

San Francisco Board of Appeals Strategic Plan



Foreword

This document outlines the key opportunities the Board of Appeals will have over the next five years to improve the services it provides to the public and increase operational efficiencies. This document strives to set out ways in which the Board can continue to utilize technology, collaborate with other City departments, and strengthen internal processes to maximize its ability to carry out its mission.

Introduction

The Board of Appeals was created by the San Francisco Charter of 1932. The City Charter and other City laws grant the Board the authority to hear and decide specific types of appeals. These Charter and Code provisions also regulate the standard of review the Board must apply in each case, what information may be considered, the time frame within which the Board should conduct appeal hearings, how notice is provided to the public, and what fees are charged.

Over the past 89 years, the Board's jurisdiction has fluctuated as Charter and legislative changes add or remove various types of appealable decisions; business trends and innovations have continuously altered the issues and parties that come before the Board. Despite these changes, the Board's purpose has remained constant: to provide the public with an impartial forum within which disputes related to City-issued determinations may be resolved.

As a quasi-judicial body, the Board acts in a manner similar to a court of law; it is obliged to objectively determine facts and draw conclusions from those facts as a basis for its decisions. To foster the Board's impartiality, regulations and rules have been enacted that provide a standardized framework within which the parties may present their arguments and evidence and Board decisions are made.

For many who appear before the Board, the stakes are high. Board decisions may affect the legal rights, duties or privileges of a party, may impact a party's livelihood or the character of the neighborhood where they live. Board decisions may right a wrong, penalize a violation, or craft a compromise among parties.

Mission

The Board of Appeals is a quasi-judicial body that provides the public with a final administrative review process for a wide range of City determinations, including the granting, denial, suspension, revocation and modification of permits, licenses, and other use entitlements by various departments, Commissions and other entities of the City & County of San Francisco.

Values

As it hears and decides cases, the Board of Appeals strives to provide an efficient, fair and expeditious public hearing and decision-making process before an impartial panel as the last step in the City's review process.

Goals

Over the past several years, and since the Covid pandemic, the Board has begun modernizing its operations, and explored opportunities for inter-departmental collaboration, process refinement and workforce development. Appeal taking and processing has moved from an outdated Access computer program to a database on the Salesforce platform. Appeals can be taken remotely. This database that assists with the preparation of appeal-related documents and allows for more robust appeal tracking and reporting. The department's website has transitioned from the antiquated Drupal system to the SF.GOV platform. It has been enhanced with more appeal-related information, in more languages, and with historical appeal data covering the lifespan of the Board. The Rules of the Board have been reworked to better articulate the Board's values of impartiality and efficiency. Staffing adjustments have been made and training conducted to strengthen the skill base of the department's workforce in order to maximize available talent among the small number of Board employees.

The ideas and action items outlined below reflect a continuation of these initiatives and others already underway or completed at the Board.

Goal #1: Enhance the appeal process for all participants (the public, Board members and staff) through the increased use of technology.

- Evaluate and implement new opportunities for automation
 - o The ability to file appeals remotely
 - o Increased reliance by Board members on electronic documents to make filings easier for the parties and to reduce the amount of paper used in the appeal process
 - o Accepting electronic payment via credit/debit cards and check
- Increase technological collaboration with permit issuing departments
 - o Board participation in the Permit Tracking System (PTS) will create a single resource for information on permit history inclusive of appeals and appeal outcomes, providing property owners and others interested in information about a particular parcel with information on any unique zoning or other restrictions stemming from Board decisions
 - o Access and utilize additional permit information maintained by DBI, Planning & Public Works

- Improve the Board’s ability to assist members of the public who want to file or are seeking information about appeals
 - Allow Board staff to more quickly evaluate timeliness and permit status (issued, pending, denied)
 - Give Board staff access to permit holder contact information, and the permit documents required when appeals are filed
- In collaboration with other public meeting bodies, evaluate and implement new technologies that allow members of the public to participate in hearings in ways other than by attending the meeting in person
 - Live video/audio call in via Zoom
 - Submittal of pre-recorded video or audio content
 - Other new and emerging technologies
- Leverage opportunities for further interdepartmental collaboration
 - IT infrastructure/data & systems sharing
 - Increase Board visibility at locations where permit applications are processed
- Enhance internal data management
 - Improve the Board’s appeal tracking and reporting database
 - Add modules that allow for the automation and reporting of Rehearing Requests
 - Modify the system to allow sorting by permit type
 - Fine tune the system’s appeal reporting function to allow more custom tailored date parameters and distinctions between cases heard and cases filed
 - Add an electronic indexing feature to house and report on historic data for appeals filed since 1932

Goal #2: Foster workforce development: as a small department, cross training is important to ensure coverage and service provision at all times; staff retention is also key to maintaining competencies and institutional knowledge.

- Outline internal & external training needs, develop and implement training plans

Goal #3: Analyze and amend the Board’s rules of procedure and governing legislation to modernize appeal processing, enhance the public’s understanding of appeal rights and the appeal process, and eliminate inconsistencies.

- Work with Board members and Board constituents to identify opportunities for Rules clarifications and revisions
 - o Incorporating new technologies into the appeal process
 - o Waste reduction, in particular with respect to the use of paper
 - o Enhancing opportunities for public participation
 - o Further aligning the Rules with actual and preferred practices
- Collaborate with other City departments involved in the permit-issuing process to resolve legislative inconsistencies and obsolescence affecting appeals to the Board