

The Permit Technician: Where it All Begins

by Steve Burger, C.B.O.

- ✓ *HOW MANY SETS OF PLANS DO I NEED?*
- ✓ *HOW MUCH IS THE PERMIT FEE?*
- ✓ *WHEN WILL MY PERMIT BE READY?*
- ✓ *YOUR INSPECTOR JUST STOPPED MY JOB AND I'M REALLY UPSET!*
- ✓ *MY CONTRACTOR JUST WENT BANKRUPT, WHAT DO I DO NOW?*
- ✓ *THIS VALUATION IS TOTALLY UNREASONABLE, I WANT YOU TO CHANGE IT!*

This is where it all begins. Every workday, thousands of building department front-counter personnel—typically known as permit technicians—serve tens of thousands of customers. Some departments have multiple, specialized permit techs, while in many smaller jurisdictions one staff member handles everything. Whatever the case, most building officials will readily acknowledge that the permit tech is the hub of their department.

The downside is that some building officials consider their permit techs too valuable to allow them time out of the office for formal training. Of course the fact is that if permit techs are able to accomplish their jobs more efficiently and accurately, building officials are better able to concentrate on their own duties and responsibilities. Just as important, permit techs are highly visible representatives of their departments: the professionalism they display has a significant influence on the perceptions of both external and internal customers.

In the “good ol’ days,” building departments were typically staffed by personnel hired or appointed by friends or relatives on the city council or county board. Some were well-suited for their positions, while others just “put in their time” until retirement. Then in the

1970s and 1980s a movement began to professionalize building safety personnel. The three legacy model code organizations—Building Officials and Code Administrators International (BOCA), the International Conference of Building Officials (ICBO), and the Southern Building Code Congress International (SBCCI)—started offering formalized training and certifications. An increasing number of people took advantage of these opportunities and by the late 1990s there were certification opportunities for just about every type of code-related discipline . . . except permit technician.

Like any other building department employee, if professionalism is to be encouraged permit techs need the opportunity to grow. Inspectors, plans examiners and building officials pursue ongoing education and training to stay up to date on the rapidly evolving field of building and fire safety, why should permits techs be denied the same opportunity? Education instills knowledge; knowledge instills confidence; and confidence instills respect. What building official does not want his or her staff to be respected by the public and elected officials?

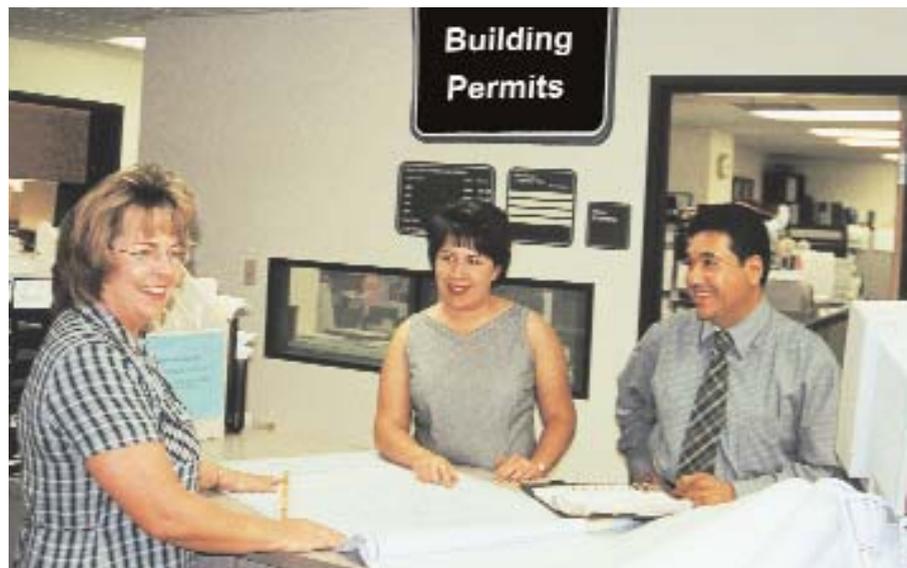
Input from several permit tech organizations prompted the model code organizations to look into the issue. ICBO took the lead in 1997 by forming a Permit Technician Exam Development Committee, and by September of 1998 a certification exam was being offered. BOCA and SBCCI followed suit shortly thereafter, and when the three groups formally consolidated into the International Code Council in 2003 the exam went nationwide. Today, many jurisdictions require that permit technicians be certified upon hire or that they become certified shortly thereafter, while others offer promotions or salary increases for certification.

