

Digital Permitting Implementing Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290) Legislative Report

Pursuant to Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290)

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Report to the Legislature

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Executive summary

This report captures the discussions and recommendations of the Digital Permit Work Group. The Department of Commerce (Commerce) convened members from city and county associations, building officials, and trades to consider streamlined permit processes, improved efficiency, and the acceleration of residential building permits needed to meet housing needs statewide.

Authorizing statute

[Chapter 338, Laws of 2023](#) (SB 5290) required Commerce to assess the existing needs, barriers and benefits of digital permitting systems, and explore the potential, including through budgetary, administrative policy or legislative recommendations, for a statewide system. Specifically:

- (1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the department of commerce must convene a digital permitting process work group to examine potential license and permitting software for local governments to encourage streamlined and efficient permit review.
- (2) The department of commerce, in consultation with the association of Washington cities and Washington state association of counties, shall appoint members to the work group representing groups including but not limited to:
 - (a) Cities and counties;
 - (b) Building industries; and
 - (c) Building officials.
- (3) The department of commerce must convene the first meeting of the workgroup by August 1, 2023. The department must submit a final report to the governor and the appropriate committees of the legislature by August 1, 2024. The final report must:
 - (a) Evaluate the existing need for digital permitting systems, including impacts on existing digital permitting systems that are already in place;
 - (b) Review barriers preventing local jurisdictions from accessing or adopting digital permitting systems;
 - (c) Evaluate the benefits and costs associated with a statewide permitting software system; and
 - (d) Provide budgetary, administrative policy, and legislative recommendations to increase the adoption of or establish a statewide system of digital permit review.

Statewide Digital Permit System – not the recommended approach

Through research, study, workgroup discussions, stakeholder engagement, and other avenues, it became clear that a statewide mandated system would have a detrimental impact on solving permitting issues. The funding, implementation and mandate of a statewide digital permit system is not the recommended approach.

Why not?

Perhaps most critically, a statewide digital permitting system may have little impact on addressing the need to streamline the processing of residential permit applications. That is because a single statewide system would be required to support 320 cities and counties in Washington – each with its own development regulations, unique internal practices and workflows, and some jurisdictions with previously established digital permitting systems. Creating such a system would involve significant cost and inherent risk that does not return a commensurate benefit to the state. Information technology projects often involve unpredictable costs and implementation schedules, with additional uncertainty tending to compound as the number of systems

required to integrate into the statewide system and the number of separate agencies and departments (such as, review by planning, building, utilities, special districts, and others) increases.

Once established, ongoing maintenance and routine updates of a statewide digital permit system would be substantial. The state would be burdened with a costly program requiring resources, staffing, maintenance, and governance to sustain. [Chapter 4](#) of this report discusses the advantages and disadvantages of a statewide permitting system.

Key findings

The Digital Permit Work Group (DPWG) offers three key findings in outlining a path forward for streamlined permit review:

- Each Washington community is unique, whether large, small, rural, urban, eastern, western, coastal, or agricultural. It's essential to respect these differences at the state level while establishing mandates, measures and requirements on local governments.
- There is initial support for a three-tiered approach to digital permitting from jurisdictions and stakeholders who comprised the DPWG.
- Based on the DPWG's deliberations to streamlining digital permitting, ongoing efforts should focus on amending the Local Project Review Act to provide clear guidance to communities.

Recommendations for digital permitting

While this report does not recommend a statewide digital permitting system, it does outline budget, administrative policy, and additional legislative recommendations that could increase and improve local government owned and operated digital permit systems. Greater detail is in [Chapter 5](#) of this report.

Budgetary recommendations:

- **A tiered approach to grant funding can support digital permitting for more communities. With ongoing grant funding, Commerce can help jurisdictions digitize their permit systems and develop resource lists for jurisdictions, along with best practice guidance.** Local governments are each approaching digital permitting from a unique and different place. A tiered approach to funding community digital permitting systems is necessary. This includes a framework for grant funding, resources, and priorities that focuses on communities using paper or hybrid permitting systems first, and cascading grant support to communities currently using digital systems and innovative systems approaches. As we make investments across each tier, it is important to emphasize Commerce's role in ensuring that best practices are followed and widely shared. Duplicating successful practices, learning from others, and developing a common language will be hallmarks of successful digital permitting practices.
- **A state-hosted opt-in digital permit system could complement the tiered approach to grant funding. However, this requires additional evaluation and the funding for Commerce to complete a feasibility study of the requirements and cost estimates of such an opt-in system.** This approach would best support communities that do not have the staff capacity or technical expertise to manage and host software in-house. Such a system would still be a significant investment with all the project risks inherent in software acquisition. The Legislature should consider this investment in the context of other investments made to achieve the fundamental policy objective of facilitating timely project approval.

Administrative policy recommendations

- **Standardize and support:** Establish a framework for best practices and resources for digital permitting processes for local jurisdictions.
- **Enhance collaboration:** Create a centralized resource and platform for sharing best practices.
- **Ensure consistency and innovation:** Regularly review new technologies and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Additional legislative recommendations

- **Facilitate procurement:** Develop a master list of contractors for digital permitting systems, allowing local governments to choose from pre-qualified vendors to avoid complex procurement processes and to select a vendor who can meet the minimum requirements for digital permitting and reporting to the state.
- **Provide process assistance:** Continue offering technical assistance and grants to local governments for documenting, streamlining, and digitizing permit processes, ensuring faster and more predictable reviews.
- **Clarify regulatory framework:** Amend RCW 36.70B to provide clearer guidance, standardized terms, and consistent application of permit processes across local governments, ensuring alignment with legislative goals.

Introduction

The Washington State Legislature passed Substitute Senate Bill 5290 (SB 5290), which became Chapter 338, Laws of 2023, to consolidate local permit review processes with the goal of expediting housing development in the State of Washington. Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 has a variety of elements and mandates but is mostly codified in Chapter 36.70B RCW, Local Project Review, which mainly applies to cities, towns, and counties fully planning under the Growth Management Act (GMA).

Background

Two pivotal efforts lay the groundwork for implementing Chapter 338, Laws of 2023. The first, Collaborative Roadmap Phase III, recommends altering the permit process and review timelines. The second document is the latest State Performance Audit Report, which assesses compliance with meeting current state permitting timelines.

Collaborative Roadmap Phase III

The Collaborative Roadmap Phase III¹ assessed Washington's growth policies over a two-year span (2021-2022). Funded by the Legislature, a task force worked with experts and the public to suggest improvements. Their balanced findings and recommendations aim to clarify and enhance growth and development regulations while providing local governments with more tools to address housing development issues.

Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 implements two recommendations from the Commerce Collaborative Framework III. The first recommendation, included in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290), aligns with GMA Goal 7, emphasizing timely and fair processing of permit applications for state and local governments to ensure predictability. The second recommendation addressed in SB 5290 recognizes and tackles the increasing housing costs in Washington, emphasizing the necessity for quicker, more predictable permitting processes. Permit delays contribute to higher development costs, ultimately affecting housing affordability.

2024 Permitting Performance Audit

In April 2024, the Office of the Washington State Auditor conducted a performance audit for county and city compliance with the state's 120-day permitting requirement. Six local governments were audited, including four cities and two counties. The report concluded that key factors for the slow processing of land use permits include project complexity, staffing shortages, and inefficient processes. Other critical findings include:

- Only one-third of local governments publicly report on permit timeliness, and even fewer include all information required by state law.
- Audited governments met state-mandated permitting deadlines inconsistently in some areas, sometimes by wide margins.
- The performance of the six local governments varied widely and depended on the type of permit.
- Governments do not count the time waiting for applicants against 120 days, but most could not produce reports showing this time.
- Audited governments were inconsistent in how they approached exceptions to the 120-day rule.
- Two audited governments inappropriately used waivers to eliminate permit deadlines entirely.

¹ Washington State Department of Commerce. (2023). [Collaborative Roadmap Phase III: Legislative Report](#).

The State Auditor recommends local governments “prepare for the updated permit performance reporting requirements that will go into effect in 2025 by assessing their ability to meet the requirements and developing any necessary capabilities (such as information systems) to produce those reports.”²

Summary

Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290) is a direct response to the challenges identified in the Collaborative Roadmap Phase III and findings in the 2024 Permitting Performance Audit. The roadmap's recommendations, alongside the audit's findings on permit delays and inconsistent practices, highlight the need for a clearer and more efficient permitting process in Washington.

Legislative mandate

Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 includes (13) sections that address local permit review processes. Specifically amending RCW 36.70B.140, 36.70B.020, 36.70B.070, 36.70B.080, and 36.70B.160; reenacting and amending RCW 36.70B.110; adding new sections to chapter 36.70B RCW; creating new sections; and providing an effective date. While not an exhaustive list, the following bullets outline relevant guidance, actions, and mandates within SB 5290, relative to this report:

- Established a grant program for local governments to improve permit process timelines resulting in housing
- Established a grant program for local governments to update their permit review process from paper filing systems to software systems capable of processing digital permit applications
- Formation of a digital permitting workgroup to examine potential license and permitting software for local governments to encourage streamlined and efficient permit review, as well as requires the Department of Commerce to submit a final report (this Legislative Report) regarding a statewide digital permitting system
- Amended local project review definitions, in particular, excluding building permits from the project permit review definition
- Clarified determination of completeness thresholds for permit processing
- Amended local project permit review timeframes and establishes annual performance report requirements
- Created provisions for expedited project permit review
- Established a technical assistance program provided by the Department of Commerce to guide the setting up of fee structures

Purpose of the report

This legislative report responds to a directive of Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290) to assess the feasibility of a statewide digital permitting system and associated actions to streamline residential development. As required by Section 4 of the law, the Department of Commerce, in coordination with the Association of Washington Cities and Counties formed a "digital permitting process work group." The group examined the feasibility of a statewide digital permitting system in Washington, including the associated challenges and benefits of establishing a statewide system, followed by a report on findings to the legislature on August 1, 2024.

² Office of the Washington State Auditor. (2024). Growth Management Act: County and city compliance with the state's 120-day permitting requirement. Report No. 1034429. Retrieved from <https://sao.wa.gov>

The 40 members of the workgroup, all with expertise in permitting processes, represent cities and counties, building industries, and building officials. The first meeting convened in July 2023. The workgroup's primary focus was the study, findings, and key recommendations within this legislative report on digital permitting. In accordance with Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 (SB 5290), the workgroup addressed four specific areas. To best assess the four tasks below, the workgroup set up biweekly subcommittee meetings to review and approve recommendations for presentation to the larger group.

