Report on Methods for Modernizing the City of Ontario's Permitting Processes

Image of Planning Department intake

PHOTO CREDIT: Ryan Lenney

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BACKGROUND

The efficacy of a municipality's permitting process can have a tangible impact on its growth and prosperity. Inefficient and outdated permitting processes can lead to increased expenses for contractors and developers, who in turn may confer higher costs to consumers and the surrounding community.[1] In California, cumbersome permitting processes contribute to the state's ongoing housing crisis, as the process to get a permit approved in many municipalities can become so drawn out that projects no longer pencil out.[2] Although permits are required for a wide range of projects outside of housing, smaller projects are often held up by larger developments that demand staff attention and bottleneck the pipeline for approval. This gridlocking of permit applications is increasingly prevalent in California, where it can take over six months to have a permit approved in some municipalities.[3] In order to meet the needs of their residents and prepare for future growth, it is essential that all municipalities take pragmatic steps to improve the efficiency of their permitting processes.

The city of Ontario is no exception to the permitting backlog occurring across California. An audit of the city's Development Agency in 2018 noted numerous complaints regarding the timeliness of Ontario's permitting process. Although the city promised a timeline of 77 days for review, this deadline was often exceeded. According to the audit, primary causes of delay in the review process included outdated technology, unrealistic timelines, and the amount of time that applicants took to resubmit plans. To remedy these issues, the audit recommended updating technology, exploring electronic permit applications, implementing new timelines, and tracking applicants' activity throughout the permitting process. The audit also made twenty-six recommendations regarding other aspects of the city's permitting procedures, namely the entitlements process and the Building and Engineering departments' plan checks.

The recommendations made by the city's audit of the Development Agency in 2018 are in varying stages of implementation. Some recommendations, including the creation of a frequently asked questions guide and making an expedited review option available for the Engineering plan check, have yet to be put in place. Other changes, such as the expansion of online review, have been, or are currently being, implemented. Despite progress made since the city's 2018 audit, improving the permitting process remains an important goal in Ontario. As the city continues to receive a large pool of permit applications each year, including over 7,500 for the 2021-2022 fiscal year, it looks for opportunities to modernize and prepare its permitting processes for the future.

The Rose Institute study will both build upon the insights of the city's 2018 audit as well as provide further recommendations for the city of Ontario to update its permitting process. The study will analyze Ontario's current practices, provide research on comparable cities with innovative permitting systems, and describe how similar processes could be implemented in Ontario. Ultimately, it will focus on four main areas of opportunity: the expansion of online permit processing, inter-

[1] Kusisto, L. (2016, March 3). *Home Builders Slowed By Permit Delays*. The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/approval-delays-stymie-home-builders-projects-1457028370
[2] Bosselman, A. (2018, May 10). *It All Adds Up: The Growing Costs that Prevent New Housing in California*. SPUR. Retrieved from https://www.spur.org/news/2018-05-09/it-all-adds-growing-costs-prevent-new-housing-california
[3] Kusisto, L.

departmental coordination throughout the permit review process, the specialization of city staff and procedure for projects of varying scopes, and certification and educational opportunities for permit applicants. Through its analysis, the Rose Institute study will propose methods for streamlining Ontario's permitting process to position it to be well equipped for the future.

EXPANDING ONLINE PERMIT PROCESSING

Image Source: City of Stockton E-Permit Portal

In recent years, the implementation and expansion of online permitting systems have represented a revolutionary reform for many municipal permitting processes. Online permitting systems allow customers to upload plans and applications with ease, enable multiple departments to share information and collaborate on reviews, and provide real-time updates on the status of an application.[4] Despite these benefits, studies have shown that most municipalities have been slow to implement online permitting systems.[5] Many municipalities are likely hesitant due to the considerable cost, time, and training involved in the implementation of an online permitting system. Regardless, among the minority of municipalities that make use of online permitting systems, many report notable reductions in cost and time for permit reviews.[6]

