



SF PERMIT CENTER

CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Project Name:	Site Permit Reforms	Date:	May 11, 2023
Project Manager:	Michael Christensen Principal Planner, SF Permit Center	Project Sponsor(s):	Planning Department & Department of Building Inspection

Introduction

The City has identified the permit review process as an impediment to the production of housing and the City's economic recovery. On August 15, 2022, the Permit Center, Planning Department (Planning), and the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) began a project to review the City's review process for Site Permits to identify ways to reduce processing timelines while ensuring City mandates are met, including life safety. The Permit Center completed a case study analysis of other major jurisdictions in California, reviewing how those jurisdictions conduct entitlement and post-entitlement permitting. Outreach is being conducted to solicit feedback on potential improvements and the specific initiatives that have been proposed. This joint hearing is part of that outreach effort and will guide the development of legislative and regulatory improvements to the permit process.

Improvement Needs

The City identified key areas of need for improvement:

- 1. The Site Permit review process is lengthy, and outcomes are inconsistent.**
 - a. City review timelines are some of the longest in the State.
 - b. The level of detail applied during plan check is inconsistent.
 - c. Applicants finish the process without guidance on the next steps.
- 2. Tools to manage permit reviews are not used effectively.**
 - a. Permit and land use data is maintained in multiple parallel permitting systems.
 - b. The main system of record (Permit Tracking System) does not include robust workflow, so it is difficult to identify the status of a permit.
 - c. City codes do not reflect modern technologies such as digital application forms.
- 3. Building Permits are used for project types where they are not an appropriate tool.**
 - a. The Planning Department lacks its own permit process.
 - b. Non-construction projects are often required to file Building Permits to obtain a Planning Department approval (e.g., a Restaurant seeking approval to serve alcohol).
 - c. Site Permits do not authorize any construction; they are a preliminary review and must be followed with construction level detail in separate submittals. San Francisco is the only major jurisdiction that manages this activity through a Building Permit.



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Proposed Process Improvements

The project proposes to improve the review process for Site Permits by replacing the existing Site Permit review process with a new review process managed by the Planning Department, the “Development Review Permit” process. This new process would provide benefits to applicants and the public by:

1. **Using digital tools, start to finish**, allowing applicants to submit applications online using the Planning Department’s Accela Citizen Access portal, submit payments or revisions, track the progress of their permit, and receive their approvals without needing an in-person visit to the Permit Center. This also improves the transparency of permit reviews and public participation.
2. **Consolidating duplicative administrative functions** by taking the existing two-stage intake process (Building Inspection first, then Planning) and consolidating it into one intake process with the Planning Department.
3. **Conducting a concurrent plan check** with the assigned planner acting as a project manager, consolidating all City review comments into one Plan Check Letter containing all the corrections that the applicant needs to incorporate into the project design.
4. **Defining the scope of review** by using publicly available checklists to guide and focus preliminary plan checks by Building, Public Works, and Fire Department staff. Draft details of what would be reviewed during this plan check are included as Attachment A.
5. **Setting expected response dates** for City actions, including 30-days for a completeness review and 30-days for a plan check.
6. **Keeping the process simple for minor projects** by allowing projects that only need Planning Department approval to work directly with the Planning Department. Currently, minor scopes (such as adding alcohol service to an existing Restaurant or conducting a different type of retail within an existing space with no construction) require review and approval by multiple agencies, even if these agencies have nothing to review. With this process, these projects would be approved by Planning without requiring actions by other agencies.
7. **Guiding applicants on what comes next** by providing a roadmap of post-approval actions needed to implement the project, such as Construction Documents, Encroachment Permits, Street Improvement Permits, Operational Permits, or Environmental Health permits.
8. **Strengthening the City’s review of post-entitlement reviews** by consolidating a listing of permit requirements into the permit itself, allowing subsequent reviewers to know what is required without needing to access documents in multiple systems. Draft details of what would be documented as part of a Development Review Permit issuance are included as Attachment B.
9. **Simplifying the review of Construction Drawings** by setting up records for applicants to submit Construction Drawings through the existing Addenda review process but encouraging submittal of one set of Construction Drawings rather than multiple. This would create a process flow like one where a Site Permit is converted to a Full Permit after Planning approval, which is what multiple applicants identified as preferable.



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Outreach and Public Feedback

This hearing is part of a public outreach campaign to inform the public of these proposed changes and to solicit feedback. City staff also hosted a stakeholder outreach event on April 19, 2023, at the Permit Center. The event was published on City webpages and via social media by the Planning Department. Invitations to the event were sent via email to all registered [Neighborhood Organizations](#) (298), frequent visitors to the Permit Center (350), and all persons enrolled to receive email updates from the Department of Building Inspection (6,800).

At the event, City staff provided a presentation of the proposed permit process, answered questions, and received public comments. Approximately 140 people were in attendance. Staff also met directly with groups who have requested to meet and learn more about the project, including Cultural Districts.

