

PERMIT LITE

A minimalist approach works to maximize efficiency



BY TONY POLLACK, SR/WA, PLS

A federal lands official once told me, “Thank you for your permit. I’ve got 280 projects in the queue. It’s nothing personal but it will take a couple years before I can get to it.”

This kind of response is not unusual. Agency permitting staffs are routinely overwhelmed, especially at the federal level. The ability to move forward with your high priority project can frequently depend on whether you’re able to get through to the one person tasked with the permitting process. And when an agency staffer leaves, it may take up to take eight months to fill

the position because of budget freezes or lengthy political processes.

It doesn’t help overall efficiency when consultants submit a foot-high stack of documents with the permit proposal. Does the agency really need a 60-page environmental assessment about foxes, squirrels and owls? And what about a 10-page development plan? When you add that to dozens of maps, construction drawings, lengthy reports describing current easements and exhaustive property legal descriptions, the paperwork seems endless. It’s no wonder that construction famously

lags the rest of the economy in terms of productivity. The current permitting process is not something one would call efficient.

A Better Way

Recently, a client began asking us to submit smaller permit packages. "I'm just trying to save you time," he said. "After all, you have 30 projects to do for us."

We thought about that. The reality is, engineers tend to give way more information than might be necessary. Our tendency is to think, "Well it couldn't hurt to give them that too." But do agency officials need any more information than a map and a brief description of the development plan? After all, more information, such as the environmental impact report, will be presented later in the process. So we decided to try it.

Doubling Productivity

Our projects for the U.S. Forest Service are a good example. We've done 15 permit applications during the past five years. With the latest batch, we went permit lite. In other words, we got rid of all the unnecessary fluff. Of course, we made sure to research the regulations to see what the permit required and checked all the boxes that we thought we needed to cover. As a result, we were able to reduce our initial submittal from 40 pages down to five pages. We typically delivered hard copies because the packages were so big. Now we can email them.

Since the project description is really the heart of the permit request, using permit lite has streamlined the entire process, while dramatically improving our workflow. We're finding that what used to take us 40 hours to compile might now take only 20.

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We've been able to use permit lite with several clients, and to date, we haven't received any negative feedback from agencies. We are happy to report that work is progressing.

Taking Some Precautions

If you are going to try the minimalist approach, there are a few precautions to take. First, make sure you have a list of all the information the agency requires. Research the regulations for exact requirements. Prepare a brief narrative, project description and map, but don't overkill on information that isn't important.

It's also essential to know your agency and your client's history with that agency. We have a client that builds multiple projects on U.S. Forest Service land, for example, and the agency trusts that our client will restore and care for the land. That translates into needing less information in the permit application.

After the submittal, expect a negotiation process. Although we always walk the official through the physical property to show what our plans are, the agency still might ask for more information. Sometimes, our client will think the request is overreaching or too costly to fulfill. If you agree, don't be afraid to push back

a little. The process may require some give and take, and getting to an agreement may take two or three review rounds.

There is the potential for permit lite to backfire, especially if an official feels blindsided by key information missing. The permitting process is open and transparent, so you don't want to leave out crucial information if you have it.

The bottom line is, permit lite can achieve the same goals with less time and money spent by all parties. And when we can eliminate inefficiencies in the system, everyone benefits. 🌟



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