

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CLEARED FOR CONSTRUCTION

Development approval and permitting in metro Milwaukee



WISCONSIN
POLICY FORUM

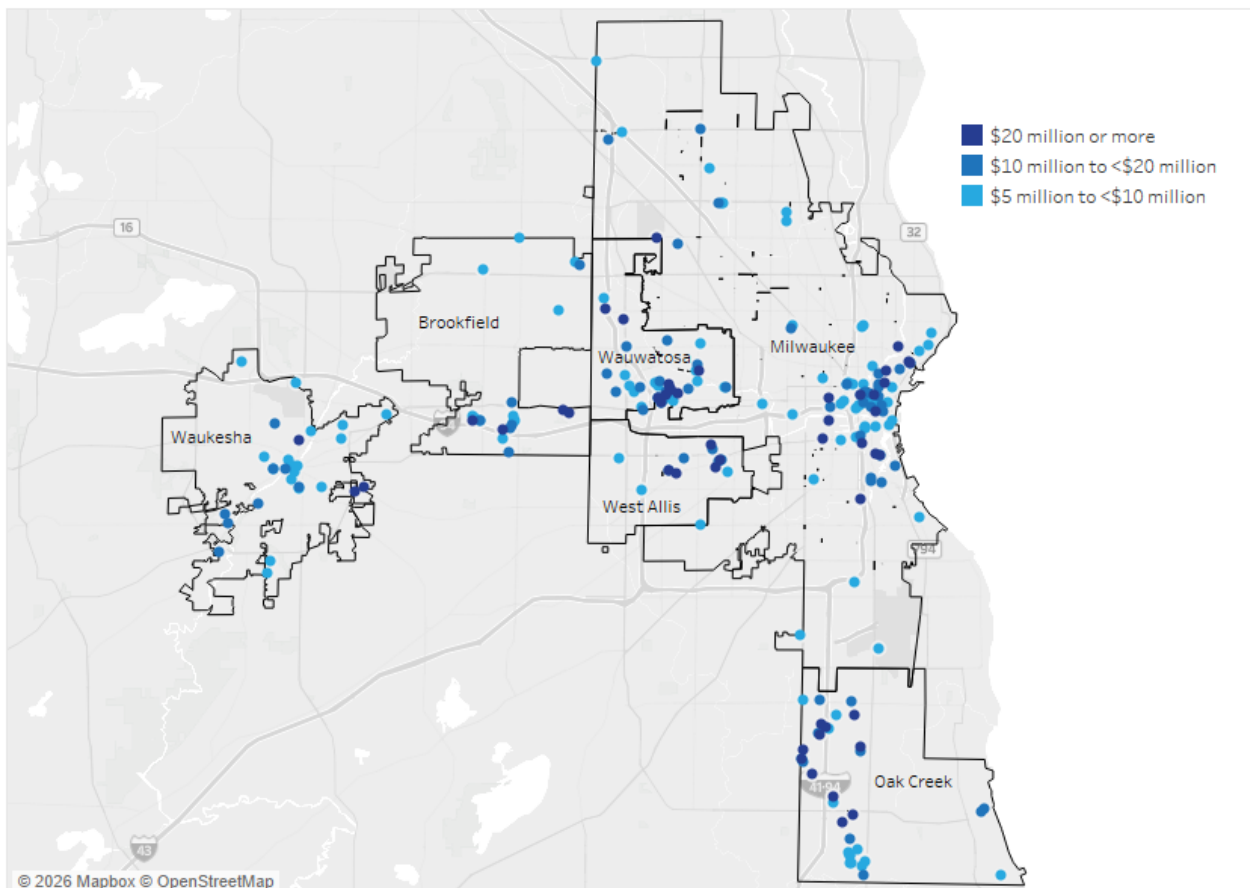
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the Milwaukee metropolitan area, housing prices have risen faster than household incomes, while the pace of new housing development has not kept up with demand. At the same time, local governments are increasingly reliant on development to sustain core services, as annual increases in the portion of their tax levy used for operations are tied to net new construction.

One strategy that local governments could consider to facilitate development that brings housing, jobs, and revenue to their communities is to examine how their zoning approval and building permitting processes affect project timelines and costs. While these processes help protect health and safety, ensure compliance with zoning, and align development with long-term community plans, they also affect how quickly projects can move from concept to construction. Longer timelines can increase project costs, introduce uncertainty, and in some cases deter or defer investment.

This report analyzes development approval and permitting practices in six area cities: Milwaukee, Wauwatosa, Waukesha, West Allis, Oak Creek, and Brookfield. We reviewed 240 commercial development projects in those cities valued at \$5 million or more that were issued building permits between January 2017 and mid-2025 (see Figure 1). Together, these projects produced more than \$4.2 billion in investment and over 8,000 housing units.

Figure 1: Development Activity Clustered in Downtowns, Along Highways, and at Regional Medical Center
Large commercial development projects issued building permits since Jan. 2017 in selected cities, by estimated project cost



Source: Cities of Brookfield, Milwaukee, Oak Creek, Waukesha, Wauwatosa, and West Allis



Our analysis combined project-level data, municipal input, and interviews with area development professionals. We examined how long projects took to advance from initial plan submission (or zoning application) to building permit approval, and assessed how factors such as project type and scale influenced timelines.

