CITY AND COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

BUDGET AND LEGISLATIVE ANALYST

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Policy Analysis Report

To: Supervisor Bilal Mahmood
From: Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office
Re: Post-Entitlement Permitting in San Francisco
Date: March 5, 2026

Summary of Requested Action

Your office requested that the Budget and Legislative Analyst conduct an analysis of San Francisco's post-entitlement permit processes, survey other jurisdictions, and identify potential practices to improve the process, particularly for housing development permits.

For further information about this report, contact Fred Brousseau, Director of Policy Analysis, at the Budget and Legislative Analyst's Office.

Executive Summary

- San Francisco Department of Building Inspection data shows that processing time for building permits for projects that added new housing units (as opposed to remodeling or modifications of existing housing), and were filed any time before August 12, 2025, and issued between January 1, 2024 and August 12, 2025 was a median of 280 days and took a median of three rounds of review. Each round represents either an initial submission or a resubmission of the building permit application pursuant to comments and questions provided by the Department of Building Inspection or other City departments reviewing the application.

- San Francisco's 280-day median processing time compares unfavorably to other cities for which comparison data is available, except for the city of Denver, which reports an average of 274 days for processing building permits.

- As shown in Exhibit A, San Francisco has the longest processing time of the cities for which comparison data could be collected. Austin has a longer process for its site plan reviews (not shown), which are required for larger housing projects, but these aren't exactly comparable since they represent various aspects of large-scale development projects only.

Exhibit A: Comparison of Building Permit Issuance Times Across Cities [Approximate 2024-2025 Time Period]

City	Median Days to Permit Issuance
San Francisco	280
Seattle	185
Austin (Building Permits)	91
Washington D.C.	92.6 (Average)
Denver	274 (Average)
San Diego	134

Sources: San Francisco Department of Building Inspection (DBI), Cities of Seattle, Austin, Washington, D.C., Denver, and San Diego, as well as BLA analysis of datasets.

- The City and County of San Francisco (the City) modified its permit application process on January 1, 2024 by decoupling the entitlement process administered by the Planning Department from the post-entitlement process administered by the Department of Building Inspection (DBI). The 280-day median shown in Exhibit A therefore includes entitlement processing time for applications filed before January 1, 2024. For applications submitted on or after January 1, 2024 and issued by August 2025, median processing time was 114 days, a lower number of days since these do not include days spent on the entitlement process. However, from the applicant perspective, total processing time can be more than 114 days since they still may go through the entitlement process before they file their building permit application.

- State laws passed in recent years have set time limits on building permit issuance for housing projects. Specifically, determinations of application completeness for building permits for housing projects must be completed within 15 business days of receipt and applications must be either approved or applicants sent comments requiring modifications to their application within 30 business days for housing projects of 25 or fewer units or within 60 business days for projects of 26 or more housing units. With these time limits, applications for smaller housing projects would need to be determined complete and approved or sent comments within 45 business days of application and larger projects within 75 days. Any subsequent rounds of review are also subject to the 30 or 60 business day time limits.

- The City's overall compliance with state mandates cannot be readily determined as DBI processing time records do not link the number of rounds of review and number of days an application is in process. In any case, San Francisco is taking longer to process building permits than other cities from which we collected comparison data.

- In February 2025, Mayor Daniel Lurie issued Executive Directive 25-01 that established the PermitSF initiative. The initiative has the goal of improving permitting customer service, speed and reliability, and coordination between City departments.

- Factors that can affect processing time include:

  - reviews by multiple departments, in which one department can extend the entire process,

  - applicant-caused delays such as delays in an applicant returning a revised application after receiving comments from City departments that resulted in a change in project plans,

  - multiple rounds of review due to unclear requirements or different interpretations/explanations by different staff in different departments, and

  - complexities with the building and other codes that are unique to San Francisco.

Tracking and identifying sources of processing delays

- *Staff vs. applicant-caused delays:* Our review of a sample of permit records shows that DBI's information system does not provide information that helps management track and pinpoint delays and other problems processing applications. For example, it is not possible to tell without a manual review of individual application files the number and amount of time applications have been delayed by City staff versus processing delays due to applicants putting their application on hold while they are making changes to their plans, seeking other financing, or for other reasons.

- Tracking time delays by responsible department or party, as is done by the cities of Seattle and Austin, would help DBI management determine how frequently the City is responsible for delays in the process, if they need to make process improvements to expedite application processing, and how frequently applicants are the cause of delays.

