

STATE AUDITOR'S OFFICE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE CENTER



Whatcom County same-day housing permits

Using Lean to improve permit processes

Do you plan to build a 1,900 square foot home with a two-car garage near Bellingham? Whatcom County permitting officials want you to be able to get your permit the same day you submit an application.

The old permit review process could take up to two months and involved spending a lot of time tracking down information missing from initial permit applications. The new permit process moves some of the permit work before the application is turned in, so that the developer can work with county staff to find out exactly what details are needed.

The department of Planning and Development Services is now helping applicants dot the "i"s and cross the "t"s, to ensure everything is on the form the day it is submitted.

Whatcom County streamlined its process during a five-day lean workshop through the State Auditor's Office Local Government Performance Center and is one of five counties that have recently streamlined their permitting processes.

The county developed checklists for applicants to review in advance and a new pre-screening process that helps planners identify if the project is complicated or easier to review based on the specifications.

Homes under 2,000 square feet can be reviewed and approved on the same day while larger projects will take about five to 15 days to review.

The new residential permit process

1. The applicant submits a project description, including the proposed building size and location, to Planning and Development Services.
2. County staff screen the project site and description to determine if any natural resource reviews will need to take place before the application appointment. Staff will also discuss and provide checklists for any other required information the applicant needs to address.
3. The applicant completes the application using the checklist and schedules an appointment to submit the application.
4. At the appointment, County staff will review the application and either:
 - Approve the application on the spot and issue a new permit, or
 - Accept complete applications that require more analysis, or
 - Identify if the applications is incomplete and needs more information.

Issuing permits in a fraction of the time

Processing Time

Before - 28 to 73 days

New goal - 1 to 15 days

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Starting one month after the workshop

The county was eager to streamline its process quickly. The staff held its five-day process improvement workshop in April 2013 and started using the new process the next month.

Although originally designed for single family homes, the County expanded to use the process for other projects, including garages, decks, and additions.

Applicants can review the County's checklists online, which provide information for various application requirements. For example, the fire marshal's checklist offers information on required driveway widths, while the health checklist ensures the proposed project has sewer and water service.

Whatcom County worked closely with builders to develop and test the new process. The County regularly updates its website to provide information on the implementation of the new process.

Visit the County's permitting website at whatcomcounty.us/pds/ to see its new checklists and how it is communicating with customers about the new process.

Results after 60 days

31 permits issued in one-day, including three for new homes.

Longer permit reviews are averaging nine days.

Whatcom County



Whatcom County's new checklist for same-day permits

This is a permit assessment checklist for same-day sign-off for a Type I Residential Permit. It includes contact information for Whatcom County Planning & Development Services and a list of 11 questions regarding building area, garage, retaining walls, roof projections, and flood zones. Each question has 'Yes', 'No', and 'TA Use' checkboxes. The form is signed by J.E. "Sam" Ryan, Director.

Whatcom County's new checklist for flood review

This is a permit assessment checklist for flood review. It includes contact information for Whatcom County Planning & Development Services and a list of questions regarding the type of development, pre-construction survey, and endangered species act compliance. Each question has 'Yes', 'No', and 'TA Use' checkboxes. The form is signed by J.E. "Sam" Ryan, Director.