

HOW CITIES WORK

A PERMIT EXPEDITER SERIES BY PERMIT ADVISORS



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How Do Cities Work?

The United States consists of thousands of various cities, linking together to form a scattered network across the nation. Each with their own sets of practices and rules that guide them as they try and run an efficient community. As a Permit Expediter, learning about a jurisdiction's specific protocols is crucial. Knowing the difference in guidelines, practices, and interdepartmental relationships can be the difference in getting your permit approved in two weeks versus five months. For example, in New Orleans, you might have a review time of only three to four weeks, but in Miami, it can be eight to twelve. Doing your research beforehand can not only save you headaches down the road but it will save your team time and money.

In this part of the series, we will discuss the necessary information a Permit Expediter needs to properly navigate a city. Keep in mind, that it is vital to do your due diligence on the specific jurisdiction before seeking approval on your project. Similar to how snowflakes have similar characteristics but are individually different, the same can be said about jurisdictions. An overall understanding of how a city works is not enough to prepare for a project submittal. City protocols can change and adapt, and any guide going in-depth on a specific region may quickly become outdated as different legislation is passed and politicians switch positions or job roles.

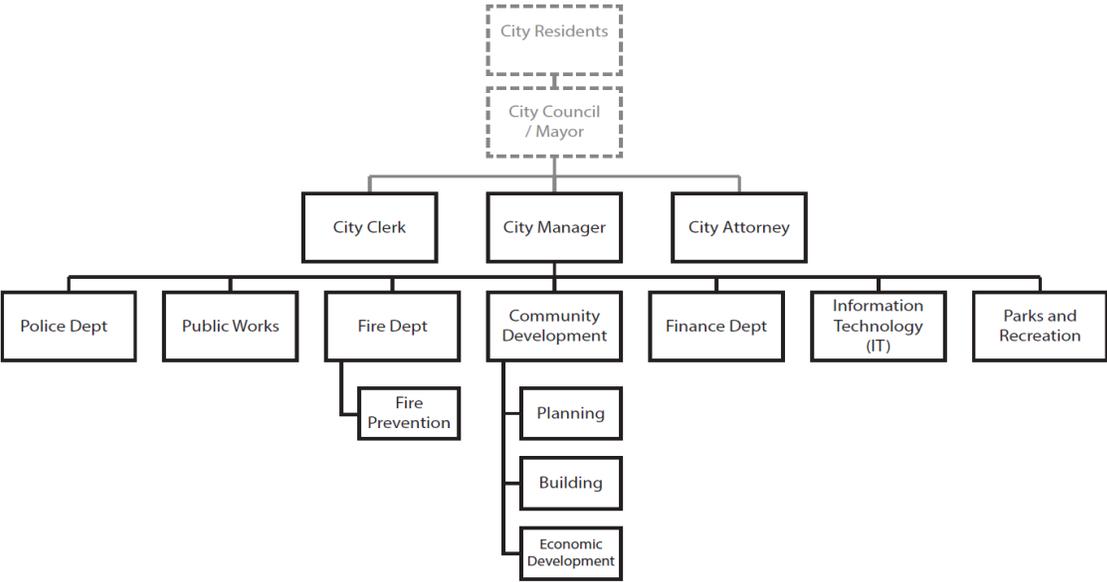


City Hierarchies

Every city consists of various departments that work together to keep the town running smoothly. When submitting a project, depending on the scope of work, the city may ask that you get approvals from multiple departments (not just the Building and Safety department). This can mean you may be waiting for approvals all at once or you may have to wait for an individual approval before starting on your next one. For example, you would have to wait for the Fire Department to approve your plans before being able to submit to the Building and Safety Department.