Online permitting systems represent a major innovation in permitting because of their ability to streamline nearly every step along the process, from initial intake to final review. A survey of municipal governments conducted by the Alliance for Building Regulatory Reform in the Digital Age shows that the implementation of online systems can reduce the time required for review for both applicants and staff by 40% to 50%.[7] In addition to time saved, the survey demonstrated that online permit processing can produce up to 60% savings in costs as a result of reductions in staff time needed for review, travel required, and errors made throughout the process.[8] Moreover, the benefits generated by introducing new technology into permitting systems are not exclusive to cities of a certain size or characteristic. A survey by the National Conference of States on Building Codes and

[4] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[5] Goodyear, S. (2015, February). *Only 21 Percent of U.S. City Planning Departments Offer Online Permitting*. Bloomberg. Retrieved from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-02-04/only-21-percent-of-u-s-city-planning-departments-offer-online-permitting
[6] Wible, R. (2008, December). Keeping Building Departments Ahead of the Curve. National Partnership to Streamline Government.
[7] Wible, R.
[8] Ibid.

Standards of over 100 jurisdictions revealed widespread savings in cost and time for those which reported using information technology in their permitting processes.[9] Both Los Angeles, California, with a population of over 3.5 million at the time the survey was conducted, and Chula Vista, California, with a population of approximately 200,000, saw a substantial reduction in the amount of time required for both staff and customers throughout the process after information technology was introduced to their permitting systems.[10]

The integration of information technology into permitting processes has been proven to increase efficiency generally, but there remain a variety of specific uses for online permitting processes. The most basic and widely implemented area of information technology in permitting is online permit applications.[11] The benefits of allowing customers to apply for permits online can be substantial, as demonstrated by Ventura County, California, which saved $1 million over six years through the implementation of an online permit application system.[12] Municipalities that use online permit applications may allow for all applicants to utilize online services or may restrict online permits to projects of a certain size. Chicago, Illinois, for example, only allows online permit applications for projects with less than 40 units.[13] Municipalities that allow for online permit applications may still require in-person meetings to receive comments, submit plans, and complete additional steps following initial intake. Others allow for nearly all steps of the review process to be conducted online. One jurisdiction which has moved all aspects of its plan review online, Maricopa County, Arizona, reduced the average time for its review process from between 8 and 15 weeks to less than a week.[14]

Given the considerable variety of online permitting systems, not all systems offer the same possibility for streamlining. A primary example of this inequality can be found in the significant differences between systems hosted in-house and cloud-based systems.[15] Cloud-based systems allow city staff to upload real-time project data and updates to applicants wherever they have internet connections, whereas in-house systems require staff to work in the office.[16] The city of Stockton, California, recently implemented a customizable cloud-based system with a "citizen portal," allowing for customers to apply for permits, schedule inspections, pay fees, review plan check comments, and check the status of their permit in real time.[17] While offering a wide range of useful features for customers and staff, cloud-based systems, such as the city of Stockton's, are not without their shortcomings. Cloud-based systems can be susceptible to slowing down or crashing during busy periods, require periodic updates that change user interfaces, and are often costly, both in terms of licensing fees and the training necessary to prepare city staff for its use.[18] The potential for cloud-

[9] National Conference of States on Building Codes and Standard, Alliance for Building Regulatory Reform in the Digital Age. (2005, May). Final Report on NCSBCS/Alliance Survey on Savings from the Application of Information Technology to Building Codes Administration and Enforcement Processes.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Wible, R.
[12] Ibid.
[13] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[14] Wible, R.
[15] Schweigerdt, J. (2019, July 30). *Implementation of Cloud-Based Permit System - City of Stockton Experience*. California Building Officials. Retrieved from https://www.calbo.org/article/implementation-cloud-based-permit-system-city-stockton-experience.
[16] Schweigerdt, J.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

based systems to make permitting processes more efficient should be weighed against the possible downsides when considering its implementation in a municipality.

