

MBAKS

Top 15 Ways Local Jurisdictions Can Streamline the Permit Process

- 1.** Commit to meeting or exceeding established review timelines to enhance predictability and transparency for project applicants.
- 2.** Ensure needed capacity for reviews by maintaining appropriate staffing levels and providing training.
- 3.** Allow for civil engineering plans to be reviewed at the same time as the preliminary plat application, with the understanding that changes made to the preliminary plat during review may necessitate changes to construction plans.
- 4.** Provide online permitting and tracking.
- 5.** Collect permit data for producing an accurate annual permitting performance report per SB 5290.
- 6.** Adopt a model home building permit ordinance allowing up to 13 building permit applications to be submitted and issued prior to final plat recording, or at a minimum, allow up to 13 building permit applications to be submitted and processed (but not issued) prior to final plat recording.
- 7.** Adopt SEPA-related planning tools to facilitate the construction of “infill” housing inside urban growth areas.
- 8.** Identify elements of the permitting process that can be simplified, such as opportunities to accept licensed approvals in place of staff review (e.g. engineering).
- 9.** Eliminate design review (preferred) or make it as timely, objective, and predictable as possible.
- 10.** Streamline utility availability certificate process.
- 11.** Allow administrative approval of final plats.
- 12.** Shorten the 28-day completeness review to 10 days or fewer when accepting applications online and eliminate the 28-day completeness requirement when requiring a submittal appointment.
- 13.** Provide more flexibility in the number of model homes allowed to be constructed in approved preliminary subdivisions.
- 14.** Allow video inspections.
- 15.** Review and update code to eliminate vague language that leaves interpretation open to subjective determinations, as it will improve the predictability of the code and speed up the review process.



STREAMLINED PERMITTING WILL HELP GET MORE PEOPLE INTO HOUSING

By TRACI TENHULZEN
Special to The Seattle Times

In the ongoing housing attainability crisis, we need a spectrum of solutions to lower barriers for those seeking a place to call home in our region. That's why I'm heartened that one of several important housing bills to pass in Olympia this year was legislation to streamline permitting for new home construction and renovation, Senate Bill 5290.

Passing with unanimous support, this new law will add important reporting requirements and accountability measures related to permit processing and review timelines in cities and counties. This legislation, part of a comprehensive effort to address the housing crisis, was adopted alongside bills that will lower barriers to housing choices like backyard cottages and legalize a range of housing types across our state. In addition to new housing, SB 5290 will also help current homeowners expedite the process for certain remodel permits while maintaining standards for safety and compliance.

Permit review timelines may not be visible when you are walking down a street in your neighborhood, but they are a critical part of the work that allowed for those homes to first be built. If this isn't working, it can have a significant impact on housing availability and affordability. Even though cities and counties do not share much information on their timelines, we know that the wait is unacceptably long in many places. The Building Industry Association of Washington reports that the average permit approval timeline in Washington is 6.5 months. These permit delays add an estimated \$31,375 to the price of a new home. Unfortunately, it is even higher in the central Puget Sound region, adding more than \$46,000 to the cost of a new home in Snohomish County and more than \$51,000 in King County.

The bipartisan permitting reforms signed into law this year establish grant funds for local governments that commit to meeting shorter permit review timelines. The reforms also add accountability measures, such as annual performance reporting and best practices for local governments. However, these critical process reforms will not be fully implemented until 2025. That does not mean local governments need to wait until then to act. Not only is it important for cities and counties to operate transparently and adopt best practices, there are steps they can take now to improve permitting timelines that will help bring more homes to renters and buyers sooner.

Having a predictable and reasonable permitting process in place is important to everyone in our community working to facilitate more housing choices. We are in a housing crisis with not enough homes to meet the need. King County will require 308,000 new homes, and Snohomish County will need an additional 167,000 new homes, over the next 20 years to keep pace with demand. Slow permit timelines make it harder for people to find housing (or fix up their own home) and can even stop much-needed projects from moving forward.



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Houses under construction are seen in an aerial view in Kirkland. A new law in Washington will streamline the permitting process.

Examples of actions local governments could take now include identifying elements of the permitting process they could simplify and implementing regular training of the planning staff to maintain consistency of application rules.

Some cities have already stepped up and shown that it is possible to insert predictability and efficiency into the permitting process. For example, the city of Auburn allows concurrent review so that reviews by different disciplines can happen simultaneously to save as much as a year in a housing project — think civil engineering plans and preliminary plat application — approximate drawing of a proposed project — occurring at the same time. Auburn is also one of many cities that allows for final plat applications to be administratively approved. Some jurisdictions still require approval by their city councils, which can result in weeks, sometimes months, of delay due to scheduling. Local governments can delegate the final plat approval to planning directors or other designated officials to save time, bringing greater efficiency to the permit process and reducing an unnecessary cost pressure on housing.

The reforms in SB 5290 are long overdue in the broader effort to better serve those confronting barriers to housing. As this work continues, we know that more can and must be done now to improve the process of lowering these types of barriers to accessing housing.

