

Business Permitting Survey results

Vallejo Chamber of Commerce – Business Permitting Survey

INTRODUCTION

The Vallejo Chamber of Commerce recently conducted a non-scientific survey of business permitting applicants who have gone through the process within the last two years. The survey was developed as an extension of the work of the Chamber's Business Permitting Ad Hoc. The purpose of the Ad Hoc is to provide input to the city on the permitting and planning process as experienced by the applicants. The City of Vallejo has suffered from a poor reputation with permitting. Given the changing economic conditions in Vallejo, the Chamber felt it was important to work closely with the city to help them improve applicant's success rate in securing a permit. The City of Vallejo agreed they needed to hear from the business community. This led to the creation of the Ad Hoc.

This group has met at least quarterly for nearly two years with senior City officials, including City Manager Greg Nyhoff and senior management from departments involved in the permitting process: Planning, Public Works, Building, Economic Development, Water, Flood & Wastewater, and Fire. During this time, many changes and improvements have been made to the systems guiding planning and permitting. This survey is an opportunity to measure the effects of the changes made and set benchmarks for customer satisfaction in key areas of the process.

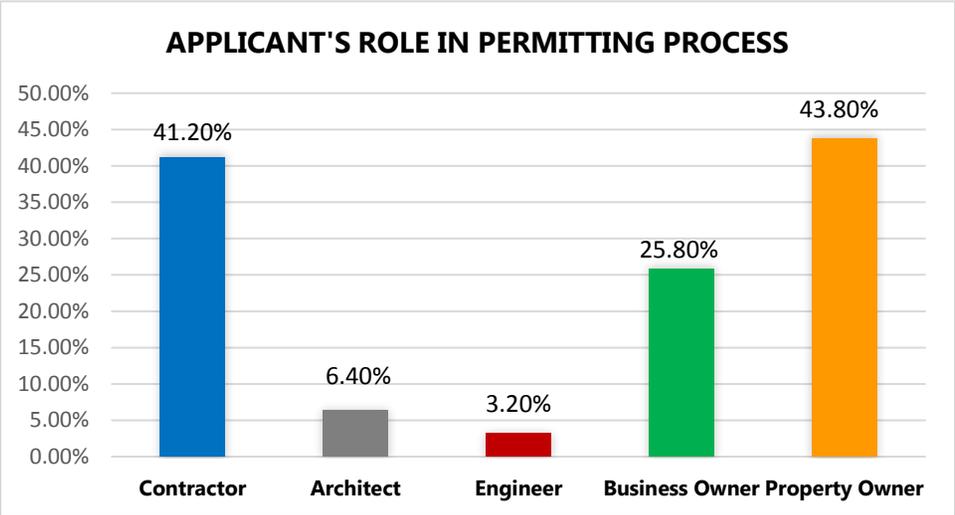
The campaign began with survey development starting on April 4, 2019. An early proof was shared with the City of Vallejo on April 22. Logistical issues caused a delay in obtaining feedback from City staff. A full list of comments was received at the end of May. Additional changes and updates were made through June. The final version of the survey was approved by the City of Vallejo on July 9.

A list of applicants from the previous two years was provided by the City of Vallejo's Economic Development Department. 1,662 names and e-mail addresses were included in this list. The survey was sent initially on July 11. Three reminders were sent to those who had not yet completed the survey, on July 16, July 29, and August 6. The survey was closed August 12. **169** total and partial responses were recorded, meeting the survey goal of a 10% or more response rate.



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QUESTION 1:

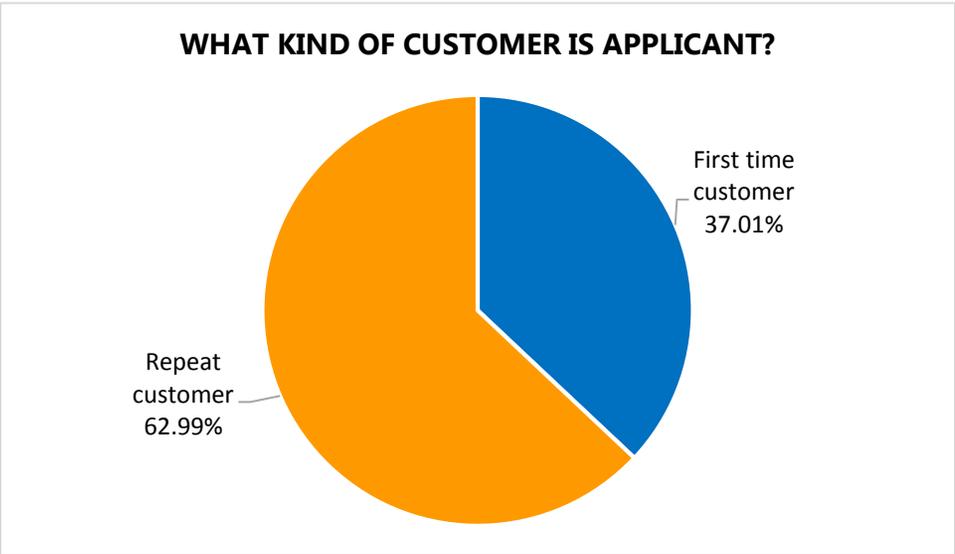


The first two questions determined the applicant's status in the process. Respondents were asked to describe their role in the permitting process, and whether or not they had previously gone through Vallejo's version.

QUESTION 1:

- 155 responses to multiple choice question
- 187 total responses measured
- 32 respondents chose more than one category
- 21.9% of contractors also biz or property owner
- 20.6% of property owners are also business owner

QUESTION 2:

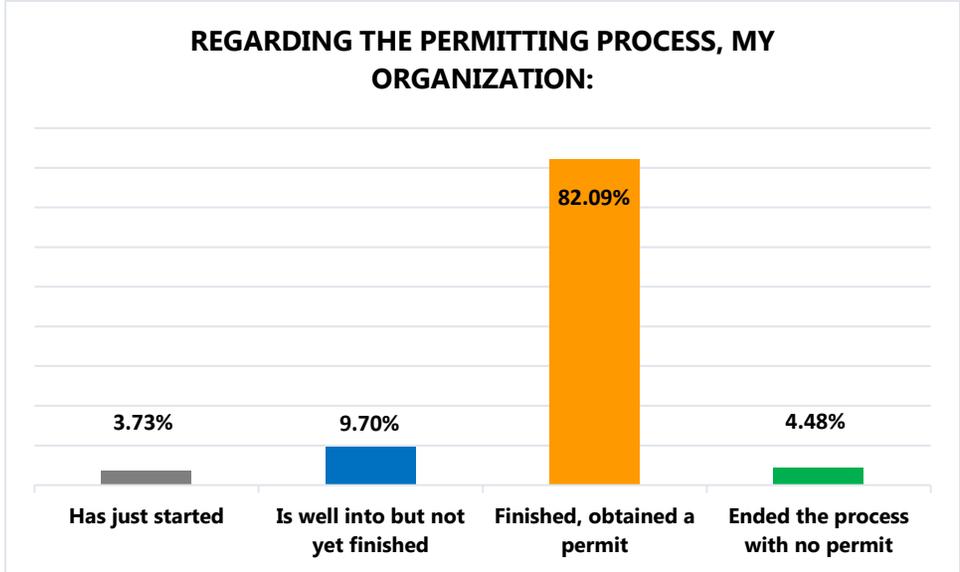


QUESTION 2:

