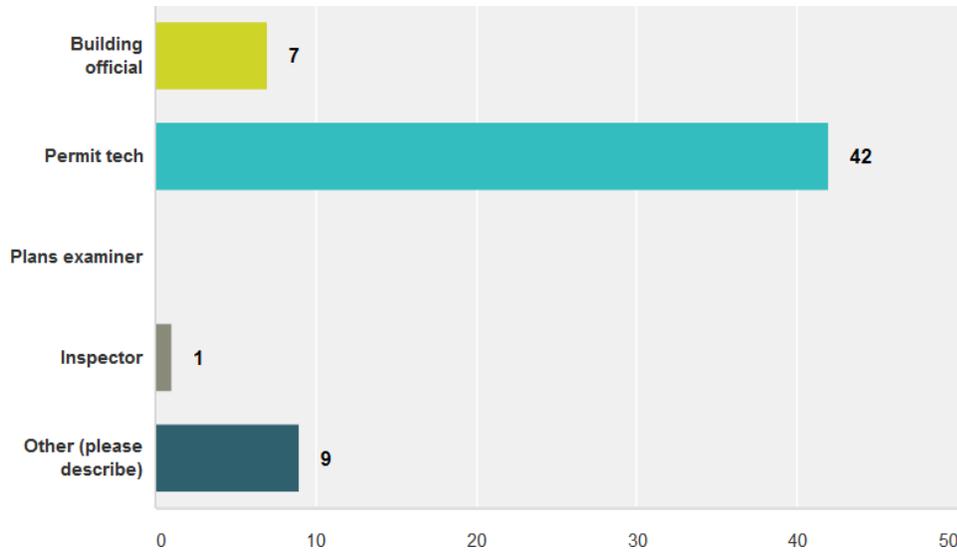
1. What is your jurisdiction and job title?

Jurisdiction	Job title
	Plan Review / Permit Center
Alameda County	Coordinator
Alpine County	Fiscal & Technical Specialist
Amador County	Admin Tech
Belmont, CA	Office Assistant
Billsborough	Building Official
Butte County Building Department	Permit Assistant
	Community Development
City of Albany	Technician
City of Arroyo Grande	Building Permit Technician
City of Belvedere	Building Secretary
City of Blythe	Permit Technician
City of Burlingame	Chief Building Official
City of Calabasas	Permit Center Supervisor
City of Calimesa	Permit Technician
City of Cathedral City, CA	Building & Permit Specialist
City of Clearlake	Assistant Planner/Cert. Perm. Tech
City of Colton	Planning/Building Permit Technician
City of Colton	Planning/Building Permit Technician
	Community Development
City of Coronado	Technician
City of Dunsmuir	Assistant to the Building Inspector
City of Elk Grove	Permit Processing Coordinator
City of Fairfield	Permit Technician
City of Firebaugh	Building Clerk
City of Fontana	Office Assistant
City of Grover Beach	Building/Planning Technician
City of Hanford	Building Official
city of Hawthorne	Permit Technician
City of Hesperia	Building and Safety Manager
City of Highland	Permit Technician
City of Kingsburg	Secretary
City of Lemoore	Office Assistant

City of Lincoln	Senior Office Assistant
City of Lompoc	
City of Long Beach, CA	Administrative Analyst
City of National City	Principal Planner
City of Newman	Permit Tech
City of Palm Desert	Permit Specialist II
City of Pismo Beach	Building Permit Technician
City of Rancho Cordova	Building Official
City of Rancho Cucamonga	Public Services Tech III
City of Reedley	Permit Technician
City of Richmond	Permit Tech II
	Deputy Community Development
City of San Clemente	Director
City of San Dimas	Permit Technician
City of Santa Rosa	Dept. Tech Coordinator
City of Sutter Creek	Administrative Analyst
City of Vacaville	Building Services Coordinator
City of Villa Park, California	Building Official
City of Winters	Building Official
City of Yreka	Account Clerk II
Fullerton	Building Permit Supervisor
Mendocino County	Staff Assistant III
Moreno Valley	Sr. Permit Technician
Napa County	Building Secretary
Orange County	Administrative Assistant
	Community Development
Red Bluff, CA	Department
San Jacinto	Community Development Assistant
Sutter County	Senior Permit Technician
Tehachapi	Inspector
Town of Mammoth Lakes	Permit Technician
	Community Development
Town of Windsor	Technician

2. Which of the following best describes your role in your building department?

Forty-two out of the fifty-nine (71%) respondents indicated that their role within their department is permit tech.

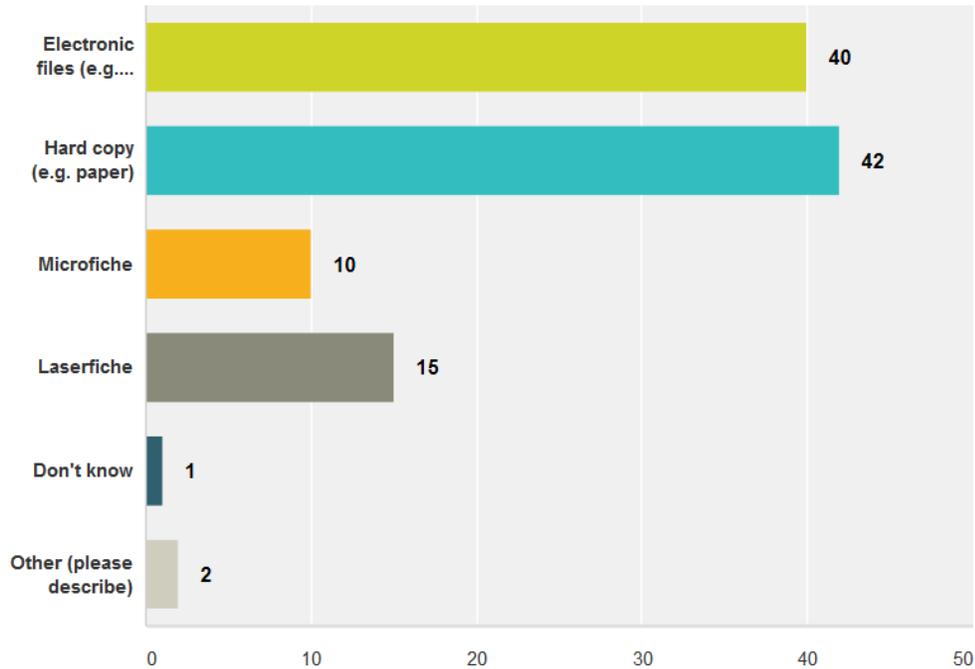


The “Other” responses included the following:

- Administrative Analyst
- Assistant Planner
- Building Department Admin
- Office Assistant/Secretary
- Work under Building Official, in charge of Permit Counter and Plan Review
- All of the above
- None

3. How are historical records for assigned HVAC permits currently stored? Select each that apply.

Having hard copy was listed as the most common way historical records for assigned HVAC permits are stored, with electronic copies listed as the second most common way records are stored.

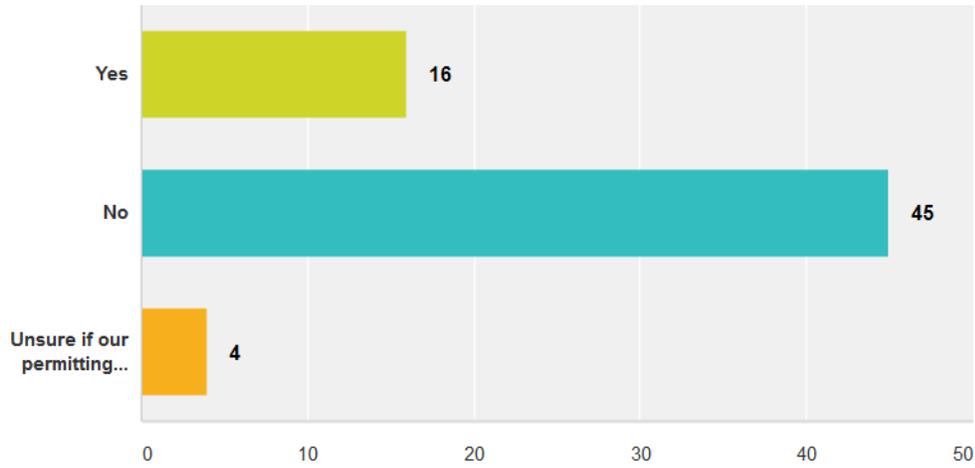


Two respondents listed other ways HVAC permits are stored, which include:

1. Scanned and attached to address/permit
2. Plans are retained for non-residential projects only

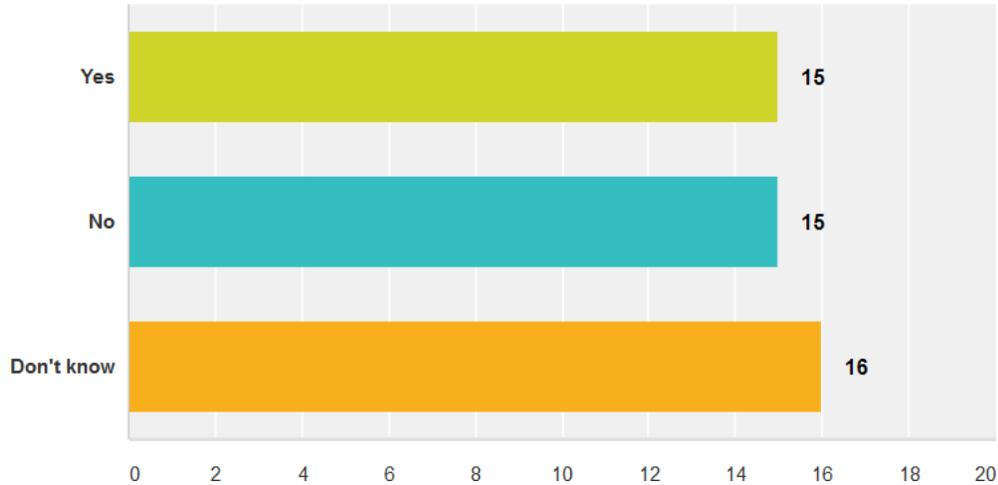
4. Does your jurisdiction currently have an online permitting system (OPS)?

Sixty-nine percent of respondents indicated their jurisdiction does not currently have an online permitting system (OPS).



5. Does this jurisdiction plan to implement an “apply for online permit system” in the next 1 to 3 years?

Sixteen respondents (35%) indicated they are unsure if their jurisdiction has plans to implement an online option. Thirty two percent indicated there are plans to implement this option, and fifteen (32%) indicated there are no plans to implement an online option.

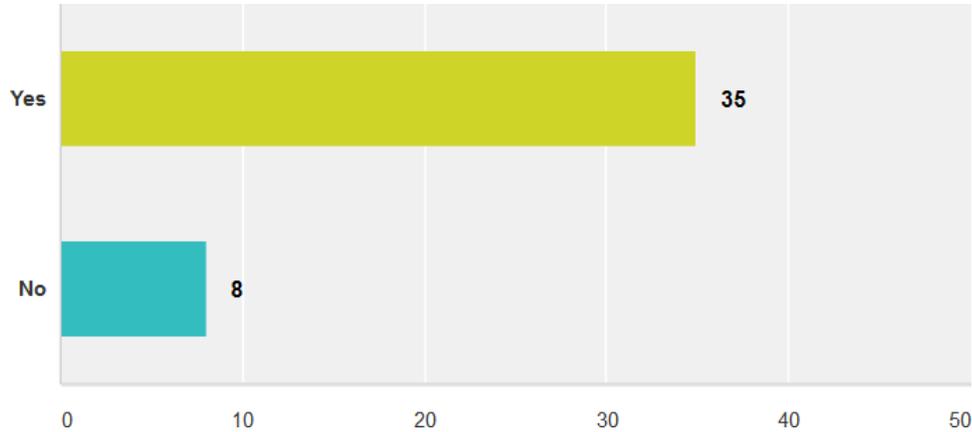


Seven respondents provided additional information for the follow up question, “If no, why not?”:

1. Budget constraints and we are a small city thus we issue maybe 10-12 HVAC permits a year. Not including systems for new or remodeled projects.
2. Cost analysis doesn't support expensive permitting software vs. 300 permits issued annually
3. HERS requirements
4. If budget and staff allow.
5. It has not been discussed.
6. We have an electronic Permitting system, Munis, as of mid-August 2016, but the program is EXTREMELY complicated and user-unfriendly. There is no practical way to allow for customer self-service permitting (of any kind) without creating a completely new customer interface. :=(
7. Working on it. Hopefully sooner than later.

6. If an “apply for permit system” was made available to the jurisdiction, do you expect personnel would fully embrace it?

Eighty-one percent of respondents indicated that if an “apply for permit system” were made available, they would expect personnel within the jurisdiction to fully embrace it.



Five respondents provided additional information for the follow up question, “If not, please explain”:

1. Due to current economy, lay-offs & budget cuts, remaining staff doesn't have the money to purchase a new system or the time to integrate it.
2. Munis is horrible! If we could use another system—provided it could interface with the Munis/Tyler financial and other packages used by other City departments—it would be hard to imagine a system worse than what we've got now.
3. The amount of permits this city issues for HVAC c/o do not warrant the effort required for an online permitting system.
4. Need more information
5. Not sure.

7. Which of the following online permit features does your jurisdiction currently offer to users? Check all that apply.

Below list the most common features offered by the jurisdiction to each group.

Building Department Staff: the ability to search for previously assigned permits, the ability to download permit applications, and the ability to check the status of a currently issued permit.

Contractors: the ability to pay permit fees online with a credit card, the ability to request an inspection, and the ability to search for previously assigned permits.

General Public: the ability to download permit applications, the ability to search for previously assigned permits, and the ability to check the status of a currently issued permit.

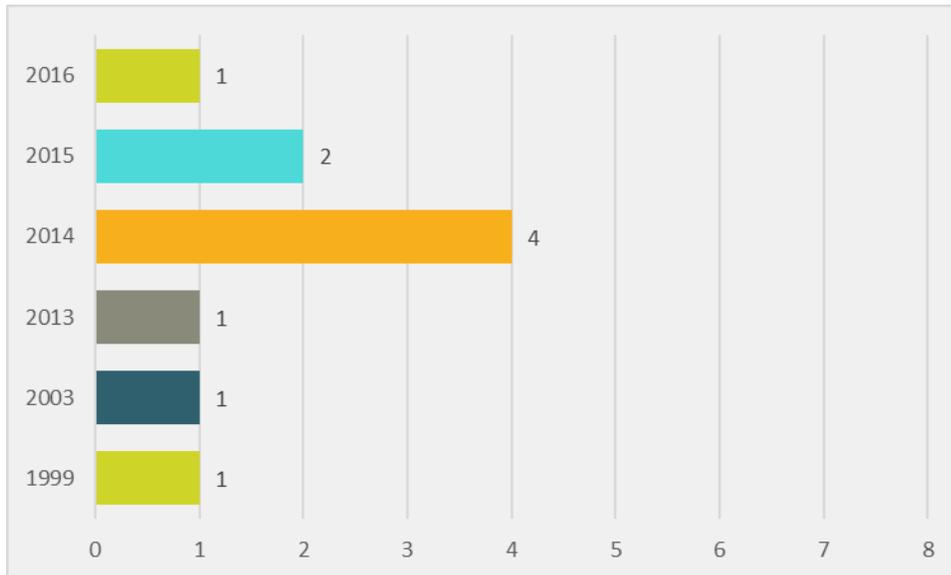
	Building Department Staff	Contractors	General Public	Total Respondents
Users may search for previously assigned permits	100.00% 9	88.89% 8	66.67% 6	9
Users may apply for certain types of permits online	71.43% 5	85.71% 6	57.14% 4	7
Users may check the status of a currently issued permit	88.89% 8	77.78% 7	66.67% 6	9
Users may download permit applications	100.00% 8	87.50% 7	75.00% 6	8
Users may obtain fee schedules for permits	85.71% 6	71.43% 5	57.14% 4	7
Users may pay permit fees online with a credit card	42.86% 3	100.00% 7	57.14% 4	7
Users may request an inspection	75.00% 6	100.00% 8	62.50% 5	8

Other (please specify)

1. This information is available to a "contact" on the permit record. The general public can only access this if the record is associated with them.

8. What year did the jurisdiction begin offering some form of online permitting system (OPS)?

Of the respondents offering an OPS, most respondents indicated that their jurisdiction began offering some form of OPS in the year 2014.



9. Which software application is used to operate the OPS? Please list the system name.

Respondents indicated that they used one of the following 8 software applications:

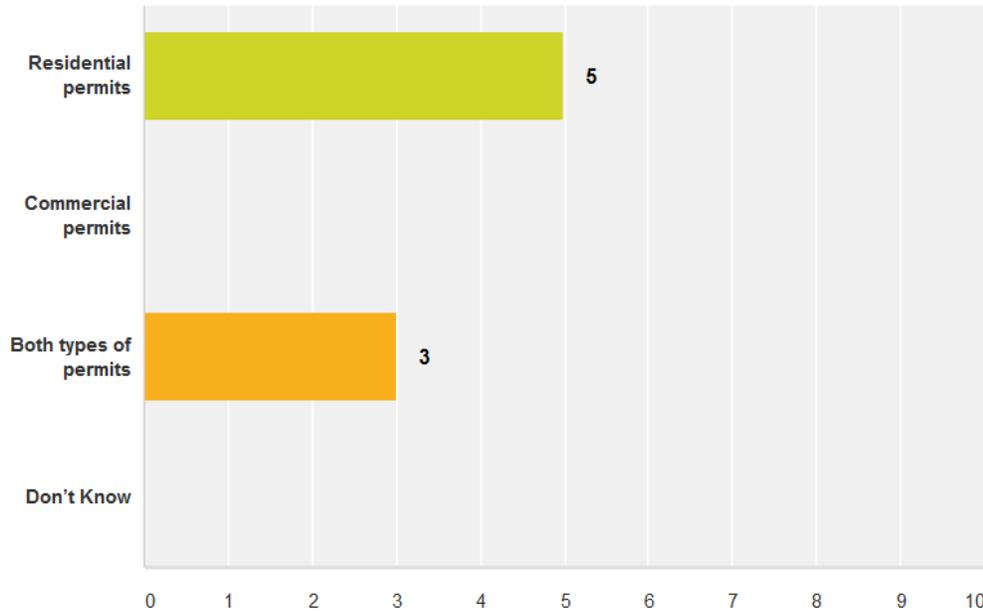
- Accela
- Accela Citizen Access
- Accela Software
- Click2Gov
- eTRAKiT
- Infor
- Permits Plus
- TrakIt

10. How do you determine which site addresses on the permits are within your jurisdiction? Please describe the database (custom, 3rd party, etc.).

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Automated through our permit system | 7. Hosted System |
| 2. Based on the assessor database that our | 8. Our permit software blocks out addresses |
| 3. Custom | outside city limits by APN. |
| 4. GIS (SQL) | 9. The database only lists addresses located in |
| 5. GIS Implementation within TRAKiIT | jurisdiction (Cathedral City, CA) which we |
| 6. GIS Layer | access |
| | on our computers. |

11. What types of HVAC Add-On or Replacement permits can be applied for using the OPS?

Five of the eight respondents indicated that only residential permits can be applied for using the OPS, while three indicated that both residential and commercial permits can be applied for using the OPS.



12. What other categories of permits, besides HVAC Add-On or Replacement permits, can be applied for using the OPS?

All nine respondents who answered this question indicated that re-roofing permits can also be applied for using the OPS. The types of permits are listed in the responses below:

1. Basic residential permits: water heater replacements, reroofs, service changes, flush-mounted solar, attic insulation, window replacement, water line repair/replacement.
2. Ductwork
3. Electrical and Re-Roofs
4. Electrical, mechanical, plumbing, reroof
5. Re-roofing, minor electrical, window replacements, water heater change-outs.
6. Reroofing, Panel replacements, Sewer line replacements, Water heater replacements, Water line replacements
7. Simple permits like water heaters, PV system, reroof
8. Water heaters, reroofs, temp power poles, service panel replacement, driveway replacement, water line replacement, sewer line replacement, solar, window replacement.
9. We do not allow any permits to be issued online yet, most of our roofing, HVAC, water heaters are permits by fax.

13. How have the following items changed as a result of the OPS?

Four out of eleven respondents indicated that the number of HVAC permits issued has increased because of the OPS.

	Increased	Decreased	Unchanged	Don't know	Total
The number of HVAC permits issued	36.36% 4	0.00% 0	27.27% 3	36.36% 4	11
HVAC code compliance	18.18% 2	9.09% 1	36.36% 4	36.36% 4	11
The average fee of an HVAC permit	18.18% 2	0.00% 0	63.64% 7	18.18% 2	11

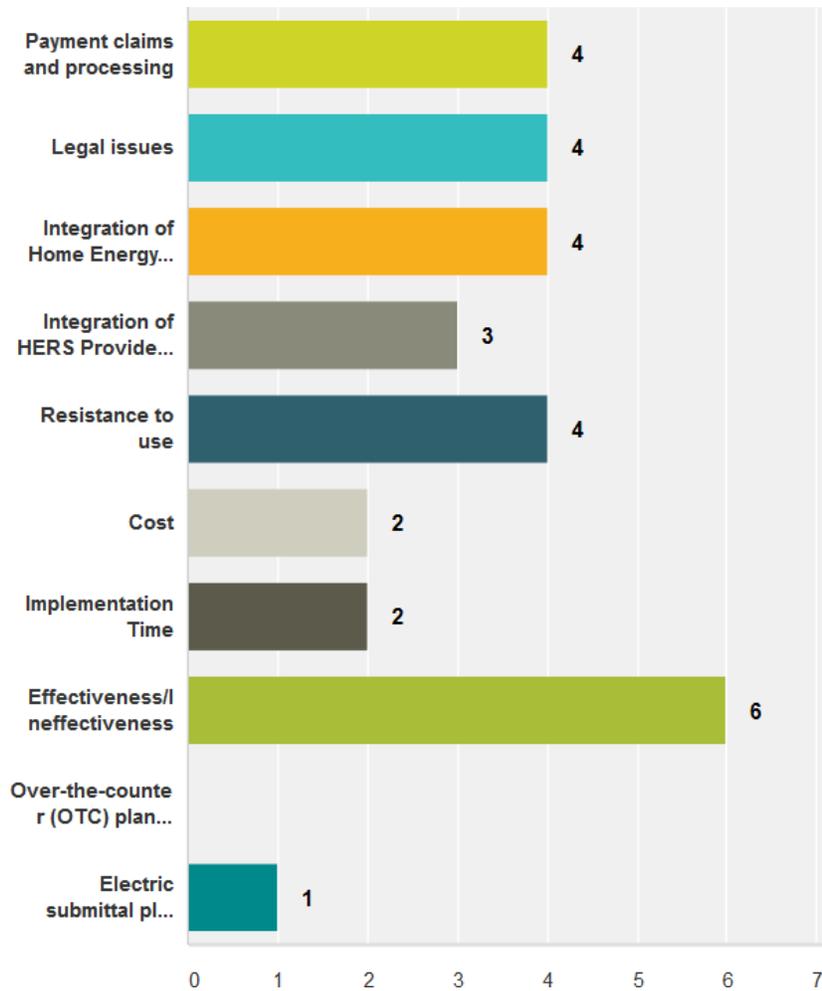
14. How have the following people responded to the OPS?

