



City of Arts & Innovation

Economic Development Committee Memorandum

**TO: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

DATE: JULY 17, 2025

**FROM: COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
DEPARTMENT**

WARDS: ALL

SUBJECT: BUILDING PLAN CHECK SELF-CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

ISSUE:

Receive and file a report on the proposed Building Plan Check Self-Certification Program and provide input and direction to proceed with the draft Ordinance and related supporting documents to City Council for consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Economic Development Committee:

1. Receive and file a report on the proposed Building Plan Check Self-Certification Program; and
2. Provide input and direction to proceed with the draft Ordinance and related supporting documents to City Council for consideration.

BACKGROUND

The Building Plan Check Self-Certification Program (Program) presents a unique opportunity to enhance the City's building permit process in direct alignment with the organization's broader economic development strategy, the goals of the Streamline Riverside Initiative, and our emergency preparedness and response effort.

Under the proposed Program, licensed architects and engineers registered in the State of California may certify building plans they prepare comply with adopted building codes and standards. The Program allows applicants to bypass the City's plan review process, significantly reducing the time between application submittal and permit issuance. The Program also provides greater flexibility, giving building owners and designers the choice to either self-certify eligible projects, or proceed through the standard plan review process.

Self-Certification Programs have been implemented nationwide for over two decades in response to growing demands for more efficient permitting processes. Originally established in cities like New York, Phoenix and Chicago, these programs are now utilized in California jurisdictions like

Bellflower and San Diego County. In California, implementation requires a more tailored approach due to the State's rigorous building standards under Title 24, which include stringent provisions for seismic safety, energy efficiency, accessibility, and wildfire resilience. Additionally, local and state mandates like the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and historic preservation necessitate careful consideration, as they often require discretionary approvals. For these reasons, self-certification has been a challenge to implement in California.

Self-certification draws on the professional responsibility of licensed design professionals like architects and engineers to ensure submitted plans meet all applicable building code requirements. Across the country, this approach has shown measurable success in improving permit turnaround times, enhancing customer experience, and supporting local economic growth while maintaining building code compliance.

The core purpose of the Building Plan Check Self-Certification Program is to provide an expedited permitting option that allows the Building & Safety Division and support from the One Stop Shop to allocate resources more effectively. By enabling qualified professionals to assume responsibility for plan compliance, jurisdictions can reduce permitting backlogs, improve turnaround times for applicants, and enhance overall service delivery. Importantly, this model maintains public safety through robust field inspection and auditing processes, ensuring that all construction work remains compliant with adopted codes and standards.

Currently, standard plan check timelines range from 10 to 25 business days for initial reviews and 5 to 10 business days for rechecks, which can contribute to permitting delays while limiting the number of permits that can be processed. Expediting the permit approval process through self-certification offers a powerful opportunity to accelerate project delivery, improve throughput, and better position Riverside as a forward thinking, business-friendly community. By eliminating technical plan review for eligible projects, the Program addresses a critical goal of the Streamline Riverside Initiative creating a more efficient, predictable, and customer-focused development experience. Moreover, it will allow Building & Safety staff to dedicate more resources to high-priority projects, further enhancing service levels across the department.

Additionally, the Program can act as a resource in times of need, such as disaster preparedness and response. Given the recent history of severe fire threat within the region and City, this tool can assist with rapid plan review and permitting approval to help rebuild as quickly as possible and restore community well-being like other programs currently under consideration, including the City and County of Los Angeles.

DISCUSSION

The City's Building & Safety Division has experience with the self-certification process for projects like residential solar photovoltaic systems and various re-roof projects, which remain successful to date. This Program will expand previous efforts to provide an alternative, expedited path for more eligible project types to obtain building permits. The Programs draft policy (Attachment 2) will establish standard operation procedures for staff and the draft Guide (Attachment 3) will act as a resource for customers.

Program Participation

Licensed architects and professional civil or structural engineers registered in the State of California with a minimum of 5 years of design experience can participate in the Program and certify that their submitted plans comply with applicable building codes and standards. By allowing these professionals to assume full responsibility for the code compliance of their plans, the Program will eliminate the need for a traditional technical plan check, significantly reducing the permit issuance

