

Oakland is automating 70% of its building permits. Here's how development will change



Oakland City Hall in Downtown Oakland on Monday, Nov. 28, 2022.
ADAM PARDEE

By [Hannah Kanik](#) – Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
Dec 5, 2023 **Updated** Dec 6, 2023 8:12pm PST

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Oakland is making changes to the way it issues some building permits in an effort to streamline the often-bureaucratic process – but some developers aren't convinced it will improve things for larger projects.

Mayor Sheng Thao announced at the San Francisco Business Times' Oakland Structures event last Thursday that 70% of the types of building permits issued in Oakland will be automated by the end of the year - meaning permits that previously took weeks to procure could be in an applicant's hands in minutes.

"You will be able to apply online, pay online and have your permit available for printing – guess what – immediately," Thao said.

And while the audience of Oakland-based developers and investors shared sideways glances of skepticism following the announcement from the mayor, Thao pressed her case: "It's true, you guys – I know everyone's rolling their eyes because they don't believe me... this work can be done."

At least for smaller residential permits, that is. Rob Selna, vice president of the Oakland Builders Alliance, said the 70% of permits cover smaller projects like residential or commercial renovations, and won't necessarily have a direct impact on larger developments.

The 70% number "exaggerates the degree to which builders and developers will be able to in any way expedite their projects," Selna said. "Those two just don't really line up."

Oakland records showed that in 2022, around 10,000 of the 15,000 permits received did not require review by a staffer. Permits for everything from lead paint removal and solar panel installation to mechanical, electrical and plumbing permits - which total 32 of the 47 permit types in Oakland - will be automated by the end of the year.

Seth Lang, vice president of development at Riaz Capital, said he hopes the automation of smaller projects will at least lighten the load for staff so they can focus on reviewing and approving permits for larger developments. He said it currently takes a couple of months for a submitted permit on a larger development to even get assigned to a plan checker.

"I would hope there would be more time capacity towards the larger permits, which obviously need to be combed over with the finer-tooth comb," Lang said. "Because then you really get the plan checkers focused on permits that actually need a review, and you don't just get this backlog based on all the permits that have been submitted."

The move is part of a larger initiative at the city of Oakland to improve all aspects of the "customer experience" when applying for permits, including the hiring of Robin Abad, a new citywide ombuds [charged with streamlining permits](#). Abad said the city is also rolling out online appointment booking and a digital scoping tool to support applicants.

George Heasley, assistant development manager at oWow, said automating the process for minor permits will help move things along and give more power to developers.

"I speak on behalf of all contractors and architects that are working in Oakland, we feel like we should be trusted by the city that we're submitting code-compliant designs, and we're going to build to code," Heasley said. "Allowing for instantaneous permit approvals gives us the power ... and responsibility in our hands to make sure that we're designing and building compliant buildings."

T H E S T

Largest Oakland Construction Projects

Construction cost

Rank	Prior Rank	Project
1	1	Samuel Merritt University
2	2	Saltaire
3	3	Casa Suenos

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Correction/Clarification

A previous version of this story incorrectly stated the number of permits the city of Oakland received in 2022. It has been updated to reflect the correct number.