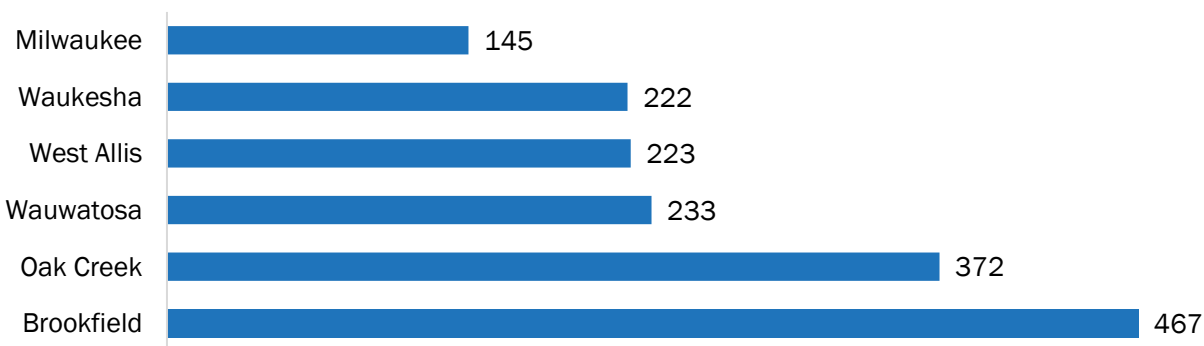
Several key findings emerged:

The degree of discretion in local approval processes influences project timelines. The most significant difference among the six cities we examined is how much discretionary review by elected and appointed bodies is required before a building permit can be issued. Milwaukee's process stands out as the most streamlined. Many projects that comply with Milwaukee's zoning standards are allowed to proceed "by right," meaning they do not require approval from its City Plan Commission or Common Council. Overall, Milwaukee had the shortest median project timeline — 145 days — among the six cities (Figure 2). Projects requiring only administrative staff review moved particularly quickly.

At the other end of the spectrum, Brookfield requires both Plan Commission approval and Common Council ratification for nearly all proposed development projects. Brookfield had the longest median timeline at 467 days. The remaining cities fell somewhere between these two cities and approaches.

This does not mean discretionary review lacks value. Public input and design review can improve project outcomes. The data show, however, that the more layers of required review, the longer median timelines tended to be.

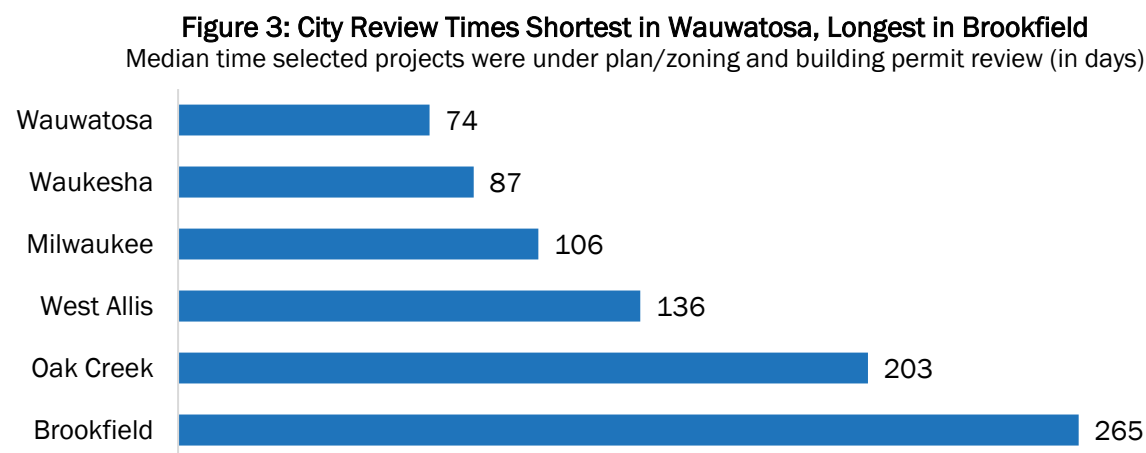
Figure 2: Project Timelines Shortest in Milwaukee, Longest in Brookfield
Median time from zoning change application (if applicable) or initial plan submission to building permit approval for selected projects, in days



Time under municipal review varies from total project timelines. Not all time between initial plan submission or zoning application and building permit approval is under municipal control. Many projects include a period after zoning approval during which developers finalize financing and construction documents before applying for a building permit. This distinction is important for policymakers as some delays reflect internal municipal processes while others reflect market realities such as financing complexity, tax credit applications, or construction timing.



When this developer-controlled period is removed from analysis, a somewhat different picture emerges. Projects in Wauwatosa and Waukesha were under active municipal review for relatively short periods, while Brookfield and Oak Creek still had the longest reviews (Figure 3).



