



Columbus Consolidated Government

Georgia's First Consolidated Government

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Donna L. McGinnis, CPA, CFE
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**Internal Audit of
Inspection & Codes Department**

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AUDIT AUTHORIZATION

This transitional departmental audit was authorized by City Council on December 15, 2020, in response to a request for audit by former Internal Auditor John Redmond. The audit began on May 23, 2023, with the audit completed by Internal Auditor Donna McGinnis and Forensic Auditors Jonathan Smith, Benjamin Meadow and Grant Conaway.

BACKGROUND

The Inspection & Codes Department is responsible for the enforcement of the latest editions of the Georgia State International Codes for Building, Plumbing, Electrical, Gas, Mechanical and Property Maintenance Codes, adopted by the State of Georgia as the State Construction Codes. Furthermore, the Department enforces the Local Zoning Ordinance, the Flood Plan Ordinance, Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control and the Georgia Safety Fire Regulations. Additionally, the Code Enforcement Division is responsible for all environmental law enforcement such as, but is not limited to the enforcement of the solid waste ordinance, business licenses, alcohol licensing, gross receipt taxes, mobile home taxes, scrap tire management, illegal dumping, weed violations, junk vehicles, fencing violations and other environmental violations.

LEADERSHIP

Director Ryan Pruett leads the department, accompanied by Assistant Director Phillip Smith and Code Enforcement Manager Natalia Zeigler. Additionally, Office Manager Jazmine Scott leads the permit & GIS technicians. The team is also supported by Plans Examiners Brett Faulkner & Charles LaPlace. The Department Director reports to the Deputy City Manager-Finance, Planning & Development.

AUDIT SCOPE

The audit scope is intended to address all material aspects of the Inspection & Codes Department. Material aspects included, but were not limited to: organizational structure, policies and procedures, internal controls, cash handling process, strategic planning, payroll, equipment, inventories, and budgetary control.

AUDIT PROCESS

The Audit Process began with the authorization of the audit. An audit program was developed to address the material aspects of the departmental audit, followed by the entrance conference with the department head and the Deputy City Manager-Finance, Planning & Development. During the meeting, attendees were presented with the preliminary audit program items and invited to suggest any additional areas that warranted inspection. The audit techniques included reviews of documents and manuals, physical verification of employees and capital assets, tests of internal controls, examination of reports prepared by the department and others from independent sources, tests of transactions, interviews, meeting observations, independent verifications, and other techniques as appropriate. During the audit, management was briefed on findings and potential recommendations. Following the audit, a draft report is presented to department management for review and response. A final report including the departmental response is then prepared and distributed to department management, the Mayor and Council, concurrently. A presentation to Council is scheduled to address any questions or concerns they may have and to avail it to the public. The auditor provides follow-up later to insure that agreed-to recommendations have been implemented and are properly functioning.

FIELDWORK ACTIVITIES

Fieldwork included payroll testing re: the payroll distributions of May 19, 2023 and June 16, 2023 with confirmation against time records and payroll system reporting and no discrepancies were noted. Additionally, a drive-thru fixed asset confirmation occurred on July 19, 2023 and no discrepancies were noted. Three years of budgetary performance were reviewed and generally Inspections & Codes have managed their divisional budgets well, apart from challenges in Postage, Operating Materials and Motor Fuel. In FY23, there was also a significant budget variance in Lot Clearing & Maintenance of \$152,975.69.

Fieldwork included a visit with Permit Technician Delaine Silva. Daily transactional processing was reviewed and found to be in very responsible order. Daily balancing and Finance reporting and records were in very good condition. This role involves a lot of customer and citizen interaction and requires knowledge of local and state laws and ordinances, some real estate knowledge and often requires empathy and a missional approach to customer service.