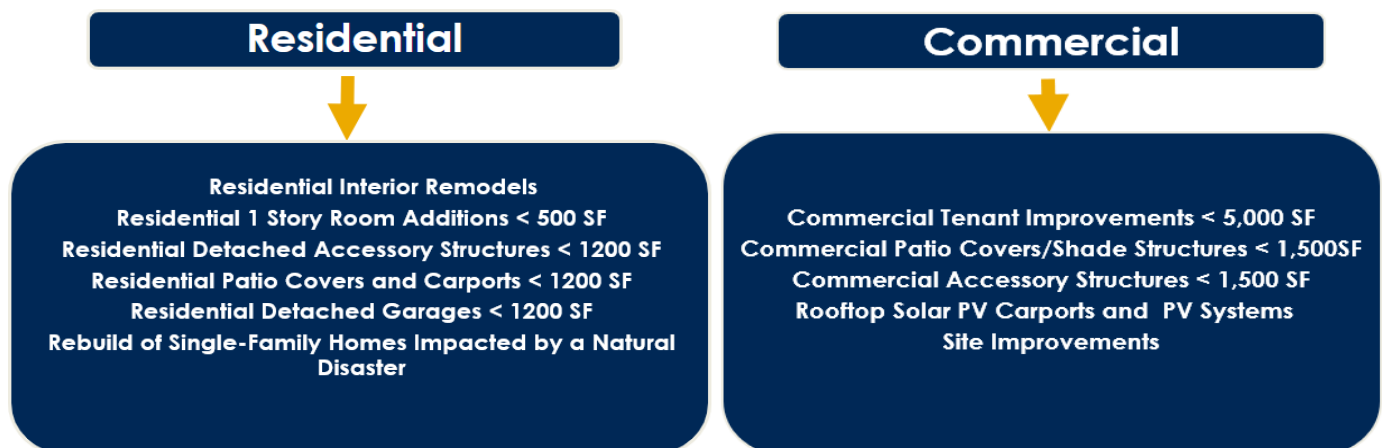
timeline to an estimated 1 to 3 business days once a complete submittal package has been accepted and approved. The Building Official shall establish a policy for acceptance into the Program which measures past design experience, expertise within project types, and overall understanding of our adopted building codes and standards.

Eligible Project Types

Utilizing a phased implementation approach, the Program will initially include various residential and commercial projects that would typically require review by the Building & Safety, Planning, and Fire Prevention Divisions.

Project types that require historic preservation or environmental reviews are excluded from the Program. Additionally, projects within high fire or very high fire severity zones, uses deemed to be hazardous, changes of use within existing buildings, and most newly constructed buildings are also excluded at this time. A measured approach to implementation will ensure that self-certification will be applied to projects that can be streamlined while maintaining minimum health and safety standards. Limiting self-certification to specific project types is a strategic and responsible approach that balances efficiency with public safety and is adaptable based on Program performance, data collection, and evolving best practices.

Eligible residential and commercial projects include:



The Program may also be utilized in times of need for emergency response purposes to facilitate the rebuilding effort and permitting needs of the community. The City's more recent Hawarden incident in 2024 is an example of an emergency response effort that could greatly benefit from the self-certification process.

Program Application and Acceptance

To be eligible for participation and acceptance in the Program, the licensed design professional must meet the following criteria:

1. Be registered in the State of California and in good standing with a minimum of five years of experience in responsible charge of building design;
2. Expertise in the specific residential or commercial project type;
3. Demonstrated technical ability in code compliance through certification or other approved means; and
4. Maintain professional liability and errors and omissions insurance as determined by the Building Official.

Licensed Design Professionals (LDP) who meet minimum qualifications and are approved by the Building Official may participate in the Program and begin submitting plans for eligible projects. A list of approved design professionals will be maintained by the Building & Safety Division for public use at the permit counter and on the Divisions webpage.

Pre-Screening Process

Projects submitted under the Program must meet the eligibility criteria outlined in the Program. During the pre-screening process, the Building Official or designee will verify whether the proposed project qualifies for the Program and determine if additional approvals from other City departments or outside agencies such as Planning, Fire, Public Works, Public Utilities, or the County Environmental Health Department are required. Any such approval must be obtained prior to permit issuance. These requirements will be identified during the pre-screening process and communicated to the applicant in writing.

Application and Plan Submission

The licensed design professional must submit a complete project package that includes:

1. Self-Certification Permit Application;
2. Professional Record Statement;
3. Owner/Tenant Statement;
4. City Indemnification Letter; and
5. Complete construction plans and supplemental design documents.

The cover sheet must include a certification notice and statement attesting to code compliance.

Staff Completeness Check

Staff will perform an initial review upon submission to confirm that the project is eligible for self-certification based on the prescreening clearance, that all required forms and pre-approvals have been submitted, and that the plans are signed, complete, and contain the appropriate self-certification language. If issues are identified during this review, the Self-Certified Professional will have the opportunity to revise and resubmit the package prior to acceptance. It is important to note that this review is administrative, not a technical plan check, but a verification to ensure compliance with the Program's submittal requirements.

