

Accelerating Construction Permit Approvals for National Transformation in Trinidad and Tobago

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Executive Summary

Foreign investors do not compare Trinidad and Tobago's aspirations, they compare its timelines. In a global investment environment where competing jurisdictions can grant construction permits in under 30 days, Trinidad and Tobago's fragmented, unpredictable, and often year-long approval process has become a critical competitive disadvantage.

The Prime Minister's National Transformation Blueprint envisions Trinidad and Tobago as a hub for diversified investment and public-private partnerships. Yet the country's permitting system is one of the slowest in the region. Investors deciding between Trinidad and Tobago, Panama, Rwanda, or Singapore will inevitably choose environments where projects can break ground quickly, where regulatory risk is low, and where time-to-construction is predictable.

This paper shows that quicker permitting is not merely a matter of administrative convenience; it is a foundational investment-climate reform. International empirical

studies link regulatory efficiency to higher GDP growth and business formation. Real-world evidence from Hawaii to Eastern Europe demonstrates that delays have quantifiable fiscal costs and discourage private capital.

To position Trinidad and Tobago as a competitive, investment-ready economy, the paper recommends two proven reforms used in top-performing jurisdictions:

1. **Statutory time limits with "deemed approval" for simple projects**, ensuring predictability and eliminating silent delays.
2. **Certified third-party plan reviewers**, which instantly increase national processing capacity without expanding the public payroll.

These reforms create a permitting system that speaks the language investors understand: speed, certainty, and professionalism, while utilizing the fastest, lowest-cost reform available to government.

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Introduction and Context

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has unveiled a bold National Transformation Blueprint for Trinidad and Tobago, aiming to diversify the economy away from oil and gas and attract substantial foreign investment through public private partnerships (PPPs). A critical component of this vision is an efficient construction sector that can rapidly turn investments into tangible projects on the ground. One longstanding obstacle, however, is the protracted timeframe for obtaining statutory approvals (planning permission and building permits) for construction. Discussions about the “ease of doing business” often cite slow permitting as a key constraint, but the practical implications are not always explained to the broader public. This paper examines why speeding up construction approvals is vital to Trinidad and Tobago’s development, drawing on international evidence, and proposes two actionable reforms to reduce approval timelines.

When construction permits are delayed, the economy suffers in multiple ways. From the moment a developer or homeowner decides to abide by the law and seek approval, any excessive wait time means that materials remain unpurchased and construction workers remain idle.¹ Economic opportunities that existed at project conception can evaporate as markets shift or competitors move ahead.² The time value of money also erodes investor interest in the context of the Prime Minister’s envisioned foreign partnerships, a drawn out approval process can cause even eager investors to lose confidence and take their capital elsewhere.³ While ad hoc ministerial intervention might occasionally fast track a high profile project, that is not a sustainable solution. International investors compare opportunities globally, and Trinidad and Tobago must demonstrate that its approval processes are as efficient and predictable as any competitor nation’s, rather than relying on case-by-case political facilitation.⁴ In short, to become a truly competitive investment hub,

Trinidad and Tobago needs a permitting system that works transparently and swiftly for all, not just via special arrangements. This would not only catalyze flagship foreign investments, but also empower domestic entrepreneurs to move from an idea to a completed project within a business-friendly timeframe, reinforcing an entrepreneurial spirit and confidence in the local economy.⁵

Economic Impact of Delayed Approvals

Research shows that delays in construction approvals have real and measurable economic costs. **Firstly, at the macro level**, burdensome permit processes can dampen overall growth and new business formation. A World Bank panel study covering 180 countries over 10 years found that improving a country’s business regulatory environment correlates with significantly higher GDP growth and entrepreneurship. Specifically, moving from the lowest to the highest quartile in regulatory quality was associated with roughly 0.8 percentage points higher annual per capita GDP growth, and an increase of about 0.5 new businesses per 1,000 adults for every 10 points improvement on the Doing Business index⁶ (*Divanbeigi and Ramalho, Business Regulations and Growth, 2015, p. 2*). While this statistic reflects broad regulatory reforms, construction permitting is a major component of the Ease of Doing Business; lengthy permit times are a significant part of why Trinidad and Tobago has historically lagged in those rankings. Streamlining this process, therefore, could meaningfully contribute to higher growth and entrepreneurship in the country.

