

# **Snohomish County Planning and Development Services**

## **Justification and Rationale**

### **2024 Staffing Request- Permitting Division**

#### **June 2024**

**Description:** Planning and Development Services (PDS) is seeking to add key permitting positions to review and issue development permits in an efficient and timely manner. PDS is committed to meeting the needs and goals of our customers. Additional staff is needed to handle increased permit volumes and high workloads, provide acceptable levels of customer service, and meet new review time frames mandated by the Washington State Legislature in Senate Bill 5290. The Washington State Auditor's Office (SAO) conducted a performance audit of PDS's permit review time frames and found that PDS did not meet minimum time frames set forth in state law. PDS met time frames for only 24% of land use applications, 40% of civil permits, and 91% of building permits. The SAO recommended that PDS "analyze cost of service and staffing levels needed to achieve 120-day performance..." PDS has conducted this review and determined that more staff is needed to perform permit reviews. PDS has reviewed and will continue to review its permit fees and bring forth to Council recommended fee adjustments to support the additional FTEs.

PDS has identified six key positions that need to be added to its 2025-2026 budget. They are: Fire Inspector Senior, Plans Examiner, Inspector Building (aka Building Inspector), Biologist, Inspector Site (aka Site Inspector), and Associate Planner. These six positions are being included in PDS's 2025-2026 biennial budget request. PDS is asking for Council approval to hire five of these six positions now, in 2024, due to the urgent need for more staffing in Permitting to handle the large volumes of permits coming in and the backlog of the permits in the queue. The addition of these five positions to the 2024 PDS budget will allow us the time to recruit, hire and train the new employees prior to 2025 when Senate Bill 5290 takes effect. In addition, time is of the essence for processing the number of permits already in the queue. We cannot wait until 2025 to add permitting staff because delays in permit reviews are currently negatively impacting PDS customers which include developers, contractors, individuals trying to build new home or remodel existing homes.

Fluctuation in permit and inspection volumes is normal for PDS and we handle it by adjusting staffing levels accordingly. When we need to reduce staff, we do so by not filling vacancies, redirecting existing staff to other areas in need, or eliminating positions in the budget. PDS budgets over the last several years have demonstrated this. When we need to increase staffing in certain areas, we find ways to do so such as by redirecting existing resources or hiring temporary employees. We currently have run out of options with existing budgeted FTEs and simply need to add staffing resources and capacity to handle the permit volumes we are experiencing. Permit forecasts for 2025 and 2026 are strong and thus we do not feel there is a risk of over hiring. We feel that our approach to managing PDS resources is fiscally prudent and demonstrates accountability to our customers in terms of our efforts to keep permit fees as low as possible. However, when we

cannot deliver good customer service and our time frames are too long, we need to take action. Therefore, we ask for Council's approval to add five staff to the 2024 PDS budget in order to meet our current and future business needs.

## **I. FIRE INSPECTOR SENIOR**

The Fire Marshal's Office currently employs 1 Fire Inspector and 3 Senior Fire Inspectors. The main functions performed by this group of inspectors includes annually conducting 4,000 fire life safety (FLS) inspections for renewals of certificates of occupancy, 100 inspections for fireworks and special event permits, and 900 inspections on Fire Systems permits. The number of inspections per year has increased over time due to more businesses needing FLS inspections and more fire systems permits. For example, the inspectors have already performed 850 inspections related to Fire Systems permits during January-May 2024 (94% of 2023 levels). These inspections are required during the construction of new buildings prior to issuance of the permanent certificate of occupancy.

In addition to the above inspection functions, the job description for a Senior Fire Inspector also includes performing technical fire plan review for all fire systems for commercial and residential construction. Fire plan review is also conducted for commercial and multifamily structures and all land use permits to determine fire code compliance withal proposed development. Since 2022, the fire inspector group has been responsible for (1) plan review of NFPA 13D residential sprinkler systems previously reviewed by a residential plans examiner and (2) plan review of all fire systems that were previously reviewed by a commercial plan reviewer. The Fire Marshal's Office fire inspectors took over this task due to their technical knowledge and association with the local fire districts regarding their service area standards and operations. At that time, no additional staffing was proposed. Since then, there has been an increase in the number of fire systems permits requiring plan review (470 in 2022; 600 in 2023, and 400 for the first five months of 2024). The number of plan reviews in relationship to staffing levels has been carefully reviewed and monitored. It has now been determined that we have insufficient staffing to perform both inspection and plan review functions.