While Ontario has taken steps to utilize online permitting technology, there remain opportunities for the city to modernize by exploring further uses for online permitting. The city's 2018 audit cited outdated technology as a primary cause of delays in its permitting process, and recommended that the city route plans electronically, keep original comments on file online, notify applicants electronically when their plans are ready, and conduct a broad assessment into the possibility of projects being submitted and reviewed online. Since 2018, Ontario has implemented a number of the changes regarding online permitting systems recommended in the audit. The city recently adopted the Blue Beam system for online review, while still using Accela for its customer portal services. Online application and review are currently being piloted on a case-by-case basis, with the goal of having all permitting processes conducted online by June 2023. As the city works to expand online permit intake and review, it should continue to make improvements to its systems. Areas of opportunity may include integrating the Accela and Blue Beam systems to save staff time when moving between the two systems, as well as identifying redundancies that arise when moving processes online, such as signature requirements. In addition, the city should ensure that both staff and customers are adequately trained on using the online system by providing educational tutorials and trainings. If used deliberately, online permitting systems stand to greatly improve the efficiency of Ontario's permitting process.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL COORDINATION

Even as a city's permit application and review are moved online, it remains essential that all departments involved in the permitting process can collaborate to move permits through efficiently. One of the more drastic methods to increase interdepartmental coordination is the implementation of a "one-stop shop," in which all pertinent departments are moved to one location and are sometimes merged into a single entity.[19] A one-stop permit system not only simplifies permit application and review for applicants, who only need to interact with a single entity throughout the process, it also helps to promote cohesion and collaboration between the various departments involved in permitting. The city of Goodyear, Arizona, for example, instituted a one-stop shop by moving its Planning, Building Safety, Engineering, Development Services, and Economic Development departments to one location, where all permit applications are received, reviewed, and approved.[20] A one-stop system such as that used in Goodyear can greatly increase efficiency, but can also be difficult to implement, as it involves an extensive reorganization of departments and city staff.[21]

[19] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[20] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[21] Ibid.

Short of creating a one-stop system, there are many steps that can be taken to improve coordination between departments. A consultant group specializing in city permitting processes, Zucker Systems, describes seven alternatives to a one-stop shop, including development review committees, co-location with some integration, and partial merger with co-location.[22] Each approach uses a different method of promoting coordination between departments. In the case of Columbus, Ohio, Zucker Systems describes a "partial merger with co-location and management and decision integration," in which the Planning and Building departments are combined to form a Building and Zoning Services department.[23] The new department includes staff from numerous other departments involved in the permitting process, as well as a manager who has the exclusive authority to move projects through the permitting process.[24] A more conservative example of increasing departmental coordination can be found with the city of Newton, Massachusetts. Without relocating departments, Newton was able to achieve similar improvements in coordination by delegating staff from multiple departments involved in the permitting process to work together in a shared building.[25] In addition, Newton instructed several departments involved with the permitting process to share staff members who perform similar tasks; a technique which was found to minimize costs.[26] The Massachusetts Association of Planning Committees determined that approaches such as that used in Newton increase efficiency throughout the permitting process.[27]

