Permit Me to Explain



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A TRIP TO SAN FRANCISCO YIELDS SOME THOUGHTS ON HOW THE CITY OF MIAMI'S BUILDING DEPARTMENT COULD IMPROVE ITS OPERATION

A few weeks ago, my wife and I were having dinner with a good friend who was in town from San Francisco for a short visit. He had recently acquired the Victorian home pictured here in a neighborhood known as Noe Valley and was in the process of renovation. Aside from being a very old structure, the home has historic designation, resulting in additional hurdles.

As he began the process, our friend was pleasantly surprised with the assistance afforded him by the powers that be in the City by the Bay. Then he lamented, "Why couldn't the City of Miami Building Department be as helpful as the San Francisco Building



BT photo by Frank Rollason

Department?" This comment really hit home with me. I was once the director of that City of Miami department.

During my short tenure as director, I strived to make the department more user-friendly and bring it into the computer age. Even back then, the city was having cash-flow problems -- always robbing Peter to pay Paul, while the Piper waited in the wings for his cut!

Anyway, during the course of our conversation, our friend suggested that Fran and I go to San Francisco to visit the building department and see for ourselves. We thought about it. Why not? We could take in the sights and help him with his renovation. We went.

Early on, it was necessary to make a trip to the building department and I was really looking forward to eyeballing the operation. Upon arriving, the first thing I noticed was that, unlike in Miami, there were no crowds. Building and Zoning occupied multiple floors in the same building with very spacious office and client spaces. We were greeted just inside the front door by a lady who asked, "How may we help you today?" Sort of like a Walmart greeter without the daily specials handout.

My friend explained that he had visitors from Miami and they would like to walk around and speak with various people about the process of obtaining a permit. Right away, she gave us several options -- we could go to the technical services station and

obtain assistance on particular questions or we could visit the upper floor, walk around, and approach any employee with general questions. We took the latter approach and ventured up to the floor where plans are reviewed and the nuts and bolts of the process takes place.

Here again we were greeted with friendly faces always asking if we needed assistance or how they could help. As we walked the floor, I could not get over how open the area was and, even though there were quite a few people present processing plans for permitting, there was more than an adequate number of stations available to assist the applicants. For instance, there were ten payment stations. In Miami, we have one -- and it took me the greater part of a year to get that one installed on the same floor as the building department.

We approached an individual who was not dealing with a client and asked if he could offer us assistance on some general issues. His response was: "Of course. How can I help you?" The young man -- Michael Gunnell, a building inspector -- was open and cordial. After introducing myself as a former building director, I proceeded to question him on various procedures in the permitting process.

Like the department in Miami, the one in San Francisco is responsible for ensuring that plans comply with the local codes and, above all, that a structure is safe for occupation. Mr. Gunnell even offered to get me up to the director's office to spend a few moments with her, but I declined, knowing that she had to have a busy schedule and did not need to entertain my mundane questions.

Overall, I was extremely impressed with my impromptu visit. Mr. Gunnell summed it up quite succinctly when he stated that his primary mission was to "get the applicant out of his office with a permit on the same day," plain and simple.

So this brings us back to Miami's building department and why the permitting process here is nothing short of brutal. One can only sum it up with the old adage: "A fish rots from the head down."

There should be no confusion as to why so much construction goes on in our city without permits. It goes on because it is the most expedient way to get something built or modified or renovated -- and politicians and developers both benefit from that in the short run. (The rest of us pay for it in the long run.) If caught doing work without the proper permits, the feeling is: "We will deal with that later, but right now, I need to get this job going or completed so I can get my business open or my family housed."

Much-needed improvements will only occur when the elected officials demand that the process be streamlined and made user-friendly. I attended a District 2 Commissioner candidate forum on September 14 in which incumbent Commissioner Marc Sarnoff extolled the virtues of the "one-stop shopping" process that he recently installed within the building department to expedite the issuance of permits.

However, one-stop shopping does *not* exist in the building department. What does exist is a one-stop shopping service in the Neighborhood Enhancement Team division

for permits, but that doesn't include building permitting of any kind. Just another little oopsie for Commissioner Sarnoff as he stretches the truth once again!

Candidate Kate Callahan's platform, on the other hand, does propose a one-stop shopping option for building permits. It would be a good start in making the process more user-friendly and needs to be expanded for all building permit applications, both large and small.

Of course it all boils down to available funds to staff such initiatives. A good strategy may be to keep the money generated from the permitting process wholly within the building department, instead of spreading it around to other city departments (under the guise of paying internal charges for services provided to the building department by those departments).

Cycling funds generated by the permitting process back into the system, to expedite and streamline permitting and inspection, would mean higher revenues, as it would result in a more user-friendly system and additional permits being issued.

You don't have to go to San Francisco to figure that one out.

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