One additional Senior Fire Inspector position is proposed to shorten review times and meet the new requirements of Senate Bill 5290, and also meet the demands of technical inspections required of the team.

## **II. PLANS EXAMINER**

PDS is requesting one new Plans Examiner to perform reviews of residential construction plans. We currently have two Plans Examiners who conduct residential plan review. This is insufficient to handle the high volume of permits needing plan review. Single family residences, duplexes, accessory buildings, garages, accessory dwelling units, ag buildings, decks, and carports are just a few of the many types of new construction permits that need plans reviewed. There are also many alterations, additions and conversions that require plan review.

Time frames for PDS to review a permit are unacceptable to applicants and the builders. It can take many weeks or months for an applicant's permit to get reviewed by a Plans Examiner. Volumes are increasing but our staffing levels have not kept up with demand. In 2022, there were 1,650 residential permit applications and in 2023 there were 2,201. In the first five months of 2024, there were 1,081 residential permit applications. As of early June, there were 270 permits in the queue for review ("under review" status) and another 500 permits for which we are awaiting more information from applicants. Two Plans Examiners cannot handle this workload and we need to provide customers with acceptable levels of service. Plan review is currently a key bottleneck in PDS. Hiring another Plans Examiner is not only prudent but necessary at this point in the year. The forecast

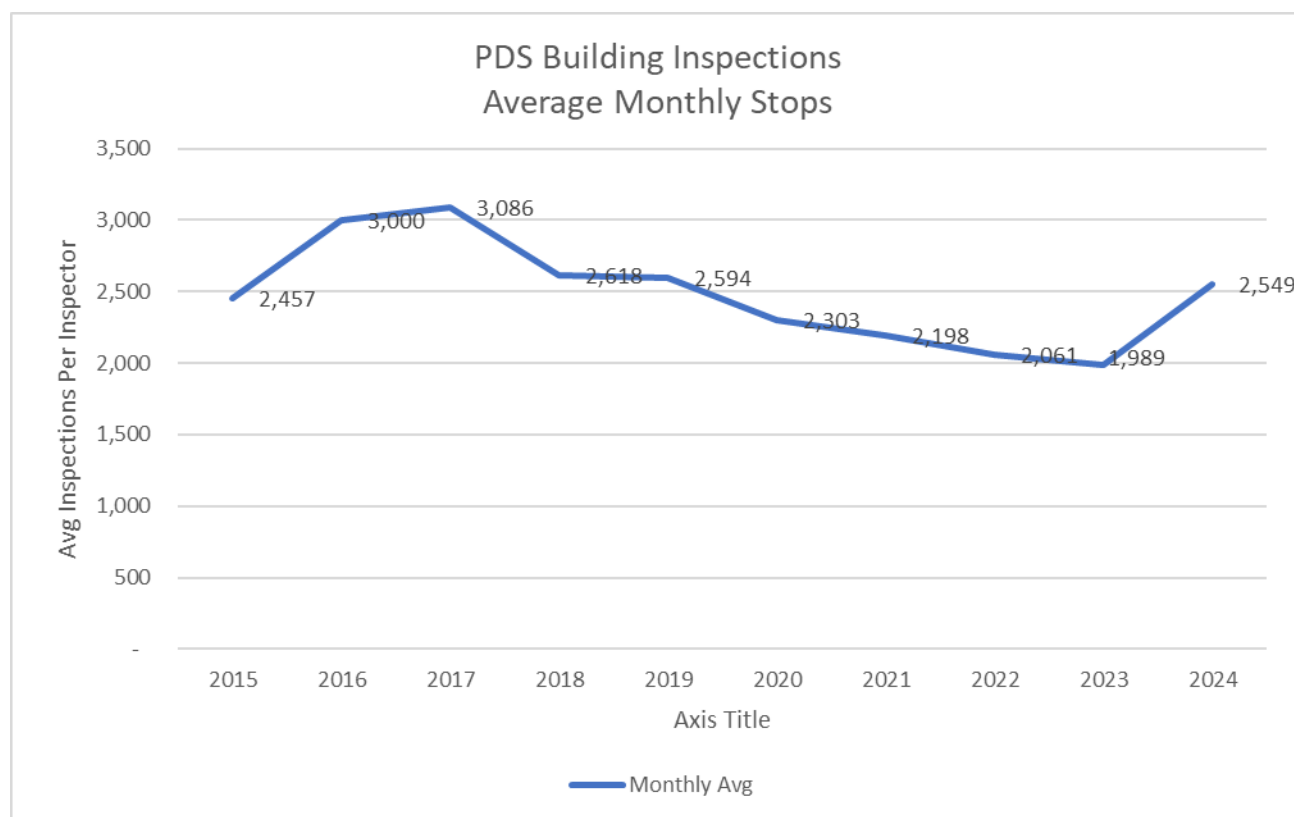
for 2025 and 2026 is similar to current trends, and we do not expect the number of residential building permits to decline. We will need this third Plans Examiner well into the future.