- 1) Evaluate the existing need for digital permitting systems, including impacts on existing digital permitting systems that are already in place;
- 2) Review barriers preventing local jurisdictions from accessing or adopting digital permitting systems;
- 3) Evaluate the benefits and costs associated with a statewide permitting software system; and
- 4) Provide budgetary, administrative policy, and legislative recommendations to increase the adoption of or establish a statewide system of digital permit review.

For this report, we define a statewide digital permitting system as a statewide owned and operated full-service digital permitting system that serves as a comprehensive online platform designed to streamline and manage the process of obtaining permits across the entire state. This system integrates various functionalities to facilitate the application, review, issuance, tracking, and retention of land development, civil sites, building permits, inspections, events, or any other activities requiring regulatory approval.

In this scenario, the state is responsible for creating and maintaining the system. The state will have complete oversight over permitting activity. This will be the most cost-intensive option at the state level.

Digital permitting systems evaluation

Overview of current permitting systems

Jurisdiction survey

Many local governments throughout Washington have already implemented digital permitting systems in their permit review processes. Digital systems are often used to intake permit applications, track permit status, and automate workflows. Systems can vary by "front-end," the electronic equivalent to the paper permit application form that applicants and technicians fill out at the counter and "back-end." The back end can vary from recording permit timeframes to software that supports the various review functions.

The Washington Department of Commerce surveyed Washington local governments in January 2024 to gather information about current permitting systems across the state. We sent the survey to representatives of all 281 municipalities in Washington, and all 39 county jurisdictions; 181 jurisdictions responded to the survey. Of those who responded, 34% were from municipalities, and 66% were from counties. Additionally, we sent the survey to a selection of professional firms that are customers and representatives of the development community, and received three responses from this group. We summarize the full survey results in Appendix D.

Results helped to guide the digital permit workgroup, Commerce, and the consultant team in organizing digital permitting recommendations for this report. Key findings included:

- How many jurisdictions are using paper, digital permitting processes, or a hybrid? See Table 1.
- Understanding jurisdictional barriers to implementing digital permitting.
- Types of digital permitting programs and software currently used by jurisdictions across the state.

- Pros and cons of implementing digital permitting software.

Table 1: Jurisdiction survey permit process

Permit Process	Response #	Percent (%)
Digital only	77	42.5
Hybrid - paper and digital submittal options	81	44.8
Paper only	23	12.7
Total responses	181	100

Source: Department of Commerce Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 Initiated Jurisdiction Survey, January 2024 Results

2.1.2 Current technology infrastructure

Of the survey respondents (181 total), 146 or 81% are ‘fully planning’ jurisdictions, and 34 or 19% are ‘partially planning’ jurisdictions.

Of the 34 ‘partially planning’ jurisdictions that responded to the survey, 32% reported that they have paper-only permitting systems, 18% have digital-only permitting systems, and the remaining (50%) have hybrid paper and digital systems.

For the ‘fully planning’ jurisdictions, 8% reported paper-only permitting systems, 48% are using digital only systems, and 44% are using hybrid-digital submittal options. The size, complexity, and sophistication of the digital and hybrid systems varied widely across these jurisdictions based on the community size and quantity of permits processed.

As a rule, larger jurisdictions with greater permit volumes tend to have digital or hybrid systems. Smaller jurisdictions with lower volumes are paper-only. Although 42.5% of jurisdictions are digital only, a much larger percentage of permits issued are through a digital-only system.

Table 2 includes responses from the survey and outreach efforts with the workgroup. The information pertains to existing digital permitting software platforms and the type of services the platforms provide.

Table 2: Overview of Existing Digital Permitting Software: WA Jurisdictions

Front end service (customer facing)	Both	Back-end software (permit tracking, time, approvals, etc.)	Supporting software
Mybuildingpermit.com	Smartgov	Most software migrated to only front-end service (cost prohibitive)	Bluebeam (plan review)
Citizen self service	CivicPlus	BIAS	DigEPlan (plan review)
Camino	City View		Avovle (plan review)
Portal(frontend), Virtual, Mobile, etc.	Accela (SaaS)		Selectron (inspections, text in request, inspection app, integrator)
	Amanda (Granicus)		Velosimo (integrator)
	EnerGov		Computronix (integrator and consultant)
	Sales force		GIS/ ESRI (mapping)

	Oracle (modules: finance/utilities)		Integration with jurisdiction finance software systems (Eden, Tyler, Warden, Workday, etc.)
	City works		Adobe Creative Suite
	Open gov		Microsoft Office
	Tyler (EPL – former Intergov)		Computer Maintenance Management System (CMMS)
	E-TRAKIT (Central Square)		
	Custom build system – Maximo, Hansen, etc.		

Source: Department of Commerce SB 5290 Initiated Jurisdiction Survey, January 2024 Results and Input from SB 5290 digital permit workgroup

Jurisdictions scale the technology they adopt to the level of revenue and quantity of permits they process. They also consider the broadband access their customers have, and the number of paper permit applications submitted.

Smaller 'off-the-shelf' applications that support online intake, inspection scheduling, plan review tracking and status, and some integration with financial and GIS software can be implemented for \$65,000 to \$100,000. For many smaller jurisdictions that plan their implementation well, these systems will – along with hybrid paper intake – serve their permitting needs. The limitations of these systems are greater for land use applications than for civil and building permits.

Larger jurisdictions that process significantly more permits and have more complicated land use codes and higher permit fees confront larger program and project challenges. Implementing technology (training, process streamlining, integration with other systems, data management, customer outreach) is resource-intensive and may be broken down into phases and into program areas. Costs range from \$1.5 million per installation (electrical permits) to \$4 million in initial program costs and up to \$750,000 in annual maintenance costs.

At the higher end of costs, software systems include various independent systems integrated to provide a complex range of customer intake, scheduling, tracking, communication, public records access and automation, review, reporting, inspection, and data management.

Impacts on existing digital permitting systems

The primary issues raised by the workgroup pertaining to statewide digital permitting system impacts of new technology on existing digital and hybrid permitting systems include:

- Ease of use, such as for training and implementation purposes.
- Technology support, given that support is limited.
- Mandating the adoption of new technology and regulations.
- Costs of adoption and the impacts of costs on fees.
- Impacts on technical staff and training costs.
- Impacts on timeframes to review and issue permits.
- Funding available for digital permitting software.
- Ability to develop software that better supports building permitting.
- Maintenance issues.
- Smaller jurisdictions are more concerned about the need for both paper and digital systems and the lack of broadband coverage to support the digital inspection services mentioned in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023.

There is the potential for regional online customer portal solutions that the state could develop and sponsor. These solutions would provide a consistent and stable platform for customer access to building, civil, and land

development, and inspection-related services for all jurisdictions in the state, regardless of the individual jurisdictions' back-end digital configuration. Such a front-end portal would capture most if not all, of the permitting data SB 5290 requires and manage the fee collection and transfer of application information to the jurisdiction for processing. (See Section 5.1.3)

Establishing regional systems could enable a customized planning-focused portal specific to regional interests and economies. An example is the MyBuildingPermit.com system in the Puget Sound Region that serves King and Snohomish County jurisdictions. (See Appendix C)

Integration with existing systems

Through the workgroup discussions, essential functions and capabilities of digital permitting systems were identified and analyzed. This effort included analyzing the capacities of existing digital permitting systems, strengths and limitations, and the requirements a statewide digital permitting system would need to meet the demands of various jurisdictions.

Some jurisdictions have built custom online systems, tailored to their unique needs and workflows. They built these systems using existing software and adapting it with modules, applications, and plugins to achieve their desired results. Other jurisdictions use a more plug-and-play system, wherein the permitting needs are generally met by the system's standard features. Furthermore, some jurisdictions do not have an online permitting system, and manage all processes via paper and standard spreadsheet tracking.

Any effective digital permitting system must address fundamental requirements, and prioritizing these features can pose a challenge that requires careful consideration of jurisdictional needs, user roles, and regulatory compliance. The identified capabilities encompass essential functionalities to enhance the permitting process's efficiency, adaptability, and transparency, catering to the diverse requirements of stakeholders involved in the system's utilization.

Barriers to digital permitting systems

Several barriers exist to prevent local governments from successfully establishing and adopting digital permitting systems, as described in this section.

Barriers identified by the workgroup

The digital permitting workgroup identified the following barriers to adoption of a digital permitting system at the local government level:

Implementation: The challenges associated with implementing a digital permitting system include

- the significant effort required to integrate existing systems with a new one and
- the difficulty in bridging the gap between departments reliant on paper copies and those transitioning to digital platforms.

Additionally, the workgroup raised concerns about:

- jurisdictions with functional permit management systems lacking a public portal,
- the hindrances to the effectiveness of digital plan review systems due to factors beyond the system itself such as ease of use and collaboration between departments,
- the oversight of alignment with the planning/land use process in many digital permitting systems, and

- delays in the process caused by varied processing times, data conversion from legacy systems, and configuration challenges.

Organizational structures: The structure of each jurisdiction contributes to significant differences in implementation and systems design. The most common structural difference is that some jurisdictions have a community development department and some do not. In jurisdictions with a community development department, the building division coordinates with a separate public works and fire department. Organizations that do not have a community development department, in contrast, provide combined services for community development (long and short-range planning), building plan review (structural, energy, mechanical, plumbing, electrical, geotechnical, etc.), fire, engineering, and combined and specialty inspections. IT resources within jurisdictions also contribute to the timeliness and resilience of implementation and data management including public records management.

Timelines: Timeframe considerations include the distinct timelines and staff efforts involved in reviewing residential and commercial permits, the required staff time for implementing a new permitting system while managing the current workload, and the time-consuming effort of digitizing paper permits.

Maintenance and control of systems: Challenges within governmental systems management and implementation, including disparities in ease of use between software designers and end-users, mismatches between state mandates and jurisdictional needs, significant variations in needs and practices among different jurisdictions, and the additional hurdle posed by jurisdictions lacking in-house tech-related expertise to oversee maintenance.

Cost: Significant financial challenges, particularly in smaller jurisdictions that have greater difficulties securing funding for these systems, highlighting the necessity for expertise in establishing cost recovery mechanisms and expressing concern over the high expenses associated with cloud hosting costs. A quality inherent in a digital system is that they have a high up-front cost to build and maintain the system, while the incremental cost for each permit is relatively low. Large jurisdictions with a high volume can spread these up-front costs across many permits. For a small jurisdiction with low permit volume, these high up-front costs become prohibitive. Additionally, annual maintenance and cloud subscription fees are also cost-prohibitive for smaller jurisdictions with low volumes. This leads smaller jurisdictions to consider participation in shared-cost regional or statewide consortiums.

User experience: The workgroup emphasized the critical importance of user-friendly systems within permit processes. They stressed the need to ensure accessibility for applicants who may lack technological proficiency. They also stressed the need for a system that is easy to navigate for both staff and applicants across various jurisdictions, the necessity for seamless integration with other state agencies to facilitate efficient collaboration and record-keeping, and the importance of easy data capture for reporting purposes, given the complexity of records retention systems.

