

# Delaware Must Turn Permitting Process from a Drawback to an Attraction

BY ROBERT PERKINS



WHEN IT COMES TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, we know that a clearly defined and predictable permitting process in a state or community is a must when companies are selecting new sites for offices or manufacturing facilities. Such clarity is crucial for businesses to meet their business goals in time and within budget.

Unfortunately, Delaware's permitting process is seen as a drag on the state's business climate, working against our reputation for low taxes, quality workforce and proximity to key economic centers on the East Coast.

In fact, the First State's permitting process often creates a litany of roadblocks for businesses and their site selectors. Those include costs, clarity on what information and materials are needed, and review duration. This last point is particularly vexing, as reviews by county and state agencies – including the state Departments of Transportation and Natural Resources and Environmental Control – can take as long as 18-24 months.

That puts Delaware at a huge disadvantage when it comes to attracting and growing business. So much so that a group of site selectors – individuals who help businesses determine where they will locate their businesses – told the Delaware Prosperity Partnership that Delaware is not considered by many corporations because of that 18 to 24-month permitting process. For Delaware to even compete with other states, they said, Delaware needs to get its permitting window down to six months.

The Delaware Business Roundtable and a coalition of organizations statewide are calling on the state to embrace the "Ready in 6" initiative, in which state and county agencies will work with the business community to develop processes by which it can significantly cut the amount of time it takes to approve development projects. The Ready in 6 coalition includes the Delaware Business Roundtable, Delaware State Chamber, Kent Economic Partnership, Greater Kent Committee, Sussex County Economic Development Action Team, ACEC Delaware, the Committee of 100, the Central Delaware Chamber, New Castle County Chamber, Delaware Contractors Association, the Delaware Chapter of Associated Builders and

Contractors, and the Home Builders Association of Delaware.

The Roundtable believes the state needs to adopt common sense solutions to get from 24 to six months. These include recommendations from a study by professional services firm KPMG, including enhancing communication, reducing bureaucracy and paperwork, and tracking and using data more effectively. Specifically, the study recommended:

Create a state permitting concierge to help streamline communication among state agencies, along with a steering committee made up of key state and county stakeholders to assist with the implementation of permit improvements.

Create a prioritization program for significant economic development projects to fast track approvals, along with pre-packaged approvals for targeted investment sites.

State and county agencies should generate data that measures permit process timelines and capture more and better economic development data, allowing regulators to develop key performance indicators once historical data is available – while identifying new, missed and lost opportunities. Data currently is inconsistently collected by state and county agencies. By collecting and publishing metrics, it would drive increased transparency and accountability among permitting agencies.

These steps would drastically reduce review times, provide badly needed certainty in the review process, and make Delaware much more competitive in the economic development game.

Coupled with low taxes, a prime location and high quality workers, a more favorable permitting environment would make it significantly more likely that Delaware would be more competitive as we work to grow, retain and attract businesses to our state. ■

## DELAWARE BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE



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