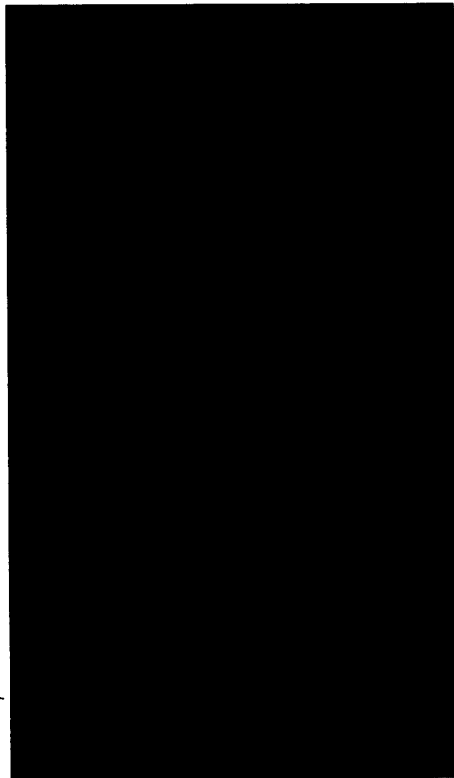


Taming the Building Permit Tiger

By William King, P.E.



One of the largest scheduling unknowns for any builder is the permitting process. There is no method to accurately determine how long it will take; a project that was scheduled to start in April could easily be pushed back to June or beyond. And although there is no way to completely tame the process, there are several measures a builder and his design team can take to make the process go more smoothly.

The first thing is to understand the county's objective. The primary purpose of the permitting process is not to hold up your job and add to the county's coffers, but to allow the local jurisdiction to verify that the proposed structure complies with the building code, thereby ensuring a minimal level

of safety. In Virginia, the applicable code is the 2000 Virginia Uniform State Building Code (VUSBC), which is based on the 2000 IRC model building code.

There are several important ideas that can be implemented in the design drawings to make your design package more permit-friendly:

- Consolidate the key items the plan reviewer is looking for, and make them readily apparent. For example, if you have a wall section, note all specifics from the foundation to the roof on that section. Remember that the reviewer is examining the drawings for code compliance, and the faster they can find the information they are looking for, the better it is for both the reviewer and the builder.
- Verify that your designer is aware of the new requirements from the International Residential Code, including VUSBC amendments. Make sure they are addressed in your drawings. There have been many changes in building requirements with the adoption of the new code, and understanding of these issues is not universal, even among plan reviewers. Several of the new changes, such as the basement egress and the separation of the garage from the living space, are straightforward and easily understood. A few of the changes will have far-reaching effects on your designs. The new issue that will have the largest impact is the braced wall requirement, which is being interpreted differently among the various jurisdictions.
- If your drawings contain an unusual design or condition, any confusion can

be eliminated by noting the applicable code reference directly on the drawing. Examples include specialized braced walls, proprietary structural systems, or construction methods not usually used in this area.

Before you submit your plans to the county, and as early as possible in the design process, talk to the your building department. Find out if it has any checklists or other tools that can ensure that your drawings contain all the information it is looking for. It is important to remember that while all of the jurisdictions are using the same building code, they may be looking for different items on the plans, and what is approved by one may not be approved by another.

If your plans are rejected, be sure the designer discusses any comments with the reviewer to ensure that the comments are addressed to the satisfaction of both the reviewer and the designer. A little extra effort here can help ensure that the problem does not appear on future plans.

As a builder, it is important to stay engaged in the process even at this point. Look at the county's comments and discuss any issues that you do not understand with your designer to avoid similar problems on other projects.

One final method to reduce the time it takes to get a permit is expedited plan review, which is not the same thing as having a permit expeditor or 'permit runner'. The concept of expedited plan review appears in VUSBC Section 111.5.3.1. The section unfortunately provides no details as to how the process is to work, leaving it completely to the discretion of the local jurisdiction.

In Northern Virginia, there are two sys-

tems currently in place for residential construction. The first is the practice of Prince William County, whereby a residential design that is signed and sealed by a Virginia Professional Engineer or Architect can apply for a Plan Waiver, which should reduce the

time required for plan review.

The second system is that of Peer Review, which is in place in Fairfax County. Under this system, the plans are reviewed by an approved third party, and required changes are made to the plans in accordance with the

building code.

When the plans are completed and approved by the Peer Reviewer, they are submitted to the County and are placed at the front of the review queue. The review time can be measured in days, not weeks, with some plans approved the same day they are submitted.

Expedited plan review dramatically reduces the amount of time the plans spend in the County office, and reduces or eliminates any design changes after submission of the plans to the County, as all code issues should have been resolved during the Peer Review Process.

The permitting process can be long and painful at times, but with a little planning, many of the common stumbling blocks can be removed, helping to streamline the process and eliminate many delays. It is also important to determine whether or not the methods of expedited plan review that have been set up are right for you. ■

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