We additionally had an opportunity to visit Assistant Director Phillip Smith. He shared how effectively his team has been utilizing Tyler's EnerGov, and they are using the product to more fully digitize their inspection processing. While there may be a bit more training ahead, it was awesome to see what has already been accomplished. Digitization will ultimately reduce costs associated with the preparation, maintenance and storage of paper permitting records. It was great to see EnerGov so fully utilized. Following our visit, the Chief Inspector provided an opportunity for our Forensic Auditors to join the team in the field, so that they could observe daily inspection activities.

As fieldwork continued, we had a chance to visit with Code Enforcement Manager Natalia Zeigler and her team. They have a challenging role in that code enforcement may lead to upset encounters out in the community. Ordinances, laws and requirements need compliance and enforcement and this team needs to often utilize firm diplomacy. We did learn that their work effort is currently quite redundant in that EnerGov doesn't communicate with the Q-Alert system that is utilized city-wide for 3-1-1 reporting. There have been discussions about addressing this disconnect which would be a wonderful process improvement. We additionally learned that in recent years, this team has approached council for additional budget support to support the escalating need for abatements in the community, and thus far, when approached, council has been very supportive of the escalating need. At the conclusion of our team visit, we had opportunities to visit further with the Code Enforcement Technician, and the Manager, and additionally Forensic Auditors joined Code Enforcement Officers in the field in order to observe enforcement activities.

Observations from the field activities include:

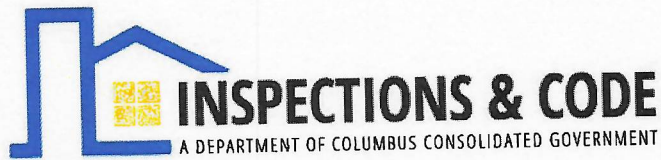
The online code case dashboard provides the public with a way to check case statuses in their area, but its outdated system falls short of real-time updates, limiting its effectiveness. While a planned software update promises to improve workflows and communication, the lack of a clear implementation timeline keeps this tool from reaching its full potential. As it stands, the dashboard functions adequately but leaves room for significant improvement.

The Inspections and Code Enforcement teams demonstrated strong dedication to safety and compliance, earning high marks for their thorough reviews and hands-on approach. From ensuring older buildings meet updated codes to managing detailed cases like solar panel installations, their methodical work reflects a commitment to quality. However, outdated systems requiring manual data transfers slowed some processes, leaving opportunities to streamline operations further.

On more complex cases like squatter residences and property clean-ups, the teams performed well. Partnering with private contractors allowed them to manage costs while adhering to city standards, and their communication with the community was clear and professional. While their work was efficient and focused on minimizing disruptions, there's still room for growth in improving efficiency and fully integrating their systems. Overall, their efforts are commendable, reflecting a strong performance that could be enhanced with modern tools and processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Would recommend the establishment of a hyper-link in the Q-Alert system which would dramatically address the known cost of redundancy between EnerGov & Q-Alert. There would be benefits city-wide, and our citizens would also enjoy more expeditious customer service.
2. Would recommend a quarterly budget review for Code Enforcement, with a focus on adequate funding to address the pace of necessary abatements.
3. Would recommend funding for training and additional efforts necessary for a more complete digitization of the department. There have been impressive strides, and improved efficiencies will reduce our costs in the future.
4. Would recommend review of procedures and resource allocation across multiple departments to reduce the amount of properties that become repeat nuisance properties. This would include coordination with the Tax Commissioner's Office and the Land Bank Authority.



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Ryan Pruett
Director

February 4, 2025

Donna L. McGinnis, CPA CFE
Internal Auditor/Compliance Officer
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RE: Inspections and Code Internal Audit

Dear Ms. McGinnis,

First and foremost, I would like to extend my appreciation to you and your team's efforts during this internal audit process. It has been a pleasant experience, and the Inspections and Code Department will be improved because of this effort.

The Inspections and Code Department is comprised of a team of 29 individuals committed to ensuring the safety and the quality of life of the citizens and visitors of Columbus, Georgia. We are tasked with the large and technically demanding job of enforcing the City's development ordinance and the state minimum construction codes. In addition, we also enforce the City's nuisance and blight ordinances. Inspections and Code also manages all the City's capital improvement projects related to buildings to include the Judicial Center, Synovus Park, City Hall, and other SPLOST projects. We have a vital role to play in this local government and we endeavor to provide our services in the most efficient and professional way possible.

