

Councils take too long

By REX BOOKER

IT REQUIRES an average of 74 days for the 31 local government councils in metropolitan Melbourne to process a medium-density planning application. The actual time taken can vary between 46 and 105 days.

A study commissioned by the Housing Industry Association into councils' performances in dealing with these applications has highlighted the need for an improvement strategy that involves the development industry and both local and state government.

The study tracked more than 1000 medium-density applications lodged in the six months to February 1996. Most of these were the subject of public notice for 14 days.

The planning policy analyst of the Municipal Association of Victoria, David Rae, says the results of the research indicate a need for the developers and local and state government to focus on a number of issues that could improve the development approvals process.

These include:

- Applicants' willingness and ability to respond to councils' requests for further information.

- Councils' preparedness to clarify as early as possible the information they require.

- The need for clear statements of councils' policies and processes.

- Councils' staffing resources — numbers, experience and ability.

- Councils' preparedness to improve their delegated decision-making processes.

- A greater appreciation by the State Government that the introduction of sophisticated, performance-based planning tools such as the *Good Design Guide for Medium-Density Housing* created the necessity for on-going skills training and education.

On this latter point, HIA chief executive Carolyn Lloyd said an on-going training and education program would boost the capacity of applicants to prepare well-researched and well-documented development proposals, which would help speed-up the process and maintain quality outcomes.

The study found that councils handling the greatest number of medium-density planning applications usually experienced the greatest delays in getting them through the process.

Ms Lloyd said that since most major medium-density developments involved costly land purchases, processing periods of the length indicated by the study obviously would impact on the final cost of the projects and the individual units.

"It also affects the degree of confidence engendered among members of the development community in applying for planning approval for medium-density housing in particular parts of Melbourne," she said.

The MAV and the HIA have agreed to work together to reduce delays.

Another applicant was granted a licence against the sub-committee's recommendation that the applicant was not technically competent. Following a complaint from the sub-committee, BCC commissioner Mr Max Croxford acted to stop the licence being issued.

Mr Croxford told *The Age* he was aware of some of the leaked information but the Building Practitioners Board was an independent body and comment should be sought from its chairman, Mr Alan Coleman.

Mr Coleman agreed that applicants had come before the board with the type of problems described.

"The intent of the process is to try and rule out the cowboys and the largest group — the domestic builders — probably have the highest proportion of cowboys," he said.

Mr Coleman agreed that one applicant was involved in litigation with the HGF. However the amount owed to the fund was not as high as \$400,000.

The applicant, he said, also had a counter-claim against the fund for about \$3 million.

"He was neither innocent nor guilty," Mr Coleman said. "He did have a somewhat erratic and troubled history, that's true, which went back some 10 years. He had gotten himself into strife with some rather extravagant behavior but I don't believe there was any conviction for assault.

"The board formed a panel to inquire into his history. We took legal advice and the panel finally recommended in his favor."