

Creating a Separate Process for Expedited Review

In addition to streamlining the standard review process, some locations create a process whereby proposals may also qualify for a separate, expedited review outside of the standard review process.

Expedited review is distinct from the streamlining/consolidation strategy grouping, in that the expedited review strategies in this section represent separate review processes that can be utilized when certain conditions are met, but they are not intended to replace or change the standard review process. The conditions that must be met for expedited review typically fall into three categories: expedited review for affordable housing projects, pre-approval based on self-certification, and expedited review for applicants who are willing to pay extra.

Expedited review for desirable housing proposals

Lengthy and complicated review processes represent an especially difficult challenge for affordable housing development. With a lower return on investment, affordable housing projects suffer disproportionately from the costs associated with regulatory delay. A result, fewer affordable housing units are built. In response to this challenge, towns and cities have adopted expedited review, often combined with other incentives such as fee waivers, for affordable housing proposals. Other housing features may also qualify a project for expedited review, such as green building or a target location.

Examples of places using the strategy

- **Austin, Tex.** allows builders of SMARTTM (safe, mixed-income, accessible, reasonably priced, and transit-oriented) housing to undergo an expedited review process, in addition to offering waivers for over 30 different fees in four city departments. Up to 1,500 units may receive full or partial fee waivers each year.
- **San Diego, Calif.** has implemented an ‘Affordable/Infill Housing and Sustainable Buildings’ program, which provides expedited permit processing for all eligible affordable/infill housing and sustainable building projects.
- **Santa Fe, NM** adopted fee waivers for housing built under the inclusionary zoning ordinance, the Santa Fe Homes Program.
- **Pinellas County, Fla.** adopted an expedited permit review process for affordable housing projects, in addition to offering a number of other incentives such as fee waivers and density bonuses. The expedited review process essentially moves affordable housing projects to the top of the queue for review.

The Community Development Department certifies proposals as affordable housing developments, provides vouchers for impact and review fee waivers, and monitors the certified developments to ensure compliance with regulations.

- *Montgomery County, Md.* has a ‘Green Tape’ expedited review process for affordable housing development.
- *Charlottesville, Va.* has an expedited permitting for affordable housing and also offers fee reductions for affordable housing developments.

Highlight location: Austin, Tex.

In Austin, the S.M.A.R.T.™ Housing Policy was adopted by the city council in 2000 to encourage the development of housing that is safe, mixed-income, accessible, reasonably priced, and transit-oriented. The policy lays out clear standards for each of these categories, which must be met for S.M.A.R.T.™ Housing certification. In addition, all S.M.A.R.T.™ housing developments must meet the minimum standards of the Austin Energy Green Building Program (GBP). Affordable housing proposals that meet these criteria are eligible for expedited review, fee waivers, and advocacy.

Ultimately, 4,900 S.M.A.R.T.™ housing units were constructed between the policy’s adoption in 2000 and 2005, with nearly 80 percent of these units being affordable to families at or below 80 percent of the Median Family Income (MFI). A 2004 survey showed that in the previous three years, the ratio of units affordable to families at or below 60 percent MFI increased by more than 25 percent.

The Austin Housing Finance Corporation takes the lead in administering the program. In addition, the Neighborhood Housing and Community Development Department acts to coordinate between other city departments to ensure the successful completion of S.M.A.R.T.™ housing developments.

Sources of information

- Austin, Tex.: S.M.A.R.T Housing™ Policy Resource Guide:
http://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Housing/Application_Center/SMART_Housing/smart_guide_0708.pdf
- Austin, Tex.: S.M.A.R.T. Housing™ ICMA Best Practices 2005
https://www.lakecountycl.gov/pdfs/2025/SMART_Housing.pdf
- San Diego, Calif: Expedite Program Information Bulletin
<http://www.sandiego.gov/development-services/pdf/industry/infobulletin/ib538.pdf>
- Santa Fe, NM: Affordable Housing
http://www.santafenm.gov/affordable_housing
Pinellas County, Fla.: Affordable Housing Incentives Information Pamphlet
<https://www.pinellascounty.org/community/affordablehousingguide.pdf>
- Montgomery County, Md.: Department of Planning FAQ webpage
<http://permittingservices.montgomerycountymd.gov/DPS/customerservice/GreenTape.aspx>
- Charlottesville, Va.: Charlottesville City Council Join Work Session

http://www.albemarle.org/upload/images/Forms_Center/Departments/Board_of_Supervisors/Forms/Agenda/2014Files/0701/Agenda.pdf

Expedited review based on pre-approval

In some locations, architects and engineers who attend courses on city laws and codes are able to ‘self certify’ that their plans meet local codes and standards. The plans are either pre-approved or go through an expedited review process. In order to ensure quality and compliance, planning departments typically audit a certain percentage of self-certified plans.

