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# Permit Streamlining

## A Resource for AIA Components

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## An imperative to act now—permit streamlining

Architecture profoundly affects people. The architect's work is essential to human well-being and bound by ethical obligation to uphold the public's trust to protect health, safety, and welfare in our built environment.

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) has been at the forefront of creating the processes and procedures guiding the practice of architecture. Since its founding in 1857, AIA's members have been instrumental in developing local, state, and national model building codes and standards.<sup>1</sup> Citing the architect's role as an industry leader, AIA's public policies emphasize the imperative for its members to participate in developing and applying appropriate construction regulations and standards.<sup>2</sup> As former AIA President Carl Elefante, FAIA, noted in 2018, architects today carry on "the legacy of challenging what is commonplace and usual, looking to what is possible and necessary for tomorrow."<sup>3</sup>

One of the emerging lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic is that it reinforces the need to advocate for robust building codes and regulatory processes and procedures: Resilient and adaptable buildings are a community's first line of defense against disasters and changing life and property conditions. We need to be prepared to adapt to abrupt change. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many municipalities had to quickly implement remote plan review and inspection procedures that may well have been under consideration for many years. Many of those local jurisdictions likely realized that such changes were not as difficult as they had presumed—if industry stakeholders remain committed to working together.

## One proposal to act now

Permit streamlining benefits everyone. Building owners and developers are more likely to move forward with their projects when unnecessary and unexpected delays are minimized. Architects can ensure the project they have designed gets built. Local communities realize significant economic development benefits by reducing costs while encouraging investment. Society and our planet thrive because of high-performance buildings and sustainably built communities.

A well-planned, collaborative regulatory structure supports good design in a timely, efficient, and transparent way. To achieve this, permit streamlining efforts must:

- **Leverage resources**—Maximize the return on what has already been invested
- **Make the business case**—Most built environment investment is spurred by the private sector using private resources
- **Carefully consider process barriers**—If the permitting, review, and inspection process remains such a significant barrier to realizing development, then the system will stifle investment, improvement, and innovation
- **Allow flexibility**—Authorities having jurisdiction (AHJs) should set up processes now that allow them to adapt to abrupt change, be resilient, and stay strong in the future, even when conditions are not ideal

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1. Saylor, Henry Hodgman, FAIA. The A.I.A.'s First Hundred Years (The American Institute of Architects, 1957), p. 163.

2. AIA Directory of Public Policies and Position Statements. 2019. [http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Directory\\_of\\_Public\\_Policies\\_and\\_Position\\_Statements.pdf](http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/Directory_of_Public_Policies_and_Position_Statements.pdf). Page 10, Category II, Public Policy A.

3. AIA Blue Ribbon Panel on Codes and Standards. 2019. "Disruption, Evolution, and Change: AIA's Vision for the Future of Design and Construction." [http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/ADV19\\_Disruption\\_Evolution\\_Change.pdf](http://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2019-06/ADV19_Disruption_Evolution_Change.pdf). Page 3.

Architects have insight, leadership skills, and technical expertise to help local jurisdictions evaluate existing conditions. They can offer improvement opportunities and recommend techniques and approaches to streamline the permitting processes that are locally appropriate. When AIA components work together with local permit authorities, resources are leveraged, and successful results are assured. When permit processing is made more effective and efficient, it creates economic and environmental benefits for the entire community.

Prospective permit streamlining advocates, especially state and local AIA components, should look to this resource as a first step in planning for changes in their community. It provides four illustrative examples from around the country as case studies highlighting different aspects of permit streamlining initiatives that succeeded. It debunks several myths about permit streamlining that often create barriers to getting started. Finally, it provides a simple roadmap that lays out a path forward.

The American Institute of Architects is your resource; our staff, volunteer members, subject matter expertise, and other guidance are available to assist you. Please consult the AIA resource collection at the end of this document for more. Get in touch with the AIA Codes Advocacy Program at [codes@aia.org](mailto:codes@aia.org) or visit [aia.org/codes](http://aia.org/codes).

## Strategies for permit streamlining

AIA has identified seven different “archetypes” of successful permit streamlining initiatives from across the country. View the four case studies that follow this section (pages 7–10) for examples of where AIA components implemented each strategy (often more than one per initiative).

### 1. Shift technology

This strategy uses digital tools and systems to systematize, coordinate, communicate, analyze, document, and process information and documents. The range of potential applications in project delivery is large and growing exponentially. Costs for implementing new technology can be high.

