

City of Windsor sees benefits of shifting to e-permitting and paperless process

Don Procter July 8, 2019



The city of Windsor began e-permitting last year and went paperless in January. It is one of the few cities in Ontario to make the shift.

Transforming a municipality's building permit process to e-permitting can appear daunting and the upfront costs can be a deterrent. But Windsor's digital transformation officer, Leslie Wright, said along with the many benefits of the change, there are tangible ways of recouping the upfront costs.

For example, by doing things the old way 100 pages of hard copy for an ICI project will typically require printing and reprinting for markups plus delivery costs.

E-permitting eliminates costs for the applicant and for the municipality, he told a seminar recently at the fourth Annual Building Tall Conference in Toronto.

Paper storage can be another area of savings, said Wright, noting that the city of Windsor has traditionally paid for off-site storage.

Wright was on a panel looking at the merits of automated code checking, e-permitting and the use of BIM.

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— **Jarkko Turtiainen**

Evolta

Ralph Kaminski, chief building official, city of Waterloo, told the audience that the cost of digitizing all of its drawings was partly rationalized by the savings of floor space.

Jarkko Turtiainen, COO, Evolta, said while some vendors ignore smaller centres in favour of bigger cities “for those big jackpot wins,” Evolta — a Finland-based technology provider of the digital building permit process — sees it differently.

Every city “should be going to e-permitting” regardless of size, Turtiainen said. “We need to make sure the price of the model is affordable...so the benefits can be pushed down to the industry.”

Kaminski said Waterloo has been working with a group of municipalities on automation.

At the city of Vantaa, Finland, an e-permitting system which operates on BIM and is GIS-enabled has improved efficiency by 30 per cent since its inception in 2014. Fewer employees are required, freeing up office space, said Pekka Virkamaki, head of building control, City of Vantaa, Finland.

He told the seminar that other benefits include updates being available simultaneously to all relevant city departments and to stakeholders such as architects, planners and building officials “They can see the latest designs and give their own opinions (quickly).”

While the move to e-permitting can be costly, increased efficiency justifies the change, said Virkamaki.

For long-time senior building staff, the change to an automated building code process can be trying.

Some cities might see this as an opportune time to hire young techno-savvy replacements, but senior staff at Windsor’s building permit department has surprised their bosses.

“Change management is tough,” said Wright, but department staff who thought they would never make the technological shift are now “doing it.”

“The challenge is to make it an enjoyable experience for them,” Wright told the audience.

Wright said it was important to include public works and planning departments in the shift to e-permitting and then move outside the city of Windsor to show designers, applicants, contractors and developers the benefits of the new harmonized process.

One of the major vendors in the move to e-permitting and other automation is Solibri. JD Sherrill, vice-president, said: “The real power in Solibri is we can run checks...decide what is relevant, important.”

Sherrill said takeoffs (a space in the model, for example) can be generated. It is “an intermediary step” between e-permitting and automated code-checking in the BIM.

“The ultimate goal is to have Solibri in a Cloud environment, similar to Evolta, where anyone can upload a model directly...and get a report for stakeholders, the architects and engineers,” said Sherrill.

The Building Tall Conference was held at the University of Toronto. It was sponsored by the Residential Construction Council of Ontario.