

Permitting process revamp, electronic components in works

By JACQUELYN WEINER

Miami's permitting process, which businesspeople have long associated with headaches, is soon due a streamlining revamp.

The building, planning, zoning and public works departments are at work to simplify permitting. Assistant City Manager Bill Anido told business leaders at the Miami Downtown Development Authority.

"We will continue to work on that," he said in response to board members' complaints of

permitting inefficiencies.

Measures include electronic permitting, funded by part of a \$20 million loan the city commission approved in December 2008.

The system, to be launched in phases starting in summer 2010, will save citizens and businesses seeking permits from multiple trips to City Hall and several fees for one project, said Don Riedel, director of 311 and CitiStat.

Mr. Riedel's department is examining how applications flow between departments to create a permit process incorporating all

the departments, he said.

Once that model is developed, the information technology department will transform it into the online permitting system, he said.

"It doesn't make sense anymore to force them [applicants] to come to the city, stand in line, go from window to window," Mr. Riedel said. "You're going to be able to pull a permit from the city without coming to the city."

Applicants will be able to pay one fee and view all permitting associated with a single project online under one master num-

ber, Mr. Riedel said.

Currently, most permits must be approved through multiple departments, each of which levies its own fee, he said.

"They all touch the permit at one point or another," he said.

The county also requires business owners to obtain a yearly Local Business Tax Receipt, according to the county tax collector's Web site.

"Now the system is going to move this application automatically to all those departments," Mr. Riedel said. "Everything is going to be on computers instead of stacks of forms."

For downtown business owners, such a solution has been a long time coming.

"This is a constant issue," said Hank Klein, a real estate professional and Downtown Development Authority board member, at this month's meeting.

Jose Goyanes, who owns several downtown businesses, also expressed concern that the city's long, complicated permitting process could be enough to drive potential new businesses away.

"I would have recommended you go elsewhere," Mr. Goyanes said.

City nitpicking delayed opening of Tre Italian Bistro, his latest downtown business venture, Mr. Goyanes said.

Jay Solowsky, special counsel to the development authority, said the city's system is not

the only problem bogging down permitting.

"It is not the process itself I think that is flawed," Mr. Solowsky said. "It's the culture of those who administer the process."

Mr. Solowsky, resigned from the authority's board in December 2008 to represent it in a lawsuit.

While some shared their permitting "horror stories," others said they felt it's important to understand the city's viewpoint.

"It's the system we have," board member Oscar Rodriguez said. "Sometimes you run into pockets of inefficiency and you have to take your aspirin."

Mr. Rodriguez, formerly of The Related Group, is now managing director of the newly created Atlantic Development Group of Florida, he said at the meeting.

Miami Commissioner Joe Sanchez, development authority board chairman, suggested the authority collaborate with the city to share its concerns, perhaps even forming a freestanding committee to address the issue.

After all, he said, it should be the Downtown Development Authority's responsibility to simplify permitting for new businesses.

"When we don't attract new business downtown, guess who gets blamed for it?" Mr. Sanchez asked. "The DDA."