

Facility Manager Project Profile

Kurt Gnessin

ALL ABOUT PERMITS

A Seasoned construction project manager discusses the importance of permit planning

What is your official title, and how long have you been in restaurant facilities? My title is Construction Project Manager. I have more than 32 years of experience in the restaurant industry and more than 20 years of experience in restaurant facilities and construction.

Based on your vast experience, what facility projects typically require permits? Permit requirements vary by municipal jurisdiction, and it may surprise even the most tenured facility managers that a permit may be required for a significant number of the projects they manage. Most municipalities have the requirements listed on their website; however, as a general rule any installation, extension, alteration or modification to mechanical, plumbing, electrical or building systems requires a permit. In some jurisdictions, they may even require a permit for minor repairs if it involves any of these disciplines.

What projects or installations should be permitted but generally aren't? The most common projects that are overlooked when it comes to permit requirements involve work that must be completed during the overnight hours when the restaurant is closed. Many facility managers rely on their contractor to know when a permit is required and to add the cost and time into the quote. Often a contractor—in an attempt to be competitive—will exclude the permit since the likelihood of getting caught with a permit violation in the middle of the night is very small. In addition, a contractor working through the night will need to extend the hours to be available the next morning for the building inspector. In many cases, the contractor believes that asking for forgiveness is the most cost-effective approach. Unless the facility manager requires documentation of the closed permit, it does not get pulled.

When are drawings normally required for permitting? Typically, some written details showing the scope of work or type of equipment being installed are required. Requirements vary by municipal jurisdiction and the scope of the project. Construction drawings may not be required for most minor modifications and repairs. Often these can be satisfied with shop drawings and manufacturer

cut sheets. In other cases, the original construction drawings may be provided along with red lines showing the proposed modifications. Major remodels involving seating, the moving of walls or the changing of exterior finishes will almost always require architectural drawings to obtain the permit.

What documents are generally needed when applying for a permit? In addition to the documents that describe the scope of work, there will be a permit application, and some jurisdictions will not allow a contractor to pull a permit without the owner's signature on the application. A good indication that your contractor pulled a permit is if the facility manager was asked to sign the application or provide a letter of authorization for the contractor to pull the permit. Generally, there will also be a fee based on the valuation of the work.

What type of facility projects expose hidden problems within the restaurant? Any time you open up the ceiling walls, you are bound to find some hidden damage or old work that may not meet current building codes. The building code changes all the time, so even work that was up to code when the store was built may not meet current building codes. Some work may be grandfathered, while other work may need to be upgraded to meet current building codes. A facility manager's reluctance to pull a permit might be the perceived risk with potential upgrades that could cause project delays and increase the total cost to the project.

What items have been uncovered when completing a project? What do the local inspectors look for beyond the project scope of work? The most common are electrical code violations above the drop ceiling. Most inspectors are not looking beyond the scope of work and don't often have to look very hard to see an obvious problem. It is rare for an inspector to require corrections that are way outside the scope permitted, but I have seen critical safety issues called out for corrections.

For major store remodels and new store construction, which codes are the hardest to follow: federal, state or municipal? Why? Building codes are easy to follow as long as you are aware of them. National and state building codes are well known by most contractors and architects. It gets difficult for regional and national project managers to know about all the local or municipal codes that are out there. It is not uncommon to be surprised by a local inspector with a requirement or interpretation of the code that is different from the city or county next door.

For new store construction, what is the responsibility of the architect, general contractor and owner? The architect is responsible for developing all the construction documents and navigating the building department to obtain the necessary permits to perform the work. In some cases, a permit expediter may be employed to help navigate the city departments to obtain the permit. The

general contractor hires subcontractors to perform the specific scope of work and manages the schedule and payments to the sub-contractors. Questions about the scope of work are sent to the owner and architect for clarification, and the architect assists with additional support with city inspectors as needed throughout the project. The owner representative is responsible for coordinating all the owner-supplied equipment and vendors in conjunction with the project schedule. He or she also performs periodic inspections of the work, authorizes payments and is ultimately responsible for the entire project outcome to meet time, cost and quality objectives.

Can you provide an example when a local code caught you off guard? What were the consequences? I was surprised by a municipality's unique interpretation of a code requirement to have the interior of my restaurant tested for first-responder radio signal strength (800 Mhz). This fire authority requirement is typically for large warehouses or multi-story commercial buildings, so I was caught off guard by the requirement. The consequences proved to be very costly and time consuming and delayed the grand opening of the store by almost a month.

What best practice have you implemented to ensure you won't be surprised by unknown or unique municipal codes in the future? I meet with the building officials in every municipality in which I do business to talk to them about their inspection processes and code requirements. I discuss project examples to flush out any unique requirements they may have.

Will there be any future additions to the federal building code? One potential addition that impacts restaurant facilities has to do with CO2 tanks for beverage equipment. The international fire and boiler code sets some new requirements for CO2 monitoring devices. These are currently enforced by the state and local level but will soon become part of the national building code.

In general, what additional codes does the state of California place on new store construction, major remodels or normal facility projects? In addition to ADA requirements that are more strict than national codes, the state of California is very progressive in the adoption of "green" and environmental codes. These include requirements for future electric vehicle-charging stations and designing rooftop solar arrays capable of providing 100 percent of future energy needs. Even minor

What has been the longest time it has taken to get a permit for a project? Municipal governments establish architectural guidelines for how they want their community to grow, so the timeframes often depend on how flexible your brand is with their building image. Most permits for new construction are obtained in a few months; however, some projects can take more than two years to obtain a permit.

Have you ever been involved with a facility project where a permit should have been pulled but wasn't and a local inspector showed up? If so, what was the outcome? There are potential civil and criminal penalties for not pulling a permit when required. Most municipalities consider building inspectors as code-enforcement officers and issue badges just like police officers. If an inspector shows up to the store while work is being performed without a permit, the inspector can "red tag" the building, which means stop all work and even close the restaurant. In one case, a building inspector arrested a general manager who refused to close the restaurant when directed to do so.

In hindsight, what have you learned in streamlining the permitting process? As with most things related to project management, the key to success is planning. I have learned the best way to manage the permitting process is to plan for it on the front end. Build the necessary time and money into your project plan and then go after it just as you would any another task on your list. Permitting is not hard unless you don't plan for it and later find that you need to do it.

Kurt Gnessin, CRFP, is a certified facility and construction professional with a diverse functional background spanning 32 years in the restaurant industry. Gnessin has worked at five national restaurant brands and held positions in facilities, construction, operations and real estate, including 12 years of executive-level experience directing facilities for a national portfolio of corporate restaurant brands. Gnessin maintains his CRFP and RFMP certifications and has a bachelor's of science in business administration.