

TECHNICAL BRIEF: **Accelerating Construction Permit Approvals for National Transformation in Trinidad & Tobago**

Prepared by: **Lauriston Lewis Associates Limited -
Consulting Engineers**

Technical Lead: **Eric A. Lewis, FIStructE, C. Eng.**



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“Foreign investors do not compare vision statements; they compare timelines.”

WHY THIS ISSUE MATTERS

Timely construction permitting is a critical enabling condition for economic activity. Where approval systems are slow or unpredictable, otherwise viable projects are delayed or abandoned, capital remains idle, and employment and public revenue are deferred. For small open economies competing for mobile investment, approval timelines are a material consideration in investor decision-making alongside fiscal incentives and market size.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, the **National Transformation Blueprint** articulated by Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar places strong emphasis on economic diversification, investment mobilisation, and public-private partnerships. However, protracted planning permission and building permit processes have become a recurring constraint on project delivery, interrupting the transition from investment intent to construction activity and limiting the pace at which development objectives can be realised.

“Delays in construction permitting do not merely postpone projects; they defer employment, private investment, and government revenue.”

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS

International evidence demonstrates that **construction permitting timelines have a direct and measurable relationship to** investment certainty, project delivery, and **economic outcomes.**

Sources referenced include:

- World Bank
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD]
- International Finance Corporation [IFC]

THE EVIDENCE

- **Deferred investment and fiscal impact:** Prolonged construction permitting **delays the transition from capital commitment to construction activity**, deferring employment and associated tax and fee revenues (World Bank, *Doing Business / Business Ready*).
- **Risk driven by uncertainty, not only duration:** **Unpredictability** in approval timelines **increases holding costs and risk exposure**, even where projects are technically feasible and financing are secured. Investors place a premium on certainty as much as on speed (World Bank; OECD).
- **Competitiveness for mobile capital:** Jurisdictions with shorter and **more predictable construction approval processes** are better positioned to **attract time-sensitive regional and international investment**, particularly in construction-intensive sectors (World Bank; IFC).
- **Private-sector participation in permitting:** *World Bank Doing Business 2018* data indicate that **93 of 190 economies** surveyed use some form of **private-sector involvement in construction regulation**, including established systems in Australia, the UK, Japan, and Singapore.

Documented impacts from reforming jurisdictions:

- In **Honolulu, Hawaii**, a study covering 2022–2023 estimated that **permitting backlogs deferred more than US\$4.2 billion in private-sector construction activity** and cost public authorities approximately **US\$87 million in foregone fees and tax revenue**. (Shirzad, 2025, *Assessing the Cost of Building Permit Delays in Honolulu: 2022–2023*).
- In **Rwanda**, the introduction of statutory decision timelines **reduced average construction permitting time to under 30 days** (World Bank, Doing Business – Dealing with Construction Permits).
- In parts of the **United States**, statutory decision deadlines and **deemed approval** provisions have been **used to reduce “silent delay”** by requiring authorities to issue decisions within fixed statutory timeframes (U.S. state planning statutes; World Bank).

HOW DELAYS AFFECT PROJECTS IN PRACTICE

The paper explains that the economic impacts outlined arise through a set of project-level mechanisms. These include scenarios where:

- **Capital remains idle** while approvals are pending.
- Construction **workers are not engaged**.
- **Materials and** professional **services are not procured**.
- **Project feasibility can deteriorate** as financing costs rise or market conditions change.

“Jurisdictions that have reduced approval timelines have done so by enforcing statutory decision periods and supplementing public review capacity with accredited private professionals.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

Recommendation 1: Enforce statutory time limits with deemed approval for small and low-risk projects.

Enforce existing statutory decision periods for planning permission and building permits, with “deemed approved” approval applying where no decision or written request for revisions is issued within the prescribed timeframe. Initial application would focus on small and low-risk developments, improving approval certainty without expanding risk exposure.

Recommendation 2: Introduce certified third-party plan review to supplement public-sector capacity.

Allow certified private-sector professionals to undertake defined plan review functions within a regulated framework. Public authorities would retain accreditation, audit, and enforcement responsibilities, while review capacity is expanded to reduce administrative bottlenecks.

The full paper sets out scope limitations, sequencing, and safeguards for each recommendation.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Based on the analysis presented, if adopted, targeted permitting reforms can result in:

- **Reduced and more predictable approval timelines** for small and low-risk projects
- **Earlier commencement of construction** activity resulting in economic growth
- **Lower project holding costs** associated with shortened approval periods.
- **Greater certainty for investors and developers** at the planning stage

These outcomes reflect direct effects of reduced delay and increased predictability, rather than broader macroeconomic projections.

FURTHER READING

This technical brief summarises key issues, evidence and recommendations examined in “***Accelerating Construction Permit Approvals for National Transformation in Trinidad and Tobago***”.

The [full paper](#) provides detailed analysis, international references, and implementation considerations.