



Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee

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Permit Assistance Center Sunset Review Report 98-4

The legislature created the Permit Assistance Center (PAC) in 1995, within the Department of Ecology (DOE), to provide assistance to businesses and public agencies in complying with the state's environmental quality laws. DOE has complied with the legislature's intent by establishing and operating the Permit Assistance Center and has also implemented the Coordinated Permit Process.

We believe that the Center would benefit from the development of a clear operational plan and measures of efficiency and effectiveness. This should enable a quantitative assessment of how effectively the PAC activities enhance the ability of both business and government to meet environmental standards in a more economical way.

The Center's customers and stakeholders view the PAC as providing a highly useful, needed, and beneficial service. Additionally, PAC activities do not appear to be duplicative of other entities' efforts, either public or private. Based on our review of other states' practices, the Center appears to be operating in the mainstream of environmental permitting coordination activities.

This report recommends that the PAC be reauthorized and that the Center's annual reporting requirement be changed to a periodic report, with information on ways to enhance state environmental permitting coordination efforts and the Center's progress in implementing a performance measurement system

BACKGROUND

Legislative History/Intent

The Permit Assistance Center (PAC) was established by the legislature in 1995 within the Department of Ecology (DOE) to provide assistance to businesses and public agencies in complying with the state's environmental quality laws. The Center acts as a clearinghouse for information on environmental permits and, when requested, may also act in a coordination role for a specific environmental permit applicant

Budget

The PAC has 2.6 FTE staff and a 1997-99 Base Biennial Budget of approximately \$309,000 (budget data updated on 9/15/98).

FINDINGS

Compliance with Legislative Intent

The DOE has complied with the legislature's intent by establishing and operating the Permit Assistance Center, and has also implemented a Coordinated Permit Process (CPP) as mandated by the legislature. Additionally, the PAC staff have completed their mandated reporting requirements. These reports, however, do

not appear to have generated a lot of interest among legislators or their staff at this point in time, and have not contained much information on program effectiveness.

PAC Workload, Measurement of Efficiency and Effectiveness of Operations

The workload of the PAC is primarily consumer driven. To date, over 2,750 individuals have contacted the center for permitting information. The CPP has been used by five entities to date, including the Department of General Administration, the Department of Corrections, and three private companies.

We believe that the Center would benefit from the development of a clear operational plan and measures of efficiency and effectiveness. This should enable DOE and policymakers to assess, in quantitative terms, how effectively the PAC activities enhance the ability of both business and government to meet environmental standards in a more economical way.

Customer Satisfaction and Non Duplication of Services

The PAC has two primary customer bases, those contacting the Center for ad hoc type information on environmental permitting and those participating in the formal CPP process. Based on a review of agency documentation and interviews with CPP participants and other stakeholders, we believe that the clientele base is very satisfied with the services that the Center provides. The PAC also does not duplicate the efforts of other agencies or the private sector.

Survey of Practices in Other States

The vast majority (22) of the 26 responding states indicated that they had created some function or process within their environmental protection agency to promote coordination of environmental permitting practices. However, Washington is the only state that we are aware of to have a formal *statutory* Coordinated Permit Process.

SUNSET CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The auditor concludes that the PAC has effectively complied with its legislative mandate and is providing a needed, highly useful and beneficial service. The Center also appears to be operating in a similar fashion to its counterparts in other states. Based on available data, it also does not appear to duplicate the services of other entities, either public or private.

Therefore, this report recommends that the Center's enabling legislation be re-authorized by the legislature and that the Center's annual report requirement be modified so that the report is produced only on a periodic basis and encompasses information more useful to the legislature and state government. Additionally, it is recommended that the DOE assist the PAC to implement a strategic planning process and performance measurement system. This should provide the agency and policy makers with more specific information on the Center's impact on this state's environmental permitting processes. The DOE and the Office of Financial Management (OFM) concur with the report's recommendations.

Recommendations

- Reauthorize the program and modify its statutory reporting requirements.
- Implement a strategic planning process and performance measurement system.