Support for change: The challenge to change organizational processes was highlighted, emphasizing that resistance to change can persist despite the potential of a new process to address existing problems and inefficiencies. This resistance may stem from a preference for established processes, particularly if staff are unwilling to navigate the challenges associated with a transition. Some resistance stems from the reality of the resource constraints that small jurisdictions experience. Limited staffing for the existing workload makes it very difficult to consider taking on the monumental task of implementing new processes and technology while continuing to deliver services.

Barriers to being fully digital identified in the survey

Budgetary constraints: Participants mentioned budgetary constraints and the cost-prohibitive nature of implementing a digital permitting system. Financial resources are a significant consideration for jurisdictions.

External user ability (customers): The ability of external users or customers to interact with the digital system. This includes issues such as user interface accessibility, ease of use, and training needs for external stakeholders.

Internal user ability: Capabilities of staff or personnel within the organization may make using a digital permitting system difficult. This could encompass training needs, technological literacy, and existing internal processes. Adequate training for staff members to use the digital permitting system effectively is noted. This includes internal personnel responsible for administering the system and those interacting with applicants.

Internet/broadband issues: Participants raised concerns about internet or broadband issues that could hinder the digital system's functionality or accessibility. This issue can hinder both the customer and the field staff, inspectors and staff who visit development sites. Finally, limited broadband hinders some jurisdictions from implementing remote work, virtual meetings, and virtual inspections.

Limited support for customers/applicants: Lack of support for customers or applicants interacting with the digital system. This might involve insufficient assistance, guidance, or troubleshooting resources for users encountering difficulties.

Priorities from elected officials: Some responses mentioned that priorities set by elected officials could act as a barrier. This suggests that political or administrative decisions may influence the allocation of resources or focus within some organizations.

Statewide digital system benefits and costs

A thorough cost-benefit analysis is a critical component of evaluating the feasibility of a statewide permitting system. This section undertakes such an analysis, considering both the potential advantages and the associated costs based on the findings of the digital permitting workgroup.

Statewide permitting system benefits

Research into digital permitting across the state indicates that jurisdictions that allow their customers to engage with them electronically rather than in person, by mail, or by fax have distinct advantages in the quality and efficiency of customer service relationships.

Specifically, those jurisdictions that process and approve permits and licenses or generally provide information to the public electronically (versus paper submittals and requests) provide distinct, measurable customer and staff benefits. Some of the measurable customer benefits include:

- It saves time for customers.
- It saves money for customers.
- It provides better customer service.
- It is faster and more efficient to get status information about a project.
- More information is available online.
- Customers make fewer trips to City Hall or the County Building.
- Online services are an expectation in 2024.

Some of the measurable jurisdiction benefits include:

- Typically, there are improved, streamlined processes and project reporting, including cost recovery with thoughtful and appropriate electronic system implementation, integration, and staff training.
- Electronic data file systems provide easier access to Project Plans and fewer lost plans.
- There are faster reviews, streamlined processes, and better-quality plan submittals at initial intake.
- Electronic review allows staff to telecommute and improve the quality of work life.
- Fewer walk-in customers and fewer phone calls (regarding the status of review) give staff more time to process permits, conduct reviews, reduce costs, and contribute to the quality of work life.
- Increased telecommuting and eliminating paper plan storage provides more office space and reduces costs.
- Better quality tools associated with electronic review, intake, issuance, inspection, enforcement, project coordination, communication (internal and external), and data storage provide improved quality of work, reporting, cost of service, customer service, success, and satisfaction.
- As the entire permitting process becomes optimized over time, more time is available for staff training and development, improving quality of work life, staff satisfaction, and overall customer service.

The Washington Association of Building Officials shared this project's research on actual cost benefits captured by implementing paperless or electronic permitting from a training program offered in 2018.³

- Paperless permitting for Swedish Hospital in Issaquah resulted in:
 - 5,000 pounds of paper saved
 - \$63,000 in printing costs savings (2018 dollars)
- King County reported cost benefits (2018 dollars) in before and after (paperless) savings for:
 - Home addition: before online at \$300, paperless less than \$50 through myBuildingPermit.com
 - New Custom Home: before online at \$300, paperless \$180 through myBuildingPermit.com
 - Preliminary Short Plat: before online at \$800, paperless \$290 through myBuildingPermit.com

The digital permitting workgroup's key findings highlight the advantages of a statewide permitting system:

- A consistent system across all jurisdictions would improve the external user experience. This approach would mitigate the learning curve that applicants encounter when navigating diverse systems and jurisdiction-specific processes.
- The statewide digital permitting system would provide greater transparency into the permitting process, allow applicants to track the status of their applications, and foster trust in government processes.
- Implementing a statewide permitting system is likely to increase the rate of complete application submissions. Experienced applicants would benefit from the familiarity of a consistent interface across various jurisdictions.
- A statewide permitting system would guarantee that every jurisdiction possesses the software to comply with mandated review timelines and state reporting requirements.
- Implementing a standardized system overseen by the state could efficiently address concerns regarding software maintenance and technical support.
- A state-provided system would enhance accessibility to digital permitting software, benefiting smaller jurisdictions with significant financial and internal capacity barriers.

³ Paperless Permitting & Electronic Plan Review, 2018 WABO AE I. contact Jake Hesselgesser Business Services Director, Development Services, City of Bellevue, jhesselges@bellevuewa.gov

- Creating a standard statewide system would promote collaboration and information sharing among government agencies involved in the permitting process, leading to more cohesive and coordinated efforts.

Consistency

One of the main benefits of a statewide digital permitting system is the opportunity for consistency among jurisdictions.

A statewide digital system would allow for the standardization of permitting processes across jurisdictions. Common workflows, forms, and approval procedures can be established, ensuring all entities follow consistent guidelines. This standardization would reduce confusion and promote uniformity in reviewing and approving permits. A universal system enables consistent communication channels, including notifications, updates, and feedback mechanisms. By utilizing a common platform for communication, jurisdictions can ensure that applicants and staff uniformly receive information, reducing misunderstandings and discrepancies. This also allows for the integration of shared compliance standards and regulatory requirements. All jurisdictions can align their permitting processes with the same set of rules and regulations and ensure that permits are issued following a consistent legal framework.

A digital permitting system facilitates the centralized storage of permit-related data. This central repository ensures that all jurisdictions have access to the same information, promoting uniformity in data records. Shared databases reduce the likelihood of discrepancies or inconsistencies in data across different regions.

We can standardize training programs and support resources for permit reviewers and administrators across jurisdictions within the digital platform. This ensures that staff members receive consistent training for using the system, leading to a more uniform application of rules and procedures.

By implementing a digital permitting system, jurisdictions can share and adopt best practices. As they interact within a common platform, they can learn from each other's experiences, leading to continuous improvement and the establishment of standardized, efficient practices.

Concurrent and consolidated review capabilities

Consolidated review refers to reviewing multiple permits for a project simultaneously or through a coordinated effort. The approach of consolidating reviews is beneficial when a project involves multiple permits that fall under the jurisdiction of separate departments. Rather than requiring applicants to go through separate processes for each permit, a consolidated review system aims to merge processes into a single evaluation.

A statewide system that applies consolidated review principles would offer an opportunity to meet approval timelines as efficiently as possible. The advantages of a consolidated review of permits include faster approval timelines, reduced administrative burden for applicants, increased transparency, and improved collaboration among regulatory agencies. However, the success of such a system often depends on effective communication, collaboration, and the establishment of clear procedures and agreements among the various entities involved in the permitting process.

Potential reporting benefits

Adopting a statewide permitting system would yield significant benefits in terms of performance reporting, offering a streamlined and centralized approach to data collection and analysis. Implementing a unified system would standardize reporting formats and data fields across all jurisdictions. This standardization ensures consistency in the information collected, making it easier to collect and compare data at the state level.

A statewide permitting system allows for real-time reporting capabilities. With a centralized digital platform, authorities can access and analyze data promptly, enabling quicker response to regulatory compliance concerns. This flexibility in reporting can enhance decision-making processes and facilitate more proactive management of permit-related activities.

The adoption of a statewide system also promotes transparency in reporting. Stakeholders, including government agencies, businesses, and the public, can access consistent and up-to-date information on permitting activities. This transparency fosters trust and accountability as the data becomes readily available for scrutiny and verification.

The centralized nature of a statewide permitting system facilitates comprehensive data analytics. State agencies can use advanced analytics tools to identify patterns, trends, and areas for improvement in the permitting process. This data-driven approach allows for evidence-based decision making, leading to more effective policies and resource allocation. These benefits create a more efficient, accountable, and responsive regulatory environment.

Establishment of digital access for all jurisdictions

Many smaller jurisdictions still process applications using paper forms only. If done correctly, shifting from paper-based processes to digital permitting would significantly reduce the time and effort of handling physical forms. Automating workflows, data entry, and communication streamlines the entire permitting process, leading to faster approvals and reduced administrative burden.

Digital systems minimize the risk of errors inherent in manual data entry and reduce issues such as lost paperwork, unreadable writing, or the need to scan documents for access. A digital system would also allow for remote access to permit-related data, in which applicants and staff can submit and track permits from anywhere as long as they have an internet connection.

Digital systems provide better tools for tracking and reporting, making it much easier for jurisdictions to meet reporting requirements and extract data for multiple purposes.

Paired with legislative updates

Linking a statewide permitting system to legislative changes would allow jurisdictions to adapt to changing policies more easily. Recommendations from the workgroup mentioned that a statewide system could simplify the process of making workflow changes to accommodate new regulatory requirements and data collection. However, the system must implement the development regulations adopted by the jurisdiction. Depending on the statutory requirement, legislative action on a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction basis is still necessary.

If a statewide system were implemented, it would best serve jurisdictions by linking regulation requirements with the system. The workgroup recommended that regulations not be enforced until or unless the statewide system can accommodate them. In this scenario, the software may be updated incrementally over time, tweaking the data it collects to better serve legislative requirements.

Without this caveat, a statewide permitting system would likely cause more administrative challenges rather than solving them.

Statewide permitting system disadvantages

Several workgroup members voiced strong opposition to implementing a universal statewide permitting system, as it would come with multiple challenges that would greatly outweigh the benefits.

