

## The Benefits of Building Permits

### **Introduction**

The core reason for zoning and building codes is to protect people and property. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that Americans spend 90% of their time indoors, so ensuring safe buildings is a worthwhile goal.<sup>i</sup> The path a city takes to achieve the goal of public safety is just as important as the goal itself. The Growth Management Department's job is to vigorously implement the codes to protect life, but to do so in a way that supports our economy.

If you want to learn more about the Growth Management Department's work, please watch [Permitting from Start to Finish](#), a video at our website. It describes each step of the development process, starting with the initial project inquiry to our planning staff, all the way through to the issuance of a certificate of occupancy. If you have any questions about the development process, please either watch the video, or contact a member of our planning staff at (850) 891-7001 or at [Zoning@Talgov.com](mailto:Zoning@Talgov.com).

### **The Reason for Permitting**

The need for permitting standards is evident from the headlines. There has been a series of tragic events that have made national news in recent years, including the following:

- February 2003 – 100 lives were lost in a nightclub fire in Rhode Island caused by pyrotechnics that ignited insulation lining the walls and ceiling of the stage. The nightclub was not sprinkled.<sup>ii</sup>
- December 2016 – 36 lives were lost in a California warehouse fire. The building was illegally used for residences and concerts.<sup>iii</sup> The staircase was narrow and was built in part from shipping pallets.<sup>iv</sup>
- October 2019 – 3 lives were lost in New Orleans when the upper floors of the 18 story Hard Rock Hotel collapsed while under construction.<sup>v</sup>

The tragedies noted above made national news, but there have been many more, including structure collapses in South Dakota in December 2016<sup>vi</sup>, Texas in July 2019<sup>vii</sup>, New Jersey in September 2019<sup>viii</sup>, Ohio in November 2019<sup>x</sup>, Pennsylvania in April 2020<sup>x</sup>, and Michigan in May 2020<sup>xi</sup>. Some of the buildings in these examples were under construction and some were occupied. These news stories demonstrate that there is a valid, useful role for well written zoning and building codes. Human error can lead to fatal mistakes. Zoning and building codes are a safety net meant to catch those errors.

### **The Benefits of Permitting**

A well-designed permitting system that focuses on both life safety and a healthy economy brings a wide range of benefits to local communities.

- Improves safety. The news headlines referenced above provide ample evidence that improper construction techniques are a direct threat to human life. Obtaining a building permit, along with its associated inspections, ensures that a home or business is built to the standards in the adopted building code. The bottom line is that building safety increases dramatically if construction practices adhere to the minimum building code standards.
- Protection from natural disasters. Hurricanes in the last few decades have been extensively studied. For example, the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety estimated that losses from Hurricane

Andrew in 1992 would have been 50% less for residential properties and 40% less for commercial properties had they been built to the standards in Florida's 2004 statewide building code. The financial costs of Hurricane Charley in 2004 were 42% lower due to the use of newer building codes. Finally, researchers at Louisiana State University estimate that wind damage due to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 would have been 80% less if better building codes had been adopted earlier.<sup>xii</sup>

- Affordable insurance. Climate change has disrupted the insurance industry's business model. Building codes provide a point of reference from which the industry can more accurately project and manage risk, thereby containing the cost of insurance premiums. A report from the Environmental and Energy Study Institute noted the following: *"In a 2012 Congressional briefing, insurance executives said the increasing cost of extreme weather events challenges the industry's ability to help clients manage risk, and that extreme weather events are increasing the number of businesses and homes considered uninsurable in the private market. In many cases, this leaves government – and, therefore, American taxpayers – liable for the costs and the risks as the "insurer of last recourse." According to the Insurance Information Institute, the total hurricane-related risk insured by the government has increased 15-fold since 1990 to \$885 billion. Incorporating measures that make buildings and infrastructure more resilient will make communities less vulnerable and provide long-term savings for taxpayers, households and insurers."* Building codes include modern building techniques that make buildings safer, thereby reducing the impact of extreme weather.<sup>xiii</sup>
- Consumption of natural resources. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that heating and cooling buildings accounts for 43% of all energy used in this country. Up to date building codes require buildings to be weatherized and sealed so that they function more efficiently and reduce energy consumption, which results in reductions to the owner's utility bills.<sup>xiv</sup> Building codes evolve over time as they incorporate better techniques and technologies. For example, a report from the U.S. Department of Energy found that homes built using the International Code Council's 2006 edition were 50% more expensive to heat, light, and cool than homes built using the 2012 edition.<sup>xv</sup>
- Energy efficiency and reduced operating costs. Modern building codes provide for better energy efficiency, which reduces an owner's operating costs over the life of a structure. For example, one study estimated that homeowners saved between \$9,780 and \$11,100 in energy costs over the life of their mortgage if their home complies with energy efficient codes.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Climate change. Building codes result in structures that are more efficient, which therefore consume less energy, which produces less carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels. The reduction in carbon emissions directly supports the fight against global warming.<sup>xvii</sup>
- Protecting Your Investment. Failing to obtain a building permit could reduce the value of your home or business, cause an insurer to not extend coverage, or complicate the sale of your property if construction didn't occur consistent with current building code standards. However, construction completed under a valid building permit is far less likely to encounter such challenges.<sup>xviii</sup>
- Construction Experience. The Growth Management Department staff offers extensive planning, engineering, and building experience. We're here to help make your project a success. Please consider us a resource that you can contact to discuss project issues and to find the most logical way to address them within the bounds of the City's zoning and building codes.

