Walking through the Bureau of Development Services permitting areas is like stepping back in time. The open floor spaces are buzzing with activity. Employees push metal carts filled with plans rolled into massive paper logs from department to department. Customers have their blueprints splayed out on all available surfaces as they pore over details. It's a process that's about as old as Portland itself.

The permitting cycle waxes and wanes with the economy; when the booms come, every cog in the processing machinery amps up its speed. This boom usually comes after many departments were decreased during a preceding bust. For a multimillion dollar project, a week delay equals thousands of dollars lost for the developer. And if the machinery gets gunked up, the complaints start flowing to City Hall louder and louder.

This is the environment that PF&R's Fire & Life Safety Plans Review team at BDS works under and why it's so noteworthy that the inspection team there recently moved their plans completion rate from 20% to 90%.

PF&R's life safety examiners at BDS do important work: it's their job to make sure commercial and residential building plans meet all fire safety codes (a separate plans review team at Gideon works on alarms and sprinklers). Their role is nuanced: they need to be flexible enough to encourage development, but persistent and knowledgeable enough to hold the line on life safety risks. Recently in London, when flammable cladding was permitted for a high-rise apartment building, it set the stage for a deadly inferno: if fire safety coding isn't done correctly, even the best line firefighters and cutting edge equipment are not enough. As Fire Marshal Nate Takara likes to say, "We're the catastrophe that didn't happen."

Deputy Chief Kari Schimel was the Senior Inspector running the plans review department for the past five years at BDS during the boom until her recent promotion to Assistant Fire Marshal. She says the departmental backlog needed to be addressed creatively. Her boss, Fire Marshal Takara, says she did just that. "There were many factors that led to BDS' successful turnaround from 20% to 90%," he says. "Kari used data collection methods to identify process issues. Using that data, she was able to re-prioritize the workload. Once Kari received additional staffing, she increased training and she and her team worked together to solidify partnerships with other bureau agencies, such as BDS. Overall, the plan reviewers with Kari at the helm fostered a culture of teamwork that increased productivity."

For a permit, five sets of plans are submitted and they wind through the different necessary departments at BDS. "It's often a game of hunting down the plans," says Schimel. "I decided one way I could help most is to go and hunt them so we're not waiting for them to get to us. Pretty soon that set the tone for the team and everyone was stalking the plans."

In talking to team members, they say they love their jobs because of the important safety legacy their work leaves behind. The life safety codes they implement carry on for the life of the building. "This job is a coveted one in the bureau now," says Senior Inspector Specialist Jason Birch. "It's really challenging and our work is highly respected among the staff at BDS." Inspector Specialist Jeff Galvan says that the perspective they offer as firefighters is valued. "We wear two hats," he says. "We're able to go into a building and explain what a crew would expect to see or do there if there was a fire. It helps people understand our life safety requirements."

Do you have a story about a PF&R coggllevation that would be great for this newsletter? Contact Caryn Brooks on the Communications Team caryn.brooks@portlandoregon.gov or 503-823-3714