The figure below illustrates a general city organization hierarchy. **Note: depending on the size and location of a city, key departments may be omitted, or additional departments may be included.**

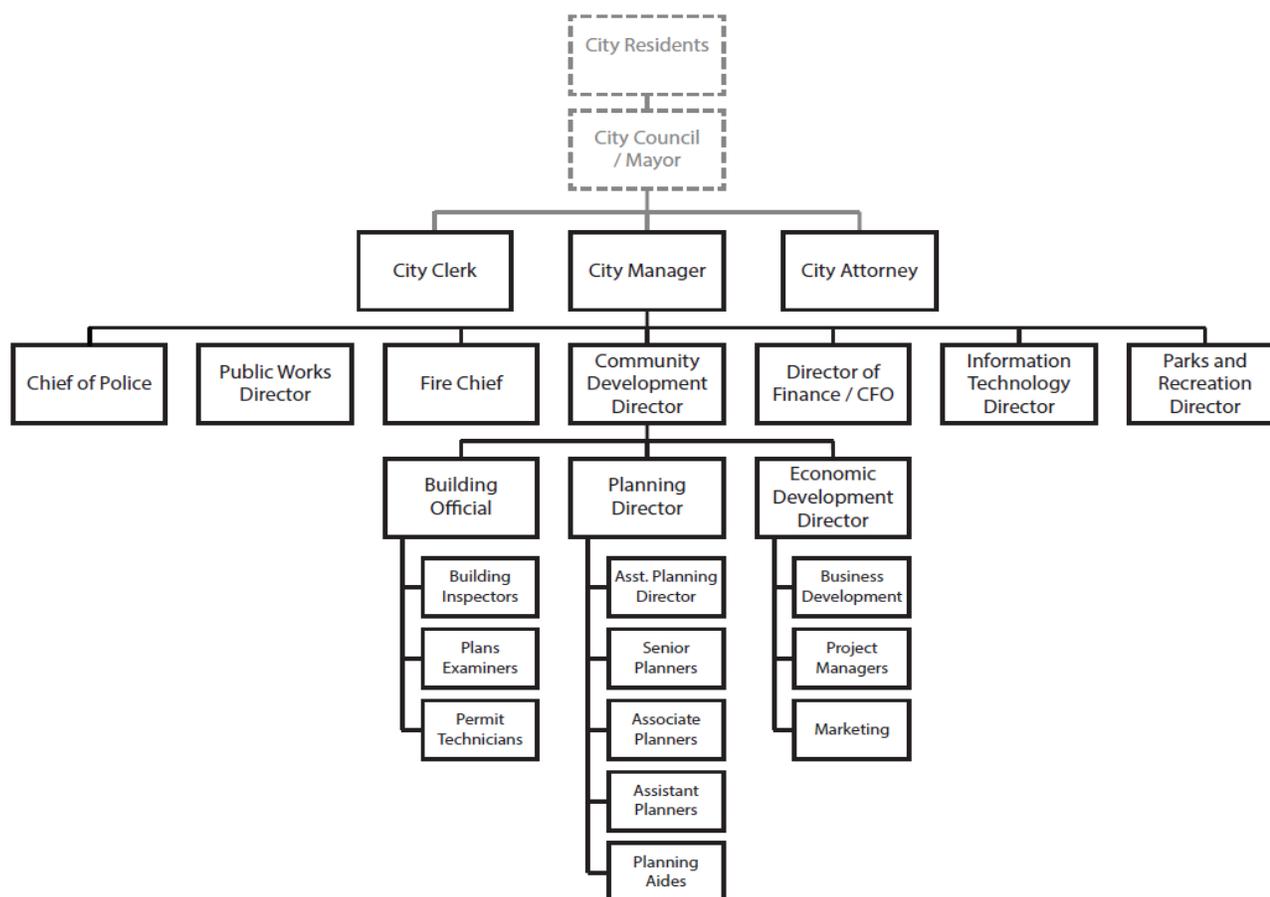
EX: the Building Department, Planning Department, and Economic Development Department are usually under the umbrella of the Community Development Department. In certain cities, these departments may exist separate from each other. In other cities, the Building Department may exist under the Public Works Department. Also, the figure shown does not include all sub-departments. For instance, the Parks and Recreation Department may include sub-departments like Parks Management and Recreational Services, but these sub-departments are not likely involved in the Building Permit Process.