Plan Approval and Permit Issuance Preparation

Once the submittal package passes the completeness check, the plans are approved as a Self-Certified project and moves into the "Plan Prep" process. Staff will prepare final fees, conditions of approval, and stamp the plans approved within three business days and notify the applicant of any other outstanding requirements.

Permit Issuance

Upon receipt of all required disclosure documents and payment of fees, the City can issue the building permit to the owner-builder or licensed contractor. Note that while the plan review is bypassed, all prerequisite field inspections remain mandatory, and the project may be subject to a random audit. Deviations from approved plans must be revised and resubmitted. If code violations are found, it is the responsibility of the design professional to ensure all violations are promptly addressed and corrected prior to any inspection approvals.

Audit Process

Self-Certification Programs include random audits of projects to ensure that approved designers follow policies and procedures, apply appropriate quality control, and help ensure compliance with the City's adopted codes and standards. The audit process and policy are established by the

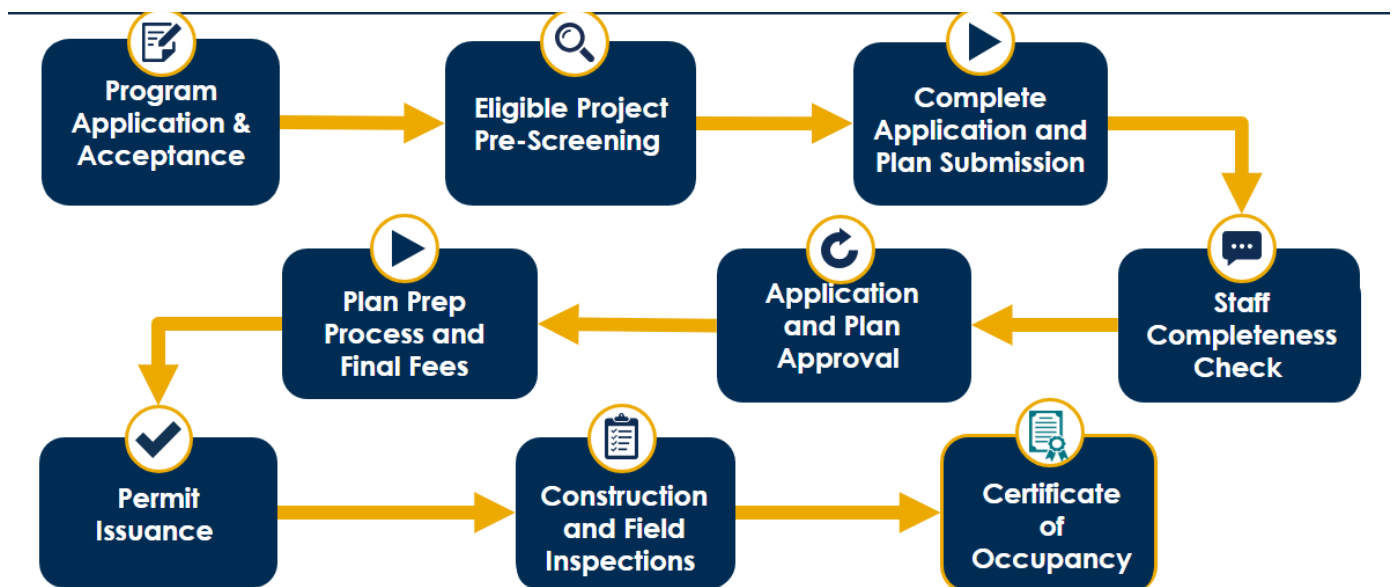
Building Official and may occur before or after permit issuance. At least 10% of submitted projects may undergo the random audit process.

In addition to random audits, audits may occur when:

1. The project field inspector finds that the plans permitted under the Self-Certification permit program are not in compliance with the code.
2. In any given month, a Self-Certified Professional has had four or more projects accepted for Self-Certification by the department and none of those projects has been audited by the department.
3. Within the preceding 12 months, no project submitted by a Self-Certified Professional has been audited by the Division.
4. A Self-Certified Professional has failed any audit within three years.

If building code violations are identified during the audit, the owner and permit-applicant will be notified in writing. The notification will direct the Self-Certified Professional to address all code violations found in the audit. A standard plan review process may commence or if the permit has been issued, inspections may be suspended until the corrected plan is made available at the construction site.

The following roadmap depicts the entire self-certification process:



Program Considerations

The Program supports the City's broader goals of modernizing permit processes, enhancing service delivery, and fostering economic development and customer service excellence. The Program will expedite permit issuance for eligible projects, helping businesses and property owners move projects forward quickly while improving overall customer satisfaction. In parallel, it will allow staff to focus more resources on complex, large-scale or special project reviews, supporting public safety, organizational priorities and enhancing operational efficiency.

