



City of Cambridge

Executive Department

YI-AN HUANG
City Manager

CMA 2026-224
IN CITY COUNCIL
August 3, 2026

To the Honorable, the City Council:

Please find attached communication Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development, regarding opportunities to streamline the permitting process.

Very truly yours,

Yi-An Huang
City Manager





To: Yi-An Huang, City Manager

From: Melissa Peters, Assistant City Manager for Community Development

Date: August 3, 2026

Re: **Streamlining the Residential Permitting Process (POR 2025 #163 / AR-26-05)**

Supporting new development—particularly housing—is a critical priority for the City, with direct implications for affordability, economic vitality, and the City’s long-term fiscal health. In recognition of these concerns, the City Council adopted Policy Order POR 2025 #163 requesting that the City Manager work with the Community Development Department and the Inspectional Services Department to pursue opportunities to streamline the permitting process. Per our response in March, we are now following up with the results of our interviews and analysis.

In an economic environment where projects struggle to pencil and margins are especially thin; it is increasingly important to evaluate regulations and processes to reduce bottlenecks and regulations that add more cost than value. In the last several years the City Council has both removed significant hurdles to building housing with zoning changes such as the multifamily zoning and added additional layers of regulations related to tree protection, fossil fuel free construction, green buildings and green roofs, and resiliency. Remaining opportunities to reduce regulations lie mainly around identifying those that are duplicative, in conflict, or unclear.

The permitting process is also naturally going to be more complicated in an urban environment like Cambridge, than it is in a less developed environment, like many Sunbelt cities. However, a review of recent permitting data shows that incomplete or incorrect permit submissions can delay the permit ten times as long as the average. The goal of this effort is to balance important code requirements related to health and safety and the city’s commitments to climate resilience, historic preservation, and quality design, while making the process easier and clearer for both staff and applicants.

CDD staff met with both internal and external stakeholders (staff, developers, architects) that are involved in the permitting process to identify challenges in the process. External stakeholders had high praise for city staff, stating they were professional, knowledgeable and genuinely want to move the process forward. The pain points identified by both staff and developers/architects generally fell into three categories:

- Policy – regulations that lack clarity, conflict with other requirements, and/or would benefit from more flexibility
- Process – processes that are unclear or add significant time
- Communication – lack of a clear roadmap for applicants

Key takeaways included:

- The process has improved significantly in the past few years, due both to regulatory changes and process changes. The OpenGov permitting portal is an improvement over the prior system.
- As a result of eliminating most discretionary processes for new multifamily development, an applicant's first interaction with staff may now be at the building permit application, often leading to confusion around the process and requirements.
- Staff repeatedly request the same documents, and significant time is lost due to incomplete building permit applications.
- Some regulations are adding both building and time costs without a clear benefit, such as the redundancy of green building zoning requirements for projects already required to be fossil fuel free and required by the building code to meet Passive House.
- Some regulations would benefit from flexibility, such as building and site plan requirements in section 19.50 of the zoning ordinance and bicycle parking design standards.
- Some regulations lack clarity or conflict with other priorities. For example, green roof zoning requires that all roof areas not used for mechanical space be a green roof when green factor requirements already incentivize green roofs and sometimes roof space could be better utilized for solar panels or as a cool roof.
- Coordination across City staff has improved. There's a strong desire for more coordination between applicants and staff prior to filing a building permit application.

The attached presentation outlines the proposed recommendations focused on construction of multifamily housing and categorizes them by what can be accomplished in the short, medium, and long term. Staff are already working on short-term items and those that require additional study. In addition to the policy and process updates proposed, a top priority is to provide clear materials and additional education up front to reduce submission errors. The proposed recommendations build upon prior efforts to improve the process and increase housing production and represent a step forward in streamlining the permitting process.

City of Cambridge
Community Development

Streamlining the Residential Permitting Process

August 3, 2026



Executive summary

Context: City Council directed the Community Development Department (CDD) and the Inspectional Services Department (ISD) to **streamline the permitting process**. CDD staff met with internal staff and external (developers, architects, etc.) stakeholders to identify further opportunities.

