

**ADDRESS BY THE HON. ROBERT MONTAGUE, MINISTER OF STATE, THE  
DEPARTMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT,  
OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
TO JAMAICA MORTGAGE BANK'S HOUSING SEMINAR, MARCH 18, 2009,  
TERRA NOVA  
"THE 90-DAY APPROVAL PROCESS"**

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**SALUTATIONS:**

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Let me thank the organizers for their kind invitation to address by way of informing, updating and educating participants and observers of this very important seminar on a subject about which I feel passionately and you no doubt have a vested interest.

Indeed, I welcome the opportunity to speak about the government's efforts and initiatives and more specifically what we in the Department of Local Government and the Local Authorities have been doing to ensure that the development approval process works as smoothly as possible.

First it is important to set this whole matter of development approvals in context. What we are talking about essentially and fundamentally is creating a culture of efficiency, excellence and facilitation. We are talking about a whole philosophy of governance: One

which is customer-focused, collaborative, consultative, responsive and result-oriented. We are talking about creating a culture in which the client is king or queen; or if you are not Royally-minded, a culture which says, “yes we can” or better yet “yes we will.”

This whole paradigm shift—which I have been calling “business unusual”—consciously moves away from the traditional habit of seeing the customer or client as a nuisance or a bother. We are talking about an attitudinal shift which recognizes that when private citizens or corporations come to Government for service, it is not just those citizens or corporations who benefit. There is a multiplier effect.

A virtuous cycle is created when service is delivered and people are efficiently facilitated. Especially at this time of global economic crisis, with dire consequences for small states like Jamaica, we can’t afford to have business as usual. It has to be, as I have been stressing, business unusual.

All arms of the state have to ensure that they are operating as efficiently as possible and that the bureaucratic red tape is cut, and cut in such a way that, like Humpty Dumpty, it can’t come back together again!

I want to assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that the Department of Local Government and the local authorities (and by local authorities I mean the parish councils) are attuned to the demands of service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and that we are actively and aggressively addressing the relevant issues. We have more than just rhetoric to show for it.

The development approval process is the overarching umbrella under which the 90-day timeline and the one stop shop concept falls .

The ninety-day timeline begins the moment you hand in your application for environmental, subdivision or building approval (with the requisite conditions fulfilled) to the day the final stamp of approval is given for you to go ahead and start your development.

Within this ninety-day approval timeframe is the “One Stop Shop” concept in which the experts in the various areas for example, hydrology, urban planning etc. review your application and pass it along the chain of agencies for the various inspections, comments and ultimate stamps of approval or rejection , all within 90-days.

**For clarity, let me take through a brief step-by-step process:**

**STEP 1. You hand in your application form at the local authority or parish council (providing it is complete. No incomplete application will be accepted. They will be returned immediately because we recognize these were clogging the systems)**

**STEP 2. Council dispatches application to the relevant agency eg. NEPA, JFB, NWA, NWC etc.,**

**STEP 3. The Agencies review and make recommendations to Council**

**STEP 4. Council acting on the recommendations of the agencies makes a decision to grant or refuse the approval**

**STEP 5. Council prepares conditions of approval/rejection documents**

**STEP 6. APPLICANT IS NOTIFIED**

**STEP 7. If your application is rejected you CAN request a review from council**

**STEP 8. You can also make a formal appeal within 28 days to the Minister with responsibility for Local Government**

**STEP 9. If it is an appeal regarding a building you CAN appeal to the chief technical director –NWA instead of the Minister**

**STEP 10. WE PROMISE YOU A FAIR AND TRANSPARENT PROCESS**

Let me give some stark examples of how we are going about this approvals process in the parish councils over the last year when we decided to improve our operational efficiencies :

In St Elizabeth there were 41 applications in March 2008 and by February this year we had reduced that figure to 15, a decrease of 63%. In Hanover there were 46 applications in March and by February that number had been reduced to 13, a decrease of 72%.

It gets better. In Portmore there were 120 outstanding building applications in March, 2008 but by February, 2009 we had slashed that number to 10, a reduction of 92%. For St. Catherine as a whole there were 96 applications in March '08—and only two in

February this year, a reduction of 98%. It gets even better. In Clarendon and Manchester there were 12 and 25 applications respectively over the same period and both had a 100% clear-up rate. We mean business unusual, ladies and gentlemen.

In terms of subdivision applications, the record has been equally impressive. With St Catherine recording an 89% reduction over the period March 2008 - February 2009—moving from 45 applications in the system to five. In St Mary a 69% reduction was recorded over the period, from 372 to 114. In Hanover there was an 80% reduction, from 74 to 15. And in Clarendon and Manchester at the end of February there was no subdivision applications in the system, as a 100% clear-up rate was achieved, with the councils processing 39 and 145 applications respectively.

But what does all of this reduction in figures mean. It means we have come to recognize that while the private sector is the engine of growth, the government is facilitator and the multi-stakeholder approach can only be effective if each partner plays its role. The Local Authorities have recognized this and the mayors of councils have been warned that deficit financing from central government will be reduced and they will have to now be creative and innovative and become better managers of their resources in improving their revenue streams. They have heeded the call, hence the reduction and now the fast turn-around time for the processing of applications.

As I pointed out earlier I am here to speak on more than just the local government aspect. Another key partner in all of this is NEPA who is working assiduously with us to

reduce the backlog and maintain the 90-day processing time. Hence, I am proud to let you know that up to January this year there was a total of 192 applications in the system with an additional 131 which were received that month. For that month 150 applications were processed and up to last month 173 were being assessed.