Staff also recognize that consistent Program execution and quality assurance are essential to long-term success. The Program incorporates multiple safeguards including project eligibility criteria, mandatory indemnification and insurance requirements, field inspections, and a formal auditing process to ensure that public safety remains protected and professional accountability is maintained. Staff will monitor program performance, track audit outcomes, and conduct stakeholder outreach to support effective implementation.

To implement the Program, additional staff training and resources are required. The Building Official shall designate a Program lead within the Building & Safety Divisions Plan Check Unit to assist with administration and oversight of the Program. Software upgrades to the City's permit tracking software solution will also be necessary.

When analyzing the proposed implementation of the Program, it's important to evaluate potential advantages and challenges. The following table outlines some of the key pros and cons associated with self-certification:

| Pros | Cons |
|---|---|
| Rapid permit issuance: Permits issued within 3 business days. | Lack of technical plan review can result in increased chances of code violations and unsafe buildings. |
| Promotes a business-friendly and efficient service, attracting businesses and developers who depend on a timely permit process. | Higher potential for increased costs and delays: Code violations can result in significant time and financial setbacks. |
| Expedites business openings and residential improvements that have a direct positive impact on the economy. | The impact of self-certified projects on professional liability insurance coverage and premiums remains uncertain. |
| Can reduce project schedule, loan duration, plan check fees, resulting in financial savings for applicants. | Shifts additional workload to inspectors, this increases the need for training and can prolong inspection times. |
| Responsibility and liability are directly placed on the Licensed Design Professional and property owner. | Additional resources to oversee and maintain the Program, including the development of new processes and procedures, audits, staff training, software updates, etc. |
| Ability to allocate staff resources more effectively and support critical projects, programs and initiatives. | Potential for reduced revenue during plan check process. |

Fees and Cost Recovery

Cost recovery and the potential financial impacts of the Program need careful consideration. Reduced plan check fees may be necessary, impacting potential revenue. This includes plan check fees, program registration and maintenance fees and inspections. State law requires that the City only charge fees for actual time spent on the services provided. Staff is reviewing potential impacts and will work with the Finance Department and City Attorney's Office to consider adjustments needed to the adopted fee schedule to help facilitate and oversee the Program should the Committee provide direction to proceed with the Program for City Council consideration.

Staff is requesting input and direction from the Committee on the proposed Program and draft ordinance (Attachment 1). To formally establish the Self-Certification Program, a draft resolution and ordinance is required that will define the legal framework and procedures within the City's Municipal Code. The draft ordinance will authorize the Building Official to administer the Program, establish eligibility and participation requirements, and provide clear enforcement mechanisms. Should the Committee support the proposed Building Plan Check Self-Certification Program, the draft resolution, ordinance, fee resolution and supporting documents will be presented to City Council for consideration in a subsequent action.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This item contributes to **Strategic Priority 5 – High Performing Government** and **Goal 5.2 – Utilize technology, data, and process improvement strategies to increase efficiencies, guide decision making, and ensure services are accessible and distributed equitably throughout all geographic areas of the City.**

This item aligns with each of the five Cross-Cutting Threads as follows:

1. **Community Trust** – The Building Self-Certification Pilot Program includes a collaborative process with community partners to ensure development services are provided in a timely and efficient manner to building community trust in the development process.
2. **Equity** – The Building Plan Check Self-Certification Pilot Program provides specialized development services to all permit applicants.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The Building Plan Check Self-Certification Pilot Program implements tools and processes that are cost-effective, saving the organization and customers time and money.
4. **Innovation** – Building Plan Check Self-Certification Pilot Program provides a full range of virtual development services including web-based building permitting and plan check services that serve our community, among other virtual resources.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The Building Plan Check Self-Certification Pilot Program will allow the Community & Economic Development Department the ability to maintain continuity of operations in times of need and during emergencies providing a full range of virtual development services.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report. Should the Committee support the program revisions, staff will work with the Finance Department to ascertain the fiscal impact, which may be a reduction in fee revenue.

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Prepared by: | Oscar Mancillas, Building Official |
| Approved by: | Jennifer A. Lilley, Community & Economic Development Director |
| Certified as to | |
| availability of funds: | Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/Assistant Chief Financial Officer |
| Approved by: | Mike Futrell, City Manager |
| Approved as to form: | Rebecca McKee-Reimbold, Interim City Attorney |

Attachments:

1. Draft Ordinance
2. Draft Program Policy
3. Draft Program Guide
4. Presentation