Pain points: Stakeholders identified **challenges in 3 key buckets** of the permitting process today:

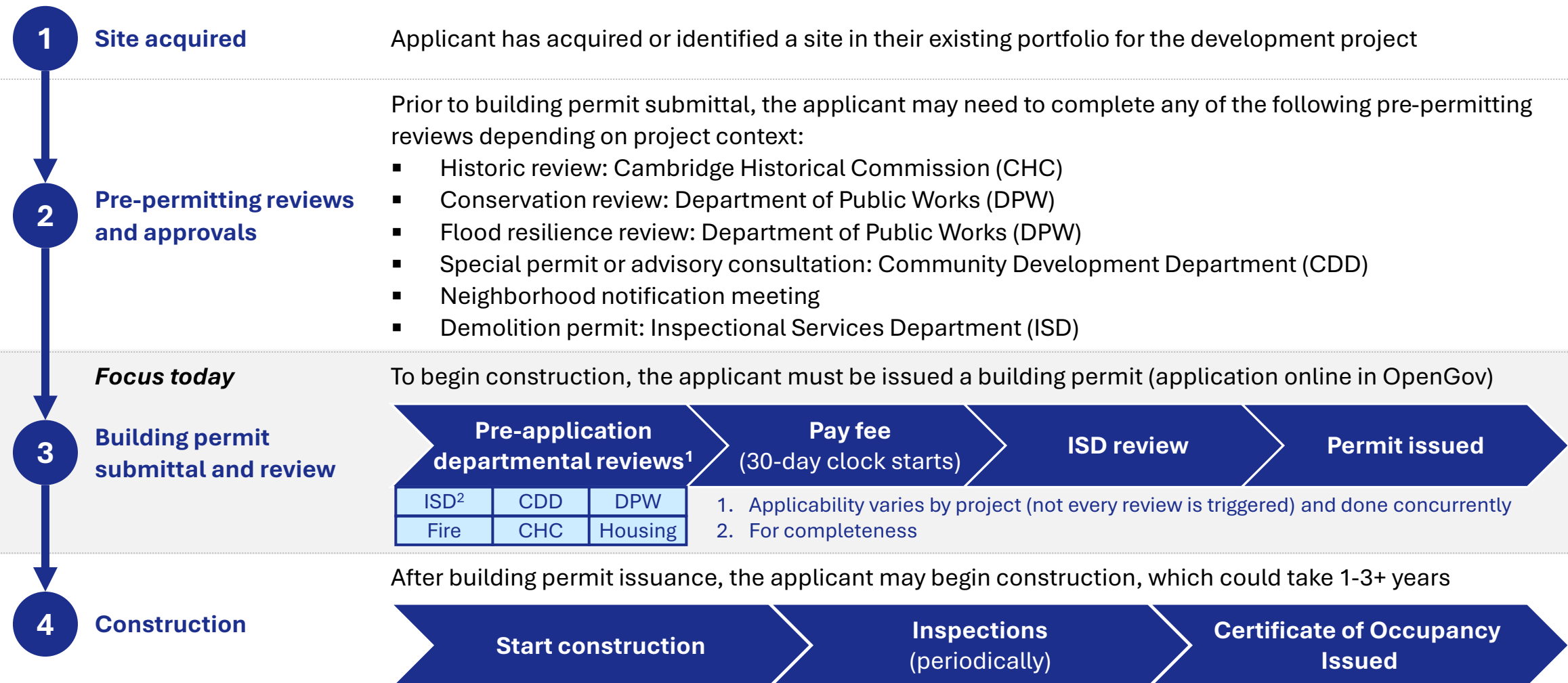
- **Policy:** redundant, unclear, or overly burdensome regulations
- **Process:** inconsistencies in forms, poor sequencing of events, and delayed reviews
- **Communication:** external parties struggle to understand process and lack a consolidated source of information

Proposed solution: To **address the pain points** in the current process, recommend the following **3 areas of action**:

- 1) **Update regulations to simplify, improve clarity, and add flexibility:** Revise regulations in consultation with developers and city officials
- 2) **Continue to streamline the review process:** Process flow changes to improve internal operations and turnaround times for reviews
- 3) **Improve communication and education materials to reduce errors and incomplete submissions:** Consolidate access to information + provide enhanced clarity around process, timelines, and point of contact