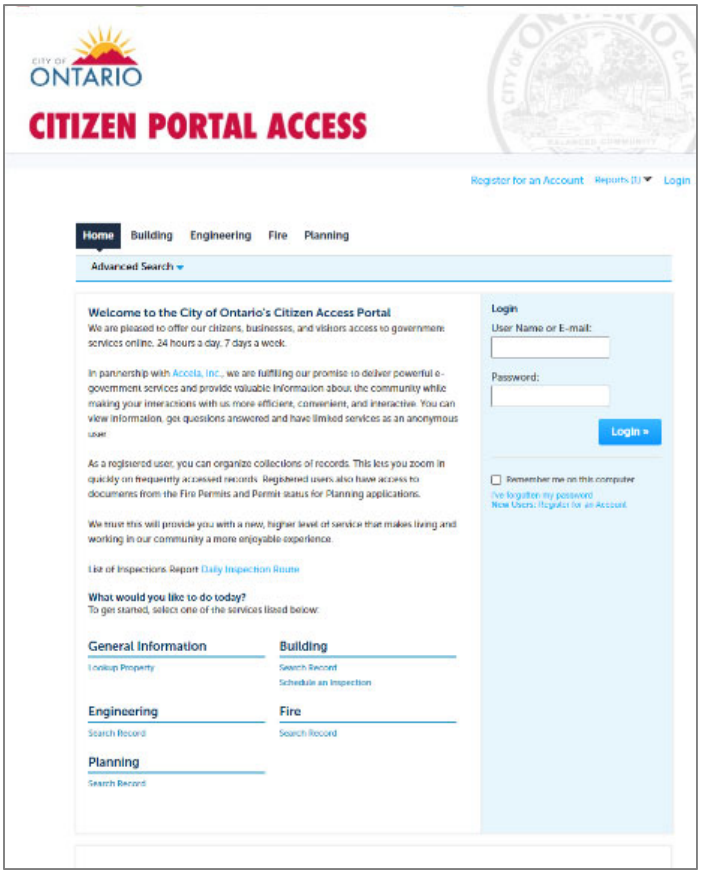

Image source: City of Ontario Citizen Portal

Without restructuring existing departments or staff, improvements to interdepartmental coordination can be achieved through the creation of committees staffed by members of the various departments involved in the permitting process. These committees can help cut down on days or weeks of communication between applicants and each department involved in the permitting process by addressing questions and clearing comments in one meeting. Before instituting a committee review,

[22] Zucker Systems. (2012, January). Review of City of Maricopa Development Services Department.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

Images source: CSAC Counties, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqXH32IXaE4

Nevada County, California, suffered from a serious backlog of plan reviews.[28] By holding meetings between applicants and a committee with representatives from numerous departments such as Planning and Environmental, Nevada County, California is now able to quickly clear up questions and help applicants make any needed changes.[29] Through this system, which is known as "The Over the Counter Wednesday Plan Review Program," permits that once took weeks to review are now reviewed in a day.[30] A number of issues can arise when using interdepartmental committees to review projects, including the applicant or department staff members not being able to attend, staff in attendance not having the authority to make decisions, and those in attendance being unprepared.[31] Each of these issues, however, can be addressed if the committee meetings are given adequate attention and viewed as an important step in the permit review process.

While interdepartmental meetings are often convened to review specific projects, they may also serve as an opportunity for staff of each department involved in the permitting process to discuss areas of improvement. The city of Roseville, Minnesota, for example, has instituted a Development Review Committee with representatives from the various departments involved in the permitting process.[32] The committee meets regularly to address conflicts between each department's review standards and to promote general coordination.[33] Whether they are used to streamline permit review, as in Nevada County, or to increase coordination, as in Roseville, interdepartmental committees can play a key role in creating a more efficient permitting process.

Implementing major changes in line with the "one-stop shop" model may be unrealistic in Ontario's case, but there are still several changes the city can make to increase interdepartmental coordination and improve the permitting process. The city might start by revisiting recommendations made by the 2018 audit which stand to increase interdepartmental coordination. One such recommendation would have the Building department assume a greater role in monitoring other departments' progress throughout the plan check process. By giving Building a more active role in coordinating between departments, similar to the role Planning serves in the entitlements process,

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[28] Fishman, G. (n.d.). *Nevada County Streamlines the Building Permit Process*. California State Association of Counties. Retrieved from https://www.counties.org/county-voice/nevada-county-streamlines-building-permit-process.
[29] Fishman, G.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Zucker Systems. (2012, January). Review of City of Maricopa Development Services Department.
[32] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[33] Ibid.

the city could help to ensure that each department does not become "siloed" in their review. Beyond the recommendations outlined in the 2018 audit, the city could consider having its departments share staff who perform similar tasks and instituting interdepartmental meetings, either for review or solely collaborative purposes. The city currently utilizes interdepartmental meetings in the entitlements process, but this practice could be expanded to the Building and Engineering plan checks. By implementing recommendations from the 2018 audit as well as exploring other options to prevent the partitioning of its review processes, Ontario can improve coordination between its departments, and thereby, the permitting process as a whole.