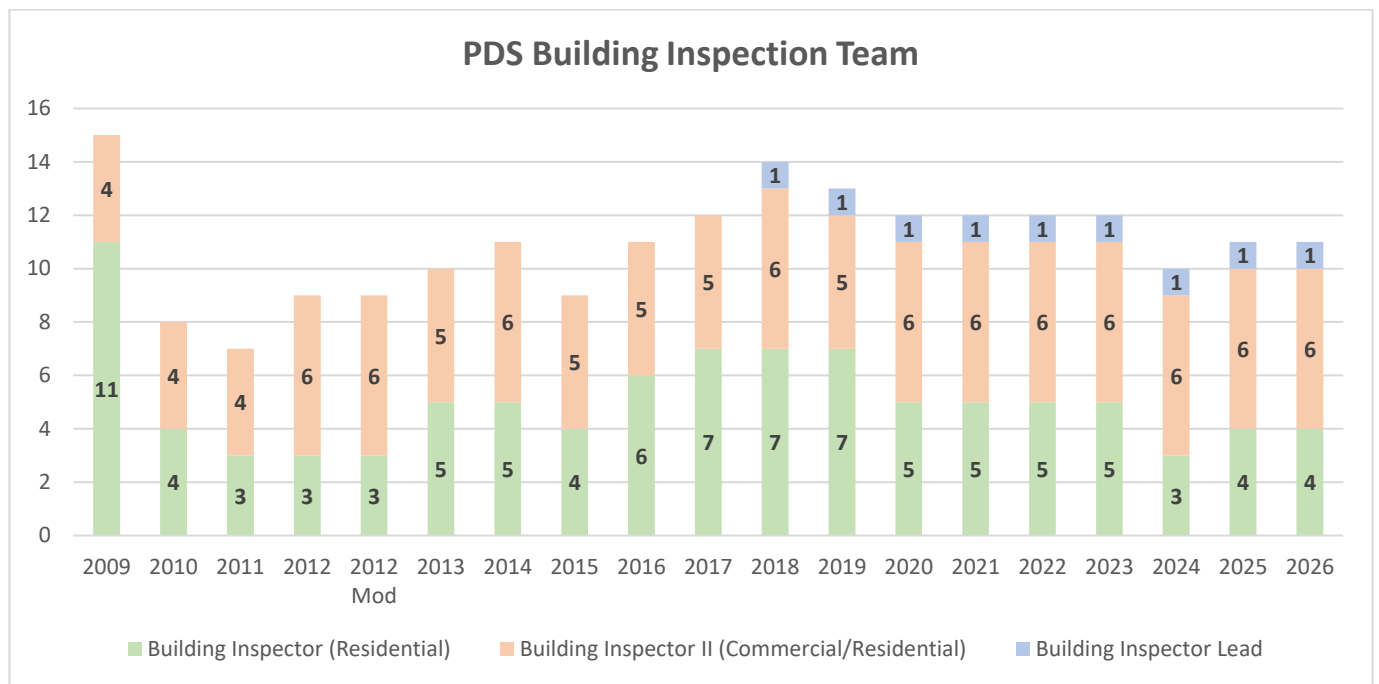
### III. INSPECTOR BUILDING

PDS is requesting another Building Inspector. The building inspector team is currently comprised of four Building Inspectors who focus on residential permits; five Building Inspector II positions who focus on mainly commercial but some residential permits; and one Lead Building Inspector who is the team lead (the lead does all the scheduling, plumbing plan review and daily inspections).

The total number of inspections performed by the team has fluctuated since 2015. In 2015 there were nine inspectors. From 2015-2017, the number of inspections increased to such a degree that the workload was unbearable and unsustainable. To meet the high demand, PDS added two inspectors in 2016, and one more in 2017, and another in 2018. At that time permit volumes were increasing. Then suddenly in 2018-2019, permit volumes dropped and continued to decline through 2023. In 2023, we had twelve inspector positions and held three of them vacant because they were not needed. At that time, we reclassified and redirected two of those vacant inspector positions to other areas of need in PDS.

We have since filled the tenth position on the team and need to add one more building inspector to meet the demand of increasing number of residential permits and daily inspections. The chart below shows that the average number of monthly inspections has increased from an average of less than 2,000 per month in 2023 to over 2,500 per month in 2024 which is at 2018-2019 levels.





#### IV. BIOLOGIST

PDS is requesting to add one Biologist position to have the ability to maintain appropriate levels of service and to meet the new permit timeframes under Senate Bill 5290.

PDS currently has no Biologist positions in the budget. However, PDS has six Senior Environmental Planner positions, but three of those positions are underfilled as a Biologist because of the difficulty finding qualified candidates for the Senior Environmental Planner role. We have a business need for more Senior Environmental Planners, who are assigned to permit applications that are more complex than those assigned to Biologists. The existing Biologists in the underfilled positions are gaining valuable knowledge and experience that will qualify them for a Senior Environmental Planner in the coming months or next year.

Adding a Biologist position now will (a) allow adequate time to train that person prior to January 2025, when the new permit timeframes under SB 5290 becomes effective, and (b) result in a more equitable mix of Biologists and Senior Environmental Planners to help PDS meet established deadlines.