Path forward: Recommend implementing a **series of near-term actions to alleviate critical pain points today** while **preparing long-term efforts** including AI solutions, larger process enhancements, and more complex policy changes

The full development process spans four broad stages, but today we're focused on just building permit submittal and review



Incomplete or incorrect applications can lead to delayed reviews

Issues with submitted applications can lead to significant delays in processing time

10x

Incomplete or inaccurate submissions can lead to review times **exceeding 10 times the average**¹

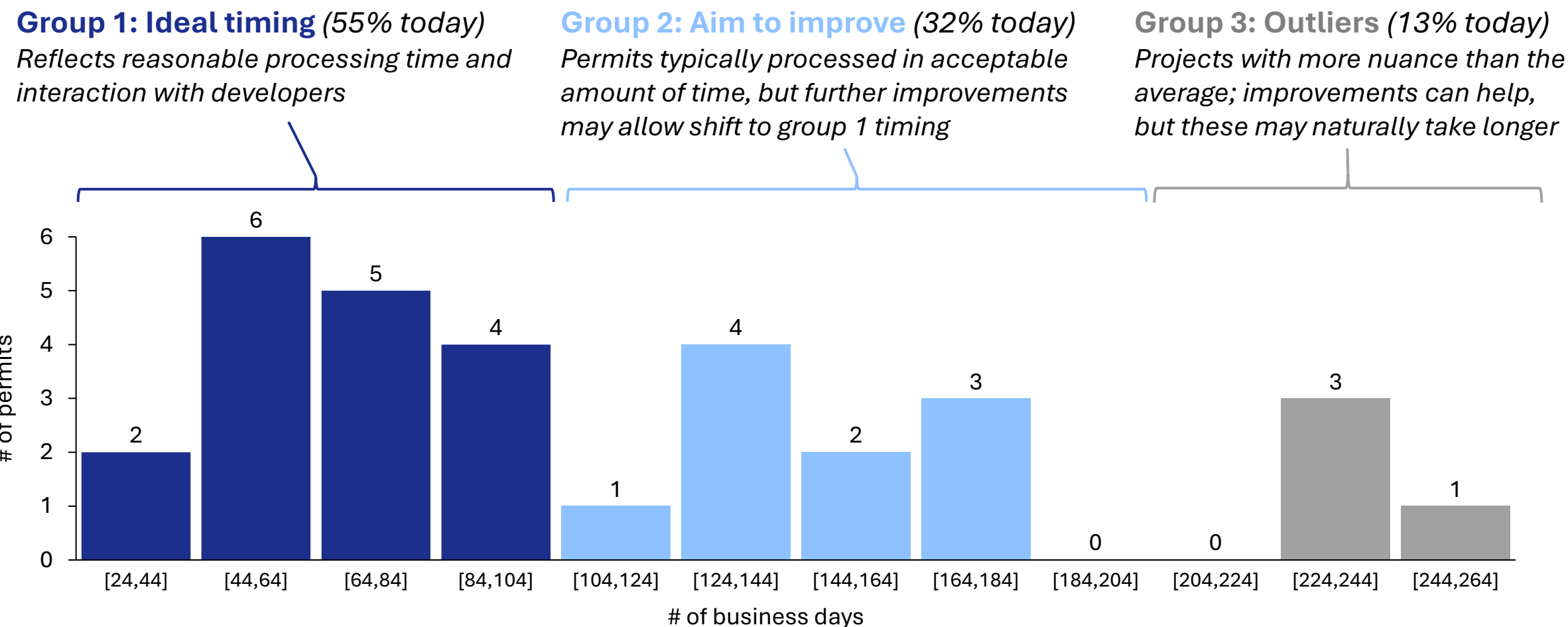
85%

When an application is delayed by a process with missing information, that **delay often encompasses 85%+** of the total review time¹



These incomplete or inaccurate applications are often a result of lack of clarity on the process / requirements upfront with the developer team

While most permits are issued in a reasonable timeframe, the city can partner with developers to further improve speed to issuance



Note: ISD issued 102 new building permits for new construction between 1/1/24 and 6/30/26; 31 of which were for multi-family

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE | COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

While the City is prepared to pull all available levers to increase housing production, permitting also matters tremendously in a dense, urban core

City efforts to increase housing production....

