

Architects contend red tape at Hamilton City Hall is dragging down development

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Kyle Slote pictured in a Spectator file photo - Scott Gardner, The Hamilton Spectator

An organization of local architects says city workers have been unduly slowing down economic development in Hamilton because of needless red tape and foot-dragging in granting approvals.

On Monday a representative of the Hamilton/Burlington Society of Architects brought the society's concerns to the city's [Open for Business Subcommittee](https://www.thespec.com/news-story/2249300-unravelling-the-red-tape/) (<https://www.thespec.com/news-story/2249300-unravelling-the-red-tape/>) and city staff has been asked to put together a response to the issues raised.

Kyle Slote presented a recent Ontario Association of Architects letter to Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister Steve Clark that says the site plan approval process across the province is a chronic problem.

Developers need to receive site plan approval from municipalities before receiving a building permit. Site plan approval involves discussion about the site layout and issues related to a project such as street widening, parking, drainage and "landscaping improving the quality and appearance of the development," according to the City of Hamilton website.

Local architects feel the process in Hamilton takes too long — sometimes a year or more — when they feel up to a few months would be more reasonable.

The provincial architects association is calling for modifications to speed up development applications and save costs. Among other things, the association believes the process should narrow its focus to matters that most directly affect the public.

Slote says reforms are needed and "a good first step would be to publicly set time lines because right now it is open-ended.

"As it stands now, if a client asks how long a project will take, we can never give them a precise answer. We can only give them a range.

"We need to address this better as a city," he said. "For us, as architects, our clients have finite financial resources. So every dollar going into processes — that go beyond being effective for the greater public good — is a dollar that isn't going to the projects itself."

But Hamilton's planning director Steve Robichaud told The Spectator, "We've done everything we can to streamline our process.

"There are only so many hours that staff have to process these applications. If you want to reduce those time frames across the board, it would take a significant increase in the number of staff."

And while local architects complain the City of Hamilton takes too long, Robichaud says the city is much faster than Toronto or GTA communities.

Hamilton, he said, handles 200 applications per year and 190 of them are done within a year.

He noted that the average in Toronto is 28 months, the Greater Toronto Area is two years, and Hamilton is less than a year.

But Slote feels that a year is still too high in a process that is often mired with unnecessary requirements.

Suzanne Mammel, of the Hamilton-Halton Home Builders' Association, said she feels the "process has deteriorated over time and there needs to be a rethink."

It used to be, she said, that the developer would go to a meeting within 30 days of applying for site approval and would be given a conditional site plan approval "to get you going."

"But what has happened is we don't get the conditions at the meeting. Often department representatives don't show up or they are not prepared with comments, so it takes longer. And over time the conditions become bigger and bigger than they used to be."

[Hamilton architect Bill Curran \(https://www.thespec.com/news-story/9342812-gore-park-developers-scuttle-boutique-hamilton-hotel-plans/\)](https://www.thespec.com/news-story/9342812-gore-park-developers-scuttle-boutique-hamilton-hotel-plans/) says he feels the process is flawed fundamentally, with planning department staff "unduly looking to find a fault rather than looking to find something good."

And as well, he said, there is far too much red tape in bylaws themselves.

"If you write a bylaw that is 100 pages rather than 10 pages, there are a lot more problems that can crop up," he said.