A lot of our discussions revolved around our permitting software and how the Inspections and Code Department currently effectively utilizes this system. I wanted to highlight our progress with making this system available online and provide a timeline for total implementation.

- Inspections and Code customers can currently register for an account on the Civic Access Self Service (CASS) Portal. By creating an account, customers can view all of their plan review and permit history and statuses.
- Users with a CASS account can currently request inspections online in lieu of calling Inspections and Code. Users can also see inspection results in real-time.
- By Spring 2025, customers will be able to purchase permits and submit certain plan reviews online.
- By Summer 2025, all permits and plan reviews will be available to be submitted online. For large commercial projects, this will save our customers thousands of dollars in printing costs that they currently incur.

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I remain committed to making our plan review and permitting process as customer friendly as possible. I would like to point out that while an online process makes it easier for our customers to submit things for our review, the process of reviewing and issuing permits remains the same for our staff in a digital process. Every submission must be completely reviewed prior to issuance so we can confirm compliance with the applicable codes, City ordinances, and State law.

In addition to the above steps toward going digital, Inspections and Code has made some internal changes to improve our efficiency. We have moved most of our records retention to digital format to reduce our demand for the City's limited records storage space. We also recently moved to an online receipts database in lieu of using a cash register. The online database allows for much quicker and reliable coordination with the Finance Department for the revenue generated by Inspections and Code.

Below are detailed responses to each recommendation found in the audit report:

Recommendation #1 - Would recommend the establishment of a hyper-link in the Q-Alert system which would dramatically address the known cost of redundancy between EnerGov & Q-Alert. There would be benefits city-wide, and our citizens would also enjoy more expeditious customer service.

Response to Recommendation #1 – I fully recognize the benefits to the public and staff for more effective communication between the Energov and Q-Alert systems and am committed to working with 311 and Information Technology to make the communication as seamless as possible. However, in my opinion, there is limited redundancy between the two systems. Q-Alert is the system that the City uses to document complaints and create work orders so that departments can address those complaints. Energov is a comprehensive case management software that allows Code Enforcement to schedule inspections, issue correspondence, and enter detailed notes on interactions with the public. These features are not available in Q-Alert.

Recommendation #2 - Would recommend a quarterly budget review for Code Enforcement, with a focus on adequate funding to address the pace of necessary abatements.

Response to Recommendation #2 – I agree that regular reviews of the Code Enforcement budget is necessary given the ever-increasing costs of abatements. Inspections and Code staff currently, and will continue to, meet regularly to review budgetary status and review reports provided by the Finance Department. Executive Management and the City Council have always been receptive to additional funding requests to allow abatements to continue including in the FY24 mid-year budget.

Recommendation #3 - Would recommend funding for training and additional efforts necessary for a more complete digitization of the department. There have been impressive strides, and improved efficiencies will reduce our costs in the future.

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Response to Recommendation #3 – I agree that keeping our employees trained on the software is of vital importance as we transition to more digital processes. Just as important will be provided enough training and instructions for our customers to be able to successfully navigate our online plan review and permitting systems.

Recommendation #4 - Would recommend review of procedures and resource allocation across multiple departments to reduce the amount of properties that become repeat nuisance properties. This would include coordination with the Tax Commissioner's Office and the Land Bank Authority.

Response to Recommendation #4 – Inspections and Code currently spends thousands of dollars a year to clean up some of the same properties year after year. A lot of these properties have several thousand in tax and lot clearing liens and are essentially abandoned. I concur that efforts to reduce these repeat nuisance properties would be beneficial to the taxpayer and to Inspections and Code. Every property that can be brought back to good ownership would reduce our lot clearing expenditures and would increase property tax revenue.

Thank you again for your facilitation and assistance throughout this audit process.

Sincerely,

Ryan Pruett, CBO
Director