

**T**o avoid the risk of getting into occupancy types I know very little about, this information is geared to the Type “B” Business Group occupancy. Specifically, interior construction for what the code describes as Professional Services or general office use.

“Can we do this without a permit?” “Can we start without a permit?” I’ve been asked

these questions more times than I can count. For better or for worse, unless you are doing what we typically call a “paint and carpet job,” the short answer to those questions are, no and ...no. Believe it or not, it is less difficult to get a building permit in the City of Houston than in many other major cities and it should get faster in the near future. The current permit cost of \$4.00/ \$1,000 of project cost is being increased to \$4.50/\$1,000 on January 12, 2004 specifically for hiring new plan checkers to reduce some of the backlog in all departments. According to Sheila Blake with the City of Houston Planning & Development Code Enforcement, they have filled five of the seven new plan checker positions already.

The City has instituted several policies and procedures to help make the process more orderly; however, even to the seasoned veteran it can be time consuming. For the first-timer it may be overwhelming. To avoid this, a large number of property owners, architects and even general contractors rely on a permit service or expediter to do the work. Regardless of who makes the application, they must come prepared with the name of the property owner, project address (including suite number) and construction cost.

Additionally, depending on the scope, the following documents must accompany the application:

■ **Construction Drawings.** Once the

drawings are in the system, rejections for incomplete information or code violations cause the most pain. Your architect or engineer will know the type and level of detail required. Drawings on a cocktail napkin or the back of an envelope are discouraged.

■ **Asbestos Survey.** Senate Bill 509 requires that where demolition and renovation is to occur, an asbestos survey or certification by the owner that an asbestos survey was conducted must be included. For more information you can go to the Texas Department of Health website at <http://www.tdh.state.tx.us> or call 1-888-963-7111.

■ **Commercial Energy Code Compliance Form.** The City of Houston requires this form any time plans are submitted. The International Energy Compliance Code and the City of Houston allow for several project types to

## Applying For A Houston Building Permit, 101

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be exempt, however the form must still be submitted and the appropriate “exempt” box checked. Unless the project is exempt, this form must be completed in its entirety and sealed by either a licensed architect or professional engineer.

■ **Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (“TDLR”) number.** If the cost of the project exceeds \$50,000.00 the drawings must be submitted by the architect for accessibility plan review to the TDLR or an approved “Independent Contract Provider” prior to the start of construction. Each project is issued a reference number that must be included

on the permit application. The property owner is responsible to arrange the subsequent inspection at the completion of the project.

■ **Property Owners and/or Designers Approval.** A letter from the owner authorizing an agent of the owner or a plan expediter/permit service to fill out the permit application or the deed restriction affidavit on the back of the application. In the case of drawings submitted to Plan Express, a letter from the designer naming the expediter as their representative is required.

■ **A Check.** Permits must be paid for when they are received. If you are using Express Plan Review the 65% premium must be paid in advance.

The traditional Commercial Plan Review process takes an average of two months to complete when you factor in resubmittal time for rejections. The City offers two additional services designed to speed up the process for some project types. They are Commercial One-Stop and Express Plan Review.

Commercial One Stop is a walkthrough service where the drawings are reviewed only by a structural plan checker. MEP work does not go through the plan review process but rather is permitted by the individual trades and their work is subject to field inspections. One Stop is designed for projects that will take no more than 30 minutes to review. Projects that meet the other criteria but require more time are taken at the plan reviewer’s discretion. General guidelines are:

■ The space is only required to have only one exit (less than 50 occupants/5,000 sf). If the space requires two exits (less than 100 occupants/10,000 sf) and meets the other criteria, One-Stop will take these plans and review them within three working days of submittal.

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■ In spaces less than 5,000 sf, the existing electrical system must be adequately sized and any load increase must be documented and signed by a licensed master electrician or sealed by a licensed professional engineer. “Minor” light and outlet relocations and the addition of less than 10 light fixtures do not require signed or sealed drawings. In spaces over 5,000 sf, any load increase must be documented and sealed by a licensed professional engineer.

■ In spaces with no existing electrical service, new service is limited to a maximum of 200 amps and the above documentation and signature/sealing requirements apply based on occupant load.

Express Plan Review is a service designed to expedite smaller new building and renovation projects too large for the Commercial One-Stop service. At 7:30 am on the first day of the workweek, drawings are taken for review for the entire week on a lottery basis. A maximum of seven projects are accepted for each day of that particular week. In a typical week, they will take 35 projects. Drawings are logged in according to their lottery number. The first seven logged in for review the first day, the next seven the second day, and so on. The drawings will be reviewed and either approved or rejected within seven working days. Rejections are described in writing and must be corrected by the designer and resubmitted for review. Each subsequent review can last up to seven days. Users of this service pay a 65% premium over the traditional Commercial Plan Review process. For more information you can go to the City’s website at [http://www.ci.houston.tx.us/departme/planning/planning\\_dev\\_web/code\\_enf/code\\_downloads/ExpPlanRev.pdf](http://www.ci.houston.tx.us/departme/planning/planning_dev_web/code_enf/code_downloads/ExpPlanRev.pdf). General guidelines are:

- One and two story new construction
- New construction and remodeling of tenant space.

As property owners here in Houston, Trizec has about 40 projects per year go through the permit process. We have had our share of costly delays and frustrated tenants. Every few years there are code changes that add to the confusion. In my experience though the City of Houston Code Enforcement staff appear to be well trained and take their job very seriously, as they should. They along with your design professionals are charged with protecting the health, safety and welfare of the general public.

Applying for a building permit is really no different than getting a car loan or filing your taxes. Things will go much smoother if you send in all the forms and fill in all the blanks.

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