

moment of clarity, we saw we could not rationally predict when or if our modest project would ever be free of the City's practice of unnecessary delay.

From its actions, we infer that the City's staff just does not want to approve our plans. We haven't heard anyone say there's anything wrong with them, per se. No one even hints that the addition of a bedroom in the back of a two-bedroom home in an R-2 multi-family zone might change much of anything. But no one wants to end the unnecessary delays, either.

We never heard anyone say there's anything wrong with our plans.

It's been said that we could hire lawyers and pick fights with everyone in sight. To us, that seems to be yet more time and money, and what do we really accomplish?

Life's short and the kids already have grown too big for this small house. It's time for us to get on with life. Besides, at the current pace, we aren't sure we could complete our new bedroom in time for our kids' high school graduations.



The City's bad process raises barriers to modest improvements like the ones we proposed. This limits the choices for the owners of the few remaining "working-class dream homes" in Santa Monica's eastern edge.

These single-family homes are a part of Santa Monica's legacy. A generation ago, our house was one of many "dream homes" for workers at places like the old Douglas Aircraft plant. Today, it is one of just three remaining single-family homes on our street.

They Just Out-Lasted Us.

It seems our City Council has debated deep into the night every law except the Law of Unintended Consequences. This is a sad time for our family, having wasted so much time and money in a failed effort to make our modest but much-loved home sustainable for the long term. But it'll be a truly sad day if the people of Santa Monica continue to tolerate a government that behaves so badly.

This story first appeared in SurfSantaMonica.com.



Have you experienced similar frustration trying to deal with the City of Santa Monica? Share your story. E-mail us at frustrated@cityhallstories.com.

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Dealing with City Hall in Santa Monica can be an experience!

Another real-life experience with City Hall

Jim Lucas explains why he walked away from a proposed 500-square-foot addition to his home after investing 15 months and about \$30,000 in cash.

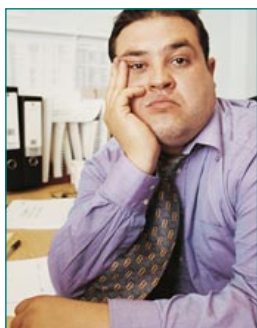
By Jim Lucas

When we put down roots on Santa Monica's eastern edge in the 1980s, our house made a lot of sense. Though modest, it was comfortable. But as our kids have grown larger, our 1,000 square feet have begun to feel smaller.

So, in the spring of 2002, we started planning more room for our teenagers. We wanted to preserve the look and feel of this 1946 house: the existing roof would be untouched and the front yard essentially unchanged. A new one-story bedroom would occupy an unused portion of our back yard. No one could honestly say this 500-square-foot addition would alter the balance of things in Santa Monica.

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We wanted to do this right. We budgeted for solar panels, redwood trees and landscaping that would eliminate 1950s concrete. We approached the City of Santa Monica's Planning Department with the intention of complying with the letter and spirit of its rules for sustainable and livable development. What a mistake that was.



To be blunt but clear, the City mired our progress with bureaucratic foot-dragging, shabby treatment and rules that vary between obscure and arbitrary. I'd like to give you a taste of our sad story.

We spent more than 15 months actively seeking a building permit from the City of Santa Monica – without receiving approval. The timeline for our project is an excruciating tale of delay. It is not marked by outrageous misconduct – rather, our project died the death of a thousand cuts.

In our first months of the process, the planners found small defects and notified us days or weeks later. Then, after we submitted corrections, the planners notified us of other small defects which had been present from the start and could have been addressed early, but were only cited later.

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After we submitted a round of corrections in October 2002, a City staffer in November opined there “should be no problem” getting clearance to go before the Architectural Review Board in January 2003. Unfortunately, with other priorities, the staff did not return or take our calls from late November until January 30, 2003. We were unable to resolve small details, and thus reached the ARB in April 2003.



After the ARB review, we learned we needed a soils report. We were surprised by this: all the regulations had been carefully reviewed by my wife and our architect, who began his career in Santa Monica in the 1970s after graduating at the top of UC-Berkeley's architecture school. Maybe we should have known about this requirement – and maybe there's a reason for the City staffer's dismissive comment that “everyone knows” about this.

We then asked a simple question to the person at the Planning Department's counter: “What should be contained in the soils report?” The official said, “It's on the Web.” Unfortunately, after several days of searching, we concluded that, if it was on the Web, we couldn't find it. So, my wife returned to City Hall. This time, she got lucky.

She was handed the document – by the same guy who, just a week before, could barely manage to grunt about the Web site.

As she stood in line at the Planning Department, the person in front of her asked for information on soils reports. Without hesitation, the city employee reached under the counter and produced a copy

of a document that described, in useful detail, what was required in a soils report. So, my wife asked for the same thing. She was handed the document – by the same guy who, just a week before, could barely manage to grunt about the Web site.

We don't object to soils studies in earthquake zones but we didn't do the soils tests at first because our reading of the City documents was that this would be required only for projects over 750 square feet (ours was about 500) and in hazard zones and according to the State our house is not in such a zone. But, as it turns out, the City doesn't accept the State's definitions.



Our teenagers, both natives of Santa Monica, were growing restless. Their crowded bedroom was piled high with art projects, books, sports gear and things that are best described as stuff. They needed more room. One thing, however, stood in their way: the City of Santa Monica's Planning Department.

All told, in pursuit of the elusive building permit, we spent more than 15 months actively working with the City of Santa Monica.

In November, the City notified us that it could not review our plans until we submitted several forms. But, here's the thing: we already had submitted those forms. It appears the City lost the originals. So, we provided new copies, hoping to avoid further and unnecessary delay.

This did not, however, put us back on track for long. It seems we had failed to write on the plans the name and phone number of the City Forester (as if the City doesn't know this number). Stupidly, we listed this information in a “corrections” document that the City required.

It seems we had failed to write on the plans the name and phone number of the City Forester (as if the City doesn't know this number).

The City staff, in stalling our review, said our architect “should have known” to put this information on the plans. It's unclear to us where the City says to do such a thing. This much is clear: this repeated a persistent pattern of relentless and avoidable delay. We had been ensnared in an extraordinarily capricious process. In a