King County

KING COUNTY AUDITOR'S OFFICE

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Opportunities for Green Building Program to Focus Reporting on Outputs Supporting Decision-Making

TO:

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King County Executive

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Department of Natural Resources and Parks

FROM:

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As King County increases its capital project investments and climate focus, it is critical to ensure that required reporting processes provide useful data and information efficiently. The Green Building Program annual reporting process complies with King County Code requirements but is time-consuming for capital project managers and sustainability staff. Further, reported information has limited utility. Taking time to reassess and refine processes to align effort with key outputs could increase efficiency and allow project managers to focus on King County's large and growing capital program.

This letter summarizes the results of our limited review of Green Building Program data and annual reporting. The intent is to highlight an opportunity for managers to ensure that time invested in reporting yields valuable information about the County's sustainability efforts. A future audit may use this letter as a starting point. In 2014, we published a performance audit of the Green Building Program in which we found that inconsistent reporting may prevent decision-makers from being able to ensure that King County is meeting its environmental and financial goals. In our 2024 review, we noted that the Green Building Program has added rigor and consistency to meeting reporting requirements. However, we found limitations on the reliability of reported data for use at a countywide level. At this point in the evolution of King County's Green Building and climate programs, there is an opportunity to redesign the annual reporting process to ensure that the data collected targets the County's strategic needs.

The Green Building Program has demonstrated considerable positive progress

The Green Building Program has robust processes to ensure compliance with reporting requirements. Since our last audit in 2014, Green Building Program leaders and the Green Building Team (made up of representatives from across King County's capital project divisions) developed a data system to track project reporting. They also developed extensive training and guidance for project managers to calculate and input sustainability metrics such as energy and greenhouse gas emission savings. Green Building Program managers update the system and guidance annually based on feedback from users. In addition, managers select two projects every one or two years to do a detailed audit to verify reported data against project documentation. Green Building leaders have also continued to refine the sustainable infrastructure scorecard that most capital projects use to plan and report their sustainability efforts.[1] These efforts have helped integrate sustainability practices into capital projects across the County, furthering the vision of the 2022 green building ordinance and improving the environmental sustainability of King County's capital projects.

Annual reporting process is burdensome

Re-evaluating and refining the annual reporting process to align effort with key outputs could save time that may be better used to support King County's growing capital improvement program. The green building ordinance requires county-owned capital projects to report annually on sustainability and green building efforts in addition to reports at 30-percent design and project completion. We found that, while the program has strong processes to ensure the project managers comply with this mandate, annual reports require significant time and effort from project managers as well as the Green Building Team members who review the annual reports. Green Building Team review staff, across eight divisions, indicated that each project takes an average of half an hour, but reviews can take up to five hours if they require multiple meetings with project managers and contractors.[2] In 2023, 12 reviewers conducted 96 percent of the 437 annual report reviews. During the months around the January 31 deadline, one reviewer said the work consumes 30–40 percent of their time. Reviewers indicated that it was difficult to get project managers to fill out the annual reports because of their numerous other duties. They noted that this was particularly true for smaller projects.

While staff spend significant effort to compile annual reports, the Strategic Climate Action Plan (SCAP) does not use annual report data in any of its metrics. Instead, the SCAP uses the percentage of projects that achieved platinum level of King County's Sustainable Infrastructure Scorecard or other third-party certification, such as LEED. We found this approach reasonable because it accounts for the wide variation

[1] In March 2024, the Green Building Program launched an online learning course available to all county staff to increase awareness of the Green Building Program and its reporting requirements.

[2] We interviewed reviewers representing the Solid Waste, Parks, Road Services, Wastewater Treatment, Water and Land Resources, and Facilities Management divisions as well as Airport and Metro Transit.

in the County's capital projects.[3] Green Building leaders stated that they use the information in annual reports to verify other reports and to track changes to sustainability components of projects between design and completion, but there may be less time-consuming ways to achieve those objectives than the current annual reporting process. Collecting information in a more efficient way would reduce time demands on project managers and other capital project agency staff. This could be particularly important as the County increases the volume of projects in coming years.