State considerations

The Washington Department of Commerce Information Services and the workgroup determined the following:

- The creation and implementation of this system would involve extreme costs and time across all jurisdictions.
- We anticipate it would take considerable time to implement statewide.
- The system may lack compatibility with jurisdictions.
- It may not make sense for small jurisdictions.
- Some jurisdictions will not have the technical support they need.
- Some jurisdictions do prefer their current system.
- The timeframe to implement may not justify the investment.
- Costs to jurisdictions and users will be significant and may exceed the value added.
- Providing technical support for jurisdictions lacking this will be an added cost.
- Providing support for old records digitization is an added cost.
- Jurisdictions will lose the ability to configure personal systems unless they are given adequate permissions and have the technical expertise to support that work.
- The cost of integrating with local jurisdiction systems (e.g., financial, GIS, data storage, IVR, CMMS, etc.) may not be fully covered or considered.
- Purchase of additional systems (Bluebeam, Adobe, Avolve, etc.) or scanning hardware for paper integration may not be covered.
- Accommodating organizational differences in how permits are reviewed and issued will challenge design and implementation.
- Accommodating code and fee differences in jurisdictions will challenge design and implementation.

Staff time

One significant drawback of implementing a statewide digital permitting system is the substantial investment of staff time required for the transition. Jurisdictions with existing systems have likely invested considerable effort in customizing their processes to suit local needs. The shift to a statewide system requires jurisdictions that have opted in to adapt their established workflows, leading to disruptions and delays. The time spent to reconfigure existing procedures and adjusting to the new system may result in temporary setbacks in permit processing, potentially affecting the overall efficiency of local permitting departments.

Additionally, the Department of Commerce's in-house IT would likely need to hire and train more employees to build and maintain a state-developed permitting solution. If they were to work with an existing vendor with established processes, the burden placed upon the in-house IT staff would not be as high, which means more jurisdictions could be helped in less time.

Even with a clear and concise onboarding and transition process, migration implications would require considerable staff resources as noted here and in the Training section.

Training

Training costs pose another significant concern in adopting a statewide digital permitting system. Any widespread transition requires extensive training programs to equip staff and customers in different

jurisdictions with the necessary skills to operate the new system effectively. Training for staff demands time away from regular responsibilities, leading to productivity losses during the learning curve. Moreover, the need for specialized consultants, trainers, and training materials incurs additional expenses, contributing to the overall financial and economic burden of the implementation process.

Home rule

Some people within the workgroup communicated that Washington is a home rule state, meaning that local jurisdictions have a considerable degree of autonomy and authority over their affairs, including matters related to governance and regulation. As a result, introducing a statewide digital permitting system would need to navigate the complexities and considerations associated with Washington's home rule principles.

To date, no statewide digital permitting system has been implemented in states with home rule status. Additionally, there is no precedent for a statewide system covering all permits, including building, land use/planning, and utility permits. Statewide permitting systems in Oregon, Rhode Island, and New Jersey only cover building and some civil site utility permits.

A statewide system that accommodates all jurisdictions would need to be extremely configurable to make it feasible for a home rule state. Such a large undertaking may be out of reach, especially when considering implementing a digital system for multiple types of permits, including building, land use, and other utility permits.

Market forces

Implementing a mandated statewide digital permitting system also raises concerns about the potential for monopolizing the market. When a statewide system is introduced, there is a risk that it may dominate the digital permitting landscape, potentially limiting competition and stifling innovation from other providers. This monopoly could have several negative implications for the market and the jurisdictions involved.

One key disadvantage of a monopolized market is the potential for reduced choices and flexibility for jurisdictions. If the statewide system becomes the dominant or exclusive option, local authorities may have limited alternatives when selecting a digital permitting solution that aligns with their specific needs and preferences. The lack of competition could result in a one-size-fits-all approach that may not adequately cater to different jurisdictions' diverse requirements.

Monopolization can also lead to increased dependency on a single vendor or provider. If the statewide system is provided by a private company, the jurisdiction becomes heavily reliant on that entity for ongoing support, updates, and maintenance. This dependence raises concerns about the system's vulnerability; if the provider encounters issues or fails to meet expectations, it could have significant consequences for all jurisdictions relying on the statewide system.

This also could limit opportunities for innovation and technological advancements. In a competitive environment, multiple providers typically strive to offer cutting-edge features, improvements, and integrations to attract clients. In a monopolized market, there may be less incentive for the dominant provider to innovate continuously, potentially hindering the adoption of new technologies and best practices in digital permitting.

The potential for monopolization also raises questions about cost control. In a competitive market, providers often strive to offer cost-effective solutions to attract clients. However, a monopolized system might lead to pricing structures that are less favorable for jurisdictions, as they may face limited negotiation power in the absence of alternative options.

While the intention is to achieve standardization and efficiency, careful consideration must be given to the potential consequences of limiting competition. It could impact choices, flexibility, innovation, and cost-effectiveness for jurisdictions navigating the digital permitting landscape.

Lack of trust in the state

Local jurisdictions may hesitate to relinquish control to a statewide system, as many value their autonomy and control over their processes. Permitting decisions directly affect jurisdictions, and political dynamics may cause departments to hold fast to their systems for fear of losing influence over local decisions.

Many departments have spent years – in some case, decades – tailoring their systems to their local regulatory environments. Working with a governmental authority as large as the Department of Commerce may lead to a perceived lack of local understanding and concerns about communication breakdowns, bureaucratic processes, and resource allocation.

A state-supported partnership with specialized vendors may be of more value, as jurisdictions would still have the benefit of choice while choosing from a vetted list of candidate vendors who are qualified and experts in the field of digital permitting.

Cost-benefit analysis of statewide digital system

A cost-benefit analysis assessed known permit software providers serving in Washington. The analysis considers assumptions such as number of users, integrated business systems, data migration, and time to set-up. In addition, the annual subscription costs with the first year estimated set-up costs, including initial data migration, are provided with each additional year's costs. The actual costs for a statewide permitting system will vary depending on the number of permit users and applications submitted.

Table 3: Software cost-benefit analysis

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
LAMA iWorQ developed by Davenport Group (very small jurisdiction)	iWorQ: data migration would have been basic (parcel data, permit history, etc.).	\$7,006	\$7,006	Unknown	iWorQ: data migration would have been basic (parcel data, permit history, etc.). No estimates for training, integration, migration, data storage and ongoing annual maintenance or subscription. No inspection services

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
					are included. No customer portal or reporting tools. Source: Emil Pierson, Community Development Director and Hillary Hoke, Assistant Planning Director City of Centralia
Clariti (small jurisdictions)	Camino's Application Portal makes it easy to accept forms, documents, and payments online, without buying an entirely new permit system.	\$46,999	\$46,999	\$46,999	https://www.camino.ai/application-portal/ Source: website
OpenGov (Small jurisdictions)	Cloud-based system modernizes community development permits, business licenses, and other complex approval processes through highly configurable, digital workflows with conditional forms, online payments, and GIS integration. Featuring a user-friendly portal for the public that is seamlessly integrated with backend data collection and approval rules.	\$12,000	\$68,000	\$12,000	From Rhode Island cost estimates, Implementation at any given site - takes 3 to 4 months, including training provided by the OpenGov team specialists and integration and migration. Costs are much less for very small jurisdictions. Source: OpenGov team specialists
Granicus (medium jurisdiction)	SmartGov, includes a limited Citizen portal, SG Smart Connect GIS, Smart	\$92,250	\$92,250	\$92,250	Provided by Kitsap County includes a customer portal at \$50,000 per year

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
	Connect Parcel, SaaS Annual Subscription, Annual Maintenance				
Tyler Technologies EnerGov (lowest price)	Citizenserve customer portal: pricing based on the number of users 5 min., customer data migrated, integration with 1 other business system (finance)	\$13,500	\$39,000	\$13,500	https://www.citizenserve.com/municipal-software-solutions/ Source: website
Tyler Technologies EnerGov (lowest price)	Citizenserve building permitting: pricing based on 10 users, permitting data migrated, integration with 1 other business system	\$24,000	\$57,000	\$24,000	https://www.citizenserve.com/municipal-software-solutions/ Source: website
Tyler Technologies EnerGov (lowest price)	Citizenserve's planning and zoning: pricing based on 10 users, permitting data migrated, integration with 1 other business system	\$24,000	\$57,000	\$24,000	https://www.citizenserve.com/municipal-software-solutions/ Source: website
All three modules of EnerGov (lowest price)	N/A	N/A	\$153,000	N/A	https://www.tylertech.com/products/enterprise-permitting-licensing Source: website
Salesforce (small jurisdiction)	Based on 10 users at \$2400 ea. per year, for the permitting system, plus \$5,000 per 1,000 application units for the customer portal (assume 4000 per year); Public Sector Applications Forms -	\$68,500	\$150,000	\$68,500	initial costs are likely much higher when training, migration, integration, data storage, inspections, reporting, customer portal for more users, and permitting activity are considered.

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
	Help individuals manage licensing and permitting applications online \$5000 per 1000 applicants, assume 4000 per year. Public Sector Mobile Inspections, \$75 per user per month, assume 5 inspectors				Source: Salesforce customer team
EUNA Solutions OpenCounter (small jurisdiction)	OpenCounter: pricing model - Costs vary depending on the population size of your jurisdiction and the number of portals you procure. Many customers begin their OpenCounter engagement with one or two portals and then expand to additional solutions. Some jurisdictions implement more portals at once to receive a discount. There are three integrations available – light, medium, and deep – to ensure our products work seamlessly with any or all of your existing systems. We've designed OpenCounter's ZoningCheck™ to make it easy for anyone – constituents and city staff alike – to navigate zoning	Assumes 50,000 pop size and purchase of customer portal, building, zoning, inspections	\$150,000	Unknown	Centralia is the source of pricing information – they like the system. Costs are likely much higher for data storage, inspection tools, training, and annual maintenance and subscription costs. Source: Hillary Hoke, Assistant Planning Director City of Centralia

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
	clearances and site selection. We configure and implement every product we deliver for your city/county. OpenCounter will perform 99% of the work involved in configuration and implementation. All we need is for your team to provide us with your data (ArcGIS shapefiles, permit catalog, overlay districts, and more) and lend a hand in the final stages of testing and quality assurance.				
Accela (large jurisdiction)	The core products, including the Civic Platform and the Civic Applications, are based on users or "seats" and have built-in volume discounts. Ancillary products, such as Enhanced Reporting Database and Premium Citizen Experience, use a different pricing model (population-based) as they are added to a core purchase. Implementation or Professional Services pricing is based on the size and complexity of the implementation, and other variables	\$33,600	\$758,600	\$32,000	The numbers provided here are calculated from the City of Tacoma's estimates and adjusted for our population and user assumptions. Our current project to stand up Electrical Permits and Inspections (for 30 users) will come in around \$1.2 million. That includes Accela licensing, data migration, vendor assistance, training, and standing up a few 3rd party applications that integrate with Accela. The current system serves building and land

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
	such as the degrees of training and integrations needed. The pricing is a subscription-based pricing model, meaning that customers pay an ongoing fee (usually annually) to use the software, which includes access to the software, all updates and upgrades, and full technical support.				use permits supports inspection services and provides a customer portal. If we scale the project back to just the setup of the platform (vendor work), migrated data, and training only, I'd estimate around \$300,000. Source: Jennifer Ward, City of Tacoma Technology Manager
Accela Customer Portal	Assumes a population of 215,000 for \$0.03 per	\$7,188	\$47,188	\$7,188	Licensing and public portal based on population Source: website
Tyler Technologies EnerGov (large jurisdiction)	Implementation at Whatcom County WA	N/A	\$922,881	\$106,520	Review of contracting documents for the initial contract, contract amendments, and the latest maintenance bill. Information provided did not reflect the server costs, SQL Licenses, Bluebeam Licenses, Large Monitors, and iPads (the monitors and iPads were around \$27,000). Note: the county is in the process of moving the software from on-premises server-based to SaaS in the Cloud.

