

STAFF REPORT

Business Agenda Item

DATE: March 2, 2026

TO: Honorable Mayor and Council Members

FROM: Amy Nilsen, City Manager

SUBJECT: Hiring Freeze Exception – Community Development Director/City Engineer

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the City Council approve an exception to the current hiring freeze to allow recruitment and appointment of the Community Development Director / City Engineer and begin the recruitment and appointment process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The position of Community Development Director has been either on leave or vacant since August 15, 2025. The City Manager has been assuming these responsibilities in addition to all other duties of that of a City Manager. On November 17, 2025, the City Council established a hiring freeze for General Fund-funded staff positions with explicit allowances for exceptions when positions are essential and critical to operations. The Community Development Director is responsible for both community development services (planning, zoning, housing, building) and the statutory duties of the City Engineer (map approvals, improvement standards, encroachments, traffic engineering, and sewer determinations). Given the legal, operational, and economic impacts of leaving this role vacant, staff requests an immediate exception to the hiring freeze to fill this position.

BACKGROUND:

Existing Hiring Freeze. Per the Council’s adopted staff report, vacancies in General Fund departments require explicit Council approval before recruitment may begin, unless automatically exempt.

Position Overview. The City is updating the title and scope of the Community Development Director position to Community Development Director / City Engineer. This revision reflects the integration of engineering duties into the department head role. Fortuna Municipal Code Section 2.10.010(B) establishes that the Community Development Department’s purpose includes “planning, engineering, building inspection, and solid waste functions.” Formally assigning City Engineer responsibilities to the Director aligns the position with these statutory duties, strengthens coordination between planning and engineering, enhances customer service for applicants, and reduces the City’s dependence on some contract engineering services. The position is at-will, FLSA exempt, and already budgeted. Key responsibilities include:

Community Development Responsibilities:

- Long-range planning, zoning, housing, building inspection oversight, CEQA compliance, staff supervision, and preparation of recommendations to the Planning Commission and City Council.

City Engineer Responsibilities:

- Approval or conditioning of subdivision tentative maps; approval of parcel and final maps; determination of survey monument requirements; and approval of subdivision improvement plans and associated securities.
- Development and maintenance of public improvement and sewer standards; review and approval of engineering plans, specifications, and estimates; inspections and acceptance of public improvements.
- Traffic engineering responsibilities, including signal timing, traffic safety analysis, and determinations on parking/loading zones within the public right-of-way.
- Review and approval of encroachment permits and site-specific traffic control plans; enforcement of right-of-way and ADA access requirements.
- Sewer system determinations on prohibited discharges; grease/oil/grit interceptor requirements; wastewater sampling methodology approvals.
- Authorization of grading and erosion control measures outside standard specifications when warranted by site conditions.

DISCUSSION: URGENT NEED

Legally Mandated Engineering Authority. Many approvals and determinations listed above must be performed by a California-licensed City Engineer. Delays impede subdivision, housing, public infrastructure plan checks, encroachment permitting, and acceptance of improvements.

Economic Development & Housing. Active and anticipated projects—including subdivision activity, Housing Element and General Plan updates, and potential Mill Site progress—require timely engineering and planning leadership to avoid schedule, cost impacts, and regulatory oversight by State agencies such as Housing and Community Development.

Capital Projects & Risk Management. Capital Improvement Program delivery requires an overseeing engineer for scoping, design review, contract and construction management, and standards. Traffic engineering duties directly affect roadway safety and liability.

FISCAL IMPACT:

No additional appropriation is requested. Salary and benefits for the position are included in the adopted budget. Recruitment will reduce some reliance on higher-cost contract engineering and some planning consultant services and support timely processing of fee-generating development activity.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Deny the exception – Not recommended. This would delay legally required approvals, slow development processing, increase consultant costs, and impede capital projects.
- Delay recruitment until freeze is lifted – Not recommended. The City’s statutory engineering obligations and operational needs require immediate action.

RECOMMENDED COUNCIL ACTION:

1. Receive staff presentation and review Council questions
2. Open Public Comment
3. Close Public Comment
4. Motion to approve an exception to the hiring freeze for the Community Development Director/City Engineer position and begin the recruitment and appointment process. Roll Call vote.

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Community Development Director / City Engineer Job Announcement (for reference)