

Maintaining Building Safety During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Considerations for Moving Permitting and Plan Review Online

April 8, 2020

Code departments are adapting to ensure that they can continue to perform their public safety mission while protecting code officials, the construction workforce and the public at large from the spread of COVID-19. To support our members at this time, the International Code Council has compiled important considerations and a set of potential solutions code departments should think about as they navigate these uncharted waters.

The options offered here are intended to address the short-term needs for permitting and plan review for jurisdictions that do not currently have them. Upon conclusion of the pandemic, code departments are encouraged to consider more permanent, formalized solutions based on the experiences and lessons learned.

While the content presented here is general in nature, code departments know their local conditions and are aware of state specific requirements including stay-in-place orders, interpretations, and waiver procedures. Code Council chapters and building associations can be important sources of local information. The Code Council has also assembled resources on its [Coronavirus Response Center](#).

Always abide by the recommendations of local health officials, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other national and international health authorities.

General considerations for remote operations

- Communicate new procedures through various channels (website and emails) to relevant groups (chapters and industry groups). Update your website frequently to address frequently asked questions.
- Adopt basic online security practices (e.g. don't open exe files, use virus scanning software). Your government's IT department can provide guidance.
- Consult with your legal counsel to assure compliance with all federal, state and local requirements.
- Ensure adherence to record-keeping rules to ensure that no information is lost and inspection information is accessible as projects proceed.
- Consult your existing permitting software provider (if you have one in place) to determine what services they can provide and how information from virtual and remote inspections can integrate with your existing system. If you do not have one in place, you can contact [International Code Council Community Development Solutions](#) for help.
- Assure that remote staff have access to the codes and standards they need. The [Code Council's Digital Library](#) offers online access to all ICC model codes and standards and most state codes.

Accepting permit applications and issuing permits

Code departments have identified several options for accepting permit applications including:

- Establishing a dedicated email address
- Physical drop off box/area
- Mail
- Web portals
- Web-based forms (Survey Monkey, Google Forms, etc.)
- Identify if there are existing software tools used by the city where capabilities could be easily leveraged to support the building department (e.g., Muncicity)

Documents could be submitted in a variety of formats, but consideration should be given as to how information will be shared throughout the permitting and plan review process. Markup and commenting features are available in programs like Adobe Acrobat (PDF), Microsoft Word and Google Docs.

Keep the following in mind as you set up remote permitting processes:

- Remote submission processes are safer, but if physical documents are required, establish collection protocols and implement a waiting period before paper applications and materials are handled.
- For larger file submissions, consider use of no or low-cost file sharing programs (e.g. Dropbox, Google Drive) or consult your IT department about establishing a secure FTP site.
- Establish procedures for securely archiving electronic records.
- Identify tools for working with a remote team (document sharing, remote meeting, video chats) that can facilitate communication within the department, and between the department and other departments involved in permit issuance (e.g., zoning, fire), and smooth transitioning to a remote process.
- Establish a workflow management process to assure that submissions get addressed and that staff are not overwhelmed (submission, tracking, review, approval, etc.). Make sure that permit applications don't get lost during the handoff between team members and "fall through the cracks."
- Put in place simple metrics to track the time for completion for permit applications for tracking and continuous improvement.

Issuing corrections during plan review

Corrections can be issued by multiple means. Consider the current methods deployed in your jurisdiction before making a decision. Options include:

- Within the body of an email
- Attached corrections list (e.g. if there's a standard corrections letter)
- Attached mark-up of plans using PDFs or CAD programs
- Web portal (with notification to submitter once review is complete)
- Conducting a web meeting (WebEx, Zoom, etc.) allowing all parties to discuss the comments and screen share. Follow up with written comments if necessary.

Additional considerations:

- For complex plans, it may also be necessary to explain corrections via phone (but be sure to capture a record of the corrections requested).
- If you will be conducting remote or virtual inspections, consider including a homeowner release as part of the permit process allowing consent for video inspections within their home.
- Continue to check product certifications and listings online. For example, ICC-ES makes its certification information readily available at <https://www.icc-es.org>.
- The [Code Council's Plan Review Services](#) can help departments fill gaps in their capacity to complete plan reviews.
- Links to the relevant code sections can be provided through the Code Council's [Digital Library](#).

Processing payments

Departments have identified a variety of methods to continue accepting payments. You should consult with other departments in the municipality (e.g. property tax collection, water department) to see if there is an opportunity to consolidate such systems. Options include:

- Over the phone
- Online (including no- or low-cost money transfer programs like PayPal, Venmo, Square or Zelle)
- Checks via mail (consider allowing prepayment of fees based on volume expectations)
- Web portal

Be sure to maintain basic accounting controls and security to prevent fraud. For payments collected by phone, put in place a process to protect personal information (e.g. don't write down the credit card numbers).

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