THE CITY OF
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**Planning Commission
Staff Report**

August 31, 2016
Item 8.e.

PURPOSE: Presentation on the redesigned City permitting and zoning website - PleasantonPermits.com, including the launch of two new online tools - ZoningCheck and OpenCounter

RECOMMENDATION

Receive the presentation on PleasantonPermits.com including OpenCounter and ZoningCheck online tools.

SUMMARY

On December 15, 2015, the City Council approved a master agreement with OpenCounter Enterprises, Inc., (OpenCounter) to create an interactive online tool that allows existing companies and prospective businesses to access City land use and permitting information. The software will assist those looking to undertake renovation, expansion and relocation projects, and open new businesses in Pleasanton. Along with facilitating the permitting process for businesses by digitizing much of the application intake process, this new tool makes City permitting and zoning regulations available online in an easy-to-use web interface, and will provide useful data about businesses to assist the City's planning and economic development efforts. To house this new online tool, the City has redesigned the current Pleasanton Permits portal (PleasantonPermits.com) to provide the community with a one-stop location for its online business, zoning, and permitting needs.

BACKGROUND

While Pleasanton has long been attentive to strengthening its reputation as a business-friendly community, for the last several years the City has been particularly focused on streamlining the permitting process. As the result of review by a customer service task force, both administrative and policy recommendations have been implemented to enhance clarity, certainty and timeliness in the City's review and approval processes. These efforts are having a positive impact, as demonstrated by a recent survey of Pleasanton companies that showed an increase in respondents indicating the permitting process was "easy" or "very easy."

Staff's ongoing work on the Zoning Code update and past experience interfacing with applicants have suggested that understanding the applicable zoning regulations is challenging for many code users, including existing and prospective business owners in the community. Prior to this relaunch of the redesigned PleasantonPermits.com portal, prospective commercial tenants would have to make multiple visits to the Permit Center to ascertain whether a specific land use is allowed at a specific location or proceed through an iterative and time-consuming process using the online zoning parcel map. In some instances, the use would not be addressed in the zoning regulations, requiring additional review and consideration by Planning staff. In addition,

the current system requires applicants to verbally convey information about development applications and business proposals to Planning staff at the Permit Counter, a time-consuming process for applicants and staff.

DISCUSSION
As part of the City's efforts to strengthen its reputation as a business-friendly community and help to make opening a business and the licensing and permitting process more efficient and streamlined, the City's "Pleasanton Permits" portal has been redesigned to provide a one-stop location for online business, zoning, and permitting needs.

Figure 1 – PleasantonPermits.com Homepage

The new portal (accessed via PleasantonPermits.com) provides links that will help business applicants check property zoning, estimate permit and development fees, process permits, search City businesses, and obtain licenses necessary to start or expand businesses. As well as facilitating the permitting process, the new OpenCounter online tools:
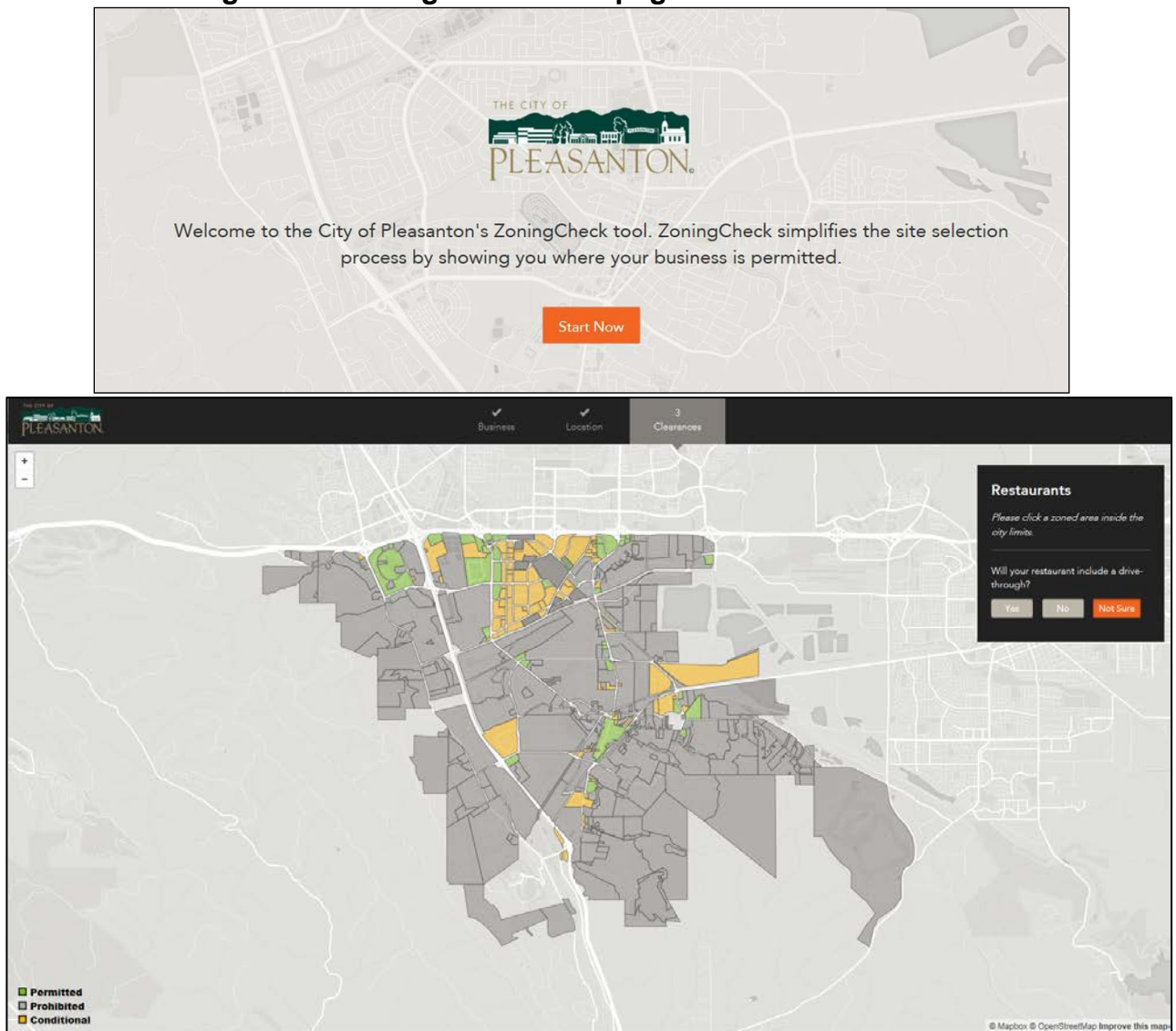
1. Digitize much of the application intake process;
2. Make City zoning regulations available online in an easy-to-use web interface; and
3. Provide useful data about businesses to assist the City's planning and economic development efforts.

