

## Report slams slow Ontario building approvals

by Don Wall Jul 14, 2017

Ontario's building permit approvals process is archaic and the province suffers in many ways as a result as the housing supply stagnates, innovation is stifled, commercial investors are scared away and the ICI sector falls short of its potential.

Those are the conclusions of a new report from Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development (CUR) in conjunction with the **Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON)**.

The paper, released July 5, reveals that the World Bank currently ranks Toronto's building permit process at 57th in the world, with site plan approval delays being a major factor cited, and the average approval time for site plan control and other applicable procedures for complex buildings, such as condominiums, is 28 months.

The CUR/RESCON study also cites a Fraser Institute finding that every six-month delay in approvals reduces growth in new housing supply by 3.7 per cent.

"Navigating the development approval process in Ontario is a long and cumbersome task involving many regulatory agencies," said David Amborski, director of CUR, in a statement announcing the report.

"The building permit process is subject to an increasingly wide range of public policy objectives, while buildings themselves are becoming more complex. Nonetheless, Ontario has yet to substantially modernize and streamline its building permit approval process."

The report, titled *Modernizing Building Approvals in Ontario: Catching Up with Advanced Jurisdictions*, argues that Ontario not only suffers in comparison to other international jurisdictions, which makes a difference when firms are casting about for places to make commercial investments, but it lags within Canada.

British Columbia, for example, has a Letters of Assurance program in which professionals support project applications, providing assurance to building departments that plans have addressed key building codes and other elements.

Enhancing the role of professionals in the permitting process is one of three recommendations identified in the report. The others are speeding up site plan control and other approvals through a better and more transparent process and increasing municipal use of online e-permitting to speed up reviews and inter-agency communication.

"People recognize there is a problem with the process being too long and there's a supply problem, but when it comes to fixing some of these things it is a different matter," commented Michael de Lint, RESCON's director of building regulatory reform and technical standards and a contributor to the paper.

improve the system in Ontario. Singapore's CORENET e-permitting system, cited in the report, uses a Building Information Modeling (BIM) platform for electronic document reviews and circulation and is said to achieve time savings of 65 per cent, a reduction in manpower of 44 per cent and printing cost savings of 72 per cent.

"I think there is a lot of interest in e-permitting. It is transformative, not just in introducing technology, which in itself is transformative...but it shines a light on the process and where the process is inefficient," said de Lint. "Because now things can happen so quickly, it even draws attention to the parts of the process that are inefficient or ridiculous.

"When a company is fully BIM enabled and then they have to do things on paper, it is ridiculous, and even talking to some people with the City of Toronto, they agree with that. It is not right. We should accept BIM-enabled plans and process them."

The report deals primarily with the residential construction sector, de Lint said, but ICI is frequently discussed among stakeholders in the context of permitting.

"There is a huge spinoff effect," he said. "Commercial and industrial projects do not come to Ontario. It is very relevant, it is very much on our mind.

"I have heard anecdotally about companies. They made the decision virtually in a flash, they say, how long is this going to take to get through the system, and they had already begun to run through some problems, and they said, 'oh no, we're going, we're gone.'"

The province, construction stakeholders and many — but not all — municipalities acknowledge the problems, said de Lint, and there have been several attempts to address them including initiatives by the Engineers, Architects and Building Officials association, the Ontario Association of Architects and Professional Engineers Ontario. The province recently set up its own Development Approval Roundtable.

De Lint said there had been a "very positive response" from industry stakeholders to the report, and added, "We have had some meetings with government officials who have been very positive as well. They want to look at some of these recommendations."

The report partners are calling for a concurrent two-track implementation process. Phase 1 would involve a number of municipalities in pilot projects to be overseen by an industry/government steering committee, while Phase 2 would have the province and stakeholders develop standards, guidelines and regulatory changes.

The report focuses on technical aspects of the process, he said, as opposed to politics and policy.

"The higher the quality of the submissions, the faster the process," said de Lint. "There needs to be very good information from the agencies, they need to be fully transparent on their requirements and their processes, the decision-making criteria and all that stuff."