



The Bureaucracy Should Be a Machine for Building

Washington, DC's Brian Hanlon is on a mission to make building more streamlined and successful

Considering where he works, it was fortuitous that D.C. architect Brian Hanlon got the public service bug. The D.C.-born architect, who has worked across the country on projects from offices to sports stadiums, served as head of the district's Department of General Services, which, like the federal government's General Services Administration, oversees the government's portfolio of buildings. He was offered the chance to run the Department of Buildings, which he saw as an opportunity to make a difference in building safety, resilience, and sustainability.

"My mantra is safe, green and moving," he said. "It's not about working faster or more hours. It's about looking for process, clutter, and friction, starting to connect the dots, and make things work better."

What He Does

"This agency, if you make it work better, if you make the systems and the processes more seamless, more intuitive, and more efficient, you actually become a catalyst for economic development," said Hanlon.

While at the helm of DOB, Hanlon seeks to create a more responsive bureaucracy and help catalyze development, as part of Mayor Muriel Bowser's Comeback Plan for D.C. He believes that eliminating the friction that comes with an unresponsive bureaucracy can play a role in accelerating economic development and making it easier to live, work and play in the city. He sees the built environment as crucial to responsible economic development, social diversity, and environmental sustainability.

How the Director of the Department of Buildings Shapes DC

Formed in 2022, the Department of Buildings was split from the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, and focuses entirely on the regulatory side of the built environment: permitting, zoning, code enforcement, residential property inspection and illegal construction inspection. Hanlon said that his previous role at the Department of General Services was much more about the physical aspect of the built environment. The Department of Buildings is much more focused on the process.

The Director oversees a staff of 380 people, covering three primary divisions: the Office of Construction and Building, the Office of the Zoning Administrator, and the Office of Strategic Code Enforcement. These areas include a significant public safety focus, as well as investigating and shutting down illegal construction.

The DOB also focuses on tenant rights throughout the District. Events like the Basic Business License Inspection Blitz, which evaluate the compliance of Georgetown student housing.

The DOB also publicly supports and testifies in favor of local laws, ordinances, or changes it believes would help its larger mission, such as the [Vacant to Vibrant Amendment Act of 2024](#), providing its expertise and insight to local government officials considering changes to D.C. law. The DOB is also playing a key role in a push to turn D.C.'s underutilized downtown office space into residential units.



How He's Helped DC

Since taking on the role in 2022, Hanlon has made speed and efficiency his central focus. He believes a significant benefit to having an architect in his role is systems thinking; dissecting the intricate web of regulations, engineering and design challenges and different players within the larger ecosystem benefits from having an “architect brain” on the job.

The DOB goes through a process called concept review, working with developers early in the process to talk through potential barriers and bottlenecks to development. These meetings can shave significant time off development projects, saving money and speeding up the development of everything from offices to affordable housing. This informal consultation, which offers guidance, not formal plan review or approval, has been recommended for projects that require multiagency coordination, such as office conversions, new construction over 10,000 square feet, or net-zero green development.

Late last year, the DOB held a Vacant Storefront Activation Hackathon, gathering different stakeholders together to devise new ideas for helping utilize the city’s underutilized retail spaces. DOB also created the PUPS program, which streamlined the process of activating vacant retail space with pop-ups.

Later this year, DOB will unveil a new process to simplify tenant improvements and upgrades, focused on a better permitting process that protects the rights of property owners.

His Role in the Architecture and Design Community

Hanlon has a varied background, having worked for various architecture firms across the country, with experience building everything from sports stadiums to high-rises. That’s made him conversant and understanding when it comes to just about any project being proposed.

That ability to speak an architect’s language and understand how a regulatory environment can impact an architect’s work, has given him a unique ability to interface with and assist the architectural community. In 2024, AIADC awarded him the Donald B. Myer Public Service Award for his years of service to the community.

He also participates in larger community discussions, such as appearing at the DC Building Industry Association’s roundtable talk about single-stair building design, to get a more direct understanding of the challenges facing architects and builders and help keep regulations and regulatory action up to date.

What Success Looks Like

Hanlon aims to deliver excellent customer service, with architects and developers as his customer base. He wants to see the DOB add a human touch to its work, even as it's trying to become more efficient and faster and provide real engagement with building professionals trying to build a better DC. That means clarity in communication, clear goals in terms of timeliness and response, and the creation and fostering of organization culture that values constant improvement.

“What is it going to take to create an organization that actually, by its nature, is able to keep looking at how to innovate and evolve?” said Hanlon.