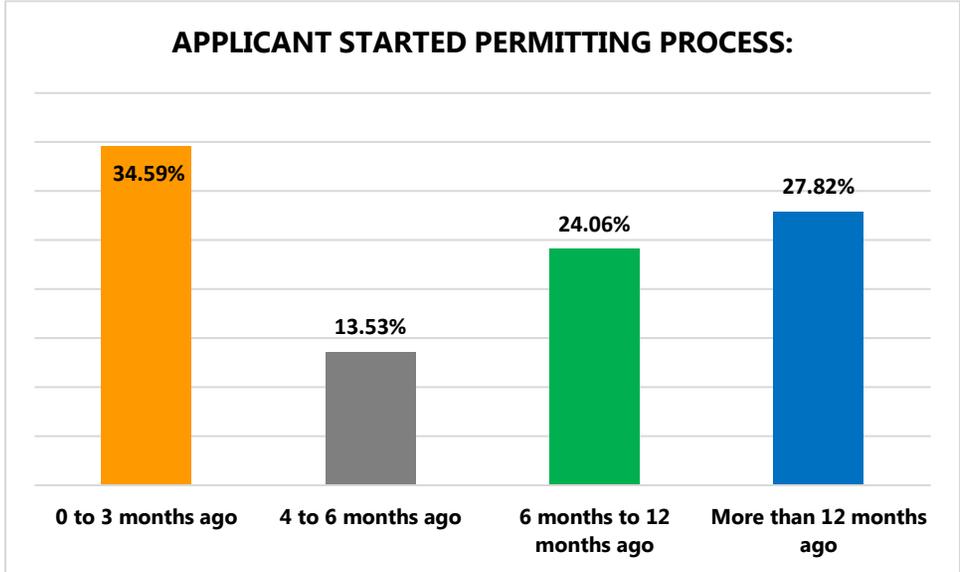
- 152 responses to single choice question
- Nearly 83% of contractors are repeat customers
- 65% of building owners are repeat customers
- Just over 44% of property owners are repeat customers

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QUESTION 3:



QUESTION 4:



Questions 3 and 4 determined the results of the application process and when it began.

QUESTION 3:

- 134 responses to single choice question
- 64.9% of new customers completed process
- 73.7% of repeat customers completed process

- 82.8% of contractors completed process
- 70.6% of property owners completed process
- 70% of business owners completed process

QUESTION 4:

- 133 responses to single choice question
- Applications completed for timeline categories:
 - o 80.4% for 0-3 months
 - o 77.8% for 4-6 months
 - o 93.8% for 6-12 months
 - o 75.7% for 12+ months
- 5 of 6 applications that were ended without permits are for apps started 12+ months ago

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QUESTION 5:

Please describe what type of permit or approval you were seeking (i.e. new construction; remodel; signage; etc.): **129 responses**

There was a broad array of projects cited including:

- Remodel/Addition: 47
 - Fire/HVAC/Plumbing/Electrical work: 22
 - New construction: 15
 - Roof: 9
 - Windows: 5
 - Tenant Improvements (TI's): 4
 - Signage: 3
-

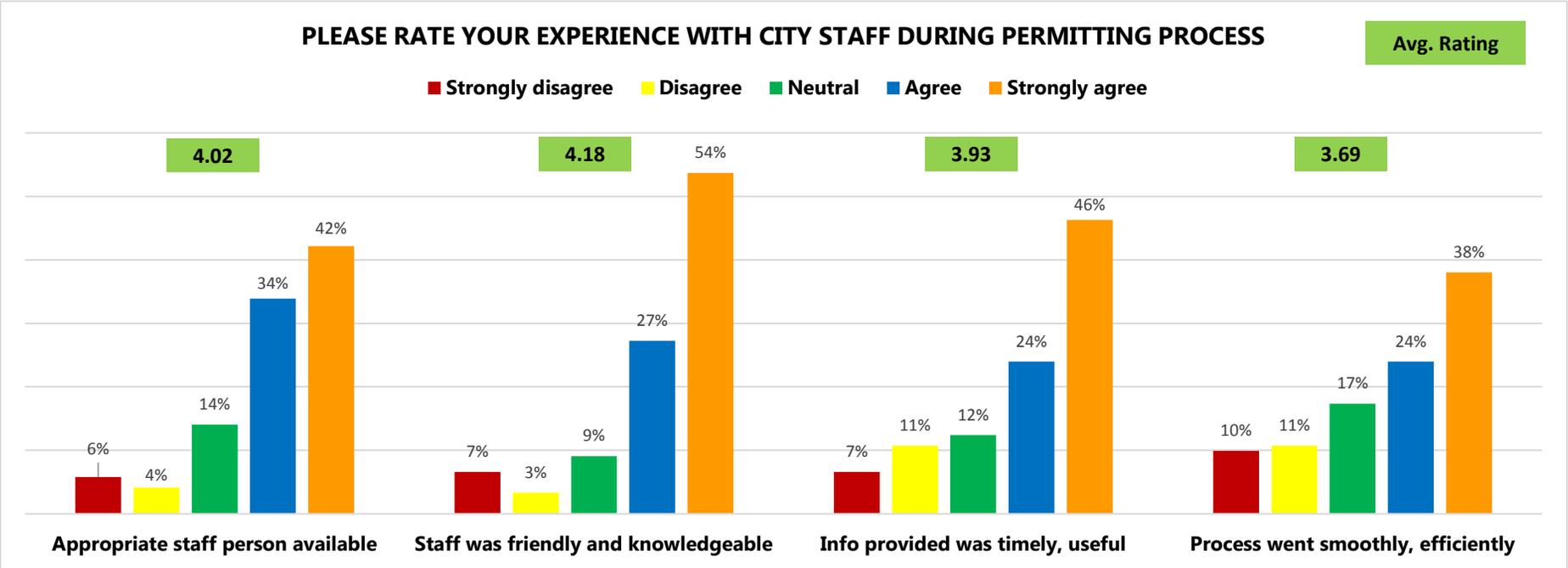
Questions 6 thru 14 asked respondents to rate different aspects of the permitting process:

- Question 6 asked about one's experience with city staff
- Four different ideas were queried: was the right staff available, was staff attitude positive, was info received useful, and did the process go well (question 7 asked for respondent comments to question 6)
- Question 8 asked respondents to rate six different departments that are part of the permitting process (question 9 for comments)
- Question 10 asked respondent to rate the overall permitting experience (question 11 for comments)
- Question 12 determined if applicant used the city's website during the permitting process
- Question 13 asked respondents who answered "yes" to question 12 to rate the website areas they used during the permitting process (respondents allowed to add comments)
- Question 14 asked about the overall customer service experience

Each question has graphs and analysis that measures overall responses. There are also two other measurements (known as "cross-tabs"): by applicant status (question 2) and by application time period (question #4). Looking at the data by applicant status reflects how those who are familiar with the process view the changes made versus those who have no previous experience with Vallejo's version. Viewing the same data by application time period shows changes over time for all applicants.