Examples of places using the strategy

- **New York City** has a ‘Professional Certification Program’ where registered architects and professional engineers self certify that their plans are in compliance, reducing the time builders wait for permits through automatic plan approval. No additional training is required for self-certification. The city audits 20 percent of self-certified plans upon permit issuance.
- **Surprise, Ariz.** has a self-certification program that eliminates the need for plan review. For eligible projects, permits can be issued within five business days.
- **Chicago’s** self-certification program eliminates plan review and requires that the certified architect take full responsibility for code compliance.
- In **Phoenix, Ariz.**, an architect or engineer must meet a set of professional qualifications for self-certification. If an architect or engineer meets those qualifications, he/she is then required to attend several training sessions from the Phoenix Planning and Development Department. Once the self-certification process is completed, the program also eliminates plan review. The Phoenix Planning and Development Department has a dedicated webpage with clear sections on professional requirements, training handouts, project eligibility requirements, procedures and forms, self-certification training class registration, as well as contact information for a program liaison.

Projects that qualify for self-certification can be issued permits within one to five calendar days.

Sources of information

- New York City: Professional Certification
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/development/procert.shtml>
- Surprise, Ariz.: Self-Certification Program for Building Permits
<http://surpriseaz.gov/index.aspx?NID=3137>
- Chicago: Self-Certification Program
http://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/bldgs/supp_info/an_overview_of_theself-certificationprogram.html

- Phoenix, Ariz.: Self-Certification Program
<https://www.phoenix.gov/pdd/self-certification-program>

Expedited review for an extra fee

Sometimes it is economically efficient for builders to pay extra for an expedited review process to avoid the costs associated with holding land while waiting to receive a permit. Some towns and counties have addressed this scenario with expedited review processes for those willing to pay extra. These processes utilize private sector consultants and off-hours permit agency staff capacity to ensure timely plan review.

Examples of places using the strategy

- In *Tualatin, Ore.*, building permit applicants may elect an expedited plan review that uses city staff working outside of regular work hours at an hourly rate of \$120. The applicant, architect, engineer, and contractor must all agree to be available during non-regular work hours and supply contact information for use during the plan review process. Expedited plan review is rotated among the building staff, and projects are assigned randomly to staff members.
- Expedited reviews in *Pierce County, Wash.* are similar, although a combination of Planning and Land Services staff (at \$100 per hour), third-party consultants (at \$124 per hour), and extra hires may be used for the expedited review. Expedited review charges are added to the application fee.
- *Fairfax, Va.* offers an Expedited Building Plan Review Program in which a permit applicant hires a private sector design professional from the county's Certified Peer Reviewer List to 'peer review' construction plans for code compliance. Reviewed applications are then given priority status in the building plan review process. The county reports that obtaining a permit under the Expedited Building Plan Review Program takes about half the time that it would under the standard review process.
- *Kirkland, Wash.* may contract for permit review services for expedited processing when requested by the applicant.

Highlight location: Kirkland, Wash.

In Kirkland, Wash., upon request, the director of the department of planning and community development may approve expedited processing of an application. To prevent delays in other permit applications, the director may contract for permit review services. Any additional costs incurred by the city due to expedited processing (e.g., the contracted permit review services) are paid for by the permit applicant. A city ordinance was required to allow the director of the department of planning and community development to begin contracting for permit review services in this way.

Sources of information

- Tualatin, Ore.: Expedited Plan Review Application
<http://www.tualatinoregon.gov/building/expedited-plan-review-application>
- Pierce County, Wash.: Department of Planning and Land Services Expedited Review Agreement <http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/DocumentCenter/View/4300>
- Fairfax, Va.: Expedited Building Plan Review Program
<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/dpwes/epr/how.htm>
- Kirkland, Wash.: Expedited Review Ordinance
<http://www.codepublishing.com/wa/kirkland/html/Kirkland05/Kirkland0574.html#5.74.090>
- King County, Wash.: Department of Permitting and Environmental Review
<http://www.kingcounty.gov/property/permits/info/applying/consultants.aspx>

This document is a portion of NAHB's report
Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape.

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Development Process Efficiency: Cutting Through the Red Tape

