Lessons learned: How counties are improving permitting processes

Most housing permits that used to take 26 days to review are now being approved in eight days or less in Kitsap County, after the county permitting staff used Lean techniques to overhaul the entire process.

After hearing about that success, other governments started working with the Local Government Performance Center to analyze their own processes and are achieving promising results. Island County is trying to cut the 90 day processing time for its shoreline exemption permits down to just 45 days, while Clark County is trying to review single family housing permits in 11 days, down from 23 days.

More governments are interested in this approach and Whatcom County and Douglas County started reviewing their permitting processes in March 2013.

When we looked at how the counties are achieving these improvements, we found common questions to ask, solutions that are working, and resources that other governments can use.

Issuing permits in half the time

County	Permit type	Time before	New goal
Kitsap	Housing	26 days	6 to 8 days
Island	Shoreline	90 days	45 days
Clark	Housing	23 days	11 days

Can your jurisdiction streamline its permitting process? Start with these questions:

? How long does it take to approve a permit from the day it was submitted?

? Are there delays in the process while a permit waits in someone's inbox or waits to be delivered?

? How many days is the application idle?

? Are some parts of the process repeated? Are some parts of the application reviewed multiple times?

? What percent of applicants have to request assistance to complete the forms?

? What percent of submitted applications have missing or inaccurate information?

? Do reviewers need multiple data systems to find the information they need to review applications?

? How many times do customers have to come to the permitting office?

? What can customers tell us about the process? What would make it easier?

"The toughest challenge is overcoming 'This is how we've always done it,'" Chuck Crider, the Clark County Permitting Services Manager.

☑ Make requirements clear. Give applicants information in advance so they are better able to complete the applications thoroughly and accurately. Review the information on the permitting website to make sure the application forms, checklists, and information are clear. Provide a sample of a complete application.

☑ Ensure applications are complete before beginning the review process. Staff should review permits to ensure all the required information is included before accepting the application. Island County now requires applicants to schedule an appointment with a planner to review the application for completeness. Clark County will have a team review all newly arrived applications the next day.

☑ Triage applications. Simple applications may not need the same level review as more complicated applications. Clark County decided that intake staff should assess stormwater permit applications and assign them a rating of one to three based on the complexity.

☑ Promptly assign the permit to a planner. Assign the application to the responsible staff person quickly. Island County now assigns the application review upon receipt of the application. Others assign the application within one day.

☑ Track applications. Use permit tracking software or a visual tracking board to monitor the status of every application. Island County trained staff on how to use its tracking software and how the software could be used for other processes. Clark County plans to use a visual control board that marks each step green if it is complete and red f it is not yet finished.

☑ Rearrange offices and lobbies. The permitting offices moved their application processing desks closer to the front door so it was clear where applicants needed to go. They also reorganized their offices so that the people who need to coordinate on permitting review decisions are seated together.

Resources for more information

The Local Government Performance Center launched the Lean Academy in October 2012 to help local governments use Lean process improvement techniques to take a closer look at how they perform key services. The Center provides a Lean expert with experience in government projects to train the county staff. The staff invites customers to provide feedback and then uses the training and tools to review their processes and remove bottlenecks. Kitsap County inspired the Academy by the success it achieved after hiring a consultant to help streamline its permitting process in July 2012. Counties expressed high demand for this service, with 14 applying to participate in the first Lean Academy program.

Definitions key to understanding Lean

Lean is a tool for improving processes. It is a set of principles and practices which focus on eliminating waste and non-value added activities in all areas of business. Some results of Lean include:

- Lower operating costs

- Reduced cycle time

- Reduced defects

- Improved customer satisfaction

- Improved employee morale and satisfaction

A **Kaizen** event is a focused event where employees review a process and all of steps with the goal of making improvements. Clark, Island, and Kitsap Counties all participated in five-day Kaizen events.

Waste is any action, task, process or product that adds time and cost, without adding value as perceived by our customer. Some symptoms of waste are excess costs, poor quality, delays, dependency on work-around methods, and daily management by exception.

The time to complete any process has two components. **Process Time** is the actual amount of time that it takes to work on a task or step without interruption or waiting. **Wait Time** is the amount of time when the no work is being done on the project. Process Time and Wait Time are added together to calculate **Cycle Time**, or the time from the moment a product is received through its completion, which includes all delays.

Resources for more information

Great resources on Kitsap County: 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

Environmental Protection Agency Lean Government webpage:
www.epa.gov/lean/government/index.htm

Minnesota's LEAN Online website: www.lean.state.mn.us

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

State Auditor's Office Local Government Performance Center: www.sao.wa.gov/PerformanceCenter

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