

The Permitting Process

The Devil is Definitely in the Details

Pre-permit Preparation

Start early and pay attention to detail. Permitting is complex, with many moving parts and a big cast of people.

A survey should be obtained as early in the process as possible as it will be an essential part of the permitting documentation. We strongly recommend obtaining a survey as part of your due diligence prior to closing on a property. If the seller gives you an old survey, verify with a survey company that they can create a site plan based on the old survey and how long they expect it will take. You can also order a new survey, just make sure the firm you're using can guarantee timely, accurate results.

The Permit Process, Step by Step

A call will be placed to the local zoning office to verify any existing zoning ordinances that need to be considered in terms of the house design.

Construction drawings are finalized, signed and sealed by the architect.

A structural engineer reviews the drawings. After any revisions are completed, he will sign and seal the drawings.

A site plan is created by the surveyor, showing the proposed build. (It typically takes 2 to 6 weeks to get a survey and a site plan)

A demo plan is created by the surveyor, showing existing conditions to be demolished, if that is necessary. If a demolition permit is part of this project, an asbestos survey and rodent letter will also be needed.

Plans are submitted to the local building authority and a deposit is paid towards the eventual cost of the permit.

Local building authority will review the drawings and documentation via several departments. In the case of the City of Atlanta these reviews include, but are not limited to: zoning, site development, building, sewer capacity and the arborist division.

If the permit office requests revisions or alterations to the plans, these will be coordinated by the permit applicant, the architect and often the builder, then resubmitted to the authority. It will usually take the city approx. two weeks to re-review any requested revisions, so we make every attempt to anticipate these requests and proactively get in front of them. Depending on the reviewer conducting the review, these revision requests will sometimes come in one at a time as opposed to in an all inclusive list. In our experience the reviewers will often stop a review in its tracks if they have a question about an item, as opposed to creating an all encompassing list that can be approached methodically. This is a common occurrence with the City of Atlanta and one that can create significant delays.

The arborist review is often the lengthiest as they have a series of signs that must be posted on the property to alert the neighbors to any possible tree removal, giving them the opportunity to learn about the project and potential impact on the trees. Each sign posting has a mandatory time duration and this entire process takes a few weeks, once the postings begin.

Once all reviews are completed and approved, final impact and tree recompense fees will be generated and invoiced by the city.

When all fees are paid, the builder will submit their contractor's license, business license and notarized affidavits at which time the permitting authority will issue a permit for construction.

A Complex Process

As you can see this is a complex process with many steps. There are many people involved in this process and each step is dependent on the accurate and timely completion of the previous step. At my count there are at least eleven separate people¹ who need to communicate and coordinate with one another in order for a permit to be issued for a straightforward single family build. So there are, unfortunately, many areas in this process where the timeline can get prolonged, which is why it is essential that a professional (permit expeditor) is in charge of coordinating the overall effort.

We have seen permits take as little as 4 weeks and as much as 6 months. This is a process that is dependent on roughly a dozen people and requires the person coordinating the permit paperwork to be extremely thorough. It is hard to believe, but permits can get hung up for weeks over an uncrossed T or un-dotted I. Fortunately, the City of Atlanta does provide a whole suite of checklists and FAQs on their official website. As cumbersome as some of this information may be, it is available, and if you take the time to go through it and use the checklists (there are checklists for every review department on the site) you can avoid a lot of wasted time.

For more information about permit expeditors and the how the permitting process fits into the single family home timeline, see "How Long Does It Take?".

¹ The investor (or owner), builder, surveyor, architect, engineer, permit intake, zoning reviewer, arborist reviewer, site development reviewer, structural / building reviewer and the sewer capacity reviewer. A slightly more complex build or even a commercial build will involve even more professional service providers and plan reviewers.