Sustainability metrics are challenging to calculate, verify, and aggregate

Leaders may want to evaluate whether the quantitative data on sustainability metrics in annual reports have strategic value, considering that calculating them is difficult for project managers and reviewers who are not able to verify the data. Despite guidance and training for project managers, reviewers said the data elements required in annual reports can be difficult for project managers to calculate. Specifically, they told us:

- projected performance can change considerably between project design and completion
- quantifying greenhouse gas reduction is an evolving science and difficult to accurately calculate
- what to include as the cost of sustainable infrastructure scorecard or third-party certification (such as LEED) is subjective depending on the baseline.

In addition, staff told us that divisions use different conventions for reporting "placeholder" data: some leave the field blank, others put zero, and one division uses "1" as a placeholder until specific data are available. We confirmed these variations in our review of the data. These differences make it impossible to aggregate data across projects, limiting the utility of the information in the annual reports.

Green Building Team reviewers emphasized that they spend a great deal of effort trying to keep projects reporting consistently across their division, noting the frequent turnover in project managers and the difficulty in training them to fill out green building reports correctly. One division's reviewers said they don't ask project managers to spend hours calculating data for their many small projects, but rather allowed them to report estimated data to save time.

Green Building Team reviewers from seven of eight divisions stated that they don't have time to verify project managers' calculations in annual reports. One person said, "The project manager is really the best person to verify accuracy. No one else really knows the project details." In general, reviewers said they can ensure annual report completeness and reasonableness, but they are not able to verify accuracy. It is important for Green Building leaders to balance the time needed to produce data required in annual reports with the usefulness of the data they collect. If data are not reliable enough to use, it may not be worth investing time in collecting and reviewing it.

[3] The SCAP also includes performance measures on construction and demolition material diversion using data collected in Construction and Demolition (C&D) reports. The green building ordinance requires project managers to submit C&D reports in addition to annual reports.

Support needed to capture post-project performance measures

Green Building leaders may want to consider ways to bolster the post-project reporting process to ensure performance measures are available and accurate. The 2022 green building ordinance directs the Green Building Team to evaluate the performance of capital projects, including conducting post-completion surveys and reviews to evaluate the sustainability benefits realized. To accomplish this, the Green Building Team of division representatives asks project managers to measure and report on the project's performance one year after the project's completion. When project managers are no longer available, as they may have left King County employment or transferred departments, the division representatives told us they do their best to find necessary data and information. However, they said that they generally do not have the capacity or resources to return to a project one year after completion to measure outcomes. As part of the efforts to re-evaluate and refine the annual reporting process as noted above, Green Building leaders may want to examine the post-project review process to ensure staff have the ability and support to gather performance information as required in code.

Equity and social justice reporting furthers equity integration in capital projects

Green Building leaders have developed a process that supports implementation on King County's Equity and Social Justice (ESJ) Strategic Plan across King County's capital portfolio. They should continue to refine reporting processes to collect information that could assist in countywide decision-making. The 2022 green building ordinance requires that project managers report annually on the ESJ credits, as outlined in the King County Sustainable Infrastructure Scorecard, that projects earn. The Green Building Program annual reporting process, aided by ESJ project managers within the divisions, helps ensure that capital projects across the County promote equity practices and outcomes throughout the project's life cycle. Green Building leaders said they use ESJ reports to demonstrate the variety of efforts that county divisions are engaged in. Further, the Green Building Team uses these examples to identify leading practices. As Green Building leaders re-examine which data are key to track through annual reporting, they should also consider what ESJ information could assist in programmatic decision-making. Based upon this evaluation, leaders could refine the ESJ reporting requirements to focus on key information.

Grant Dailey, Luc Poon, and Ben Thompson conducted analysis for this letter. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact the King County Auditor's Office at KCAO@kingcounty.gov or 206-477-1033.

NON-AUDIT

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