Zoning and land use

- Created the Inclusionary Housing Program, leveraging market-rate production for affordable units
- Allowed residential development in all zoning districts (2001)
- Rezoned for redevelopment of former commercial/industrial sites to housing
- Rezoned special redevelopment areas to require mixed-use with housing
- Adopted the Affordable Housing Overlay (AHO), providing a streamlined, by-right permitting for 100% affordable development
- Eliminated parking minimums (2022)
- Adopted citywide multifamily as-of-right zoning (2025)

Funding & investment

- Providing consistent, robust funding for all affordable housing from sources like property taxes, building permit and short-term rental fees, the maximum CPA fund contribution, and incentive zoning
- Strategically repositioning City properties for housing (e.g., 35 Cherry Street)

... Importance of permitting in a dense City



Fire and life safety: Close-set, shared-wall buildings require strict adherence to fire and life-safety codes to protect nearby properties



Sewer and stormwater capacity: New development adds load to aging, shared infrastructure; unmanaged flows can cause backups for neighbors



Traffic and curb impacts: Added trips and deliveries affect an already-congested street network shared by many residents



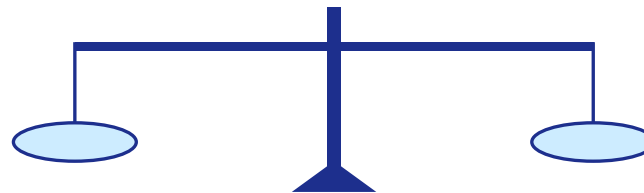
Tree canopy and green space: Mature trees and green infrastructure are a limited, shared resource that can be affected by work on adjoining lots



Flood resilience: Closely built lots mean stormwater and flooding on one site can directly affect neighboring properties



Construction impacts on neighbors: Noise, dust, and street/sidewalk closures are felt by more residents when buildings are close together



Recent Progress

Multifamily zoning – eliminated discretionary process for most multifamily development

Simultaneous building permit pre-application reviews – Departmental reviews (CDD, DPW, Housing, Fire, etc.) happen at the same time rather than sequentially

ISD short form – simple application for minor projects that can be reviewed by admin staff, freeing up inspector time for more complex reviews

Regular interdepartmental coordination - staff from departments involved in permitting meet regularly to discuss active projects

CITY OF CAMBRIDGE		ISD Inspectional Services
NEW SHORT-FORM BUILDING PERMIT		
A Faster and Simpler Permit Process for Qualifying Projects		
LESS PAPERWORK • SIMPLER APPLICATION • FASTER REVIEW		
The Short-Form Building Permit is designed to help eligible projects move through the permitting process more quickly.		
CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITY	SHORT-FORM PERMIT	ADDITION/ALTERATION OR NEW CONSTRUCTION PERMIT
Window, Door & Skylight Replacement	✓	✗
Insulation & Weather Sealing	✓	✗
Bathroom Remodel (Non-Structural)	✓	✗
Kitchen Remodel (Non-Structural)	✓	✗
Miscellaneous Interior Remodel Work (Non-Structural)	✓	✗
Change of Use	✗	✓
Major Structural Alteration	✗	✓
Basement Finishing (Unconditioned/Uninhabitable to Conditioned/Habitable)	✗	✓
Additions	✗	✓
Interior or Structural Demolition	✗	✓
Exterior Changes Including New Window or Door Openings	✗	✓
BZA or Planning Board Related Work	✗	✓
Food Establishments and Other Commercial Uses	✗	✓

Projects that include any activity marked under the "Addition/Alteration or New Construction Permit" column must use the appropriate building permit application.

