



ACEC
BRITISH COLUMBIA

Position Paper

Electronic Building Permit Applications

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ACEC-BC Position Paper

Position Papers are articles developed by ACEC-BC Committees and published for use by consulting engineering companies as a general resource. The information provided highlights relevant issues and practices for the industry and should not be construed as legal advice.

Electronic Building Permit Applications

The traditional building permit process requires engineers to authenticate physical documents for building permit applications. Recently, many BC jurisdictions have adopted partial use of electronic submission for building permit applications. These include electronic applications for residential construction, with many jurisdictions also accepting electronic applications for commercial, industrial, and institutional building permits.

Like traditional building permit processes, there are no standards for electronic building permit applications in place across jurisdictions. Some jurisdictions are transitioning to fully electronic submissions, while others are adopting a hybrid approach, which requires a blend of electronic and physical copies (i.e., “wet sealed” authentication)

The paper outlines support for electronic building permit applications and their expanded use, and considerations for ACEC-BC members when applying for building permits.

Hybrid Permit Application

Where an approving authority has a hybrid (electronic and paper) application process in place, ACEC-BC members report being asked, in some cases, for submitted documents to be authenticated both digitally and manually. In this scenario, the *authenticating professional must ensure they are following the EGBC Quality Management Guide to the Standard for Authentication of Documents*¹. Specifically, the second set of issued documents must be clearly identified as a reissued version per Section 3.4.5 of the EGBC Standard for Authentication of Documents:

“When reissuing a copy of a Document that was previously Authenticated, the same Professional Registrant who originally Authenticated the Document must initial and date the reissued copy of the Document”.

Should the approving authority request both digitally and manually authenticated documents, the original authenticated document (either paper or electronic) and a reissued authenticated document would have different dates. Such a situation is considered inefficient and is not recommended. Moreover, providing the approving authority with a “reissued” copy of authenticated documents can possibly create confusion for approving authority staff reviewing the application.

¹ [Guide to the Standard for Authentication of Documents](#), Version 4.0. June 15, 2023. Engineers and Geoscientists BC.

If the approving authority requires physical copies after submission of the electronic submission of a digitally authenticated document, it is preferred that the approving authority accept printed reproductions of the digitally authenticated electronic file, as permitted in Section 3.6.4.3 of the EGBC Quality Management Guide to the Standard for Authentication of Documents. In this case, the authenticated electronic file is the original file and must be retained by the authenticating professional as a record. If the approving authority will not accept printed reproductions, and the documents are not issued as a revision, the authenticating professional must provide a “reissued” copy of authenticated documents as described above. Refer to the EGBC Quality Management Guide to the Standard for Authentication of Documents for more information on digital seals and their use.

Physical Permit Application

Where an approving authority requires a physical (hard copy) permit application, the number of physical copies to be submitted varies between jurisdictions. Typically, the engineer may be asked to submit anywhere between two and five copies of manually authenticated documents. Multiples of the same document can lead to:

- **Increased cost of production:** Depending on the number of documents, physical authentication can be administratively demanding. A large project may require hundreds of drawings to be manually authenticated. *Use of electronic submission will be more cost effective.*
- **Increased climate impact – materials:** Material (i.e. paper) use and related emissions for material production and shipping.
- **Increased climate impact – delivery:** Emissions and costs related to transportation of permit application documents. Transportation-related emissions accounted for 28% of Canada’s overall greenhouse gas emissions in 2021, with road transportation contributing the largest proportion². Transportation costs and emissions not only pertain to the delivery of the documents to the approving authority, but also the movement of physical documents between design team members, who may be in different cities, provinces or countries.
- **Decreased capacity – authority:** Use of physical documents will increase the workload for approving authority staff, requiring multiple drawing packages to be received at the building department, physically distributed to different departments within the jurisdiction and retained as hard copy or scanned for electronic filing.

² Statistics Canada. (2023, June 09) [Canadians’ commutes: Still car-heavy, but some lighter footprints](#).

Moving Forward

The transition to electronic building permit applications is ongoing and ACEC-BC strongly encourages faster adoption of electronic building permit applications. The transition improves efficiency, document control, and is in the public interest. Based on experience with jurisdictions that have adopted digital permit applications, ACEC-BC members have shared perspective that the processes:

- Improve communication and control: electronic documents reduce the time required to review, ask, and answer questions relating to the documents.
- Reduce time to process applications: administrative processes are quicker including intake, which helps to reduce the time between submission and construction.
- Reduce process climate impact: use of electronic documents eliminates transport and printing of physical copies.
- Increases authority capacity: more efficient processes and reduced administration can support an increase in authority staff capacity to review submissions.

Approving authorities are encouraged to adopt a standard approach to electronic building permit applications, making permit applications consistent and accessible across BC jurisdictions.

Consulting engineers should also be aware of the ongoing transition from paper-based to electronic building permit applications, and their professional obligations when submitting permit applications. Where possible, consulting engineers are encouraged to support authorities to transition from physical to electronic permit applications.

For more information on building permit processes, see [Building Permit Level of Design Recommendations](#).