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QUESTION 6:



- 121 responses to each of the four questions
- Overall, staff rated high on personal qualities (friendliness, ability)
- On all questions, staff did well (strongly agree, agree)
- Lowest rating was for a smooth, efficient process

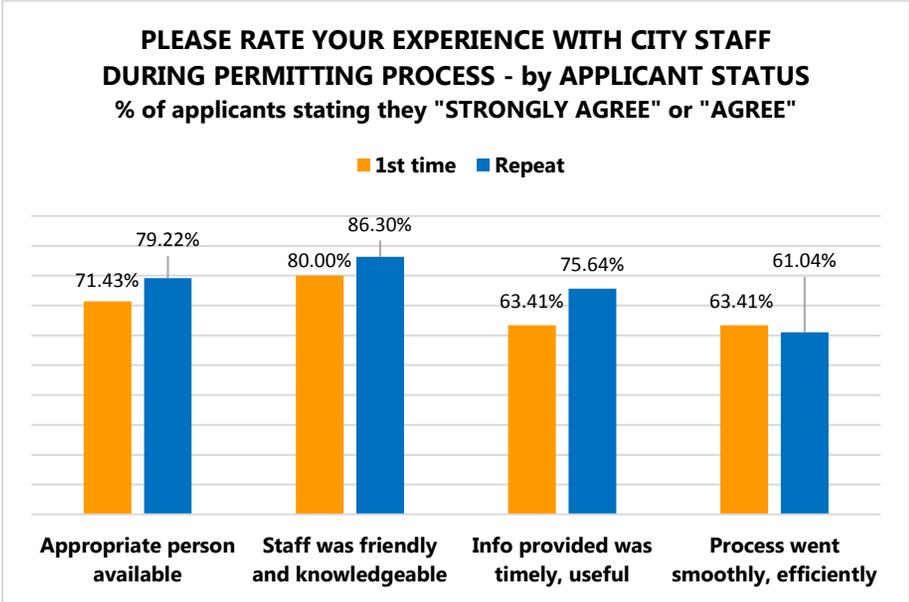
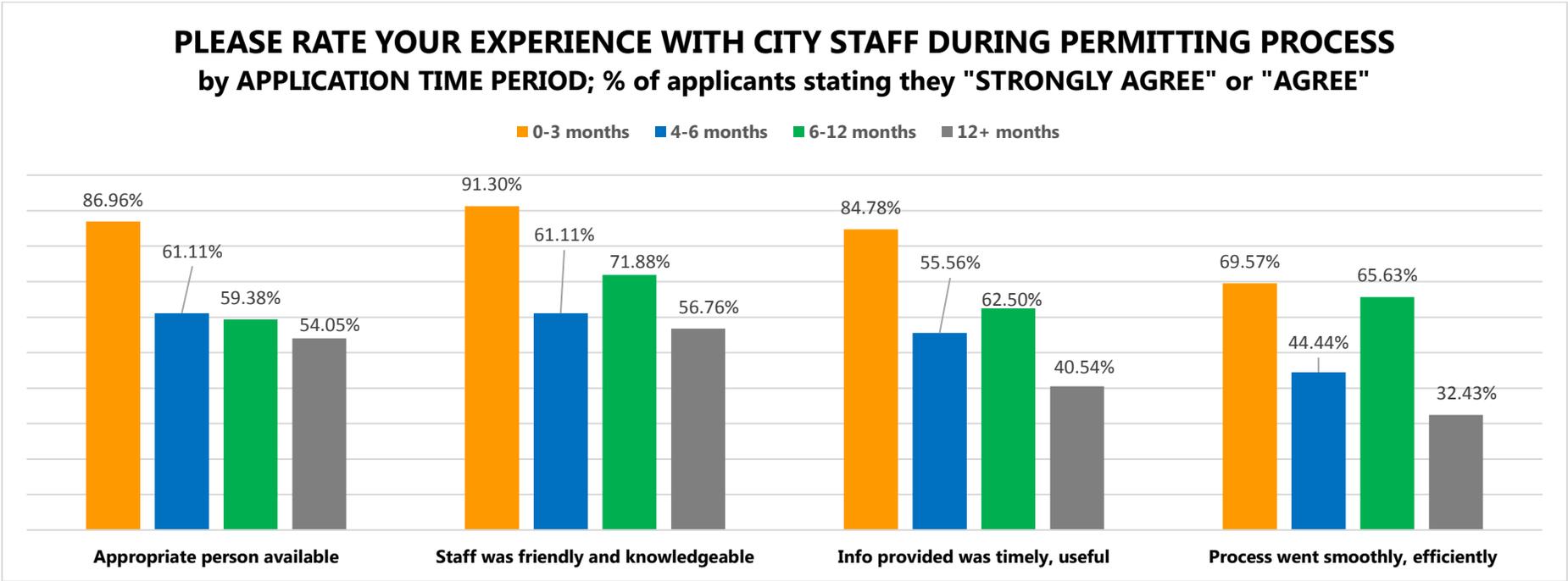
General text comments were positive about staff friendliness; negative about slow process, staff not always possessing the same information, too much back-and-forth and too much time to process.

Examples of respondent comments:

- "I pull permits all over the state. Your dept. did a good job of making the process simple ..."
- "There's a reason why the city is broke. I have built houses in multiple cities and never encountered so many issues and problems."
- "I found that the staff in Planning and Building were knowledgeable, courteous, and helpful in obtaining permits."
- "Really takes a long time, costing the customer more money in holding costs."
- "Overall improvement compared to years past."
- "The staff is friendly but generally slow to process."
- "Submitted application to replace 3 windows (like for like), and it took 1 week to process and to issue the permit. Other City Building Depts issue permit if not the same day than max the day after ... Unacceptable!"
- "The people at the counter are nice but don't always have correct info. I'm more annoyed about cost. My \$500 repair project cost over \$500 for permit."

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Question 6: cross tabs:

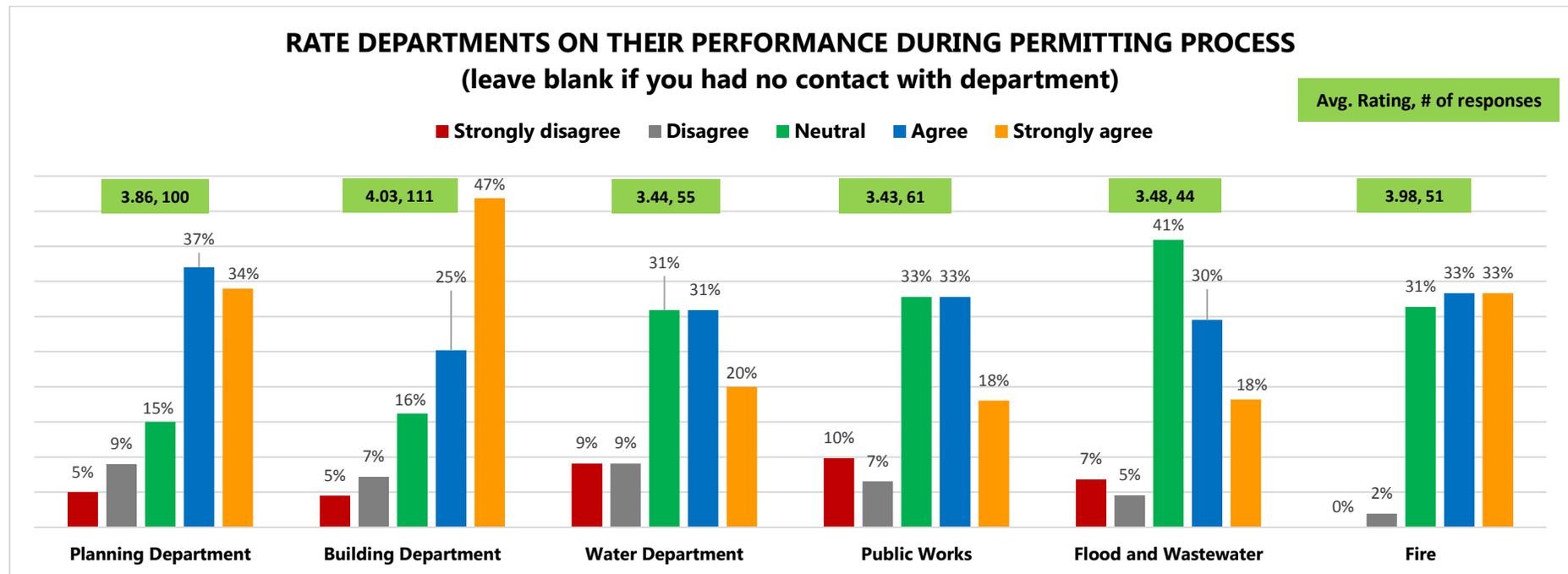


- Recent applicants rated city staff higher in all areas
- Interestingly, applicants from 6-12 months ago rated all areas second highest (except "appropriate person available")
- Largest improvement for "applicants by time period" was "info provided was timely, useful", +44%
- Repeat customers consistently gave a higher rating in all areas except "process went smoothly, efficiently"
- Staff friendliness rated highest in both cross tabs
- Only 2 respondents who answered these questions answered less than all four questions; 42 respondents did not answer any