In response to the council's direction to streamline the permitting process, CDD and ISD have engaged internal and external stakeholders

POR 2025 #163 gave direction to CDD and ISD to streamline the permitting process

CDD and ISD engaged internal and external stakeholders to identify pain points + potential solutions to the process



**Cambridge City
MA**
**Policy Order
POR 2025 #163**

Order Adopted as
Amended
Dec 8, 2025 5:30 PM

That the City Manager is requested to work with the Community Development Department and the Inspectional Services Department staff to streamline the permitting process, including but not limited to creating a central role dedicated to the permitting process, the creation of a unified online permitting portal, and standardized timelines.

Information

Department:	City Clerk's Office, BA	Sponsors:	Vice Mayor Burhan Azeem, Councillor Catherine Zusy, Councillor Paul F. Toner, Councillor Marc C. McGovern, Councillor Patricia Nolan
Category:	Policy Order		

Links

[Origin](#) AR-25-68 : Streamline the permitting process, including but not limited to creating a central role dedicated to the permitting process, the creation of a unified online permitting portal, and standardized timelines, and report back to the City Council not later than March 2026.

Attachments

[Printout](#)

Body

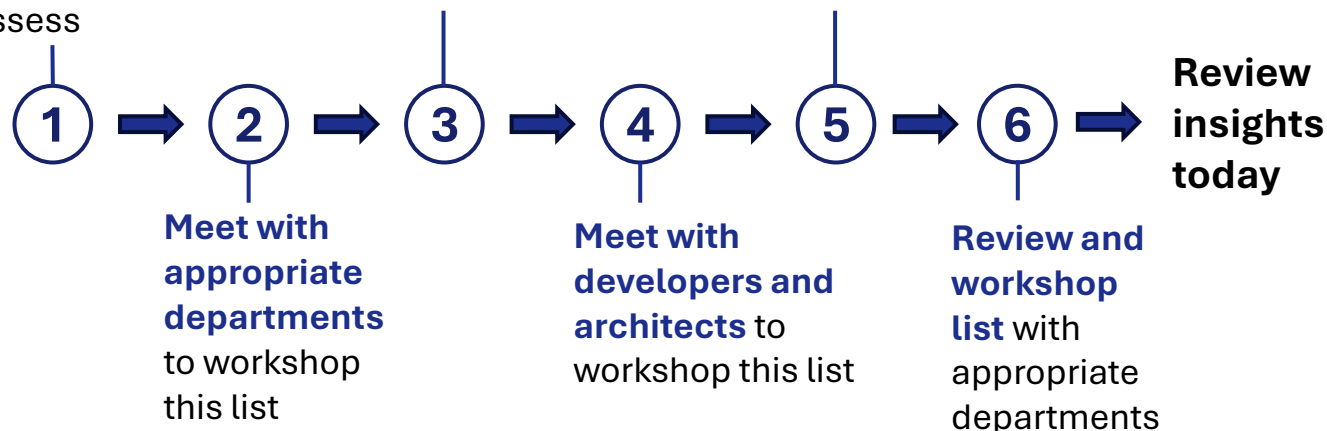
WHEREAS: A November 21, 2025 *Boston Business Journal* article recently reported that Cambridge was ranked at the bottom of a national ranking of 500 cities for permitting efficiency; and

WHEREAS: Local developers have shared frustrations with projects taking almost two years to permit due to a lack of coordination between Community Development and Inspectional Services staff; and

Draft a shortlist
of policies and
processes to
assess

Refine list
based on staff
feedback

Refine list based
on developer
feedback



Both internal and external stakeholders identified pain points in 3 key buckets of the permitting process

Pain points	Internal	External	Solution area
① Policy	– Redundant regulations lead to duplicative work ✓ City has made good progress in reducing regulatory barriers in recent years	– Many regulations feel too restrictive and can lead to churn – Inclusionary, green building and bike parking add most significant costs ✓ Cambridge has done better job responding to dev input than other cities recently	Clearer, simpler, more flexible requirements
② Process	– Inconsistent forms (spread across OpenGov, paper, other sites, etc.) ✓ Strong coordination amongst departments	– Developers feel some reviews take too long – “Fatal flaws” flagged too late ✓ Biggest asset is staff, viewed as professional, experienced, & move projects forward ✓ OpenGov an improvement on prior permitting system	Streamlined reviews
③ Comms	– Incomplete applications lead to increased staff and permitting time – Lack of single source of info creates more questions for staff to answer	– Unclear point of contact through the process – Process feels unpredictable – Lack of clarity on process	Reduced Submission Errors

