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ALERT

TOP STORY

Tucson trims building permit lag time but much to be done

From the Tucson Morning Recap: Get today's top stories series

David Wichner

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Nathan Mulford, left, Sundt Construction field superintendent, talks to Ernie Stevens, center, City of Tucson inspector supervisor, and Salvador Carrasco, inspector in training, about the windows while Stevens and Carrasco check on Sundt Construction's project at the Benedictine Monastery in June 2022.

Rebecca Sasnett, Arizona Daily Star

David Wichner

The city of Tucson has improved its turnaround times to approve building permits and plans since installing a new online permitting system last fall.

But there's still much work to be done, business leaders say, and the city acknowledges there's room for improvement as it optimizes the new system and looks forward to the arrival of a new planning director by the end of May.

Overwhelmed by record-high construction activity and staffing challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the city last year was taking 90 days or more to review some building permits and plans.

In July, the mayor and council approved nearly \$1.5 million in funding to help the Planning and Development Services Department add staff and upgrade systems to alleviate the permit delays.

After a delay due to the pandemic, the city finally installed a new online permitting system last fall, launching **Tucson Development Center Online** on Oct. 31.

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Assistant City Manager Tim Thomure said the city is in most cases meeting a goal of 20 working days, or 30 calendar days, to perform individual permit or plan reviews, after one to three days for initial staff intake for referral to a reviewer.

"We are in almost all review types meeting that timeframe right now, and in fact, most of our review timeframes are running well under that right now," Thomure said.

Though permit review times vary widely among cities and counties, local stakeholders cite Pima County, which says it turns around nearly all of its permit reviews for smaller projects in just five days, or 20 days for projects greater than 20,000 square feet.

Aside from larger and more complex projects, the county guarantees “a review timeframe of fifteen business days for all projects.”

Thomure noted that some building permits require multiple reviews, to process plan corrections, for example.

“A permit might take two or three cycles to get approved depending on the complexity, but our commitment is that when we get it in our hands we turn it around within 30 days or less, and we’re doing that,” Thomure said.

Other things like approvals needed by external agencies can lengthen the process, and sometimes the onus falls on the permit applicant, he said.

For example, fees must be paid and before a permit can be issued, the contractor or property owner must submit an affidavit showing who will be performing the work, Thomure said, adding that he’s seen more of those issues holding up permits recently for owners who aren’t familiar with the process.

There are more improvements on the way with the new online permitting system, including new user dashboards to allow easy tracking of permit reviews, and workflow improvements in the works, he said.

New director named

After a nationwide search, the city named Kristina Swallow, most recently director of the Nevada Department of Transportation and a University of Arizona graduate, as the new director of the Planning and Development Services Department, according to a city memo on Wednesday.

Swallow, who is expected to start in her new role with the city on May 30, got her undergraduate degree in civil engineering from the UA in 1994. Before her four-year stint heading Nevada’s transportation agency, she spent more than five years as program manager for the city of Las Vegas.

Improvements to the city’s permitting process couldn’t come fast enough for Tucson’s contracting and development community and businesses seeking to grow, said Michael Guymon, president and CEO of the Tucson Metro Chamber of Commerce.

“We think there’s still a lot of room for improvement,” said Guymon, a member of a stakeholders group working with the city on improving the permitting process.

“We still need to see those turnaround times improve, especially on the commercial side,” he said. “When I’m hearing that spec (speculative) builders are potentially pulling their projects (because of permit delays), that’s affecting our economic development, and we cannot afford to lose out on some of these deals.”

Permitting data the city shared with stakeholders showed some improvement in March but commercial data was incomplete, he said.

“They had a good month, where you’re starting to see those numbers come down, but we would like to see a series of months when those numbers tick down a little bit,” Guymon said.

David Godlewski, president of the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association, said home builders have seen some improvement in permit and plan turnaround times, but the system still falls short.

“There are signs that things are trending in the right direction, but by and large, they are still behind what we would hope for,” he said.

Godlewski — who like Guymon gives Thomure high marks for his collaborative work on permitting issues — said he and other stakeholders hope a new city planning director will bring new focus to the permitting process.

“We are optimistic that having someone who comes in, who’s in a leadership position, who can bring some fresh ideas and a new perspective to this will help them expedite the process of getting to the timeframes that we want to see, and they want to see,” Godlewski said.

Thomure said he understands the urgency of improving the city’s service, particularly on the commercial side, but projects that were submitted for review this year will have a much better experience and shorter timeline.

According to city data, the city issued 679 commercial permits of all types from the end of October through April 24, while receiving 1,125 new applications.

“I have no doubt that we have had an impact on some projects over the past year,” Thomure said.

“What I would say is, those issues have been corrected and we’re now in a space where those issues would not be expected on the work from here moving forward, as long as we keep our eye on the ball and keep investing in our people and our technology.”

Posting review times

Permit and plan review times vary widely across Arizona cities and counties, and across the nation.

Under Arizona’s “Regulatory Bill of Rights,” passed into law in 2011, cities and counties are required to establish and follow time frames for a broad range of permitting processes, consisting of an “administrative completeness” time frame and a “substantive review” time frame.

Many cities and counties, **including Pima County**, prominently post their permit review timeframes, but Tucson doesn’t.

Phoenix **posts online monthly updates on turnaround times** for plan reviews. For April, for example, the city reported an average 28 calendar days to approve a medium-size commercial building plan compared with a goal of 35 days, and was taking an average of 48 days to review residential building plans with a goal of 30 days.

While Tucson doesn’t post its review turnaround time goals or average turnaround times, review time frames are **included in its Unified Development Code** — 20 days for administrative compliance review and 65 days for substantive review, for a total of 85 days.

Thomure said he would look into adding monthly turnaround times on the city’s website in the future, as part of improvements planned under the new online permitting system.

Getting bugs out

The new system has **generated some complaints** as the city continues to work out bugs.

For example, Thomure said, the system is set up to automatically schedule building inspections, but applicants initially weren’t getting email notifications.

In response to feedback, the city is working to add a feature that allows users to see a big picture of complex projects and all of their reviews and progress.

A local user said the new system is promising, but lacks transparency and is still dependent on poor human workflow.

Dave Norton, a project director for a hotel development company, said it took the city two months to complete a zoning review to build a new fence at his east side property. After hearing nothing back from the city, he suddenly found his request marked as “passed.”

Norton said he got conflicting information when he spoke with city staff, and he had no notification of the \$56 review fee, the status of his request, or its approval. His account still shows his review as 19% complete.

“The permit process has not changed, it is not transparent, communication is non-existent. My review should have taken less than an hour, it took almost two months to complete,” Norton said. “The approach and the process are flawed. A shiny website will not fix that.”

Thomure said the city has improved its overall permit-review processes and is studying fundamental changes to improve the flow including separate processes for simple and more complex applications.

He cited the city’s partnership with Pima County on rooftop solar permits, which are now processed within 24 hours through an automated process.

“That’s because it’s very predictable type of work, and it can be automatically reviewed, but not all of the permits we do can make it to that automation,” he said.

Over the coming months, the city will be studying ways to create a “fast lane” for simpler review requests, Thomure said.

“The time is driven by the hard things, not by the easy things,” he said. “So one of the things we’re looking at is creating a fast lane and a slow lane. Maybe it’s multiple lanes, maybe it’s a big freeway with lots of lanes.”