City Positions

There will be times while applying for a permit that you come across a blockage. There may be a miscommunication, a guideline you were not familiar with, or the city could be especially swamped that month with requests. In these cases, having a strong relationship with the jurisdiction you are working with can be a large help. The people who make up a jurisdiction are knowledgeable, experienced, and a great tool in finding the answers needed to escape tough situations. Just like any organization, there is a chain of command that makes up the city. In times where communicating with a City Planner is not helping, skipping to a more senior official might be able to smooth the issue over.

Shown below is a figure that illustrates the hierarchy of positions in relevant departments and their typical titles. Further illustrations will detail the various ways relevant departments and agencies can be structured.



Glossery of Terms: City Positions

Building Inspector

Building inspectors ensure that construction meets local and national building codes and ordinances, zoning regulations, and contract specifications.

Building Official

A Building Official directs, manages, supervises, and coordinates the activities and operations of the Building Inspection Division within the Planning Building, and Environmental Services Department, including building inspection and enforcement of state laws, codes, and local ordinances dealing with the construction of new buildings and the alteration, use, and ongoing safety of existing buildings; coordinates assigned activities with other divisions, departments, and outside agencies; and provides highly responsible complex administrative support to the Director of Planning, Building, and Environmental Services.

City Manager

A city manager is an official appointed as the administrative manager of a city, in a council manager form of city government.

Community Development Director

The director of community development position is responsible for planning and organizing the implementation of projects, administering community activities, and coordinating the implementation of public facility improvements, public services, and other related programs. The position also oversees the building and zoning function, which includes current and long-range planning, code enforcement and real estate and lands activities.

Economic Development Director

Economic development directors have a strategic focus. They administer economic development programs for a city. While they deal with individual businesses in individual situations, they maintain a macro-level perspective on the city's economy. Economic development directors study market trends and apply their expert judgement to opportunities and threats facing the local economy.

Glossary of Terms: City Positions

Permit Technicians

These are the initial and most frequent points of contact when researching, submitting, and communicating with jurisdictions about permitting and project process/review timeliness. They are not decision makers when it comes to pushing things along, but they are usually the initial threshold of any process.

Planner

City planners determine the best way to use a city's land and resources. They may help draft legislation, plan the construction of new public housing or buildings, help protect the environment, and suggest zoning regulations for private property. City planners may choose to specialize in transportation planning, community development and redevelopment, code enforcement, or environmental and urban design.

City planners spend much of their time interacting with other professionals. They may need to hold public meetings with government officials, land developers, lawyers, special interest groups, and the public to develop or address issues regarding city land use. They may hear proposals and recommend denial, approval, or conditional approval, as well as make changes as necessary. City planners must also defend their own proposals before legislative committees.

Planning Director

The Planning Director plans, organizes, and directs the overall operation of the Planning Department, including budget preparation and administration; serves as staff advisors on community development projects; acts as City liaison with developers and property owners; is responsible for zoning enforcement and coordination with other City enforcement functions; is responsible for long range planning projects; performs related work as required.

