

Industry Perspectives Op-Ed: One Ontario takes aim at municipal permitting problem

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Navigating the municipal development approval process can be a frustrating experience for Ontario's builders.

Rules and systems can vary greatly, adding to the complexity of the permitting process.

The One Ontario project launched by AECO Innovation Lab in concert with the Residential Construction Council of Ontario (RESCON) and other industry stakeholders is taking aim at the problem.

As part of this innovative new venture, we'll be developing guidelines for harmonized data exchange standards that will set the stage for a uniform e-permitting framework to be established that can be used for development approvals by municipal planning and building departments across the province.

In our opinion, this is a very necessary and important initiative that will dramatically change and speed-up the permitting process, making it more efficient and easier for contractors to submit

applications and build much-needed housing. Approval agencies will be digitally linked which will improve the workflow.

The project is gaining momentum in the building community. The Ontario Building Officials Association (OBOA), for example, is also on board with the initiative and we intend to officially launch the project at OBOA's virtual annual meeting and training session being held Sept. 27 to Oct. 2.

We are pleased to report that the Toronto BIM Community has also joined the project and expect more organizations to sign on as we move forward. So, the initiative is definitely gaining momentum.

In the end, we will develop a blueprint and roadmap for Ontario municipalities to follow. The present framework is fragmented across our 444 municipalities. Standards can vary from place to place. The situation is frustrating for builders who work across different municipalities as it takes a lot of time to prepare and submit permit applications that are subject to different rules and systems.

The team of engineers, finance and business development consultants at AECO regularly tackle the most urgent needs of architectural, engineering and construction (AEC) industries and look forward to this challenge. It's essential that the construction industry be on the same page with municipalities.

There are presently no common standards to govern the flow of information and data transfer among stakeholders of permit applications. Without such standards, permitting systems can vary greatly between jurisdictions, causing myriad communication issues. This initiative will change that.

Having a common, streamlined digital framework in place across municipalities will reduce the cost of builders having to customize applications to different municipalities. The framework will be the same so developers will know what to expect — no surprises. One municipality will have the same setup as another. This can only result in a more efficient system and faster approvals of buildings.

We envision a framework that will link with provincial agencies like conservation authorities which are often called to weigh-in on development approvals. This will ensure a harmonized workflow between entities.

Because it is digital, developers, designers, architects and engineers will be able to submit more compliant applications. Builders will be able to communicate in real-time and informally test their development ideas for regulatory compliance prior to making a formal submission.

Over the years, there have been calls for a more streamlined development approval process.

A research report done in 2018 by RESCON, in fact, recommended that Ontario's municipalities move out of the world of pen and paper and adopt an interconnected, state-of-the-art digital platform.

Speeding up the approval process for developments is essential because the number of new homes being built simply isn't keeping up with demand.

Reports suggest the province needs to build 75,000 new homes each year over the next 24 years to keep up with expected population growth. However, we are short 12,000 units per year on average. Zoning delays can take up to three years and residential site plan approvals can take an additional two years in the permitting process.

The economic cost of these delays can add up to tens of thousands of extra dollars in cost for a single home. There is also the cost of tax revenue lost due to delays in construction of homes, especially in the case of high-density buildings. Those are just a couple of good reasons for moving on this.

This initiative is being rolled out at the perfect time as government has identified the development of digital tools to support e-permitting as a goal through its More Homes, More Choice housing supply plan. COVID-19 has also shown us how digitization can help improve our lives.

AECO and Ontario's builders, building officials and the BIM community are pleased to be leading the way.