#### V. INSPECTOR SITE

PDS is requesting a new Site Inspector to assist with the large volume of residential and commercial land development activity permits. For many years, PDS has had only four site inspectors who handle land use, clearing, grading, drainage, and right-of-way inspections. There are three Senior Site Inspectors who handle commercial sites and one Site Inspector who handles residential sites. The workload of each of these inspectors is high. The work itself is highly specialized and requires a great deal of knowledge and experience in order to achieve proficiency in the position.

Each Senior Site Inspector has, at any given time, approximately 50 projects for which they are responsible for inspecting on a regular basis during the land development phase of construction. Most land development projects require multiple inspections; the frequency of site visits (weekly, daily, etc.) depends on the size and complexity of the project. As a result, the inspectors must prioritize their projects and decide which sites they have time to visit in a given day or week. They weigh many factors such as risk of contractor errors, speed of construction progress, and the consequences of missing something. They try to strike a balance and weigh the risks involved with each project. The inspectors have at times felt a need to inspect certain site more frequently than they are able due to the workloads and not enough time in the day.

On the residential side, there are currently over 550 issued residential LDA permits to be inspected. The residential Site Inspector performs an average of 145 inspections per month.

There are also approximately 400 issued Right-of-Way permits that require inspections. The four inspectors share these permit inspections, with the Senior Site Inspectors handling the majority of them.

We are also asking for the new position to begin succession planning in the site inspection team. PDS expects turnover in the team to occur in the next 2-3 years. One existing site inspector is close to retirement and another is seeking other career growth opportunities. We need to hire a fifth site inspector to receive training from current team members to gain the specialized and valuable knowledge and experience. It is only a matter of time before someone leaves, and the team cannot properly function and complete the required work with only two to three team members.