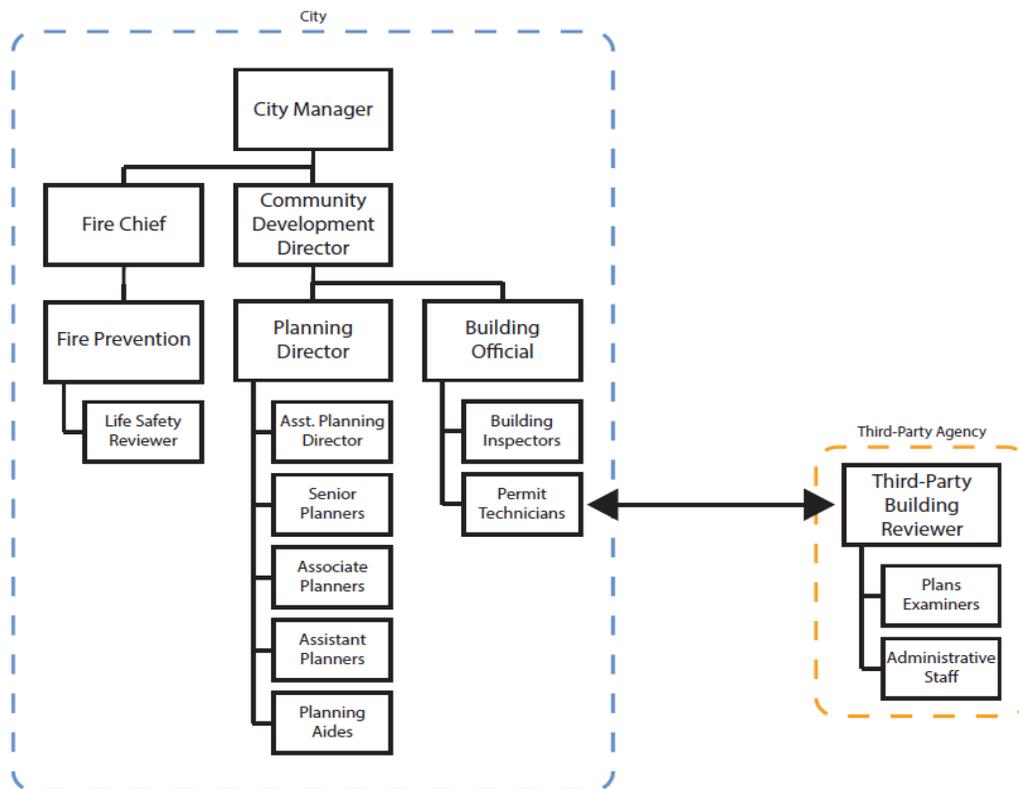
Plans Examiner/Reviewer

A plans examiner is a person qualified to determine that plans submitted for purposes of obtaining building and other permits comply with the applicable building, plumbing, mechanical, electrical, gas, fire prevention, energy, accessibility, and other construction codes.

Third-Party Plan Review

In a booming economy, rapid development can overwhelm a building department, no matter the size. This can cause the performance standards of a city to slow, which unfortunately heavily impacts the development of said community. If businesses cannot begin construction to open at a reasonable schedule, then this causes a ripple effect that hurts not only the economy but the citizens living in the town as well. As much as a public agency wishes to dedicate a high level of customer service, staff can become overloaded causing the efficiency of the department to suffer. To help, municipalities (both large and small) will often employ private consulting companies to perform Building Department duties. Sometimes these third-party agencies are only looped in for expedited reviews, but other jurisdictions may have a third-party agency perform ALL plan review duties. In certain circumstances, a third-party reviewer may be employed for only a portion of the plan review (e.g. a third-party reviewer handles the architectural review while MEP reviews stay internal to the city).

The figure shown below illustrates how a Building Plan Review can be handled by a third-party agency.



Multiple Internal Reviewers

Due to a city having numerous moving parts, it is common for a jurisdiction to have multiple internal building reviewers. These internal reviewing parties, depending on the volume of projects and size of staff, have varied projected review times and differing techniques on handling reviews. Most internal reviewers tackle plan reviews either sequentially or concurrently.