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
					<p>This will increase the annual maintenance fee significantly (estimate at least double) but is somewhat mitigated since we will not have to buy and maintain servers.</p> <p>Source: Mark Personius, Whatcom County Planning Director</p>
<p>Amanda at Bellevue (large jurisdiction) Permit tracking system (Amanda/Integration/ Subsystems)</p>		<p>N/A</p>	<p>\$3.25 mil.</p>	<p>\$125,600</p>	<p>Bellevue's actual replacement costs. The one-time costs are estimates based on current systems and market research that we use for projecting financial reserve targets to support periodic system upgrades and/or replacements. It's important to note, these one-time costs only include the four primary systems we use in our paperless permitting program. Several other City systems integrate with these primary systems (financial, timekeeping, etc.), and the costs for many of those systems are wrapped into the broader citywide technology costs that we contribute to funding. Some service offerings are</p>

Name of software	Assumptions (number of users, [based on population size or subscription only], number of business systems that are integrated [finance, IVR, etc.], data migration [basic, medium, larger], months to set-up, implement, and train)	Annual subscription costs	Total first-year estimated costs	Each additional year's annual costs	Source of data
					<p>not available between software providers, such as the case with MyBuildingPermit.com, which offers traditional online portal features, in addition to the cross-jurisdictional partnerships (common code adoption, time sheets, training, etc.) that are not available from other providers.</p> <p>Source: Jake Hesselgesser, Business Services Director City of Bellevue</p>
Plan Review and Records Software (Bluebeam and SharePoint)		N/A	\$125,000	\$43,000	Source: Jake Hesselgesser, Business Services Director City of Bellevue
Online Portal (MyBuildingPermit.com)		N/A	\$250,000	\$543,000	Source: Jake Hesselgesser, Business Services Director City of Bellevue
City of Bellevue Totals		N/A	\$3.625 mil	\$711,600	Source: Jake Hesselgesser, Business Services Director City of Bellevue

Statewide permitting system summary

In summary, the workgroup and consultant team did not find logistical or economic reasons to support a mandatory statewide digital permitting system as proposed in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023. While there is a range of potential costs reported by individual jurisdictions for initial upfront software costs, translating this

information into estimates for a statewide cost for the proposed mandatory statewide digital permitting system is challenging. Estimating the full scope of the software services, number of FTEs needed, ongoing costs, initial setup, passing on user fees, code changes needed at the local level, and many other nuances are involved. In other words, there is no one size fits all.

Please see [Appendix B](#) for information about how other states have developed statewide systems.

Legislative recommendations

Recommendations for statewide digital permitting systems

Statewide mandated digital permitting system not recommended

This report addresses the directives outlined in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023, focusing on the need, challenges, and benefits of digital permitting systems while exploring the potential for a statewide solution. The Digital Permit Work Group (DPWG) recommends actions for the Legislature to streamline permit processes, improve efficiency, and accelerate residential construction to meet statewide housing needs. After extensive research and stakeholder engagement, the workgroup found a statewide mandated system to be impractical due to significant costs, risks, and limited benefits.

Recommendation: Grant funding for a three-tiered approach scaled to support digital permitting

Rather than a statewide mandated digital system, the DPWG recommends that Commerce fund and administer a three-tiered, grant-funded approach to support digital permitting at the local level, emphasizing best practices, resource sharing, and technical assistance. This strategy respects the unique needs of diverse communities while fostering innovation and continuous improvement in permitting processes across the state. Additionally, recommendations include providing ongoing process assistance, and clarifying regulatory frameworks to ensure consistent and effective implementation of permit systems. It is important to emphasize Commerce's role in ensuring that best practices are followed and widely shared. Duplicating successful practices, learning from others, and developing a common language will be hallmarks of success.

[Table 4](#) illustrates the tiered concept for grant funding to support digital permitting. This program will enable communities most in need of assistance, technical support, workflow development, and other needs to meet the performance measures and overall intent of Chapter 338, Laws of 2023. The DPWG recommends this approach to funding and associated actions that would best support jurisdictions to achieve timely permit issuance.

Most jurisdictions have some kind of hybrid system (paper and electronic). However, the management of land use and zoning codes varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as do resource and revenue constraints that affect service levels. Against this backdrop, implementing new technologies or technology upgrades must always consider the benefit against the costs of implementation time, resources, investment in data migration, internal and external training, ongoing maintenance investment costs, and fee adjustments.

A new permitting system, particularly one that crosses organizational boundaries, includes both a customer portal and full work management capabilities with integrated data management, scheduling, financial/billing, and time-tracking features. Tools that support work management permitting systems include BlueBeam™, ePlan™, Adobe®, and others; scanners; large screen monitors; VPN access; cyber systems; and cloud-based

subscriptions, all part of ongoing costs and considerations for jurisdictions. In addition, funding for organizational work is equally important as funding for software. Given these complexities, acquisition and implementation of a new system is a multi-year project for most jurisdictions.

Table 4: Recommended tiered approach to support digital permitting

Tiered scale to support permit processes	Suggested percent of funding based on priority tier	Description	Applicability
Tier 1. Essential Digital Upgrade Grants	55%-60% Estimated costs: \$1-\$3 million (per jurisdiction)	<p>This category is the highest priority and biggest need for communities and should be funded first. Appropriate for jurisdictions that are currently hybrid/paper only and need a digital permitting system/software. Grants would fund mergers with other systems and upgrades from legacy systems. It can fund a consortium's initial implementation/setup for permitting sustainability. Priority is given to jurisdictions required to report under Chapter 338, Laws of 2023, but not limited only to those jurisdictions.</p> <p>Intent: Optimization tied to performance while allowing flexibility for local needs and nuisances.</p>	Performance report communities under Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 and jurisdictions lacking digital permit software systems
Tier 2. Performance Optimization Grants	35% Estimated costs: \$1 million or less (per jurisdiction)	<p>Tier 2 category is for those already using digital permitting systems or hybrid systems but are not meeting state guidance on performance needs or requirements. Grants could fund implementing recommendations from the 5290 guidebook, due in June 2025. Eligible applicants are prioritized for those not meeting review deadlines.</p> <p>Intent: Examples of activities could include business process improvements to help meet deadlines, electronic or paper, moving towards electronic review. Also, could include lean process consultants, accounting system improvements such as implementing electronic payments. Support and supplemental systems such as BlueBeam™, ePlan™, to assist with workflow and more efficient processes.</p>	Performance report communities under Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 and jurisdictions with lacking digital permit software systems
Tier 3. Innovative Tech Solutions Grants	15% Estimated costs: \$100,000 - \$500,000 (per jurisdiction)	<p>The third-tier funds innovation and technology solutions to improve permitting processes. This can include exploratory research through an advisory committee/forum that engages building officials. It can also include funding generative AI for permit review, transitions to new regulations and processes, and studies on fees/costs for sustaining and maintaining systems.</p> <p>Intent: Funding opportunities to optimize processes. This includes additional consulting on workflow, business processes, underlying technology, permitting structure, customer resources, etc. Examples could include generative AI, system innovation, working systems operating more uniquely and efficiently, reorganization or merger, storage for electronic documents (cloud or other opportunities) relating to record retention.</p>	Jurisdiction illustrates the need and showcases support for innovation.

Repeated two-year program grant funding would enable jurisdictions to apply for future grants for add on-services such as virtual field inspections, a web-based customer portal, or a time-tracking system. A constraint to be considered in grant funding is the state's two-year funding cycle. This may present a challenge to jurisdictions in the midst of implementing a new system, or with a system already fully implemented requiring

uninterrupted service to the public. It is not likely that a fully digital permitting system could be supported in a two-year time frame that is all-inclusive.

Using the tier recommendations, the state could develop a prioritized budget of resources for each tier, with targets established and aligned with the performance metrics in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023. For example, a portion of fund priorities might be allocated:

- **Tier 1. Essential Digital Upgrade Grants:** 55% to 60% allocation
- **Tier 2. Performance Optimization Grants:** 30% to 35% allocation
- **Tier 3. Innovative Tech Solution Grants:** 10% to 15% allocation

Tier one and two investments add the greatest value to the Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 goals of digital permits, permit performance, and cost transparency. As these organizations implement improvements with the help of state funding, capturing and sharing lessons learned will be important in finding the 'best' tools and applications for Washington's challenges.

Grant awards should give priority to high-growth areas that need to build systems to prepare for performance reporting. Supporting growth and aligning investments for emerging 'non-planning' jurisdictions would also be useful for more modest technology grants emphasizing customer portals and GIS use.

It is the intention that the state invests in those areas where the requirements of Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 have the greatest impact on jurisdictions with existing legacy, or limited electronic, or paper systems that would benefit the most from grant funding support. The state's success may come over the next five years as the data from jurisdictions becomes more consistent and we standardize reporting.

Secondary preferred recommendation: Determine feasibility of opt-in statewide digital permit system

A secondary recommendation is for the state to evaluate the need for a front-facing customer portal as a state hosted opt-in system. In this scenario, jurisdictions would opt in to a service that the state would provide through a web portal for customer convenience.

This alternative would address the intake of applications and payment, and coordinate with local jurisdiction back-end software. In practice, users would submit to the state portal, and the state staff would disseminate the information to those local governments that have opted in to be users of the system. Access to a consistent set of land use, building, and civil permit applications, instructions, and connections for inspection scheduling would be available in one location.

This approach would best support cities and counties that do not have the staff capacity or technical expertise to manage and host back-end software in-house. Such a system would still be a significant investment with all the project risks inherent in software acquisition. This investment should be considered in the context of other investments toward achieving the fundamental policy objective of facilitating timely project approval. If the Legislature chooses to explore this opportunity, the workgroup recommends that it fund and direct Commerce to conduct a feasibility study that can outline the requirements and a preliminary cost estimate of the opt-in system.