Repeat customers are better evaluators of the effects of changes made by the City's permitting team. As the service gets better, their expectations go up, which is one explanation why "process went smoothly" was lower for repeats than for first timers despite otherwise higher ratings.

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QUESTION 8:



- Varied # of responses for each department; respondents told to leave answer blank if they did not interact with department
- Two of the three highest rated departments had the most responses
- 38 respondents rated all six departments
- All departments under a 20% negative rating (strongly disagree + disagree)
- Building dept. only one to have more "strongly agree" than "agree"

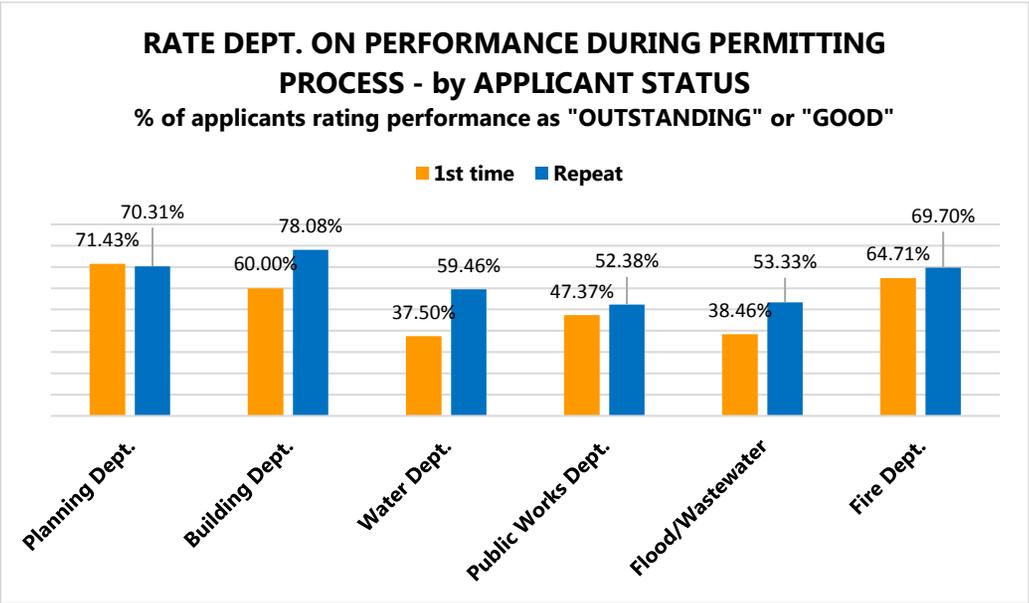
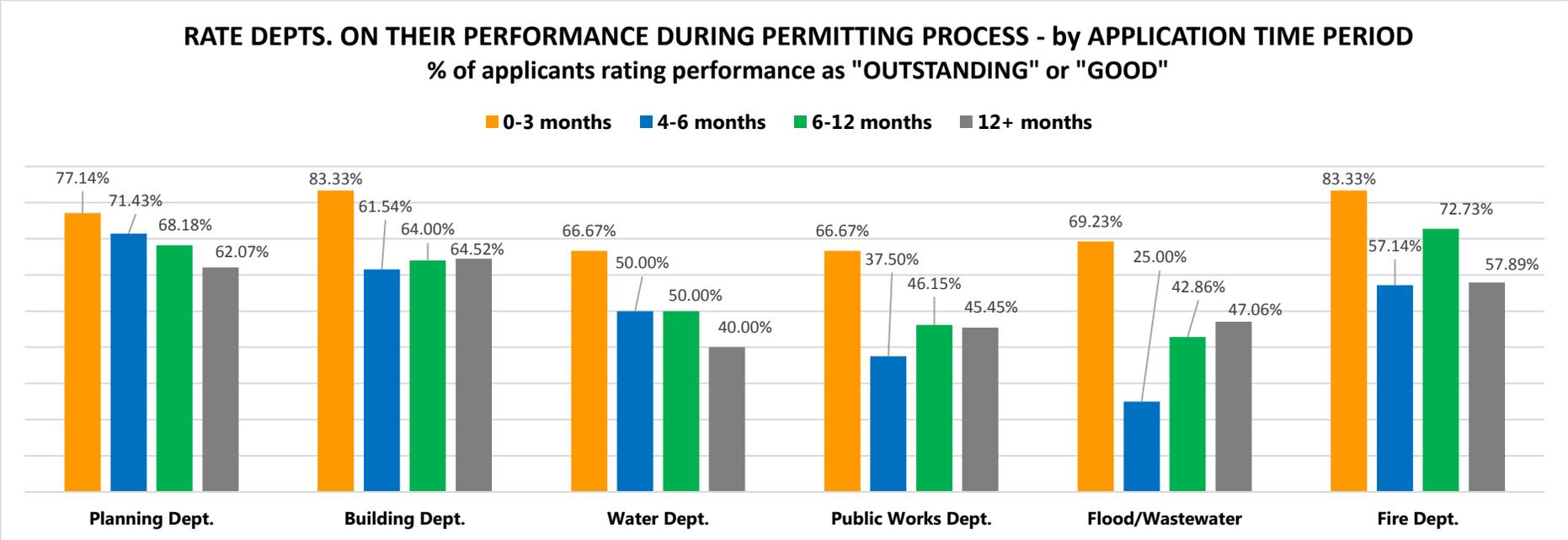
The best way to characterize respondent comments is that departments were inconsistent in their performance. Negative comments focused on a shortage of staff members, being provided inconsistent information, long processing times and high fees. Positive comments stressed staff's attitude (polite, pleasant, always smile) and a sense the process is better than before.

Examples of respondent comments:

- "I'm baffled by the amount of time it takes for small projects to be reviewed."
- "Planning/Building were the only ones we needed to interact with, did their job professionally."
- "I did not understand that many additional fees and permits would be required by various departments."
- "Would be a much better experience if there was more staff for shorter wait times or better instructions on what forms to fill out beforehand."
- "Greeted as soon as I came in. Application process was straight forward and efficient."
- "Surrounding cities offer incentives for bldg ADU's. Vallejo offers roadblocks."