STAFF AND PROCESS SPECIALIZATION

A major source of delay in a city's permitting process can come as a result of it being bottlenecked by larger and new-construction projects. These projects, which require approval from many departments as well as much time and attention from city staff, can keep smaller projects from moving through. Thus, even if an applicant only wishes to remodel their kitchen or put in a new deck, that applicant may be stuck waiting in queue for larger projects to clear. Introducing specialized processes for projects of varying levels of complexity can help to prevent the bottleneck problem and move all permits through at a faster rate.

Image source: Pixabay.com

The specialization of city staff and processes in the review of smaller projects can help a city to ensure that smaller permits are cleared in an expedient fashion. Local Housing Solutions, a subset of the NYU Furman Center's Housing Solutions Lab, describes the benefits of staff specialization with smaller projects as such: "establishing an exclusive dedicated review channel with specialized staff can help applicants move through the regulatory process more quickly and at a more predictable pace."[34] Not only would a specialized process allow for smaller projects to be approved faster, but it would also reduce the time needed to review larger projects, as other staff members would be enabled to focus their time more exclusively on their review. In practice, this triage approach would take the form of a staff member, or a small team of staff, focusing on projects which do not require extensive review by other departments. In instances where other departments' review is required, the specialized staff member would act as a point person and shepherd the project through the review process. Specialized review processes can also include over-the-counter (OTC) permits, or in the case of a cloud-based permitting system, allowing permits for smaller projects to be approved online.

[34] *Streamlined Permitting Processes*. Local Housing Solutions. (2022, February 8). Retrieved from https://localhousingsolutions.org/housing-policy-library/streamlined-permitting-processes/.

Image source: Pixabay.com

To prevent the backlog of permits that can result from a "first come first served" approach, a city should explore numerous methods for specializing review processes. A prime example of specialization can be seen in the city of San Jose, where an efficient use of OTC permits, online approval for smaller projects, and specialized review teams allow projects of varying scopes to move quickly through the permitting process. San Jose allows for OTC services on projects which require minimal structural change, and developers with adequate plans and paperwork can receive their permit in one visit.[35] Other projects that are of a smaller scope, but may not qualify for OTC, can apply online and go through a streamlined process to approval. Still larger projects are processed in an online portal and have options for expedited review available for a fee.[36] Allowing for numerous pathways to permit approval for projects of different sizes helps the city of San Jose prevent its system from being slowed down by a few large projects that demand an inordinate amount of staff attention.

The city of Ontario can further modernize its current permitting process by introducing specialized processes for smaller projects. The city currently offers OTC services for some projects, but most are addressed using a "first come first served" approach. By expanding the availability of OTC and online approval services, as well as creating a separate pipeline with specialized staff to review smaller projects, the city can move smaller permits out quickly to help decongest their current system. In addition to improving the processes for smaller projects to receive permits, the city might consider opening new pathways for larger projects. The 2018 audit recommended making an option available for expedited permit approval in the Engineering plan check, similar to the option that currently exists in the Building plan check. By implementing this recommendation and allowing customers to use outside consultants for the Engineering plan check process, the city can move permits through faster while reducing the workload for city staff.