Overall, building department permit processors, other building department staff, contractors, and the general public have responded positively to the OPS, with 29 respondents giving ratings of 3 or 4 (very positive).

	4 – Very Positive	3	2	1 – Very negative	Too soon to measure	Don't know	Total
Building department permit processors	30.00% 3	40.00% 4	20.00% 2	0.00% 0	10.00% 1	0.00% 0	10
Other building department staff	55.56% 5	22.22% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	22.22% 2	9
Contractors	33.33% 3	44.44% 4	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	9
General public	33.33% 3	55.56% 5	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.11% 1	9

15. What challenges or barriers did the building department experience in the development and implementation of the OPS? Check all that apply.

The effectiveness/ineffectiveness was the most common listed challenge or barrier that the building department experienced in the development and implementation of the OPS.



Other responses include the following:

1. Less counter customers
2. Many contractors who would walk in can now process their permits 100% online. The inspector asks for the HERS report before the final inspection can be signed off.
3. More permits issued online = more time for counter staff to work on other stuff
4. Negligible
5. Reduces customers at the counter.

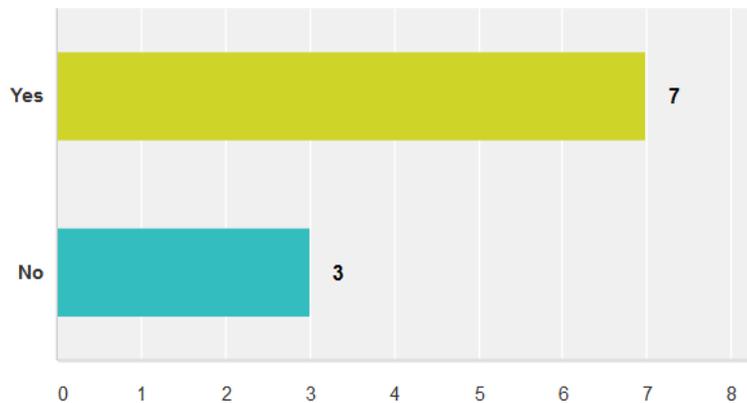
16. What benefits did the building department experience from the development and implementation of the OPS?

Five out of the seven respondents who answered this question indicated that one of the benefits is that it reduced the number of customers at the counter. The detailed responses are listed below:

1. Less counter customers
2. Many contractors who would walk in can now process their permits 100% online. The inspector asks for the HERS report before the final inspection can be signed off.
3. More permits issued online = more time for counter staff to work on other stuff
4. Negligible
5. Reduces customers at the counter
6. Less walk-in traffic
7. Less counter traffic leaves time for staff to work on other stuff, saves time in other areas but not in others

17. Can a user submit the Home Energy Rating System (HERS) compliance forms with the current OPS?

Seventy percent of respondents who answered this question indicated that a user can submit the HERS compliance forms with the current OPS.



18. Would the following OPS features be desirable to building department staff?

The ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website was listed as the most desirable OPS feature to building department staff, with eight out of ten respondents rating this feature a score of 4 – very desirable.

	4 – Very desirable	3	2	1 – Not at all desirable	Total	Weighted Average
Ability to integrate with the HERS Registries	54.55% 6	36.36% 4	9.09% 1	0.00% 0	11	3.45
Ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website	80.00% 8	10.00% 1	0.00% 0	10.00% 1	10	3.60
Ability to look up requirements from a state code website	50.00% 5	30.00% 3	20.00% 2	0.00% 0	10	3.30

19. Would the following OPS features be desirable to contractors?

Seven out of the nine respondents who answered this question indicated that all three features would be desirable to contractors.

	4 – Very desirable	3	2	1 – Not at all desirable	Total	Weighted Average
Ability to integrate with the HERS Registries	77.78% 7	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	0.00% 0	9	3.67
Ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website	77.78% 7	11.11% 1	11.11% 1	0.00% 0	9	3.67
Ability to look up requirements from a state code website	77.78% 7	22.22% 2	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	9	3.78

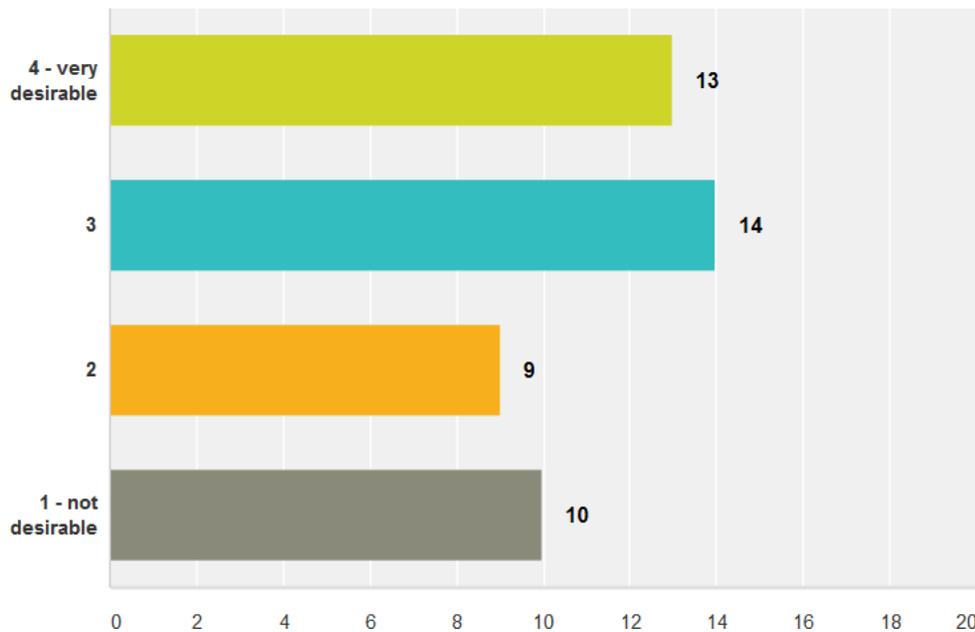
20. Would the following OPS features be desirable to the general public?

The ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website was listed as the most desirable feature to the general public, with the ability to look up requirements from a state code website listed as the second most preferred feature.

	4 – Very desirable	3	2	1 – Not at all desirable	Total	Weighted Average
Ability to integrate with the HERS Registries	14.29% 1	14.29% 1	0.00% 0	71.43% 5	7	1.71
Ability to verify a contractor’s license from the CSLB website	50.00% 4	12.50% 1	12.50% 1	25.00% 2	8	2.88
Ability to look up requirements from a state code website	37.50% 3	0.00% 0	25.00% 2	37.50% 3	8	2.38

21. How desirable would it be if the State of California was to provide a statewide “apply for permit system” that could be redirected to this jurisdiction’s website?

Over half (59%) of respondents who answered this question indicated that it would be desirable for the State of California to provide a statewide “apply for permit system” that could be redirected to their jurisdictions website.



How do you envision a system like this working?

The open-ended responses to this question are categorized below.

Positive or neutral feedback:

1. Application would be completed online and then directed to the website of the agency responsible for issuing the permit.
2. Good, but State of California would also need to implement system allowing jurisdiction to access details i.e. count, value, dates and details accessible daily.
3. Great
4. I envision the State running all aspects.
5. It would definitely be something that I would be interested in.
6. The state would become responsible for collecting T-24 forms and determining if they are the correct ones and correctly completed.
7. There are many challenges to online permitting, not the least of which is making it simple to use and secure.

Negative feedback:

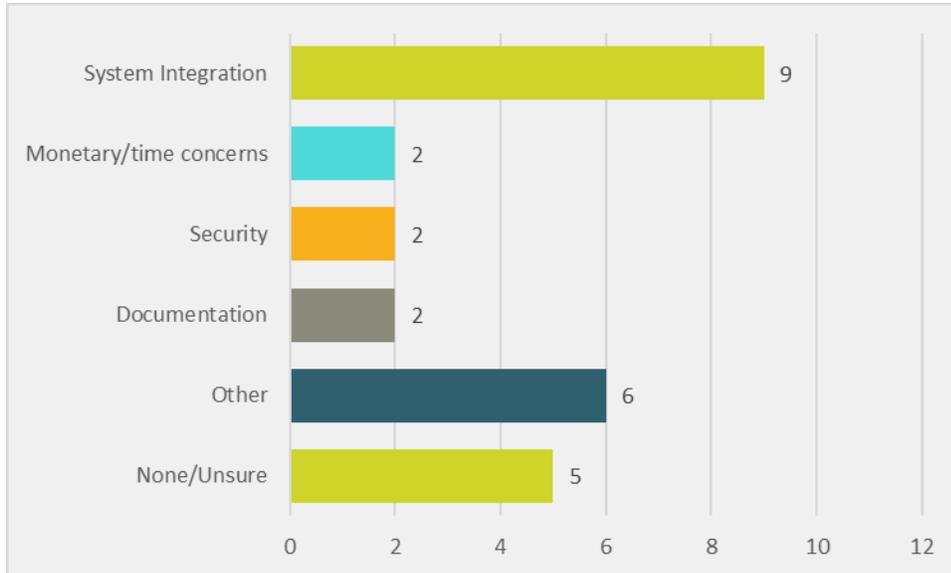
1. Anything the state government does, doesn't work
2. Knowing California, cumbersome!! Full of mistakes and issues that don't make sense or don't apply to the issue.
3. Slowly and not very efficiently. The State isn't known for its willingness to complete projects in a timely manner.

Unsure/Need more information:

1. Not sure at this time
2. Not sure if this would be needed or desired. I guess we would take a look at it and see if we could utilize within our website.
3. Not sure need more information
4. Not until we have more info
5. Would it integrate seamlessly with the system(s) jurisdictions are already using? Or would we need to have a separate interface? What would that cost be? Would there be any downtime during implementation?
6. I don't know.
7. Desirable, but I don't see how it would interface with Munis.
8. This could be positive or negative. I'd have to see how it can be done.

22. If the State of California “apply for permit system” was made available to the jurisdiction, what concerns would you have?

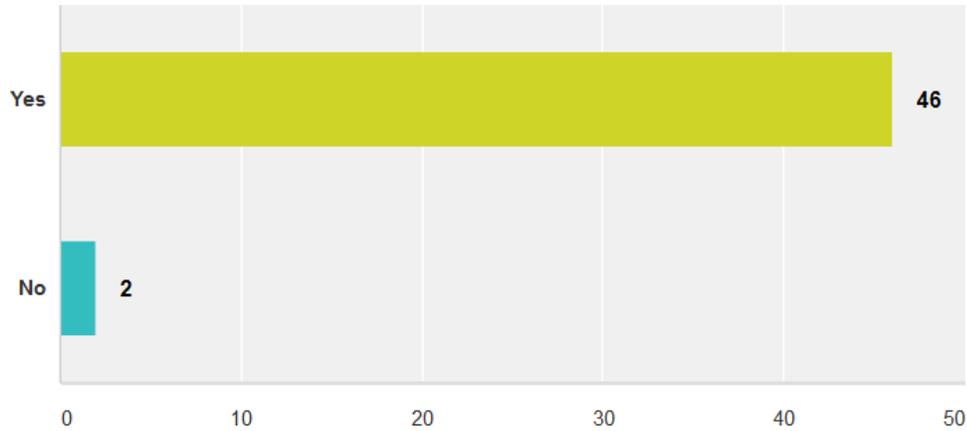
Most respondents have concerns regarding how it would work with the current system, and how it would work with given that there are different requirements by jurisdictions. Those responses that fell into the “other” category are listed below.