Please see [Appendix B](#) for information on other state opt-in systems.

Budgetary recommendations

Digital permitting grants guidance and assistance

- Consider ongoing grant funding to Commerce to help jurisdictions digitize their permit systems. Commerce provided \$3 million in the 2023-25 biennium and requested an additional \$3 million each fiscal year in the 2025-27 biennium to advance local permit modernization (Paper to Digital Grant Program) and to support residential permit review (Consolidated Grant Program). Local governments are each approaching digital permitting from a unique and different place, and additional investment can assist the transition.
- Consider providing funding to Commerce to develop a resource list for jurisdictions to use.
- Consider providing funding to Commerce for best practices guidance and ongoing process assistance.

Statewide opt-in system evaluation

Consider providing funding to Commerce to perform a thorough evaluation of a statewide opt-in front-facing portal system in alignment with the [associated legislative recommendation](#). The evaluation will include the need for such a system, the benefits, disadvantages, barriers to implementation, and the costs to implement the system.

Administrative policy recommendations

Administrative policies relating to digital permitting and streamlining permitting across the state will continue to take shape as we conduct further studies and analyze needs. These policies can address the following: technical assistance, grant funding, consultant rosters, clarifying best practices, data management, data collection and reporting, financial management, and policies statewide. These policies intersect standardization and support for communities, enhanced collaboration and consistency and innovation in local permit review. They could include:

- Provide a framework standard as an example of how any jurisdiction in Washington can use digital permitting processes.
- Provide resources to implement and understand local workflow procedures for streamlined operations.
- Establish best practices and resources for staffing requirements and roles within permitting departments.
- Connect jurisdictions with technical experts to support permit staff and capacity building.
- Create a centralized statewide resource for sharing best practices and tools for digital permitting.
- Establish a statewide committee dedicated to knowledge collaboration and furthering streamlined processes comprised of different jurisdictions, stakeholders, and users.
- Review and update administrative and financial policies regularly to adapt to evolving technologies and needs.
- Ensure consistency in data management and reporting across all permitting systems.
- Foster a statewide culture of innovation and continuous improvement in digital permitting practices.
- Provide support and resources for jurisdictions to effectively implement and maintain digital permitting systems.

Additional legislative recommendations

Because this report does not recommend adoption of a statewide system, our recommendations focus on what state legislation could help increase local government adoption of their own digital permit systems.

Procurement assistance

Selection of an appropriate digital permit system is a significant undertaking for a small local government, and an error in the selection of a system that is not capable of performing the needs required can have substantial negative financial consequence for local government.

The Washington State Archives and Department of Enterprise Services (DES) has demonstrated one possible way the state can assist local governments with the procurement of appropriate software, in this case, an enterprise content management system for required records retention. DES has performed its own procurement process and developed [statewide contracts](#) that local governments can use to purchase pre-qualified content management systems with set pricing.

The Legislature could direct that a similar path be followed for state procurement and master contracts that local governments could exercise for a digital permit system. The result would be a discrete and limited list of vendors and products, pre-qualified to facilitate permitting under [RCW 36.70B](#), from which local governments could choose if they wanted to avoid performing their own procurement process.

Process assistance

The initial step for a local government to implement any digital permit system is to document and streamline its existing analog permit processes. In many cases, that exercise may reveal internal inconsistencies in locally adopted permit processing regulations, or inconsistencies between those regulations and state law, notably RCW 36.70B, Local Project Review. It will also identify opportunities to implement new processes for customer education, outreach, intake, completeness review, communication with applicants, interagency reviews, field visits and inspections, and permit issuance.

Commerce should continue to develop technical assistance materials to facilitate timely permit review and otherwise implement RCW 36.70B.

Clarifications to RCW 36.70B

Chapter 36.70B guides local governments in developing their permit processes, but does not provide enough guidance to ensure consistent application of the chapter across local governments.

Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 set in motion a number of new requirements for Commerce and local governments to implement, many of which went into effect January 1, 2025. The Legislature should make clarifying edits to Chapter 36.70B RCW to ensure that cities and counties understand and can implement the Legislature's policy goals. The Legislature should standardize the use of terms throughout the chapter, supply definitions for critical undefined terms, and remedy various inconsistencies. Importantly, the scope of the chapter, i.e., whether it continues to apply to building permits, should be clarified by the Legislature.

The Legislature should clearly define various important common terms and require local governments to use those common terms in crafting their development regulations. It should further clarify the process for, and allow exclusions from, the consolidated review requirement of RCW 36.70B.120. It should also make further efforts to refine and simplify the entirety of Chapter 36.70B.

Stakeholders (e.g., AWC, BIAW, MBAWA, WSAC) have not reached consensus about such changes to Chapter 36.70B, but a process to draft and vet technical changes to the chapter to achieve the Legislature's stated policy objectives would be worthwhile.

Legal and regulatory considerations

A significant barrier to adopting a single statewide digital permitting system is the incongruities in how local governments process applications, understand the application processing requirements of Chapter 36.70B RCW, and use terminology related to planning and permitting. While we assume the principal goal of a single statewide digital permitting system is to provide a commonality of process and function to applicants, to be effective at achieving that goal, it would need to be based on a common set of processes. Even if a single statewide system is not pursued, any jurisdiction that converts from a paper system to a digital system first needs clarity in its procedures for processing applications – clarity that is not currently provided by state law.

The state's various planning statutes lack consistent clear definitions for important terms. For example, "permit" is defined in RCW 36.70B.020 to also mean "permit application," although they are different concepts. While Chapter 19.27 (State Building Code) includes definitions of commercial and residential building permits, the definitions include the term "building permit," no definition of building permit itself is included. Some stakeholders have also asked for better alignment between land use code and building code definitions of similar terms, such as "multifamily" and "triplex" or "fourplex."

The term "project action," which is key to the application of SEPA and is used repeatedly throughout Chapters 36.70A and 36.70B, as well as 43.21C, is not defined except in the SEPA rules. Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 introduced the new term "construction plan review," which it did not define – some local governments consider construction plan review to mean "civil plan review" (encompassing the horizontal aspects of construction) in some contexts, while other jurisdictions, as well as a plain-language reading, might consider it to encompass all construction, including vertical construction. Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 expanded the use of the term "site plan review" without adding a definition. Chapter 338, Laws of 2023 also introduced new ambiguity to the entire application of the chapter; see discussion of the changes to the definition of "project permit" in section 5.5 of this report.

Some local governments have overarching land use approval permit processes that they call master use permits, site plan review, or site development permits, while others lack those processes, instead hanging application of their land use codes on other permits, such as land divisions, conditional/special use permits, or building permits. Some jurisdictions allow for the consolidation of all types of applications together, as is contemplated by RCW 36.70B.060 and the new grant program in 2SSB 5290 Sec. 2, but others do not allow the consolidation of some types of permits. Even the relatively straightforward limitation on the number of local appeals, in RCW 36.70B.050, is interpreted by some jurisdictions to mean only one local appeal, and by other jurisdictions to allow for up to two local appeals – one open-record and one closed-record.

Even in the absence of new state law revisions, local governments likely need changes in their locally adopted development regulations to simplify and consolidate review processes prior to adopting a new digital permit system. Development regulation changes frequently require assistance from private consultants, expert legal advice, and lengthy public processes but are infrequently funded by the Legislature.

Conclusion

This report addresses the directives outlined in Chapter 338, Laws of 2023, focusing on the need, challenges, and benefits of digital permitting systems while exploring the potential for a statewide solution. The report recommends actions for the Legislature to streamline permit processes, improve efficiency, and accelerate residential construction to meet statewide housing needs. After extensive research and stakeholder engagement, we found a statewide mandated system to be impractical due to significant costs, risks, and limited benefits. Instead, the report advocates for a three-tiered, grant-funded approach to support digital

permitting at the local level, emphasizing best practices, resource sharing, and technical assistance. This strategy respects the unique needs of diverse communities while fostering innovation and continuous improvement in permitting processes across the state. Additionally, recommendations include facilitating procurement through master contracts, providing ongoing process assistance, and clarifying regulatory frameworks to ensure consistent and effective implementation of permit system.

Appendix A. Definitions

Data migration – is the process of transferring data from one storage system or computing environment to another. Most commonly, data migration is an essential step in migrating on-premises IT infrastructure permit data to a cloud computing environment. It is also a consideration in understanding trade-offs in design and costs. Consider, for example, how important historical data is in accomplishing daily review and decision tasks for each workgroup. For example, if access to recent data and decisions (2 to 5 years) is frequently needed to make current decisions, then migration of that data is likely to be warranted. If not, then accessing historical data through logging into another platform (which adds time) may be a better option.

Data integration – is the process of first determining what different IT infrastructure systems need to 'connect' or transfer data from one computing environment to another. Secondly, determining the specifics of that data and assessing whether the data integration process needs to accommodate real-time processing. Budget constraints and the existing IT infrastructure also influence the choice of the data integration method. Evaluating whether batch, real-time, or hybrid integration best suits the jurisdiction's data needs. Typical permitting system integrations are made with: financial systems for fee collection and revenue tracking and reporting, with timekeeping and payroll management for cost recovery and reporting, and with CMMS systems for ROW, site development activity, inspections, and as-builts.

Document Management System – a place to store the electronic documents received from customers and scanned documents produced in the paperless permitting process. Examples include Shared Network Drive; Microsoft SharePoint; Oracle ECM; OpenText; Adobe Document Cloud Standard; ProjectWise; Bluebeam Studio.

Electronic mailbox or portal – a place for customers to submit and for the jurisdiction to receive electronic plans.

Electronic plan review – a portion of the paperless-permitting process that entails reviewing PDFs of project plans using markup software like Bluebeam Revu eXtreme or Adobe Acrobat.

Timekeeping and payroll management – Workday, HRIS, PeopleSoft, etc. that capture and manage timecards. It is important to design time capture beyond payroll to reflect project-specific time, and if possible, direct, indirect, and overhead hours.

Electronic signature – an electronic sound, symbol, or process attached to or logically associated with a contract or other record and executed or adopted by a person with the intent to sign the record. RCW 19.360.030.

A digital signature is one type of electronic signature. Digital signatures have a digital certificate behind them, offering authentication when sending a "signed" electronic document. This "signature" may belong to an individual, an entity, or a server. RCW 19.34.020(11).

A valid digital signature issued by a certificate authority provides the following protections:

- (1) Verifies the signer is who they represent themselves to be, because the signer has had to prove their identity to a certificate authority to obtain the digital signature.
- (2) Confirms the signature was applied to the document and not copied from another document because the signature file is cryptographically bound to the document.

(3) Ensures the document was not altered after it was signed.

