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Complaints growing over slow pace of approvals in the city

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If Robert Lampl had his way, his namesake law firm would already be operating from its new space in the Benedum-Trees Building. But a battle with the City of Pittsburgh over permits has delayed the move he expected to make in March to late July.

He blames the Department of Permits, Licenses and Inspections.

“That place is loaded with monster bureaucrats,” Lampl said. “It’s madness over there.”

Lampl’s firm filed suit against the city last month in an effort to speed up the approval process so that his 15-employee firm can occupy the two office condos in the Benedum-Trees Building that he bought last fall, on the building’s third and fourth floors, according to court documents.

Lampl said he submitted plans to the building's condo association in December and filed the first application in January with the PLI department. He then faced delays over issues related to the Americans With Disabilities Act regarding the building entrance and first-floor bathrooms.

Each time PLI asked for changes, Lampl said, his application went back to the end of the line in terms of priorities.

“We went through three cycles,” Lampl said. “At the end, they give you a review. You can’t discuss it with them. The review is by email and it’s first-come, first-served and you’re starting over.”

Lampl received clearance at the end of May — the Friday before Memorial Day — on the permit. His 27-year-old firm, which specializes in bankruptcy cases, has always been based downtown to be near the courts. But he said he found the experience as a first-time buyer so frustrating that if he had to do it over, “I’d go to the suburbs and commute.”

Kevin Acklin, the chief development officer for the City of Pittsburgh, said in an email response to Lampl’s complaint that “we believe the threatened lawsuit to be without merit.”

At the same time, the administration of Mayor William Peduto is rolling out investments in a new software and a consultant to overcome some of the larger issues Lampl’s complaint touches on as the city works to process quadruple the number of permit applications it received six years ago.



PAUL J. GOUGH

The skyline of Pittsburgh, Pa.

Lampl isn't the only one complaining.

Real estate professionals have been grumbling about it under their breaths for some time now, rarely on the record, wary of the cost and unpredictability of approvals on developments of all kinds.

It's a complex issue in which an array of different city departments and agencies — the Department of City Planning, the Department of Permits, Licenses and Inspections, the Zoning Board of Adjustment, the Pittsburgh Water & Sewer Authority — must sign off on a variety of different components of a plan.

Add in other levels of government, whether it's Allegheny County for health department approvals or the state of Pennsylvania for American with Disabilities Act compliance, and the opportunity for greater delay only increases.

Regardless of all the issues involved, the slow process of getting approvals in the city is leading more real estate professionals to be concerned.

Terri Sokoloff, a principal of Ross-based Specialty Group, a restaurant services firm, noted how such delays can result in thousand of dollars in lost business for independent restaurant operators who may struggle to afford it.

"At this point with anybody doing a restaurant, I cringe on finding some space in the city that needs to be built out," she said. "I'm concerned from what some of our clients have gone through with the delays and the expense. Knowing that, I don't want somebody else to go through that."

Sokoloff's clients who have struggled in the city include Bob Miller.

Miller's memory of the delays he faced in starting Fire Side Public House in the former Station Street Hot Dogs restaurant in East Liberty are still fresh in his memory more than a year after he opened the restaurant in November 2015, four months after he originally expected to begin operating.

He said he faced a very different process than at his other two restaurants, Sidelines Bar & Grill, in Millvale and Sewickley, for which he was able to establish approvals through a straightforward process and little delay.

"It puts you behind the eight ball before you even get started," he said of how delays can hamper the launch of a new restaurant.

Miller said he would schedule a full year to get through the process if he pursued another restaurant in the city. But he also added that if he had to do it over again, "I wouldn't have opened in the city."

"When you have never run into anything like that before, and you're just not expecting it, it's definitely a financial burden," he said.