- Contractor’s qualifications. Finally, you can think of a building permit as a means to assess a builder’s qualifications. If a permit is required for your project and the builder notes that you’ll need one, that’s likely a sign that they have the expertise and experience to know how to do the job right so that it meets the relevant codes.

**Permitting and Other Needs**

The Growth Management Department believes we can vigorously protect people and property but do so in a way that supports the economy. Why does that matter? One study found that speeding up building permit approvals by only 3 months for a 22-month project could grow construction spending by nearly 6% and property taxes by 16%.<sup>xix</sup> Similarly, another study concluded that the speed of the permitting process ranks among the top 12 issues for start-up businesses when choosing a location.<sup>xx</sup> Higher construction spending, a bigger tax base, and attracting quality employers aren’t just good for businesses. They also reduce taxes for existing Tallahassee residents and improve our city’s quality of life with better jobs, a more diverse economy, and more funding for critical public services like parks. The Growth Management Department understands that the goal of public safety and the actions we take to achieve it are both important for the City. With that in mind, we offer a wide range of services meant to make permitting faster, more efficient, and more customer focused, including the following:

- Fast track permitting. The Growth Management Department has an expedited permitting program which commits to issuing permits as follows:

	<u>Working Days</u>
1 and 2 family dwelling units	7 for new applications 5 for resubmittals
Environmental Management Permits	7 for minor EMPs 15 for standard EMP new applications (with stormwater) 7 for standard EMP resubmittals
Site Plans	7 for Type A 20 for Type B
Natural Features Inventories	15 for new applications 7 for resubmittals
Environmental Impact Analysis	15 for new applications 7 for resubmittals

- Electronic permitting. 100% of our zoning and building permits are available online. Our goal is to eliminate time consuming trips to our offices where applicants must deliver multiple plan sets or plan revisions. With electronic permitting, all applications can be made from your office, and you’ll receive comments back from staff through Growth Management’s online portal.
- Online resources. Our website also has a variety of online resources designed to make your life easier. For example, our new video library provides in depth knowledge on select topics. For example, [Permitting from Start to Finish](#) describes the development process from beginning to end. New titles will be added each year.
- Connect with staff. We understand that questions often can’t wait, so we have four ways for you to reach us. First, you can reach members of our planning, engineering, or building staff by calling (850

891-7001, and then following the menu to reach the desired staff. Each division in the Growth Management Department has a help desk with staff members ready to help. Second, you can stop by our offices at the Renaissance Center at 435 North Macomb Street. Third, our staff can be reached via a convenient [Online Chat](#) through our website. Finally, the email format for City employees is FirstName.LastName@talgov.com.

The Growth Management Department is fully committed to implementing the City’s zoning and building codes to protect life and property, but we strive to do so in a manner that is customer focused and supportive of the economy.

### **Conclusion**

Zoning and building codes did not exist for most of human history. As humans moved from dispersed villages to cities, the lack of zoning and building codes caused great suffering. The impact of fire and disease illustrate this point.

Prior to the arrival of modern building codes, history is filled with catastrophic fires that leveled all or large sections of major cities. This is just a small sample, but they include the fires listed below.<sup>xxi</sup> Modern zoning and building codes have played an enormous role in making citywide fires a tragedy of the past.