- *Multiple rounds of review*: Building permit applicants typically go through more than one round of review when City staff request more information or changes in plans for their projects to ensure they meet life safety standards and are consistent with all code requirements. For building permit applications issued in 2024 or 2025 through August, the median number of rounds of review was three. This means that it is the minority of applicants that are issued a permit after their initial submission; approximately half of all applicants are subject to three or more rounds of review,

extending total processing time and helping to explain the 280-day median number of days between filing an application and a building permit being issued.

- PermitSF tracks the percentage of applications that meet the City's processing time targets on its website. For December 2024 through November 2025, PermitSF reported that application completeness for 98 percent of building permit applications was within the target of 21 calendar days, 72 percent of first round reviews were completed within the 30 calendar days target, and 88 percent of second round reviews were processed within the target of 14 calendar days. The PermitSF target of determining completeness in 21 calendar days is consistent with the state requirement of 15 business days. The City target of 30 calendar days for the first round of review is shorter than the state requirement of 30 business days (for housing developments with 25 or fewer units).

- Median processing time measures are useful, but total elapsed processing time (e.g., the median 280 days between building permit application and issuance reported above for housing permits for 2024 and 2025) is the most important measure from the applicant perspective. We note that the median processing days reported by the City are for all review stations combined and do not show total elapsed time for the applicant. This means that the total time to complete a first review or resubmission review could take longer than the reported median when one or more review stations exceed the median.

- Further details are needed about applications that are not processed within the targets or whose total elapsed processing time exceeds the median number of days reported for each segment of the process. For example, DBI management needs to provide and track more information about the more than 25 percent of first round application reviews that are not processed within PermitSF's 30-day target. According to DBI and Permit Center Staff, the planned transition to OpenGov software should improve data accuracy and transparency.

Need for clear compilation of required information to be provided with applications:

- While multiple rounds of review may be necessary when applicants make changes to their proposed projects that trigger other code and documentation requirements, it is incumbent on DBI and the other reviewing departments to communicate City requirements as clearly and completely as possible in advance of applications being submitted to help minimize resubmission of applications and extending processing time.

- The DBI website contains numerous guides and information about the building permit application process and applicant information requirements, but it does not

provide a checklist detailing in one place information and specifications that must be provided covering all aspects of the project:

- general project information,
- site plan details,
- architectural details,
- structural details (foundation, framing, and structure details),
- mechanical, electrical, and plumbing plans,
- energy details,
- structural calculations,
- civil engineering documents such as grading plans, and
- other requirements.

While all the City's requirements can be obtained from various sources and departments, having all the information and a level of detail in one place would help applicants prepare complete applications and could reduce the number of City-required resubmissions. Further, a compilation of most requirements would help staff respond to applicant questions and misunderstandings.

- Though the City's intent is to have all reviewing departments conduct their processes concurrently, this does not always occur. In some cases, one or more departments start later than the others and extend the review process. We also found instances of one department taking a week or more longer than the other departments, extending total elapsed time for application processing.

No centralized oversight of multi-department review process

- There is no single City staff person responsible for tracking post-entitlement building permit applications through the process and intervening if a single department is not brought into the review process timely or if one or more departments istaking substantially more time than others. For pre-entitlement applications, a Planning Department staff member oversees applications, tracks them through the review process, and intervenes if delays are identified.

- Designating staff for this role for the post-entitlement process could help minimize or avoid delays though it would probably not be needed for most applications. The Permit Center has started a process where it sends out automated weekly notices to reviewing departments listing all current applications and deadlines. In addition, staff supervisors are now required to investigate applications that have not been approved by a third round. We recommend that DBI monitor the impact of these initiatives before allocating a staff member to overseeing post-entitlement building permits and intervening when delays occur. However, if DBI finds the desired results

of fewer delays and shorter processing time are not occurring, it should consider assigning a staff member responsibility for overseeing timely application processing.

Policy Options

The Board of Supervisors should:

1. Request Department of Building Inspection (DBI), the Permit Center, and PermitSF to provide an annual report to the Board of Supervisors with updates on performance data, recommended and enacted process improvements, and legislative recommendations to improve the permitting process, particularly the post-entitlement building permit phase.

2. Request that PermitSF and DBI officials establish an ongoing multi-departmental task force to regularly convene, such as quarterly, to monitor permit processing time and other key performance measures and to recommend improvements to the process to ensure that requirements are clear to applicants, the process is efficiently operated, and that automated systems are used to support and measure performance.

3. Request that PermitSF expand its data dashboard to include the measurement of time to complete each round of post-entitlement building permit review (rather than the median time of all review stations) and the amount of time permit applications are held by the City compared to the applicant, as well as to allow the data to be filtered by type of project (such as residential, commercial, mixed use, etc.).

