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Big Government is Delaying Building Projects, Economic Growth

As contractors know, in Wisconsin most commercial building plans must be reviewed by the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Standards (DSPS), or to a delegated local unit of government. In the best of times, these reviews cost a little bit of money, and take a little bit of time, but really, the review is nothing more than a formality. If heaven forbid, anything goes wrong with a commercial building, blame goes to builders and more likely the engineer or the architect who approved the building plans, not a state bureaucrat.

I became intimately aware of the problem when there was a significant delay on plan review for the remodeling of the shelter at Homestead Hollow County Park. Thanks to DSPS's Dan Hereth, the review was back on track and the citizens of Washington County will soon be able to reserve the converted barn for gatherings.

Another park remodeling project in Sandy Knoll County Park is currently being held up, again by Madison government employees. The snafus regarding the barns highlight a problem which needs to be solved because it is not just government projects being unnecessarily delayed.

Yes, commercial plan review delays have preceded Governor Evers' administration, but the problem is getting worse. For example, in 2017, 8,845 plans were reviewed. In 2019, 7,408 were reviewed. At the same time, reviews have been taking longer, going from 22 days on average in the first quarter of 2017 to 46 days during the third quarter of 2019.

The delay also applies to plumbing and sprinkler plans which also must be reviewed by DSPS or a delegated local government. Even the timely and quality work by the eight communities in Washington County that may review commercial plans is not going to solve the backlog. Before COVID19, some contractors were waiting five months to have their plans reviewed. Even now, during the shutdown, reviews are taking up to two months, twice as long as DSPS's stated goal. This wait is going to get longer as economy reopens. In the past, some construction projects which were ready in late summer and fall had to wait to break ground until spring because of the approvals backlog. That means new and expanded businesses and schools, and the jobs to build them and to run them and the tax dollars that come from those businesses are unnecessarily delayed.

It is bad enough to slow park renovations. Now, Madison is slowing economic growth in Washington County.

Fortunately, there is a solution. One of Washington County's state senators, Duey Stroebel, introduced legislation that would significantly streamline the commercial plan review process. Under the plan, routine commercial building plans would not need to be reviewed by DSPS or a local unit of government if they

are approved by a licensed engineer, architect, or designer. Examples of routine building plans would be a one-story building that will not be a place where a significant amount of people assemble, or a high-risk building. So, all schools, medical, childcare, apartments, multifamily, churches, bars, theaters and any building one story or greater would still need to have their commercial plan reviewed by government. In all cases, building inspections would not be affected by the legislation. The point is for the professionals to focus on the larger, higher risk, and less routine commercial plans.

Also under the legislation, commercial plumbing plans with 25 or fewer fixtures would not need to be reviewed by state or local units of government if they were approved by a licensed master plumber. Right now plumbing plans with fifteen or fewer fixtures are not reviewed. For reference, most new homes with a master and a main bath have 24 fixtures, and their plumbing plans are not reviewed because they are not commercial buildings.

Unfortunately, the legislation was introduced late, so it did not have a chance to become law. But, there is no reason that Governor Evers' DSPS could not institute many of the proposals in the through the administrative rule process, so the reform is in place before Wisconsin's construction season comes to an end later this fall. If DSPS fails to act, then Wisconsin's construction employers that are literally building Wisconsin will have to wait until the 2021 building season at the earliest to get systematic reform of the commercial plan review process.

After COVID19, Washington County and Wisconsin needs to get back to work. Unfortunately, a bureaucratic process is literally getting in the way of rebuilding our economy.

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