



ANALYSIS 3: APPROVALS & PERMITS

Problem Statement:

With scheduling and project completion continually being a main focus for new construction projects, it is important for industry members to evaluate where time and money are being wasted to improve the process of project design and construction. For Geisinger Gray's Woods Ambulatory Care Campus, numerous approvals and permits delayed the design and early construction phases of the project for three months – so far the most costly delay on the project. At such an early stage of the project, it becomes frustrating and aggravating to owners, design professional, and construction managers to not see their vision become a reality. I have found that many other new commercial construction projects throughout the US have experienced this same problem, and at times, encounter even larger delays from approvals and permits.

Proposed Solution:

Through continuing education of the ICC codes and increasing the amount of plans examiners within each municipality, tension created between code officials and project members could be greatly reduced. Furthermore, initial project delays from approvals and permits could be greatly reduced.

Methodology:

Preliminary research began with researching the permitting and approval process used on the Geisinger Gray's Woods project as well as other municipalities in Central Pennsylvania. A short survey generated from knowledge gained from research was then sent to several municipality code officials. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix E. The survey was sent by email and was either returned through email or a phone interview of the questions was completed. Completed surveys can also be found in Appendix E. Further research was then completed on successful permitting processes – more specifically Seattle, Washington's process. The results from both research and interviews were then compiled to produce a recommendation.



Resources and Tools:

Plan Review Officials

Geisinger Gray's Woods Construction Manager – Alexander Building Construction

Centre Region Code Administration

Geisinger Gray's Woods Conditions:

For the Geisinger Gray's Woods Medical Office Building, the permitting and approval process delayed the start of construction on the project. During the permitting and approval period, the project team was involved with six permitting/approval agencies to get the project started. Of these included the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES), PennDOT, Patton Township, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Centre Region Code Administration, and the Sewer Authority.

Overall, the permitting and approval process took over a year – 13 months. Site drawings were completed March 27th, 2006 with construction originally scheduled for December of 2007; however construction did not actually begin until April 23rd, 2007 – a four month delay.

Permitting History:

The International Code Council, ICC, founded in 1994, is responsible for developing the codes used to design and build commercial and residential buildings. It was created by combining Building Officials and Code Administration International, Inc. (BOCA), International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), and Southern Building Code Congress International, Inc. (SBCCI). ICC is a non-profit organization.

After the ICC was enacted, cities, counties, and states slowly started adapting the new codes. With over fourteen ICC publications and an impressive inventory of codes, commercial project teams can now work with a consistent set of requirements throughout the entire United States. Other services provided by the ICC are uniform education and certification programs, plan reviews, monthly magazines and newsletters, training and informational videos, and publication of proposed code changes. This mission of the International Code Council is to provide the highest quality codes, standards, products, and services for all concerned with the safety and performance of the built environment.



When the ICC change occurred, the Department of Labor and Industry was no longer involved with the permitting processes for those municipalities and cites that adopted the new code. With the Department of Labor and Industry out of the process, many smaller municipalities either joined together to form a larger office, or started contracting the larger projects out to a third party agency such as Pennoni Associates, Inc. or the Bureau Veritas Group. Without enough personnel and resources within the municipality offices, the permitting packages are now sent to many different parties, each one requiring their own amount of time for review.

Permitting in Areas of Central Pennsylvania:

Name	Position	Municipality, Company
Michael Rupert	Senior Building Inspector	Centre Region Code Administration
Donald Fure	Code Enforcement Officer	Swatara Township
Ned Liggett	Commercial Plan Examiner	Centre Region Code Administration
Rod Smay	Manager	Bureau Veritas
Albert Wrightstone	Building Inspector	Susquehanna Township
Dan Slatt	Building Inspector	Lower Paxton Township

List of Surveyed Industry Members.

Currently in Pennsylvania, building permitting and approvals are handled by the municipality in which the project is located. There are two different approaches municipalities have taken on how their office handles building permitting and plans review.

First, the smaller municipalities, such as Swatara, Lower Paxton and Susquehanna Townships, tend to only review small projects (< 5,500 SF) in their office. For the larger projects being proposed in their areas, they contract out to a third party that has more resources and manpower to get the plans reviewed in the 30 day time limit. For these areas, there is one in-office plans reviewer per 9 square miles on average. When surveyed, all parties stated that the most time consuming part of the process is when larger commercial project plans are submitted. Additionally, the majority felt the best



way to improve the permitting process is for Architects and engineers to attend continuing education classes on the codes. When researching the permitting process online, it was very difficult to find the correct links to get any information on the necessary forms and the contact information of officials.