Case study example: AIA Florida

### 2. Shift the flowchart

The flowchart is a step-by-step diagram that follows the permitting process from beginning to end with all parties, tasks, milestones, and timelines identified. Streamlining initiatives that analyze and modify the flowchart can identify disconnects, black holes, time gaps, and other problems for any type of process. Costs can range widely from three to six figures.

Case study examples: AIAIDC, AIA Austin, AIA Central Valley

### 3. Shift resources

This approach reallocates jurisdictional resources to shift work from one element to another. The use of “resource sharing” between jurisdictions is far less common but may have potential. “Process managers” who help customers navigate internal reviews and approvals via a single, consistent point of contact have been widely touted as a part of effective streamlining measures.

Case study example: AIA Central Valley

### 4. Shift the timeline

There is a typical sequence of steps between the preparation of construction documents and the issuance of a building permit, but some approaches aim to disrupt that sequence. Real-time plan review that occurs in a meeting setting has become increasingly common for smaller projects like tenant improvement. For larger jurisdictions, this approach can work even for large, complex projects.

Case study example: AIA Central Valley

### 5. Shift roles

The architect's typical role is the applicant for a building permit, while the jurisdiction's typical role is the reviewer of the applicant's documents for code compliance. Professional certification programs shift these roles, so the applicant is also the reviewer of the documents, while the jurisdiction maintains its role as gatekeeper in issuing permits. In many cases, the jurisdiction also conducts audits to maintain quality control. Also known as self-certification, these programs (in theory) bypass normal plan checks based on the licensed professionals' affirmation that the plans comply with all applicable code provisions. Peer review is another example of a shift in existing roles. In these cases, the reviewer is typically a different licensed professional from the professional who submits the design documents.

A fair number of jurisdictions across the country have used professional certification and self-certification for many years. They tend to work best for projects that do not have "unusual" issues subject to differing code interpretations by different code experts. Program participation and operation costs range widely from three to seven figures depending on application and scale.

Case study examples: AIA Austin, AIA Central Valley

### 6. Shift the paradigm

Creatively thinking about new approaches can lead to paradigm shifts that often result in more efficient and effective permitting processes. One example, the [Prequalified Architectural Submittal System \(PASS\)](#), is based on document content and organization standards that allow for more efficient plan review. These standards also offer corresponding benefits through higher compliance rates, better field inspection outcomes, and easier pathways to code compliance. PASS program plans go through a typical plan review process but are more expeditious because the standards used focus the participants on achieving more efficient outcomes. The PASS program is in use in 19 jurisdictions in Northern California, but its principles could apply to any type of project in any location. Costs can range from hundreds to thousands of dollars, but volunteers can manage much of the work in development.

Case study examples: AIA Austin, AIA Florida, AIA Central Valley

### 7. Shift the culture

The first six of these archetypes tend to be *program-based* streamlining initiatives. Culture shifts, however, are sometimes necessary to create a supportive environment for program success. An unsupportive culture can be a barrier to effective reform, even after a jurisdiction has already implemented multiple programs. Culture is both a dominant factor in a jurisdiction's operation but also difficult to define or measure. Proponents of streamlining have identified six key cultural characteristics that successful, high-performance permitting jurisdictions exhibit: customer-oriented attitudes, transparency, collaboration, forward thinking, consistency, and "big picture" thinking and planning.

Case study examples: AIAIDC, AIA Austin, AIA Florida, AIA Central Valley

## Case studies

### Capital streamlining (AIA|DC)

Washington, DC: 2017 to present

The [District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs \(DCRA\)](#)—the local permit processing authority—had a reputation of being a challenging place for developers and design professionals. AIA|DC set an initial goal of a 10-day reduction in processing time for specific permits—a goal it met and then doubled.

#### Timeline • Costs • Benefits

After years of discussion about improving the system, the department asked AIA|DC in May 2019 to review the process for the most problematic permit category—Job Class C+D permits (ranging from 1,000 to 4,000 square feet)—and to address the most common mistakes. The ongoing effort has spanned several years and involved many AIA member volunteers and DCRA staff participants. As of late 2020, DCRA has documented average time reductions of 20 days for the targeted permit category.

Permit streamlining strategies used: Shift flowchart, Shift culture

#### Description

The high level of economic activity in the District of Columbia had masked the disconnect between design and construction professionals and their regulators. Initial efforts to promote a more efficient permit process were stymied by DCRA leadership, who seemed to focus more on protecting the status quo than engaging the customer.