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Question 8: cross tabs:



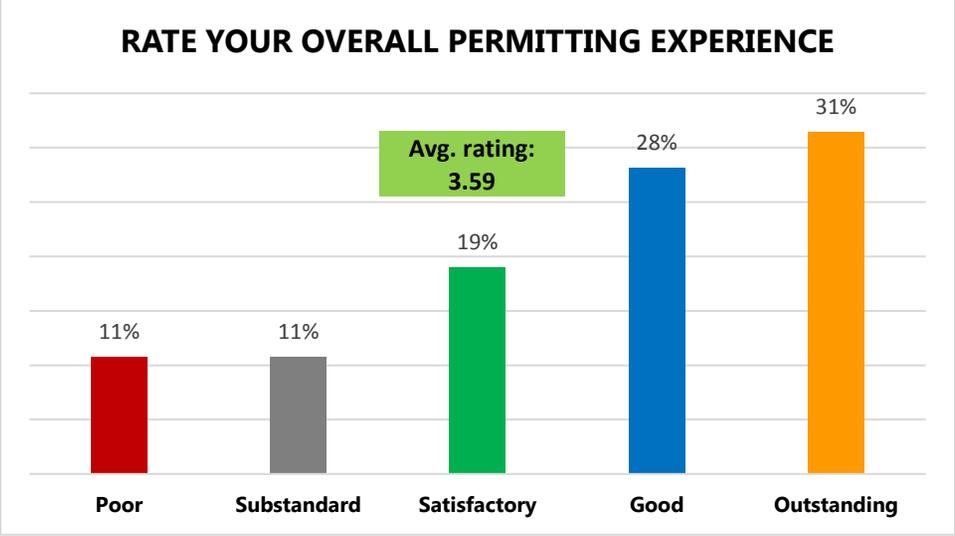
- Recent applicants gave all departments the highest ratings
- Applicants from 6-12 months ago rated all departments second highest (except Planning)
- Largest improvement by application time period was for the Water dept., +26.6%
- Repeat customers consistently gave a higher rating for all departments except Planning
- Spread (by applicant status) was highest for Water Dept. (22% difference)

Recent and repeat customers rated departments the highest. This suggests recent improvements by the City of Vallejo are making an impact, especially for those who are familiar with Vallejo's process.

A dip in ratings (from 6-12 months to 3-6 months) suggests the city was in a "learning mode" with the many changes made. The fact all recent time period applicants rate departments highest indicates the learning has paid off in improved performance.

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QUESTION 10:



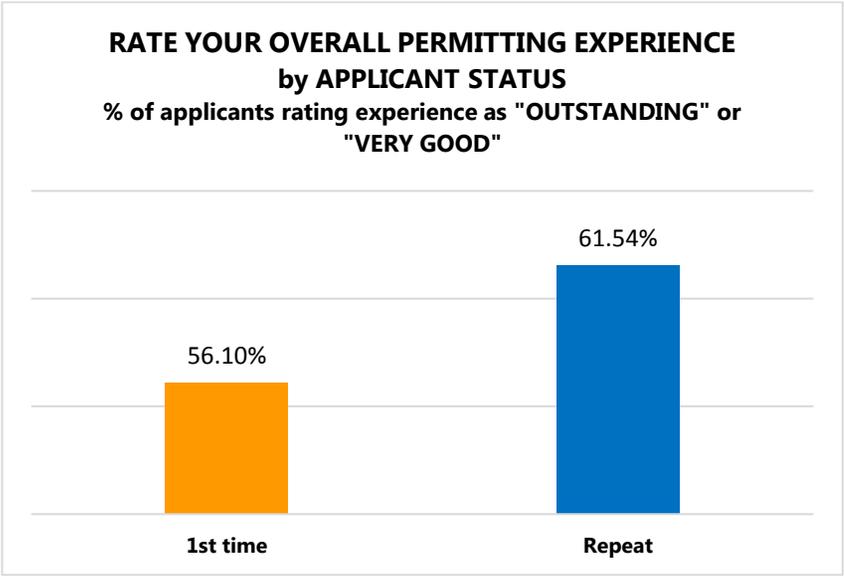
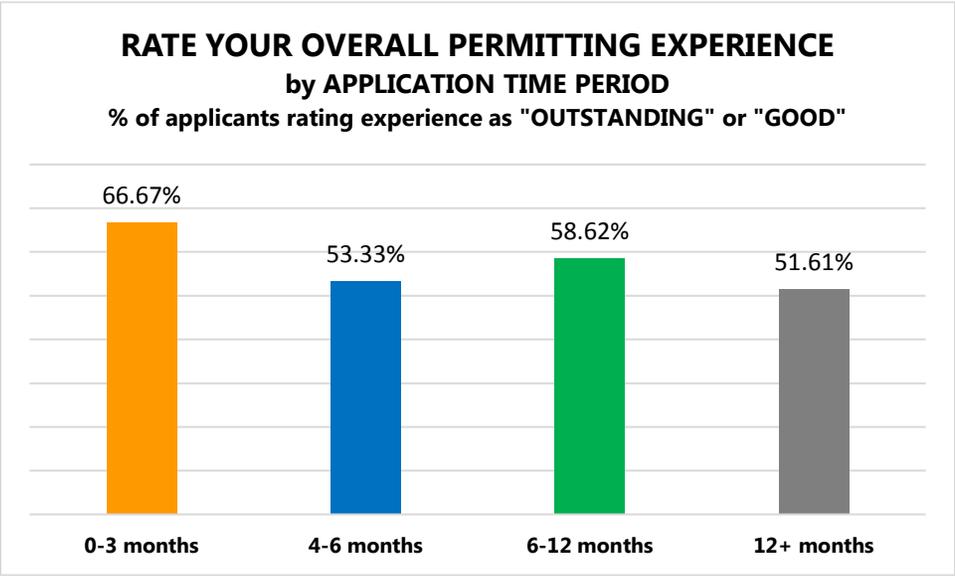
There is measurable improvement in the overall permitting experience though there is still inconsistency:

- Applicants within the last three months rate the experience +7.5% above the overall pool average; all other application time periods rate at pool average or below
- Repeat applicants rate at +2.5% above overall pool average

Examples of comments:

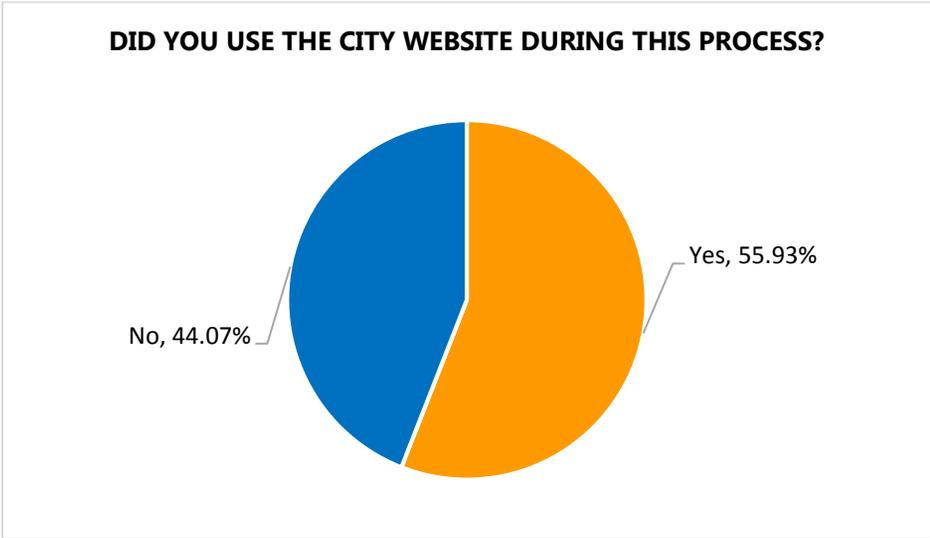
- *"Things seem to have gotten better recently, in the last few months - in the past Vallejo's process was so bad I would avoid jobs in this community."*
- *"Four trips to the office to make changes due to inconsistencies of the inspectors."*
- *"Seems like these departments do not want to communicate."*
- *"Overall, it was a quick permit process but too much misleading information and no one taking responsibility."*

