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How to avoid nightmares with your permits

If you have ever been involved in a construction project you know how crucial it is to have all your permits in order, and what a nightmare it can be when you don't.



GUEST COLUMN

Jon E. Daskam

Permits indicate that you have had your project inspected or reviewed by officials at the town, city and/or state level, and a particular aspect of the project has been given the green light. Commercial projects commonly require permits from zoning,

building and fire officials, and often from state health officials as well.

The inability to obtain a permit can negatively impact a project by slowing the building process down dramatically and increasing unwanted costs.

Whether your project is large or small, detailed architectural and engineering drawings are the key to obtaining approved permits and controlling costs.

Getting professional drawings and well-thought-out, written plans for the scope of project work upfront can save money in the long run. Construction managers can get better competitive pricing, schedule the job efficiently, catch details that may be missing, and avoid guessing games once the project is running. More important, change orders can be avoided because the level of detail for the job was provided at the start.

How do you know if your drawings are good enough? It's not in the number of pages, but rather in the details and specifications included. For example, everything from window types, means of egress, handicapped access, construc-

tion materials, paint colors, light fixtures, plumbing fixtures, HVAC system, sprinkler and fire alarm work, door hardware, landscaping, stormwater runoff, number of parking spots – the list goes on and on – must be outlined.

Consider the 'domino effect'

Sketchy drawings can cost both time and money on a project. For example, if you are opening a secondary location for your business, you may be paying rent in the new space and a mortgage in the original location. Let's assume you submit plans to the zoning and fire inspectors. Your drawings do not detail the right number of parking spots or proper means of egress. Now you must apply for a variance and add more detail to your drawings. This will delay your permit approval and the start of your construction – and you still need to pay your ongoing mortgage, rent, fees and utilities. Such permitting delays can also affect the timing of subsequent approvals needed, such as a health inspection or a certificate of occupancy.

Bring your team in early

If you have an idea or vision and a location in mind, bring in your construction management team to evaluate the building space for its code compliance (handicapped access, fire, etc.) and/or to determine what you can expect in infrastructure costs.

Construction managers can provide upfront budgets, direct the information to architects and engineers to properly plan drawings, and handle the submission of the plans for permitting. The better the drawings, the more comprehensive a budget you'll get, and the less time you'll be delayed. Don't wait to involve the team – the earlier, the better.

Listen to your experts

Contractors know what permitting officials are looking for; this is their job. It may not be what you want to hear. If you have your heart set on buying a particular building to renovate but you're told it will be costly to bring it up to code compliance, you may be advised to forgo the purchase if it's not within your budget.

Perhaps you can also use this valuable information as a potential negotiating tool to purchase or lease the building. Don't rely on getting a variance. Don't rely on calling your politician friend. Don't put pressure on inspectors and fire marshals. Don't let your emotions get in the way of the reality of what's really needed. Don't ignore the issues thinking they will just go away. Do your work upfront, and the entire process will be pushed through faster.

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Let your construction managers advocate for you. They are constantly keeping up with building codes and changes. Much like law, some codes aren't negotiable, but certain codes are often left up to interpretation. It's important to have a trusted team member to counsel and advise as if it were their money at stake.

At Cobalt Construction, we are always meeting with building officials and keeping our education and licensing up to date. By bringing us into your project early, we can be your best advocates for a smooth and successful project from start to finish. ■

Jon E. Daskam is president of Cobalt Construction, a Warwick-based construction management, design/build and project management firm.