4. Request that DBI prepare a comprehensive checklist of building permit application requirements detailing in one place required information and specifications that must be provided with applications such as architectural details, foundation, framing and structural details and mechanical, electrical, and plumbing plans.

5. Request PermitSF and DBI officials to explore opportunities to integrate artificial intelligence into permit review such as determinations of application completeness, to reduce staff time.

6. Request the Mayor's Office to provide a plan for the future of PermitSF, including whether it will be time limited or ongoing and a staffing and funding plan.

7. Request that DBI initiate an ongoing process for periodic review of the City's Building Code, to identify areas where the City's additions to the Code could be deleted and modified when they are no longer adding value so that the City's Code more closely mirrors the State Code.

Project Staff: Fred Brousseau, Reuben Holober

Post-Entitlement Permitting in San Francisco

Background

Observers and City officials have long viewed San Francisco as a jurisdiction with lengthy timelines for processing building permit applications.[1] According to the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), self-reported data from 2022 showed that in San Francisco it took an average of 605 days for a building permit for an already entitled housing project to be issued, while it took 418 days in the second slowest jurisdiction. In 2023 and 2024, San Francisco had only permitted 4,129 housing units, or five percent of the 82,069-unit goal in the 2023-2031 Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA).

The City and State have initiated several programs and laws to improve permit processing times. The City opened the Permit Center at 49 South Van Ness Avenue in 2021 to improve customer service and allow applicants to move easily between permitting departments. Assembly Bills 2234 and 1114 (AB 2234 and AB 1114), signed by Governor Gavin Newsom in 2022 and 2023, require local agencies to determine if a post-entitlement building permit application is complete within 15 business days. For housing developments with 25 or fewer units, the local agency must review permit applications and either approve the permit or provide a set of comments to the applicant within 30 days.

PermitSF

On February 13, 2025, Mayor Daniel Lurie issued Executive Directive 25-01 that established the PermitSF initiative. The initiative has the goal of improving permitting customer service, speed and reliability, and coordination between City departments. Mayor Lurie has announced various reforms as part of the initiative, including legislative packages to reduce permit requirements, expanded Permit Center hours, performance targets, and website improvements. PermitSF is currently staffed by employees from various City departments located at the Permit Center, rather than with dedicated staff. At this time, it is not clear how long the PermitSF initiative will last, or whether it will receive designated funding and permanent staffing.

Permitting Time in San Francisco

Data from the Department of Building Inspection (DBI) shows that building permits for San Francisco housing projects filed before August 12, 2025 and issued between January 1, 2024 and August 12, 2025 that were subject to an in-house review took a median of 280 days between permit application filing date and permit issuance date. These permits had a median of two

[1] The State Building Code requires a permit to be issued before the construction, alteration, or demolition of any building or structure. Unless otherwise specified, this report refers to post-entitlement building permits, meaning that the project has already received entitlement approvals.

rounds of staff comments, meaning that they were approved on their third submission. For all building permits reviewed Citywide between December 2024 and November 2025 (not specific to housing projects), staff completed their first plan review in a median of 15 calendar days (below the target of 30 days) and resubmission reviews in a median of three days (below the target of 14 days).

We compared the time it takes to process building permits in San Francisco to other cities and found that the process generally takes longer in San Francisco. We note that this is not an exact comparison as each city presents its data slightly differently, including whether data is for all building permits or specific to housing projects, whether medians or averages are used, and the time period from when data was collected. A comparison of building permit issuance time in San Francsico compared with other cities for the approximate 2024-2025 time period is shown in Exhibit 1 below.[2] For San Francisco, the median days to permit issuance and number of review rounds are specific to in-house building permits for housing projects only, while the median days to complete first application review is for all in-house building permits.

[2] The time periods for data are as follows: San Francisco: permits issued from January 1, 2024 through August 12, 2025; Seattle: permits issued from January 1, 2024 through October 6, 2025; Austin (Building Permits): permits issued from January 1, 2024 through August 25, 2025; Austin (Site Plans): permits issued or reviewed from October 2024 through September 2025; Washington: permits issued or reviewed from October 2024 through September 2025; Denver: permits issued from approximately mid-December 2024 through mid-December 2025; San Diego: permits issued from January 2025 through approximately mid-December 2025.