Secondly, delays impose immediate fiscal and economic opportunity costs. When a planned building project is stuck in the pipeline awaiting approvals, the government forgoes revenue and the economy misses out on activity. For example, a recent study in Hawaii quantified the impact of permitting backlogs in Honolulu: over 2022–2023, permitting delays deferred more than US\$4.2 billion worth of private sector construction and cost public

authorities an estimated US\$87 million in lost fees and tax revenue ⁷ (*Shirzad 2025, Assessing the Cost of Building Permit Delays in Honolulu: 2022–2023, p. iii*). This illustrates how slow approvals not only delay investment and jobs in the construction sector, but also hit public finances by postponing associated revenues such as permit fees and property taxes. In Trinidad and Tobago’s context, faster approvals would mean private investments materialize sooner, leading to earlier hiring of construction workers, earlier purchase of building materials (benefiting suppliers), and earlier generation of tax receipts for the state. Recent World Bank insights echo this: reducing approval times can “bring forward private investment and tax receipts, and improve measured productivity by cutting idle time in the investment pipeline”. ^{8; 9} In other words, time saved in permitting is not just time saved, it is money earned, both for the investor and the nation.

Finally, slow approval processes deter potential investors and undermine Trinidad and Tobago’s competitiveness. If a medium sized local developer must wait, say, 12–18 months for all approvals before breaking ground, many will simply shelve projects or operate informally (with attendant safety and legal risks). For large foreign investors evaluating where to deploy capital, an uncertain, slow permitting process in Trinidad and Tobago can be a deal breaker, especially when other countries can guarantee permits in a few months. Empirical evidence suggests that clear and speedy regulatory processes help attract business entry. Conversely, a reputation for red tape can cause investors to demand a risk premium or avoid the market entirely. In a very real sense, then, reforming the permitting system is a *growth strategy*: it signals that Trinidad and Tobago is “open for business” and capable of moving at the speed of global commerce.

International Approaches to Faster Permitting

Around the world, recognizing these stakes, many countries have overhauled their construction permitting systems to reduce delays. Two broad strategies stand out among top performers: enforcing statutory time limits (often with a “deemed approval” clause), and integrating private sector expertise into the review process. These approaches have often been part of wider reforms (such as one stop permit centers and e-permitting systems), but they are distinct tools that have proven effective even as standalone measures. Before proposing how they could be applied in Trinidad and Tobago, it is instructive to consider international examples:

- **Statutory Time Limits & Deemed Approvals:** A number of jurisdictions impose strict legal deadlines for authorities to decide on permit applications, after which an application is automatically approved by law. For instance, Minnesota in the United States has a state statute requiring a decision on zoning or permit applications within 60 days of submission (once an application is complete). Failure of an agency to deny a request within 60 days is deemed an approval of the request ¹⁰ (*Marohn, “A Permit Process Should Never Take a Year,” Strong Towns, 2019*). In practice, this “silence is consent” rule forced Minnesota municipalities to streamline their review processes, coordinate agency inputs quickly, and avoid arbitrary delays. Many other U.S. states have similar provisions for development permits or subdivisions. In Rwanda, the introduction of a One Stop Center for construction permits combined with legal time limits helped cut the average permitting time to under one month.¹¹ These examples show that statutory deadlines, backed by an automatic approval mechanism, create accountability and certainty. Certainty (Usually phrased as the reduction of uncertainty) is a

necessary ingredient to attract investors to and spur business development.

