

sc Question of the Month

How can retail and commercial owners save time and money during the approval process?

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How do retail and commercial owners save time and money during the approval process in these difficult financial times?

Owners and developers of retail and commercial projects are facing more design challenges than ever. With local zoning requirements becoming more and more demanding, the need for an experienced design team is critical. An experienced design team that is aware of the various issues and approvals required is the only way to smoothly carry an application through the approval process. In the past, a design team consisting of a site engineer and attorney was sufficient during approvals. Design teams now need to consist of qualified experts from several different fields such as architecture, civil engineering, traffic, professional planning and real estate law to carry a project successfully to completion. Without the aid of these

professionals, unforeseen approvals during the course of an application can become a major stumbling block for new developments.

With diminishing properties available, development is reaching further and further into areas requiring special approvals such as flood plain and protected areas. These approvals have been some of the most difficult to obtain due to the fact the design requirements are constantly being revised to keep with current policy and environmental issues.

More emphasis has been put on the architectural review process as towns have found the importance of creating a unique architectural identity. This has led to architectural review boards and downtown development committees. No longer are towns accepting basic drawings that schematically resemble the final building design. In many cases the local boards are requesting detailed façade designs depicting accurate material samples, colors, product specifications and details that will reflect the final built product at early stages of the application.

A new requirement that is quickly finding its way into retail development is the ability of new construction to be environmentally

sustainable or "green." The retail industry has finally developed a set of requirements that would allow

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retail buildings to be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified. LEED is defined as a voluntary, consensus-based national standard for developing high-performance, sustainable buildings. In the past this was a difficult hurdle to jump due to the lack of control an owner might have over the tenant fit-out of individual retail spaces. The new requirements put the burden on the owner and initial shell construction of the building to comply and not the final completed product, as is required on other types of buildings such as schools

and municipal buildings. Recently, local boards and township officials have been requesting some level of

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LEED compliance incorporated into the project. Although these requirements are not enforceable at this time, implementation of these elements can help re-enforce goodwill with the community and how the development is ultimately viewed. Green design has also served as a strong incentive for prospective tenants. Retailers are being drawn to green buildings because it is positive for their company image and bottom line.

Owners and developers can successfully navigate through the challenges of Zoning Board approval,

constantly changing zoning laws, each city's unique architectural identity and the requirement or desire for LEED certified buildings by working with an experienced and knowledgeable design team.

During these difficult economic times many developers are remaining optimistic regarding the future of the retail markets. Many are taking the time to analyze their existing properties and realizing the benefits of investing in façade and building renovations. With the success of pedestrian friendly centers such as "Lifestyle" or "Main Street" type centers throughout the country, developers are incorporating these small scale design features into older outdated centers. These renovations are proving to be a success and rejuvenating these once underutilized centers. This downtime in the economy is turning out for many to be the perfect time to focus on these projects. Starting the design and approval process now also allows developers to be poised for the eventual upturn in the market in the near future.

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