Proposed solutions

Proposed three-pronged approach to address pain points in the permit process today

Approach	Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
1 Clearer, simpler, more flexible requirements	• Streamline green building requirements for residential & mixed-use buildings • Conduct comprehensive review of demo delay ordinance • Issue updated stormwater regulations	• Review Green roof zoning • Fix inconsistencies between zoning and building codes • Review zoning building and site plan reqs in 19.50 to clarify and add flexibility • Update TIS Regulations	• Review inclusionary study • Update bike parking requirement • Review Green Factor
2 Streamlined reviews	• Add required attachments to building permit application • Utilize Project Review Coordination meetings prior to permit • Add descriptions and timelines to permit workflow steps	• Review and streamline Traffic Impact Study process • Move all apps to OpenGov • Revisit plan for Planning Board visual mockup	• One project manager to be main city point of contact for applications
3 Reduced Submission Errors	• Publish FAQs and permitting guides • Provide a matrix of different permit and ordinance thresholds • Provide a typical process map	• Consolidate to a central permitting website • Updated application checklists for each permit and review • Publish clarifications on confusing policy	• Add AI chatbot to central permitting website • Create custom, AI-made process maps for each permit applicant • Regular continuing education sessions with ISD

Update regulations to simplify, improve clarity, and add flexibility

Timing	Action	Department	Council Action?
Short	Align zoning green building review with building permit stretch code review and fossil fuel free ordinance for residential and exempt the commercial portion of mixed-use projects	CDD	Yes
	Issue updated stormwater regulations to clarify thresholds, particularly for by-right development	DPW	No
	Conduct comprehensive review of demo delay ordinance	CHC	Yes
Medium	Review green roof requirements to determine if necessary, given Green Factor and competing rooftop requirements	CDD	Yes
	Review TIS regulations	CDOT	No
	Update 19.50 building and site plan requirements for clarity and flexibility	CDD	Yes
	Fix inconsistencies between building and zoning code – definition of first floor and story exemptions	CDD, ISD	Yes
Long	Review inclusionary zoning study currently underway	Housing	Yes
	Review Green Factor requirements for applicability to existing buildings and paved commercial sites	CDD	Yes
	Update bike parking requirements	CDOT, CDD	Yes

Continue to streamline the review process

Timing	Action	Department	Council Action?
Short	Add required attachments to building permit application with descriptions of required documents and links to templates/forms	All	No
	Institutionalize Project Review Coordination meetings with applicant prior to building permit	All	No
	Add descriptions and timelines to building permit workflow steps	All	No
Medium	Review and streamline Traffic Impact Study process	CDOT	No
	Move applications to OpenGov	CHC, CDD	No
	Revisit need for Planning Board visual mockup	CDD	No
Long	One project manager to be main city point of contact	All	No

Improve communication and education materials to reduce errors and incomplete submissions

Timing	Action	Department	Council Action?
Short	Publish FAQs and permitting guides	CDD	No
	Provide a matrix of review thresholds	CDD	No
	Create a typical process map that shows the order of applications and reviews prior to building permit application	CDD	No
Medium	Central Permitting Website that links to all applications, checklists, and other permitting info	All	No
	Updated application checklists for each permit and review	All	No
	Publish clarifications on confusing regulations and processes	ISD	No
Long	AI chatbot on permitting website to answer developer questions / direct to resources	All	No
	ISD to hold regular continuing education sessions for contractors	ISD	No
	Automated process map / checklist for developers based on their needs	All	No

Next steps

- Get feedback from City Council
- Implement set of short-term actions by November 1, 2026
- Begin implementation of medium-term initiatives, goal to complete by February 1, 2027
- Notify stakeholders involved in this process of our planned path forward
- Continue discussions with external stakeholders and test communication materials with focus groups
- Begin to look at streamlining permitting process for small businesses