In addition to the various tools and sites already provided by the City that will be consolidated on the PleasantonPermits.com portal page, there are two new online tools that can be found on the page:

1. *ZoningCheck*. The ZoningCheck site is a web-based system configured using the City GIS map, zoning ordinance, and Planned Unit Development criteria that provides a user-friendly interface to check where in the City a specific use is permitted "by right" or conditionally permitted. This site avoids the need to search, parcel-by-parcel, to determine whether a business type is allowed within the City's many zoning districts and Planned Unit Developments.

   ZoningCheck will save business owners from having to travel to the City's Permit Center to navigate paper or digital copies of zoning regulations. It also allows staff to work with applicants on refining their site/business plans to better conform to zoning and community standards, instead of simply identifying appropriate locations for businesses.
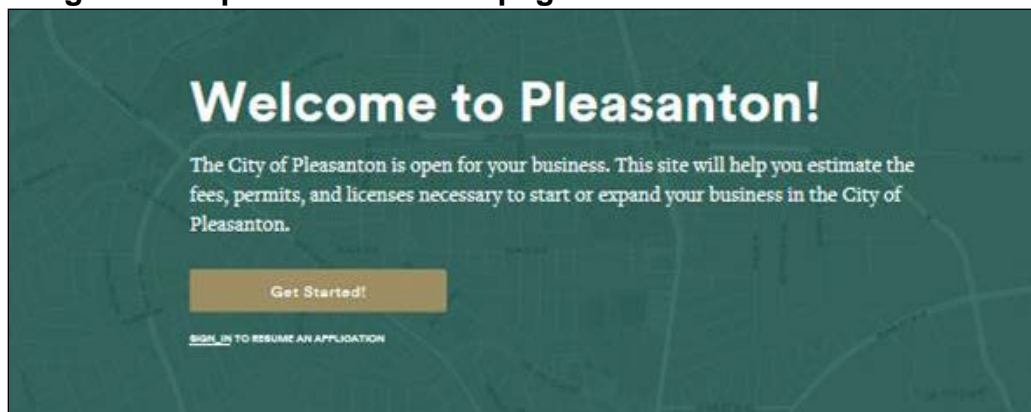
Figure 2 – ZoningCheck Homepage

2. *OpenCounter*. OpenCounter's web-based system is configured using City ordinance criteria and fee schedule information and provides a user-friendly interface to work through an online questionnaire to determine appropriate zoning requirements and help an applicant estimate the fees, permits, and licenses necessary to undertake renovation, expansion and relocation projects, and open new businesses in Pleasanton. OpenCounter is also integrated with the City's existing permitting software, Accela, to allow for data transfer between the two systems. In time, this will allow the staff of the Planning and Building Divisions to quickly and easily review applications for minor permits to help applicants identify full submittal requirements and more efficiently process applications.

In addition, OpenCounter will generate useful economic development and planning data that can be used by the City to make existing policies more effective and responsive to development trends (e.g., a trend showing a desire to open up bakeries in a specific location could prompt the City to change the development regulations in that area to encourage the relocation and expansion of more complementary businesses). The program also collects information about which shopping centers/areas of the City have the most permitting activity, what kinds of businesses are being created (and the numbers of jobs being created) and the average cost and time frames for a particular entitlement process, which are valuable for the evaluation and expansion of planning and economic development strategies.

Figure 3 – OpenCounter Homepage

Staff believes that the redesigned PleasantonPermits.com portal with new OpenCounter and ZoningCheck tools will result in improved customer service. Information previously housed in City offices and various locations online is now consolidated in one location and available online in digital format, making it more easily and widely accessible, and resulting in a more streamlined path to a new, relocated, or expanded business.

Primary Author:
Jennifer Hagen, Associate Planner, 925-931-5607 or jhagen@cityofpleasantonca.gov

Reviewed/Approved By:
Steve Otto, Senior Planner
Adam Weinstein, Planning Manager
Gerry Beaudin, Director of Community Development