CERTIFICATION AND EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

A city's permit application and review processes are only part of the equation when it comes to seeing permits moved through in a timely manner. The other part, which is no less important to ensuring the permitting process works efficiently, is borne by the applicant. Permit applicants who do not have adequate knowledge of the city's code and permitting requirements will likely create backlogs as they require multiple reviews and much staff assistance throughout the process. In Ontario, the amount of time it takes for permit applicants to incorporate comments and resubmit plans was noted as a major cause of delay in the city's 2018 audit. Although the city provides

[35] *Streamlined Permitting Processes*. Local Housing Solutions. (2022, February 8). Retrieved from https://localhousingsolutions.org/housing-policy-library/streamlined-permitting-processes/.
[36] Ibid.

comprehensive checklists outlining requirements for permit applications, it is evident that some applicants require additional support to complete the process. Exploring methods to further inform applicants on city codes and requirements could help the city avoid delays throughout the permitting process and lead to a more efficient system.

Image source: https://www.phoenix.gov/pdd/self-certification-program

One potential solution to the issue of applicant driven delays is self-certification. Self-certification is a process by which registered professionals can have their permit applications approved in an expedited process. With self-certification, a city provides trainings to professionally certified architects and engineers, usually through the Planning or Zoning department.[37] Permit applicants who have completed the training are able to "self-certify" their plans and are either pre-approved or are fast-tracked through the review process.[38] Many municipalities across the U.S. make use of self-certification programs, from smaller cities like Surprise, Arizona, to near city-states like Chicago and New York.[39] In Phoenix, Arizona, a self-certification system allows certified professionals who meet a number of requirements and complete a training from the Planning and Development department to skip the plan review process and receive their permit in one to five days.[40] Limitations on self-certified projects in Phoenix still apply, however, including the possibility of city audits and structural or electrical peer reviews.[41] While self-certification offers a compelling strategy for decongesting the permit pipeline and reducing workload for city staff, it is not without its shortcomings. The lack of oversight inherent to self-certification programs can result in corners being cut, as demonstrated by

[37] *Streamlined Permitting Processes*. Local Housing Solutions. (2022, February 8). Retrieved from https://localhousingsolutions.org/housing-policy-library/streamlined-permitting-processes/.
[38] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[39] Ibid.
[40] *The Self-Certification Program*. City of Phoenix. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.phoenix.gov/pdd/self-certification-program.
[41] Ibid.

an audit by the New York Department of Buildings in 2006, which found that the majority of self-certified projects in the city did not comply with building codes.[42] Architects and engineers may also be hesitant to self-certify project plans, as doing so could mean taking on additional liability for any issues with compliance that might arise.[43] An approach similar to self-certification, but without as many potential risks, is prequalification.

Prequalification offers an avenue for certified professionals to become registered as "prequalified" for permit applications. Unlike self-certification, prequalification does not give applicants a green light to skip the permit review process entirely. It does, however, help to streamline the permitting process by ensuring that prequalified applicants are knowledgeable about city and state codes and that city staff are aware of their qualifications. A city that offers prequalification usually works with local stakeholders to create a training for professional architects, engineers, and contractors who wish to do business in the city.[44] A professional who completes the city's training is deemed "prequalified," has their name entered into a database of prequalified professionals, and can be eligible to have initial review waived or have their permit processed in an expedited fashion.[45] To remain prequalified, a professional must adhere to city standards in all of their projects, as well as renew their designation with the city by attending a training after a certain amount of time has passed.[46] As a result, prequalification can help to streamline the permitting process without requiring sacrifices on oversight.

