

One Ontario e-permitting program ‘groundbreaking’: RESCON president

Don Wall August 31, 2020



The newest effort to streamline Ontario’s project approvals process through e-permitting recently picked up momentum with the announcement that the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON)** has joined the fledgling One Ontario Program.

One Ontario was established by Toronto’s AECO Innovation Lab to establish a set of provincial guidelines for data and information exchange during the development approval process. AECO CEO Arash Shahi explained recently that One Ontario aims to ensure that developers, municipalities and other government agencies are all working in harmony using the latest digital protocols such as web-based geographic information system applications, BIM tools and automated code-compliance checking algorithms.

The end goal is to streamline the municipal approvals process, thus minimizing uncertainty and risk for developers and speeding up construction.

“One Ontario is coming up with a data-exchange framework for applicants, municipalities and provincial agencies,” said Shahi. “We are going to do a blueprint of what that data exchange

should look like, and that blueprint can be something stakeholders and municipalities can all agree on. We are bringing all stakeholders together so we can all solve the problem.”

Ontario currently has a patchwork of development approvals platforms across its 444 municipalities with some stuck still using binders and rolled up plans. Others merely scan paper documents to enable information exchange. None are at the level of digitization reached in Finland and Singapore, which are estimated to be 10 years ahead of Ontario.

[A 2018 RESCON/Ryerson](#) study found that the approvals timeline is more than two years for residential buildings in some Ontario communities.

The World Bank ranked Toronto 54th among 190 world jurisdictions in approval efficiency for routine building projects.

“Sometimes it takes multiple years for a permit to come in, and that uncertainty increases the risks, and most often that translates to increased costs, and at the end of the day the consumers are paying for all the costs,” said Shahi. “So by establishing a more consistent and predictable and transparent permitting process, we are reducing the risks for investors and developers.”

RESCON president Richard Lyall noted there have been numerous efforts to encourage streamlining the municipal approvals process over the years, many of which he has participated in, including the establishment of the Building Regulatory Reform Advisory Group over 10 years ago, the publication of RESCON’s Streamlining report in 2018 and Toronto’s current Concept to Keys initiative. He called the One Ontario program “groundbreaking.”

The drive for more digitization has picked up steam during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lyall noted, given that many municipal offices shut down, leaving Ontario stakeholders frustrated that there were limited digital opportunities for processing plans.

And McKinsey and Company produced a report arguing digitization and the modernization of processes is critical to economic recovery, he said.

“We are looking to be innovative to provide solutions and get productivity up to what it was,” said Lyall.

“The idea here is to have one system, not one company, that is interoperable, where all the various applications can communicate with each other and where we have one model system or performance standard across the province.”

RESCON will shortly be publishing a new report that will quantify the wasted costs associated with various lengths of delays in processing.

“The more it costs to get through the process, with no added value, the less money there is for innovation,” said Lyall.

“With more predictability, it will encourage more projects to come forward because investors can determine their return on investments.”

The Ontario Building Officials Association (OBOA) and the Toronto BIM Community have also come on board as supporters of One Ontario and Shahi said next steps include confirming support from municipalities and government agencies. The provincial government has already identified the development of digital tools to support e-permitting as a goal within its More Homes, More Choice housing supply plan.

Shahi said the process of harmonization could take years but the initial goal will be to get all stakeholders together and working toward solutions.

One Ontario will have its official launch at the OBOA convention later in September.