- **Private Sector Plan Review and Inspection:** Facing capacity constraints in permitting agencies, dozens of countries now allow certified private professionals to perform some approval functions. According to the World Bank's *Doing Business 2018* data, 93 out of 190 economies surveyed use some form of private sector involvement in construction regulation.¹² The modes vary: Australia delegates almost the entire permit process to licensed private building surveyors, who can approve building plans, conduct inspections, and issue compliance certificates, with minimal municipal involvement.¹³ The United Kingdom since the 1980s allows developers to choose an *approved inspector* – an accredited private building inspector to handle building control approvals as an alternative to going through the local authority's building department.¹⁴ Japan, after a 1998 reform, introduced private third-party inspectors to increase final inspection rates; within two decades Japan achieved over a 90% final inspection rate (up from 40% before) by leveraging private capacity.¹⁵ France and other EU countries use insurance based regimes where private experts must certify buildings for them to obtain mandatory defect insurance¹⁶ – an indirect but effective enforcement tool. In Singapore, certain plan checks for building code compliance can be outsourced to registered structural engineers in private practice, who sign off on designs to expedite the approval. And notably, North Macedonia (formerly FYR Macedonia) in 2007–08 required all building plans to be reviewed by licensed private engineers (members of the Chamber of Engineers) before submission; this reform was credited with significantly speeding up permit issuance and improving the country's *Doing Business* rankings for construction permits.¹⁷

These cases demonstrate that engaging the private sector can increase bandwidth for permit processing, introduce specialized expertise, and improve compliance – though it requires proper accreditation systems and oversight to manage conflicts of interest. The World Bank found that, in general, private involvement tends to improve efficiency and quality control in building regulation, albeit sometimes with higher upfront costs for applicants.¹⁸ In sum, many countries have embraced “third-party” plan review or inspection as a solution to bureaucratic bottlenecks, with proven outcomes in faster approvals and maintained (or enhanced) safety standards.

Bearing in mind these international lessons, Trinidad and Tobago can craft a solution suited to its legal context and administrative realities. In fact, the country already has the seeds of these ideas in existing law and practice, they just have not been effectively implemented. The Town and Country Planning legislation, for example, already stipulates a period for the Town and Country Planning Division (TCPD) to respond to a complete development application.¹⁹ In practice, this deadline is routinely exceeded due to agency overload and lack of enforcement mechanisms. Likewise, Trinidad and Tobago already relies on private professionals in related domains (consider how private land surveyors sign off on cadastral plans, or how independent property valuers provide valuations that banks and even government agencies trust for decision making). Leveraging private “peer reviewers” for building proposals is not a radical leap, but rather an extension of principles already in use.

Recommendations for Trinidad and Tobago

1. **Enforce Statutory Time Limits with “Deemed Approval” for Simple Projects**

Proposal: Amend the relevant planning/building regulations to enforce a strict maximum timeline (e.g.

2 months, as currently stated in Clause 6(6)(b) of the Town and Country Planning (General Development) Order) for authorities to issue a decision on certain categories of building applications. If the timeframe elapses with no decision or written request for specific corrections, the application is *deemed approved* by operation of law (with a certificate of this deemed approval automatically granted). This reform should be applied initially to small and low risk projects, which constitute the bulk of applications and can jump start construction activity.

Scope: The deemed approval mechanism would cover projects like single-family homes, modest multi-family developments (e.g. townhouses or apartment buildings up to two or three stories), and small commercial buildings below a certain size (for example, under 6,000 square feet/560 square meters). These types of developments are typically straightforward in terms of code compliance and have relatively standard designs. They are also precisely the projects that, en masse, create widespread employment and business for local contractors and suppliers. By focusing on this segment, the reform targets the next potential construction boom at the community level, housing, small businesses, etc.; where quick approvals can translate into immediate visible development. Larger or more complex projects (e.g. high-rises, industrial plants, large public infrastructure) can for now remain under the existing process, as they often require more detailed scrutiny and inter-agency coordination; freeing officials from the volume of minor applications will allow more attention on these major projects.