Question 10 cross-tabs:



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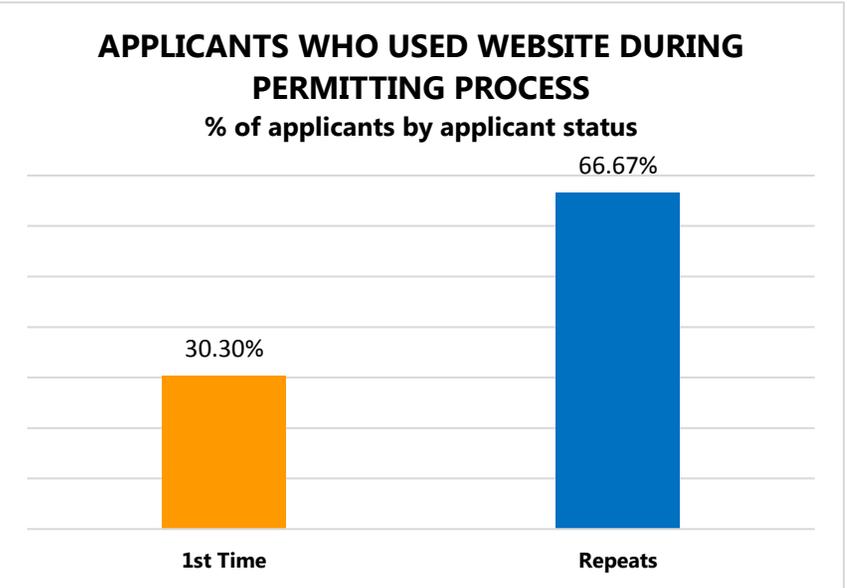
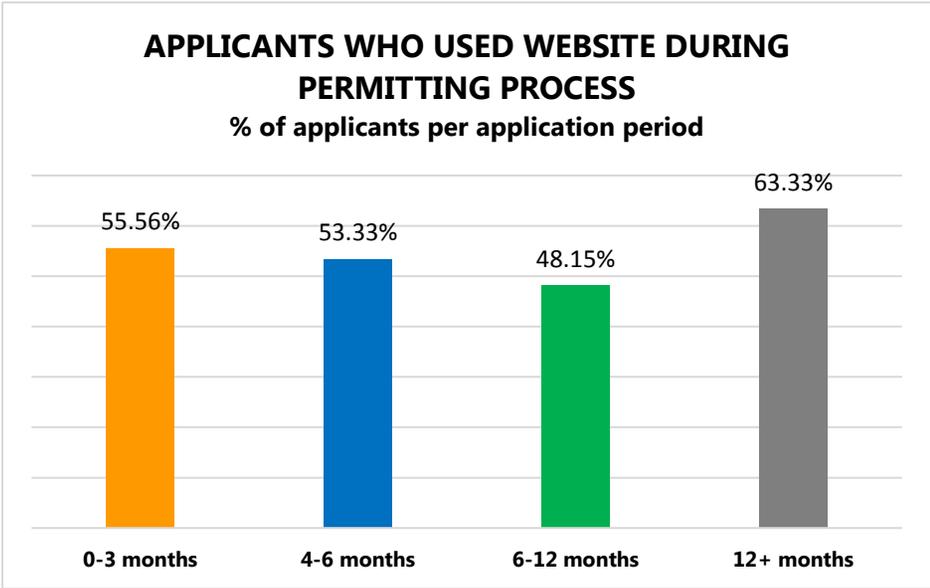
QUESTION 12:



Use of the website during the permitting process is slowly increasing after a significant drop from 12+ months ago:

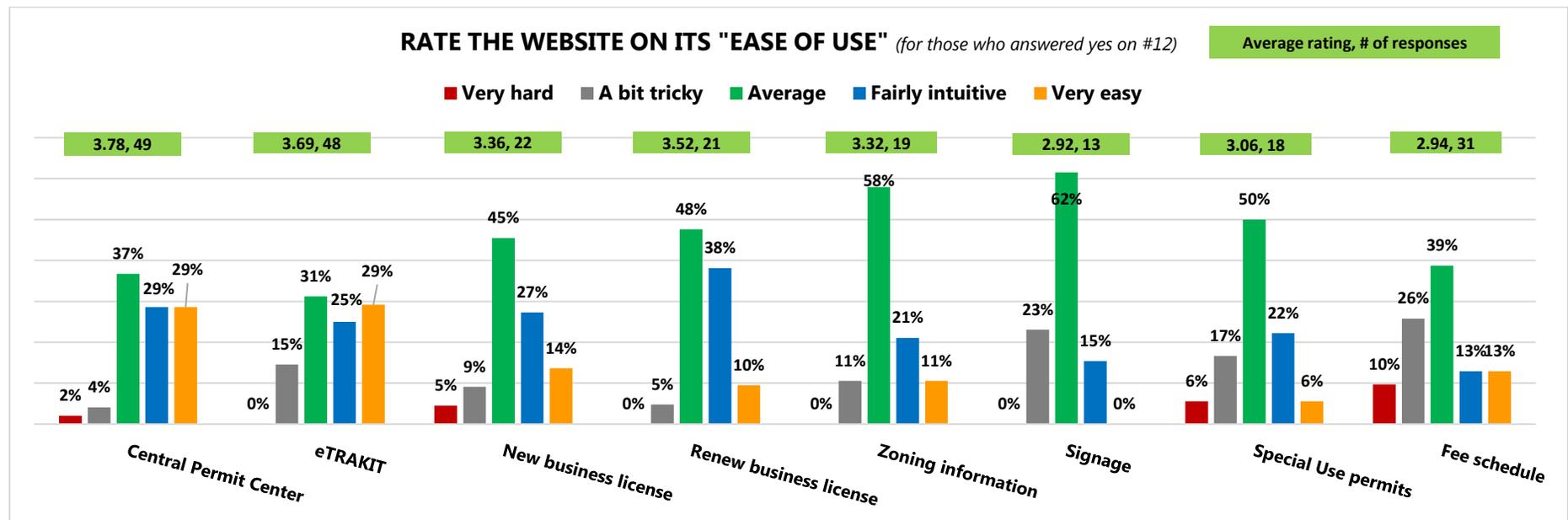
- Applicants from all application time periods other than 12+ months ago use website at a lower-than-average rate
- Repeat applicants use the website at 10.7% above avg. rate
- 1st time applicants are significantly lower users of website
 - o How is the website being promoted to applicants?
 - o What can the City of Vallejo do to increase usage, especially among 1st time applicants?