Project Timeline

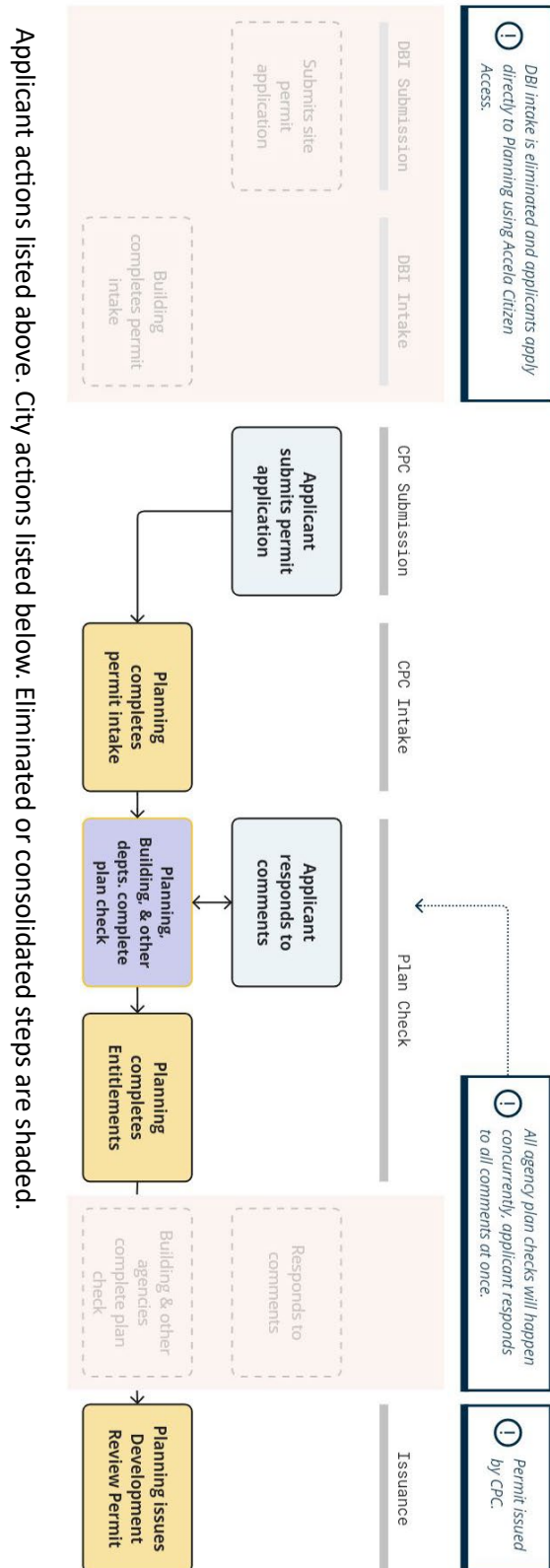
August 15, 2022	Project Charter Published
September 13, 2022	Updated Project Charter Published
November 16, 2022	Analysis and Recommendations Published
January 13, 2023	Project Kickoff
April 19, 2023	Stakeholder Outreach Event
May 11, 2023	Joint Hearing, Building Inspection Commission and Planning Commission
Summer 2023	Introduction of Legislation



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Existing & Proposed Process Flow





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Attachment A: DRAFT Plan Check Scope

Planning Department

- Conduct a full plan check for compliance with all requirements of the Planning Code, including completion of any required entitlement or notification process.
- Coordinate the Design Review of the proposed project, verifying compliance with applicable design guidelines such as the Residential Design Guidelines and Urban Design Guidelines.
- Review for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), request any studies or reports necessary to complete an environmental review of the proposed project.
- Coordinate review of the project by the Streetscape Design Advisory Team (if applicable).
- If any unique circumstances exist, conduct a policy review of the proposal.

Department of Building Inspection

- Determine what (if any) additional permits or other submittals must be provided and approved for the proposed project to be legally constructed.
- Review if the proposed type of construction is appropriate for the proposed height and number of stories, and that allowable floor area is consistent with the proposed occupancy class(es).
- Review if exterior fire-resistive construction meets requirements based on the location of buildings on the site and distances to property lines and other buildings. Determine if additional firewalls are required and if proposed wall openings are allowable.
- Review if the proposal provides adequate means of egress and number of exits.

Public Works

- Determine what (if any) additional permits or other submittals must be provided and approved for the proposed project to be legally constructed.
- Review the finished floor elevations at entrances and the relationship to sidewalk height.
- Review any proposed transformers within the public right-of-way and any justification for such placement.
- Review if the project impacts any trees that would require issuance of a tree removal permit; if any are impacted, provide preliminary feedback on whether such permit is supported or if an alternative design is warranted.
- Where any features (such as driveways) require alteration of public streets or sidewalks (such as the flaring of a sidewalk), provide a preliminary determination of whether the design of such features is acceptable or if an alternate design (or removal of such features) is advised.

Fire Department

- Determine what (if any) additional permits or other submittals must be provided and approved for the proposed project to be legally constructed.
- Review if the overall development plan provides adequate access for Fire Department personnel in the event of an emergency.



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Attachment B: DRAFT Permit Issuance Details

An issued Development Review Permit will contain the following details:

- The **Project Site** information
 - Block and Lot
 - Address
 - Floor level
- The approved **Scope of Work**
- Key **Project Details**
 - Square footage of uses.
 - Number and type of dwelling units.
 - Building height and number of stories.
- A **roadmap** of post-approval actions
 - Construction Drawings
 - Encroachment Permits
 - Street Improvement Permits
 - Operational Permits
 - Notices of Special Restrictions
 - Affordable Housing Designations
 - Transportation Demand Management plan submittals
- Documentation of **Conditions of Approval** and **Stipulations**
 - Where an entitlement was required or where the Planning Commission exercised Discretionary Review, a listing of any imposed Conditions of Approval
 - Where necessary to clarify post-approval requirements, a listing of stipulations on the permit approval (e.g., construction plans must provide XX number of Class Two bicycle parking spaces).
- Documentation of the **expiration date** of the permit approval.
- Instructions on how to **appeal** the issuance of the permit.