

Cutting Through Red Tape

How to Avoid Delays and Surprises in Building Renovations

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Most likely, your municipality has created codes that apply to all significant building projects, and its codes probably consist of adopted "standard" codes, like the International Building Code, the Uniform Building Code, the National Electric Code, or the National Fire Protection Association codes, with minor amendments to make them fully applicable to conditions in your city. Codes are intended to maintain standards of building practice that are safe, healthy, and preserve the public interest. They serve as a common point of reference for professionals and city officials who enforce these rules.

The code enforcement process is tied to your right to occupy your building as a safe accommodation, so you have no legal alternative but to conform to the city's interpretation of its codes. This brings your school face-to-face with city bureaucracy, and entails potential risks of cost overruns and schedule delays if not well-managed. Here are a few general suggestions for you and your renovation project team to help you avoid the red tape.

Tip #1: Determine whether you need a permit. Some renovations (e.g., painting and carpeting, in most cities) don't require a permit. If not, your city has determined that projects like it don't require city inspection and are inconsequential to the public interest. Why pay a fee, spend the time, and risk having city-mandated additions to your project?

Tip #2: Get a professional involved, such as an architect, project manager, or code consultant. Often, when renovations get out of control, it's because the school tried to avoid the expense of professional oversight and relied on someone with only a narrow view of the project—perhaps an HVAC contractor or roofing contractor. Sometimes, a simple summer renovation "grows" into a multi-faceted project, far from its original intent. It pays to have someone with professional skills involved, who will recognize when code-related issues are being added to the building program as it evolves in the planning stages.

Tip #3: Be entirely open with city officials. Many problems can be avoided by reviewing specific conditions in a frank and open manner with city plan reviewers, so the inspectors don't "discover" a building condition during construction that was not anticipated and reflected clearly on the approved drawings. Your professional advisor can present the information using language that building officials can relate to, enhancing your likelihood of success. Most cities give special consideration and grant reasonable interpretations to schools, including independent schools, while remaining within the boundaries of safety and good practice. However, any property owner that is found to be cagey and conceal possibly illegal conditions quickly gains a bad reputation with the city that can be hard to shake.

Tip #4: Start early and be informed about the process. In every city, there are multiple codes, departments, and inspectors. Often, plans are reviewed sequentially by several departments. If your municipality offers a pre-development conference that brings together the building, fire, plumbing, mechanical, electrical, zoning, traffic, and public works officials in one meeting, you should take them up on it. Even if they charge a user fee for the meeting, it is well worth the benefit of getting everyone's thoughts at the outset. This way, you will not have to wait until the plans circulate through all departments to get the input you need.

Tip #5: Fire officials have ultimate authority, and inspectors are kings. Regardless of well-laid plans, decisions are sometimes reversed in the field by inspectors. A school may be tempted to appeal to the inspector's supervisor or to an elected city official, but these appeals are rarely successful, and may even be met with retribution. The fire inspector is (usually) not part of the building department organization, so his or her interpretations may be totally independent of the building department's. The fire department has its own plan reviewer, but its inspector is looking at specific conditions that may not be part of the other inspectors' concerns. You will need everyone's signoff on your project, in order to use the space, and the fire department is often the last one to visit you. Your contractor or project manager should walk the inspector through the space, and be available to answer questions, so that the inspector isn't left to make his or her own worst-case assumptions.

Taking these five tips into consideration as you go about your next renovation project can help you avoid wasting time and money—now *that's* something to celebrate.

*For more information on Building Solutions, visit www.buildingsolns.com
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