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City has plan to cut logjam in building-permit approval

By: **Murray McNeill**

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WAYNE GLOWACKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS [Enlarge Image](#)

Manitoba Home Builders' Association president Mike Moore with Mayor Sam Katz in the Sage Creek development Friday.

City and construction industry officials have come up with a first-in-Canada plan to significantly reduce the building-permit backlog at city hall.

The new strategy, which could come into effect as early as June, should reduce City of Winnipeg permit-approval times by as much as 25 per cent, officials told a news conference Friday.

That means homeowners won't have to wait as long to get a permit for their new deck or rec room

project, and homebuilders and commercial developers will be able to get their shovels in the ground much quicker, officials said.

The strategy, developed with input from industry groups, aims to reduce wait times for permit approvals by switching to an audit-based approach for the approval process, and by putting more onus on property owners and industry professionals to ensure their designs meet building code requirements.

A city spokesperson said city officials aren't aware of any other Canadian cities that use such a system, although New York City has something similar.

An audit approach means some designs, particularly for complex projects or facilities such as hospitals or schools, will still be heavily scrutinized by the city. And others -- things like single-family homes or routine retail or industrial strip malls -- could pass with little scrutiny.

Instead, property owners and industry professionals -- homebuilders, architects, engineers and the like -- will have to submit certificates stating their plans meet code requirements.

Officials with the Manitoba Home Builders' Association, the Winnipeg Construction Association and the Manitoba Association of Architects said they're OK with that, because they already had that responsibility anyway.

Winnipeg Mayor Sam Katz and Barry Thorgrimson, acting director of the planning, property and development department, insisted public safety won't be compromised.

Thorgrimson said city officials will still review any life-safety aspects of a project -- such as the structural integrity of the building or if it has proper fire alarm or sprinkler systems.

And city inspections will still be carried out during construction to ensure they're being built to code, he said. If they're not, changes will have to be made at the property owner's expense.

Because it costs more to make changes at that stage, Thorgrimson said property owners and professionals will have added incentive to make sure their plans are up to snuff.

Developers, homebuilders and construction contractors have been complaining for years -- at least eight years according to Winnipeg Construction Association president Randy Clegg -- that the process takes far too long, often many months for complicated projects. They say that causes scheduling nightmares for constructors.

Clegg said Friday previous attempts by the city to speed up approvals have met with limited success. So this new plan is welcome.

Property owners and homebuilders will still have the option of going through the regular city inspection process instead of the audited one.

murray.mcneill@freepress.mb.ca

Audit-based plan

THE City of Winnipeg's has a new action plan for reducing wait times for building permit approvals.

How does it work? It adopts an audit-based approach whereby some projects are still fully reviewed by city officials and others receive little scrutiny.

How do they decide which ones gets which? Large or complex projects and projects involving a higher

degree of life-safety issues -- hospitals, schools, and highrise buildings, for example -- will be fully reviewed. Less complex projects -- like single- or two-family homes or standard retail or industrial strip malls -- could be subject to less scrutiny, although not necessarily.

How does the city decide which residential projects get regular scrutiny? A computer program will randomly select which projects get detailed reviews. Among the criteria are a developer or homebuilder's track record for code compliance. Those with a good record will receive fewer reviews. Those that do not will continue to receive standard reviews and inspections.

What about commercial construction projects? The property owners or professionals applying for permits -- architects or engineers usually -- must submit certificates of compliance stating the design complies with building codes and bylaws. But city officials will still review aspects that deal with life-safety issues such as structural integrity or whether a building has adequate fire-safety systems.

When does the new system take effect? By June, if it is approved by city council.

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