



CITY OF BALTIMORE
MAYOR BRANDON M. SCOTT

TO	Legislative Investigations Committee
FROM	Justin A. Williams, Deputy Mayor for Community and Economic Development
CC	City Administrator Leach; Mayor's Office of Government Relations;
DATE	March 6, 2025
SUBJECT	CCB25-0003R – Informational Hearing on Permit Reforms

On behalf of City Administrator Faith Leach, I appreciate the City Council's attention to the critical issue of permitting reform in Baltimore City. We welcome the opportunity to discuss the comprehensive efforts currently underway to streamline and improve development processes across all agencies involved in permitting and approvals.

Bmore FAST Initiative

Since assuming my role as Deputy Mayor for Community and Economic Development, I have been working to address the challenges outlined in the resolution through various initiatives including the launch of PermitStat. More recently, Mayor Scott has directed the formalization of these efforts under "Bmore F.A.S.T." (Facilitating Approvals and Streamlining Timelines), a comprehensive initiative to modernize Baltimore's development approval processes. This initiative represents the most significant reform of the City's permitting and development procedures in decades.

The full Bmore FAST report will be available at www.baltimorecity.gov/bmore-fast following its public release. The report contains dozens of detailed recommendations organized around key stakeholder groups:

1. **Public Engagement & Access:** Making development processes more transparent and accessible to all community members
2. **Developer & Builder Support:** Streamlining processes for development professionals while maintaining robust oversight
3. **Small Business & Emerging Developer Resources:** Creating targeted support systems for smaller-scale participants
4. **City Operations & Capacity:** Strengthening Baltimore's institutional capability to support efficient development

Cross-Agency Coordination Approach

We appreciate the Council's interest in examining the permit process and would like to address an important misconception reflected in the resolution. While the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) operates the "One-Stop Shop Permit Center," permitting and development approvals extend far beyond a single department's authority.

Development projects typically require coordinated reviews and approvals from multiple agencies, including:

- Department of Housing and Community Development
- Department of Transportation
- Department of Public Works
- Fire Department
- Department of Planning (including CHAP, UDAAP, and Planning Commission)
- Board of Municipal and Zoning Appeals
- Health Department
- Baltimore Development Corporation

This fragmentation of authority is precisely why a centerpiece recommendation of the Bmore FAST initiative is the creation of a new Director of Permitting and Development Services position. This role will provide centralized oversight and accountability across all agencies involved in development approvals, with the authority to coordinate processes, identify bottlenecks, and implement solutions that transcend departmental boundaries.

E-Permits Implementation

The resolution correctly notes that DHCD has been working on implementing a new permitting system, which deployed in early February 2025. As detailed in DHCD's responses to the Council's questions in advance of the hearing, this modern system provides numerous improvements, including:

- Online application submission and tracking
- Electronic plan review capabilities
- Automated routing between departments
- Enhanced transparency for applicants and the public
- Improved data collection for performance measurement

Additional Reforms Underway

Beyond E-Permits implementation and the creation of the Director position, numerous additional reforms are in development or already being implemented, including:

- Enhanced customer service through the permits call center (which has already improved answer rates from 10% to 98%, with monthly answer rates in 2024

consistently exceeding 95% according to DHCD data)

- Self-certification and third-party review pilot programs to accelerate approvals while maintaining safety standards
- Pre-approved plans for common building typologies to reduce costs for small developers
- Streamlined minor variance processes for uncontested requests
- Expanded technical assistance for small and MWBE developers

Conclusion

The Scott Administration shares the Council's sense of urgency regarding permit reform, particularly as we implement the historic \$3 billion initiative to address vacant properties across Baltimore. As someone who previously worked as a land use attorney navigating these same processes, I personally understand the frustrations experienced by residents, businesses, and developers.

Our vision is ambitious but clear: to make Baltimore the best city in the country to undertake development. When development processes work efficiently, we create more housing options across all market segments, more vibrant commercial corridors that serve residents' needs, more employment opportunities, and ultimately stronger neighborhoods. By focusing on what we can control—our own internal processes and coordination—we can help offset challenges in capital markets, interest rates, tariffs, and construction costs that are beyond our influence.

We look forward to discussing these efforts in detail at the upcoming hearing and welcome the Council's partnership in creating more efficient, transparent, and equitable development processes.

As the Deputy Mayor for Community and Economic Development and lead of the Bmore FAST initiative, I am personally committed to continuing this dialogue throughout the implementation of these reforms. I understand that while the E-Permits platform has been deployed, there have been some transitional challenges that DHCD is actively addressing, as detailed in their response to the Council's questions. City Administrator Leach and I both appreciate the Council's commitment to periodic hearings on this topic as we work together to transform Baltimore's development ecosystem.