Exhibit 1: Comparison of Building Permit Issuance Times Across Cities 2024-2025 Time Period[3]

City	Median Days to Permit Issuance	Median Days to Complete First Application Review	Median Number of Review Rounds
San Francisco	280	15	3
Seattle	185	47.5	3
Austin (Building Permits)	91	-	-
Austin (Site Plans)	465 (Average of 4 quarterly averages)	30.7 (Average of 12 monthly averages)	6 (Average of 4 quarterly averages)
Washington	92.6 (Average)	30 (Target, 97% success)	-
Denver	274 (Average)	14-28 (Estimate)	-
San Diego	134	-	-

Source: DBI, Cities of Seattle, Austin, Washington, Denver, and San Diego, as well as BLA analysis of datasets.

The time it takes for building permits for housing projects to be issued in San Francisco is comparable to Denver but generally longer than other cities. Austin has a twofold permitting process, where all construction projects require a building permit, but larger projects (including residential projects with over four units) also require a site plan to outline the horizontal aspects of development on a lot, including the locations of buildings, landscaping, parking and driveways, and utility improvements. Because not all housing developments require a site plan, we could not determine the overall median or average number of days for permit issuance.

It should be noted that prior to 2024, permit applicants in San Francisco typically filed building permits at the same time as entitlement permits. Therefore, there were many permits filed prior to 2024 but issued in 2024 or 2025 where the total elapsed time included pre-entitlement work. For in-house permits filed for housing projects on or after January 1, 2024 and issued in 2024 or through August 12, 2025 (thus excluding time associated with the entitlement process), permits were issued in a median of 114 days. This figure accounts for eliminating the permits that included pre-entitlement time, eliminating the outlier permits that for whatever reason took several years to be issued, improvements resulting from PermitSF efforts, and changes to state law. Using separately reported data from PermitSF, for all in-house building permits issued between December 2024 and November 2025, regardless of their filing date, the median was 177 days to permit issuance. These figures, more in line with the comparison cities, do not

[3] Data is specific to housing developments for San Francisco, Seattle, Austin (for building permits), Denver, and San Diego. Data was obtained from staff at San Francisco's DBI and Seattle's Department of Construction and Inspections, and from publicly available datasets and dashboards from other cities.

include permits filed any time before November 30, 2025 but not yet issued as of that date. An overview of San Francisco permit issuance time with each metric is shown in Exhibit 2 below.

Exhibit 2: San Francisco Permit Issuance Times

Description of Data	Data Source	Median Days to Issuance
In-house building permits for housing, issued 1/1/24 – 8/12/25, regardless of filing date	DBI	280
In-house building permits for housing filed and issued 1/1/24 – 8/12/25	DBI	114
All in-house building permits issued 12/1/24 – 11/30/25, regardless of filing date	PermitSF	177

