Building Snags? Call the Expediter;
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Originally Posted on February 28, 2013

Developer Alan Khedari bought a hilly lot in Bel Air, Calif., with plans to build a big house on it. Just how big? Ask the expediter.

With building permits for single-family homes in the U.S. jumping 24% last year compared with 2011, there has been a resurgence of the behind-the-scenes players who get paid to interpret local building codes and help permits make their way through city hall. Expediters stand in line to discuss blueprint revisions with plan examiners and sit through countless zoning meetings and variance hearings on behalf of their clients.

The role of the expediter reflects a common source of frustration for homeowners: In cities with seemingly Byzantine building rules, it can seem like hiring an insider who has a good rapport with local officials is the most efficient way to ensure that permits arrive in weeks instead of months. In Mr. Khedari's case, expediter Jason Somers hauled in a surveyor to do a slope analysis, which Mr. Somers then interpreted. The verdict: If Mr. Khedari kept the home to 14,000 square feet, it would pass the city's rules. Construction is slated to begin in about three months, and when completed in 18 months, it will include a movie theater, a gym and a two-story master closet. Mr. Somers, whose firm charges around $175 per hour, depending on the specialization, estimates that he was able to increase the size of the home by 2,000 square feet. "We were able to stretch the building envelope," Mr. Somer says.

Expediters were widely used during the housing boom, when speed was essential. But these days, their roles are different. More cities have implemented online permit applications and other filings, reducing the need for clients to hire mere paper-pushers. New York City, for example, now allows 90% of all construction permits to be submitted electronically and created a digital project-review center that has helped projects get approved three times as quickly, building officials say. In July, the city of Chicago unveiled E-Plan, which allows architects and builders to submit plans online; city reviewers can directly mark up the plans and then send them back.

Now, expediters are increasingly hired by builders, architects and homeowners to advise them on complex problems like how a subterranean garage lift will fit within the city code or to how to get a swimming pool approved on a parcel with wetlands. Like lawyers, many of today's expediters bill by the hour, stay current with town codes and negotiate with high-level building officials. They're often brought in at the same time as the architect to help anticipate what design snafus might pop up.

"Expediting like this is sort of new because codes have gotten more complicated," says Los Angeles architect Richard Robertson III.

Most expediters don't have any formal training. Mr. Somers, 28, started doing it during his sophomore year at UCLA with a local land-planning and expediting firm. Laurie Wiltshire, an expediter in Wainscott, N.Y., had just moved from Los Angeles, where she was a contracts administrator at New Line Cinema, when she spotted an ad in the local paper for a land-planning company that was looking for an administrator of environmental permits. That job eventually led her to start her own firm in 1998 to help residents in the Hamptons, where local building requirements can vary widely. She typically charges clients between $75 and $160 per hour, depending on the task.

Similarly, Water Mill, N.Y., builder Jeff Gardner approached Ms. Wiltshire about adding a swimming pool to a property he was about to sell, which proved difficult because the majority of his 1-acre lot was wetlands. To make the pool work, Ms. Wiltshire worked out a trade with the conservation board: The home buyers would give the town about 400 square feet of their land to get an additional 3-foot easement into what's called a "nondisturbance" buffer so that the pool could fit. "She knew who to talk to, and they knew she was knowledgeable," Mr. Gardner says of the success.

Even with the help of an expediter, not all undertakings result in a permit. Ms. Wiltshire took one client's request to create a lawn on his beachfront property to the town of East Hampton and was denied because adding soil to a sandy environment would require an irrigation system and disrupt the habitat of the dunes. (Ms. Wiltshire says she predicted that outcome and warned her client ahead of time).

Sandra Costa, an interior designer and expediter in Los Angeles, thought she had a simple solution to turn client Jimmy O'Mahony's cantilevered balcony on his Venice Beach home into a wine cellar because the structural support was already there. The city denied the request, saying the support structure wasn't adequate. Mr. O'Mahony, vice chairman of digital-design firm Wilshire Axon, said he had fallen in love with Ms. Costa's plan—"I fell over," he says of the idea—so he and his wife shelled out an extra $10,000 on their remodel to add the necessary support to make the wine cellar happen.

In the end, even the best expediters can't always work their magic. Ms. Flinn recalls a recent case in which the permit process for a new home in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles started in November 2010 and was supposed to take six to nine months to get permits from the building department and city-planning department. The city's hillside ordinance went into effect in the middle of the approval process, requiring the architect to redesign the entire home, downsizing it from 6,400 square feet to about 5,000 square feet. The permits were just approved in October. "We try to anticipate everything," Ms. Flinn says. "But that one was out of our hands."

Original article and images at:
https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324503204578316171954273606