1. 1.) Keeping track of the permits issued. 2) Would job cards also print with the permit? 3) Would our system only list addresses in our jurisdiction or would we have to research.
2. Proper fees paid-where? How? Who assesses? Appropriate Inspections conducted? Paperwork/database-search for permit, obtain copy, proper inspections, final? Energy code met?
3. Exterior HVAC systems need to be reviewed closely due to neighborhood noise concerns for residences located on the lagoon because noise travels
4. I would assume there would be some sort of back up for when the internet is down?
5. Same as above. I believe only established contractors with each jurisdiction should be granted access to an online permitting system.
6. The State cannot operate follow through or manage any type of program well. It would be a disaster.

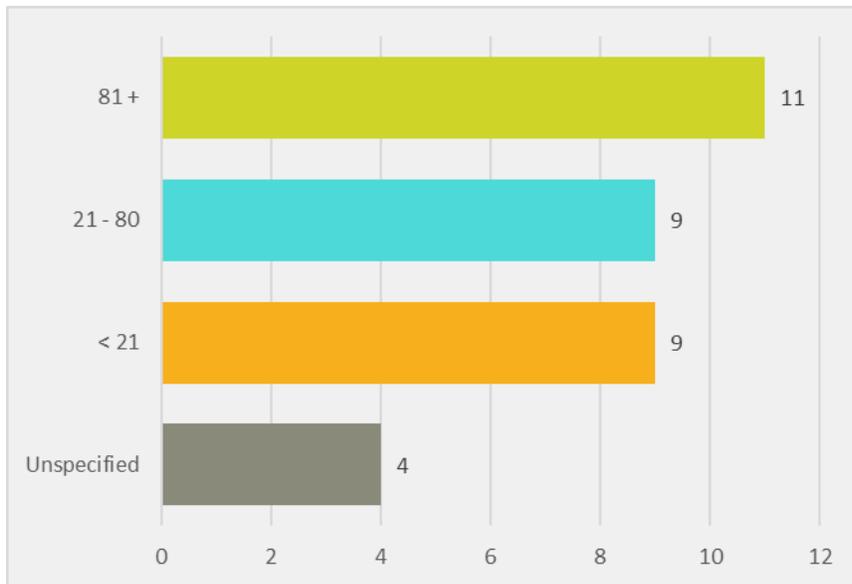
23. Within the previous fiscal year (July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016), has this jurisdiction issued any HVAC changeout permits?

Almost all (96%) of respondents who answered this question indicated that their jurisdiction issued an HVAC changeout permit within the previous fiscal year.



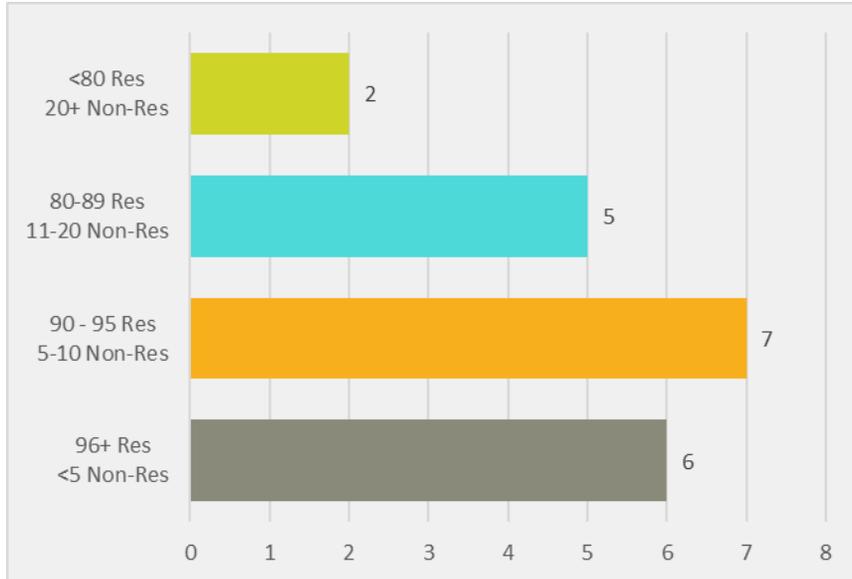
24. From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, approximately how many changeout permits has your building department issued?

Of the 29 respondents who gave valid responses to this question, 11 of them issued anywhere from 81 to 600 changeout permits.



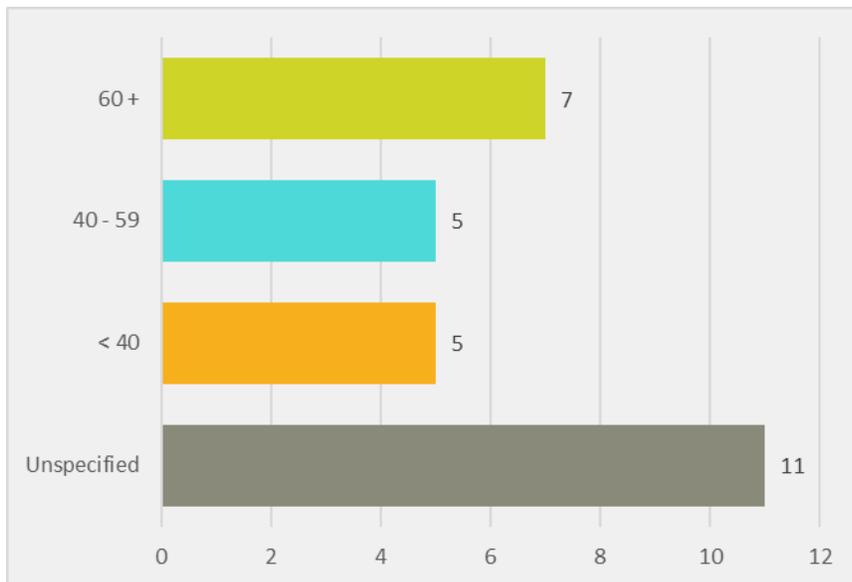
25. From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, approximately what percent of the changeout permits issued by your building department were residential vs. non-residential?