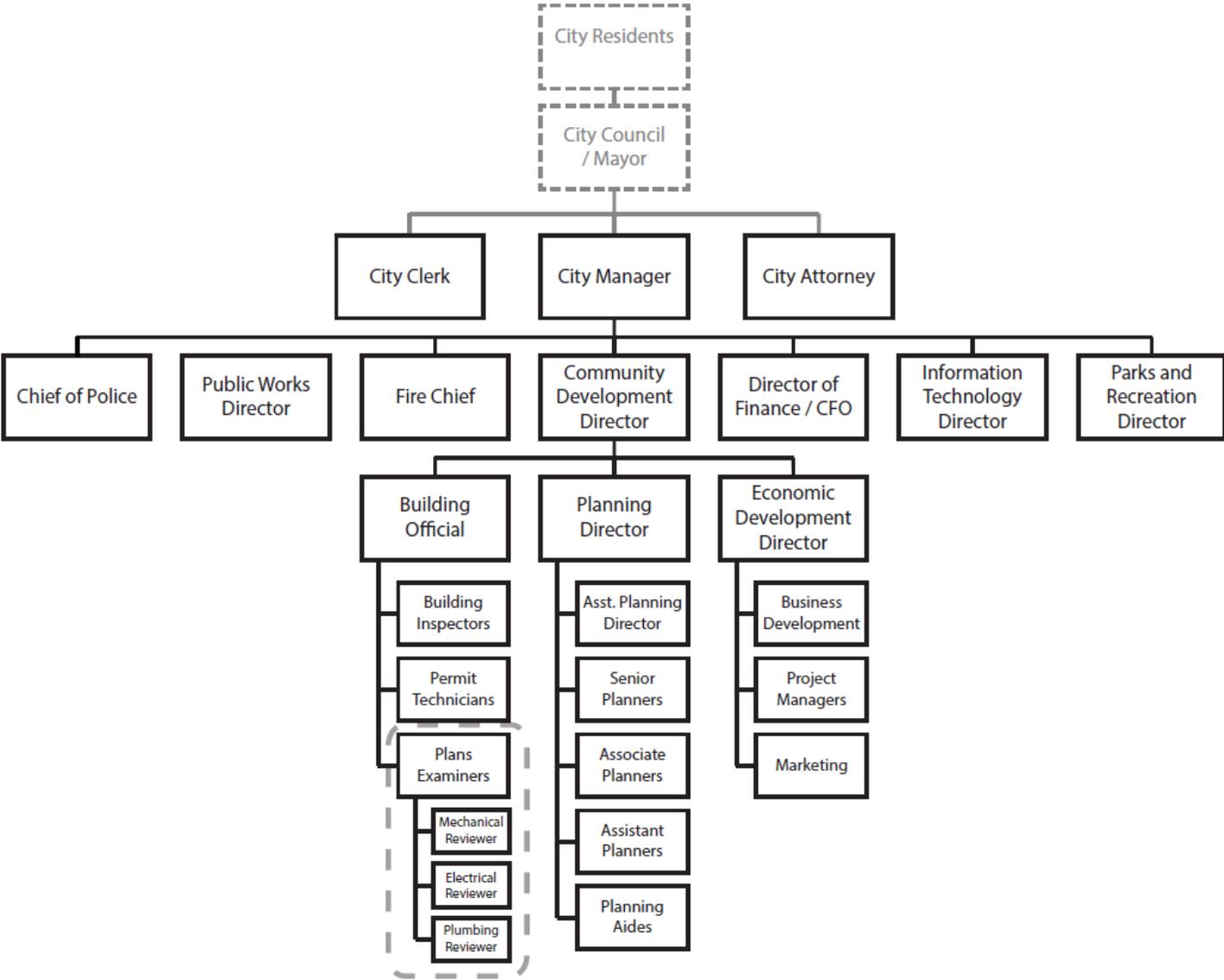
Concurrent reviews mean that all reviewing parties will receive a copy of the drawings and will review the project as it moves through their work queue.

Sequential reviews mean that construction drawings are passed from one reviewer to another. This is the lengthiest timeframe as reviews are staggered instead of occurring all at once. Please note that reviews are often a combination of concurrent and sequential reviews.

A grouping of departments/reviewers may be waiting for approval from another grouping prior to starting their review (e.g., building reviewers pending planning's initial clearance).