Mechanism: When an application for a qualifying project is submitted, the clock starts ticking. The agency (Town & Country Planning or the Regional Corporation, depending on the stage) must issue one of the following within the statutory period: an approval, a refusal (with reasons), or a request specifying necessary modifications. If none of these

are forthcoming by the deadline, the law deems the permit granted. To balance accountability, the law can specify that a deemed approval still binds the applicant to full compliance with all applicable building codes and regulations, therefore it is not a blanket license to violate rules, but rather a procedural green light. Notably, this approach is essentially already envisioned by the current two-month rule; the reform would give it teeth. This paper also recommends allowing conditional approvals: i.e. the authority could respond within the time limit with an “approval subject to minor corrections,” listing small issues to be addressed (for example, “relocate one fire escape” or “add a ventilation window in the stairwell”). This way, the project is not stalled; the developer can proceed, undertaking to make those minor plan adjustments at the next stage. This is a critical change to the conditional approval structure already given, as the current conditional approval speak specifically to subsequent action required by other statutory authorities such as WASA, EMA or FIRE, usually guided by some governing legislature. The conditional approvals that this paper is referring to are in addition to these already existing Statutory Authority referrals. This recommendation mirrors how constructions approvals are often issued in practice. During many construction projects, Contractor Submissions to be fixed in the works are routinely granted permission to proceed with conditions to be satisfied (e.g. hand rail details approved, subject to pipe diameter increased to 3” (75mm)). This recommended process acknowledges that even if a plan isn’t 100% perfect, it’s better to keep the project moving than to reset the entire process or delay the stage approval for a discreet and clearly identifiable corrective action.

Benefits: The deemed approval rule creates a powerful tool for timely review. Agency staff, knowing that inaction means an application proceeds by default, will prioritize at least an initial review within the window. If an application is truly deficient or dangerous, the agency’s recourse is simply to issue

a denial or request changes within the time limit – which is reasonable if the submission was egregiously non-compliant. On the other hand, for compliant or borderline compliant plans, officials might actually prefer *not* to act (i.e. let the clock run out and let it be deemed approved) rather than invest scarce time in processing a routine approval. In those cases, deemed approval actually saves public sector effort, the law’s presumption is essentially “no news is good news.” This can substantially reduce the workload backlog. It is important to note that a deemed permit does not waive the developer’s responsibility to follow building codes. Similar provisions in places like Minnesota (for development permits) and the UK (for certain planning approvals) have not led to a flood of unsafe construction; instead, they tend to weed out bureaucratic delay while still holding builders accountable to regulations. If Trinidad and Tobago implements this, it could accompany it with measures like random audits of some deemed approved plans or mandatory stage inspections during construction to ensure compliance, thereby safeguarding the public interest.

Counterarguments and Responses: Some stakeholders may worry that automatic approvals will allow substandard buildings to slip through. However, consider the current scenario: due to the perceived inefficiency of the approval process, many potential building developments are not constructed at all, reducing economic activity, or, for those with free cash and an appetite for risk, are constructed in the informal sector, without building approvals; these building constructed in the informal sector all over nation without Statutory oversight rely on the professional oversight of architects and engineers. In a deemed approval system, that reliance on professionals remains, except now projects enter the formal economy en-mass, and won’t languish in the back-and-forth process of defects identification to developer correction and resubmission and back to defects identification. Moreover, for truly high-stakes developments (complex structures, large

occupancies), the safety net is that those are excluded from the deemed approval stream and will still get full agency scrutiny. The goal is to separate the wheat from the chaff fast track the simple, standard projects that are low-risk, and thereby allow regulators to concentrate on the unusual or high-risk proposals.

2. Introduce Certified Third-Party Plan Reviewers (“Peer Checkers”)

Proposal: Establish a program of accredited private sector professionals of experienced architects and engineers, who are authorized to conduct plan reviews and code compliance checks on behalf of the regulatory authorities. These third-party plan checkers (or “peer reviewers”) would operate under two possible models (not mutually exclusive):

(a) Agency engaged consultants: The government empanels a roster of approved professionals/firms on contract, and when an application comes in, it can be outsourced to one of these for expedited review (with the applicant paying the requisite fee that covers this service).

(b) Applicant engaged reviewers: The developer/owner may directly hire an accredited plan checker from a public list to review their plans and certify compliance; the agency then accepts this certified report in lieu of conducting the full in-house review, issuing the permit more or less automatically if the certification is in order. Both models have been used internationally.

