

Building Department Best Practice: Expedited Building Plan Review

"[The] building official may expedite issuance of the permit." These few words provide significant flexibility to building departments challenged with overworked (and occasionally under-qualified) technical support staff necessary to ensure public safety in the built environment. These words do not mean that an official can extend favors of quick permits to friends and family. Rather, these words are presented to define the circumstances under which a building official may expedite issuance of a permit.

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Challenge

Building departments nationwide are challenged daily, with designers and engineers, builders and homeowners wanting to do things that in many instances do not meet the full letter or intent of applicable building codes. Many departments are also understaffed and challenged by an extremely heavy workload, a small local talent pool and the demands imposed by local governments, often limiting their ability to perform services.

Ask any building official, and they will tell you of subtle requests or outright demands from the mayor/councilman/police chief/_____ to see that their church/school/housing project/_____ is reviewed and delivered by a certain date. Often, these demands require that multiple projects suffer so that a politically sensitive project is fast-tracked through the process, if not simply around the process, to show the department and all involved in the high-profile project in the best light.

How can projects that often deserve special attention and fast-tracking through the regulatory process be processed fairly, without further delaying other projects that are equally important for the economic stability or growth of a region?

Solution

Virginia has adopted language into the Administrative Chapter of its Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) in a paragraph titled Expedited Construction Document Review which reads as follows:

"The building official may accept reports from an approved person or agency that the construction documents have been examined and conform to the requirements of the USBC and may establish requirements for the person or agency submitting such reports. In addition, where such reports have been submitted, the building official may expedite the issuance of the permit."

This and similar codes often contain the following points.

- The building official may accept the reports of approved parties.
- The building official sets requirements for these approved parties.
- The approved parties must meet the building department's requirements.
- The building official reviews the work of the approved parties.
- The building official retains the ultimate responsibility for permit issuance.

This language informs everyone that the building official may accept reports from people or agencies other than those employed by the jurisdiction itself. Even top-notch building departments can find that plans for construction of a sports complex, nursing home, high rise, co-generation facility or similar high profile projects can impact review schedules within a department, and ultimately issuance of permits for many projects. This language also informs building officials that they may establish requirements for the person or agency submitting such reports. Those outside parties are, rightly, often held to a higher set of standards than the people that work with and for the building official.

Benefit

Notice that nothing in this language says that if someone pays more for a permit, they can obtain an expedited review. The focus is and should be on recognizing that if a set of plans are properly reviewed by an approved person or agency, the building official should be able to perform the review and issue the permit with less effort. By reducing the overall effort of the building official, plans can be expedited without negative impact on overall targets for plan reviews and similar services. Cost for the expedited review is generally paid by the developer/designer directly to a party approved by the building official. This cost is often considerably less than interest on a construction loan or paying subcontractors to sit and wait until plans are approved. The free market determines if and when an approved party will be used in addition to services provided by a building department.

Done right, the expedited review of construction documents will cost the building department nothing, while at the same time producing building plans that have undergone code review prior to submittal to the building department, saving the building department both time and money. Note also that the building department maintains complete control over the approved parties and permit issuance.

For detailed information on one successful Expedited Building Plan Review program, see information provided on Fairfax County's website at <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/epr/>. Fairfax County's program is established to recognize approved people that can submit reports concerning the review of building plans to the adopted codes. A program could just as easily be established to recognize approved companies that meet similar requirements.