

The Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process
Chesterfield County, Virginia

Program Overview

The ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** has become an economic and community development tool for new and expanding development. By giving high priority and rapid review schedules to any non-residential development that is ready to build, we accomplish the following: (1) sustain jobs in the local construction industry and its suppliers during the economic downturn; (2) enable smaller builders to put together projects and acquire financing; (3) bring new tenants and jobs more quickly into the economy.

The process prioritizes the schedules for the county's plan review process to match construction start dates needed by developers for any type of non-residential development. Plan reviews can be as short as three days per review. In return, each developer using the ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** guarantees timely participation by all consultants on all plan submittals. The developer also has to have his contractor on board and financing established for the project.

The County has reviewed thirty *Ready to Build Expedited Plans* since January 2010 with twenty-six constructed or under construction.

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The Problem/Need for the Program

The ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** was generated from a concern in mid-2009 that many employees in the construction industry and related suppliers were losing their jobs with the economic downturn. We recognized that the normal plans review process is typically handled on a first come, first serve basis. While this may be a fair and equitable system for serving customers, the only customers being served are the consultants submitting plans. We asked ourselves the question, “Can the Plans Review process serve the larger community that is hurting for jobs?” In essence, we considered the middle and end users of the process as our clients as well. Employees of the construction industry (middle) and employees of new businesses (end) are served by a review process that considers the immediacy of their timeframe as well. The construction industry serves the full range of the built environment, and we did not constrain our thinking to only larger scale economic development fast-track reviews. We had to come up with a new model that prioritizes any and all projects when the developer or business owner is poised to build upon approval. The ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** is the result of changing our reviews from a first come, first serve process to a process that places the review priority with those developers that have the earliest construction start dates.

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Description of the Program

The **Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process** is offered to all developers of non-residential development. The objectives of the **Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process** are: (1) to protect jobs by getting projects under construction as fast as possible; (2) to give priority to those developers who have obtained financing and have committed their team to high speed submittals of plans.

The process begins with a preliminary meeting between the developer's team and the County/State review team. During that meeting, the development proposal is discussed, and the developer's construction schedule is determined, backed by whether financing is already established for the project or can be obtained quickly. If the developer needs the **Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process**, the consultant team prepares a calendar schedule for an initial submittal and up to three resubmittals with County and State reviews (example-attachment #1). The calendar will end with the construction start date desired by the developer. The time frame for each County/State review can be as short as three (3) business days. However, the developer's team that prepares plans has no more than double the number of days to resubmit plans for the next review. If the County/State review team takes 3 days, then consultants have 6 days to resubmit plans. It should be noted that projects not given an expedited schedule will follow the County's standard review timeframe of 21 days per review, and consultants have no time constraints for resubmittal.

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To develop this process, the five County departments of transportation, fire, utilities, environmental engineering, and planning, and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) met to discuss how this process would work. The cross-departmental team had experience performing economic development Fast Track reviews. Their experience told them that they could perform on a priority basis, but that the developers and their teams may not meet their own goals. We put into place several requirements to assure that the County and the developer's team would act as one team to get the job done. These requirements are: (1) the developer has his full consulting team, contractor, and financing in place before we start; (2) we always start with a preliminary meeting between the two teams to discuss the project; (3) everyone works from a set calendar for submittals and review, and the developer's team signs an agreement to perform accordingly (copy of agreement-attachment #2); (4) the two teams meet after each review to make sure there is no misunderstanding about our review comments or what the consultant's plans show; (5) the Planning Department case manager serves as the team leader who has the clear responsibility to resolve any conflicts that may hinder the speedy approval of the project.

VDOT has been a valuable participant in the development of this process. Despite State Code that allows VDOT significantly longer time frames for review of site plans, the VDOT Residency in Chesterfield supports the goals of the process to keep the construction industry active and jobs protected. They are meeting or exceeding the expedited turnaround times for each review.

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Technologically, Chesterfield County has had on-line viewing of review comments since 1997 that allows developers and consultants to see review comments at any time, and this enhances the expedited process. However, with the advent of the ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process***, we also placed on-line for public view what is called the Weekly Review Order for Active Site Plans (example-attachment #3). This is a list of all site plans that are actively being reviewed each week, and the due dates for staff to complete each review. All expedited plans are in red and bolded at the top of the list, and all non-expedited plans are listed below and are noted that their due dates may shift as needed to address expedited reviews. The Weekly Review Order for Active Site Plans has provided additional benefits by being on-line. We no longer receive interruptions from clients asking when their project was submitted or when we will finish, and our State partner, VDOT, fully understands what the County's priorities for review are each week. Rather than being behind in their reviews for much of the time, VDOT now regularly completes their reviews faster than the five County departments for each project.

Operating costs did not change with implementing this program. Capital costs for Chesterfield County were negligible since we already had an operating website for allowing the viewing of on-line review comments and the Weekly Review Order of Active Site Plans. Otherwise, the costs to set up the program included staff time to work out a program unique to our business culture, and staff time to develop appropriate forms for implementation.

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The Results/Success of the Program

This process is set up to serve many of our smaller clients that could not receive an Economic Development Fast Track designation. The **Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process** has served clients such as CVS and Walgreen's, Sonic Restaurant, Wawa, Dollar General, and many local offices, retail, and churches that provide many jobs for the construction industry, and that provide jobs when tenants move in. One clear measure of the program's success is the number of requests from developers to use the process during an economic downturn (30 projects in two and a half years).

While many of the expedited site plans are approved in under 60 days (shortest has been 17 days), we have come to recognize that developer problems occur that delay projects. New regulations from the State relating to storm water management, delays with developers to get off-site easements, resolving citizens' concerns, or developer changes can slow down the process. Regardless of developer delays, County and State staff has averaged 6.5 days per review with expedited projects (88 reviews total with 30 projects). We note that several contractors now market their services to clients that they can get their projects expedited through the County reviews if they are ready to build.

To enable clients to see the value of what they receive, plan review timeframes are tracked and communicated. Once Chesterfield County approves a site plan, we send a Timeliness Report (example-attachment #4) along with a survey to each client and consultant asking each how we did. The Timeliness Report states when a project was

submitted, how long the County spent on each review, and how long the developer's

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How the Program Fulfills the Eligibility and Awards Criteria

The ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** fulfills the eligibility standards by becoming operational before January 1, 2012 (operational on January 1, 2010), and is currently operational. County staff played a significant role in developing and implementing the program with no assistance from technical experts or consultants.

The awards criteria have been met in the following ways:

- The ***Ready to Build Expedited Plan Review Process*** is an innovative solution to sustain and foster job growth during difficult economic times by giving the highest priority to any development that is ready to build.
- Each time the process is used, the plans review process becomes a public/private partnership between the County/State review agencies and the developers and businesses seeking to develop and expand.
- Other localities desiring to promote development activity in their jurisdictions can implement this program. The program promotes intergovernmental cooperation between five County departments and the Virginia Department of Transportation to deliver a process that protects jobs in the private sector.
- While similar to programs that fast-track significant economic development projects, this program enables small businesses, churches, and other types of non-residential development to be treated as economic drivers of a local economy.