Of the 150 applications processed some 91% were processed within the 90-day processing timeline, with only 13 missing that deadline. We are serious about this 90-day approval system. We are not far from it. And I am happy to report that there has been a clear-up of all the backlog applications in the NEPA system.

NEPA has also implemented the Public Interface component of the AMANDA tracking system that enables clients to view the status of the Application as it is processed by NEPA. As we implement the AMANDA tracking system in the Local Authorities it is envisioned that ultimately clients will be able to view the process from submission to Parish Councils to receipt of decisions. NEPA has also been building internal capacities and realigning internal processes to fulfill the mandate.

I also have some figures, relating to the NRCA/TCPA Board, that is, the National Resources Conservation Authority and the Town and Country Planning Authority .

As at the end of January this year there was a total of 213 applications in the system with an additional 73 received that month. Of those, 103 applications were processed and 183 were being assessed up to early February, which was the last report I received.

Of the 103 applications processed 70% met the 90-day timeline. We are making progress, ladies and gentlemen and we are putting in place the mechanisms, structures and financial resources to ensure that we do achieve the 90-day timeline for development approvals.

We have given substance to our commitment to strengthen capacity in the local authorities, without which we will not be able to meet the 90-day approval target. We have significantly enhanced the planning functions in all the parish councils and we have brought in consultants to help us in this critical process.

Importantly, we have appointed directors of planning in all the parish councils. Strengthening the technical capacities of the parish councils is vital to boosting efficiencies. We want to equip our parish councils with the skills and competencies which will enable them to make a proper assessment of the applications before them. So we are making available to them the expertise of hydrologists, geologists, demographers, engineers, environmentalists and planners etc.

Then we are also beefing up that vital area of technology. To improve productivity the technology issue has to be addressed. We will be using information technology heavily and will be implementing a web-based tracking software within the local authorities.

Known as the AMANDA system, this software will help considerably in the attainment of the 90-day approval timeline. The system has already been rolled out in the Manchester Parish Council as well as the Kingston and St Andrew Parish Council.

In addition, a Geographic Information System (GIS) was implemented in NEPA in 2008. This allows for a multi-user platform and also integrates multiple datasets in a single platform for rapid preview and analysis. It also provides an evaluation of the effects of the development vis-à-vis the location's history, characteristics and potential for hazard impacts. The GIS system also facilitates rapid feasibility assessment by approval agencies and greater access and transparency to the entire approvals process. It is an invaluable tool to inform and guide the development process.

The parish councils themselves will be using GIS and we have already appointed a lead person to guide that whole process. To ensure that the council operates in the facilitatory, customer - focused way that we have mandated. We have increased the frequency of the planning meetings to review applications from once to twice-monthly.

We have also put in place highly trained people in auditing to ensure more than the vetting of grammar and invoice numbers but to ensure that all our councils have the proper accounting skills which will enable their improved efficiency.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are moving to standardize and streamline our building processes and to this end we are addressing the completion of a new international

building code as a standard for building construction. This was one of our major achievements for 2008. The promulgation of the National Building Act will soon be done. Our last Building Code dates back to about 1964. So we have been working on all the fronts--- technological, human, administrative and legislative. All in an effort to ensure that we achieve the 90-day approval timeline to which we are committed.

Officers within the approving-agencies including the local authorities have been trained in the new building code. There have been some other key achievements:

- The conceptual framework has been completed and approved by the Prime Minister for An Environmental Regulatory Authority(ERA)
- The conceptual framework has also been completed and accepted by the Prime Minister for a One Stop Shop for development applications—which will be most welcome news for all of you here. This will cut down bureaucracy, time, effort and ultimately money. We hope to implement that system this year.
- The reengineering of process flows for subdivisions 9 lots and under was also done.
- A Development Approval Master Plan has been completed
- A Development and Investment manual was completed for 2007
- The development of a national fee policy is far advanced and is set for implementation by the first quarter of 2009/2010
- An organizational review and restructuring of the local authorities is being undertaken

- A data sharing and pricing policy is being developed with completion expected almost immediately
- There has also been improved enforcement and compliance initiatives
- Improved inter-agency collaboration—with NEPA, NWA, Ministry of Health and the NGOS working more closely. Applications are now referred to NEPA within five days.

Ladies and gentlemen, all of us here will agree that the development approval system has to be significantly improved.

I have given you some indication today of the concrete measurable things which we have accomplished and which we have been doing. Philosophically, we are committed to business unusual. We are committed to having a Local Government system which works; one that is well-oiled, efficient, smooth, transparent and one which will make corruption redundant.

Inefficiency, outdated legislation, unnecessary bureaucracy are some of the major contributors to corruption. We will use technology, the best procedures and training to ensure that that you our clients are satisfied and well-served.

If Jamaica is to be a place which continues to attract investors, especially at this period of global meltdown, we have to be known for our efficiency and smooth-functioning Governmental systems.

People don't want to invest in a country where development approvals are a headache and where public officials don't seem to know what they are doing and what they are about. Citizens and investors don't want to be frustrated when they submit their plans for approval. If indeed we want to make Jamaica the ideal place for people to live work and raise their families, they must know that they can get the services they desire in the most efficient way.

This Government is committed to restructuring the bureaucracy, so that people's interests in doing legitimate business are served. The ripple effect is that Jamaica will indeed be a place to do business.

It is my objective and the vision of the government of Jamaica for us to all work together in making the approvals process efficient, effective and customer-friendly, for in the end when we succeed, - not if - it will be all of us who will benefit. I thank you.

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