

Faster Permits – by Design

Permit Streamlining: The phrase resonates with many: architects, engineers, business leaders, developers, contractors, politicians, and civic leaders. With the right kind of streamlining, the **benefits** can be wide and deep:

- **Civic Leaders** achieve increased economic activity and community investment
- **The public** is served by buildings that meet today’s high level of performance and design standards in energy, sustainability, and aesthetics
- **Businesses** get on with their business sooner and save time and money
- **Design Professionals** and all those involved in the creation and support of the built environment work more efficiently

As economic conditions continue to improve, backlogs are increasingly common in many locales. With so much interest and so many who benefit, why is Permit Streamlining such a challenge?

As a researcher and proponent of Permit Streamlining for over a decade, I believe the answer includes both complexity and simplicity.

A complex response would reference the number of variables in play – complexity of modern codes and regulations, variations in code interpretation and application, lack of attention to code training, the baggage from tired anecdotes of past wrongs ... and ... well, you get the idea.

A simple response would start with a single word: **Communication**. Greater dialogue between design professionals and plan review professionals can lead to an excellent foundation for effective streamlining - our common ground in responsibility to the public health, safety, and welfare.

In my own component, AIA Central Valley, I launched a program over a decade ago called “**Code Conversations.**” It has provided a simple forum once a year where regional code officials and design professionals can explore challenges they each face in carrying out their responsibilities. With good communication comes respect and understanding and from that can flow collaboration.

This is the foundation that led to my favorite Permit Streamlining Program, called **PASS**, adopted by 12 cities and 4 counties in the Sacramento region and touching some 2.6 million people. The PASS program is a voluntary framework for Document Content and Organization tuned to make plan review more efficient. For many participants, on both sides of the counter, the PASS program requires minimal to no change in “standard operating procedures.” For participants, benefits include both a bypass to typical “intake triage” (meaning anyone can drop off a submittal set) to faster processing. The program has built-in checks and balances with a “flag” system.

The success of PASS has been driven both by what it does and also by what it does not.

What does PASS do? To quote Randy Goodwin, CBO West Sacramento and member of both AIA and the PASS development Team:

“PASS is a collaborative process that increases the efficiency of the permit process ... and will save owners, contractors, developers, jurisdictions time and money.”

What does PASS not do? *“... it doesn’t change any existing roles or processes, and will not increase risk or liability ...”*

To quote Tim Culvahouse FAIA in *Architecture Magazine*: *“Unlike self-certification programs, PASS facilitates permitting without reassigning responsibilities or changing the approval path. Instead, it clarifies, in a Building Project Submittal Checklist, the information required in a submittal. Participants in the program—both authors of permit documents and lead plan reviewers—must pass a training course on effective ways of satisfying the checklist ... The PASS program is proving to be of value in several ways: It speeds approvals, both during permit issuance and during construction, providing real financial benefits to all parties—building department, architect, and developer. It helps educate young professionals. And it is building a spirit of collaboration between designers and regulators.”*

As a lead in creation of PASS, you won’t be surprised by my excitement about what the PASS development team has accomplished in 18 months and the expansion of the program to more project types, which is underway. But I will be the first to say that PASS is not a magic bullet and far from the only path toward effective Streamlining.



In fact, there is a high level of interest in Permit Streamlining, as evidenced by the record number of hits on a recent article in [AIA Architect \(March 25\)](#) and the top mentions of Streamlining in a poll of attendees for the upcoming National State Government Network Conference in Washington, DC.

To help those in the architectural community that want to “dive in,” I’ve gathered Permit Streamlining success stories from around the country – including many in which local AIA components have played a leadership role - and posted them online at [PermitStreamline.com](#). I’m also pleased to announce a 501c3 nonprofit - the Streamline Institute, created to promote high performance permit processing. Just one example of an upcoming Streamline Institute initiative is **“One and Done,”** a program to eliminate unnecessary multiple plan review cycles. For more information or to become a change agent in moving Permit Streamlining forward, please visit [StreamlineInstitute.Org](#) or shoot me an email at: mfm@appliedarts.net

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