Multiple Internal Reviewers

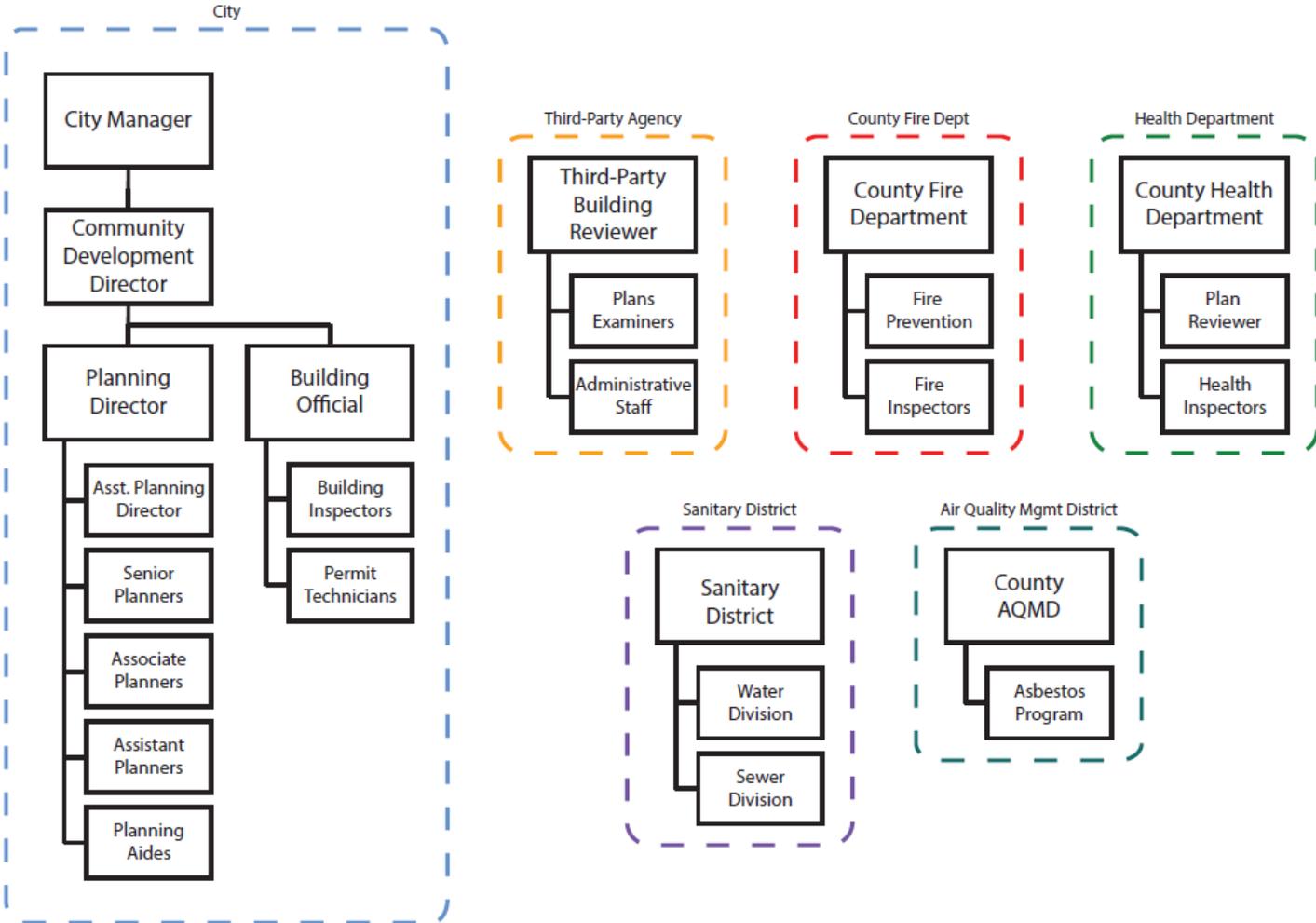
The figure below demonstrates a city with an individual reviewer for each trade: Mechanical, Electrical, and Plumbing.

