

Reforming Denver's Development Review Process

Contributed by Ben Wilking, AIA, and Dyan M. Humphries, PA, AIA Denver

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SUMMARY

AIA Denver recognized an opportunity to change the city's planning and development process when newly elected county and city officials took office in 2003. The component quickly formed a task force to address the city's broken development process. They created a well-developed report on effective and ineffective city development approval procedures. The report was so well received by local officials that it was disseminated to a broader audience, including AIA National and other local components.

SEIZING A POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

Communities have an essential need for planning and construction regulations to guide sound development and to protect the health, safety, and welfare of their citizens. Unfortunately, when misapplied or slowly administered, these necessary requirements can stifle economic growth and thwart the work of design professionals. Development review processes, once only momentary inconveniences, have become costly impediments. This longstanding problem affects cities and towns across the nation. AIA Denver capitalized on a nearly unprecedented confluence of circumstances to address the problem at the local level.

Municipal elections in May 2003 led to a near-complete turnover of office holders in the city and county of Denver: A new mayor was elected due to term limits, 10 of 13 city council seats turned over, and a new city auditor took office. Moreover, the new mayor, John Hickenlooper, had campaigned on a platform that included a promise to streamline Denver's development review process. With the benefit of a mayor sensitive to the problem and most city council members not entrenched in the bureaucracy, a unique opportunity for constructive change presented itself.

To participate in this process and influence the outcome, AIA Denver formed a STOPP (Streamline Our Permitting Process) Task Force to develop a formal position and to present the component's

position to the new mayor and city council within the mayor's first 100 days in office.

Following publication of the task force's final report, *Denver's Development Review Process: Can It Be Fixed?* the mayor invited the STOPP Task Force to continue its contribution to the city's regulatory reform process. As a result, task force members have met regularly with city officials to further inform the city about needed reforms, evaluate proposed policy changes, and review the status of changes as they are instituted.

In addition, the American Institute of Architects has adopted the task force's report to serve as a national model for local components to use when considering regulatory reform of their own. Among other outcomes, the report garnered local news coverage, and neighboring cities and counties have asked the STOPP Task Force to help them establish similar groups.

THE "STOPP" STRATEGY

Changing policies, procedures, and regulations that have been embedded by decades of institutionalism was a significant task. A committee of approximately 20 AIA members convened in July 2003 to discuss the problems and to outline solutions. Two committee members were professional affiliate engineers and developers who were also on the staff of the City of Denver Office of Planning and Community Development. The committee decided to convey the component's position through a well-documented report that clearly identified the problems and delineated how they could be solved.

A core group of five, including a former Denver component president, was assisted by five other committee members in drafting individual sections within the report, based on the committee's discussions. The resulting 34-page document was broken down into nine chapters, the last two of which ("Reform Across the Country" and "After All Is Said and Done: Where Do We Go From Here?") were especially important because they demonstrated, through careful research, that the problems were neither unique to Denver nor beyond

solving. The document also emphasized that *legitimate* regulations are essential for promoting and maintaining the quality of life in any city.

The report addressed these problems, among others, in Denver's development review and permitting processes:

- Unnecessary delays
- Unpredictability, including reversals of direction and additions of requirements late in the process
- Personal interpretations of lawfully promulgated regulations
- Conflicting requirements between departments
- Lack of a mechanism to resolve conflicts
- Lack of a coherent process for accommodating unconventional projects

The report was published on September 26, 2003 (meeting the Chapter's October 1 deadline), and bound copies were presented to the mayor, the city council, the mayor's senior staff, and the city auditor. The component subsequently distributed copies to the media and to its membership through AIA Denver's Web site.

A MODEL FOR RESULTS

Following publication of the report, members of the STOPP Task Force were invited to meetings with the mayor and other city officials to review the report and to continue providing input concerning the city's regulatory reform process. The mayor also directed the city's new planning director to continue such meetings with the task force on a monthly basis. AIA Denver has commended the new city administration for its progressive attitude and sincere ongoing efforts to reform its development review regulations and processes. Denver's Community Planning and Development Department has already implemented several task force recommendations.

In addition, the STOPP Task Force's report and other activities have had the following positive outcomes:

- The report serves as a national model for other local components that want to pursue regulatory reform.
- Neighboring cities and counties have asked the task force to help them establish similar groups.
- Task force members provided a panel discussion and presentation about how to start a similar task force at the AIA State Government

Network Conference, held in Denver in August 2004.

- The effort garnered local media coverage, most notably in the *Denver Business Journal*, which said the "blistering report" became "a key part of the Hickenlooper administration's effort to make good on campaign promises to clean up the city's building department."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact Dyan Humphries, PA, 303-377-6601, ext. 12
dyan.humphries@mnaengineering.com or
www.aiacolorado.org

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

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| 21.03.04 | Building Relationships with Elected Officials |
| 17.07.01 | City of Carrollton New Development Plan |
| 22.07.01 | Destination Detroit: Advancing Architects' Viewpoints in Business Media |

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architecture associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components
- Web sites