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Project owners, economic developers, builders search for the true meaning of "shovel ready sites"

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Those of us in real estate and economic development love buzz words. The current buzz naturally revolves around "bio" and "green". Our ability to throw around terms like "Class 100,000 clean room" and "LEEDs Platinum level" establish our credibility among professionals in our field.

One of the most opaque of gray areas for project owners, economic developers, and for builders is the term "shovel ready". Does "shovel ready" simply mean that the property is available for sale? Does it mean the property is for sale and will be ready for development as soon as the town finds \$2 million to complete the last leg of its sewer extension project? Or is it that construction can start after another four months of public hearings for wetlands and site plan approval?

When Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick came into office in 2007, one of his first appointments and initiatives were a permitting czar and an incentive program aimed at rewarding municipalities that could permit larger projects in less than 180 days. While six months seems like a lengthy period, it is quite common for large, controversial projects to be held up at the state and local level for a year or more, particularly if environmental or archaeological studies are required. This work of the Patrick administration demonstrates an effort to bring common sense to the permitting process while at the same time protecting the public from the adverse impacts associated with economic growth.

Westmass Area Development Corporation and Westover Metropolitan Development Corporation own and operate seven business parks in western Massachusetts. These two corporations are land developers that bring fully serviced industrial and office property to market for sale, primarily to end users. A very small portion of the western Massachusetts market is devoted to speculative development. This results in a low vacancy rate for modern industrial and office space and price structure that is somewhat insulated from cyclical swings. On the negative side, the lack of an inventory of speculative space limits the region's ability to respond to the industrial or office space prospect in need of space on short notice.

In an effort to respond to this market reality, Westmass and Westover have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars at the front end of its projects to re-zone the property, settle regulatory issues, and to construct roads, water lines, sewer lines, and drainage systems to insure that the project is not delayed.

With the governor's priority on streamlined permitting, Westmass looked at new ways to shorten what was already a comparatively stress-free process that typically took less than three months.

As an example, the permitting for a new 250,000 s/f manufacturing facility for Harvey Industries at the Chicopee River Business Park, took 69 days from plan submittal to project approval, including wetlands hearings.

An accelerated permit approval process can make a build to suit or build to lease project competitive

schedule-wise with the purchase of an existing building. Even an existing building requires several months to acquire, allowing for environmental site assessments, legal, and financial work. Since renovation work or building upgrades are almost always required, it is often six months before a purchaser can occupy an existing facility.

Westmass targeted one of its prime properties, an eight acre site in the Chicopee River Business Park, off exit 6 of the Mass. Pike, that was slated for office development. The company hired Vannasse Hangen Brustlin to prepare plans and a Notice of Intent for work in the wetland buffer. It then permitted maximum development on the property for a 64,000 s/f office building with 240 parking spaces, complete with a storm water management plan. The Order of Conditions issued by the Conservation Commission included a condition that the project permit only needed an amendment approval if the project was substantially different from what was proposed.

In short, as long as a project is no larger than 64,000 s/f, is an office use, has the approximately same amount of paved area and does not propose to alter the wetland buffers beyond what was shown on the plan, then no further action is required.

The Chicopee Building Commissioner has determined that work can begin on the property as soon as an application for a building permit is approved, typically within two weeks. Westmass invested additional money in the permitting process and took the project over the regulatory hurdles in order to achieve the true meaning of "shovel ready".

"Shovel ready" means that Parcel 1 at Chicopee River is ready for construction - now.

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