London (1135, 1212, and 1666)	St. Louis (1849)
Munich (1327)	Toronto (1849)
Amsterdam (1421 and 1452)	San Francisco (1851)
Moscow (1547 and 1571),	Montreal (1852)
Stockholm (1625 and 1759)	Chicago (1871 and 1874)
Boston (1711, 1760, 1787, and 1872)	Hong Kong (1878)
New York City (1776, 1835, and 1845)	Seattle (1889)
New Orleans (1788 and 1794)	Jacksonville (1901)
Detroit (1805)	Baltimore (1904)
Savannah (1820)	Atlanta (1917)
Pittsburgh (1845)	Berkeley (1923)

History is also replete with untold human suffering brought by diseases that have impacted the entire planet, including cholera, influenza, typhus, smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, leprosy, malaria, and yellow fever.<sup>xxii</sup> Building codes aren’t the single reason these diseases have been eradicated or controlled. However, the improved ventilation, potable water, and central sewer made possible by building codes played a supporting role.

Nearly all people living today have experienced the benefits brought by zoning and building codes their entire lives. They have become commonplace, and it’s easy to forget our troubled history. We can’t imagine our entire city burning down in a single blaze or the spread of disease due to unsafe water. We don’t see those threats, but they were the lived reality for humanity for centuries. Zoning and building codes have benefited our country and our city in ways that would be unimaginable to our ancestors.

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- <sup>ii</sup> National Institute of Standards and Technology, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2020, June). *Report of the Technical Investigation of The Station Nightclub Fire*. [https://www.nist.gov/publications/report-technical-investigation-station-nightclub-fire-nist-ncstar-2-volume-1?pub\\_id=100988&referringSource=articleShare](https://www.nist.gov/publications/report-technical-investigation-station-nightclub-fire-nist-ncstar-2-volume-1?pub_id=100988&referringSource=articleShare)
- <sup>iii</sup> Fuller, T. (2016, December 4). *Death Toll in Oakland Warehouse Fire Rises to 36 as Search Continues*, New York Times.
- <sup>iv</sup> Fessenden, F. (2016, December 12). *The Oakland Fire: What Happened Inside the Ghost Ship*, New York Times.
- <sup>v</sup> Price, T. (2020, April 3). *At Collapsed New Orleans Hard Rock Hotel, OSHA Cites 'Willful' and 'Serious' Safety Violations*. USA Today. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/hotels/2020/04/03/hard-rock-hotel-collapse-new-orleans-oshareport-safety-violations/2943438001/>
- <sup>vi</sup> Ferguson, D. (2020, April 16). *Copper Lounge collapse: Structural engineer says it should know confidential settlement details*. Argus Leader. <https://www.argusleader.com/story/news/2020/04/16/copper-lounge-collapse-structural-engineer-settlement-details-fodness-mcmahon/5141464002/>
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- <sup>ix</sup> Brownfield, A. (2019, November 25). *Downtown Building Partially Collapses*. <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2019/11/25/downtown-building-partially-collapses.html>
- <sup>x</sup> Koob, D. (2020, April 19). *'Sounded Like an Earthquake': Philadelphia Fire Crews Rescue 14 People from Apartment Building Collapse in Mount Airy*. <https://philadelphia.cbslocal.com/2020/04/19/apartment-building-collapse-mount-airy-fourteen-people-rescued/>
- <sup>xi</sup> Rahai, S. (2020, May 19). *Four workers injured in partial building collapse in Traverse City*. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2020/05/19/workers-injured-partial-building-collapse-downtown-traverse-city/5220144002/>
- <sup>xii</sup> Environmental and Energy Study Institute. (2013, September 30). *The Value and Impact of Building Codes*. <https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/the-value-and-impact-of-building-codes>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Environmental and Energy Study Institute. (2013, September 30). *The Value and Impact of Building Codes*. <https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/the-value-and-impact-of-building-codes>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Environmental Protection Agency. (2020, June). *Health, Energy Efficiency, and Climate Change*. <https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/health-energy-efficiency-and-climate-change>
- <sup>xv</sup> Environmental and Energy Study Institute. (2013, September 30). *The Value and Impact of Building Codes*. <https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/the-value-and-impact-of-building-codes>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Environmental and Energy Study Institute. (2013, September 30). *The Value and Impact of Building Codes*. <https://www.eesi.org/papers/view/the-value-and-impact-of-building-codes>
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- <sup>xviii</sup> International Code Council. (2020, June). *Benefits of Building Permits*. [https://www.iccsafe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018\\_BSM\\_Building\\_Permits\\_Brochure\\_lores.pdf](https://www.iccsafe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_BSM_Building_Permits_Brochure_lores.pdf)
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