Source: DBI, PermitSF

Permitting Process

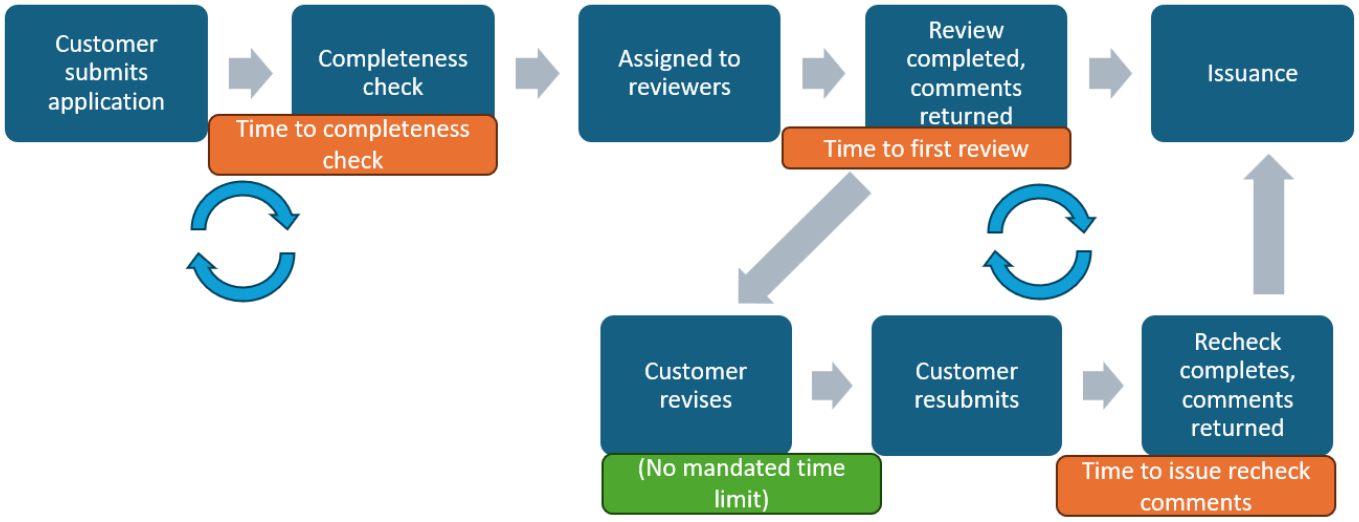
Pre-Entitlement Process

Changes in state law over the past decade, including Senate Bill 423 (Streamlined Multifamily Approval, previously known as Senate Bill 35), Assembly Bill 2011 (Affordable Housing and High Roads Job Act Supplemental), Assembly Bill 2162 (Supportive Housing Streamlined Approval), Senate Bill 4 (Affordable Housing Streamlined Approval), and Senate Bill 9 (Streamlined Housing Development Supplemental), have largely streamlined the pre-entitlement permitting process. Most housing development projects can now be approved ministerially by Planning Department staff without having to go through a public hearing process. According to the PermitSF dashboard, entitlement planning applications for all types of projects approved between December 2024 and November 2025 took a median of 121 days to approve.

Post-Entitlement Process

San Francisco has two types of building permits: over the counter (OTC) permits and in-house permits. Over the counter permits are for smaller projects, such as minor remodels, new windows or exterior doors, and sign permits. These permits are typically approved in one day. New construction or any projects that add or remove housing units require a more extensive in-house review. The in-house review process involves the applicant submitting an application, staff conducting a completeness check, and reviewers from various City departments reviewing the application. If the reviewers do not approve the application as first submitted, they provide comments and the applicant needs to resubmit. Once every review station has approved the application and the applicant has paid fees, the permit is issued. A flow chart is shown in Exhibit 3 below.

Exhibit 3: Flow Chart of Post-Entitlement Process



Source: DBI

The points in the flow chart shaded in orange show the points where City staff have time limits to process the building permit application. Staff has a target of 21 calendar days to conduct a completeness check; recent data from the PermitSF dashboard shows a median of 13 calendar days for this step and 98 percent of applications meeting the 21-day target. The target to complete first plan review is 30 calendar days[4] and the actual median is 14 days, with 72 percent of applications meeting the target. For resubmission reviews, the target is 14 calendar days and the actual median is three days, with 88 percent of applications meeting the target. We note that the medians shown are for all review stations, not total elapsed time for the applicant, meaning that the total time to complete a first review or resubmission review could take longer when one or more review stations exceed the median. For example, if five review stations complete a round of review in 14 days each, but the sixth station takes 40 days, the median time would only be 14 days. While the 14 days reported sounds reasonable, it would be very different than the applicant's experience in this instance where the full review cycle would take 40 days. DBI and PermitSF do not currently track the total elapsed time it takes for a permit application to complete a review cycle.

[4] State law sets a standard of 30 business days for the first round of review to be completed for housing projects of 25 or fewer units and 60 business days for projects with 26 or more units. The City's standard of 30 calendar days for first round of review is shorter than the state requirement of 30 business days.

For in-house building permits, applicants have the option of applying for a site permit, which allows applicants to begin work on a project before all detailed plans have been submitted. After submitting preliminary designs to receive the site permit, the applicant submits various addenda with more detailed designs for different components of the construction, such as grading, structural, mechanical and electrical systems, and fire sprinklers. Each addendum is reviewed in the process shown above and tracked in the DBI data as its own distinct permit. The site permit process is typically only used for larger, more complex projects.

Assembly Bills 2234 and 1114

In September 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 2234 (AB 2234), which set time limits for staff review of nondiscretionary post-entitlement building permits for housing development projects. AB 2234 required local jurisdictions to determine whether a permit application is complete within 15 business days of receipt. If the jurisdiction does not respond within 15 business days, the application is automatically deemed complete. Local jurisdictions are also required to review and either approve or issue comments on applications within 30 business days (for projects with 25 or fewer units) or 60 business days (for projects with 26 or more units), with the same limits for reviews of resubmissions. If an applicant appeals a jurisdiction's determination of non-compliance with requirements, the jurisdiction must issue a final determination of appeal within 60 business days (for projects with 25 or fewer units) or 90 days (for projects with 26 or more units).