Most permits issued were residential, with only two respondents indicating that the permits were split 50/50 between residential and non-residential. Twelve of the thirty-two respondents did not provide specified values.



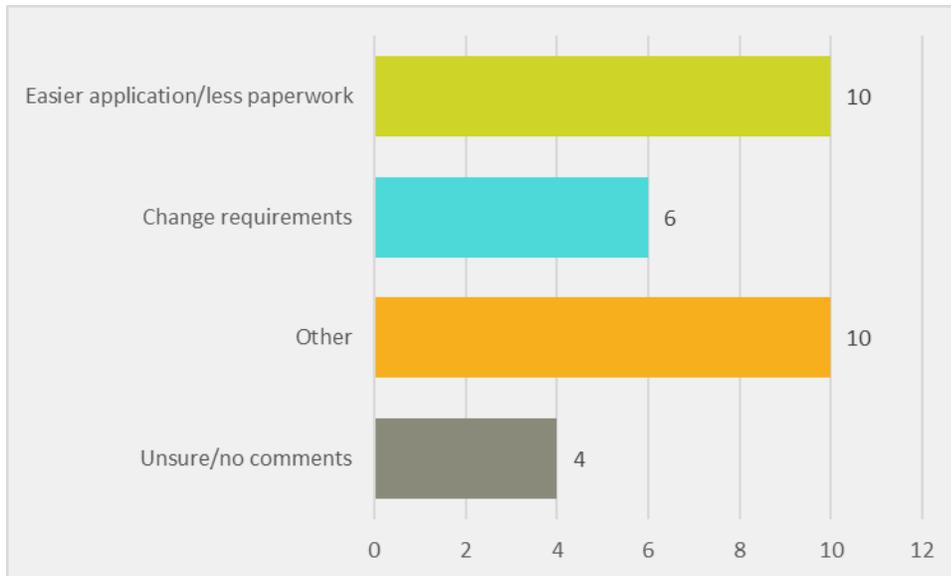
26. From July 1, 2015 through June 30, 2016, approximately what percent of changeouts statewide in California, would you estimate, were installed without a permit?

Of the 28 respondents, 17 indicated that between 20% and 85% of changeouts statewide were installed without a permit.



27. The state’s goal is for 90% of all HVAC installations to be permitted by 2020. What changes should the state make in order to increase the rate of permitting?

Making the application process easier, including less paperwork, was listed as one of the most common suggested changes by the jurisdictions. The “other” responses are listed below.



- I don't think the state should be involved in local jurisdictions permitting unless they want to take it over completely.
- Inform the public of the need for permitting
- Information regarding permit requirements could be added on/in HVAC packages and/or on purchase receipts.
- Maybe the state could go after the contractors that do not pull permits. I turned in a HVAC Contractor for installing HVAC (15 of them). The state did nothing because they came in after the fact and pulled the permits, although I was able to Red Tag Fee them, the state did nothing to penalize them. Had we not caught them they would have gotten away with not applying for the permits. What is the use of reporting violators?
- Monitor the sale of HVAC components Statewide. Link the property resale to the "NEW HVAC" install. Similar to the Smoke detector rules.
- Some sort of rebate for installations both permitted and inspected.
- Tougher enforcement on HVAC Contractors.
- Unfortunately, a lot of homeowners are not happy to pay for the HERS rater. I realize it's necessary, but feel it makes owners not ask contractors to pull permits.
- We currently charge \$44.50 for an HVAC permit, change out or rehab. We are in the process of increasing the price, but the public has told us many times that they or people they know pull HVAC permits with our city and not other jurisdictions because our pricing is extremely reasonable and other jurisdictions are all above \$100.00 per permit up to \$250.00 which is too high in their opinion.
- We know the benefits of environmental compliance and safety regulations. Always important to consider the costs, and the likelihood of these costs "driving" work underground. Example: SB 407 water conserving plumbing fixture requirements.

28. (OPTIONAL) Who at your building department should we speak with concerning a statewide application for online permit system or anything else related to this topic?

Name	Title	Contact information
Al Jimenez	Building Official	ajimenez@cathedralcity.gov or (760) 770-0358
Bill Tarin	Building Official	714-998-1500 530-822-7400
BRIAN FRENGER	BUILDING INSPECTOR III	BFRENGER@CO.SUTTER.CA.US
Daniel Garnica	Chief Building Inspector/Building Official	dgarnica@cityofblythe.ca.gov
Deborah Rodriguez	Community Development Assistant	drodriguez@sanjacintoca.us
Eric Roark	Community Development Tech	619-522-2413
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Mike Brinkman	Building Official	mikeb@csgengr.com
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Tim Anderson	Building Official	tanderson@hillsborough.net
Tina Dye	Building Official	tdye@pismo beach.org or 805-773-7070
Tom Perry	Building Official	tperry@townofmammothlakes.ca.gov
Tom Webb	Building Official	twebb@cityofhanfordca.com

29. Other comments regarding online permitting:

1. If you have any questions regarding questions that were not answered, please direct them to Brian. Thank you!
2. I still want control of where the systems will be installed. Documentation!?!?! Cover my time spent!
3. Don't do it.
4. Staff assumed that some kind of on-line, self-help permitting for simple permits would be possible with Munis, but were shocked to find out this was not the case. It is crucial to get the input of experienced frontline staff when designing, choosing, and implementing permitting software!
5. Given the number of permit systems in use any State system would just be a portal to the local system, local requirements including sound requirements need to be included
6. Online permitting needs to be very simple. If it is too complex, the applicant either gives up or come in to pull it.