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Building-permit backlog better, officials say

But sides differ on how much improvement is still needed

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City and construction-industry officials agreed Thursday progress has been made at reducing the building-permit backlog at city hall, but opinions differed on how far they still have to go.

"This is a topic that has certainly caused our members a lot of frustration over the years," Ron Hambley, executive vice-president of the Winnipeg Construction Association, said in kicking off a Manitoba Building Expo panel discussion on the topic: City of Winnipeg Building Permit Improvements: Are We There Yet?

Hambley, who served as moderator for the nearly two-hour session, said the WCA has been complaining for more than a decade it takes too long for the city to process and approve building-permit applications. And in the past seven or eight years, industry officials have been working closely with city officials on trying to resolve the problem, he added.

Stan Dueck, manager of development and inspections for the City of Winnipeg, said the city has made a number of improvements to speed up the permit-review process, especially for residential permits and less complex commercial projects.

They include launching a new online tracking system that enables permit applicants to check on the status of their application, and introducing an optional professional certification program that requires less scrutiny by city officials and instead relies on industry professionals involved in a project -- architects, engineers and builders, for example -- to certify their design plans meet code requirements.

Dueck said with some of the improvements, the city is close to hitting its timeline targets for less complex permit applications, which are one or two weeks. However, he admitted it "continues to struggle" with meeting its targets for more complex commercial applications.

"But we are making progress," he added.

All five construction-industry officials who participated in the panel discussion, including Hambley, agreed progress has been made.

"Great strides have been made in the last year, for sure," said Wayne Anderson, partner and senior contract administrator with SMS Engineering Ltd. "But overall, there is still room to improve."

Bockstael Construction president and CEO John Bockstael said, "There has been remarkably good progress, particularly in the last couple of years."

But Bockstael said there's still too much uncertainty over how long it will take to obtain a permit.

Another panel participant -- Bob Downs, development manager for Shindico Realty Inc. -- said while progress has been made, there's still lots of room for improvement.

He cited one case where it took 10 to 12 weeks to obtain a permit for some relatively simple office-building renovations.

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