AIA|DC devoted considerable time to initiating reforms, starting with published editorial coverage of conditions in the local press. Following leadership changes at DCRA at the executive and key staff level, a focus on fostering collegial relationships and a conversational environment began to yield significant progress. Specific problem areas became clear, and the stakeholders together designed specific corrective measures to address them. Collaborative conversations continue on “both sides of the counter” to encourage further improvement.

*“The slowness of DC’s permit process is of great concern to the chapter because it is not only frustrating for our members, it has become an impediment to economic development. The system is unpredictable, forcing builders and developers to have contingency budgets to handle the carrying costs of a project while they wait months, or even years, for a permit. The city does not benefit because slow permitting delays the revenue from property taxes that new development would bring. In fact, nobody wins in this process—it raises the cost of everything in the city. It is entirely possible to reduce the cost of housing by fixing the permit process.”*

— Mary Fitch, Hon. AIA, AIA|DC Executive Director

#### More information

- [Redesigning DC’s Permit Process: Reducing Review Times by 10 Days](#) (a joint project of DCRA and AIA|DC)
- Contact: Mary Fitch, Hon. AIA, AIA|DC Executive Director [MFitch@aiadc.com](mailto:MFitch@aiadc.com)

### **Pro-certification for houses (AIA Austin)**

Austin, TX: 2013 to 2015

AIA Austin created a robust [Residential Advocacy Roundtable](#) that actively engaged with city of Austin staff in implementing a series of zoning and building code changes and streamlining permitting processes while maintaining code compliance and project quality.

#### **Timeline • Costs • Benefits**

AIA Austin coordinated and supported a multiyear volunteer effort that led to a number of milestones, including the creation of the [Certificate of Compliance Program](#) in 2013. Today, the City of Austin Residential Review Division offers self-certification for certified building designers and Texas-licensed architects. The review timeframe for qualified projects (including new single-family construction and additions as well as single-family interior remodels) is seven to 10 business days—a significant decrease in the timeline for residential permit processing.

Permit streamlining strategies used: Shift culture, Shift roles, Shift flowchart, Shift paradigm

#### **Description**

Active, years-long engagement between the design professional community in Austin and the city government has spurred a series of shifts, innovations, programs, and enhancements that benefit the city's citizens and their economic vitality. Today, the AIA Austin [Residential Advocacy Commission](#) maintains active communication with City of Austin Residential Review Department and Inspections Department staff to stay updated on zoning and building code changes. This component engagement keeps AIA Austin members informed when code changes happen and highlights city staff interpretations that affect architects and their practice.

*"It was taking longer to get a building permit for a house in Austin than to actually build it."*

— John Nyfeler, FAIA, AIA Austin Past President

*"Since 2013, AIA Austin's Advocacy Liaisons have worked closely with city of Austin staff to maintain the option for architects to self-certify residential projects."*

— Ingrid Spencer, AIA Austin Executive Director

#### **More information**

- [AIA Austin Residential Advocacy Roundtable](#)
- [AIA Austin Residential Advocacy Commission](#)
- AIA Austin Residential Liaison Contacts:
  - o Travis Young, AIA, 2020 Chair ([tgyoung@studiomomentum.com](mailto:tgyoung@studiomomentum.com))
  - o Bhavani Singal, AIA, 2021 Chair-Elect ([vani@workshopno5.com](mailto:vani@workshopno5.com))
  - o Ingrid Spencer, Staff Liaison ([ingrid@aiaaustin.org](mailto:ingrid@aiaaustin.org))

**Defining code-compliant documents (AIA Florida)**

State of Florida: 2008 to 2011

AIA Florida partnered with the Florida Engineering Society (FES) and the Building Officials Association of Florida (BOAF) to develop a set of eight technical guides that establish statewide standards for documents, electronic submittals, and even professional practice.

**Timeline • Costs • Benefits**

The Joint Task Force found that “[t]ransitioning from paper documents to electronic documents is not easy, quick, or cheap. It is, however, efficient and will shorten the turn-around time for processing most permits. With a little creativity, it is possible to chart a course that starts with simple affordable procedures that utilize existing technologies and capabilities and evolves over time to a fully Web-based process.” While noting the costs will vary by local jurisdiction, the task force outlines multiple benefits specific to each industry stakeholder group.