Because San Francisco building permits are discretionary (and subject to appeal), AB 2234 did not apply and was not implemented by the City. In 2023, Assemblymember Matt Haney introduced Assembly Bill 1114 (AB 1114) to close this loophole and apply the AB 2234 requirements to all post-entitlement permits, regardless of whether they were discretionary or nondiscretionary. After passing through the legislature, AB 1114 was signed by Governor Newsom in October 2023 and went into effect on January 1, 2024.

Possible Points of Delay in the Process

As noted above, building permit applications are reviewed by multiple departments, including DBI, the Planning Department, Department of Public Works (DPW), San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), and the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD). Some departments have multiple review stations, such as DBI (which includes the Building, Mechanical, and Structural divisions) and DPW (which includes the Bureau of Street Use and Mapping and the Bureau of Urban Forestry). Data from DBI with the median number of days applications spent with each department for housing development permits filed and issued between January 1, 2024 and August 12, 2025 is shown in Exhibit 4 below.

Exhibit 4: Median Number of Days Applications are Reviewed by Department Permits Filed and Issued in 2024 and 2025

Reviewing Department	Number of Permits Reviewed	Median Days Reviewed by Department
DBI	300	30
Planning	123	24
DPW	203	14
SFPUC	129	14
SFFD	236	14
Total Days to Issuance		**114**

Source: DBI

Permit applications were reviewed in a median of 14 calendar days by DPW, SPFUC, and SFFD, 24 days by the Planning Department, and 30 days by DBI. These median amounts are cumulative of multiple rounds of review by each department. Permit applications are typically reviewed concurrently by multiple review stations, so the amount of time it takes for the City to process an application is not simply the total of all department review days. We note that this data is taken from dates in DBI's permit tracking system that are manually input by reviewers and are subject to error, including instances where the number of days a permit application is shown with a particular department is greater than the total elapsed time from permit filing to issuance.

While long permit issuance times are often attributed to a slow City review process, they may also be due to delays caused by the applicant in resubmissions or design changes. DBI and PermitSF do not currently track the amount of time a permit application is held by the City compared to the time it is held by the applicant. The median total elapsed time of 114 days to issuance for the dataset shown above implies that the permits may be held by the applicant for an extended period of time, as the longest median review time for any department is 30 days, and the reviews are typically done concurrently by departments.

Unexplained Delays

We reviewed several permit applications in DBI's tracking system and found examples of permit applications being placed on hold or having long pauses in the review process. For example, we found a permit application filed in March 2022 that was placed on hold four times by three different review stations, including a hold of approximately one year by DPW's Bureau of Streets and Mapping. This permit application also arrived at the Bureau of Urban Forestry in January 2023, but review did not begin until July 2024. In this case, it is unclear whether the holds and the delayed start to review were due to the applicant missing requirements or staff delays. A site permit addendum application for a fire alarm system underwent three rounds of review by SFFD staff. Between the three rounds of review, SFFD did not begin review for a combined 55 days

after receiving the plan submittals. It was unclear as to why this was the case, but it may be due to a backlog of permits under review. Causes of building permit processing delays are not systematically tracked in the DBI system.

Departments Added Late to the Process

In our review of permit applications in DBI's tracking system, we found examples of new departmental review stations entering the process several months after the permit had been filed and other departments had begun review. For example, we found a permit application that was originally filed in January 2024 and then resubmitted and reviewed multiple times by the Building, Mechanical, Structural, Planning Department, SFPUC, and Urban Forestry review stations before arriving at the SFFD review station in May 2025. While SFFD approved the plans in two days and did not significantly slow down the approval process, it raises questions as to why SFFD was brought into the review process so late and if that can be a factor in delays for other permit applications. According to a PermitSF representative, this may be due to the City's permit routing process, which is done manually and could miss needed review stations earlier in the process. It may also happen if an applicant revises the scope of their plans, which could trigger a new department needing to review the plans.

Multiple Rounds of Review

As noted above, building permit applications typically are not approved on the first submission. Each review station provides comments on the plans in the City's Bluebeam system, and the applicant uses those comments to amend and resubmit their plans. This process is repeated until each staff review station has approved the plans.

While DBI does not directly track the number of review rounds for each permit application, DBI does track the number of comments provided by each review station and which review station provided the most comments on each application. DBI provided a dataset of 1,371 in-house building permits filed and issued between January 1, 2024 and September 15, 2025, which was not specific to housing development. These permit applications had a median of two rounds of comments issued, meaning that the median application was approved on the third round of review. This is less than Seattle, where building permits for housing developments were approved in a median of four rounds of review. In Austin, site plans were approved in a median of six rounds of review, although as noted above, site plans are only needed for larger and more complex projects. However, there is potential for a lengthier process with more rounds of review in San Francisco. While total median processing time for the DBI dataset of 1,371 permit applications was 113 days, 213 applications (16 percent) had five or more rounds of review before issuance. 19 permit applications had 10 or more rounds of review, and four permit applications had 17 rounds of review (which were the most).