Question 12 cross-tabs:



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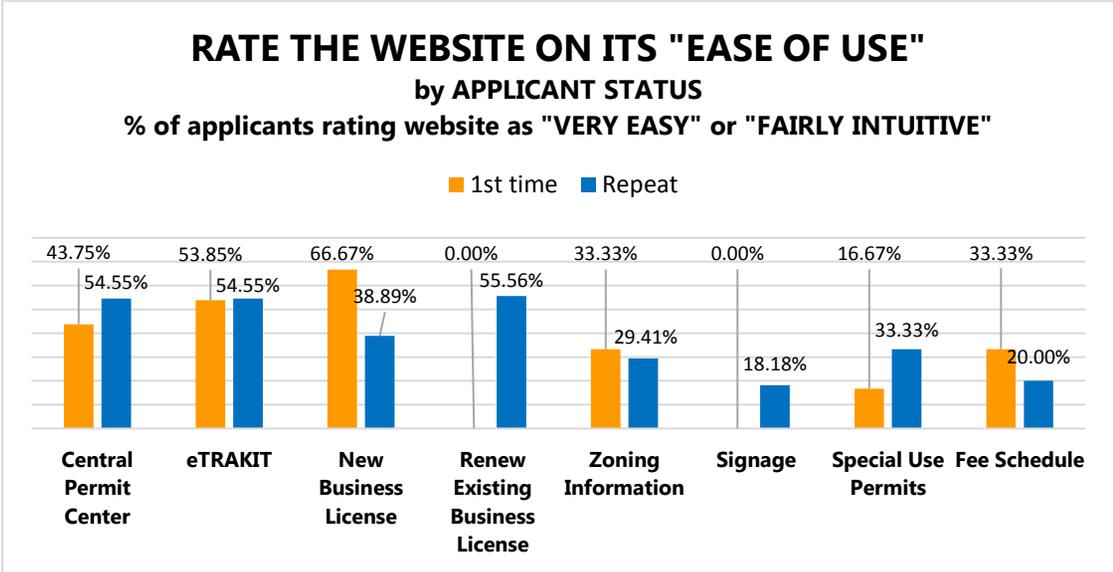
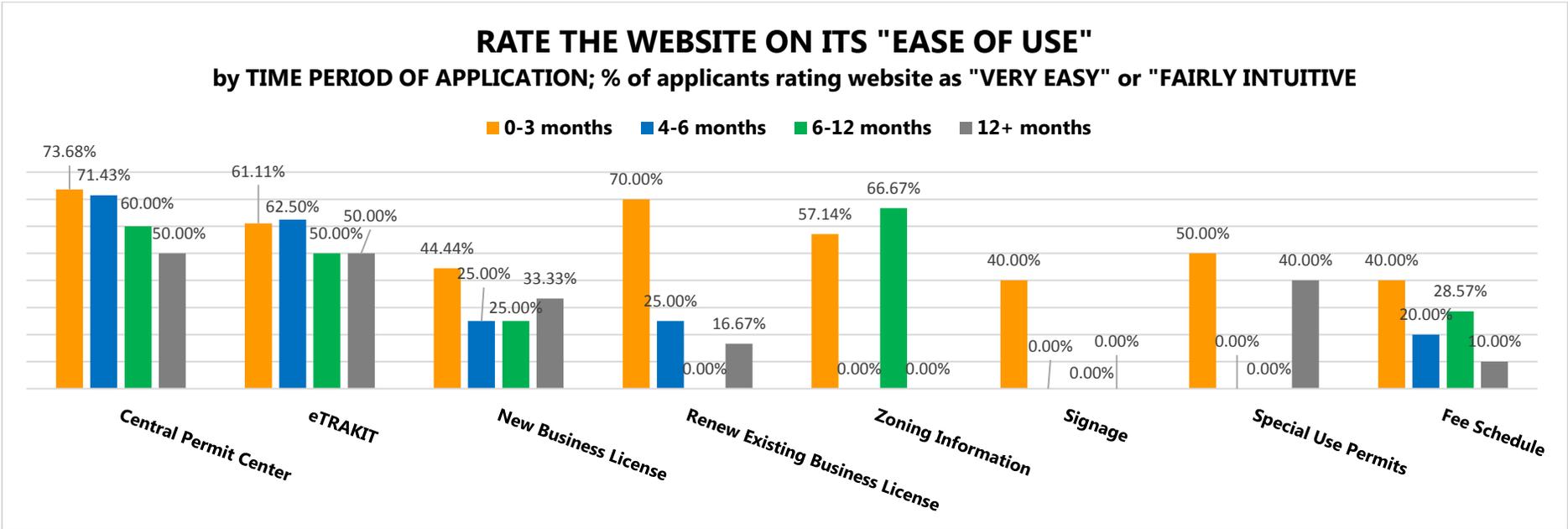
QUESTION 13:



- Applicant opinion on website "ease of use" ranges from a high of 3.78 (CPC) to a low of 2.92 (signage)
- All categories other than Signage and Fee Schedule rate above 3.0 (average)
- Website sections used most frequently received highest average ratings (CPC, eTRAKIT)
- Example comments from question 13:
 - "Lots of broken links to documents. eTrakit is slow. I also wasn't told all my documents would be made publicly available online."
 - "Fees are impossible to calculate even in person."
 - "Logging on the City website is a real pain. IT couldn't figure out my password and the UI is klunky at best so I gave up trying to use it. I do use the websites at places like Contra costa where I can actually schedule inspections online from my phone."
 - "To my knowledge Vallejo does not use eTRAKIT as yet."
 - "I am not aware that we can pull permits online at this time. We do that in many other cities and counties. I am perfectly fine with eTrakit and using their website. I would love to be able to pull online in the future..."
 - "I didn't like the Central Permit Center webpage when I first viewed it a couple of years ago but it has gotten better. eTRAKIT has improved also."

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QUESTION 13: cross tabs



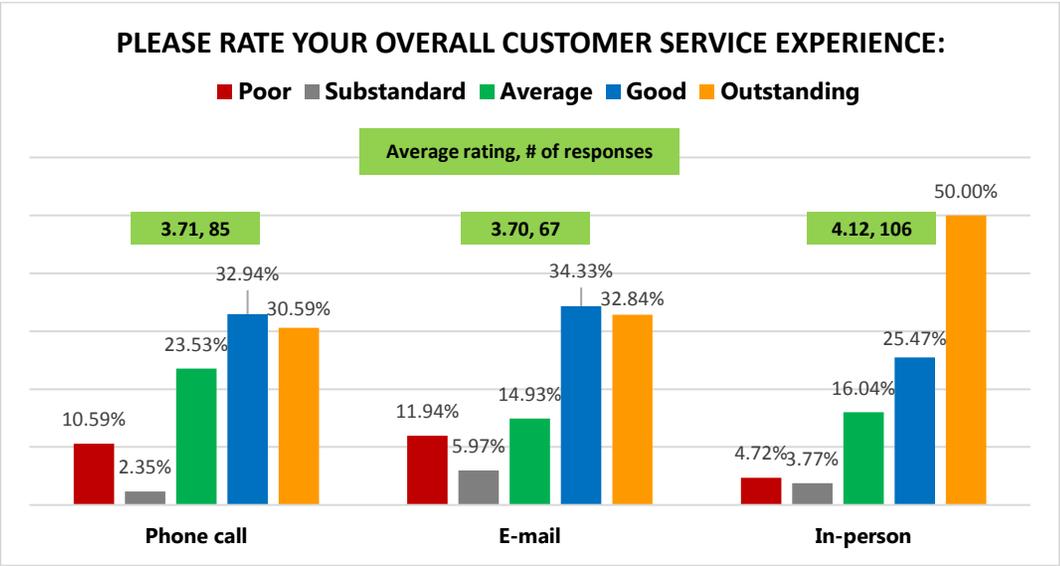
Website "ease of use" has improved in most areas rated:

- Recent applicants (0-3 months) rate website "ease of use" higher than average in all areas
- Some areas received a "0.00%" due to respondents not highly rating the area or a lack of respondents
- Repeat applicants rate 5 of 8 areas higher than 1st time applicants
- 1st time applicants rated 4 areas higher than average (eTRAKIT, New Biz License, Zoning, Fee Schedule)

Main issue is not enough applicants using website.