Secondly, municipalities have united to create a larger regional office to enforce building permitting and plans reviews such as the Centre Region Code Administration. The Centre Region Code Administration includes the State College Borough and the five townships that surround the borough. For this area, there is one in-office plans reviewer per 554 square miles on average. These areas are, however, not as urban as the previous discussed municipalities. Here, all plans are reviewed by two plan reviewers with no third party contracting. Centre Region Code Administration's online website is very easy to navigate and to find all documentation needed to prepare permitting packages. Those surveyed ranked the following as the best ways for contractors and design professionals to improve the permitting processes:

Best Ways For Contractors and Design Professionals to Improve the Permitting Process

- Schedule a Preliminary Meeting with Region Office
- Communication Between All Parties Involved with Plans and Plan Review
- Properly Prepare Permitting Packages Prior to Submittal

Other Current Permitting Processes:

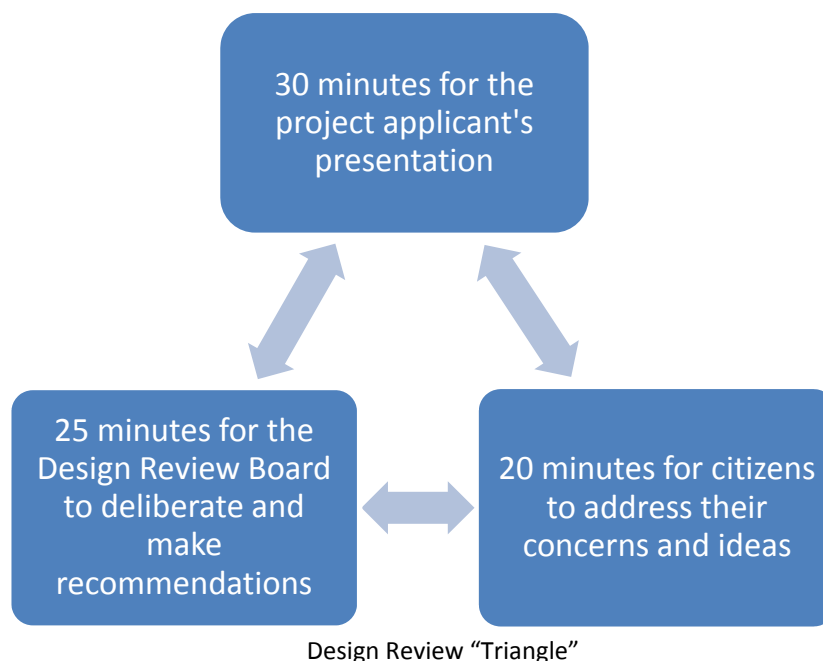
Started in the 1960's, Seattle, Washington has included a new branch to their city government – the Department of Planning and Development, DPD. Within the city limits, DPD develops and enforces code standards for construction. DPD has developed their own set of codes and policies for the planning and developing processes which include the Seattle Building Code, the Seattle Mechanical Code and the Seattle Energy



Code to name a few. Approximately 80,000 on-site inspections are performed and over 23,000 land and construction related permits are approved each year in Seattle through the DPD.

The design review board consists of thirty-five members, five for each of the seven districts. Each individual board's five members represent key players in the development process. Each member serves a two-year term which can only be renewed once. Also, there is no financial compensation for the members. Typically, most boards only meet two times a month.

Another key development made by DPD is their Design Review Program. This program reviews private projects such as new commercial and multi-family developments in Seattle. The program has several objectives. First, to enhance the city and ensure the proposed project fits into its surroundings, the program encourages better design and site planning. Next, the program provides flexibility in the use of development standards. Lastly, the program strives to open the lines of communication and involvement of designers, citizens, and the City early in the design process. Built off the concept of a triangle, the citizens of Seattle, the project applicant and the City are all given a say in the review process. Below is a diagram of how the 90 minute review meetings are conducted to ensure everyone's voice is heard.





Program Administrators manage the program, recruit and train citizens to serve on the Board, and schedule the Board's project review meetings. Design Review Planners lead design professional through the design review process and explain code and design guidelines.

Seattle's Department of Planning and Development's online website homepage is very straight forward. From this page you can directly find out such things as how to apply for a building permit, request a building inspection, and check the status of your building permit. Those visiting the site can easily get to the Applicant's Toolbox which gives detailed instructions on the design review process and the project application and submittal requirements.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Currently in Pennsylvania, building permitting and approvals are handled by the municipality in which the project is located. There are two different approaches municipalities have taken on how their office handles building permitting and plans review – in office reviews or contract out to third parties. With either process, it is vitally important that contractors know the codes and engage in early communication with the code officials during the design phase. For the Gray's Woods Project, better understanding the DEP processes would and preparing drawings that fulfill all requirements could have given some relief to both the Department of Environmental Protection and the project team. For this analysis, DEP was contacted several times with no complete response back. Rather, I was forwarded to another department or another person that "could" help me. The suggestion of having more plan reviewers in each municipality was discussed, but this would involve increasing taxes (for their pay) which could have deterrent effects on the community.

With seeing such success in Seattle, Washington, it should be only a matter of time until other municipalities around the nation research their process on their own and take from it what they can to improve their organization. Changing the code review process would require time and even more patience from all parties involved while the process is in limbo. And by creating a code review organization that is non-profit that could be funded by a private sector or donations, the community's taxes could possibly be reduced.