Regulatory Reform:
Improving Permit Timeliness

Business permitting could be improved with simple, low-cost actions

Agencies could shorten the time it takes to submit, review, and make decisions on business permit applications through simple improvements, according to our review of state processes and business feedback. By providing more information and assistance as businesses are preparing their applications, agencies can help to reduce permit decision times. In addition, agencies should tell businesses how long permit decisions take, and they could continue to reduce permit decision times by using performance data to identify and correct bottlenecks in the future.

🔍 What we found

Not all agencies:
- Track permit processing times
- Tell businesses processing times
- Provide businesses sufficient up front assistance
- Use data to identify and correct process delays

💡 What we recommend

To improve permitting, agencies should:
- ☑ Track and publish permit processing times
- ☑ Identify decision time targets
- ☑ Provide assistance to applicants early in the process
- ☑ Use performance data to identify and eliminate process bottlenecks
- ☑ Share effective practices among agencies

Lawmakers recognize the need for efficient permitting

Lawmakers have long recognized that businesses need predictability and efficiency in permitting. In Washington, various laws and executive orders direct state agencies to tell businesses how long permit decisions can take and to ensure those decision processes are as streamlined as possible.

Predictable permit decision times help businesses successfully plan their activities and make sound investment choices. When permitting decisions take longer than expected, businesses can face higher costs and lost revenue. Inefficient permitting can also cost the state money in the form of unnecessary staff work and lost tax revenues that pay for state programs.

Businesses want prompt, predictable, and transparent permit processes

To better understand businesses' recent experiences with state permitting processes, we surveyed more than 4,200 recent permit applicants. Survey results revealed a 90 percent overall business satisfaction with permitting processes statewide. However, two areas whose scores were among the lowest – and therefore offer the most opportunity for improvement – are also what businesses say are their most important permitting needs. They are: knowing how long a permit decision will take, and prompt permit decisions.

We also conducted focus groups in Port Angeles, Seattle, Spokane and Tri Cities. In those discussions, businesses confirmed that predictable permitting timelines are critical. Businesses want transparent processes with more information and help as they prepare to apply, so that they are better able to submit a complete application and easily navigate the permitting process.

What businesses say are important aspects of successful permitting

- Knowing how long a permit process will take
- Knowing what the permit process will require
- Early assistance to help them submit a complete application
- Consistency of expectations among regulatory agencies
- Receiving positive and helpful customer service

Business permitting could be improved with simple, low-cost actions

We surveyed each of the 14 permitting agencies to learn which permits they track for timeliness, how long their decisions take, and which permits have formal timeline targets. We also looked on application forms and agency websites to see how often agencies provide businesses with processing time information before they apply for a permit.

We found that:

- Agencies provide businesses with information about how long a permit decision will take, either online or on the application form, for less than half (40 percent) of all permits.
- Agencies formally track processing times for less than two-thirds (62 percent) of the states' business permits, and tracking is inconsistent. Some agencies begin tracking as soon as the permit application is submitted; others begin tracking once the application is deemed complete.
- Slightly more than half (57 percent) of all business permits have formal decision-time targets found in statute, rule, or policy.

Providing assistance as businesses prepare their applications and using performance data to reduce delays can improve permitting

To look for opportunities to reduce permit decision times, we compared current permitting practices of selected permits to best practices in permitting from around the country. We looked at best practices in four broad areas.

Best practices by permit process phase

1 Pre Application

Clear process information
Clear permit requirements
Early assistance to applicants

2 Application & Intake

User-friendly forms
Screening for application completeness

3 Review & Notification

Prompt staff assignments
Managing process bottlenecks
Communication with applicants

4 Process Management

Performance measures
Performance targets
Performance management

We found that while agencies are already doing many of the practices we looked for, each permit we evaluated had opportunities for improvement. The two areas where we found the greatest opportunities were in the pre-application phase when an applicant is preparing the application, and throughout the process management phase, where agencies collect and use data to improve their processes.

Agencies can help businesses be more successful and reduce processing times by providing more information and assistance to businesses early in the process as they are preparing their applications, by developing performance measures and targets, and by using the data to identify and eliminate bottlenecks.

To improve business permit processes, we recommend:

- Agencies measure the time it takes to make a permit decision, provide businesses with estimates of the time required, and report to the Legislature on progress toward providing this information for all permits.
- On their websites, agencies provide the following information to applicants: the types of assistance available and how to access them, the maximum time an applicant will wait for a response, checklists for completing applications, and examples of successful applications.
- Agencies develop and use performance measures to improve permit processes that take longer than an average of two weeks and report to the Legislature on how they used their performance data to improve their processes.
- The Governor's Office or its delegate compile and publish the most effective permit process streamlining practices of state agencies, based on agency reports of performance to the Legislature.

Fourteen state agencies issue 225 business permits.

Agriculture
Archeology & Historic Preservation
Ecology
Fish & Wildlife
Gambling Commission
Health
Labor & Industries
Licensing
Liquor Control Board
Natural Resources
Parks
Revenue
Transportation
Utilities & Transportation Commission