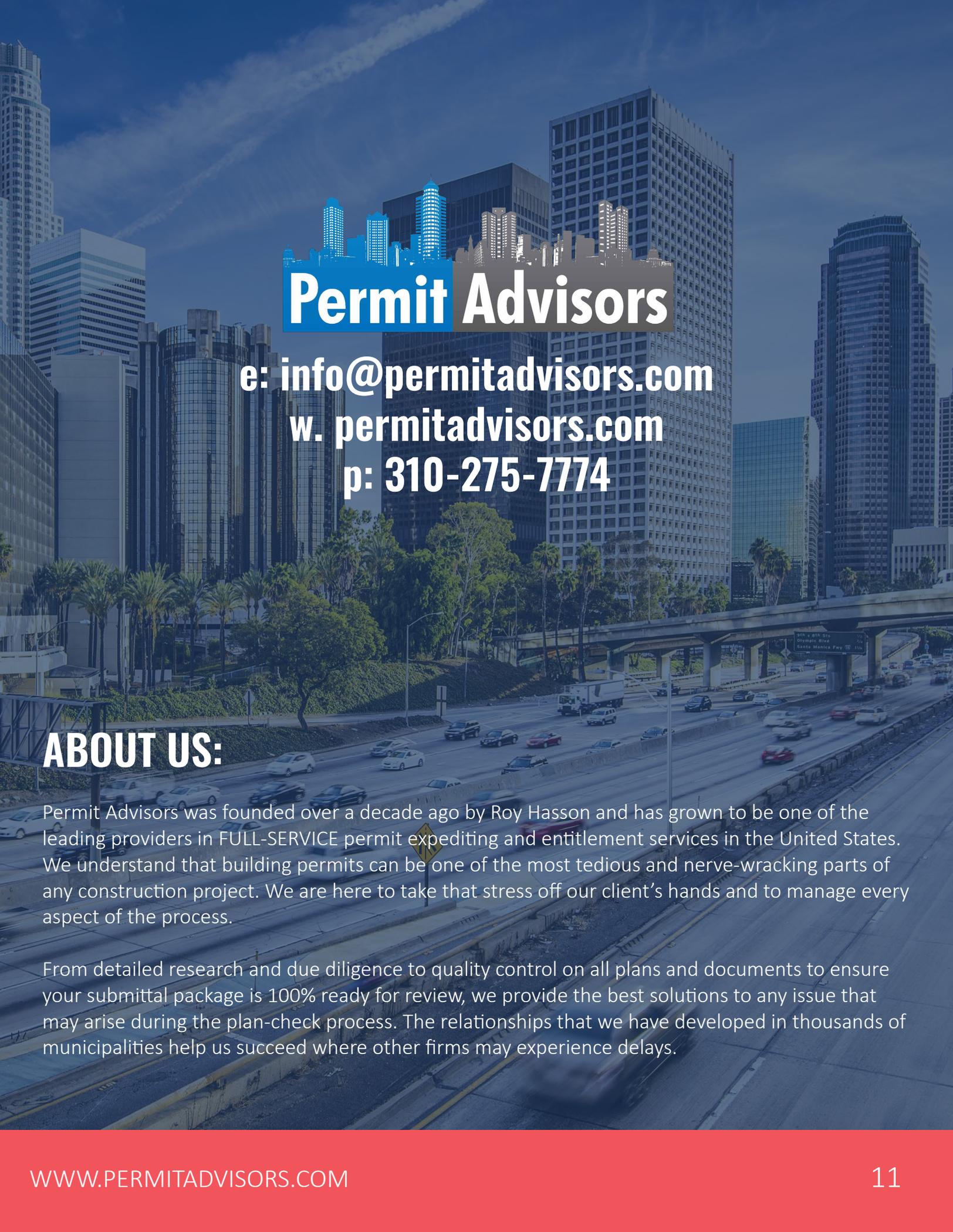


External Agencies and Clearances

Similar to how a city can often outsource plan reviewing to a third-party supplier, some jurisdictions rely on external resources for clearances and approvals. This can come in the form of a third-party agency, but also in the form of another government entity such as the Health Department, County Fire Department, Sanitary District, etc. Involved agencies will vary by jurisdiction and project.

The graphic below showcases an example of how a city with multiple external agencies and clearances are structured.





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ABOUT US:

Permit Advisors was founded over a decade ago by Roy Hasson and has grown to be one of the leading providers in FULL-SERVICE permit expediting and entitlement services in the United States. We understand that building permits can be one of the most tedious and nerve-wracking parts of any construction project. We are here to take that stress off our client's hands and to manage every aspect of the process.

From detailed research and due diligence to quality control on all plans and documents to ensure your submittal package is 100% ready for review, we provide the best solutions to any issue that may arise during the plan-check process. The relationships that we have developed in thousands of municipalities help us succeed where other firms may experience delays.