The first model is akin to how some cities handle overflow building inspections or permit backlogs by hiring consultants on demand. The second model resembles how the UK’s approved inspector’s system works, or how licensed valuers are used in property transactions – the public authority sets the standards and recognizes the sign off, but does not itself perform the work.

Scope and Phasing: As with the first recommendation, this should kick off for *specific categories* of approvals. For example, one could start by allowing third-party review for structural designs and detailed building plans at the construction permit stage (the engineering drawings that go to Regional Corporations or the Ministry of Works for building approval). Trinidad and Tobago has many Boards of Engineering registered engineers in private practice capable of verifying structural calculations and compliance with the building code. If an engineer of a certain standing (say, a registered engineer with 10+ years of experience, approved by the Board of Engineering) reviews and stamps the structural plans, the agency's role could be limited to a perfunctory check and then issuance of the permit. Another area is Town & Country Planning compliance for straightforward cases: certified town planners or architects could verify that a proposed building meets zoning and development standards (setbacks, land use, parking requirements, etc.) and issue a compliance certificate to the TCPD, which would then grant planning approval swiftly. Initially, third-party review could be optional – an alternative path for applicants who are willing to pay a bit extra for speed and certainty. Over time, if successful, it could be expanded or even made a standard requirement for certain classes of projects (as was done in North Macedonia for all plans, or in parts of Australia). This paper recommends introducing third party reviewers at all stages of the approval process chain, thereby ensuring that no bottlenecks occur and effectively flooding the country with approved, legal and shovel ready projects for the private sector to begin.

Accreditation and Oversight: Crucially, a formal accreditation mechanism must be instituted. The relevant professional bodies (Board of Engineering, Institute of Architects, etc.) in collaboration with the government can set criteria for who qualifies as a peer reviewer. Candidates might need to pass a screening or have certain certifications (perhaps even a short course on local codes and administrative

procedures to standardize their work). Once accredited, they would be officially gazette as authorized plan checkers. To mitigate conflict of interest, rules would be needed such as: a professional cannot review a plan from his/her own firm, and perhaps the developer must choose from a list rather than the agency assigning (to avoid cozy relationships). The agency should spot audit a sample of third-party checked plans and retain the right to revoke an accreditation if a reviewer is found negligent or fraudulent. Experiences from elsewhere show that with these safeguards, private reviewers can uphold high standards. In fact, private professionals have reputations and liability to consider – they are often insured and risk losing business or facing lawsuits if they certify faulty plans which can make them *more* diligent in some cases than an overworked civil servant. For example, Japan's system holds private inspectors legally liable for ten years for defects,^{20,21} which has incentivized thoroughness and improved overall compliance. Trinidad and Tobago's legal framework would need to clarify the liability of third-party checkers (e.g. require that they carry professional indemnity insurance) and the extent to which a government issued permit based on a third-party certification transfers responsibility to that third party, and how much liability resides with the design Engineer or Architect of Record.

Local Precedent: It is important to communicate that this is not an entirely foreign concept parachuted into the local context. Even now, many governmental decisions rely on external professional inputs. For instance, when calculating stamp duty or property tax on real estate, authorities often accept valuations done by independent chartered valuation surveyors. Court cases use expert witnesses. Environmental impact assessments for development projects are done by private consultants and then reviewed by the EMA (Environmental Management Authority). In a similar vein, allowing *private plan approvals* simply acknowledges that a competent, licensed

professional can perform certain approval tasks to the same standard as the agency – with the agency focusing on verifying the credentials and random auditing rather than duplicating every check. This public-private partnership in regulation has been successfully implemented in numerous countries as noted. The World Bank reports that *“private third-party involvement...when carefully implemented...offers an innovative way of addressing capacity gaps”* and can improve service delivery efficiency.²² For Trinidad and Tobago, this could dramatically reduce queues at Town & Country and regional corporations, as developers would no longer be solely at the mercy of a limited number of government plan examiners, who themselves are stretched.