Permit streamlining strategies used: Shift culture, Shift paradigm, Shift technology

**Description**

The AIA Florida/FES/BOAF Joint Task Force launched a multiyear effort that engaged a host of volunteers to create eight **technical guides**, including resources tailored for design professionals, contractors, building officials, and other building department staff. The task force developed specific guidance for each relevant industry stakeholder group detailing all the best practices recommended for the creation and handling of secure electronic documents used in the permit process. When these groups work as a team, the task force emphasized, they can complete large, complex projects. The resources describe standards that are clear and comprehensive, creating consistency and a foundation for collaboration throughout this large, diverse state.

*“AIA Florida’s co-authored document that outlined drawing standards for small commercial projects was one of the inspirations that helped lead to development of the PASS permit streamlining program now in use in Northern California at 19 different jurisdictions.”*

– Michael Malinowski, FAIA, Streamline Institute President

**More information**

Technical guide series developed by the AIA Florida/FES/BOAF Joint Task Force:

- [Guide to Creating Building Code Compliant Documents Part 1 – Introduction](#)
- [Guide to Creating Building Code Compliant Documents Part 2 – FBC Government Sheet](#)
- [Guide to Creating Building Code Compliant Documents Part 3 – Life Safety Plan Demo](#)
- [Guide to Creating Building Code Compliant Documents Part 4 – Area Increase Calculator](#)
- [Building Department Guide to Creating and Processing Electronic Documents](#)
- [Contractors Guide to Creating and Processing Electronic Documents](#)
- [Design Professionals Guide to Creating and Processing Electronic Documents](#)
- [Building Official’s Guide to the Professional Practice of Architects and Engineers in Florida](#)

Contact: Vicki L. Long, CAE, Hon. AIA, AIA Florida Executive VP [vlong@aiafla.org](mailto:vlong@aiafla.org)

### **From worst to first (AIA Central Valley)**

Sacramento, CA: 1997 to 2009

A major, multiyear effort to reshape the culture of permit processing in the city of Sacramento took the California capital from dead last in regional customer satisfaction surveys to No. 1.

#### **Timeline • Costs • Benefits**

Surveys in the late 1990s ranked the City of Sacramento Community Development Department (CDD) dead last in customer satisfaction among municipal building departments in the California Central Valley region. Following a stakeholder commitment spanning more than a decade and involving over \$1 million in public and private investment, Sacramento's customer satisfaction ranking rose to No. 1. Innovations included matrix review—bringing internal department stakeholders together in a consistent team to work on complex projects—and the creation of a new staff role: “process managers” who help applicants navigate internal reviews and approvals via a single, consistent point of contact.

Permit streamlining strategies used: Shift culture, Shift roles, Shift flowchart, Shift resources, Shift timeline, Shift paradigm

#### **Description**

The initial impetus for this effort was a political and economic development crisis that crystallized when the largest regional developer said in a front page story in the *Sacramento Bee*, “I will no longer do business in the city of Sacramento.” The mayor created a Commission on Development, which conducted public hearings over a six-month period to develop a list of 33 specific objectives for reform.

Topping the list was the establishment of a Development Oversight Commission, which worked over a five-year period to implement a cultural shift and series of reforms and programs. The culture shift was the largest and most complex undertaking, moving city staff away from problem finding toward problem solving. Action items included workshops over a two-year period as well as substantial personnel (staff and leadership) changes. The commission implemented several programs still in place in 2020, including the “matrix” process (which assembled a multidimensional project review team for large, complex projects to avoid handoffs and silos) and the project manager system (which assigned a single point of contact and project responsibility for large undertakings). The city originally only used this system for very large projects but now uses it for any project exceeding a \$1 million valuation. Staff and architect members of AIA Central Valley were key players throughout the entire process.

*“Get the Customer to Success. The city is committed to providing accountable, transparent, fair and streamlined services to our customers.”*

— City of Sacramento Community Development Department (CDD) staff ID cards

#### **More information**

- Contact: Michael F. Malinowski, FAIA, Former Chair of the City of Sacramento Development Oversight Commission [mfm@appliedarts.net](mailto:mfm@appliedarts.net)
- Contact: Kim Anderson, Hon. AIA, AIA Central Valley Executive Director [kanderson@aiacv.org](mailto:kanderson@aiacv.org)

## Busting myths about permit streamlining

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**Myth** Permit streamlining involves either asking people to work harder or faster, getting more work done in less time, or skipping steps that may be important.

**Fact** The best permit streamlining involves working smarter (not harder), and it does not skip steps that would compromise the bottom-line objective to protect the public health, safety, and welfare via full code compliance.

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**Myth** It is only practical to muster the resources and effort for permit streamlining in either great times (when resources are abundant) or in times of crisis (when there is no choice but to implement positive change).

