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2013

FAST TRACK

HOW THE AUSTIN, TEXAS, APSP CHAPTER WORKED TO DEVELOP AN EXPEDITED PERMITTING PROCESS

BY MATT ALDERTON

The city of Austin, Texas, is something of a civic wunderkind. While the rest of the nation has limped along, crippled by the weight of the economic downturn, the Texas state capital has sprinted ahead, unburdened and unfazed. Unlike cities such as Baltimore, Cleveland, Detroit and St. Louis, all of which are shrinking, its population is expected to grow at a rate of 2.8 percent a year through 2016—almost triple the national rate, according to Moody's Analytics.

Already, Austin is swollen with transplants, having added approximately a million new residents since 1990. Even more impressive is the fact that most of those residents have jobs. Among the nation's 50 largest metro areas, Austin had the lowest unemployment rate (4.9 percent) as recently as November 2012.

So much growth means that Austin's real estate market is swimming even as so many others are sinking. In 2012 alone, Austin saw a 63.1 percent increase in new housing starts, according to Metrostudy, which studies local housing markets across the country. That's nearly 20 percent higher than the national growth rate of 46.9 percent.

"Austin is the most cushioned city in the United States, and Texas is the most cushioned state," says Rusty Signor, president of TX Pile LLC, an Austin-based marine construction company. "We're seeing a big surge in building and construction here."

PRESSURE ON PERMITTING

That surge has been great for the local economy. For bureaucrats, however, it's been exhausting.

Case in point: the City of Austin's Planning and Development Review Department (PDRD). Last year, the growing demand for building permits in Austin created a pressure-cooker environment so demanding that six of PDRD's eight reviewers resigned. For the building trades—including pool builders—the result was a sudden, jolting bottleneck in permit processing.

"Stuff was backing up horrendously," recalls Rik Holberg, CBP, president of Splash & Company, an Austin-based pool builder. "In the old days—the old days being a couple of years ago—you could take in your application [and have it approved the same day]. Then it turned into a two-day process. Then, all of the sudden people might not hear anything back for 30 to 45 days."

With pool approvals taking one to two months instead of one to two days, customers began losing their patience and contractors their paychecks. The city and the industry agreed that something had to give. Together, therefore, they devised the City of Austin "Fast Track" program to expedite building permits for specially trained and certified pool builders.

A MEETING OF THE MINDS

When he began attending monthly gatherings of the APSP Greater Austin Chapter in 2012, Signor told Holberg, the chapter's treasurer, how difficult working with the city had become. He wasn't alone. As it turns out, permitting obstructions were ubiquitous.

Signor had been president of the Central Texas Pool Association in the 1990s, when the State of Texas debated the idea of licensing for pool builders. Although the Texas legislature ultimately voted against licensing, the issue paved the way for significant revisions to the state's pool building codes. As an instrumental figure in those revisions, and on several other projects requiring close collaboration with the city, Signor was used to working with government. He therefore proposed a meeting with PDRD representatives to discuss the challenges that pool builders were experiencing.

"[Rusty] knows a lot of the people [in city government], so he said, 'Let's bring in some people from the city review department and see if they can give us insight as to what the problem is and what we can expect in the future,'" Holberg says.

Signor used his contacts at City Hall to arrange the get-together, which took place at an APSP chapter meeting in the fall of 2012. Three people from PDRD attended in order to field a battery of questions from concerned pool builders, who attended in record numbers to grill the reviewers, one of whom was Development Services Manager John McDonald.

"I've worked with John McDonald for a number of years, and he mentioned that the problem right now is the city doesn't have the budget to review all the permits that are coming in," Signor says.

Still, McDonald promised, PDRD was doing its best with the few resources it had. "People were starving to death [because of permit delays]," Signor continues. "Kitchen remodelers, for instance, only take a week or two to complete their projects; if they had to wait two months to get a permit they were going to go out of business. So, John decided to expedite kitchen remodelers' permits."

But what about pools? "Toward the end of the meeting," Holberg recalls, "John McDonald said, 'Unfortunately, the only way to make changes is from the top down, and that means going to the city manager. We'll all be dead by the time we get anything resolved that way. But I really think that if you guys worked it from the bottom up we could accomplish something.' A light bulb went off. We took the idea and ran with it."

THE CASE FOR QUALITY

When it learned that PDRD was expediting certain types of building permits, the APSP Greater Austin Chapter was determined to make sure pool permits were among them. The key, it decided, was demonstrating to the city that APSP members were professionals who knew local building codes intimately and had been trained to follow them faithfully.

"Rusty and I put our heads together and said, 'We've got to prove to the city somehow that there's some kind of accreditation that's valuable to the city and to the profession as a whole,'" Holberg says. "That, of course, would be the CBP [Certified Building Professional® Program]."

Because Texas doesn't require pool builders to be licensed, many amateurs enter the trade without proper training and education. For Austin, the result is a tangle of substandard permit requests that take a tremendous amount of time to review, reject, revise and revisit, often at the expense of sterling applications from best-in-class builders. Holberg and Signor hypothesized that the APSP CBP Certified Building Professional® Program could help permit reviewers clear their desks faster by way of vetting qualified contractors.

"Without increasing its staff, the city could turn out a lot more permits and the quality of construction in the city would increase greatly," says Signor, who explained the CBP program and demonstrated its rigorous standards during follow-up discussions with the city. PDRD, meanwhile, expressed its frustrations with erroneous permit applications. Quickly, the idea emerged to simultaneously certify pool builders in pool construction and in the city's permitting requirements.

"The city said, 'OK, great.' They saw it as a good deal for both of us," says Holberg, who along with Signor spent the next three months engaged in emails and conference calls with the city, the result of which was a mutually beneficial agreement to train and educate pool builders in exchange for expedited permit processing.

FINALLY ON THE FAST TRACK

Concurrent to its discussions with the city, the APSP Greater Austin Chapter was introduced to the new APSP Pool and Spa Construction Course (PSCC), which teaches material covered in the APSP Builders Manual. Developed by leading industry professionals and APSP's Builders Council, it includes three days of technical education and training preceding a CBP exam on day four of the program. Working with APSP's Director of Professional Development Michael Reed, the chapter turned the PSCC into a platform for its new initiative: Qualifying pool builders can enroll in the PSCC, take the CBP exam and then complete an additional half-day "Fast Track" course designed in collaboration with PDRD.

While passing the CBP exam would demonstrate to the city that pool builders had the technical knowledge to comply with best practices, completing the "Fast Track" course would certify that they understood and promised to follow the city's permitting rules, which ranged from formatting requirements to application content. In exchange, builders' permits would be processed within 10 days—and likely sooner.

"Everybody is so excited about this development," concludes Signor, who says the inaugural "Fast Track" training course reached 100 percent capacity within a month of accepting registrations. "It will greatly accelerate permits with no city budget increases while greatly improving the professionalism and the quality of pool projects for Austin residents."

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