

E-governance for building permits

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Introduction

In 2019 nearly 50,000 construction projects for buildings were planned in Switzerland with corresponding investments of over Sfr46 billion. Before construction work can begin for any of these projects, a building permit procedure must be completed. In the canton of Bern alone, approximately 20,000 building permit requests are submitted annually. This involves about 350,000 postal deliveries and approximately 28 million pieces of paper.

In a standard building permit procedure, numerous forms must be completed for the submission of a building permit request. In practice, forms are often missing or completed incorrectly.

In particular, builders and architects must submit building permit requests in a simple, fast and ideally electronic way. In addition, the municipalities and cantons have an interest in making the approval process efficient and transparent.

In response to these growing market needs, several cantons have introduced an electronic procedure for building permit requests. In the canton of Zurich, for instance, applicants have been able to submit building permit requests electronically in eight municipalities since February 2020. There are plans in place to extend this project to 30 municipalities and launch an updated version of the Zurich platform in the third quarter of 2020.

Faster and simplified building permit procedures

The electronic building permit procedure allows the exchange of information between applicants and the public administration to be handled more efficiently and with less paperwork. While the process as a whole is simplified, the framework conditions remain unchanged (ie, the approval process remains within the competence of the municipality).

By submitting the existing documents electronically and then releasing them to all authorities involved in the construction process (eg, municipal engineers, land surveyors and cantonal offices), communication and access to documents between the applicant and the administration or from municipality to canton and vice versa is optimised. For the involved authorities, the electronic submission of documents is a considerable relief. It simplifies the process during meetings, telephone enquiries and building inspections. At the same time, the use of a web-based platform enables the approving authorities to communicate status changes, responsibilities and actions regarding building requests via the platform at any time to all involved parties.

Thanks to these improvements, the building permit process is more transparent for applicants and planners. Applicants can use the platform to:

- submit numerous requests to the municipality;
- view the decisions of the authorities; and
- discover the status of the building permit request.

This considerably increases transparency for applicants.

Moreover, the submission of electronic building permit requests is more efficient and tends to contain fewer errors than the traditional paper-based method. The amount of paper used for the request documents themselves and the number of documents to be signed has been considerably reduced. For this purpose, some cantons have combined the building permit request form and various additional forms in one e-request. Further, the ordinary procedure for obtaining a building

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permit and the simplified notification procedure, which is used for small projects, are no longer handled in two different procedures as before. Instead, a uniform building permit request form has been developed, which eliminates numerous additional forms.

Besides the reduction in administrative work caused by fewer forms, the procedure has been further improved by intelligently designed programs. The programs provide an input logic that enables the applicant to submit a correct request for a building permit electronically in a simple and straightforward manner. Depending on the program and the entries made, the applicant is intuitively guided through the form and appropriate assistance is offered – for example, with regard to which documents to upload for the building permit request. In particular, the programs provide for verification steps that check whether the input is complete and whether all necessary information has been supplied.

Cantonal implementation

The confederation, cantons and municipalities have been working for over 10 years on the digitisation of government and public services. During that time, the electronic channel has existed in parallel, as an alternative to the analogue channel. In order to achieve the transition to digital administration, the confederation, cantons and municipalities aim to make the electronic channel so attractive that it will be users' first choice.

Not all cantons provide e-governance to simplify the building permit process via e-request and those that do have chosen different applications. Vaud, Neuchatel, Ticino, Uri, Jura, Fribourg, Schwyz, Bern and Solothurn use the Camac application. Other cantons, such as Zurich or Aargau, have launched their own application. All cantons expect a significant reduction in costs through digitisation. In Bern, the estimated reduction in costs is Sfr3.5 million per year.

Until now, a number of cantons have lacked the legal basis to handle the building permit procedure entirely electronically. The cantons concerned are working intensively to close this gap. Until then, implementation generally looks as follows:

- The building permit request forms and plans must be submitted to the authorities in hard copy.
- Each municipality determines the exact number of paper dossiers required.

Comment

The improved applications and increased transparency with regard to the documentation and the status of building permit procedures enable planners to carry out projects more efficiently. This is a major advantage, especially for institutional investors and project developers.

Until the legal basis for a completely digital building permit procedure is in place, redundancies will continue to cause unnecessary work and costs. Apart from this, the electronic building permit procedure considerably simplifies the process for both the involved authorities and applicants. Moreover, all parties involved can check the progress, deadlines and status of the construction project at any time via the platform and access approved documents. Overall, the administrative workload can be significantly reduced.

Last but not least, thanks to the substantial reduction in paper, this step towards e-governance will benefit the environment.

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