**Fact** The best time to work toward implementing streamlining efforts is now. Streamlining is a journey, not a destination. Every permit-processing environment has some room for improvement in efficiency and effectiveness.

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**Myth** Best practices in permit streamlining are universal.

**Fact** Successful permit streamlining strategies are not one size fits all; they vary in each jurisdiction.

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**Myth** Bringing in an outside consultant is the best way to get streamlining going.

**Fact** Cooperative efforts that involve both design professionals who prepare plans and building departments are the most effective and direct means to launch a streamlining initiative. Consultants can play a key role in comparing benchmarks, processes, and strategies to those found in similar communities and then create an action plan. Some consultants focus primarily on technology, which is just one of the strategies that can be effective. It is equally possible, however, to effect these changes by further developing your working relationships with building department officials and other stakeholders.

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**Myth** Self-certification has a poor track record.

**Fact** Good self-certification programs have built-in checks and balances. Some jurisdictions, such as New York City, have decades of positive experience with self-certification.

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**Myth** AIA components do not have a role to play in permit streamlining.

**Fact** AIA components can be very effective in implementing streamlining benefits in local communities by:

- a) Helping to vet measures before spending time and money to implement them;
- b) Identifying roadblocks and low-hanging fruit that stakeholders can address easily; and
- c) Working to implement programs such as pre-qualification, where training and feedback can provide qualified applicants streamlined plan reviews without changes to internal steps or responsibilities.

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**Myth** Streamlining means getting permits out more quickly to everyone who wants one.

**Fact** Properly implemented streamlining starts with the premise that time matters, without any compromise to public health, safety, or welfare. Getting to an answer quickly is at the heart of streamlining, whether the answer is “Yes, we approve that” or “No, as configured that does not meet code.”

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**Myth** Discretionary entitlements like special permits and zoning variances are not amenable to streamlining.

**Fact** Every regulatory and permitting process can benefit from streamlining. The easiest processes to streamline, however, are ministerial ones where the application of a uniform set of code provisions is at the heart of the matter.

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**Myth** Eliminating plan check is at the heart of most streamlining efforts.

**Fact** Many, if not most, design professionals appreciate a good plan check. In jurisdictions where self-certification is an option, many design professionals choose to have their plans reviewed. This is particularly true for review for zoning and environmental compliance where an ordinary reading of an ordinance may not be sufficient to understand its history or objective.

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## A roadmap for AIA components

### **Find champions and focus**

1. Before getting into the problem-solving specifics, connecting with local plan review professionals for open conversation is important. The dimensions and nature of the challenges on each side of the counter may not be inherently clear to the other side.
2. As a volunteer-based organization, a key first step is to locate an individual or small group of design professionals and other stakeholders with interest in improving permit processing.
3. At an initial meeting, a free, open, judgement-free comment period can help find common ground in shared experiences and concerns.
4. Due to the complexity of permit processing, it can be helpful to focus on one or two very specific areas of friction or disconnect.

### **Develop a plan for action**

5. Discussions with a broad group of stakeholders can increase the bandwidth of the effort and increase the potential for success.
6. In a collaborative environment, discussions can often move past problem identification to brainstorming and then vetting of potential solutions. If it is not possible to establish meaningful communications with the jurisdiction, then moving higher up in the chain of authority may be necessary. Participants can accomplish this by simply reporting facts and not focusing on specific people or projects.

### **Gather momentum for positive change**

7. Focusing on a small number of easily described and commonly recognized issues can help build an environment of trust where participants can implement and evaluate measures.

### **Build relationships**

8. A successful start with collaborative movement toward increased efficiency can become the basis of an ongoing relationship between all stakeholders to shape the built environment. This can provide a foundation for a culture of collaboration and advancing efficiency and effectiveness across the community. In some places, this might become a formal entity, such as a Development Oversight Commission; in others, it might be an informal platform for conversation and collaboration. Ultimately, the shared objectives of these efforts benefit everyone: civic officials and staff, design professionals, business and property owners, and all residents of the community.

### **And, most importantly**

9. The American Institute of Architects is your resource; our staff, volunteer members, subject matter expertise, and other guidance are available to assist you. Please consult the AIA resources collected in this document, including the AIA component contacts listed in the case study examples.
10. Share your permit streamlining successes and challenges with the AIA Codes Advocacy Program at [codes@aia.org](mailto:codes@aia.org) or visit [aia.org/codes](http://aia.org/codes).