On-prem – Abbreviation for on-premises IT infrastructure vs. cloud computing environment.

Paperless permitting – Beginning-to-end permit submittal, processing, review, inspection, and archiving using hardware and software that enables customers and jurisdictions to process permits electronically.

Permit tracking system – A database to track some or all permit activities (e.g., intake, fees collected and owed, contractor certification, acceptance, review, comments, elapsed time, status, permit issuance, call for inspections, temporary and final certificate of occupancy, etc.).

Portal or file sharing – An internet site providing access or links to other sites that allow secure file sharing, storage, and collaboration. Examples include MyBuildingPermit.com; Dropbox; Permit Track System Public Portal; Jurisdictional FTP (File Transfer Protocol) Site; Microsoft Office 365; Google Docs; Adobe Acrobat Document Cloud; Bluebeam Studio.

PDF markup software – A software application where jurisdictions can process, review, and markup electronic plans.

Appendix B. Digital permit review case studies

Review of other statewide digital permitting systems focused specifically on building or land use permitting yielded a limited number of case studies. Most common profiles were systems managed by a state building agency responsible for implementation and oversight of state building codes and review of state-owned buildings and infrastructure. None of the statewide permitting systems are mandatory permitting systems⁴, and none are designed to accommodate land development permitting currently.⁵

Two states, Oregon and Rhode Island, most closely operate statewide digital building permitting systems. There are some examples of statewide digital systems designed for other types of applications – Washington already has some of these, for example, business and contractor licensing, environmental permit applications, etc. The consultant team did not find any examples of statewide digital building and land development combined systems, though Oregon indicates that they have intentions to expand a pilot site to include land development permits.

Three other states are included as case studies – Indiana, Wisconsin, and New Jersey – because their versions of digital statewide building permitting systems have some features that may inform performance, governance, and cost considerations in evaluating the feasibility of implementing a Washington statewide building and land development digital permitting system.

Oregon Building Codes Division

The Building Codes Division (Division) administers Oregon's Statewide Building Code, which provides uniform standards that ensure that newly constructed residential and commercial buildings are safe. The state legislature established a "uniform" building code in 1973; the division is celebrating the 50th anniversary of that statewide code this year. The Division also administers and regulates building laws and rules, and licenses qualified businesses and individuals working in these trades: electrical, plumbing, boiler and pressure vessel, and elevator.

The services they provide include:

- Adopting a set of uniform construction codes
- Licensing construction trades workers, inspectors, and businesses
- Training and certifying building inspectors and building officials
- Enforcing laws and rules to ensure safe building practices
- Providing permitting and inspection services
- Collaborating with cities and counties to promote efficient building practices and positive economic development

Under the Division, permitting services provide a local Building Department Directory to find where to access permitting services and offer online e-permitting services for local jurisdictions that voluntarily subscribe to those services. The Division provides all permit and inspection services throughout Oregon for amusement

⁴ Defined as requiring every jurisdiction that administers and manages building permits to use or adopt the statewide permitting system.

⁵ Some states have plans to expand their statewide permitting systems to accommodate land development permitting. Some states have separate environmental statewide permitting systems that are required to be used by any applicant needing a state environmental permit.

rides and devices, boiler and pressure vessels, elevators, manufactured dwellings, and prefabricated structures.

Starting in 2006, the state began to provide electronic building, land use, code enforcement, and inspection permitting software systems to those jurisdictions in the state that opted to implement the system. Over the years that system (Accela) has matured, expanded (public works and engineering), and standardized. The division currently provides building department services for some counties, including Curry County, Grant County, Harney County, Morrow County, Umatilla County, Sherman County, and Wheeler County.

Oregon uses Accela Citizen Access (ACA) as a customer portal.⁶ The state is set up as a “superagency” which allows the customers to come to one website and submit permits/upload documents/make payments/schedule inspections and search for information from all 85+ participating jurisdictions (out of approximately 135 jurisdictions). This website only interfaces with the back office Accela, although it could pass information through the API to other systems. Online payments and all transactions go directly to each jurisdiction, just as they would if an individual jurisdiction implemented ACA and Accela Automation.

The Division provides Accela to participating jurisdictions (in Oregon, all jurisdictions must be on ePermitting OR something comparable by 2025 (...comparability is defined in terms of user outcomes, rather than technical specifications). The participating jurisdictions do all permit intake, workflow tracking, payment tracking, and inspection tracking within Accela.

Cost/Business Model

ePermitting is provided at no cost to the participating jurisdictions. It is funded by a portion of the state surcharge on all building permits sold (4%). Initially, only the Building Module was offered (with the plan that jurisdictions could purchase other modules from Accela), but they have expanded to provide planning (land use), code compliance, public works, and on-site (septic). These are also provided at no cost, but jurisdictions get fewer choices when using the optional modules. The state provides the customer website and a help desk which supports that customer website, the jurisdictional permitting system, electronic document review licenses for Bluebeam, and mobile apps (City Gov App) for inspectors and customers (inspection resulting and scheduling, direct messaging, video inspections, and photo/document uploads). Automated nightly batch jobs are provided for getting financial information to each jurisdiction's finance system and many reports to help the jurisdiction deal with their finances, do statistical reporting and provide customer information.

The Division has a staff of 12 people: a program manager, two customer help desk staff, one outreach coordinator who works with contractors and inspectors on mobile app training and support, three project managers who work with local jurisdictions doing implementations and providing training and ongoing support, and five technical staff who do a range of tasks from report writing to data conversions, to scripting, upgrade testing, and other Accela enhancements.

The Division does not provide interfaces to document management systems; that is a jurisdictional responsibility.

⁶ [Oregon ePermitting](#)

Other tools

Providing support to many agencies and external customers requires using several electronic tools to manage the Division workload. Monday.com⁷ has been a fantastic tool for tracking all projects and shoring up documentation of system features. Kayako⁸ is our Help Desk ticketing software for our jurisdictional users. Users email us with questions/problems/enhancement requests, and responses; Kayako also knows where training materials are posted on the ePermitting system. There is a blog, a YouTube channel, and GovDelivery that is used to communicate with subscribed jurisdictions about things regularly happening in permitting.

Observations

- Larger jurisdictions – Portland⁹, Sandy¹⁰, Wilsonville¹¹, Salem¹², Josephine¹³ – had/have well-established electronic building permitting systems. There is no plan to integrate with the statewide system as an intake portal.
- Initially (2006), most Accela implementations were customized at the jurisdiction level and took as long as 18 months each. Since the legislature has a 10-year timeframe to implement across the state, it was clear that the project needed to move away from customization to more standard modules. (In 2024, Accela says everyone will use cloud-based software as a service (SAS). Currently, the Division doesn't customize for jurisdictions to allow for faster implementation.
- In 2006, the state started with the trades (mechanical, electrical, plumbing, etc.) and let success with processing permits for those industries drive the next level with building and inspections, followed by code enforcement. Land use was followed by reduced customer portal functionality (Building and Inspections are the priority). Only some jurisdictions use the public works and engineering modules because the system is address-based, not parcel-based, which poses some challenges for ROW permits.
- Observation – there is good integration between addressing and parcel identification initially in the customer portal database, which is important for land use and public works users.
- Observation – the state of Oregon's legislative mandate is to move all jurisdictions to digital or e-permitting by 2025 and is performance-based, supported by providing no-cost access to Accela. This seems like a 'no excuses' mandate.

Rhode Island: Building Code Commission State Building Office

The Rhode Island Statewide Permitting Initiative¹⁴ established a uniform, web-based system (OpenGov - Viewpoint Cloud¹⁵) to be used by the state, its municipalities, and taxpayers for statewide permit management, inspection management, and electronic plan review. The Office has a \$16 million budget and 61 FTEs.

The Building Code Commission (BCC) issues permits for all state buildings and buildings on state-owned/leased land. Types of permits issued include:

- Building
- Demolition

⁷ [Monday homepage](#)

⁸ [Zendesk homepage](#)

⁹ Amanda

¹⁰ Tyler EnerGov

¹¹ Tyler EnerGov

¹² Amanda

¹³ TrackIt and PeopleSoft

¹⁴ [State of Rhode Island Online Permitting System homepage](#)

¹⁵ OpenGov Cloud, OpenGov Government Solutions

- Electrical
- Mechanical
- Modular
- Plumbing
- Solar
- Amusement Rides (Annual Inspector of Amusement Ride Registration, Amusement Ride Annual Inspection, Amusement Ride Event Inspection),
- Native Lumber Registration, and
- Tents on State Property.

Observations

- Phase 1 in 2016 of ViewPoint Cloud (OpenGov) was implemented to meet the needs of 10 pilot municipalities (Cranston, Pawtucket, Newport, Warwick, North Kingstown, West Warwick, North Providence, Westerly, North Smithfield, and Woonsocket) as well as the office of the State Fire Marshal and State Building Code Commissioner. It focused primarily on trade permits (building, fire, electrical, mechanical, and plumbing).
- Their stated goals in 2016 were to create a more business-friendly atmosphere in Rhode Island, ensuring that “high-value construction projects are protected from the needless and excessive building permit process.”¹⁶
- FY 2013 through FY 2015 budgets include \$900,000 in general revenue to fund an e-permitting technology provider. These funds are dedicated to Phase One of the pilot program.¹⁷
- Rhode Island’s implementation included examining every step of the permitting process to streamline workflow as it transformed from a manual, paper-based process to an e-permitting system. They developed a citizen access portal – a website – where constituents in Rhode Island can go online and apply for, pay for, and track trade permits from beginning to end.
- Currently, Rhode Island, which claims to be the first state to have implemented a statewide e-permitting system, notes that the most transformative aspects of the system are:
 - Convenience of self-service: Applications and payments may be submitted online at any time of the day, and permits may be received electronically and printed as soon as they are approved.
 - Transparency: Processing status can be tracked step by step, giving applicants visibility into where their application is in the process, but the name of the actual employee working on it.
 - Contractor validation: Applicants and government officials know the validity of licensed/registered professional credentials
 - Management: Governmental bodies collect information related to a permit application in one place, track progress across multiple applications simultaneously, and assign tasks to achieve higher levels of efficiency and service for the public.
 - Collaboration and Consistency: The state has partnered with Rhode Island municipalities to design and implement the same platform for online permitting, providing a more comprehensive solution and allowing both levels of government to benefit from economies of scale both in system cost and implementation timelines.

¹⁶ Rhode Island leads the nation with statewide ePermitting initiative, By Microsoft Industry for Government Team, Jan. 13, 2016

¹⁷ <https://www.ri.gov/press/view/23656>

Indiana: Fire Prevention and Building Safety Plan Review

The Indiana State Building Commissioner, appointed by the governor, oversees the Fire Prevention Building Plan Review and Code Services Sections.¹⁸ The Building Plan Review Section reviews Class 1 structure construction plans for compliance with the rules of the Indiana Fire Prevention and Building Safety Commission, including the state-adopted building codes. When the plans are approved, the state issues construction design releases that allow local building departments to issue the appropriate building permits.

