



Chicago Green Permit Program signage for Loyola University's new Information Commons.

The City of Chicago Green Permit Program

by Erik L. Olsen, P.E., LEED AP

Growing interest in sustainability has resulted in numerous public policy initiatives across the U.S. encouraging, requiring or seeking to enhance the capacity for green building. Although there are some state and federal programs, most such efforts are occurring at the municipal level.

It is difficult to find a major jurisdiction today that does not require its own public projects to be built green, typically meaning LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified. Others, like Arlington, Virginia, also offer incentives such as floor area ratio bonuses or, as with the Austin, Texas, Green Building Program, technical assistance for private construction projects. Some municipalities, like Boston, Massachusetts, and Washington, D.C., have even experimented with green requirements for private buildings.

Expedited permitting programs, although frequently mentioned as an incentive worth consideration, currently have few full-scale implementations. The City of Chicago, Illinois, provides an excellent example of the successful implementation of such a program. Introduced in 2005, the Chicago Department of Construction and Permits Green Permit Program is the first of its kind in a large U.S. jurisdiction, and its success—from 19 permits in 2005 to 71 in 2006 and a goal of over 100 this year—has helped significantly accelerate the growth of private-sector green building in the city. Today, Chicago leads the nation in number of LEED registered projects.

Developer Benefits

Chicago's Green Permit Program offers two main incentives. First, permits for large or complex projects can be issued in as little as six weeks from the time of construction document submission—approximately half the typical time. This time savings can translate into substantial financial

benefit for developers because earlier construction starts mean earlier sales or leasing and reduced interest on construction loans.

The program also offers a more direct financial incentive in the form of reduced fees. Developers of larger projects typically pay additional fees for the services of city plan review consultants, and up to \$25,000 of these fees are waived for projects that qualify for Chicago's Green Permit Program. Whereas expedited permitting is mostly of interest to for-profit developers, the reduction of fees associated with permitting can be a major benefit to nonprofit and affordable housing developers. Even \$50,000 is a nearly invisible line item in a \$100 million development, but \$15,000 or \$20,000 is a substantial contribution to the bottom line of a proposed \$10 million affordable housing project with 10 different funders.

Rationale

Expedited permitting is likely to be of greatest value in large, dense cities. Moving green projects to the front of the plan review queue may expedite permitting in some jurisdictions, but in Chicago most would still be at risk of delays because of the complexity of the permitting process.

To help developers navigate this complexity, projects that qualify for Chicago's Green Permit Program receive a much higher level of customer service than typical large developments. The number of projects in the program at any one time is deliberately controlled through the adjustment of program criteria in order to ensure a single point of contact. This is critical to maintaining involvement with projects early on and throughout the design process in order to identify potential permitting problems and solve them in advance.

This approach surprises both new customers and visitors from other jurisdictions, distinguishes Chicago's approach

from green building programs elsewhere, and is a key to the program's success. Green assistance and permit assistance are fully integrated, so rather than provide an outside advisory group specific only to green strategies, one individual is responsible both for ensuring a project's sustainability and coordinating its regulatory process. Only 10 percent of the time spent on a typical project involves evaluating its green elements. The remainder is spent on typical permit management concerns such as developing and maintaining project schedules, coordinating with related city departments, and providing code interpretations.

If a project is identified as a Green Permit Program participant, all City of Chicago departments are expected to provide priority service. Nonetheless, any required legal review periods must be maintained and necessary legislative approvals obtained. Such potential concerns emphatically underscore the need for early coordination. After all, designing a green building is not worth much if final approval cannot be gained.

Additional Considerations

A benefit of any such program is risk reduction. Project teams are often reluctant to consider the use of alternative building products or systems for fear of rejection during the permitting process. Providing dedicated assistance for green projects turns this attitude on its head: "If you're trying something different, we'll work with you to try to approve it as quickly as possible while still following all appropriate protocols."

On the downside, jurisdictions considering a permit-based green building incentive program must be cautious of "greenwashing": attempts to promote projects with questionable environmental value. That is why Chicago's Green Permit Program has published qualifying criteria that include LEED certification for commercial and large residential projects and Chicago Green Homes certification (provided by the Chicago Department of Environment) for small residential projects. In addition, a pre-permit review is required to ensure that prospective projects meet program requirements, and free technical assistance is provided to help meet designers meet their sustainability goals.

Conclusion

Although Chicago's Green Permit Program has been remarkably successful over its short history, there remains room for enhancement. For example, additional incentives—such as the partial waiver of basic permitting fees—may be necessary to draw in more small projects like the installation of solar thermal panels on single-family



residences, and providing prototypical plans or system diagrams may serve to encourage such projects.

By the same account, Chicago is beginning to see a troubling increase in "greenwashing," with more and more products and systems with no clear environmental value being marketed to homebuyers. This troubling trend poses an important public education challenge and emphasizes the importance of third-party green building certifications. ♦

Erik L. Olsen, P.E., LEED AP, is Green Projects Administrator for the City of Chicago Department of Construction and Permits. His current projects for the department include managing of its Green Permit Program, developing a green building code and piloting an electronic plan review process.

Olsen is also a member of the U.S. Green Building Council's Greening the Codes Committee and writes and edits "GreenBean" (<http://greenbean.typepad.com>), a blog dedicated to reporting on built, in-progress and unbuilt green buildings in Chicago.

The Only UL Classified Receptacle

CLASSIFIED
C UL US

Fire Stop Device
For use in through-penetration firestop systems. See UL directory of products certified for US or Canada and UL Fire Resistance Directories 25XC

US - XHEZ.W-L-7129
Canada - XHJ17.R21933

the dryerbox

Recommend the Safest Exhaust Hose Connection

The homeowner can push the dryer flush against the wall without the risk of fire from a crushed hose. And, by eliminating one elbow, you can allow the installer more duct run-length.

Insist on the UL Classified Metal Dryerbox®

In-O-Vate
Technologies Inc

888-443-7937
www.Dryerbox.com