Zoning changes and special zoning approvals add significant time. Across all six cities, projects that required zoning changes, conditional use permits, or other special zoning approvals took substantially longer to advance than those that did not. For example, in Milwaukee, projects requiring only staff review for zoning and building code compliance advanced to building permit approvals in a median of 86 days. Projects requiring additional zoning approvals such as a special use permit took a median of 288 days, and those requiring zoning changes (a legislative process that permanently alters what can be built on a given parcel of land) took a median of 510 days. A similar pattern held in other communities, including Oak Creek, where zoning changes were more common and median timelines were typically longer.

These findings suggest that zoning flexibility — including allowing more development “by right” — can reduce approval timelines. Conversely, when zoning does not align with development demand, projects must undergo legislative processes that often add months to their timelines.

Residential and mixed-use projects take longer than other types of development. Rising housing costs have made housing production a top policy priority across the region, yet residential projects have consistently taken longer to advance than industrial, institutional, and commercial projects. Given the region’s housing challenges, this pattern merits particular attention from policymakers seeking to increase supply.

In four of the six cities — Wauwatosa, West Allis, Oak Creek, and Brookfield — the median timeline for residential projects exceeded 400 days. By contrast, institutional and industrial projects often advanced in fewer than 200 days.

Several factors likely contribute to this pattern. Residential projects were more likely to require zoning changes. Multi-family housing developments often involve greater public scrutiny and community input. Housing projects frequently require complex financing structures, including tax credits for affordable housing developments. Residential construction also typically requires more extensive building systems (e.g., plumbing, HVAC), which may lengthen review.



Larger and new construction projects require more time. Project size and scope also matter. Across all cities, projects valued above \$20 million took substantially longer to advance than smaller projects. Larger developments often involve more complex engineering reviews and financing arrangements. Similarly, new construction projects often took longer than additions or alterations to existing buildings. New buildings are more likely to require site plan review, stormwater management planning, traffic analysis, and in some cases state-level plan review.

City officials and developers we spoke with said that projects seeking support from tax increment financing (TIF) or other public funding sources also typically take longer to advance, but we were unable to analyze that factor in this report,

These differences are not necessarily avoidable, but they underscore that project scale and complexity influence timelines independent of municipal efficiency.

A city's mix of project types shapes its typical approval timeline. Cities with higher concentrations of institutional or industrial development tended to have shorter median timelines than those with higher concentrations of residential and mixed-use projects. For example, Wauwatosa saw a significant number of health care, educational, and government facility developments, which generally advanced more quickly than residential projects. Similarly, industrial projects in Oak Creek and Waukesha moved faster than housing developments.

This means cross-city comparisons must be interpreted carefully. A city with a larger share of mixed-use or residential development projects that more often require zoning changes – or more new construction as opposed to alterations or additions to existing buildings – may appear slower overall even if its administrative processes are similarly efficient.

Clear communication and formal pre-application processes can reduce friction. Many area development professionals we interviewed identified clear expectations, predictability, transparency, and early and consistent communication as their highest priorities for municipal approvals and permitting. They cited suburbs such as West Allis and Oak Creek as models for establishing a clear point person to coordinate inter-departmental reviews and communicate with applicants, and Wauwatosa and Brookfield for requiring pre-application meetings that connect applicants with staff across departments and provide early feedback. Many suggested that Milwaukee – which as a much larger city has a more complex staffing structure and processes more development proposals – has more fragmentation across city departments involved in reviews and may benefit from replicating at least some aspects of these approaches in the suburbs.

Regional collaboration among local officials, development professionals, and relevant community organizations may help to improve outcomes. Those we interviewed said it is difficult for smaller and less experienced developers to work across communities with different processes and requirements, which may limit their ability to advance projects throughout the region and satisfy the overall demand for housing and economic development. Sharing best practices and establishing more consistency across cities in how information about development requirements is provided, how applications are accepted and tracked, how municipal staff communicate with developers, and other aspects of plan and zoning approvals and permitting may be beneficial for the region overall.

Ultimately, we are not using our analysis to argue for a single “best” model for development approval. Instead, our study highlights tradeoffs. Cities that allow more projects to proceed by right with only staff review tend to see them advance through the approval process more quickly. Those that require more discretionary approvals by elected or appointed bodies provide additional oversight but generally experience longer timelines.

For local leaders seeking to increase housing supply and encourage economic development, one potential strategy may be to expand “by right” development in targeted areas or for certain development types. In November 2025, the city of Wauwatosa adopted an updated zoning code that seeks to make more projects – particularly those involving multi-family housing – developable by right. The city of Waukesha is currently advancing a similar zoning code update.

Other potential strategies include:

- Reviewing whether certain approvals can occur at the same time rather than one after another.
- Strengthening pre-application processes and municipal communication with applicants.
- Investing in staffing, training, and technology to streamline plan and permit review.
- Monitoring and reporting review timelines to improve transparency and accountability.

Ultimately, development approval and permitting processes are among the key tools local governments can use to guide and shape community growth and to improve their own finances. In a region facing housing affordability pressures and evolving economic conditions, we hope that this report and our findings help to strengthen understanding of how proposed development projects move through the approval process in metro Milwaukee, and help inform discussions among local leaders on potential improvements.