



# WISCONSIN POLICY FORUM

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## **Cleared for Construction: Development Approval and Permitting in Metro Milwaukee**

*As new housing supply lags demand, report looks at zoning, permitting approval processes in six cities*

Building projects in metro Milwaukee are approved more quickly in cities that allow development to move through a streamlined review process so long as it meets appropriate zoning standards for its proposed location, a [Wisconsin Policy Forum study](#) has found.

The study found that development projects typically take longer in those communities where most or all projects must not only go through staff review but also be approved by an appointed plan commission and elected city council.

In many parts of Wisconsin including metro Milwaukee, housing has become less affordable, in part because housing construction has not kept pace with demand. At the same time, under state property limits local governments are increasingly reliant on development to sustain core services. This invites discussion about which state and local policies could enable increased housing supply and other types of development that bring jobs, services, and tax revenue. For local communities, one option is to examine how their zoning approval and building permitting processes affect project timelines and costs.

While these processes help protect health and safety, ensure compliance with zoning, and align development with long-term community plans, they also affect how quickly projects can move from concept to construction. Longer timelines can increase project costs, and in some cases, defer or deter investment.

Our report analyzes development approval and permitting practices in six cities: Milwaukee, Wauwatosa, Waukesha, West Allis, Oak Creek, and Brookfield. We reviewed 240 commercial development projects, each valued at \$5 million or more, that were issued building permits from 2017 through mid-2025. These projects totaled \$4.2 billion in value and produced more than 8,000 housing units. We examined how long these projects took to advance from plan submission (or zoning application) to building permit approval.

The most significant difference among these six cities is how much discretionary review is required before a building permit can be issued. Milwaukee stands out as the most streamlined and had the shortest median project timeline (145 days). At the other end of the spectrum, Brookfield requires both Plan Commission approval and Common Council ratification for nearly all projects. Brookfield had the longest median timeline at 467 days. This does not mean discretionary review lacks value. However, the more layers of required review, the longer median timelines tended to be.

Researchers also interviewed 10 industry professionals about their experiences. The top theme in those interviews was the importance of predictable, transparent processes for plan approval and permitting.

“Interviewees emphasized that uncertainty has more potential to delay or derail a project than local regulations,” the report says. Other key findings are summarized below.

**Time under municipal review varies from total project timelines:** Not all the time leading up to building permit approval is under municipal control. Many projects include a period after zoning approval during which developers finalize financing and construction documents before applying for a building permit. This distinction is important as some delays reflect internal municipal processes while others reflect market realities. When this developer-controlled period is removed from analysis, a somewhat different picture emerges. Projects in Wauwatosa and Waukesha were under active municipal review for the shortest periods, while Brookfield and Oak Creek had the longest reviews.

**Zoning changes and special zoning approvals add significant time:** In Milwaukee, projects requiring only staff review for zoning and building code compliance advanced to building permit approvals in a median of 86 days. Projects requiring additional zoning approval, such as a special use permit, took a median of 288 days; those requiring zoning changes took a median of 510 days. Similar patterns held in other communities. These findings suggest that zoning flexibility – including allowing more development “by right” – can reduce approval timelines when projects meet zoning requirements.

**Residential and mixed-use projects take longer than other development types:** In Wauwatosa, West Allis, Oak Creek, and Brookfield, the median timeline for residential projects exceeded 400 days. Meanwhile, institutional and industrial projects often advanced in fewer than 200 days. This pattern merits particular attention from policymakers seeking to increase housing supply.

**Larger and new construction projects require more time:** Across all cities, projects valued above \$20 million – which often involve more complex engineering reviews and financing arrangements – took substantially longer to advance than smaller projects. These differences may not be avoidable, but they underscore that project scale influences timelines independent of municipal efficiency.

**A city's mix of project types shapes its typical approval timeline:** Cities with higher concentrations of institutional or industrial development tended to have shorter median timelines than those with higher concentrations of residential projects. This means cross-city comparisons must be interpreted carefully. A city with a larger share of mixed-use or residential development projects that more often require zoning changes may appear slower overall even if its administrative processes are efficient. The same can be true of communities with more new building projects rather than renovations.

**Clear communication and formal pre-application processes can reduce friction:** Many development professionals we interviewed identified clear expectations, predictability, transparency, and early and consistent communication as their top concerns. They cited West Allis and Oak Creek as models for establishing a clear point person to communicate with applicants, and Wauwatosa and Brookfield for requiring pre-application meetings that connect applicants with staff and provide early feedback. Many suggested that Milwaukee may benefit from replicating at least some aspects of these approaches.

**Regional collaboration may help to improve outcomes:** Those we interviewed said it is difficult for smaller and less experienced developers to work across communities with different processes and requirements. Sharing best practices and establishing more consistency across cities for plan and zoning approvals and permitting may be beneficial.

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