Expected Outcomes: If both of these recommendations, statutory deadlines with deemed approval, and third-party plan review, are implemented for small to medium projects, we can expect a sharp reduction in average approval times. Instead of taking many months (or years in worst cases), a homeowner building a house might secure all permissions in a matter of a few weeks. A developer of a small apartment block could hire an accredited reviewer, submit compliance certified plans, and get approval in one month rather than wait twelve. The knock-on effects would be substantial: immediate commencement of construction means immediate hiring of workers and contractors. It means a faster turnover of capital, investors can move to their next project sooner, potentially undertaking more projects than before (compounding the positive effect on the economy). The government will collect fees and taxes earlier, and can even structure fees such that a portion of the third-party review cost comes back to fund oversight or further improvements (for example, a small administrative fee on every private review submission to fund an “Approvals Modernization Unit”). Over time, as confidence builds in the system, more ambitious reforms can follow, such as

comprehensive e-permitting platforms (the ongoing *DevelopTT* digital portal is a step in the right direction), integration of all utility and fire approvals into one streamlined process, and risk-based classification of projects (where very low risk ones might even be *instant* permits subject only to post construction inspection).

Conclusion

Trinidad and Tobago stands at the cusp of potentially transformative development, but to realize this vision, it must address the chronic bottleneck of slow construction approvals. By enforcing the laws on the books, with a cultural shift that values time as much as compliance and by embracing the capacity of the private sector to share the regulatory workload, the country can significantly reduce permit waiting times within months, not years. These changes would send a strong signal in the national and international arena: that Trinidad and Tobago is serious about doing what it takes to become a competitive, investment friendly, and future ready economy.

For the academic and policy community, it is also an invitation to monitor and study the outcomes. Implementing statutory deadlines and third-party reviewers offers a natural experiment in public administration. Key performance indicators, like the average calendar days to permit approval, the percentage of permits granted within the prescribed timeframe, and the volume of development applications, should be tracked and published. We should also track economic indicators such as construction sector employment, new firm registrations in construction related fields, and changes in the country’s *Ease of Doing Business* metrics. If our hypotheses are correct, we will see an uptick in all the positive metrics. Faster approvals are not just a bureaucratic reform, they are a catalyst for growth, job creation, and confidence in the local economy.

Trinidad and Tobago has an opportunity to learn from global best practices and leapfrog ahead by tailoring them to our needs. Reducing statutory approval timeframes in the construction sector is low hanging fruit in the grand scheme of economic transformation: it requires political will, administrative tweaks, and stakeholder buy in, but not heavy public spending. Yet, its impact can be far reaching, literally laying the foundation (in concrete and steel) for the nation's next chapter of development. As the government pursues its

diversification agenda, ensuring that the road from an investor's interest to a ground-breaking ceremony is as short and smooth as possible will be essential. The recommendations in this paper offer a way forward to achieve that, grounded in evidence and proven elsewhere. Now, the task is to adapt and implement them, keeping Trinidad and Tobago's unique context in mind, and to do so with a sense of urgency that matches the ambitious goals we have set for our future.

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He was awarded his M.Sc with Distinction from the University of the West Indies, with “Structural Retrofitting of Traditional Building Structures for Seismic Events” as his special area of research. During his post graduate studies, he was also awarded “The Leonard Prize for Construction Project Management”, “The NIPDEC Prize for Human Resources and Industrial Relations in Construction”, “The Trintoplan Prize for Infrastructure Planning and Construction” and “The Harricrete Prize for Construction Materials”.

His engineering career has included assignments on both new construction and renovation-upgrade of numerous Government of Trinidad and Tobago (GOTT) primary and secondary schools; many of these funded by either the World Bank 4th Basic Education Program or the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) Secondary Education Modernisation Program. His involvement in GOTT Design-Build projects include the 9,894 sq.m (106,505sq.ft) Tobago Financial Complex which is the head office of the Tobago House of Assembly Division of Finance, and the 382 sq.m (4,120 sq.ft) Rio Claro Public Library.

Eric is the Managing Director of Lauriston Lewis Associates Ltd., a Consulting Engineering Firm founded in 1970 with an excellent history of projects successfully completed throughout the Caribbean and Guyana.