Complexities with Building Code

While the San Francisco Building Code mostly duplicates the State Building Code, there are many amendments that are specific to San Francisco. Local amendments may only be more restrictive than the State Building Code, such as for environmental, seismic, or slope reasons. These complexities may add challenges to permit applicants who are used to adhering to the State Code but are less familiar with San Francisco requirements. PermitSF has begun intermittently reviewing the City's Building Code to identify any requirements that are unnecessary. For example, in July 2025, the Mayor's Office introduced an ordinance repealing the Slope Protection Act, which required expert geotechnical analysis for projects in high slope areas, as well as approval from the Structural Advisory Committee, Fire Department, and Department of Public Health. PermitSF found that these requirements added cost and time to permit approvals without improving safety beyond baseline state requirements. In September 2025, the Board of Supervisors approved the ordinance. Concluding there are more opportunities for improvements, PermitSF staff periodically looks for other opportunities to streamline the Building Code but there are no dedicated staff assigned to this endeavor and it is not occurring on a regular basis. Dedicating staff to this function on a regular basis could further help streamline post-entitlement building permit processing.

Who's In Charge?

From our interviews with DBI and Permit Center staff, we learned that typically no staff member is in charge of guiding a post-entitlement building permit through the process. This is in contrast to the pre-entitlement process, which is guided by a Planning Department planner.

In lieu of this role, the Permit Center sends out automated emails to plan reviewers across departments each week to remind them of their assignments and deadlines to complete review. In a new directive under PermitSF, if a building permit application is not approved after the third round of review, a supervisor is brought in to try to resolve any outstanding issues with the applicant.

From these discussions, it is not clear if there would necessarily be a benefit to assigning staff to an in-charge role in the post-entitlement process. While it may be helpful to speed up the applications that take the longest to approve, it likely would have little impact for the majority of applications. At this time, it may be best for DBI and the Permit Center to assess the effectiveness of the recent process improvements before considering this change. Alternatively, DBI could assign a staff member to monitor and intervene for just those applications that exceed a certain amount of elapsed processing time or consistently miss deadlines.

Are the Requirements Clear?

Applicants typically do not receive a checklist of requirements for their applications to be approved, with the exception of applicants for accessory dwelling unit (ADU) projects. This

contrasts with other jurisdictions, including the City of Santa Clara, which provides a detailed checklist of requirements to applicants.

All comments from City reviewers are issued in the Bluebeam system as reviews are completed disparately, rather than through a comprehensive response letter to the applicant. This creates the possibility for different review stations to provide inconsistent comments, which causes confusion for the applicant. The City is moving to a new system with OpenGov that will generate one response letter to the applicant, inclusive of all comments for each round of review.

Lessons from Austin

As noted above, Austin has a twofold post-entitlement permitting process, where all housing developments require a building permit, but projects with five or more units also require a site plan. Site plans take significantly longer to be issued, with an average of approximately 465 days of elapsed time compared to a median of approximately 91 days for building permits.[5] Austin has undertaken a plan with 45 initiatives to improve processing times and the quality of experience for applicants and staff. Austin officials have the goal of reducing elapsed site plan processing time to six months, or approximately 180 days, compared to their current average of 465 days, or one year and 100 days.

According to Austin representatives, the most important initiative has been the establishment of cadenced inter- and intra-departmental meetings to discuss continuous improvement. The meetings are outcome driven and run by a business process specialist on staff. While PermitSF staff holds similar meetings to coordinate between reviewing departments, we believe a more outcome-driven approach could be beneficial to reducing permit issuance times in San Francisco. Austin has also utilized artificial intelligence technology to assist with completeness checks and plan review. We believe this is an area DBI and PermitSF officials can explore to reduce staff review times.

DBI Data

As noted above, DBI is able to measure various metrics through its permit tracking system, including the number of days to issue a permit, the number of days permits are reviewed by each department, and the number of rounds of review. As discussed above, post-entitlement housing building permits filed prior to August 2025 and issued in 2024 or 2025 through August were in process a median of 280 days, while permits both filed and issued in 2024 and 2025 took a median of 114 days to issuance.

[5] The median of 91 days for building permit issuance is specific to housing projects, while the average of 465 days is for all site plans, regardless of whether housing is included in the project.

