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### Council streamlines building permits, but stops short of consolidation

By Jim Mayer, The Oregonian  
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Say you want to build a two-bedroom addition to your house in Portland.

You come downtown for the needed permits and run around to as many as seven different city departments and talk to seven different people with seven different sets of rules that may contradict one another.

"It's maddening for people -- not wealthy developers, not real estate moguls, just the average person," said Commissioner Randy Leonard. "The system is extremely dysfunctional."

For at least a decade, city commissioners have talked about streamlining the development permitting process, but the effort has run into powerful bureaucratic inertia. After he took office in January, Mayor Sam Adams made the issue a top priority and put Leonard in charge of making it happen.

Tonight, the City Council finally did it. But not without some last-minute negotiations.

Faced with objections from activists and environmentalists, Leonard backed away from a plan to fully consolidate permit functions under his Bureau of Development Services.

Instead, the council adopted a plan to move 37 employees of the transportation, sewer, water and parks bureaus, who conduct building and land-use reviews and issue public works permits, into the BDS offices at 1900 S.W. Fourth Ave. by July 1.

Although at one site, they will continue to serve under the authority of their respective bureaus.

In addition, a committee will establish standard turn-around times for permit application reviews, predictable fee schedules and appeals procedures.

The approach will be examined in a year, and a decision will be made whether to proceed with full consolidation.

Leonard said discussions late today with Adams and Commissioner Nick Fish led to the compromise plan.

Bridget Bayer from Portland Community College's Small Business Development Center, who is the former owner of Bridges Cafe, praised the council for tackling the issue.

"It was a huge struggle to open the restaurant. It was a real eye-opener," Bayer said.

An oversight committee could not agree on whether consolidation was a good idea.

Environmental activists worried that disconnecting the permit process from the policies behind the regulations could erode protections.

In a letter to the council, Mike Houck, executive director of the Urban Greenspaces Institute and a member of the oversight committee, cited his 30 years' experience dealing with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers:

"Those of us in the conservation community are painfully aware that if it were not for the counterbalancing influences of the environmental protection agencies, many more wetland fill and other environmentally damaging permits would be issued by the Corps, whose culture is directed to getting permits out the door."

Making the process more efficient also carries the risk of concentrating power, said Bonnie McKnight, a neighborhood activist and oversight committee

member.

McKnight was happy to see the compromise, but she argued that neighborhood associations should be involved earlier in the development process.

Leonard insisted that the change would not lead to hasty development decisions. He argued that consolidation would reduce political meddling.

"The current system is heavily politically influenced," he said. "This will take the politics and special interests out of it."

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