

Gratitude – and guidance – as city leaders tackle Portland’s problematic permitting system

By Gary Fisher, deputy executive director, Multifamily NW

In a city that prides itself on its innovative spirit and progressive ideals, Portland has long been a beacon for smart growth. But our rising star has dimmed in recent years, as the demand for rental housing has skyrocketed and a city bureaucracy that spans seven bureaus continually stands in the way of developers eager to meet that demand.

For context, a 2023 report from Johnson Economics found that the average time for a multifamily development to make it through Portland’s permitting process was 303 days – which extended to upwards of 500 during economic downturns.¹ With so few new options, no wonder Portland renters are feeling the pressure.

There is no overnight fix. But fortunately for all Rose City residents, we have two city commissioners that are tackling this problem with the urgency that it deserves. Commissioner Mingus Mapps has led an effort to evaluate the current system and has proposed eliminating duplicative or onerous requirements – and Commissioner Carmen Rubio is advocating for a new permitting review system altogether.

Both commissioners’ commitment to working with developers, labor leaders, environmental advocates, city employees, and other stakeholders is commendable. I can’t recall a time in recent memory when there was a competition among city leadership to see who could propose the most innovative solution to a long-term priority issue for the business community.

Specifically, Commissioner Rubio's bold plan to reform the city's permitting system comes as a breath of fresh air, promising to fuel sustainable development, bolster economic vitality, and enhance the overall quality of life for our residents.

Portland’s permitting rules have often been criticized from all sides for their complexity, red tape, and delay. These barriers not only deter potential investors and developers from entering the market but also exacerbate the housing shortage, driving up costs and leaving countless individuals and families struggling to find suitable accommodations. By simplifying the bureaucratic maze, Rubio aims to facilitate the construction of new housing units, which, in turn, will help alleviate the mounting pressure on Portland's housing market.

One of the cornerstones of Rubio's plan is the creation of a dedicated permit review team in a brand-new office, a move that demonstrates a commitment to both efficiency and transparency. This team of experts would be tasked with expediting the review process and ensuring that each application receives the attention it deserves – reducing the chances of bottlenecks but also enhancing the city's ability to provide accurate and timely feedback to developers.

¹ <https://www.revitalizeportland.com/post/stop-the-bleeding-issues-symposium-materials>

We believe this approach represents a real chance at a more collaborative and productive relationship between the public and private sectors – something that is desperately needed in Portland as the city reckons with a significant population decline for the first time in years.

Critics argue that streamlining the permitting process might compromise the city's commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection. However, Rubio's plan explicitly addresses this concern by integrating sustainability requirements into the new streamlined process. This ensures that while the process becomes more efficient, the city's commitment to environmental stewardship remains unwavering. By promoting sustainable construction practices, the plan aligns perfectly with Portland's long-standing dedication to maintaining a green and livable urban environment.

In a time where job creation and economic stability are paramount to the recovery of our city, a more efficient permitting system encourages developers to invest confidently in Portland. This infusion of capital not only revitalizes neighborhoods but also supports local businesses, stimulates job growth, and fosters a robust and diverse economy. The plan's emphasis on affordable housing units and workforce housing also ensures that economic progress is accessible to all members of the community, promoting inclusivity and social cohesion.

Portland's housing crisis demands bold and innovative solutions that challenge the status quo, and Commissioner Rubio's permitting reform plan answers this call admirably. By expediting the development of new housing units, promoting sustainability, and fostering economic growth, this plan is a testament to Portland's commitment to progress.

The time has come for Portland to reestablish itself as a pioneer in urban development by embracing a permitting system that reflects the city's vibrant and forward-thinking spirit. As leaders in the rental housing industry, Multifamily NW is grateful to both Commissioner Rubio and Commissioner Mapps for their solutions-oriented approach to this longstanding problem.