



## PERSPECTIVE

## Permit Delays: Solving a Thorny Challenge

BY KATHERINE BARRETT AND RICHARD GREENE

**Y**ears ago, while working for a private-sector architectural firm in San Antonio, Texas, Florence Diaz was often frustrated by difficulties in obtaining permits. “It wasn’t always clear what the city was asking for,” she said, noting that the application form was long and not entirely clear. “I never knew what was really required. I was guessing most of the time.”

The situation is a lot different these days. Diaz became an employee of the City of San Antonio about 15 years ago, and for the past eight years, she’s been the manager of final permit review in the city’s Development Services Department. Improvements she’s worked on include establishing a one-stop digital portal, constant vendor communication,

and intense staff training to improve the consistency of response.

### Getting it right

Developers often complain about the cost and time it takes to pull permits, but at the same time, permits help make sure construction projects comply with safety codes, protecting occupants from hazards like fires or structural failures. They also guarantee that work is done by qualified professionals, maintain property value, prevent legal or financial issues during resale, and ensure compliance with zoning laws. It isn’t an area where corners can be cut, and there are reasons why the process can’t be handled overnight.

Governments are very much aware that unnecessary delays in permitting can impede economic development

initiatives and stall commercial and residential building construction at a time when states and local governments are confronting an affordable housing crisis. And when delays occur, city councils often hear about it. Supervisor Ed Smyth in the Town of Huntington, New York, said: “Before being elected supervisor, one of the most frequent complaints I heard as a councilman was about the arduous task and ridiculously long wait to obtain a building permit. In many cases, people were waiting up to two years for what should be a more routine process.”

Residents don’t typically dig into the weeds to discover the cause of long delays in promised construction—but they’re certainly aware if they’re left waiting for an exciting new project to come to fruition. “There’s a strong case that one of the big drivers of distress in government is the worry among citizens that government programs either don’t work, don’t work well, or don’t benefit them, and it’s hard for people to trust things when promises are made but aren’t kept,” said Don Kettl, professor emeritus at the University of Maryland.

The City of San Antonio is not alone in its efforts to update permitting processes. The last few years have seen legislation, gubernatorial executive orders, and other executive action in states including Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. Most recently, the governor of New Jersey signed an executive order to update the state’s permitting process on her first day in office in January 2026.

Local governments are also hard at work eliminating permitting inefficiencies.

### Technological advances

Many improvements in the permitting process have been significantly aided by technological improvements and a shift away from paper to digitally based systems.

But the process is complicated, and technological improvements aren’t as easily achieved as one might expect.

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The City of Starkville, Mississippi, experienced technological growing pains as it tried to improve its permitting process, according to Lyle MeCaskey, assistant city planner. The City of Starkville's initial shift to an online process created an "endless cycle" of trying to teach external customers how to use complex software, he explained. After a lot of time spent answering customer queries and creating instructional materials and YouTube videos, MeCaskey says he started wondering, "Are we really making the process easier with a digital solution, or have we traded one problem for another?"

The situation improved when the city invested in a one-stop permit portal that used more intuitive technology that could retrieve city data to help businesses and residents answer the detailed questions a permit application asks. A number of other cities are using similar one-stop permit portals that ease customer confusion and simplify a complex multi-agency approval process that has traditionally made permitting a challenging management task.

Creating a single permit application portal in January 2023 helped the Town of Huntington, New York, consolidate and master the complexity inherent in the three major steps of the process—online submissions, internal workflow, and automatic issuance of digital permits. "There's not even really anything that we have to send to the applicant anymore," said David Geneway, IT director. "Instead, the system itself will issue the permit directly as soon as someone completes a final workflow step."

### The next step?

Particularly in bigger cities, pilot programs have begun using artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist permit reviewers by accelerating their access to information. Some places are also using AI as a quality check early in the permitting process through analyses that uncover potential problems when building plans and drawings are matched up against code requirements.

"I think this is going to be transformative technology that is really going to make a difference in how quickly we can add to the supply," said Lydia Murray, the state and local housing lead at Deloitte, where she is a managing director. Although envisioning 2026 as a year of pilots and increased AI adoption in the permit field, she noted that many smaller communities remain cautious, particularly those that haven't yet put AI governance rules in place.

### Beyond the technology

Of course, technological advances won't solve all the difficulties of issuing permits. Back in San Antonio, Diaz detailed a slew of management improvements that help reduce permit delays and business frustration—including a continuous process of surveying businesses and residents about their permitting experience.

Two issues that have surfaced over time have been the consistency of separate staff permit review teams and the ever-tricky task of communicating clearly in a government area filled with the jargon of code enforcement. These have required intensive ongoing training programs for both staff and customers.

Staying in communication with external permit users also helps the city explain the plan review and permit process, and it gives them advance notice when there are changes to the codes that will affect development—a process that occurs every three years as the International Code Council, a source of model codes for building safety, reports adjustments to model building codes. In general, monthly meetings are held with the vendor community. But at times when codes are changing, the planning department keeps in close touch with the business community to discuss and get input on changes.

Other improvements made by the City of San Antonio include offering partial permits, which allow work to begin on part of a project even if there's a delay in the permit needed for the project as a whole. The city also offers businesses the option of a preliminary plan review to uncover any issues that might come up when a permit application project is submitted. It will also consider "code modification" requests if a developer can suggest alternative materials, designs, or construction methods that could safely solve problems they're having with meeting the City of San Antonio's codes.

Finally, the city is careful about tracking how it's doing, using a publicly available dashboard that posts monthly data about permit awards and shows the average time it takes from application submission to approval. The dashboard currently provides data from 2023 through the end of 2025.

"The City of San Antonio doesn't wait every quarter or every half a year to see if there are issues with our process. It's ongoing," Diaz said. ■



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