

STATE AUDITOR'S OFFICE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE CENTER



Douglas County Commercial Building Permits

Using Lean to improve permit processes

Douglas County can issue a new housing permit in one to three days, but its commercial permitting processes take weeks and require additional coordination with builders and other local governments.

The County conducted a week-long process improvement event in April 2013 to streamline the steps to review and approve a commercial building permit.

The County's process improvement team developed a plan to cut the average review time down from 36 days to 20 days to provide faster service for customers.

"When money is at stake, every day is critical," said Douglas County Director of Land Services Mark D. Kulaas. "Being able to get things approved faster gives them more time to work on their project and not be travelling around looking for permits."

The County recently participated in the Local Government Performance Center's Lean Academy, which has helped four counties streamline their permitting processes.

Coordination is critical for Douglas County

In Douglas County, separate government organizations responsible for water, sewer, and fire protection services all evaluate permits. Those governments need two weeks to review and comment on each commercial building proposal.

To meet its new 20 day goal and accommodate the required 14-day review period, the county must complete its work in six days or less.

Ensuring applications arrive complete

One of the barriers to quick turnaround is that builders often do not know everything required for the application and the permit review staff often requests additional information. The process improvement team focused on helping ensure its customers provide complete applications the first time.

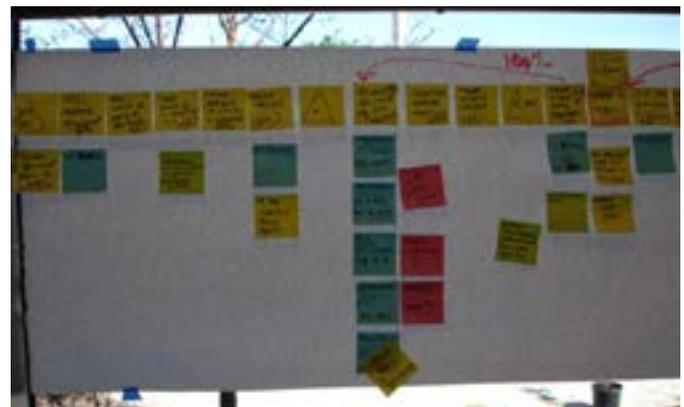
To help developers submit complete plans, Douglas County is developing a checklist and a new pre-application meeting to clearly communicate what pieces need to be submitted. The permit office developed a checklist and now uses the pre-application meeting with the builder to review all information needed in the permits.

Issuing permits in less time

Processing Time
Before - 36 days
New goal - 20 days



Douglas County permitting officials mapped out their processes with sticky notes, above, to help make improvements. The changes are designed to speed the review and approval process.



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Douglas County and other counties that have conducted lean reviews have noticed that trying to track down missing information can compound delays in its process.

“What had been happening is that applications were submitted, then evaluated for completeness, and (applicants) would be told, you need this information, and you’re adding time to the process.”

The most complex elements of the permits were most likely to require more work by the developer. By reviewing the plot plans and stormwater requirements early, the County could identify the applications that needed the most help and advance the others into the approval stage faster.

Wanting to improve, not fix, permitting processes

Permitting departments don’t need to have problems to improve their processes, Kulaas said.

“We believe we do a good job of processing our permits, although that doesn’t mean there isn’t room for improvement,” he said. “One of the things that happens in any organization is we get used to the paths that we’re taking and then we have a workload that doesn’t let us step back and take a look.”

Douglas County focused on commercial permits because it wanted to review a process that other counties in the Lean Academy had not yet examined.

The new process reduced work by just one hour but cut out many of steps by eliminating duplicate reviews of applications.

***“When money is at stake,
every day is critical,”***

**Mark D. Kulaas, Director of Land
Services for Douglas County**

Douglas County



Resources for more information

Douglas County Department of Land Services:

www.douglascountywa.net/departments/tls/land/default.asp

State Auditor’s Office Local Government Performance Center: Find tools for creating a lean process improvement team and read more case studies: www.sao.wa.gov/PerformanceCenter

Kitsap County’s Lean Process: Learn more about Kitsap County’s experiences from videos on the Department of Community Development’s website:

www.kitsapgov.com/dcd/permit_process_kaizen.htm

King County’s Lean Toolkit: www.kingcounty.gov/employees/Lean/Toolkit.aspx

Washington’s Government Management and Accountability Performance Lean page:

www.accountability.wa.gov/leadership/lean/default.asp