Pending Permit Applications – Unissued

As part of our analysis, we reviewed a DBI-provided dataset of 1,389 building permit applications for housing developments that have been filed but not issued, dating back to 2017. The applications in this dataset had an average of 1,468 days and a median of 1,491 days between filing and October 29, 2025 (the date the dataset was generated). While these applications are shown as "filed" in DBI's Permit Tracking System, DBI has flagged permit applications as "inactive" if there has been no permitting activity for at least 360 days (for projects with a construction valuation of $1 million or less) or 720 days (for projects with a construction valuation of over $1 million), although extensions are possible with DBI approval and payment of additional fees. However, DBI allows permits to be considered "active" if the system shows they are still being reviewed by the Planning Department. This is because, before 2024, customers were allowed to apply for a building permit before they finished their Planning approvals, which can take more than the allotted 360/720 days. Customers are now required to finish their Planning approvals before applying for a building permit, and the reviewing stations no longer record their stations as "on hold," so this exception is largely irrelevant for newer applications.

Beginning in September 2025, DBI embarked on a project to formally cancel inactive filed status permits. Over 10,000 over-the-counter applications have been cancelled, and the Department is now working on cancelling in-house applications, which will address many of the permits in the dataset we reviewed. As part of that effort, DBI will be working with the Planning Department to determine which applications that appear to be under Planning review have been abandoned and can also be cancelled, which requires giving the owner 60 days' notice before the cancellation. In addition to data system clean-up, DBI has worked with the Board of Supervisors to simplify the criteria for application cancellations. In December 2025, the Board of Supervisors approved an ordinance that amended the Building Code to state that all permit applications expire 730 days after filing, with possible extensions of 180 days with justifiable cause (File 25-0811).

The primary issue that has allowed many applications that should have been cancelled to remain in filed status is the lack of automated customer notifications and updating of application status after the specified time has transpired. Future permitting systems should notify the customer when their time to obtain a permit is running out and automatically move a permit from filed to cancelled status if an extension is not granted.

Problems With DBI Data

While DBI's data is useful for detecting trends and identifying areas for improvement, it has limitations. Data is currently based on manually input dates in the DBI tracking system, which is subject to error if reviewers enter incorrect dates. For example, we found permit applications where the number of days reviewed by a particular department was greater than the total elapsed time from filing to issuance, as well as an unissued permit application that had a negative number of days since the last activity.

In addition to the errors, DBI data has limitations. At this time, DBI is unable to determine the total elapsed time it takes for all reviewing stations to complete a round of review, as well as the amount of time an application is with the City compared with the amount of time with the applicant. We believe this is an important part of the story that would provide better insight into how long the City takes with permitting and whether the City is complying with AB 1114. Representatives we spoke with from Austin and Seattle report that they track such information and find it useful in their efforts to manage and reduce overall permitting times. According to DBI and Permit Center staff, the planned transition to OpenGov software should improve the data available to the City and the transparency of the data to the public.

Policy Options

The Board of Supervisors should:

1. Request Department of Building Inspection (DBI), the Permit Center, and PermitSF to provide an annual report to the Board of Supervisors with updates on performance data, recommended and enacted process improvements, and legislative recommendations to improve the permitting process, particularly the post-entitlement building permit phase.

2. Request that PermitSF and DBI officials establish an ongoing multi-departmental task force to regularly convene, such as quarterly, to monitor permit processing time and other key performance measures and to recommend improvements to the process to ensure that requirements are clear to applicants, the process is efficiently operated, and that automated systems are used to support and measure performance.

3. Request that PermitSF expand its data dashboard to include the measurement of time to complete each round of post-entitlement building permit review (rather than the median time of all review stations) and the amount of time permit applications are held by the City compared to the applicant, as well as to allow the data to be filtered by type of project (such as residential, commercial, mixed use, etc.).

4. Request that DBI prepare a comprehensive checklist of building permit application requirements detailing in one place required information and specifications that must be provided with applications such as architectural details, foundation, framing and structural details and mechanical, electrical, and plumbing plans.

5. Request PermitSF and DBI officials to explore opportunities to integrate artificial intelligence into permit review such as determinations of application completeness, to reduce staff time.

6. Request the Mayor's Office to provide a plan for the future of PermitSF, including whether it will be time limited or ongoing and a staffing and funding plan.

7. Request that DBI initiate an ongoing process for periodic review of the City's Building Code, to identify areas where the City's additions to the Code could be deleted and modified when they are no longer adding value so that the City's Code more closely mirrors the State Code.