



For Immediate Release

Contact: Peter Donovan  
(360) 630-6246  
[peterd@mountvernonwa.gov](mailto:peterd@mountvernonwa.gov)

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### **Mount Vernon Planning Department Innovations Pay-Off for Builders, Developers**

MOUNT VERNON—State mandates have placed the construction industry on hold. Project sites lie vacant, waiting for an end to the COVID-19 shutdown. Still, even while regulations prevent hammers from hitting nails, developers who are building in the city of Mount Vernon are discovering an innovative and streamlined way to continue to get some of their business done.

Planning departments throughout Skagit County have either completely shut down, or are offering very limited services; the City of Mount Vernon Planning Department, however, remains determined to safely keep development moving forward in the city.

The utilization of virtual processes for pre-application meetings, cloud-based permit submittals, even skype-based building inspections, are allowing builders in the city of Mount Vernon to maintain momentum on their projects in this time when all other building operations have come to a halt.

The vision to transfer to a cloud-based permitting system began in 2017, when Mayor Boudreau challenged her Development Services Department to cultivate a climate of customer-focused service, while utilizing the most practical and efficient technological tools available.

Department Director Chris Phillips responded to that challenge by transforming the Mount Vernon Department into a State-leading planning department in the areas of transparency and efficiency, and now builders are responding.



Rex Orkney is with Chuckanut Commercial Real Estate and has been utilizing Mount Vernon’s new services for a mixed-use (residential/commercial) project on LaVenture Road. Orkney has submitted land use permits, provided critical areas reports, generated and paid for permits without having to leave his office, or go into City Hall.

“The ability to process this cleanly through a portal does not exist anywhere else in the county,” Orkney said. “I’m very excited about how this will work for us now, and in the future.”

Wayne Crider is the Executive Officer for Skagit-Island Counties Builders Association (SICBA).

“The abilities in Mount Vernon to be able to submit plans and to do virtual inspections have been a great advantage for those in the industry who are not excluded from working right now,” Crider said.

John Piazza of Piazza Construction also believes the system will be a great long term investment for the community.

“I really appreciate the efforts that the City of Mount Vernon has made to make this a better place to conduct business,” Piazza said. “Being able to request inspections and track permits in real time is extremely helpful and a huge time saver, as we are not having to make multiple trips to the job site.”

“The new system has refined the traditional process, and all but eliminated paper submissions, by reducing the number of plan sets from nine copies to just one copy,” Planning Director Chris Phillips said. “That’s a significant monetary and time savings that allows our planning staff—most of them working remotely from home—to focus more of their attention on the increased demand for building permits.”



In 2019, the Planning Department processed 15% more permits than the previous year, and has processed twice as many permits during the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of 2020, compared to 2019.

“Our demand is not slowing down, and we are doing all that we can to ensure that we are not slowing down our building community,” Mayor Boudreau said. “This is about empowering development, and finding creative ways to keep everyone moving forward.”

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