A preeminent example of prequalification is found in the Prequalified Architectural Submittal System (PASS), a permit streamlining process used by 19 municipalities in California, including the city of Sacramento and the city of Modesto.[47] The PASS system allows for professional architects, engineers, and in some cases, contractors and interior designers, to become PASS certified by attending trainings that cover state and local code compliance.[48] Professionals who complete the PASS training can have their names entered into the PASS registry, which currently lists over 100 professionals.[49] Certified PASS

Image source:
http://streamlineinstitute.com/index.php/passplans/pass-logo/

[42] Bowen, T. S. (2015, November 17). *Should Architects Self-Certify Building Plans?* Architectural Record. Retrieved from https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/4019-should-architects-self-certify-building-plans.
[43] Milrose Consultants. (2015, July 1). *Back to Basics: Professional Certification-Pros and Cons*. Milrose.com. Retrieved from https://www.milrose.com/insights/back-to-basics-professional-certification-pros-and-cons.
[44] *Prequalification*. Streamline Institute: Resources for more Efficient and Effective Permit Processing. (2018, January 30). Retrieved from https://streamlineinstitute.com/index.php/2013/04/05/prequalification.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] *Pass Registry*. Streamline Institute: Resources for more Efficient and Effective Permit Processing. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://streamlineinstitute.com/index.php/passplans/pass-registry/.
[48] Culvahouse, T. (n.d.). *Goodbye Delays, Hello Permits*. The American Institute of Architects. Retrieved from https://www.aia.org/articles/4531-goodbye-delays-hello-permits.
[49] Malinowski, M. F. (n.d.). PASS Permit Streamlining One Minute Introduction. Streamline Institute.

professionals are then eligible, in municipalities that use the PASS system, to bypass the initial review process when submitting permit applications. The opportunities for streamlining built into the PASS system have been found to save both the municipality and applicant considerable time without compromising on the project's adherence to codes.[50]

An approach that does not clear applicants for fast-tracked review processes, but which still helps to ensure that applicants are aptly prepared for a city's permitting process, is the expansion of educational opportunities. The city of Ontario currently provides extensive checklists for applicants on its website, as well as optional pre-application meetings. Both approaches give applicants the ability to become knowledgeable in Ontario's permitting process, but they may not provide an adequate education of Ontario's codes and regulations - especially for the average person who is not experienced in permitting processes or professionals who are new to the city. Considering this, the city should explore offering new educational opportunities to its customers.

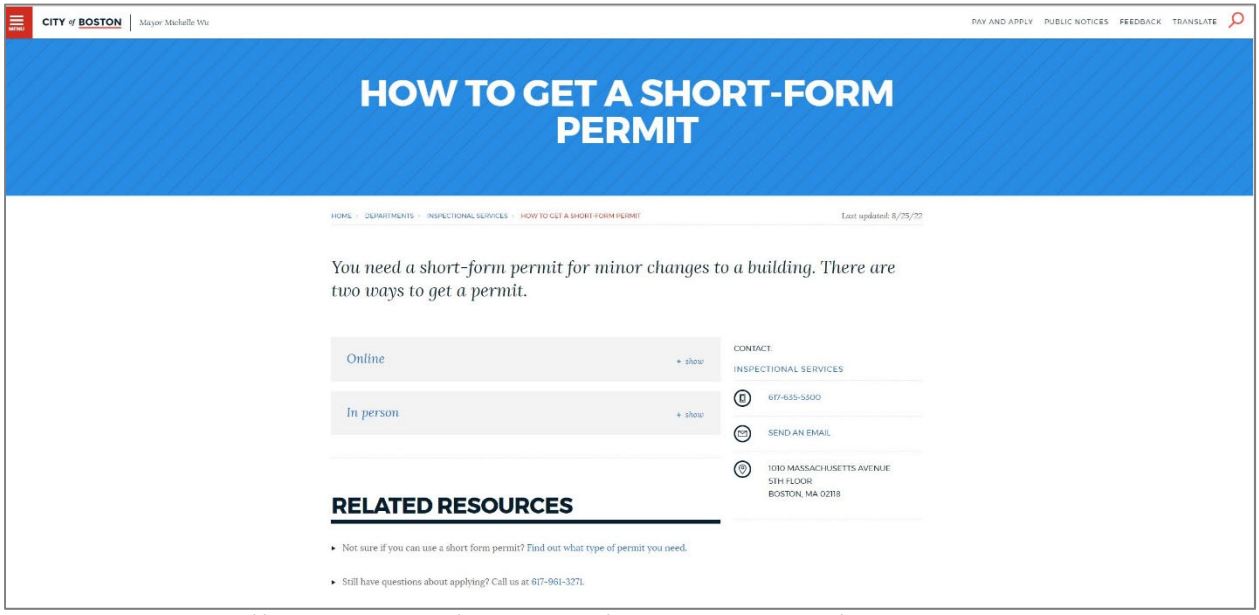

Image source: https://www.boston.gov/departments/inspectional-services/how-get-short-form-permit