In mid-2007 the ICC Permit Technicians Ad-Hoc Committee was established to perform an in-depth inquiry into the needs of permit techs and how the Code Council can better serve them. At its first meeting in November 2007, the committee—consisting of fifteen permit technicians and one ICC staff member, and

chaired by an ICC Board member—identified several areas that needed to be addressed, including the development of a second tier of certification covering such topics as plan review, inspection, means of egress, and basic plumbing and mechanical systems; offering additional training; and enhancing public awareness of the permit tech profession.

The current range of opportunities for permit technicians to further their knowledge and professionalism includes web-based training through the online ICC Campus (www.iccsafe.org/training/campus), one- and two-day on-site seminars by the Code Council and several independent entities, and comprehensive training manuals like the *ICC Permit Technician Study Companion*.

In addition, the first ICC Permit Tech Institute was offered in Overland Park, Kansas, in March of 2007. Co-hosted by the Kansas City Metro Association of Permit Technicians, the three-day event covered topics such as permit fee calculations, blueprint reading, customer service, overviews of the *International Building Code* and *International Residential Code*, height and area calculation, occupancy classification, communication skills, legal aspects of code enforcement, and zoning requirements. Just as important, it gave the more than 60 permit technicians from around the U.S. and beyond who participated the chance to network with one another. ICC Permit Tech Institutes are scheduled





this year April 7–9 in Kansas City, Missouri, and in October in Portland, Oregon. Go to www.iccsafe.org/training/PTI for the latest information.

Permit technicians who want to get more involved in their profession and connect with their peers should also strongly consider joining a local or regional permit tech chapter. ICC Chapter Relations can help: just email chapter@iccsafe.org; phone 1-888-ICC-SAFE (422-7233), extension 7205; or visit the Chapter Information webpage at www.iccsafe.org/government/chapters. Even if there currently is not a chapter in your area, any of the growing number of others will be happy to add you to their email list and some may even be able to assist you in starting your own chapter.

I cannot emphasize enough how invaluable it is to both permit techs and their departments that they develop and maintain relationships with their peers, whether by attending Permit Tech Institutes, joining a permit technician chapter or—hopefully—both. If a difficult or unfamiliar situation arises, a “connected” permit tech can readily tap his or her network for possible solutions. Often, just knowing that others face similar challenges reduces stress levels and opens the door to pool talents and find solutions to a common problem.

It is important for building officials to recognize that these opportunities exist, but it is also important that permit technicians express their interest in pursuing them. The days when building department personnel could get by just by getting by are long past in most jurisdictions. The new generation of permit techs recognize the importance of their jobs and many of them are at least considering a life-long career in the code industry, whether it be at the front counter or by working their way up to plans examiner, building inspector or even building official.

Permit technicians play a critical role in our industry and merit the support and respect of everyone in their department. Fortunately, more and more opportunities are becoming available for dedicated permit techs to increase their skills and knowledge. Identifying and pursuing these opportunities shows the drive for excellence—and for those of us in the life safety business, that is something we owe not just to ourselves but to the community we serve. ♦

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In addition to teaching permit technician classes since 1998, Burger authored the 2006 ICC Permit Technician Study Companion, “The Public Counter” chapter of the newly updated Building Department Administration book and an update of You Can Build It!