

Top 10 Things to Know about Land Development and Permitting

Get the Facts Before Your Project Begins

1. The Land Development Process is Often Lengthy

A critical piece of knowledge for anyone considering a new construction project or major addition/renovation is that the process of meeting land development requirements is often a lengthy one. Unfortunately, we have seen seemingly straightforward projects take anywhere between six months to a year. There are many factors at play of course, with ground-up new projects anticipating a lengthier approval process than simple additions or renovations. Special restrictions, such as building on a wetland or state road, could also increase the length of time significantly. Be sure to start land development early to allow ample time.

2. Make Sure Your Location is Zoned Properly

Zoning depends on the type of structure you are building. Sometimes zoning is easy and straightforward; while in other situations you may need to re-zone your property. Certain zoning districts can impose additional requirements and may necessitate special approvals. Additionally, if you find yourself in a re-zoning situation, be aware that neighbor input will be considered—something that many people are unaware of.

3. Find Out About the Rocks

When designing the structure of the building, soil probes will need to be used around the building site and evaluated by a geo-technician to determine the

bearing capacity of the soil. This information can provide insight as to how much rock you may encounter during construction. Unknown rock can become a very costly expense for project Owners, so a geo-technician's report can be a very important early tool.

4. Permitting Requirements May Not be Easy to Maneuver

Often, each phase of your project requires separate permitting—land development, demolition, building, plumbing, mechanical, electrical, fire protection, etc. In Pennsylvania, where Horst does a lot of its work, over 90% of the 2,562 municipalities have elected to administer and enforce the Uniform Construction Code. While you may think that would streamline the permit process, it can actually create more confusion. Each local authority has its own way of administering the process of the Uniform Construction Code. Some will require a permit review up front, and then ask you to pay a fee before you pick up the permit. Others may require you to pay the permit (or a portion thereof) up front when submitting for review. Most authorities will require original stamped drawings, while others may accept copies.

It is key to know who the governing authority is for the area in which you want to build and find an outline of the process for that agency. This can often be obtained on their websites or by directly contacting each authority. Lastly, be aware that on rare occasions when a property or

building is in multiple areas, you may have to deal with two or three authorities—multiplying the amount of work needed to get approvals.

5. Consider How You are Going to Tie-In to Your Utilities

If you have access to public water and sewer, make sure you have adequate space to tie into those utilities and a suitable water supply for what you need. This can sometimes be a stumbling block or cause additional cost to a project if not thought out in advance of the project's start. You may also be required to have a water flow test completed to determine an adequate supply for fire protection.

6. Get Everything in Order for Department of Health Reviews

In Pennsylvania, many types of facilities—including home healthcare, nursing homes, and surgical care centers, to name a few—need to be reviewed by the Department of Health. Drawings will need to be submitted, with the opportunity to review the plans together. At the completion of your project, you will need an inspection through them, in addition to your normal building inspections. Each state has their own way of handling approvals, with detailed websites available as a resource in most states.

7. Be Prepared for Department of Agriculture Reviews

Much like the Department of Health, several types of facilities may require inspection by the Department of Agriculture. If your building contains a commercial kitchen, if you are preparing food in a dining hall, or if you are retailing food in any way, you will fall into this category. Small kitchens that only serve members are considered non-public and are thus usually exempted from this process. While Pennsylvania has a state Department of Agriculture, local authorities may also have their own health departments. In fact, there are 6 pages of municipal ones—and they are the ones who approve and do the final inspections.

8. Watch out for Municipality-Specific Amendments

As stated before, each local municipality in Pennsylvania is required to adopt the Uniform Construction Code; however, some municipalities adopt their own amendments that can add to the code requirements. In fact, the Uniform Building Code has a commentary that is just as thick as the code itself—no kidding! While this often helps better understand the code, it still does not make every area of the code perfectly clear. Furthermore, not every project falls neatly into how it is described in the code.

9. Have Your Construction Partner Involved Early in the Process

Many of the above-mentioned pieces of advice are timely and need to be addressed and adequately planned for at an early stage in your project. While it is never “too late” to get a construction partner involved, it will be in your best interest to have your partner involved as early in the planning stages as you feel comfortable. This enables your construction partner to anticipate and address the specific needs of your project efficiently and in a timely manner.

10. Make Sure You Partner with Someone Who Advocates for the Owner

With Horst's Design-Build Process, the owner benefits from the most cost-effective finished product because Horst is able to advocate for the owner from day one. It is critical to choose a partner who has ample resources and opportunities to evaluate the different angles of your project and ensure your finished product is everything you hoped for. Horst can use its own experience, plus that of the project architect, to make sure as many issues as possible are accounted for *before* submitting drawings.