Educational materials to simplify and share a city's complicated permitting processes can come in many forms. To preempt potential questions and concerns, the city of Columbus, Ohio, created a guide with answers to hundreds of questions regarding the city's permitting processes.[51] Likewise, the city of Boston, Massachusetts, drafted a "plain-language guide" to provide an easy explanation of their development process for applicants.[52] Ontario's 2018 audit recommended the creation of a frequently asked questions guide similar to those used by Columbus and Boston. The city could produce a frequently asked questions document by taking an inventory of questions that arise before formal submittal, as the 2018 audit recommended, and by sending out surveys to applicants to identify points of confusion. Additionally, as the city moves its permitting processes online in the

[50] Culvahouse, T.
[51] ABT Associates and the National Association of Home Builders. (2015, November). Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.
[52] Ibid.

near future, it should look to create educational materials focused on helping applicants understand how to use the online portal. The many features available online are only beneficial to customers if they know how to use them, and the city could help ensure that they do by providing applicants with a how-to guide and walkthrough videos. All education materials that the city provides, both for its online systems and general processes, could be improved through the use of graphics and flowcharts, which help to break down dense language and long procedures.

Image source: https://www.columbus.gov/bzs/primary/How-Do-I-/

Beyond providing educational materials, Ontario might also consider making pre-application meetings mandatory. Many municipalities, including the city of San Francisco,[53] require pre-application meetings for projects of certain scopes. Although Ontario currently offers optional pre-application meetings, it could be advantageous to require pre-application meetings in various cases. Decisions regarding which projects require a pre-application meeting could be made based on the complexity of the project, or on a case-by-case basis. Addressing questions and concerns in a pre-

[53] *Pre-Application Meeting*. San Francisco Planning. (2022, February). Retrieved from https://sfplanning.org/resource/pre-application-meeting.

application meeting so that they do not cause delays down the line in the review process would be to the benefit of both applicants and the city staff.

Given the role that applicants have played in project review delays in Ontario, the city should consider exploring self-certification, prequalification, and further educational opportunities regarding the city's codes and permitting requirements. Each strategy offers a varying degree of city oversight and potential for streamlining the permitting system. The city's current approach to addressing applicant delays, which is described by the 2018 audit as "track the applicant's activity and facilitate obtaining proof of delays caused by the applicant's engineers in case of complaints," does not address the underlying causes of delay. By providing opportunities for applicants to become better educated on the city's code and requirements, the city can ensure that it is doing all it can to make the applicant's side of the review process move efficiently.

CONCLUSION

While the methods identified in this report are widely viewed as effective means for streamlining a city's permitting process, there is no one size fits all approach. When considering opportunities to modernize its permitting processes, the city of Ontario should utilize those approaches which work best for its unique situation. The city should solicit input from the staff of all departments involved in the permitting process, as well as local stakeholders, to ensure that any reforms implemented serve the interests of the city and the surrounding community. Ongoing feedback in the form of outreach to customers and city staff can be used to continuously improve the city's permitting processes and address potential issues that may arise when introducing new technology and procedures. The work of updating and improving a city's most integral processes is never finished, but by expanding the use of its online permitting systems, increasing interdepartmental coordination, introducing staff and process specialization, and providing additional opportunities for education and certification, the city of Ontario can make significant progress towards preparing its current permitting process for the future.

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