At the state level, the work is done by a staff of building code professionals who work to protect the health and welfare of the occupants of Indiana's built environment while also serving as active partners in the ongoing economic development of the state. Building and land development permits are also reviewed and issued for non-Class 1 structures at the local government level throughout the state. The state's Department of Fire and Building Services is considered a partner by local governments and the construction trades. Links and coordination with local Building Commissioners are found on the state's Fire and Building Services website.

The submission of a Class 1 building application starts an automatic 10-business-day clock. Within those 10 business days, the department will respond to the application with one of (1) a notice of Construction Design Release, (2) a notice of incomplete filing, or (3) a notice that the project has been selected for a detailed review. Before that response, if additional documents are uploaded, the 10-day clock will restart. If the project is selected for a detailed review, Indiana law allows a further 20 days to complete that process.

Note: The time frames described above apply only to the Building Plan Review Section's processes and do not include the time spent waiting for the submitter's response(s). The actual length of time between the submission of an application and the issuance of a design release will depend on the completeness and code compliance of the project submitted.

The state reviews all Class 1 structures. Class 1 structures are defined as any part of the following:

- A building or structure that is intended to be or is occupied or is otherwise used in any part by the public, three or more tenants, one or more persons who act as the employees of another, and site improvements that affect accessibility to buildings that are Class 1 structures.
- In general, supportive living facilities are considered Class 1 structures. For conditions that must be met for a supportive living facility to be considered a Class 2 structure, review the Classification of Supportive Living Facilities guidance. Buildings used only for agricultural purposes on the land where they are located and not used for retail trade are not Class 1 structures.

Put in place in May 2000, the new system solved the backlog problems and saved the Indiana Fire Prevention and Building Safety Department. Almost all plans are now submitted electronically, and departmental personnel scan non-electronic submissions when there is a hardship on the part of the applicant. When submissions are received, submitters are notified and given a project number and the reviewer's name. Plan review time has been reduced from 45 days in 2000 to 10, and the 20-person division annually processes over 8,000 plan reviews for 92 counties and generates over \$4,000,000 in fees.

¹⁸ [Indiana Department of Homeland Security Building Plan Review page](#)

Observations

- This system appears to be a 'statewide' electronic permitting system for narrowly defined work that falls within the mission mandate of the Building Plan Review Section. However, the system is electronically connected with local building departments.
- The system does not serve as a portal to intake other types of permits that can be forwarded to local building departments.
- Performance review cycle times for fire prevention and building safety permits are impressive, and backlog resolution from 45 days to 10 is laudable.

Wisconsin: Department of Safety and Professional Services

The Online Building Permit System¹⁹ was developed by the Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) to allow municipalities to gain compliance with Wisconsin 2015 Senate Bill 458, Act 211.²⁰ Not all municipalities use the Online Building Permit System.

The owner, builder, or agent completes the application form, and the Online Building Permit System routes it to the enforcing jurisdiction. Permit application data is used for statewide statistics on new one- and two-family dwellings and local code administration.

Applicants are responsible for complying with state and federal laws concerning the construction near or on wetlands, lakes, and streams. Applicants are directed to the Department of Natural Resources wetlands identification web page with an electronic permit system.²¹

Act 211 requires the department to have a standard electronic building permit form (SBD-5823) available to municipalities implemented on January 2, 2017. This permit form requires contractor license numbers and the expiration dates of their licenses. It also requires municipalities or their agents to provide their permit forms electronically to DSPS through the approved electronic system. These permits must be submitted to DSPS by the 15th day of the first month after they are issued. If a municipality fails to submit the permit by the required time after the permit was issued, a refund of the amount paid for the building permit minus the state seal shall be given to the applicant.

To ensure compliance with Act 211, municipalities must contact DSPS Uniform Development Code staff to obtain an access code and choose the method by which they will submit information to the DSPS. All municipalities began supplying their new one- and two-family dwelling permit information to the DSPS by January 2, 2018.

An official representative of the municipality initiated and authorized the creation of the municipality's access code and selection of the filing method. A building inspector contracted with the municipality may establish a login access code with this system only upon completion of an agreement between the inspector and the municipality, such as provided in the Act 211 Inspector-Muni Agreement.

Over 500 cities, villages, and towns across Wisconsin's 72 counties use the Electronic Safety and Licensing Application (eSLA) platform for functions like building permits, contractor licensing, and related services. eSLA allows applicants to complete all their applications, submissions, renewals, and payments related to their credential, permit, or plan review online. If conducting business in these program areas applicants must begin

¹⁹ [Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services Online Building Permit System introduction page](#)

²⁰ [Wisconsin 2015 Senate Bill 458, Act 211](#)

²¹ [Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources Water Permit Applications page](#)

using the system to submit plan reviews, schedule inspections, make online payments, and conduct license look-ups with DSPS.

Observations

- The web portal is very simple to use. The sign-in page features a list of Wisconsin jurisdictions. The user can select one and then enter a code provided by that jurisdiction to gain access. The user is then taken directly to the jurisdiction system for further permitting work.
- Act 211 dictates information required on building permit forms and requires establishing an electronic system for building permits in Wisconsin.
- Act 211 also requires "If a city, village, town, or county fails to file with the department an electronic copy of an issued permit not later than the last day of the first month beginning after the issuance of the permit, [that jurisdiction] shall refund to the person to whom the building permit was issued an amount equal to the difference between the amount paid by that person...for that permit...to the department"
- Over 500 cities, villages, and towns across Wisconsin's 72 counties use the eSLA platform for functions like building permits, contractor licensing, and related services.

New Jersey: Department of Community Affairs, Division of Codes and Standards

In New Jersey, the Department of Community Affairs operates a Division of Codes and Standards whose mission is to establish and enforce health, welfare, and safety standards for anything built, constructed, or erected for use, occupancy, or ornament on, above, or below the surface of the earth in New Jersey. They provide electronic Plan Review for projects under DCA jurisdiction. Municipalities are responsible for processing construction permits, including inspections and issuing Certificates of Occupancy by state-licensed inspectors. Primarily, the State Department of Community Affairs provides services municipalities are not equipped or licensed to provide.

Only those who submit plans to the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) are required to use the ePlan Electronic Plan Review System. Municipalities ARE NOT required to use ePlan unless submitting directly to the DCA.

To implement a system to streamline and modernize the state's plan review process, the Department of Community Affairs Division of Codes and Standards launched ePlan, a web-based electronic plan and document workflow solution that automates the plan submission, review, and approval process using digital files to the state for state reviewed plans. ePlan allows all stages of the review process to be transmitted electronically via the internet, thus eliminating paper-based building and code review processes and reducing the time between plan submission and final approval.

ePlan is provided for all building projects that require plans from a licensed architect or engineer. When a citizen (architect, engineer, contractor, owner) applies for a construction or land use permit requiring drawing plans and other documents, ePlan will invite the applicant to a "project" where the applicant can upload electronic plan files. The Bureau of Construction Project Review staff will then have access to the plans, and use the ePlan workflow, collaboration, and view/markup tools to complete the initial review within 20 business days. Required changes are noted on the files and then communicated to the applicant, who makes the noted revisions to the original files and then resubmits revised files back into ePlan. The review cycle continues until all the regulatory requirements are satisfied and the DCA grants approval for the plans.

The Bureau of Construction Project Review is required to perform plan reviews in municipalities where the subcode officials and construction officials do not possess code enforcement licenses of the appropriate class. The construction class of the municipality can be obtained either through the municipality's construction office, administrative offices, or by calling the Office of Regulatory Affairs.

Following the UCC, submission to the Bureau for plan review must be made if the proposed project is:

Class 1: A Bureau plan review and release is required before the issuance of a construction permit unless the construction official and each appropriate subcode official in the municipal enforcing agency are certified as an HHS construction official or subcode officials²²;

Class 2: A Bureau plan review and release is required before the issuance of a construction permit unless the construction official and each appropriate subcode official in the municipal enforcing agency is certified as an HHS or ICS construction official or subcode official²³; or

Class 3: A Bureau plan review shall not be required except when the Department acts as the enforcing agency. Application should be made to the local construction office, not the Department.²⁴

Revenue earned from uniform construction code (UCC) enforcement fees must be dedicated to UCC enforcement rather than diverted to support the general fund in New Jersey. The state laws require municipalities with UCC enforcement offices to budget for sufficient staff to handle reviews and inspections in a timely fashion. The established period for completing the permit application review is within 20 business days.²⁵ Inspections are to be scheduled and performed within three business days of the time for which the inspection has been requested.²⁶ Office hours are to be commensurate with the municipality's construction activity level.²⁷

Observations

- The system does not serve as a portal for the intake of other permits that local building departments are equipped to handle.
- The system may serve as a model for local jurisdictions.
- The system is not an ideal model for a statewide permitting system.
- Most municipalities and townships in New Jersey are small and work in partnership with the state to provide compliance with the Uniform Construction Code requirements.

Other models

Further lessons can be learned from local governments that provide county-wide electronic permitting portals and services to communities within county jurisdictions. The City-County of Honolulu, Hawaii, is one such example, driven by the passage of a local ordinance that streamlined permitting timelines within the local government.²⁸ Similar efforts are in place in Salt Lake City and County, Utah,²⁹ using Accela software.

²² NJAC 5:23-4.3A(d) for agency classification, New Jersey Register, Vol. 55 No. 23, December 4, 2023

²³ IBID

²⁴ IBID

²⁵ N.J.A.C. 5:23-2.16(a). New Jersey Register, August 7, 2023

²⁶ N.J.A.C. 5:23-4.5(h)1(ix). New Jersey Register, August 7, 2023

²⁷ N.J.A.C. 5:23-4.4(b). New Jersey Register, August 7, 2023

²⁸ "[Mayor Roth signs Bill 84, Making Building Easier for Big Island](#)," Big Island Now Newsletter, December 2, 2023

²⁹ [Salt Lake City Building Services](#)

Undoubtedly, many more local governments in the US are employing this approach to support the smaller jurisdictions in the local county areas.

An excellent example of a regional customer portal that standardizes digital permit applications for the Puget Sound area is the My Buildingpermit.com³⁰ system. This local subscription system allows applicants to apply for building, grading, electrical, fire, land use, natural resources, plumbing, mechanical, sign, or utility permits. It also allows an applicant to schedule inspections and track permitting progress. There are currently 17 jurisdictions in this consortium. They also support training and seminars for their members.

³⁰ [My Building Permit homepage](#)