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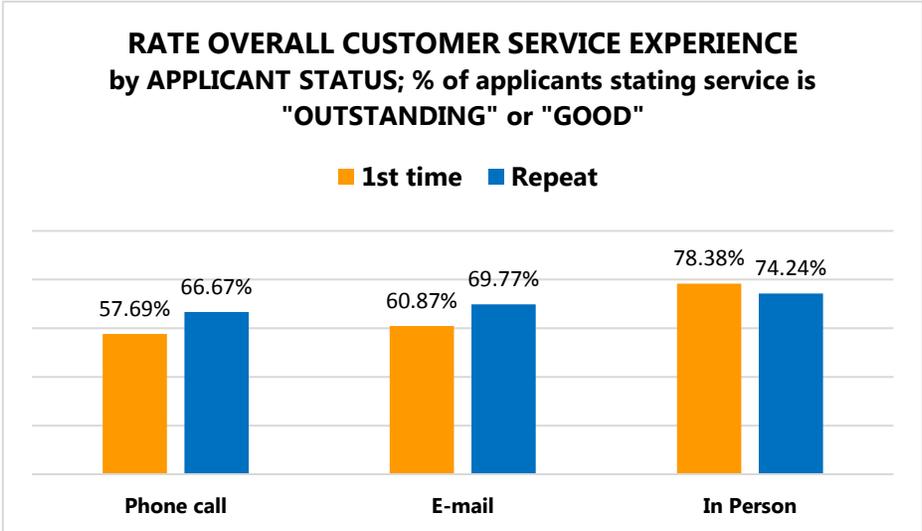
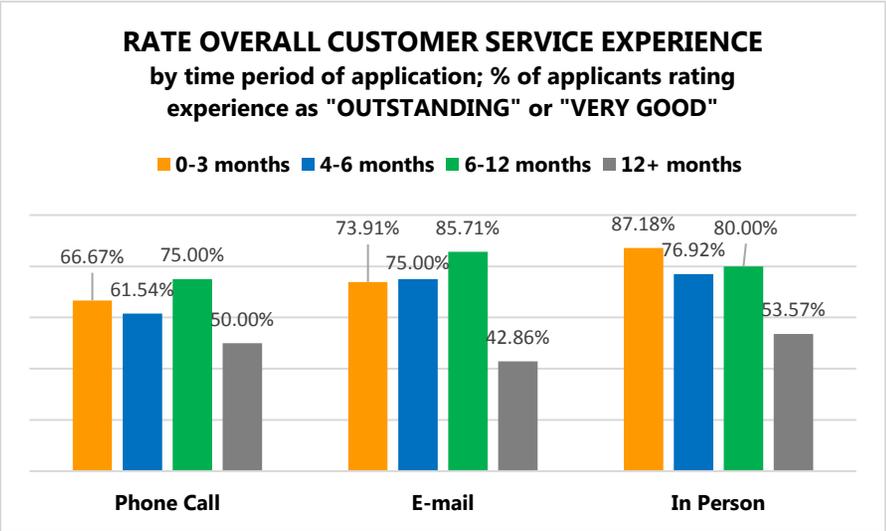
QUESTION 14:



Overall customer service experience rated highly in all areas:

- In-person experience rated highest
- Phone call and e-mail rated evenly (e-mail has higher negative and positive ratings)
- Highest improvement: In-Person service (+33.6%)
- All three services declined from 6-12 months to 3-6 months applicants
- Only e-mail continued to decline for recent applicants (0-3 months)
- Repeat applicants rate phone calls (+3.14%) and e-mails (+2.60%) above overall average
- 1st time applicants rate only one category, in-person (+2.91%) above overall average

QUESTION 14: cross tabs



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SUMMARY

The permitting process is perhaps the most important activity performed by a city in relation to business. A permit is a legal document that shows proof that one is complying with local rules and regulations regarding the action being permitted. They are the key to business being done in a legal and above-board way.

For nearly two years, the Vallejo Chamber of Commerce has worked with the City of Vallejo on improving the permitting process in Vallejo. This effort started with the formation of the Business Permitting Ad Hoc, which met quarterly with the City Manager and city department heads. These meetings focused on identifying what was working and what wasn't working in the permitting process. Vallejo took this information and used it to make changes that were hoped to lead to improved service and results. This survey was created to measure those results.

As with any "change" process, implementation is just one step along the way. Once changes are made, the participants in the process go through an adjustment period as the new process is experienced. This is felt on both sides – by the applicants and city staff – and should be expected. The goal of a change process is to complete the changes, give the new process time to take root, and then measure the changes. If this is in fact happening, the results should show some decline in performance before rebounding, hopefully to a higher level than before.

The survey measured change in two ways: by grouping applicants into four groups: 0-3 months; 3-6 months; 6-12 months; and 12+ months; and by comparing repeat and first time applicants. As expected, for the group separated by application date, survey results repeatedly show a dip in results from 6-12 months ago to 3-6 months ago, before recovering to an even higher rating for the most recent applicants (0-3 months ago). This dip likely resulted from the changes made by the City of Vallejo. Changes in how permitting is done cause disruptions to service by the departments. Changes also alter the expectations and experience of the applicants. A positive result from the changes would be to see ratings go up after the changes took root, which is what the results consistently show.

Another group that was examined to measure change is repeat applicants. When measured against first time applicants, repeat applicant consistently rated city services and departments higher. One exception was in how repeat applicants rated the process being smooth and efficient lower than first time applicants. Given nearly all other marks being higher for repeat applicants, it is likely what changed was their expectations became higher with better performance along the way. This is a good indicator the City of Vallejo is on the right path.

On the negative side, it is clear the City of Vallejo needs to do a much better job communicating – to applicants and to each other. A number of users complained city staff didn't know what they needed to know in order to be of better service. Other comments reflected frustration at not being aware of the tools available, especially online resources. Underlying many of the negative comments was unhappiness

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with the time-cost of the permitting process. Over and over, applicants cited how long the process took and the adverse impact this had on their business.

FINAL THOUGHTS

One thing that can be taken from this survey is that changes made by the City of Vallejo are yielding better results from the applicant's perspective. The experience is better overall and with each city department, regardless of how the process is engaged. Those who have previously experienced Vallejo's permitting process rate the city higher than average in nearly all areas, especially those who have gone through the process in recent months. This is an important step forward for Vallejo that, if continued, should lead to more business being done by our business community.

Where the City of Vallejo isn't succeeding at a high enough level yet is primarily in two areas: timing and communication. A business relies on "time-certainty" when planning projects. It is important the business has a clear understanding of how much time it will take to get the permit at the beginning of the process. Delays caused by inefficiencies in the permitting process can end a project before it even starts.

The other key improvement will be with communication, which drives the permitting process. Though better, there are still too many examples of incomplete or inaccurate communication disrupting an application. Reasons cited, like inexperienced staff and last-minute changes to the requirements, again lead to delays that could stop a project in its tracks. None of this addresses respondent concerns about the financial costs, which was cited by many who completed the survey and should be the subject of a separate survey.

The Vallejo Chamber of Commerce is very positive about where the City of Vallejo is at with the permitting process. Though issues remain, the city has made great progress on changing the perception that Vallejo is a great place to do business. This effort will continue, by both the City and the Chamber.

We look forward to continuing to work together on making Vallejo's permitting process the best in the Bay Area!

